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An Ode to Springtime The Ancient Capital in Bloom





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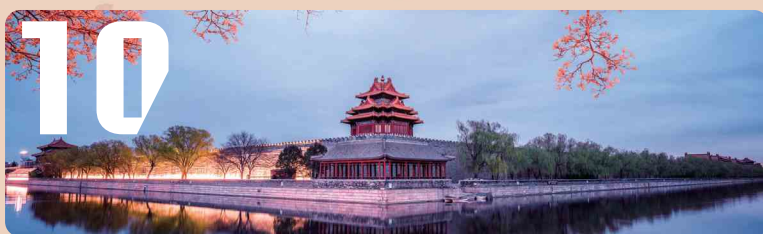
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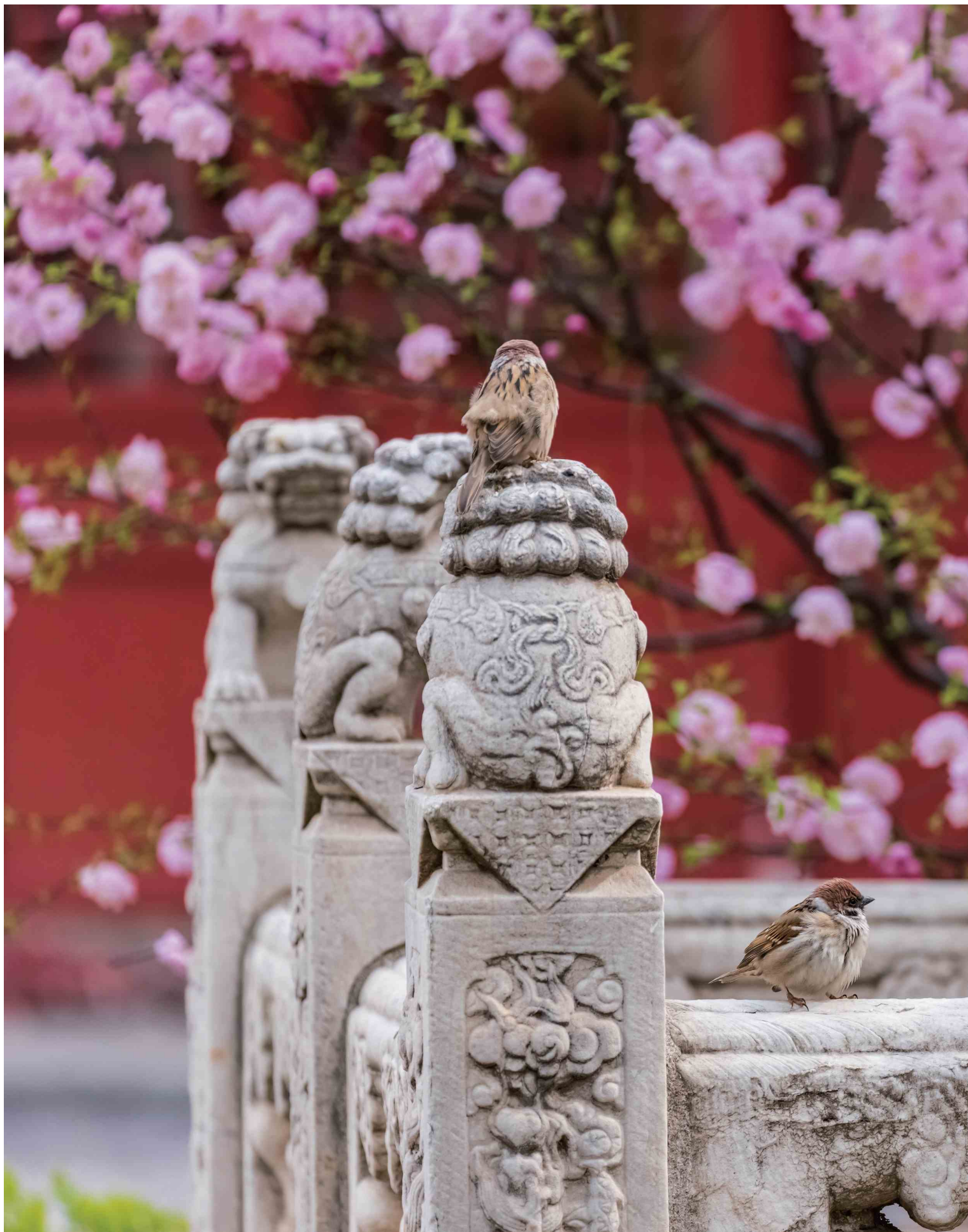
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Culture Express





Spring Flowers Refresh the Ancient Capital

Translated by Wang Wei Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi Photo by Jiang Litian

Spring arrives gently in Beijing, gracefully transforming the ancient capital into a vast garden once more. The city's inherent romance with flowers becomes evident, providing its residents and visitors with a warm and comforting daily connection to nature's beauty.

The earliest collection of Chinese poetry, *The Book of Poetry*, documents 132 species of plants. Since ancient times, Chinese people have not only admired the rich and beautiful forms of flowers and trees but have also utilised them to convey their pursuit of morality and aesthetic sensibility. Poems and essays praising flowers have consistently emerged since ancient China, with literati infusing flowers and trees with personification and human emotions.

Today, Beijing has truly evolved into a garden city. Everyone there enjoys convenient access to the beauty of nature. As flowers bloom one after another, the city exudes the essence of spring.





A Millennial City Filled with the Fragrance of Flowers

In Beijing, flowers grace every corner of the cityscape. Whether they are the familiar *yueji* (Chinese roses) adorning the streets or exotic blooms from distant lands, the grand garden displays a variety of flowers at Tian'anmen Square during National Day or the floral landscapes adorning street corners. Each scene is visually captivating and creatively unique. Beijing has indeed transformed into a city filled with the fragrance of flowers.

Beijing boasts a rich history of floriculture dating back to the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), when it served as the Jin's "Zhongdu" or Central Capital. Outside Fengyi Gate stood Baijiao Platform, also known as Fengtai, where farmers cultivated flowers, laying the foundation for the city's flower gardening industry. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, this industry flourished in Fengtai. Residents in villages like Fanjia, Huangtugang, Caoqiao, Yuquanying, Majiapu and Zhenguosi ingeniously utilised local conditions to cultivate a variety of plants in simple adobe greenhouses. They successfully nurtured plants like plum blossoms and peonies, even pioneering winter flowering production. These "Eighteen Villages in Fengtai" gained national fame for their large-scale flower and tree cultivation. Farmers transported these products to temple fairs at Longfu, Huguo and White Dagoba temples, while vendors peddled them on the city's streets, saturating every corner with a riot of colour.

Those 18 villages later evolved into Huaxiang Township, which was renamed Huaxiang Sub-District in 2021. Serving as the city's prominent horticultural industry hub, Huaxiang (flower township) is particularly renowned for its cultivation of *shaoyao*, the Chinese peony. During the fourth lunar month when Chinese peonies bloom, vendors flock to Huaxiang to procure a variety of flowers, including

this prized plant. The high-quality Chinese peonies from Huaxiang are quickly snapped up as soon as they hit the city's market. Not only popular in local markets, Chinese peonies also elevate Huaxiang as one of the premier destinations for flower enthusiasts, attracting numerous sightseers from afar.

While Chinese peonies are beautiful, they do not quite exude the same allure as flowering crabapple blossoms. During the Song (AD 960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, flowering crabapple blossoms were revered as the “Queen of Flowers.” Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, these trees were extensively planted across the capital city, gracing its gardens and temples with their elegant presence. The delicate and charming flowering crabapple blossoms were often likened to the faces of beautiful young women. In the eyes of the ancients, these blossoms symbolised love and the melancholy of parting, as they projected their emotions and experiences onto the spring flowers.

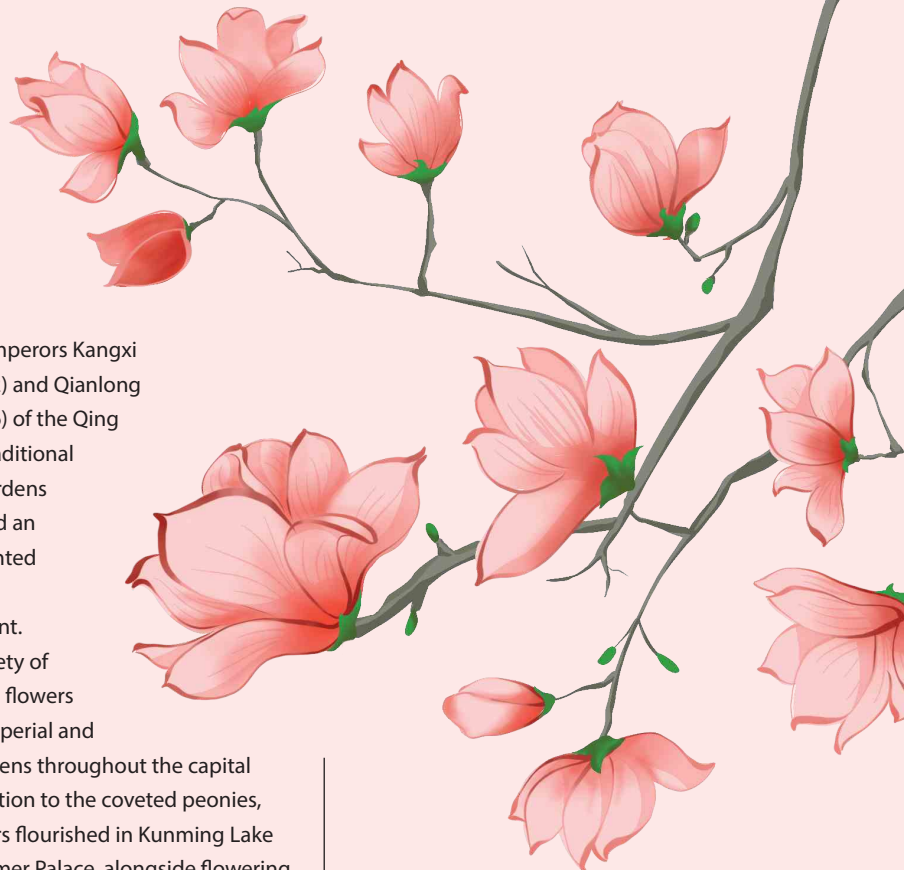
For centuries, Beijing residents have upheld the time-honoured tradition of “viewing *mudan*, or peonies, before and after the Grain Rain (between April 19 and 21), and enjoying *shaoyao*, or Chinese peonies, before and after the Beginning of Summer (between May 5 and 7).” Peonies hold profound significance in the hearts of Beijingers, revered by some as the “national flower,” symbolising their grand affection for this exquisite bloom. Jile Temple, first constructed during the Yuan or Ming dynasties, was renowned in ancient times for its flourishing peonies. From emperors to common folk, people from all walks of life would flock to admire the blooming peonies in April and May, igniting the entire capital city with excitement. Due to locals’ deep affection for peonies, the Peony Garden in Jile Temple is also affectionately known as the National Flower Hall. The widespread popularity of the peony can be attributed to its elegance, grace and magnificence, symbolising national prosperity and flourishing development.

During the Ming Dynasty and the

reigns of emperors Kangxi (1661–1722) and Qianlong (1735–1796) of the Qing Dynasty, traditional Chinese gardens experienced an unprecedented level of development. A wide variety of ornamental flowers adorned imperial and literati gardens throughout the capital city. In addition to the coveted peonies, lotus flowers flourished in Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace, alongside flowering crabapple and magnolia trees, as well as pines and cypresses in other areas of the imperial garden. During these periods, the capital city witnessed a widespread planting of flowers and trees, transforming flower appreciation into a popular and elegant trend. The gardens and temples in the capital city were bedecked with blooming flowers, creating a vibrant tapestry of spring colours.

In traditional Chinese culture, flowers are often personified, their characteristics likened to human traits, imbuing them

with symbolic meaning. Beijing residents deeply appreciate flowers, believing that plants possess virtuous qualities. They particularly admire the resilience of plum blossoms, the elegance of orchids and the purity of lotus flowers. These beautiful floral elements represent people’s commitment to a noble spiritual realm. Though the cycle of blooming and withering of flowers continues endlessly in Beijing, the city’s enduring love for flowers remains vibrant.





■ Vitalising the City with More Green Spaces

Just over seven decades ago, at the dawn of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing was characterised by a mere forest coverage rate of 1.3 percent, a far cry from the lush greenery and vibrant blooms that now adorn the city. Presently, the city proudly boasts a forest coverage rate of 44.9 percent, with tree-lined streets and verdant surroundings that evoke a sense of tranquillity in both locals and visitors alike. As spring approaches, new greens emerge on tree branches, heralding Beijing's first spring since being designated as a National Forest City of China in January 2024.

From its once barren mountainous regions to its now verdant spaces, the city's afforestation endeavours, which began in the 1980s, have turned this vision into reality. However, lush greenery remained insufficient in the city's urban areas. In 2012, the city launched two rounds of million-*mu* (one *mu* equals approximately 0.067 hectare) afforestation and greening projects. In just over a decade, more than 30 areas with over 10,000 *mu* of green space each and 260 areas with over 1,000 *mu* of green space each were established across the city's plains, effectively doubling the total forest resources in these areas.

