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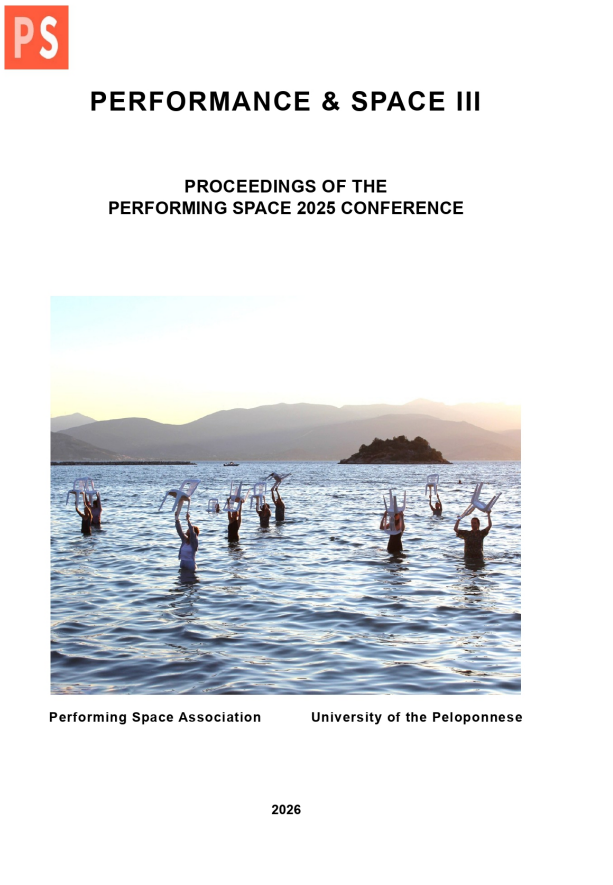

Mapping Temporal and Spatial Dynamics of Imperial Rituals in the Forbidden City

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Mapping Temporal and Spatial Dynamics of Imperial Rituals in the Forbidden City

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Abstract

Viewing ritual as a distinctive form of social performance, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore how “order” was structured in the ritual environment of the Ming China, using *dailou tu* (paintings of officials awaiting court) and *chaoyi* (court ritual). Through visual analysis supported by a series of diagrams, this paper identifies three key characteristics that define the spatial logic of Ming imperial rituals. First, ritual order emerges from the interaction among time, action, and space. Time was conveyed through auditory signals at the court ritual by drums, bells, and whips, which directly regulate participants’ positioning and movement, reconfiguring the established spatial structure of imperial architecture. This interaction establishes spatiotemporal units and sequences that correspond precisely to specific ritual stages, forming the foundational structure of the Ming dynasty “ritual space”. Second, although time and space functioned as separate systems within the imperial ritual space, they were not equivalent. Through the use of three distinct auditory signals, the imperial ritual detached time from the ordinary temporal order which thereby became the dominant force in structuring a non-ordinary temporal framework. The cultural and symbolic connections between “the present” and “the past” reinforce time as the more stable element within the ritual spatiotemporal pattern. Third, from a ritual perspective, the Ming imperial city had no fixed or absolute spatial “centre”. Various architectural elements, such as halls and gates functioned as “temporary centres” depending on specific ritual context even if they were not located at the centre. In short, the Ming imperial city’s ritual space operated both as an instrument of ordering and as a product of that very ordering process. The dynamic zoning patterns revealed in the ritual practices of Beijing’s imperial city constitute a critical dimension for understanding the spatial logic of China's built environment.

