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## Panorama - Caring for the Palace Museum, Beijing, China

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# THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT

Photographer/Artist: James Hagy

**Panorama**

## Caring for the Palace Museum, Beijing, China

**Shi Zhimin** discusses his work as Director of the Ancient Building Management Office of The Palace Museum in Beijing, still also recognized by many visitors as the former Chinese imperial palace known as The Forbidden City, with **Cai Bowen** and **Professor James Hagy**, Director of The Rooftops Project.



Photographer/Artist: James Hagy

Any facilities manager might feel challenged in running the maintenance operations of what is believed to be the world's most popular tourist attraction by visitor count, some 14 million in 2012. But the operations led by Shi Zhimin are all the more impressive when you take into account that his team is also responsible for the ongoing preservation of thousands of rooms in structures some 600 years old, ranging across a site bigger than Disneyland and located just north of Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

As The Forbidden City, the imperial palace property was originally constructed from 1406-1420 A.D. as the home of the emperors of China and their imperial households. The property was also the site of imperial examinations. It was for centuries, and in many ways remains today, the center of Beijing (meaning "Northern City"), with a population of more than 20 million people.

The grounds of the site are some 720,000 square meters (the equivalent of approximately 7.75 million square feet or 178 acres). While scholars have not reached agreement on a single standard to calculate the exact number of surviving rooms, the Museum accepts that there are more than 8,700 rooms in the complex.

Its massive scale is generally believed to qualify it as the world's largest palace inside of fortified walls, which surround and define the site and are joined by a deep moat around the entire perimeter. Each corner of the wall has an elaborate tower with an ornate roof. Within the palace, buildings have roofs adorned with colored glazed tiles (mostly bright yellow, signifying the color of the emperor) and innumerable statuettes of dragons, phoenixes, and other figures.

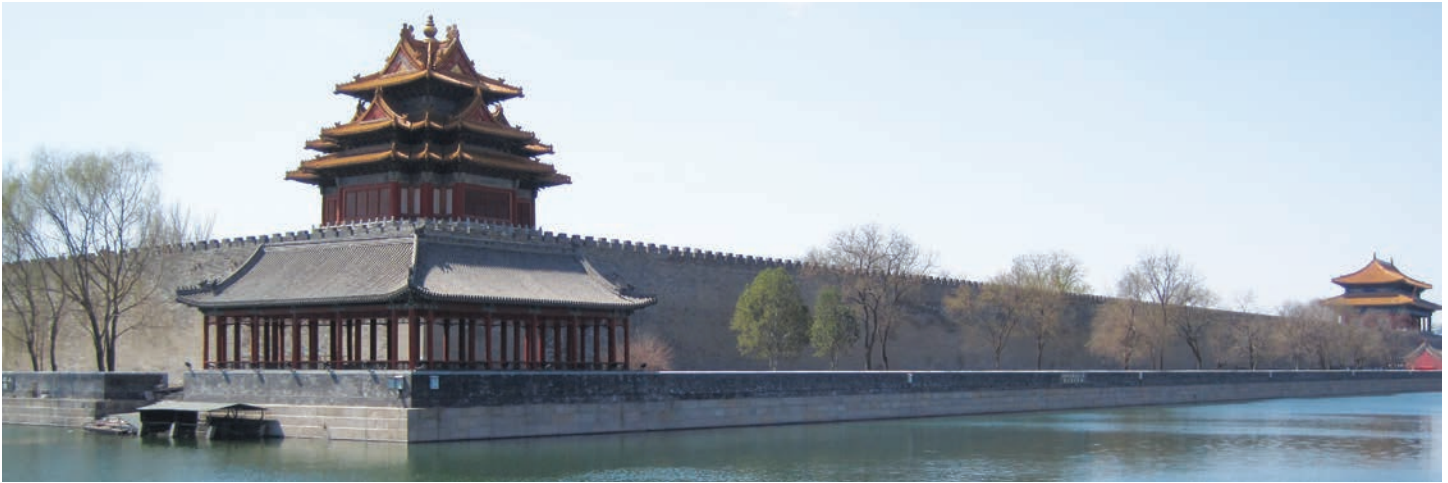
The Palace Museum has been charged with oversight of the property since 1925. The Museum is affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, which has responsibility for museums and monuments throughout the People's Republic of China. In addition to the historic structures themselves, the Museum's collection includes some 1.8 million rare artifacts ranging from paintings, pottery, ceramics, porcelains, bronze, and jade, to books, papers, and court documents. Much of the collection is on-site in Beijing, while some objects are still in Nanjing, where they have been in storage since the founding of the People's Republic of China at end of the civil conflict in 1949.

An expert team at the Museum selects items for display. Most collections rotate every two years; some, like handwriting and painting, rotate twice each year. Like many similar world-class museums, objects from the collections are loaned for exhibit elsewhere in the world, and works from other museums are featured in temporary exhibitions at the Palace Museum.