Amidst the plethora of tree species worldwide, choosing the most fitting ones holds paramount importance for greening Beijing. The city's greening selection principles place emphasis on local species known for their longevity, resilience to adverse conditions, provision of food sources for both animals and humans, and aesthetic appeal. This succinct overview

encapsulates the essential traits required of the ideal tree species for Beijing, underscoring the meticulous planning behind the city's landscaping and greening endeavours.

Selecting trees for urban greening should be tailored to local conditions. Locally distributed native species demonstrate superior adaptability compared to plants introduced from other regions. If these tree species also exhibit longevity and resilience to adverse environments, the city can more effectively achieve a sustainable green landscape. By infusing dynamic beauty into the vibrant yet static canvas of greenery, Beijing's current splendour will shine even brighter.

The pollen, nectar, wild fruits and berries produced by the city's plants serve as vital food sources for wildlife. When selecting trees to green Beijing, experts carefully consider how growing plants could provide essential sustenance, water and shelter for small animals. By enhancing biodiversity, the city will establish a more robust and balanced ecological chain, promoting a healthier environment for all inhabitants.

In beautifying Beijing through greening efforts, the city prioritises the expansion of green spaces, enrichment of greenery levels and extension of the green season. The selected tree species predominantly feature large canopies, complemented by shrubs. Through mixed planting of trees, shrubs and grasses, the city aims to elevate its greening levels, showcasing seasonal characteristics such as spring flowers, summer shade, autumnal foliage and winter branches

to enhance the winter landscape effect. This approach will create a picturesque representation of evergreen and intertwined seasons within the cityscape.

Beijing's relatively square layout is encircled by several ring roads, extending from the Second Ring Road to the Sixth Ring Road. Harnessing this urban design, the city has cultivated three green belts: the urban park belt, the suburban park belt and the forest wetland park belt encircling it. This deliberate arrangement forms a picturesque and recreational network interwoven with blue and green elements, embracing residents and tourists alike in a lush environment, irrespective of their location within the city.

The surrounding greenery in Beijing is far more than a mere addition to the city's greening efforts. Amidst the verdant landscape, with colourful adornments interwoven above, flowers and trees harmoniously complement each other, gradually shaping Beijing into what can be aptly described as "an authentic garden city."

While traversing the city of Beijing, one is invariably struck by the green belts flanking several main ring roads like the Second Ring Road, Third Ring Road and Fourth Ring Road, embellished with climbing Chinese rose clusters soaring over one metre tall. Amidst the bustling traffic, these climbing Chinese roses craft a picturesque "dreamy wall." Mirroring the greening concept of Beijing's ring roads, the circular Chinese rose belt is aptly named "a Chinese Rose Necklace." Extending 250 kilometres, this urban flower belt not only imparts a unique scenic charm but also embodies Beijing's association with the Chinese rose as a city identity.

During a visit to Beijing in 2016, Kelvin Trimper, president of the World Federation of Rose Societies, was captivated by the exquisite cultivation of Chinese roses in the city. He marvelled at the array of colourful Chinese roses in shades of pale pink, crimson, light yellow, snow white and more. What he might not have realised was the enduring affection that Beijing residents have for Chinese roses. Over





30 years ago, Beijing held a city flower selection, and the Chinese rose emerged as the top choice with a 51 percent approval rate. This outcome was not unexpected, as even in the past when Beijing had limited greenery and plant diversity, Chinese roses thrived in the sparse floral landscape, becoming a familiar and easily accessible sight for locals, earning the moniker “the flower at the doorstep.” Blooming in three seasons, Chinese roses add vibrant hues to the city, creating a fresh and lively botanical ambiance for most of the year.

The Chinese roses burst into bloom from the city’s space belts along its ring roads to flower beds in individuals’ courtyard residences, from the city’s street gardens, small green spaces to pocket parks. In the blink of an eye, spring flowers blossom all over the capital city. Beijing’s greening efforts not only focus on extensive afforestation on the outskirts of the city but also pay attention to colourful flowers around individuals. Numerous parks and green spaces seem to have sprung up out of nowhere, including Guangyanggu Urban Forest, micro wetlands in the Asian Games Village, Xidan Pocket Park and Yong’an Balcony, allowing plants to flourish freely. Colourful Chinese roses, chrysanthemums and other flowering shrubs complement the tall Chinese scholar trees, pines and cypresses. Local residents in the city can now enjoy greenery from their windows and gardens when they leave their homes to experience more verdant spaces. Additionally, more famous parks in the city have removed their walls and fences, eliminating hindrances to the urban landscape. One expresses joy at the increased sense of greenery in the city: “Visiting parks no longer requires a sense of ritual but has become a way of life, where we can take a leisurely stroll after meals.”

Today, Beijing boasts over 1,000 parks of various sizes. The boundaries between residential areas and parks, urban areas and forests have blurred, with greenery spreading to every corner of the city. Beijing has transformed from a millennium-old city into a vibrant metropolis adorned with colourful parks brimming with floral beauty and charm.



Year after Year of Endless Floral Beauty

Translated by Wang Wei, Zhang Hongpeng Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi

Photos by He Rong, Jia Jianxin, Li Zhisong, Li Xiaoyin, Xiao Zhuang

Beijing can be compared to a tapestry, adorned with flowers in full bloom.

In spring, flowers bloom throughout the city. Summer invites one to embrace the vibrant life of the city's flowers. Autumn gifts Beijing with a sea of fresh flowers evoking happiness and joy. Winter, with its wintersweet blooms and golden reeds, reveals that each flower is a world unto itself.

Vibrant flowers distinctly characterise Beijing's four seasons. Generation after generation of Beijing residents have grown alongside this poetic cycle, ageing within its verses year after year.





Seeking Springtime in the City

In Beijing's spring, a plethora of flowers such as Yulan magnolia, peach, apricot, pear and lilac blossoms, alongside Chinese flowering crabapples, appear to vie for attention as they grace the city with their beauty. Their petals, adorning the branches, infuse the ancient capital's spring with vibrant hues. The gentle spring breeze meanders through the city's floral tapestry. Whether one wanders through ancient gardens, follows winding mountain streams, marvels at trees in full bloom or beholds a vast expanse of flowers, the spring narrative of a city pulsating with vitality and intense beauty becomes palpable.

Spring Blossoms in Ancient Temples

In early April, the Wenyang Road station of Beijing Subway Line 16 frequently witnesses considerable crowding. Amidst the influx of people, a cursory observation reveals a shared characteristic among the crowd: their pace is neither quick nor leisurely. It is evident that this is not the rush hour commute for work. Leaving from Exit C of the station and turning left leads to Dajuesi Road. Continuing straight along this road will soon bring one to Dajue Temple. In early April, the temple's Siyi Hall courtyard is adorned with Yulan magnolia blossoms in full bloom.

Ascending a flight of 21 stone steps leading to its main gate, passing through the gate ornamented with the hanging plaque "The Construction of Dajue Zen Temple according to an Imperial Edict," crossing a stone arch bridge and turning left to pass through a moon-shaped gate into the courtyard where Siyi Hall is situated, visitors are greeted by pure white Yulan magnolia blossoms hanging from the branches. The sight creates the impression that the branches are entirely concealed

by the blossoms, forming a stunning display: all blossoms seemingly integrated into a massive white bulb.

In traditional Chinese culture, the Yulan magnolia symbolises the demeanour of a gentleman, evoking deep affection among the Chinese people for its abundant blossoms. Even as its blossoms fade, its former beauty is still cherished. To ancient literati, the presence of a Yulan magnolia tree could elevate the elegance of an ordinary courtyard. The Yulan magnolia tree at Dajue Temple is over 300 years old, making it one of the city's most renowned specimens. Legend has it that the tree was planted by the temple's abbot, Jialing, during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722) of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Throughout the years, the Yulan magnolia has faithfully adhered to its natural cycle, blooming around the time of the Qingming Festival (between April 4 and 6), resembling “a pagoda reaching the sky” or “countless bright candles,” captivating literati spring after spring.

White, pink or purple Yulan magnolia blossoms have long been a springtime spectacle throughout Beijing. Noteworthy attractions include the breath-taking display of 94 Yulan magnolias lining Chang'an Avenue, a garden boasting over 5,000 of these blooms at the Beijing International Sculpture Park, the famed “Erqiao Magnolias” gracing Tanzhe Temple, an ancient magnolia tree adorning the front of Wanshou Hall in the Summer Palace and the revered Yulan magnolia at Dajue Temple. Among these treasures, the tree at Dajue Temple holds a special place in the hearts of Beijing residents. Today, beneath its ancient branches, visitors will find tea tables and lounge chairs, crafting a tranquil ambiance perfect for relishing the blossoms, indulging in tea and enjoying delightful conversations with friends—a truly

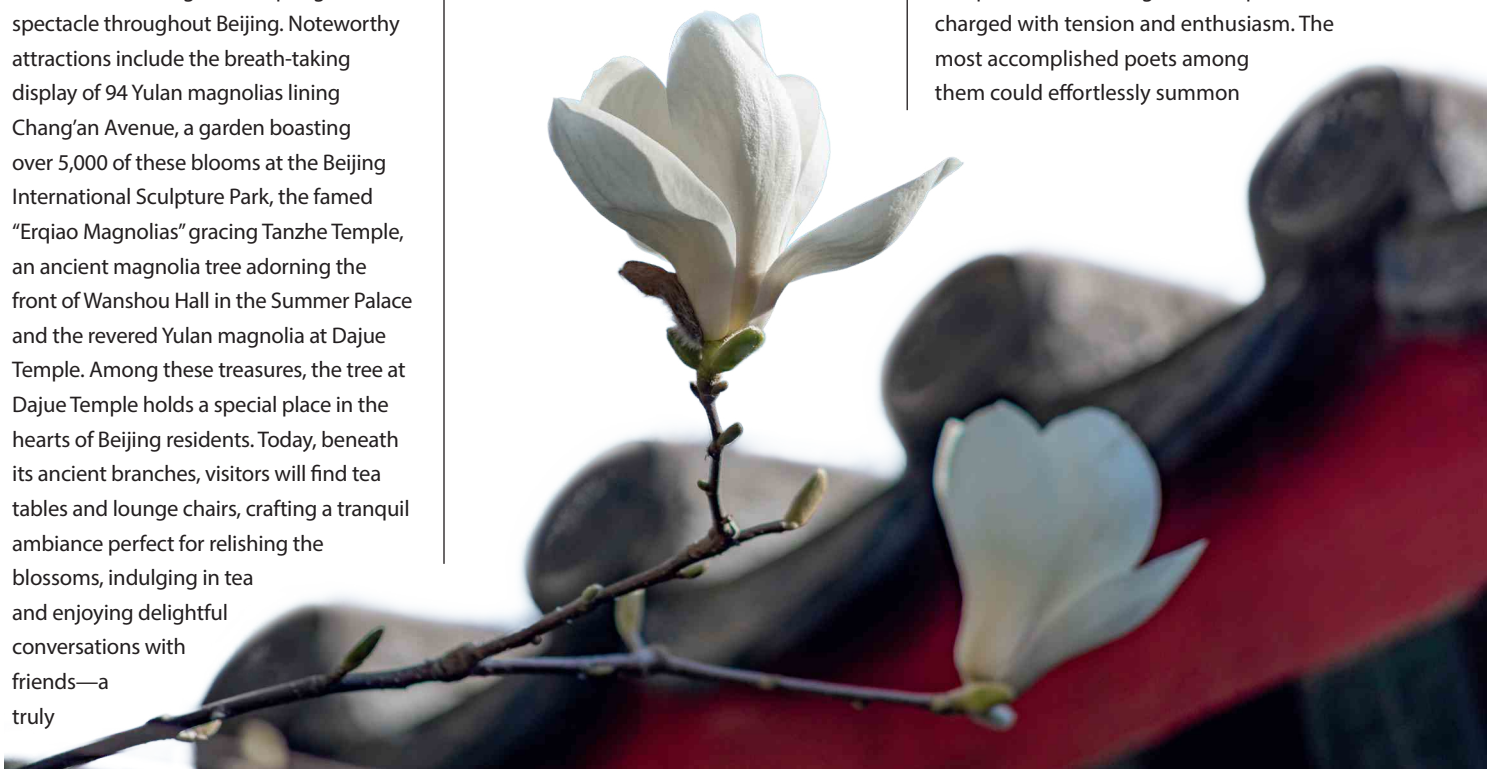
enchancing springtime pastime.

In addition to the Yulan magnolia blossoms at Dajue Temple, there are numerous other famous temples in Beijing offering splendid displays of spring flowers. Among them, Fayuan Temple stands out as one of China's most elegant temples. This ancient temple rose to prominence thanks to renowned writer Li Ao's (1935–2018) novel *Martyrs' Shrine: The Story of the Reform Movement of 1898 in China*, which vividly depicts the historical turbulence of that era.

