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CHAPTER ONE

# The Center

*Beijing, Early 1794*

The emperor is the pivot around which everything turns. Today he's holding court in the Forbidden City, but to get there, you have to pass through walls. As you approach Beijing, you can see them looming over the plain, crowned by many-storied gatehouses with curved roofs and rows of black windows. If allowed through the cavernous port, you'll find yourself in the Outer City, also known as the Chinese City. Follow this wide street, but be careful not to lose your place, because it's so crowded that you'll have to stand to the side until you can seize an opening and rejoin the press of humanity. At least the shuffling bodies offer relief against the bitter wind, which drives dust over everything, forcing shopkeepers to pull tarps over their hanging ducks. The dromedaries are lucky to be able to squeeze their nostrils shut. Maybe you want to keep yours open, to smell the dumplings and the incense from temples.

After an hour—and perhaps a dumpling or two—you reach the next set of walls, equally massive. If you have the right credentials, you're allowed into the Inner City, also called the Manchu City, because it was designated for families of the Qing conquerors of China. The roads are better paved but still dusty and busy. Every so often an ornate palanquin appears, carrying someone important, and people have to step out of its way and wait for it to pass.

But maybe you are one of these important people—a noblewoman, a dignitary, a high official. Maybe your palanquin even has



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a little wood stove, like the emperor's, so you're cozy under your fox fur blanket. With servants to clear the way, you make rapid progress and are soon waved through another set of walls and into the imperial city.

It's less crowded here, with fewer shops. Brick walls are interrupted by an occasional grand gateway. If a gate is open, you might catch a glimpse of children chasing one another under lanterns left over from New Year's. Soon you're granted access through another wall and into the imperial park, where the wind hisses across frozen lakes: North Lake, Middle Lake, South Lake. You'll want to open your curtains wide to look at the famous sites: the Five Dragon Pavilions or the White Pagoda, whose bulbous stupa juts up from the top of Jade Flower Island. Maybe you ask your porters to stop for a moment on Rainbow Bridge to watch Manchu champions skating, their twirling figures reflected in the clear ice, so that they seem like phoenixes flying in the sky.[1]

Soon you arrive before the massive walls of the Forbidden City itself, which squat over a wide moat. Now, even you must get out of your palanquin and set foot on the cold flagstones, because beyond this point, only the emperor and a few favored ones are permitted to be carried. If your documents are sound, you're escorted through the long, cavelike entranceway into the Forbidden City.

The Forbidden City is a warren of courtyards laid out on a divine axis. The largest courtyards contain grand temple-like halls where the emperor presides over banquets, audiences, and ceremonies. The rites and sacrifices he performs are a key part of his job, because he's the prime intermediary between heaven and earth. When you meet him—if you're so lucky—his dragon throne will stand to the north, like the ever-constant pole-star, and you'll approach from the south, kneeling and touching your head to the floor three times and then standing and doing it again and again, three times three.

Each year a thousand ten thousands kowtow to him this way. Most do so far beyond the walls of Beijing, in the cities and towns of the provinces, prefectures, and counties, where his golden tablets are displayed in the temple-like offices of local ministers. But the lucky ones do it here in person, at one of the many halls and palaces. These fortunate people tend to be ministers, officials, princes,

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or nobles from the vast empire: Chinese, Mongols, Tibetans, and Turks. But each year, visitors also come from beyond the borders. Ever since the ancient kings accepted the obeisance of the people of the four directions, foreigners have come to take part in the harmonizing rites. This is how the earthly realm is ordered.

The current occupant of the dragon throne has been carrying out his duties for fifty-nine years, and the weight of office shows. His eighty-three-year-old eyes are so wrinkled he has to lift his head to see from beneath the drooping lids. His shoulders ache, and he can't draw a bow. He can walk but needs help climbing stairs. He has trouble sleeping. He can't hear well. He's forgetful.[2]

His reign is one of the longest ever recorded, and one of the most prosperous, but lately he's been worried. There are rumblings of rebellion, reports of strange teachers spreading dangerous ideas, complaints about dishonest officials bullying the people, news of robbers robbing and pirates pillaging. Most troubling, the rains and snows haven't come to the capital since last year.[3]

This may be a sign of heaven's disapproval, and who else is there to blame but him? As he frequently points out, he's never ceased to work tirelessly for the well-being of his subjects, carrying out the rites and prayers and sacrifices, reading memorials and issuing edicts, punishing the wicked and rewarding the good. But perhaps there's something to reproach in his conduct?

Maybe, he feels, he's wrong to have scheduled a party. Next New Year's Day will mark the beginning of his sixtieth year on the throne, and princes, dukes, and ministers from throughout the realm and beyond have begged him to hold a national celebration. Of course, every New Year's is celebrated with two weeks of banquets, fireworks, acrobatics, plays, concerts, wrestling displays, and ice-skating competitions. But his subjects say next year's festivities should be grander. After all, an emperor reigning for a full sixty-year calendrical cycle is a rare and wondrous thing. He has ruled as long as any other emperor in the thousands of years of recorded history, a clear sign of heaven's blessing.