Mr. Shi joined the Palace Museum staff in 1974. During the next 14 years, he worked as a member of the Museum's engineering and construction team, moving to the Ancient Building Management Office in 1988. From the outset, his focus was on the maintenance and protection of the ancient complex of buildings and associated research. In late 1991, Mr. Shi became Vice Director of the Ancient Building Management Office, focusing on the design of the



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Museum's ongoing maintenance program. He was named Director in 2004, where he leads preservation efforts and maintenance.

The team within the Ancient Building Management Office that addresses everyday maintenance, cleaning, and general operation of the property totals approximately 1,800 people. The Ancient Building Maintenance Office sets the long-term preservation plan and supervises its implementation. About 200 of the staff focus on long-term preservation, 40 of whom are dedicated to research, 30 to engineering, and more than 100 to daily maintenance. That team is a combination of Museum employees and contract workers.

Original materials used in the construction from 1406-1420 include highly scarce materials from around China, including rare woods from the southwest, marble from near Beijing, and special baked paving bricks (so-called "golden bricks") from Suzhou used throughout the major halls. When UNESCO designated the property as a World Heritage Site in 1987, it recognized the property as having "the largest collection of preserved ancient wooden structures in the world."

The property will celebrate 600 years in 2020. In 2002, the State Council made the decision to embark on a major renovation and repair project to bring the site back to its pre-1912 condition. It is an ambitious plan of work anticipated to extend over 20 years, especially when recognizing that the property remains open to visitors seven days a week.

The overall project is organized in three phases: short-term, middle-term, and long-term. That program began with the renovation of the Hall of Martial Prowess, used as a pilot for the future restoration of the entire site.

The scale and scope of the work are easily evident as you tour the site. To date, work on the axle wire or axle line section of the site, which defines the north-south axis of both the Palace Museum site and the city of Beijing itself, has been almost completed.

The Museum established a *Preservation Guideline*, which has continued to be subject to dynamic adjustments by the Ancient Building Management Office as work has progressed. The work strictly follows the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, which provides that "in repairing, maintaining and removing immovable cultural relics, the principle of keeping the cultural relics in their original state shall be adhered to."

New techniques and modern technology are not an acceptable substitute. The Museum follows standards that Mr. Shi explains as the Triple Original Principles: original materials, original forms, and original craftsmanship.

The amazing set of structures presents myriad special maintenance and preservation challenges, as it must have done since it was first completed in 1420. Rare woods are no longer available to replace worn materials. Fortunately, these woods are well preserved, so this has posed few issues. The traditional craftsmanship used to make the golden bricks was for a time lost to history. The bricks are covered by protective material, while the Museum and a Suzhou research center have cooperated to regain this knowledge.

Through their constant close observation and work in the preservation of this historic property, Mr. Shi and his team have occasion to reflect on the concepts and quality that are represented in the original 15th-century design. Mr. Shi notes with pride that the Museum's design and craftsmanship is second to none.

The exterior elements of the site require attention, too. The moat around the property, which follows the more than 3,400 meters (roughly 2.1 miles) of fortified wall, had its own thorough repair program in 1998.

The Ancient Building Management Office must constantly consider the dual goals of preserving the design and craftsmanship of the original buildings and grounds with the benefits and needs of modern facilities management



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and 21st century visitors. The team's philosophy is first, keeping the original integrity and appearance of the property, and second, providing the necessary visitor conveniences.

Visitors come from across China and around the world. Beginning in 2012, the Museum established a daily limit on the number of visitors, set at 80,000. The acceptance and enforcement of this policy has been difficult, since most visitors to Beijing put The Palace Museum and the Great Wall at the very top of their sightseeing list.

The Museum has sensors to monitor the environment, air quality, and other parameters for the protection of the facility. Fire, earthquake, and other natural causes can pose potential disastrous effects for cultural institutions. In planning and operations, the staff remains acutely aware of these risks, too.

As restoration work is completed, the Museum is considering what changes may be possible in the ways artifacts from the collections are displayed. New

areas of the site may also become open to the public for the first time. Other areas, such as the Buddha halls, will remain closed after preservation but be accessible to scholars for research purposes.

There are between 200 and 300 staff directly assigned to handle visitors. Given the massive visitor flow, modernization of the property's infrastructure is also an ongoing priority. The Museum undertakes improvements to the electricity, heating systems, and temperature controls, as well as to the communications system that is particularly important given the property's large scale. Another goal of the ongoing renovation project has been to provide more open areas for visitors, but this goal has been delayed due to the extraordinary number of daily visitors to the site. Meanwhile, for safety reasons, isolated areas may be closed or restricted from time to time to facilitate the long-term restoration efforts.

Mr. Shi notes the importance of engagement and communication with other museums around the world. He believes that through shared experiences, unique sites such as The Palace Museum have much both to teach and to learn.



Cai Bowen is legal counsel in the global litigation and dispute management department of a Chinese high-tech company. He is a graduate of Peking University School of Transnational Law, where he studied with Professor Hagy, who serves there as Affiliated Transnational Professor of Law in addition to his position at New York Law School.



**James Hagy** is Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Law at New York Law School. He also founded and directs The Rooftops Project at New York Law School's Center for Real Estate Studies. More information about The Rooftops Project and Professor Hagy may be found at [www.nyls.edu/rooftops](http://www.nyls.edu/rooftops).

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