The lilac tree, adorned with heart-shaped leaves symbolising “sincerity brings blessings” and exuding a rich floral fragrance, has long been favoured as the flowering woody plant of choice in Buddhist temples since ancient times. While the exact origins of lilac cultivation at Fayuan Temple in Beijing have faded into history, it is evident that the venerable monks who nurtured these lilacs possessed a remarkable skill for adapting to local conditions. Stepping into the temple's ancient courtyards, one encounters resilient trees that have weathered countless changes, surrounded

by vast natural vistas that extend beyond, enveloping the temple's crimson interiors. The lilacs, thriving in harmony, gracefully complement the temple's ancient structures such as the moon-shaped gates and long corridors, juxtaposed with fragrant and verdant flowering crabapples and Chinese scholar trees, symbolising boundless vitality, auspiciousness and tranquillity. This harmonious blend infuses the ancient temple with an enduring fragrance and serenity throughout the four seasons.

As far back as the Ming and Qing dynasties, the lilacs at the temple have enjoyed fame throughout the capital city. In mid-spring, when hundreds of blossoms burst forth in a riot of colours, literati would converge from all corners of the capital to partake in the annual cultural extravaganza held at the temple. These gatherings encompassed blossom appreciation, convivial drinking and the composition of poetry. Among them, the most illustrious was the Lilac Poetry Gathering, renowned as the capital's premier cultural event. During this occasion, participants engaged in poetic competitions, fostering an atmosphere charged with tension and enthusiasm. The most accomplished poets among them could effortlessly summon





Tourists along Haitang Huaxi

chapter and verse, eliciting admiration and applause from fellow poetry enthusiasts who eagerly joined in lively and sustained exchanges of poetic responses.

The Fayuan Temple Lilac Poetry Gathering continues to unfold as scheduled every April and May. As early spring bathes the temple in radiant sunshine and aromatic blossoms, poets, artists and residents of Beijing gather to recite poems, paint and play music, celebrating the exquisite beauty of the lilac blossoms. The temple exudes an enchanting atmosphere that captivates visitors, compelling them to linger and hesitate to depart. Year after year, the lingering aromas of incense and blossoms permeate the temple.

Bursting Beauties by the Water

Since antiquity, the Chinese have demonstrated a profound and nuanced sensitivity to nature, coupled with a keen

awareness of the passage of time. This innate appreciation has fuelled their enthusiasm for appreciating flowers in accordance with the seasons. Rooted in the rich soil of Chinese agricultural civilisation, this connection with plants runs deep, intertwining with their emotions. The changing seasons, marked by the blossoming and fading of flowers, serve as poignant reminders of the inexorable march of time. Through this rhythmic cycle, they bear witness to the ebb and flow of all things under heaven, experiencing both the fragility and resilience of life itself. Today, for the Chinese people, the enjoyment of flowers remains an idyllic and refined pastime, not merely centred on the spectacle of blossoms in full bloom, but also on the manner and setting in which this appreciation occurs.

The peach blossom has long held a cherished place in the hearts of the Chinese people, symbolising beauty since

ancient times. Whether flourishing in the untamed peach groves of the city's countryside or gracing its urban parks, peach blossoms never fail to captivate and draw admirers. Wherever they bloom, these delicate blossoms infuse the world with vibrant hues. Yet, in the eyes of ancient Chinese observers, it was the peach blossoms by the river, their blooms reflected in the crystal-clear spring waters that held the greatest allure. The gentle interplay between water and blossoms heightens the vibrancy of spring, creating an enchanting spectacle. In the sunny March days of Beijing, peach blossoms typically burst into full bloom. Along the southern edge of Longevity Hill in the Summer Palace lies Kunming Lake. Stretching from the Stone Boat to the western shores, one can traverse a stone bridge to reach the West Dyke of the lake. Here, the peach blossoms casting their reflection upon the tranquil waves define the distinctive charm of the spring scenery



along the West Dyke. Throughout the city, numerous early spring vistas showcase the beauty of peach blossoms in full bloom. Yet, it is on the West Dyke where peach trees and willows grace the shoreline that the spectacle reaches its zenith. Branches laden with peach blossoms extend towards the lake, some even dipping into the water, while delicate petals float gracefully on the surface. Amidst this picturesque setting, the swaying peach blossoms by the lakeside offer one of the most enchanting sights within the Summer Palace.

Thanks to the enchanting spring scenery, ancient Chinese poets often depicted falling flowers, such as peach blossoms drifting in rivers and lakes, as imbuing the water with fragrance. As the peach blossoms wane, however, another native flower of China, the flowering crabapple, bursts into full bloom across the city. Revered by literati and poets throughout the ages, this plant, known as

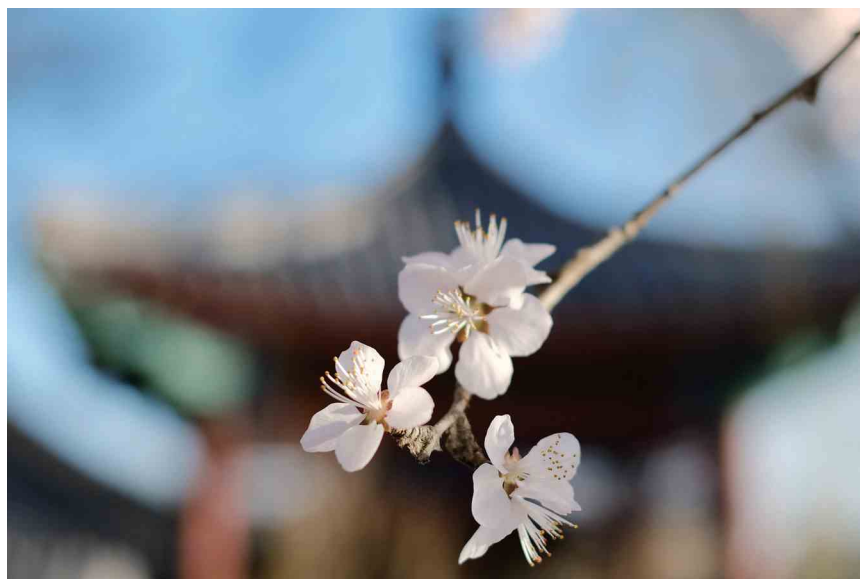
“the immortal among flowers,” has inspired countless verses. Among these poetic tributes, one of the most beloved is by the female poet Li Qingzhao (1084–1155): Last night the wind was strong and the rain was fine. / Sound sleep did not dispel the taste of wine. / When I ask the maid rolling up the curtains, / She answers, “The crabapple blossoms look the same.” / I cry, “Can’t you see? Can’t you see? / The green leaves are fresh, but the red flowers are fading!”

In ancient China, flowering crabapple blossoms symbolised wealth and power due to their rarity. They were often cultivated alongside Yulan magnolias, peonies and sweet osmanthus in imperial gardens, temples and the courtyard residences of affluent individuals and high-ranking officials, embodying the concept of “wealth and prosperity in a hall adorned with beautiful jades.” Beijing, as the nation’s capital for over 800 years, boasts countless architectural treasures like the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, Tanzhe Temple and the Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling (1893–1981), where the presence of flowering crabapple blossoms is prevalent. However, today, people prefer to admire these blossoms by strolling through Haitang Huaxi, or “Flowering Crabapple Blossom Creek.”

Nestled within the Yuan Dynasty Capital City Wall Ruins Park, Haitang Huaxi stands as the largest crabapple blossom grove in the city’s urban expanse. For those

unfamiliar with the area, the name “Huaxi” (“Blossom Creek”) might initially seem perplexing, given its obvious abundance of flowering crabapple trees. However, the explanation is quite straightforward. Over 3,000 vibrant flowering crabapple trees adorn both sides of the Xiaoyue River within the park, extending for one kilometre (km). During the peak of bloom, a profusion of petals, carried by the spring breeze, cascades onto the river’s surface, creating a picturesque scene reminiscent of a flowing creek of flowers, thus earning the grove its evocative name, “Blossom Creek.” Within Haitang Huaxi, one can encounter authentic varieties such as the Xifu and Jinxing flowering crabapples, adorning the landscape in a tapestry of colours.

In the minds of literati and scholars, flowering crabapple blossoms are revered for their exquisite beauty yet lamented for their absence of a rich fragrance. Shi Chong (AD 249–300) once expressed his wistfulness, remarking that if only flowering crabapple blossoms possessed a scent, he would construct a golden house to preserve it. Similarly, Zhang Ailing, also known as Eileen Chang (1920–1995), mentioned in one of her works on the study of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, that the lack of fragrance in flowering crabapple blossoms ranks among life’s three great unfortunate realities. Unlike the peony, celebrated in traditional Chinese culture as a national beauty with a heavenly





fragrance, the flowering crabapple blossom may lack scent, yet this characteristic adds to its unique allure, appealing to refined and popular tastes alike.

Not all flowering crabapple blossoms lack fragrance. The Xifu flowering crabapple (Kaido crabapple) tree is one exception, boasting rich, colourful and fragrant blossoms. Popular in traditional Beijing courtyard residences along hutongs, the Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling showcases two renowned old Xifu flowering crabapple trees adorned with vibrant blossoms in spring. Once the imperial garden of Prince Chun (1883–1951), the father of Puyi, the last emperor (reign: 1908–1911) of the Qing Dynasty, this courtyard complex preserves the nearly 300-year-old Xifu flowering crabapple trees as remnants of Prince Chun’s mansion. During April, the blossoms are in full bloom, transitioning from red-pink and light pink to eventually turning completely white within just one week. The morning after a night of spring breezes, the petals blanket the ground, creating a unique sense of elegance.

Fragrances Fill Every Nook and Cranny

As one rides in a car, passing clusters of flowers, petals may casually drift into the vehicle, evoking scenes reminiscent of beautiful and romantic love films. Today, stepping onto the “train to spring” at the foot of the Juyong Pass section of the Great Wall in Beijing offers the opportunity to run in the sky amidst dancing flowers, allowing one to become the protagonist of those memorable films.

Due to the slightly lower temperature at the high altitude of the mountainous areas in Beijing, every year as apricot, peach and cherry blossoms in the urban areas begin to wither, the mountain flowers along



the Juyong Pass section of the Great Wall burst into bloom, exuding their vitality and charm. In late spring, venturing into the city's outskirts and ascending the mountains reveals a variety of thriving spring blossoms. Their flowering period typically lasts for about half a month, during which time, from the hillside to the valley, they paint the landscape with white or light pink hues. Riding "the train to spring" to traverse alongside mountain flowers in the city's outskirts creates a picturesque scene, captivating the senses with a riot of colours.

Sitting on the train, slowly emerging from the darkness of the Juyong Pass Tunnel, one may suddenly encounter numerous branches adorned with pink peach and cherry blossoms, along with white apricot blossoms. Stretching endlessly, they form layers of hues that make it difficult to believe that this moment is real.

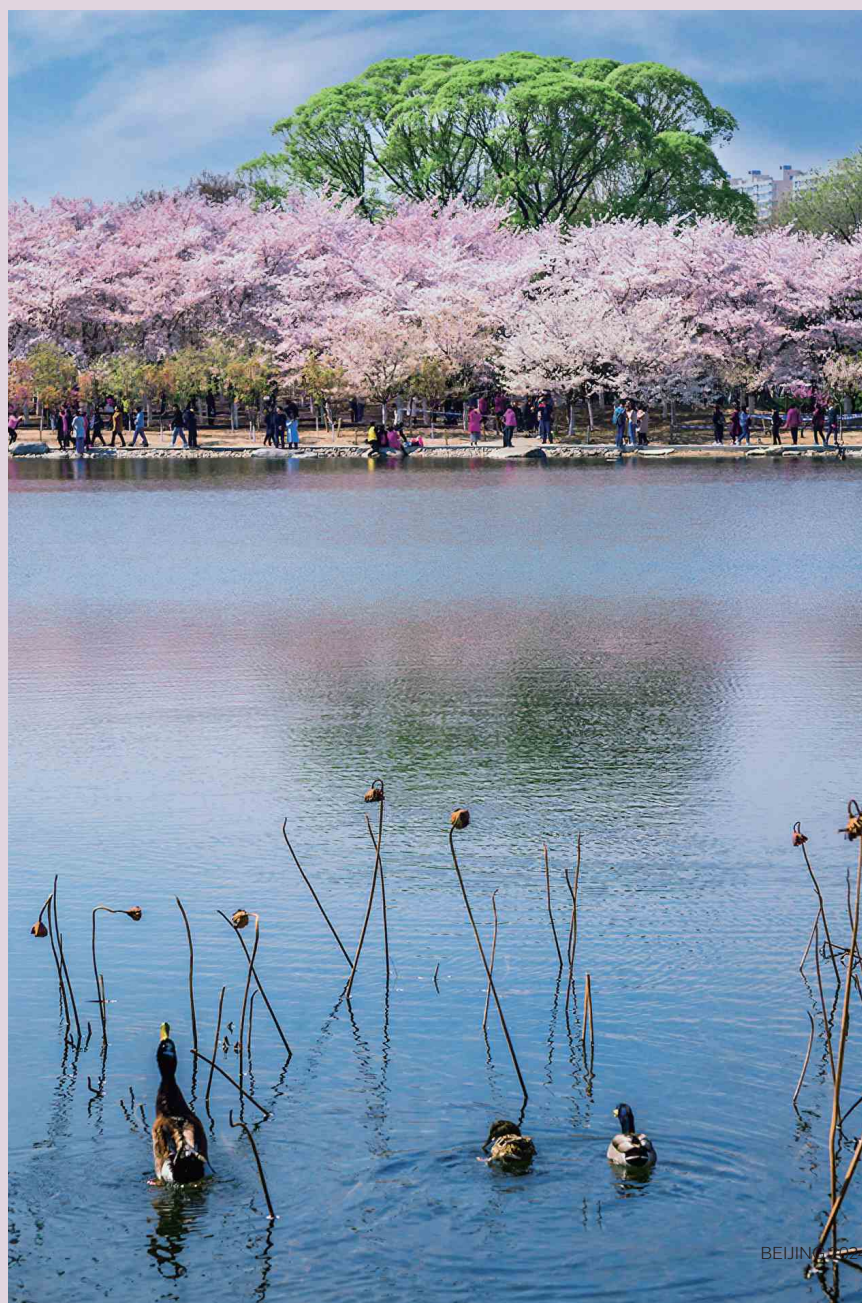
Whether capturing the vibrant spring colours of the city's mountains and wild fields or portraying the lively spring scenes within its ancient gardens, cherry blossoms invariably take centre stage. Along the Juyong Pass section of the Great Wall, cherry blossoms evoke the image of clouds and mist, while those in the city's parks enchant with their captivating and lovely blooms.