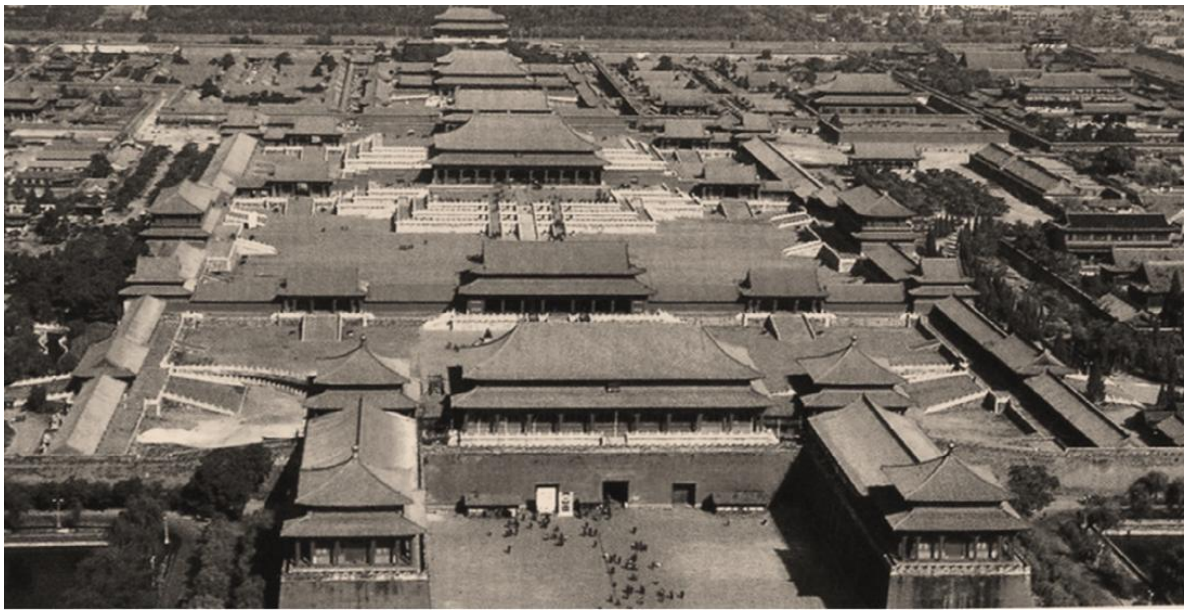
Keywords: imperial ritual, social performance, visual analysis

Mapping Temporal and Spatial Dynamics

The architectural environment of imperial China has often been interpreted as a static collection of buildings arranged within a fixed spatial hierarchy (see Figure1). This study offers an alternative perspective by examining how the built environment of the Forbidden City in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was deconstructed and reconfigured within the temporal framework of ritual. Moving beyond the grand processional sequence of the central axis, it approaches the Forbidden City as a dynamic stage for political and social performance, rendering it a continuously active ritual theatre (Turner, 1982, p.68-69).[1] The inquiry is guided by a central question: how did auditory signals reconfigure imperial space into ritual order?

Figure 1

Bird's-eye view of the Forbidden City, Beijing, from the album Ground and Aerial Views of China, photographed c.a. 1940 by J. P. Koster. Collection of the University of California, Berkeley Library.



Ritual space is understood here as an integrated narrative shaped by the interplay among scene (space), action (the movement of participants), and sound (a marker of time or ritual stage) (see Figure 2). To capture this interplay, the research adopts an interdisciplinary methodology drawing from architecture, design studies, and anthropology. Focusing on the regular ritual (*chang chao*)[2] as its primary subject, the analysis proceeds in

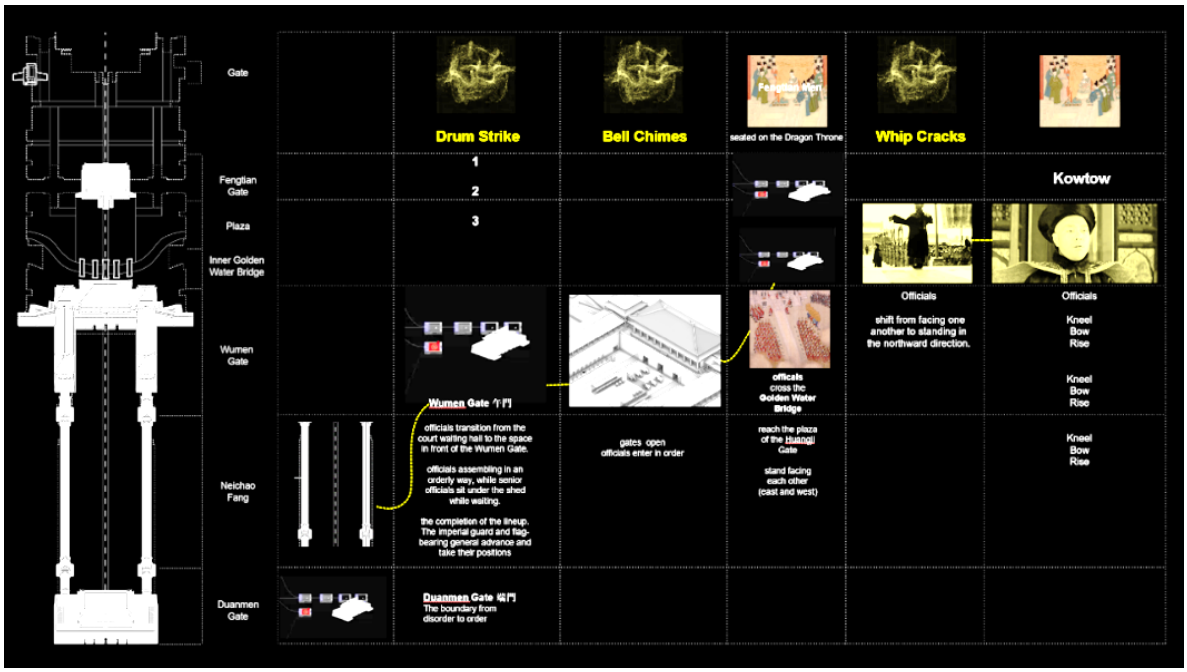
[1] This viewpoint is heavily influenced by the "performative turn" in anthropology, particularly the work of Victor Turner. In his book *From Ritual to Theatre*, Turner (1982) introduces the concept of "social drama," positing that ritual is a structured performance through which communities articulate and address their internal conflicts.