He loves celebrations, especially when they focus on him and his many accomplishments, so he initially agreed to the proposals. After all, how could he deny his subjects' heartfelt wishes? But now he wonders whether such a celebration might manifest arrogance

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or self-satisfaction. It is especially troubling that a solar eclipse will occur right on New Year's Day next year. Eclipses have been seen from time immemorial as warnings from heaven, and this one will be followed just two weeks later by a lunar eclipse, which will coincide with the second most important day of the New Year's season—the Lantern Festival.

He acknowledges that solar and lunar trajectories and their resulting eclipses are in the category of things that have been determined for thousands of years, recalling the words of the ancient sage Mencius, who said, "Despite the height of heaven and the distance of the stars, one can calculate the solstice of a thousand years in the future while sitting in his seat if one has apprehended the underlying principles."[4] Still, it's highly unusual for two eclipses to occur during the first month of a lunar year.

The emperor decides to be cautious. "This is a clear portent," he proclaims, "a warning sign descending from heaven."[5] He declares that no grand celebration must take place:

> The capital has not obtained any auspicious snow since the beginning of winter last year, and up to today there still has not been any significant precipitation or rain. I long for moisture. Worried and worn down, I have been praying devoutly and piously and carrying out sacrifices, but still we've not received any precipitation. Enquiring into the reasons for this, it might be precisely this desire to allow the carrying out of a great celebration. Already, this borders on egotism and self satisfaction, . . . but next New Year's solar and lunar eclipse events make it impossible not to feel all the more a sense of fearful admonition and to reflect urgently and examine one's conscience. The great celebration ceremony for next year—it seems evident that it's not really necessary to hold it.[6]

He orders his ministers and officials to refrain from asking again for an anniversary celebration. In this way, perhaps heaven will bring succor "so that the districts of the common people will all increase in happiness and well-being. This is, in any case, my great wish, although I don't dare to suggest that it must be so."[7] He reassures his subjects that his decision doesn't foreclose the possibility of future festivities, and he suggests the following New Year, when he plans to abdicate and let his son take the throne, another rare and wondrous event.

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The edict ends as edicts do: "Let this order be known." But the Great Qing is unimaginably vast, stretching from the far Western oases of Turkmenistan to the Yellow Sea, from the tundra of northern Mongolia to the tropical beaches of Hainan Island, from the highest mountains of Tibet to the river ports of the Lower Yangtze, and its people are multitudinous and diverse. How can one make certain that the emperor's words are understood throughout the realm?

The answer is that the empire is held together not just by armies, officials, and legal codes, but by ritual. Of the six boards of government, the Board of Rites plays a central role. Rites organize the hierarchical relationship of all imperial subjects, and even those from beyond the borders. They are, as a historian has recently written, "the foundation of the Qing political system."[8]

The Board of Rites is responsible for promulgating imperial edicts, which it does via a series of ceremonies designed to extend the emperor's sacred presence into the farthest reaches of the realm. The process begins in the Forbidden City, where an edict is placed on an altar in the Hall of Great Harmony. High officials kowtow to it, and then one of them raises it up and gives it to another official, usually a President of the Board of Rites, who receives it with hands above his head. The president carries it down three flights of marble stairs to the vast paved courtyard below, where he places it on another altar, kowtows, pauses, lifts it again, and then, standing up, sets it on a lacquered tray. A canopy is raised over it, and the tray is carried southward through the Forbidden City, accompanied by a retinue of officials carrying flags, umbrellas, and instruments. At the southern gate of the Forbidden City, the Meridian Gate, the edict is placed in a special palanquin carved with dragons. It is kowtowed to again and then carried, incense wafting, through long paved courtyards southward beyond the Forbidden City to the Gate of Heavenly Peace, the main gateway between the Imperial City and the Inner City of Beijing.

Here, the edict is proclaimed from the top of the walls. Below, on the other side of the five marble bridges that span the Golden Water River, officials kneel and listen, and then they kowtow, heads touching the paving stones.[9] The edict is lowered from the gate, placed on the dragon palanquin, and carried across the central

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bridge—the Dragon Bridge—to the Board of Rites Building, accompanied by music and incense.[10] Here it's placed on another altar and kowtowed to. Not all edicts receive such attention, but all of the emperor's official communications involve this sort of ritual theater.

The officers of the Board of Rites are tasked with printing edicts so they can be sent out to the provinces and prefectures, where they'll be received in musical processions, displayed on altars, kowtowed to, and proclaimed out loud. In this way, the emperor's sacred authority is felt even in the farthest reaches.[11]

Yet it takes time for the emperor's orders to travel. An edict must be painstakingly carved into woodblocks, each character in reverse, and then printed, after which it must travel in multiple copies through the empire, post station to post station, canal lock to river port. By early April, a month after the edict is proclaimed in the Forbidden City, it seems that it still hasn't reached the great southern city of Canton, which is how the Dutchman Everardus van Braam Houckgeest gets a chance to go to Beijing.

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