Yuyuantan Park boasts cherry blossoms that are unparalleled in the city. From late March to early April, the park becomes a heaven for cherry blossom enthusiasts as these delicate blossoms burst into abundant bloom. Characterised by their dense buds and delicate, translucent petals, cherry blossoms attract photographers who meticulously observe and contemplate their form, direction, colours and position to craft the perfect composition for their photos. Even seemingly ordinary buds or branches, with careful composition, can be transformed into stunning beauty. Shooting into the light, with the light projecting from behind onto the petals, outlines graceful shapes and forms a layer of highly aesthetic halo on the blossoms. Employing a large

aperture for close-up shooting creates a dreamlike, painting-like colour palette in the lens. Each cherry blossom becomes an endless source of inspiration, immersing people in the bustling crowd as they strive to hold the camera steady, avoid interference and capture the park's most exquisite cherry blossoms.

Cherry blossoms boast over 300 varieties, with the classic Japanese cherry and Yoshino cherry being the most cultivated types in the park. In Beijing's spring, each cherry blossom tree strives to flaunt its beauty within a narrow timeframe, appearing as white as snow and as pink as rosy clouds. In

Japan, cherry blossoms are known as *hanafubuki*, meaning "fallen cherry blossoms scattering and flying around like snowflakes." Carried by the gentle spring breeze, countless pink and white petals continuously flutter in the park's cherry blossom groves before gracefully descending to the ground. After captivating onlookers with their brilliant display, the blossoms return to the earth without any reluctance. Undoubtedly, they rank among the world's most unrestrained blossoms. Being surrounded by the park's cherry blossoms evokes a profound sense of awe, owing to their magnificent presence.





A Riot of Radiant Summer Colours

The Beginning of Summer, falling on May 5 to May 7, marks the transition from spring to summer in Chinese solar terms. During this period, the city retains a late spring ambiance characterised by vibrant and fragrant scents. Lotus flowers emit their delicate fragrance, Chinese peonies, known as *shaoyao*, display their elegant blooms, Chinese roses compete for beauty and wisterias exude an aura of purity and cleanliness. Each flower, in its moment of blooming, endeavours to showcase its unique beauty, magnificently expressing its aspirations and epitomising the essence of a splendid summer day to onlookers.

Shaoyao and Peony Exude Their Own Unique Beauty

As spring gives way to summer and other flowers fade, the Chinese peony stands out as a rare sight in the city. Jingshan Park offers a captivating display of these flowers, including the vibrant red *hongyun yingri* ("red clouds reflecting the sun"), the delicate pink *Xi Shi fen* ("belle Xi Shi's pink") and the majestic purple *wulong tanhai* ("a black dragon exploring the sea") varieties of Chinese rose. With their blooms, the park transforms into a colourful spectacle. During this season, some visitors may mistakenly identify

shaoyao as peonies, a testament to the captivating allure of these blossoms.

Chinese peony and peony are often mistaken for each other due to their striking similarities. During the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), the poet Liu Yuxi (AD 772–842) famously described Chinese peony as "seductive," contrasting with the peony's reputation as a national beauty renowned for its heavenly fragrance. Since then, the term "seductive" has become a defining characteristic of the Chinese peony, emphasising its irresistible allure. This description, far from derogatory, underscores the flower's captivating



woman invited a man to admire the spring scenery together. Though the man had already seen it, he agreed to accompany her once more, not for the landscape, but for the opportunity to present her with Chinese peonies. Dubbed “farewell grass” in ancient times, Chinese peonies symbolised affection or parting between lovers. The man’s intention in offering the flower, as depicted in *The Book of Poetry*, is unmistakable.

Prior to the Tang Dynasty, the peony was known simply as *mu shaoyao*, or “wooden Chinese peony.” Peony and Chinese peony coexisted for a significant period, with the former eventually surpassing the latter to be hailed as the “national beauty with heavenly fragrance.” During the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (reign: AD 690–705), the blooming of peonies often caused a stir in the capital city of Luoyang (in today’s Henan Province). Thanks to the empress’s patronage, the flower was extensively cultivated, leading to the development of highly ornamental varieties. Despite being crowned the “king of flowers,” the peony could not diminish the ancients’ affection for the Chinese peony. Poets such as Bai Juyi (AD 772–846), Han Yu (AD 768–824), Yuan Zhen (779–831), Qin Guan (1049–1100) and Jiang Kui (1155–1121) frequently referenced Chinese peony in their works. Furthermore, renowned

artists created masterpieces featuring the Chinese peony. During the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Guangxu (reign: 1875–1908) even painted a picture depicting the Chinese peony. Artists like Yun Shouping (1633–1690) and Zhou Zhimian, who flourished during the reign of Emperor Wanli (1573–1620), often produced exquisite artworks centred on the Chinese peony.

After the peonies have faded, Chinese peonies burst into full bloom. Each bulb of a Chinese peony is as large as an adult’s fist, with petals arranged meticulously, creating a unique beauty and filling the air with a delightful fragrance at the site of the ruins of Louyuekaiyun in Yuanmingyuan, also known as the Old Summer Palace. Originally named Peony Terrace, Louyuekaiyun was one of the earliest structures in Yuanmingyuan. Historical records reveal that on March 25, 1722, Emperor Kangxi made a special visit to Peony Terrace to admire the beautiful blooms. During this visit, in addition to Yinzhen (one of Kangxi’s sons, later Emperor Yongzheng) accompanying Emperor Kangxi, the 12-year-old Hongli (later Emperor Qianlong) met his grandfather, the emperor, for the first time in the imperial garden. The tale of three generations gathering to appreciate both peonies and Chinese peonies has been passed down through the ages, bringing fame to Peony Terrace.

nature. Indeed, the beauty of the Chinese peony transcends mere surface appearances; upon closer observation, one can discern the flower seemingly revelling in its own magnificence.

The Chinese people’s reverence for and depiction of the flower traces back to eras preceding the founding of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). *The Book of Poetry* recounts a tale: during the Shangsi Festival, a warm spring breeze thawed a frozen river, casting the Zhen River and Wei River in shimmering green waves. Those residing by the rivers would bring orchids to bathe in the water, seeking to dispel ill fortune. In this narrative, a





▲ Lotus flowers in Beihai Park

Today, as spring arrives at Peony Terrace, Chinese peonies bloom in hues of red and pink, emanating the essence of nature and evoking tranquillity for onlookers. It is remarkable to ponder that Chinese peonies were once considered unconventional due to their captivating allure and were not perceived as rivals to peonies. To ancient observers, both varieties held their distinct charm, rendering them indispensable in each other's company.

Refreshing Lotus Scent from Lakeside Attractions

The lotus flower, a key element of traditional Chinese culture, is often likened to a melodious symphony of summer that has entranced people since ancient times. Across history, countless scholars and poets have extolled this botanical

marvel in their works, with one of the most renowned being “On the Love of the Lotus” by Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073). Zhou’s masterpiece has entrenched the image and significance of the lotus flower, dubbing it the “nobleman among flowers,” possessing a dignified demeanour akin to individuals of noble and self-respecting character. The allure of the lotus emanates from its graceful form, vibrant hues and profound cultural symbolism. Admiring lotus flowers has evolved into a cherished pastime for Chinese individuals during the summer months.

The lotus ponds nestled within the city’s attractions such as Beihai, Shichahai, Yuanmingyuan and Lianhuachi have garnered devoted followers, each with its own distinctive allure. The Garden of Harmonious Interest in the Summer Palace offers a picturesque vista of lotus flowers under the moonlight, with garden pavilions

providing a stunning backdrop. Beihai Park, famed for its serene ambiance, provides an ideal setting to admire lotus flowers in the clear, post-rain morning. Its expansive grounds and the gentle morning light evoke a poetic atmosphere reminiscent of the graceful “Lotus Dance” performed by a Chinese art troupe in New York.

Beihai Park, once an imperial garden during the Ming and Qing dynasties, holds a rich history of lotus cultivation. Whether as the “imperial favourite” among the Qing Dynasty’s three major lakes or as part of the current initiative to highlight each of the city’s parks based on their unique features, such as floral displays, lotus flowers have perennially dominated the summer scenery in Beihai and the capital as a whole. During summer days, Beihai teems with visitors, and the park’s lakeside docks bustle with customers inquiring about the prices of pleasure boats. Upon



boarding, the delicate fragrance of lotus flowers wafts through the air. As the boat glides closer to the lotus blooms, the towering lotus leaves dwarf the passengers. Despite the cordoned-off area around the lotus blooms, gentle breezes reveal the graceful sway of the petals, enhancing their beauty up close even more than from afar.

The Lotus Flowers Market in Shichahai stands out as one of the city's beloved attractions for flower enthusiasts. Upon entering this enclave, the traditional architectural style of quaint buildings arranged in an orderly manner evokes the ambiance of Old Beijing. In the summer, as visitors leisurely stroll and engage in conversation within the market, they may find themselves unexpectedly drawn to a vast lotus flower pond, experiencing a genuine sense of tranquility and coolness in that serene moment.

Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Shichahai has drawn crowds seeking relief from summer heat and the beauty of lotus flowers. During the Lotus Viewing Festival on the 24th day of the sixth lunar month, a bustling lotus flower market would emerge. Vendors sold various items such as tea, lotus root drinks, toys, books and seasonal cultural products. Street performers entertained visitors. For native Beijingers, memories of summer include the scent of lotus, dragonflies, sour plum soup and lotus lanterns floating on the lake on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month. These cherished childhood memories encapsulate the essence of summertime in Beijing.

Today, Beijing residents prefer leisurely walks along the west bank of Shichahai to admire lotus flowers. The combination of admiring lotus flowers at night and singing while

drinking, which merges classical summer scenery with trendy bar music, offers a fresh perspective on summer life at this lakeside spot. These attractions are embraced by tourists, offering a distinctive form of entertainment.



Unique Beauty of the Chinese Rose

By July, Beijing feels the onset of summer's heat, yet many drivers on the Second Ring Road remain reluctant to roll up their car windows. The streets bustle with traffic, the thoroughfare divided by a lengthy barrier adorned with lush climbing Chinese roses.

Around 250 km of major roads like the Second Ring Road are embellished with Chinese roses, forming a spectacular long barrier belt that contributes to one of the capital city's distinctive landscapes. This achievement is the outcome of over three decades of promoting Chinese rose cultivation in the city. Presently, Chinese roses

bloom vibrantly in the heart of the urban landscape, adorning streets, parks, gardens and the courtyards of hutong residences.

With its enduring vitality and rich historical significance, the Chinese rose has been designated as Beijing's official city flower and stands as one of the symbols of the ancient capital. Even amidst the chilling winds of December, Chinese roses defiantly flourish in every corner of the city, radiating a beauty unyielding to the harsh cold. This perpetual blooming trait has earned it the endearing titles of the "flower of eternal spring" and the "red flower of every month."

Ancient yet modern, Beijing harbours a profound fondness for the Chinese rose. This affection springs not only from its

graceful form and enchanting fragrance but also from its steadfast endurance through harsh winters and scorching summers, echoing the resilience and determination of Beijingers. Chinese roses embellish the lives of the city's residents, enriching their inner worlds with beauty and depth. In Old Beijing, whether among the imperial court or common households, Chinese rose motifs adorned various items, such as a vividly painted porcelain cup from the Ming Dynasty depicting colourful chickens amidst vibrant red blooms. Furthermore, images of Chinese roses frequently find themselves featured in paintings, photography and literary works. Within the Forbidden City, a notable painting by Ju Lian (1828–1904)



Chinese roses on the Second Ring Road

masterfully captures the delicate brushstrokes of a Chinese rose thriving amidst adversity, symbolising its resilience and ability to flourish despite challenges. Through this artwork, not only is the vitality of the Chinese rose celebrated, but it also serves as a metaphor for the indomitable spirit of the city.