[2] Regular ritual: *chang chao* 常朝, a daily morning meeting where officials paid homage to the emperor and reported on state affairs.

three stages: tracing procedures from historical paintings and official documents; diagrammatically visualising the auditory spaces of drum, bell, and whip; and comparing these with other imperial rituals. The findings reveal that auditory signals produced a non-ordinary temporality that restructured spatial hierarchies, created shifting ritual centres, and transformed the Forbidden City into a flexible and polycentric ritual landscape.

Figure 2

Ritual Performance Display. Created by the authors (*2025*).



Disorder and Order in the Regular Ritual

Dailou tu is a Ming dynasty hanging scroll painting that depicts officials awaiting outside the palace for the early morning court session (see Figure3). The painting is not a record of a single static moment. Instead, it offers a diachronic perspective: its vertical composition unfolds from bottom to top like a timeline, visually guiding the viewer through successive stages of the entire ritual process.

The first scene of this painting, shown at its lower end, depicts officials arriving at the Left Chang'an Gate at *wugeng*.[3] At this stage, the relationship between among action (entering the city), time (*wugeng*), and space (the gate) was loose. The officials' movements were governed primarily by the institutional rule of "gate opening," and the physical boundary of the gate did not alter their state of continuous movement. The real threshold between disorder and order was not the outer Chang'an Gate, but the Duan Gate, which led to the inner court waiting rooms (*nei chaofang*). These rooms functioned as a crucial "backstage" area before the ritual began. Within this space, the previously loose crowd was transformed

[3] *wugeng* 五更: a traditional Chinese timekeeping, roughly between 3:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m.

into a static, spatial, and hierarchical order: the waiting rooms were divided according to administrative department, and the officials' seating was strictly arranged by rank, forming a clear spatial sequence of ascending hierarchy from south to north. This meticulously organised space prepared the officials for the commencement of the ritual performance.

Figure 3

Illustration of the Peking Palace 北京宫殿图 (known as the Taipei A edition 台甲本), 192.4 x 155cm. I*mage provided by the National Palace Museum.*

The upper part of the scroll displays the scene where the ritual formally began, marked by the six elephants in front of the Wumen Gate (six elephants were used for the regular ritual, while different rituals required different numbers). When the elephants stood in formation, the static preparatory phase ended, and a dynamic, performative order, triggered by sound, unfolded. The *Da Ming Hui Dian* (Collected Statutes of the Great Ming Dynasty) records this process in detail, showing that sound (the drum, bell, and whip) was intricately linked to specific actions and spatial locations and was the key to activating the order. Shen et al. (1988) in noted that:

> For the morning ritual, when the drum is struck, civil and military officials stand in hierarchical order outside of the Left and Right *yemen*.[4] They wait for the bell to chime and the gates to open, then enter in hierarchical sequence. After crossing

[4] *yemen* 掖门: side gates next to the main entrance of the imperial palace.

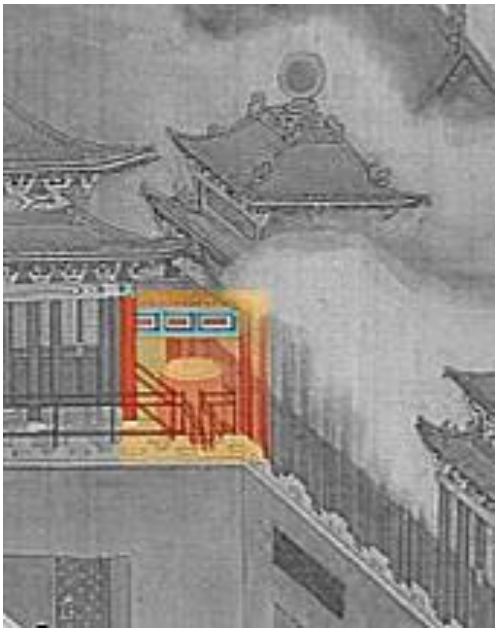
> the Golden Water Bridge, they reach the *danchi*[5] in front of the Huangji Gate, where they stand on the east and west sides facing each other, awaiting the emperor's ascension to the throne. The whip cracks. (juan 44)
>
> 凡早朝，鼓起，文武官各于左、右掖门外序立。候鐘鸣开门，各以次进。过金水桥，至皇极门丹墀，东西相向立，候上御宝座。鸣鞭。

