

Dancing at the Temple of Heaven

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There's something wonderfully romantic about old movies where characters burst into song and dance spontaneously in public places. In our modern world, nobody sings in the rain anymore and nobody ballroom dances in the park. Well, almost nobody.

In Beijing, the capital city of China, people dance in the park every day. At the Temple of Heaven Park in Beijing, locals come out in masses to exercise in the morning. There are no joggers or tracksuits to be seen in the park, but groups of people practicing different versions of tai chi, Chinese hacki-sack, or ballroom dancing. In China there is a lesser emphasis on aerobic workouts and activities such as ballroom dancing are viewed as good exercise and stress relievers.

I was mesmerized as music played gently in the background from a portable CD player and an elderly Chinese man dipped his partner as they gracefully moved across the cobblestone walkway. Not far from them a woman wearing a bright pink ruffled shirt and a black velvet hat practiced her dance moves with another lady who was also lacking for a male partner. They waltzed, they did the samba, they even did the tango, and they were very good at it. Watching their fluid motions across the cobblestones it was easy to tell this wasn't their first time dancing in the park.

The Temple of Heaven, or Tian Tan, has become the universal symbol for Beijing. Pick up any brochure on the city or any travel information on China and you will probably see a picture of the Temple of Heaven. In ancient times the Temple of Heaven was off limits to all but the emperor, but today it is the place where the locals come to play cards or other games like Mahjong, exercise, and visit. It is also one of the most significant historical sites in the city and covers a land space five times bigger than the Forbidden City at 273 hectares.

There are many temples dotted throughout Beijing. The Temple of Earth is in the northern part of the city, the Temple of Sun is in the east, the Temple of the Moon is in the West, and the Temple of Heaven is in the South. Of all the temples in the city; however, the Temple of Heaven is the most

grand. Historically, the Temple of Heaven was a place where the emperors of China worshipped the God of Heaven. There were few individuals considered more powerful than an emperor, but since the emperors referred to themselves as Tianzi or “children of heaven”, they did concede supremacy to the God of Heaven.

Built in 1420 AD, the Temple of Heaven reflected an ancient Chinese belief that heaven was round and earth was square. A wall surrounds the entire temple area and the northern part within the wall was built semicircular and symbolized the heavens, while the southern part was built square and symbolized the earth. The Altar itself is a circular structure with three terraces symbolizing the degrees of heaven. The Altar sat higher than any other structure in all of ancient China, including the Imperial Palace. The symbolic layout of this temple had a lasting influence on architecture and planning in the Far East over many centuries.

In ancient China, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368- 1911 A.D.), the emperor would visit the Temple of Heaven three times per year. He visited during Winter Solstice (the shortest day of the year) every year and offered up sacrifices to the God of Heaven at the altar and thanked God for a good harvest. In the spring the emperor prayed for a good harvest and in the summer he prayed for rain. Animal sacrifices were also

used to thank God for the blessings of the previous year and to hope for good blessings for the future.

In ancient China, the emperor left the Forbidden City through the Front Gate for the Temple of Heaven. No common people or foreigners were allowed to watch the Emperor's procession to the temple. They had to remain hidden behind closed doors and windows or risk being put to death. Even the Empress was not allowed to take part in the procession.

Other important structures besides the Altar itself include the Imperial Vault of Heaven, the Hall of Prayers for Good Harvest, the Three Echo Stones and the Echo Wall. The Hall of Prayers for Good Harvest is a big palace with a round roof and inside there are twenty-eight huge posts. The roof is adorned with black, yellow, and green coloured glaze. The Hall has a base named Altar for Grain Prayers, which is made of three layers of white marble and has a height of six meters. Every year the emperor would pray for a good harvest in the Hall of Prayers.

It was fascinating to spend a morning just exploring the Temple of Heaven with its ancient structures that at one time would have been off limits to ordinary people. But perhaps what was more interesting than the structures themselves was the Chinese people who visited the

surrounding park area. With almost one quarter of the world's entire population living in China, it is a good idea to learn a little about Chinese culture and there is no better place to start than at the Temple of Heaven.

If You Go:

-The Temple of Heaven is located just two km from the Forbidden City in Beijing and is open daily from 6:00 A.M. to 7:50 P.M.

-It will take about 90-minutes to thoroughly tour the Temple of Heaven.

-Admission to the temple is ¥ 35