The Chinese rose embodies a captivating fusion of visual and spiritual magnificence, enhancing the lives of every Beijing resident. With each sunrise and sunset, the graceful Chinese roses serenely adorn the bustling cityscape, providing solace to its urban dwellers. These flourishing blooms have gifted millions of Beijing residents with boundless joy and an extraordinary existence.





Graceful Flowers Under the Autumn Moon

The city's unique cycle of seasons unveils its ever-transforming beauty. Though autumn flowers may not bloom with the same vibrancy as those in spring and summer, they exude a distinct charm of their own. Exploring the historical significance of renowned flowers like sweet osmanthus, chrysanthemums and begonias not only allows one to appreciate fleeting beauty but also unveils the artistry of garden landscaping, immersing individuals in the encompassing beauty that envelops them.

The Sweet Fragrance of Osmanthus Permeates the City

When sweet osmanthus blooms in southern China, people in Beijing also delight in the sight of beautiful osmanthus blossoms.

The osmanthus flower, renowned for its fragrance, was revered as the most aromatic among all autumn blooms in ancient times. Chinese tradition celebrates the admiration of well-known flowers during the mid-autumn days. However, due to the harsh winter climate in northern China, osmanthus shrubs cannot thrive in Beijing during the colder months. To savour the beauty of osmanthus, flower growers in the imperial palace during the Qing Dynasty cultivated osmanthus shrubs in imperial greenhouses. These shrubs, carefully nurtured, boasted elegant shapes and abundant blossoms akin to those in southern China. During the mid-autumn festivities, bonsais of osmanthus shrubs adorned imperial gardens, delighting emperors and empresses alike. Today, the Summer Palace and Zhongshan Park, once imperial domains, remain popular havens for admiring osmanthus flowers in Beijing.

Thanks to its unique allure and rich historical significance, osmanthus shrubs stand as bright pearls within the Summer Palace. Featuring a diverse array of osmanthus varieties, these shrubs boast a deeply rooted historical legacy. During the Guangxu era (1875–1908), Empress

Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) held a fondness for osmanthus flowers and instructed the placement of over 100 pots of osmanthus shrubs in the Hall of Happiness and Longevity and along the Long Corridor of the Summer Palace during autumn. As a result, the palace was enveloped in an enchanting fragrance. Standing prominently in front of the Hall of Happiness and Longevity are two majestic osmanthus trees, each towering at three metres in height, serving as a scenic highlight. Despite the passage of time, these ancient osmanthus trees continue to flourish within the Summer Palace.

During the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Summer Palace hosts an osmanthus-themed cultural event. Yellow and white osmanthus blossoms are scattered among the green leaves. In the breeze, their petals gently swirl down from the branches, adorning the roofs of the palace's ancient structures.

Chrysanthemums Blooming in Frost

As chrysanthemums bloom in late autumn, they often endure frosty conditions. Chinese people deeply admire the flower's resilience in facing harsh natural environments, viewing it as a symbol of fortitude and bravery.

The cultivation of chrysanthemums in Beijing traces its roots back to the Liao Dynasty (AD 916–1125). Historical records indicate that in 1057, Yelü Hongji (1032–1101), the eighth emperor of the Liao Dynasty, led officials and officers to the South Capital (present-day Beijing) to admire chrysanthemums. On a bright, clear day outside the Guang'an Gate of the capital, a vibrant platform adorned with chrysanthemums attracted a gathering of many people. The empress dowager, emperor and empress sat upon this platform, enjoying the beauty of the chrysanthemums while indulging in drinks. Yelü Hongji harboured a deep affection for chrysanthemums and dispatched envoys to transplant them from Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty (AD 960–1127), on several occasions. Under his decree, numerous chrysanthemum gardens were established within the Danfeng, Kaiyang, Tongtian and Gongchen gates of the South Capital.

The emperor's fondness for

chrysanthemums led to their flourishing in the capital. In ancient Beijing, no flowers bloomed later than chrysanthemums, which typically blossom in the ninth month of the traditional Chinese calendar. Consequently, admiring these flowers became a popular pastime in the city. During the Double Ninth Festival, both Khitan and Han people frequented markets to purchase chrysanthemums for home decoration. Additionally, it was common for individuals to wear chrysanthemums in their hair and partake





of chrysanthemum wine. In the Ming Dynasty, people could even change the florescence of chrysanthemums.

And according to *Notes of Landscapes and Natural Resources in Beijing*, a remarkable horticultural technique known as “*tanghua*” emerged in the imperial court, allowing for the manipulation of flower blooming times. Using this technique, temperatures could be adjusted within enclosed spaces, enabling flowers to bloom at any desired time. For instance, peonies could bloom in winter and chrysanthemums in spring. The Tanghua Room in Zhongshan Park stands as a

testament to this technique, functioning as a greenhouse where flowers bloom year-round. The sight of peach blossoms, peonies and chrysanthemums in spring would be truly remarkable. This innovative approach to horticulture not only captivated flower enthusiasts but also added a unique vibrancy to Beijing’s floral landscapes. During the Qing Dynasty, growing chrysanthemums was common in imperial palaces, dignitaries’ mansions and common households alike, introducing many renowned chrysanthemum varieties into the city.

Today, chrysanthemums hold not just a cultural significance but also the esteemed title of Beijing’s city flower. Annually, during the chrysanthemum festival, exhibitions bloom across the city’s prominent venues like the China National Botanical Garden, the Temple of Heaven, Beihai Park and the Beijing Garden of World’s Flowers. These displays dazzle visitors with over 1,000 precious chrysanthemum varieties and lifelike artworks in myriad shapes.

Emotional Begonias, a Grief Trigger in Chinese Literature

In autumn, alongside chrysanthemums, Beijingers can also

delight in the beauty of begonias.

In Chinese, the Chinese flowering crabapple is called “*haitang*,” while the begonia is known as “*qiu haitang*.” Despite their similar names, these plants are entirely distinct. Unlike the Chinese flowering crabapple, the begonia is an herbaceous plant. Begonia branches readily take root when inserted into soil, making them a favourite among old Beijingers for planting in shady areas behind houses or in yards. While people may not meticulously care for the plant, begonias reliably bloom each autumn.

The begonia is also known as “*duanchang hua*” (meaning “heart-breaking flower”). Legend has it that during the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279), the poet Lu You (1125–1210) was forced to divorce his wife, Tang Wan (1128–1156). In a poignant gesture, Tang gave Lu a pot of begonias as a keepsake. Whenever Lu beheld the flower, he was reminded of Tang and missed her deeply, leading him to affectionately dub it “*duanchang hua*” to express his enduring love for her. From then on, the begonia became synonymous with heartache and longing.

In *The Return of the Condor Heroes* by Hong Kong writer Jin Yong



(Louis Cha Leung-yung, 1924–2018), a paragraph vividly describes begonias. When Huang Rong encounters a cluster of begonias at the base of a weathered wall, she exclaims, “The begonias are so beautiful!” Lu Wushuang then informs her, “Senior sister apprentice, the flower is called ‘*duanchang hua*’ in our Jiangnan region and is considered a sign of bad luck.” Curious, Huang inquires, “Why is it called *duanchang hua*?” Lu replies, “In the past, a girl missed her boyfriend, who did not visit her. She often wept at the foot of a wall. Later, a cluster of flowers bloomed there. The flower has green leaves, of which the back is red and looks pretty. People say that the leaves only appear red on the back, so the flower is heartless. Therefore, they call it ‘*duanchang hua*.’” Cheng Ying recalls Yang Guo’s past encounter with begonias in Jueqing Valley, where he consumed them to counteract the poison of *qinghua*. Cheng then picks two begonias, remarking on their beauty as “*bayuechun*.” Reflecting on the mysterious nature of flowers, Cheng muses quietly, “When I ask flowers whom you bloom for, you don’t answer me. Who do you bloom, fall off or feel heartbroken for? Some flowers fall on flowing water, while others fall on ground and turn into dust.”

At that time, begonias become a trigger to Cheng Ying’s grief. The pretty girl is secretly in love with Yang Guo, but dares not tell anyone. Writer Jin Yong used begonias to communicate Cheng’s heart-breaking love to readers.

In Beijing, begonias commonly adorn flower beds and yards, adding vibrant splashes of colour to spaces like the China National Botanical Garden and the Beijing Garden of World’s Flowers. Despite their ubiquity in the city, begonias are often overlooked due to their commonplace presence. However, those who have the opportunity to observe begonias up close should take the time to appreciate their delicate beauty and perhaps discern a hint of sorrow within their petals.





Beiwu Park



Flowers in Winter

In winter, trees and grass wither under the snow-blanketed landscape of Beijing. During this season, flowers shed their usual tenderness and beauty, taking on a sombre yet captivating allure. In late autumn and early winter, reed catkins flourish in wetlands, evoking feelings of melancholy and sorrow as visitors stroll along the banks of Beiwu Lake, especially at sunset. Conversely, late winter and early spring

bring the blooming of wintersweets, signalling the imminent arrival of spring. In revered old temples and famous gardens, visitors have the opportunity to admire the enchanting charm of these remarkable wintersweets.

Thriving Reed Catkins in Early Winter

In late autumn and early winter, lush greenery is a rarity in Beijing, let alone blooming plants. In such a barren landscape, the sight of blooming reed catkins becomes all the more precious, breathing life into the otherwise bleak cityscape.

While observing reed catkins, some discover a sense of vitality, while others experience a feeling of bleakness.

Throughout history, many intellectuals have felt unsettled when encountering reed catkins, leading them to compose numerous emotional poems about this subject. In the realm of poets, reed catkins frequently evoke distressing emotions in people.

Chinese poems and ink-wash paintings often employ simple depictions to evoke emotional atmospheres and create imaginative spaces. When reading poems about reed catkins, people may envision a small sailing boat concealed within the reed bed, an angler peacefully seated among the reeds or reed catkins gently swaying in the moonlight. In Chinese literature, reed catkins serve as a poignant symbol of sorrow.

In Beijing, reed catkins can be admired at various scenic spots, often



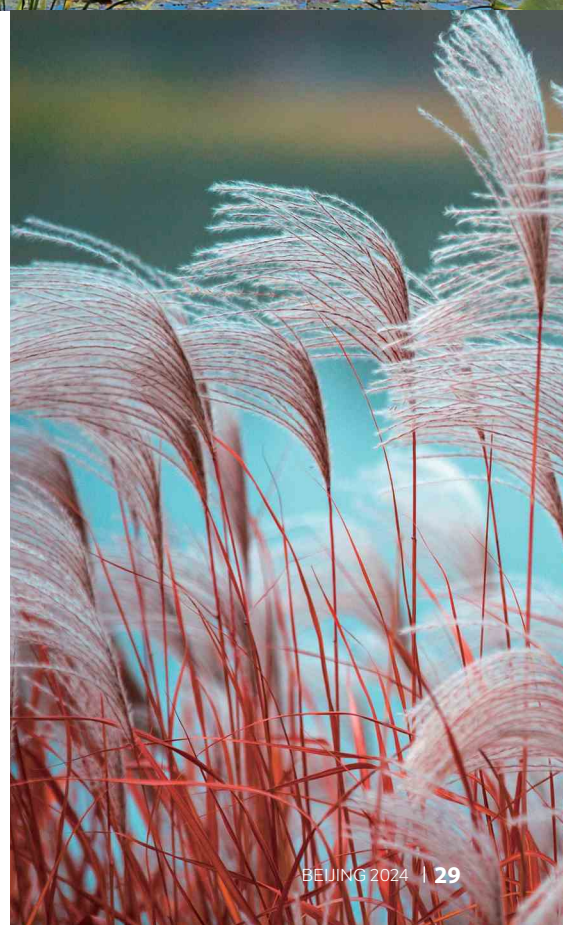
found along the waterfronts of lakes or boardwalks in parks. For those seeking a particularly beautiful and evocative scene, Beiwu Park's reed catkins come highly recommended.

Beiwu Park, situated west of the Summer Palace, often escapes the notice of tourists. With its sparse visitors, the park offers a tranquil sanctuary amidst the bustling city. Echoing the traditional charm of nearby parks like the Summer Palace and Jade Spring Hill Park, Beiwu Park features traditional architectural designs and layouts. Walking along its slopes, visitors are greeted by expansive lawns and diverse trees. On one side, a serene lake reflects the sky, clouds and surrounding foliage; in the distance, Yufeng Pagoda atop Jade Spring Hill adds to the picturesque landscape, resembling a breath-taking painting of

mountains and water.

At the heart of the park lies a tranquil lake, serving as an ideal habitat for reeds. In late autumn, the reeds take on a golden hue and catkins begin to sprout. As the catkins reach full bloom, their flight resembles wisps of smoke or drifting snowflakes. Even as early winter sets in and the grass and trees begin to wither, the reed catkins endure, swaying gently in the breeze. Their flight into the sky creates an ethereal scene reminiscent of a delicate snowfall. Walking amidst the reed bed beneath the white clouds evokes the sensation of strolling through picturesque scenery found in southern China.