This record clearly indicates that the actions accompanying the sounds of the drum, bell, and whip — such as "standing in hierarchical order" (*xuli*), "entering in sequence" (*yici jin*), and "standing on the east and west sides facing each other" (*dongxixiang xiangli*)— transformed the officials from a static, loose state into a dynamic and orderly whole, enabling them to precisely execute ritual actions within this vast space.

Three Sound-Initiated Ritual Spaces

As interpretations of historical paintings and official documents show, the dynamic unfolding of the ritual was governed by time — specifically, a non-ordinary temporality defined by sound. The spatial configuration of the regular ritual can be deconstructed into three parts: the drum sound space, the bell sound space, and the whip sound space. These sounds detached the ritual from conventional clock time, creating a unique ritual rhythm that actively reconfigured the use of architectural space.

Figure 4
The position of the drums, from Xu Xianqing's Official Career (Xu Xianqing huanji tu), painted by Yu Shi and Wu Yue in 1588 (a*lbum format, Ming dynasty*). *Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.*



[5] *danchi* 丹墀: terrace plaza, the place where rituals were held.

The ritual proper commenced with a sequence of three drumbeats (Fig.4). The first drum signaled officials to leave the waiting rooms and proceed to the Wumen Gate Plaza, where ritual elephants were simultaneously forming up. At the second drum, a distinction in status became apparent through action: lower-ranking officials assembled in orderly lines, while senior officials remained seated under the sheds, awaiting the signal to advance. When the third drum sounded, the lineup was complete, and the imperial guard and flag-bearing generals advanced to take their positions (see Figure5). These three drumbeats thus served to sequence a complex series of movements, progressively building the visual and spatial foundation of the ritual (see Figure 6).

Figure 5
The imperial guard and flag-bearing general, *from Return Clearing Imperial Procession Returning to the Palace, Ming dynasty. Collection of the National Palace Museum.*

The chiming of the bell signified the next major phase. The gates were opened, and the officials entered the second ritual space, the plaza of Fengtian Gate (see Figure7). The path of movement was strictly dictated by rank: officials used the side gates and outer bridges, while the central axis was reserved for the emperor (see Figure 8). As officials crossed the Inner Golden Water Bridge and formed their ranks, the emperor approached from the north (see Figure9). In the regular ritual, the emperor and officials moved toward each other simultaneously, suggesting some degree of equality. In congratulatory rituals, officials would arrive and wait for the emperor, emphasising their subordinate role. The bell, therefore, did not just mark time: it initiated a set of movements that defined the political relationship between the sovereign and his court.

Figure 6

The drum space: three drumbeats. Created by the authors (*2025*).

