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Let's clear our minds now and get this straight: On Sept 13 the Hall of Mental Cultivation had been closed to the public for exactly 1,000 days — the official reason being that it was being repaired.

But a couple of weeks earlier, anyone thinking the hall, part of the Palace Museum in Beijing, also known as the Forbidden City, must surely reopen its doors again soon, received an ice-cold shower. That came courtesy of Shan Jixiang, the museum director, who jauntily informed assembled media on Sept 3 that the repair work was in fact just about to begin.

So what on earth have those armies of repair personnel been doing for the past two years and eight months?

To explain it all, Shan took the medical route.

"It's like doctors doing tests to get an absolutely accurate diagnosis before they treat a patient," he said. "If you first get a complete picture of where things stand with the architecture it makes the restoration work itself a lot easier."

Considering the huge complexity of this operation it is easy to sympathize with Shan.

The Hall of Mental Cultivation is a key site in the museum, China's imperial palace from 1420 to 1911, and it covers 2,540 square meters. It was first built during the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and the last eight emperors of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) used it as a living room.

More than 2,000 exquisite art pieces and daily-use royal artifacts were moved out of the hall, some being exhibited in cities including Beijing, Hong Kong, Nanjing, in East China's Jiangsu province, and Jinan, East China's Shandong province.

In-depth research of the tiles, the walls and every inch of the beams and columns, a process called "archaeology on the roof", was done not only to accurately spot damage done over the centuries, but also as the basis of 33 academic studies.

"Every wall tells a story, and each of those stories is waiting to be told," Shan said. "For example, the building has often gone through repairs over the centuries, and numerous records have been made. We need to check whether the vestige of previous restorations matches the records."

The latest research results were displayed in a temporary exhibition in the museum from August until early September.

There are other reasons for the delay in restoration work beginning, too.

Until recently there were simply not enough competent people in this kind of restoration work whom the museum could call on, but in



A 'treasured box' is taken from the roof of the Hall of Mental Cultivation on Sept 3, marking the beginning of renovation on this Qing emperors' residence.

JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

Surgical approach to restore old glory

Repair works ahead of Palace Museum's huge anniversary celebration are being carried out with painstaking precision

late August, 116 qualified restorers graduated from a program tailored to teaching the skills required to do the restoration work in the Forbidden City.

Of those 116, about 20 are likely eventually to be offered permanent jobs with the museum.

"We are keen to ensure that everyone who is working closely with cultural heritage is certified and has gone through the training with us," Shan said. "It's important when we are restoring this royal architecture stretching from the Ming to the Qing Dynasties to strictly follow the proper procedures."

The certified restorers are selected from engineering teams nationwide through theory and practice tests, and the successful candidates receive training and tutoring on cultural heritage from veteran restorers in the museum and experts from several other national-level institutions.

In centuries gone by, maintenance work on buildings in the Forbidden City almost never stopped, Shan said.

"There were generations of tal-

ented restorers with a huge amount of experience."

Comprehensive restoration of major structures in the Forbidden City began in 2002 and is due to continue until 2020, the 600th anniversary of the former imperial palace's founding. It is the largest scale renovation of architecture in the palace after the monarchy fell.

In 2008, architectural restoration techniques pertaining to the museum were listed as a national-level intangible cultural heritage, but in itself that declaration cannot ensure that restoration in the future will be up to scratch. Like a parent employing a child minder, Shan is extremely anxious to ensure that anyone the museum brings in to do the intricate, demanding restoration work possesses the skills and has the character that deserve his trust.

Li Yongge, 63, a carpenter who has worked at the museum since 1975, and who was one of the tutors on the recent training program, said: "In the old days when restorers were trained, the master-

apprentice model was followed.

"Doing it that way you couldn't train many people. Leaders in our industry are in their 60s and it has been very sad to see that in our craft no new blood has been coming through."

However, things seem to be changing, Li said.

"I'm delighted to see that a lot of new talent is finally here, and I feel confident about the training these people will receive from people like me."

"Everyone who works for the Palace Museum will get an official certificate from now on. That is an honor for them and will encourage them to do better with other restoration work."

Skills competitions were used to determine who, among bricklayers, carpenters, painters, stonemasons and others from 10 engineering companies, would do work in the Hall of Mental Cultivation. In the competitions, those taking part are required to use old tools rather than new technology, Li said.

"Despite the 2020 deadline, we insist that the work on the project is of the highest standard," Li said.

Architecture experts will follow the whole process as supervisors.

"This project will set an example for us because we fill in the gaps in studies, design and field work," said Liu Yang, deputy head of the archaeology department in the State Administration of Cultural Heritage.

"It will eventually help form China's own systematic disciplines and criteria for restoring cultural heritage, which differ from general construction."

Restoration of the Hall of Mental Cultivation will end no later than June of 2020, Shan said, and after the 18-year comprehensive renovation is completed, all engineering projects in the Palace Museum will pause for six months.

"Then, on the Forbidden City's 600th anniversary, visitors will be able to appreciate what a wonderful place it is, and the following year another 15-year cycle of maintaining the architecture will begin."