Nestled among the reeds, visitors can immerse themselves in the essence of traditional Chinese paintings with reed motifs.





Wintersweets Distinguished for Fragrance

When it comes to winter flowers, fragrant plum blossoms immediately spring to mind for Chinese people. A well-known line of poetry describing plum blossoms in China goes, "From afar, they can't be mistaken for snow; for a delicate fragrance comes wafting with a breeze." The proverb, "There will be no fragrant plum blossoms without freezing cold weather," evokes associations of resilience and tenacity with these delicate blooms. However, in regions of northern China like Beijing, plum trees typically bloom in March and April. Wintersweets, which share a similar name with plum blossoms in China, usually bloom in the 12th month of the traditional Chinese calendar. When wintersweets grace Beijing with their blooms, the weather remains chilly and other flowers are still absent. The yellow petals of wintersweets herald the imminent arrival of spring.

The wintersweet, known as "*lamei*" (literally, "wax plum") in China, is a species of shrub characterised by its glossy branches, which appear as though

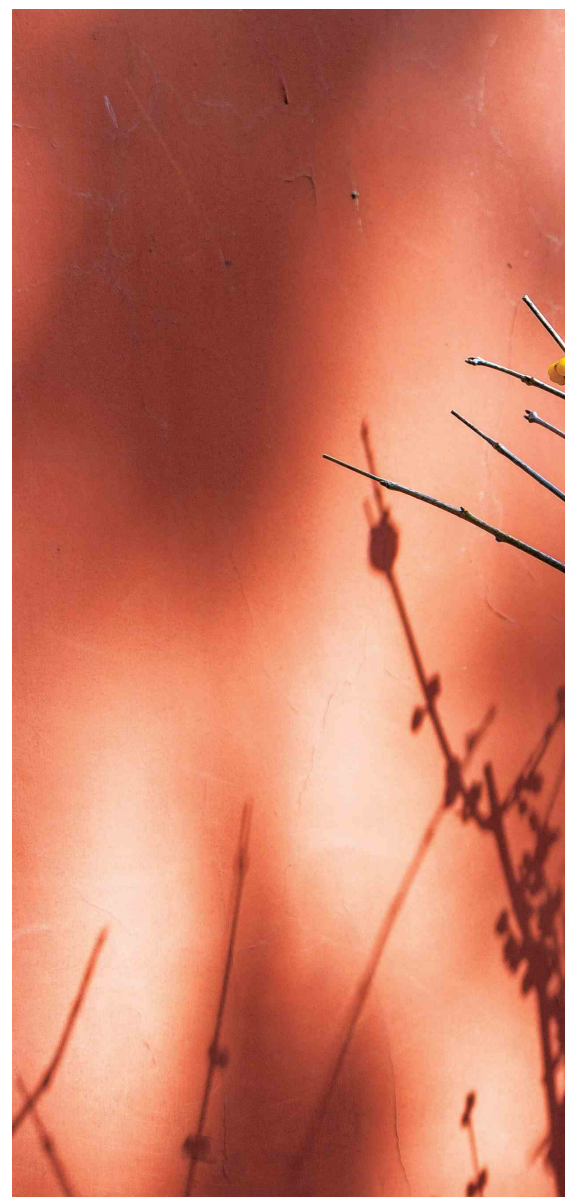
polished with wax. In *Compendium of Materia Medica* by Ming Dynasty herbalist Li Shizhen (1518–1593), the wintersweet is compared to the plum tree, elucidating the origin of its name, "*lamei*."

In Beijing, wintersweets bravely bloom in defiance of the cold winter winds, earning them the title of the "first flower in Beijing." While there are no written records detailing the history of wintersweet cultivation in Beijing, the presence of ancient wintersweets suggests they have been planted and grown in the city since at least the Yongzheng era (1722–1735). Wintersweets are predominantly found scattered in old temples throughout Beijing, with those in Wofo Temple holding a high reputation. It is rumoured that wintersweets in Wofo Temple bloom earlier than those elsewhere in the city. Situated within the Beijing Botanical Garden, Wofo Temple can be accessed via the garden's south entrance along the central axis.

Wintersweets in the temple boast a long history. Among the more than 100 wintersweet shrubs, one ancient specimen stands prominently on the eastern side of the Hall of the Buddhas of Three Times. Every day, countless tourists pass by this

shrub, unaware of its storied history. During the Yongzheng era, Wofo Temple served as a temporary imperial palace, with the emperor appointing his younger brother Yunxiang (1686–1730) to oversee its restoration. Tragically, Yunxiang fell ill during the restoration efforts and passed away. His sons, Hongxiao (1722–1778) and Hongjiao (1713–1764), assumed his responsibilities and continued the restoration work. Wofo Temple as it stands today retains the appearance from this restoration period, during which the old wintersweet was planted.

With a history spanning over 300 years, the wintersweet has stood witness to numerous historical changes and developments. Legend has it that the wintersweet faced demise over a century ago, its branches nearly barren. Yet, to



the joy of onlookers, buds miraculously emerged, breathing new life into the plant. Astonishingly, the wintersweet flourished once more, blooming annually thereafter. This cycle of withering and revival earned it the moniker “*erdumei*,” or “second-life wintersweet.” The resilience and vitality of the old wintersweet in Wofo Temple continue to inspire awe, its blossoms serving as a testament to the enduring tenacity of wintersweets.

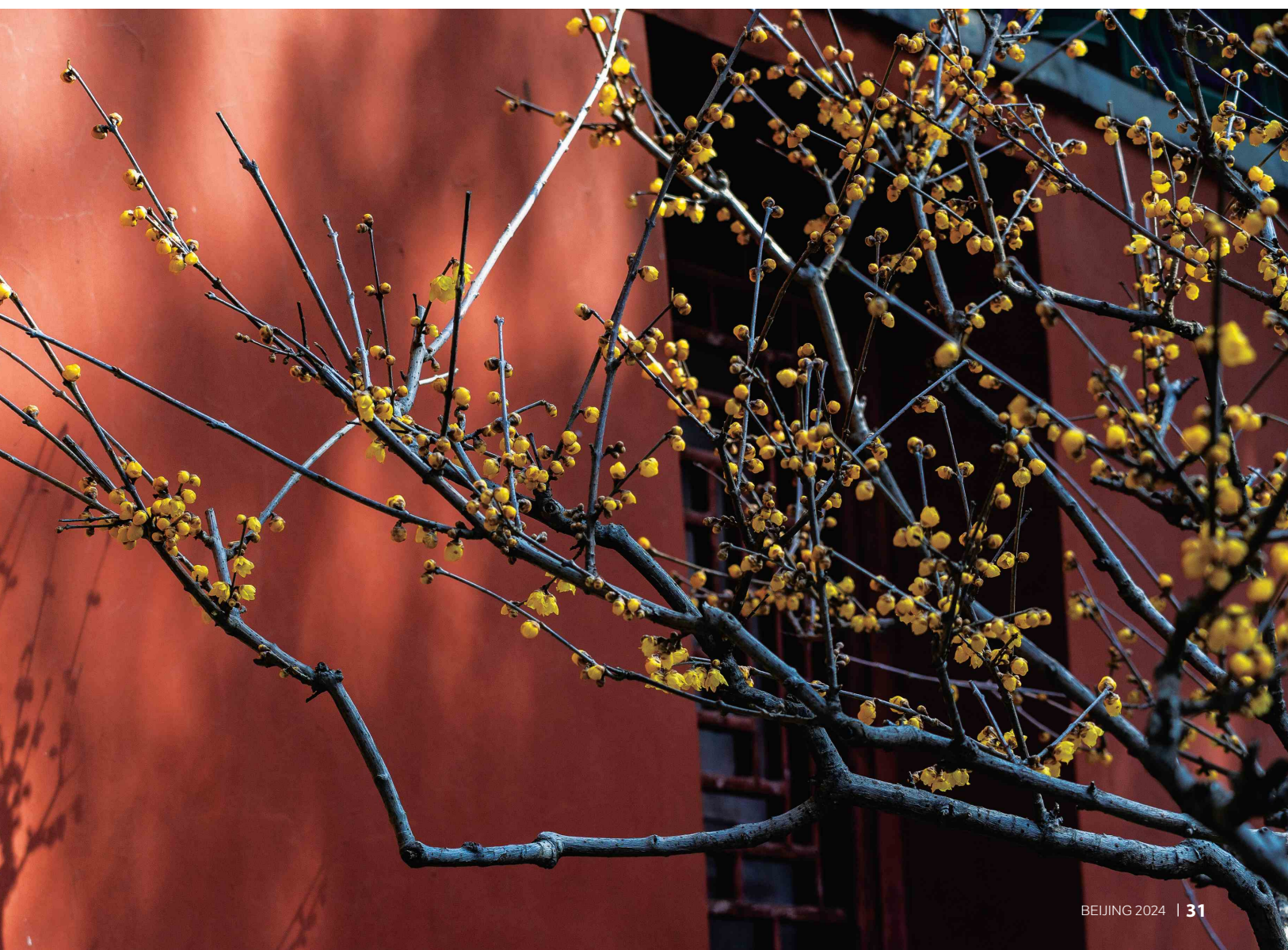
Wintersweets in temples carry a spiritual essence, blooming defiantly amidst the early spring chill and filling the air with their delicate fragrance. During the Song Dynasty, renowned poet Chen Yuyi (1090–1138) penned a poem celebrating the beauty and allure of wintersweets. While the modest size of wintersweet flowers may pale in comparison to more

flamboyant blooms in some people’s eyes, their distinctive fragrance sets them apart. In early spring, wintersweets grace numerous tourist attractions across Beijing, including the Summer Palace, Taoranting Park and Wanshou Temple.

Wanshou Temple, another prominent religious site in Beijing, is popular for its stunning wintersweets. Embracing traditional Chinese architectural standards, the temple’s spatial layout seamlessly integrates structures with garden elements. Shanmen Hall, situated at the southernmost end of the temple, features a weathered plaque bearing the inscription “*chijian huguo wanshousi*” (“constructing Wanshou Temple under the decree of the emperor”) above its stone door, a testament to the temple’s enduring history. Near the main gate of the temple,

clusters of wintersweets stand adorned with delicate flowers, their leafless twigs offering a memorable sight.

At the base of the walls of Wanshou Temple, a few sparse twigs of wintersweets stand. In early spring, only a scattering of flowers embellishes these twigs, with most buds yet to bloom. Despite their modest appearance, the blossoms exude a delicate charm, resembling miniature lanterns. In contrast to the abundant and fragrant blooms of wintersweets at Wofo Temple, those at Wanshou Temple emit a faint fragrance, requiring careful attention to detect. Against the backdrop of the ancient temple’s red walls, the wintersweets cast a mesmerising aura, their presence enlivening and brightening the temple grounds amidst the brisk breezes of early spring.





Graceful Flowers Blooming Everyday

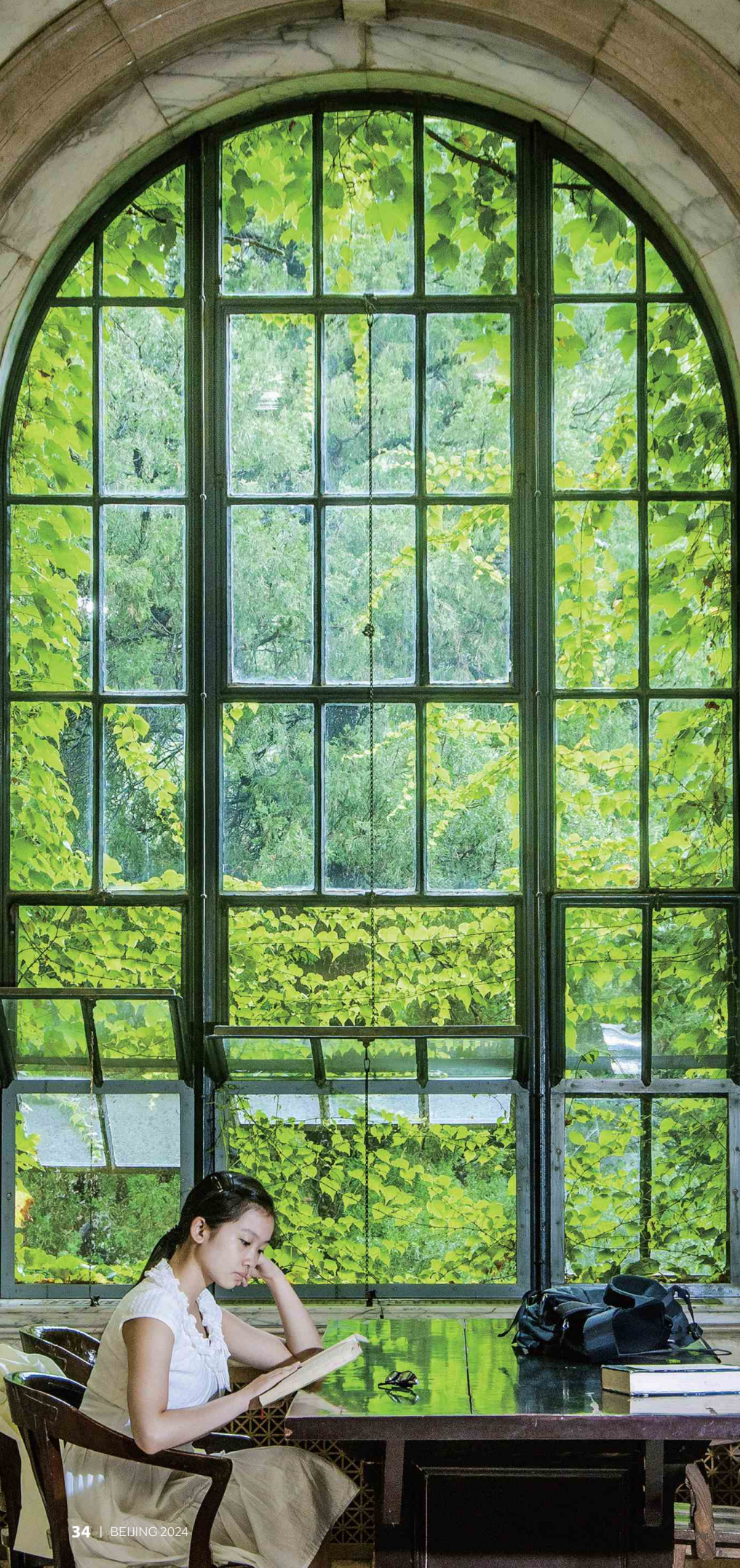
Translated by Wang Wei Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photos by Ding Yiwei, Li Rui, Zhu Wenxin