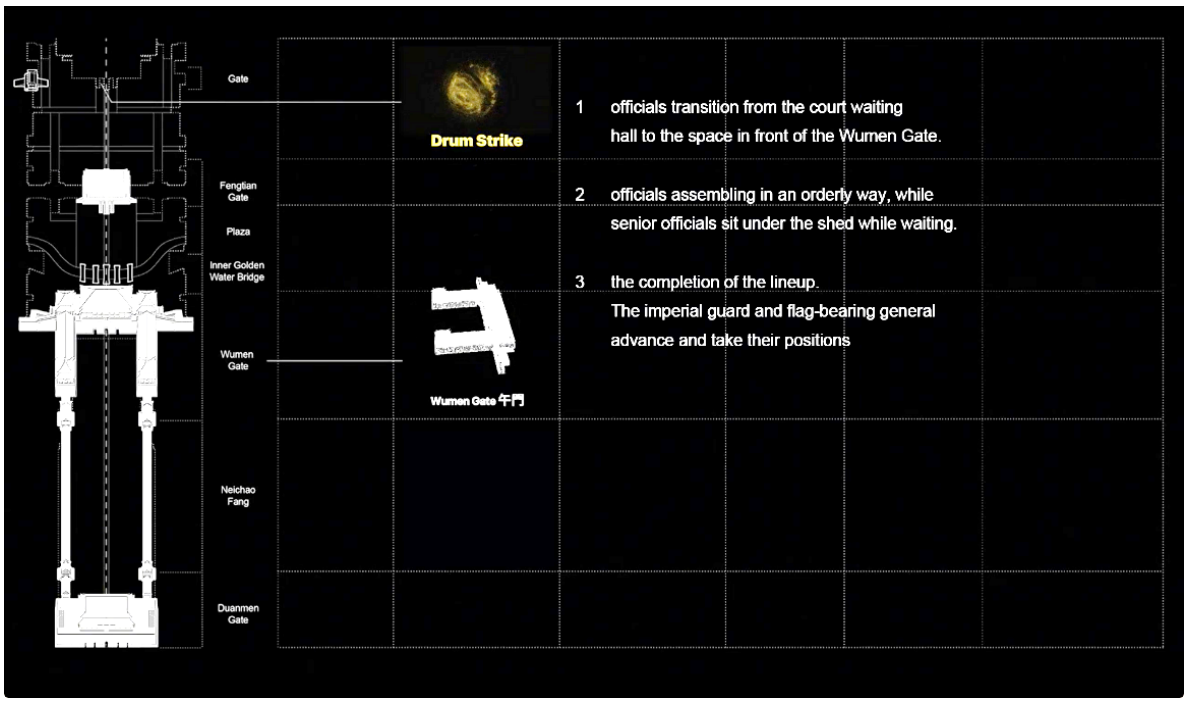


Figure 7

The bell space: Ggates open. Created by the authors (2025).

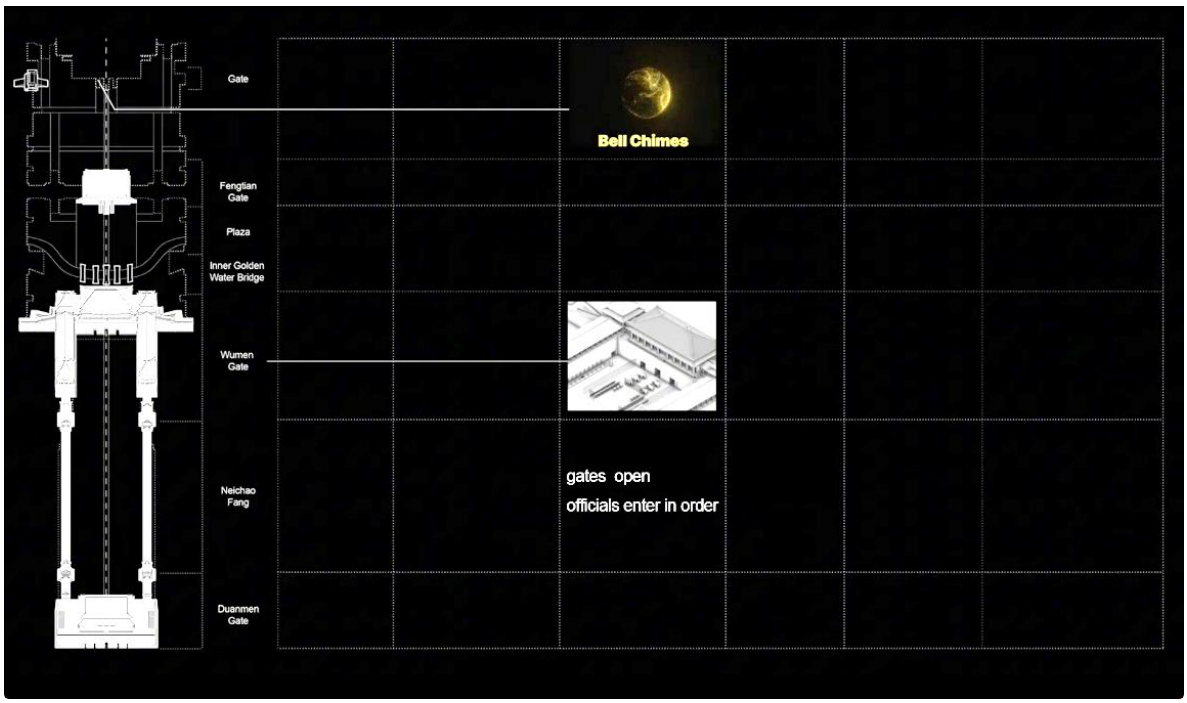


Figure 8

The movement of the officials, from Xu Xianqing's Official Career (Xu Xianqing huanji tu), painted by Yu Shi and Wu Yue in 1588 (album format, Ming dynasty). Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

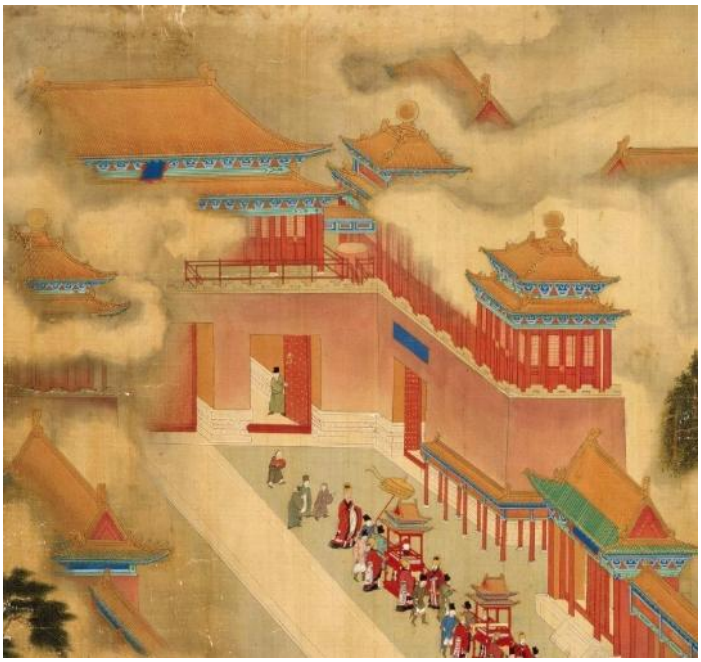
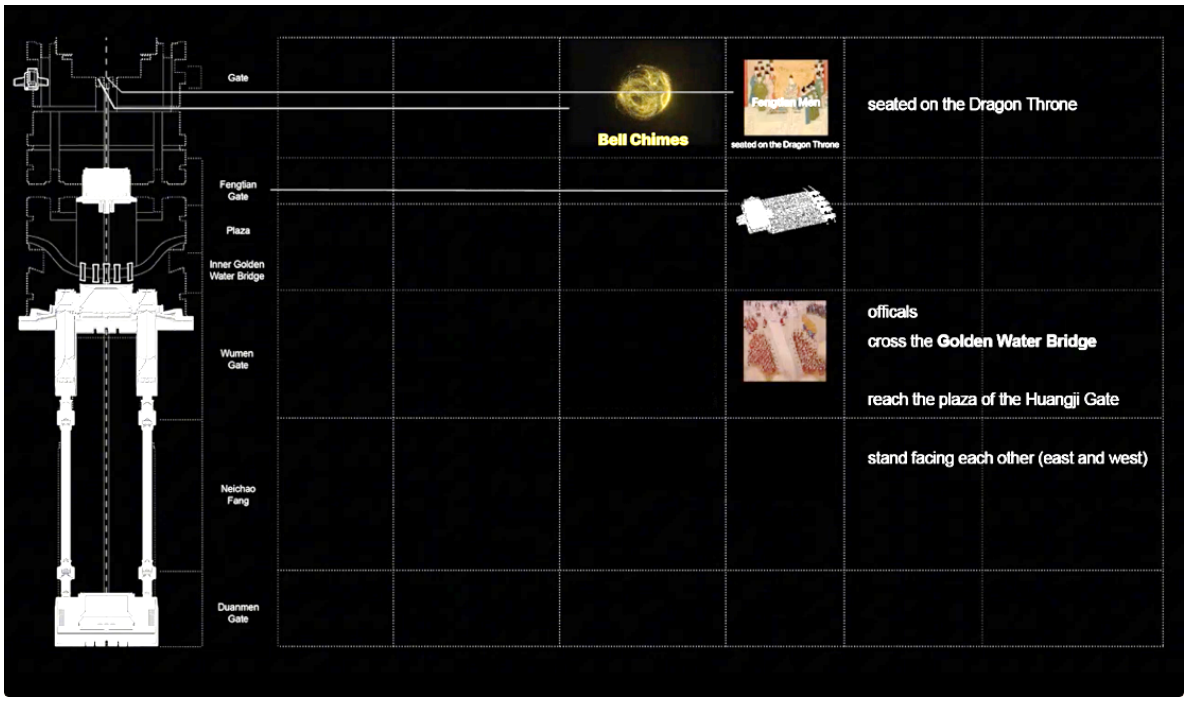