Beijing residents engage with flowers through various activities: appreciating them outdoors, cultivating them at home, relishing dishes made with fresh floral ingredients, admiring their beauty in seasonal exhibition halls, and crafting lifelike velvet and silk flowers with skilful hands. These activities serve as the bond between Beijingers and the world of flowers.

In the eyes of Beijing residents, flowers symbolise positivity. They delight in cultivating Chinese roses (*yueji*) outside their homes and decorating their interiors with bonsai. Cultivating flowers requires patience, but they find joy in the process, driven by their aspirations and affection for the city and their lives.

Throughout millennia, the flowers of Beijing have bloomed and withered in harmony with the changing seasons, while the blossoms in the hearts of locals have perpetually remained in full bloom. For residents of the capital city, flowers have become a profound expression of their love for life.





Delicious Food Featuring Flower Ingredients

Presently, Beijing is ablaze with blossoms, gracing its streets and traditional alleyways, known as hutongs, in a kaleidoscope of vibrant hues. Each breeze that blows seems to conjure a cascade of flowers. While some revel in their beauty, others ponder the delicious culinary possibilities they offer.

The use of fresh flowers as ingredients in delicacies has a rich history in China. For instance, Qu Yuan (340–278 BC) from the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) referenced this tradition in his long poem *Lisao* or *The Sorrow of Parting*: “Dew from magnolia leaves I drank at dawn, at eve for food were aster petals borne.” Flower banquets thrived among literati and noble families during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), serving as a symbol of their elevated status. During the Song (AD 960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, the consumption of flowers, with its intricate culinary techniques, gained traction. Notable books like *A Mountain Family’s Pure Offerings* and *Records of Various Flowers* documented recipes featuring flower ingredients. As the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties unfolded, the repertoire and culinary finesse of flower dishes expanded, gradually making flower consumption a commonplace practice among the general populace. The adage “Appreciate flowers when they bloom, and eat them when they fade” encapsulated the shared sentiment of this era.

Where flowers bloom, gourmets gather. In Beijing, aficionados of culinary delights featuring flower ingredients seize every opportunity to savour fragrant delicacies year-round.

The Chinese scholar tree holds the prestigious title of being the official city tree of Beijing. Its blossoms have become a beloved seasonal delicacy on the dining tables of some Beijing residents. The white blossoms grace the city from April to May, offering a perfect opportunity to admire their beauty. During this time, along the Chaobai River embankment and in Chaolai Forest Park, one can often spot people



gathering fallen tree blossoms. There are various ways to enjoy these blossoms, but one of the most nostalgic and delightful methods is consuming them raw. Simply plucking a handful of blossoms from a Chinese scholar tree and gently blowing off any surface dust, one can savour the stamen or pistil along with the nectar directly. The mouth is instantly flooded with sweetness, making it a delightful snack for fatigued children playing outside and a refreshing quencher for those feeling thirsty.

Consuming the blossoms of Chinese scholar trees raw is a straightforward method, while meticulously preparing a dish of the tree blossoms with stir-fried eggs is considered a more sophisticated approach. The key element in crafting stir-fried eggs with the tree's blossoms is *huohou*, which refers to the duration and intensity of heat used when preparing the dish. Given that the tree blossoms are delicate, they require high heat for a brief stir-fry. However, if the heat is too low, the blossoms may become tough, compromising their distinct freshness.

Indulging in harvested tree blossoms is a common activity during snack times in homes, while delicacies incorporating floral elements like chrysanthemum flowers are more commonly savoured in high-end restaurants. An elegant cloisonne hotpot, featuring delicate yellow chrysanthemum flowers, serves as a highlight of the renowned Beijing dish known as chrysanthemum hotpot.

Legend has it that Empress Dowager Cixi (regency: 1861–1908) introduced this dish. *The Records of Imperial Fragrance* mentions that Cixi consumed fresh flowers to maintain her beauty and youthfulness.

She had a particular fondness for chrysanthemums, which adorned the Imperial Garden and the Summer Palace, meticulously tended to by dedicated gardeners. The Cixi-styled chrysanthemum hotpot features white chrysanthemum flowers, known as “snowballs,” delicately washed and placed in a flavourful broth made from premium pork ribs. The broth, clear and translucent, is further enriched by the addition of fresh chrysanthemum flowers, resulting in a visually appealing and aromatic dish. Carefully selected ingredients such as thinly sliced meat, prepared without skin and bones, are cooked quickly to preserve their freshness. Dipping sauces like vinegar are provided to enhance the flavours. While many hotpot restaurants in Beijing now offer Chrysanthemum Hotpot, the preparation may not be as elaborate as Cixi's; nonetheless, the essence of the dish's taste remains faithfully preserved.

The tradition of crafting crispy crust cakes using fresh flower ingredients is a cherished cultural practice among Beijing residents. Dao Xiang Cun, a time-honoured Beijing brand, proudly presents its exceptional rose cakes. While fresh rose flower cakes are typically available year-round, locals eagerly anticipate visiting the shop at the end of summer and beginning of autumn, coinciding with the full bloom of flowers spread from Meigui (“Rose”) Valley at Miaofeng Mountain. A significant portion of the roses harvested annually at Miaofeng Mountain are meticulously



used to produce rose jams, which serve as the mouth-watering filling for these fresh rose cakes. The roses in Miaofeng Mountain reach their peak bloom in May and June, after which they are carefully pickled and transformed into rose jams. By late summer and early autumn, the jams boast their most superb flavour. The process involves blending the rose jams with honey and flour, encasing them in a crispy crust and imprinting a distinctive rose decoration on top.

One of the standout offerings among the city's fresh flower cakes, evoking the essence of the rose cake, is the wisteria flower cake. Nestled nearby the former

residence of Ji Xiaolan (1724–1805) in Xicheng District, Jinyang Restaurant specialises in Shanxi cuisine. Despite not being a traditional Shanxi dish, the wisteria flower cake becomes popular again each spring. This cake holds special significance as it is closely tied to the esteemed scholar Ji. Over 200 years ago, Ji personally planted a wisteria tree in his courtyard residence. The wisteria flower cake at Jinyang Restaurant is brimming with fresh wisteria flowers and an assortment of nuts, all encased in a crispy crust. The outer layer of the cake is delightfully crisp and crumbly, while the filling exudes a sweet and fragrant aroma. Indulging oneself in the wisteria flowers at Ji's former residence, savouring Jinyang's wisteria flower cake and enjoying a cup of tea could give one an elegant and refined feeling, akin to the lifestyles of ancient Chinese literati and scholars.

Works of Art with Flower Decorations

In Beijing's Dongcheng District, there is a street known as Huashi ("Flower

Market") Street. However, its name did not come about as a result of fresh flowers being available here year-round. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, numerous handicraft artisans resided and worked in the area, crafting paper and silk artificial flowers, which ultimately led to the street being named Huashi Street. A number of the beautiful silk and velvet flowers that were once meticulously crafted and traded on Huashi Street are now included in the collection at the East Huashi Community Museum.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Beijing gained renown as the nation's centre for the production of artificial flowers. An old saying aptly captures this reputation: "The nation's silk flowers come from Beijing, and Beijing silk flowers come from Huashi." With a rich history and international recognition, these flowers also became known as "Jinghua" or "Beijing-styled Artificial Flowers," symbolising traditional Beijing crafts that encompassed paper, silk and velvet flowers. Originally known as "Palace flowers," the tradition of wearing artificial flowers from nobility to the commoners,

gradually evolved into a popular handicraft industry in the ancient capital.

The production of silk flowers in Beijing traces its origins back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), gradually flourishing during the early Ming Dynasty and reaching its zenith in the mid-Qing Dynasty. Legend has it that during the Tang Dynasty, Imperial Concubine Yang of Emperor Xuanzong (reign: AD 712–756) had a small nevus on her left temple. To conceal this flaw, she instructed a palace maid to gather fresh flowers daily which could be crafted into a headpiece to cover her temple. However, during winter when fresh flowers were scarce, the palace maid resorted to crafting artificial flowers using silk and satin instead. So enamoured was Yang with these creations that the Emperor commissioned artisans to replicate similar headwear flowers, thus establishing and perpetuating the tradition of this type of embellishment.

In the past, artificial flowers were primarily utilised for clothing and headwear adornments. However, Jin Yulin, the fourth-generation heir of Jin-styled traditional Beijing silk flowers, breathed new life into the art form by introducing artificial potted flowers and large baskets filled with artificial blooms. This innovative transformation elevated silk flowers from mere accessories to distinctive objects capable of enhancing any environment, establishing them as standout features in modern times. Within the museum, Jin Tieling, the fifth-generation heir of Jin-styled traditional Beijing silk flowers, has adeptly crafted artificial potted chrysanthemums, plum blossoms, roses and magnolias. These creations exude lifelike appearances under the museum's lighting, exemplifying the beauty and artistry of traditional silk flower making.

Another renowned product of Beijing-styled artificial flowers is the velvet flower (*ronghua*), which carries a homophonic pun in Chinese characters, signifying "high position and great wealth." Historically, wearing velvet flowers was reserved for special festive occasions. Within the velvet flower exhibition area of the museum, visitors can marvel at



and majestic phoenix crowns, all adorned with vibrant red hues. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, velvet flowers often depicted various birds and beasts, as well as Chinese characters symbolising “福” (*fu*, good fortune) and “喜” (*xi*, joy). During weddings, brides would embellish their headdresses with velvet flowers adorned with the Chinese character “喜.” Consequently, the velvet phoenix crown became a popular choice. During celebrations, women would adorn themselves with two or three velvet “福” and “喜” Chinese characters for happiness and auspiciousness. At the Miaofeng Mountain Temple Fair, visitors would procure a red flower to wear on their chest or in their hair as a symbol of “bringing good fortune back home.”

During that period, velvet flower workshops began to emerge in Beijing. Along Huashi Street, nearly 10 shops including Dongshengyong, Ruiheyong,

Hongxingde and Chunhuaqing congregated, specialising in crafting velvet flowers. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, arts and crafts enterprises were established to ensure the ongoing production of velvet decorations in Beijing and other regions.

In addition to silk and velvet flowers, colourful glazed flowers are also esteemed as exquisite authentic local works of art in Beijing. Within a large glass display case at the museum lies a magnificent potted colourful glazed flower, radiating splendour under the museum's lighting conditions. Legend has it that colourful glazed wares have a connection to a native of Guangdong who failed the imperial examination in the capital three times. Destitute and disheartened, he stumbled upon a broken stone bracelet and ingeniously transformed it into a piece of jewellery through firing. Taking it to a jeweller's shop, he sold the piece instantly

and was shocked by its popularity. Sometime later, the failed Guangdong candidate abandoned his pursuit of the imperial examination and focused on creating colourful glazed wares. With the establishment of a colourful glazed ware plant at Nanxiaoshikou in East Huashi after the founding of the People's Republic of China, this traditional Beijing handicraft continued to flourish. Today, colourful glazed products have become popular decorative items found in many homes in Beijing and around the world.

Flowers that Bloom in the Indoors

Beijing residents have long been devoted to cultivating blooming flowers at home, employing various methods to brighten their living spaces. During the city's cold winter months, when outdoor flowers are not in full bloom, they





gravitate toward the city's flower markets to experience a different rendition of "springtime." Beijing boasts numerous flower markets scattered throughout its districts, catering to the locals' diverse flower-buying needs. These markets specialise in a wide array of options, including potted plants, fresh-cut flowers, artificial blooms and even slightly more upscale bonsai trees. At the Flower Market of Huaxiang in Fengtai District, visitors are welcomed by the fragrant scents of flowers as they step through its main gate. The interior ambiance is warm and humid, reminiscent of a vast greenhouse. Customers of all ages frequent the market with varying needs but share the common objective of selecting their favourite flowers to adorn their homes.