Figure 9

The bell space: M*ovement of the participants. Created by the authors, (2025).*

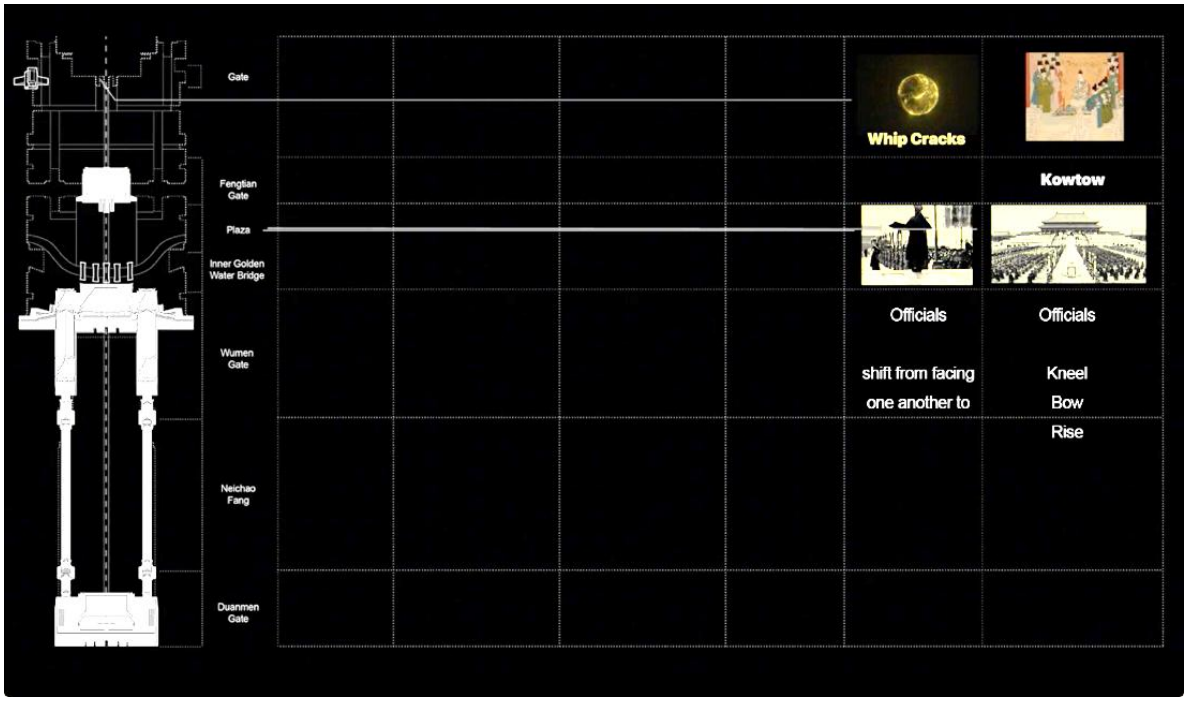


The final auditory signal was the crack of a whip (see Figure 10) Unlike the drum and bell, the whip did not regulate major spatial transitions, instead, it governed subtle movements and postural shifts within a fixed location. Upon the first crack of the whip,

officials, now assembled before the emperor, would shift their orientation, and perform the kowtow. The second crack indicated the emperor's departure and the orderly exit of the officials. The whip's sound controlled the most solemn and direct interactions of the ritual, imposing order at the most intimate scale.

These three sounds, passed down through dynasties,[6] were more than mere signals. They constituted a dominant temporal framework that superseded the spatial logic of the architecture itself, dictating how and when each space was to be used.

Figure 10
The whip space. Created by the authors (*2025*).



The Shifting Centre in the Forbidden City

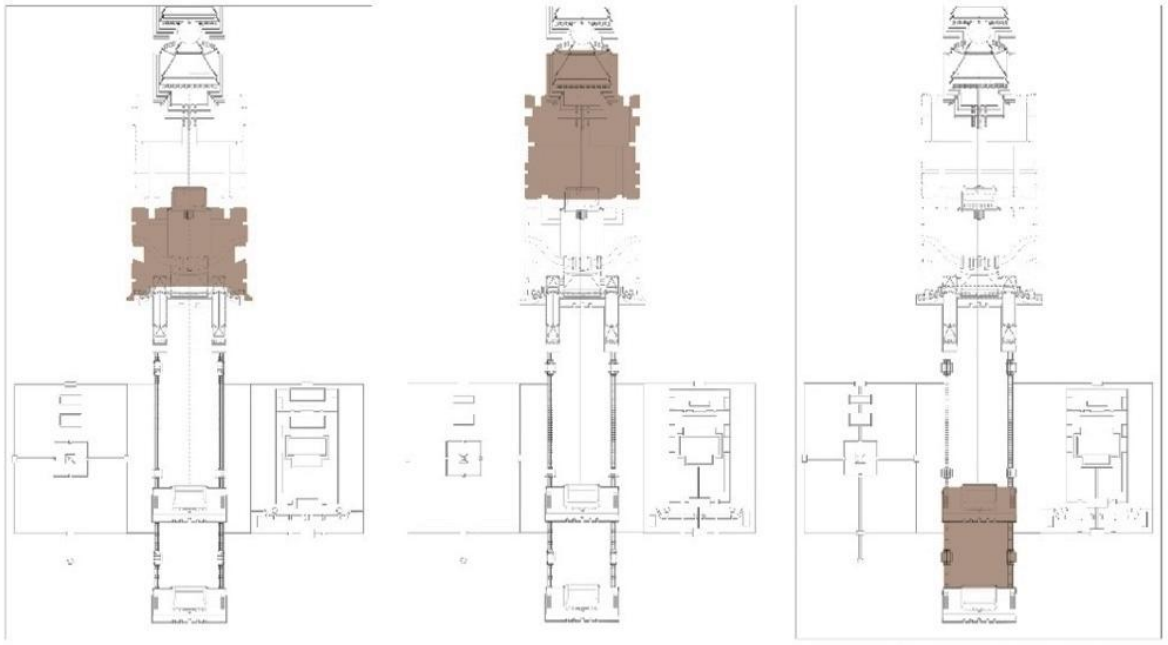
The Forbidden City's nested structure of gates and courtyards creates a flexible framework for imperial rituals. Within this setting, the central area of a ritual is not fixed: rather, it shifts according to specific needs. Ritual practice itself is what activates the space, allowing different architectural elements to function as "temporary centres", whose significance is continuously defined and redefined.

[6] The origins of the three ritual sounds — drum, bell, and whip — are respectively traced to three of the most sacred sources in Chinese tradition. The drum is linked to the primordial ritual music of the ancient ruler Yiqi Shi (c. 2400-2200 BCE), giving it a mythological origin. The bell, as a sophisticated instrument, is attributed to the era of the Yellow Emperor (c. 2700–2500 BCE), the progenitor of civilization, symbolising national craftsmanship and achievement. The whip, according to the *Rites of Zhou*, is defined as an official tool of power for maintaining order, establishing its place in the ritual-legal tradition.

This polycentric nature is clearly demonstrated through the strategic placement of ritual elephants (*yixiang*), which mark the symbolic start of the ritual. In the regular ritual, the elephants were positioned at the Wumen Gate, establishing its plaza as the focal point (see Figure 11-A). However, for other rituals, such as the congratulatory ritual and the *Xiang Taimiao* ritual,[7] the centre shifted dramatically. For more elaborate congratulatory rituals, it shifted north to the grander Fengtian Hall courtyard (see Figure 11-B); and for the *Xiang Taimiao* ritual, the *Da Ming Hui Dian* specifies that for this event, ten elephants were to be arranged *inside* the Chengtian Gate. This directive transformed the area between the Duan and Chengtian Gates (see Figure 11-C) — ordinarily a mere transitional zone — into the central stage of the ritual (Shen et al., 1988).

Figure 11

The Shifting Center of Different Rituals. Created by the authors (*2025*).



The unified plan of the city, with its central axis and symmetrical layout, provides a stable grid upon which these transformations could occur, but it was the ritual action itself that activated specific locations as centres. Therefore, relying on a singular, idealised spatial model like the classic *Sanchao Wumen*[8] risks oversimplifying the inherent complexity and polycentric reality of the imperial ritual system.

[7] *Xiang Taimiao* 享太庙: a shamanic ritual space, also known as Tangzi Jitian 堂子祭天.

[8] *Sanchao Wumen* 三朝五门: Three Audience Halls and Five Gates, which represents the ideal model of ancient Chinese imperial cities.

Conclusion

The ritual space of the Ming Forbidden City was both an instrument for creating order and a product of that very ordering process. This study has demonstrated that ritual order was not inherent in the architecture but emerged dynamically from the intricate interplay of time, action, and space. A unique, non-ordinary temporality, articulated through the auditory signals of drums, bells, and whips, served as the dominant structuring force, sequencing movements and activating different parts of the built environment. This system allowed for a remarkably flexible and polycentric use of space, where any gate, hall, or courtyard could be temporarily elevated to the status of a ritual centre based on ritual requirements.

By moving beyond a static analysis of architectural forms and embracing a performance-based perspective, we gain a deeper understanding of the Forbidden City as a flexible entity. The dynamic spatial patterns revealed through the court rituals constitute a critical, and often overlooked, dimension for understanding the spatial logic of China's imperial past. This approach uncovers how ritual action inscribes the built environment with deeper meaning, revealing its significance in the narrative of order, hierarchy, and power.

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