In some shops that sell fresh-cut flowers, regular customers often engage in exchanges with the shop owners, sharing tips on flower care. For instance, they may discuss why newly purchased pink roses appear slightly withered or why the water in which Chinese violet cress is soaked quickly becomes murky. While caring for

fresh-cut flowers may appear a simple task, nurturing them to maintain vitality and longevity requires various techniques. Tending to plants can be rewarding, yet handling fresh-cut flowers demands patience and skill. Upon bringing fresh-cut flowers home, one should first trim their stems at an angle to enhance water absorption. If there are excessive leaves on the stems, they should be pruned to allocate more nutrients to the flower buds. Newly purchased fresh-cut flowers should be submerged in deep water, preferably with a drop of disinfectant to prevent root rot. Once the flowers have absorbed sufficient water and regained their vigour, they can be arranged in vases to meet aesthetic or thematic preferences. Crafting flower arrangements is a nuanced art form that involves careful consideration in selecting both flowers and vases. There is much to explore and learn in the realm of flower arrangement.

A variety of books and courses on flower arrangement are readily available in today's market. However, for a wife, a mother or a career woman, arranging flowers can serve as a means of expressing

one's creativity. Whether it involves a bunch of discounted daisies from a flower market, a bouquet received from a friend for a holiday celebration or a handful of wildflowers gathered on the way home from work and placed in a drinking glass or even a green beer bottle, these simple actions can transform a stale house into a lively and inviting space imbued with the essence of springtime.

Most Beijing residents prefer potted flowers, finding them not only beautiful but also easy to care for. Many potted flowers can last three to five years without issue. The city's flower markets offer a wide array of colourful and low-maintenance potted flowers such as orchids, jonquils and Chinese roses, most all at relatively affordable prices. In fact, at such markets, a majority of vendors specialise in selling potted plants. For those who enjoy exploring more, the abundance of options may lead to confusion. As the saying goes, "A riot of blooms begins to dazzle the eye." Bonsai, a more upscale variety of potted plants, has become extremely popular in recent years. Its uniqueness comes from its shapes and charms, testing the green

thumb's aesthetic sense and patience. It is important to prune the Bonsai's excess branches and leaves, and remove any elements that detract from the overall beauty. When it comes to flower species, there is no distinction between lowliness and nobleness, or between beauty and ugliness. Regardless of the type of flowers purchased, they bring a touch of springtime into the home.

Watering flowers, punctually pruning branches and leaves, and positioning flowers in sunny or shaded areas according to their needs have become well-known "maintenance principles" for every plant enthusiast. Flowers that receive proper care over time naturally become part of one's family. Caring for them comes with its highs and lows, from the excitement of blooming to the sorrow of withering. The care provided to plants in the home brings joy not only to its residents, but also to visitors.

In addition to cultivating flowers at home, residents of Beijing also delight in visiting various flower exhibitions, thanks to the numerous parks in Beijing that regularly host large-scale events. From early March to mid-April, Ming City

Wall Ruins Park held its 17th annual Plum Blossom Festival. With plum blossoms in full bloom and their fragrance permeating the air, visitors could leisurely stroll through the park, reflecting on the past and savouring the present. Apart from admiring the beauty of the ancient wall and plum blossoms within the park, visitors could also partake in activities such as painting, photography, poetry recitals and the appreciation of plum blossoms. The park offers a diverse plum blossom experience, including bonsai plum blossom displays and themed art exhibitions, in addition to educational programmes offering plum blossom-related knowledge. At the market within the park, visitors can indulge in themed snacks like plum blossom coconut milk and plum blossom cotton candy, while around them, paintings and calligraphy capture the timeless essence of these elegant blossoms.

The cherry blossom exhibition at Yuyuantan Park is an absolute must-visit. This park showcases a cherry blossom garden spanning 25 hectares and is home to over 2,000 cherry blossom trees, forming the city's renowned "Eight

Views of Cherry Blossoms." Besides the pink cherry blossoms, visitors can also explore cherry blossom-themed cultural and creative products. Visitors treat themselves to cherry blossom-shaped ice cream or capture group photos with friends against the backdrop of these elegant trees. Sharing such on social media platforms has become a popular activity among young people. Bringing home themed souvenirs like refrigerator magnets or bookmarks related to cherry blossoms not only brings joy and happiness and recollections of beautiful flowers, but also leaves a lasting memory in one's heart.

In Beijing, there are a number of flower exhibitions for the public to enjoy, including the tulip exhibition at the China National Botanical Garden, the chrysanthemum exhibition at Zhongshan Park, the Chinese rose exhibition at the Temple of Heaven Park and the sweet osmanthus exhibition at the Summer Palace. Immersing oneself in these floral displays is like walking amid the strokes of a painter's brush, embarking on a springtime rendezvous through pure beauty.



White Dagoba, Crimson Walls and Old Manchurian Catalpas

Translated by Wang Wei

Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi

Photo by Gu Ying

On the north side of the White Dagoba in Beijing's Miaoying Temple, a row of tall and straight Manchurian catalpas stands proudly. My familiarity with this species dates back to a prior encounter many years ago within the Imperial Garden of the Forbidden City. It was there that I first noticed the distinctive leaves of these trees, their shapes bearing a passing resemblance to those of the bodhi tree. Although my observation was merely a passing one and not thoroughly investigated at the time, it left a lasting impression. The most renowned Manchurian catalpa, often referred to as "*Guhuaqiu*" or "the blossoms of an ancient Manchurian catalpa," can be found in the garden of Ningshou Palace (or the Garden of Qianlong) within the Forbidden City. Emperor Qianlong (reign: 1735–1796) of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) held a great fondness for this tree, as evidenced by his composition of a couplet and four poems in its honour. Today, the garden unfortunately remains inaccessible to the public.

The Manchurian catalpa, counted among China's living fossil tree species, holds a significant historical presence within the country. Much like the catalpa, it stands as a towering deciduous tree, capable of reaching heights of up to 30 metres (m). Those clustered on the northern side of the White Dagoba are estimated to surpass 10 m in height. Among them, the easternmost tree bears a distinguishing green sign indicating its status as a second-class tree along with its age, which is at least over 100 years old. While online speculation once attributed its origins to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), current estimates suggest it was planted during the Qing Dynasty, likely following extensive renovations of Miaoying Temple and the White Dagoba during the reigns of emperors Kangxi (1661–1722) and Qianlong. These restoration efforts potentially led to the



growth of the tree post-renovations. Curiously, while the diameters of the other three trees align closely with the easternmost specimen, the reasons behind their exclusion from second-class status remain unknown. In the entirety of Beijing, only 33 aging Manchurian catalpas hold the esteemed title of registered ancient trees of this species. Thus, the presence of at least one such tree behind the White Dagoba of Miaoying Temple renders it a truly precious ancient specimen.

The Manchurian catalpa, a native species of China, has long been revered for its ornamental magnificence. It graced gardens, lined roadsides and adorned prestigious locales such as imperial palaces, temples and scenic spots. Particularly prominent in northern China, alongside ginkgo, lilac and tilia trees, the Manchurian catalpa emerged as an alternative for the Bodhi tree, a revered symbol in Buddhism. This marks the moment of glory for the Manchurian catalpa. Beyond its stately trunk, elegant blossoms and impressive lifespan, its popularity owes much to its leaves, which bear a striking resemblance to those of the Bodhi tree. The Manchurian catalpa captivates with its aesthetically pleasing features, especially its triangular leaves and bell-shaped, light pink blossoms adorned with dense purple spots. In traditional Chinese culture, the colour purple is associated with the Heavenly Emperor's residence, connoting auspiciousness. Hence, the allure of the Manchurian catalpa is further heightened by its purple blossoms. During the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), the poet Han Yu (AD 768–824) vividly depicted a Manchurian catalpa entwined by vines, symbolising imminent danger. He expressed hope for the tree to be liberated from the vines, allowing it to blossom in a myriad of colours.

Beyond its symbolic beauty and ornamental value, the Manchurian catalpa held significant economic importance in ancient times. Revered for its dense texture reminiscent of *nanmu* wood, a species within the Lauraceae family, it earned the illustrious title of the “King of Timbers.” The Manchurian catalpa found

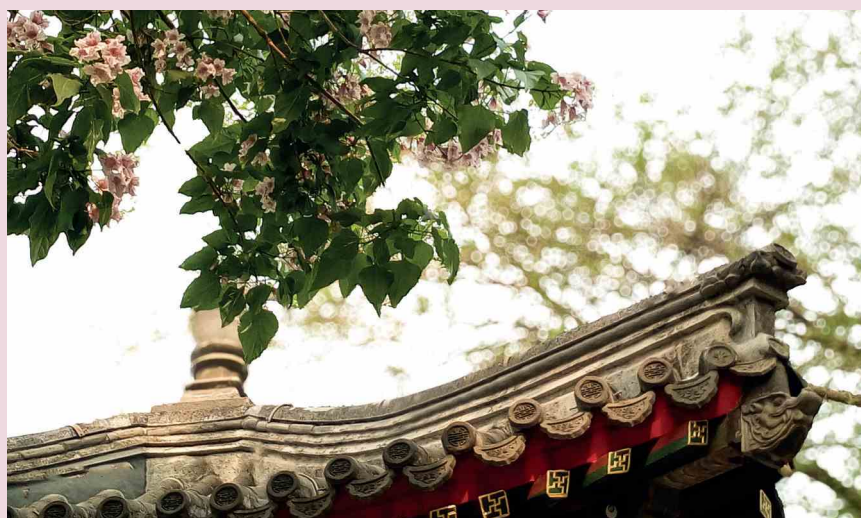
extensive utility in the crafting of musical instruments, models and an array of other products. Additionally, its blossoms served as a vital source of wild vegetables during periods of famine. *Wild Vegetable Records*, published during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), details various cooking methods for the blossoms, including frying them with oil and salt, or drying and stir-frying them. Li Shizhen (1518–1593), in his *Compendium of Materia Medica*, expounded upon the medicinal properties of the tree's bark and leaves, underscoring their value in herbal medicine. Li further explained the origin of the tree's name, attributing it to the premature shedding of its leaves in autumn, thus earning it the designation of the *Qiu* Tree (“Autumn Tree”). During the Tang Dynasty, a custom on the day of the Beginning of Autumn (one of the Chinese solar terms) involved the sale of tree leaves in the capital city of Chang'an. Women and children would fashion them into flower shapes to wear, indicating the onset of autumn.

The Manchurian catalpas lining the north side of the White Dagoba typically do not reach full bloom until May, possibly due to the shaded conditions behind the structure, where sunlight is limited throughout the year. Unlike the vibrant allure of peach and plum trees or the majestic grandeur of peony flowers, the beauty of the Manchurian catalpa is more subtle, akin to a young maiden in a secluded chamber—graceful yet straightforward. Its light purple blossoms,

composed of five delicate petals encircling a yellow stamen or pistil, resemble ethereal bells. When gently swayed by the breeze, they emit a soft and melodious sound, evoking echoes of ancient legends.

Beneath the canopy of Manchurian catalpas, the setting sun cast dappled light through the treetops, filtering rays through the spaces between the White Dagoba and the crimson walls nearby. Petals drifted gently on the breeze, softly brushing against my cheeks, carrying a subtle coolness and fragrance. I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath of spring, feeling a surge of emotions welling within me. In that fleeting moment, time seemed to stand still, leaving only the crimson walls, the White Dagoba, myself and the flourishing trees in serene surroundings.

The ancient Manchurian catalpas have stood witness to the storied history of Miaoying Temple and its revered White Dagoba. Their towering presence and beautiful purple blossoms have transformed into a cherished springtime spectacle at the temple grounds. When these ancient trees burst into bloom, they harmonise with the dagoba and crimson walls, imbuing the surroundings with a unique elegance. Though their blossoming season is fleeting, the memories they evoke are eternal. Recalling moments spent strolling beneath the trees fills my heart with a sense of warmth and resilience. These delicate blossoms not only adorn the earth in spring but also illuminate the inner landscape of my soul.





Encountering Springtime at Zhihua Temple

Translated by Wang Wei Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi Photos by Yang Wei


"Wait and wait. Spring is just around the corner. It is indeed approaching." According to the writer Zhu Ziqing (1898–1948), spring is vibrant and radiant. In the early days of spring, a gentle breeze whispers against one's skin, while a soft drizzle delicately moistens everything, coaxing new life from the earth as plants begin to unfurl fresh leaves and buds. In the distance, a haze of grass and fog paints the landscape, their details obscured when viewed up close. Pear, flowering crabapple and lilac trees sway gracefully in the spring breeze, their leaves and buds gradually unfolding. The long-awaited arrival of spring brings its anticipated beauty. From March to April, Zhihua Temple, nestled in the ancient capital, enters its most enchanting period. Here, amidst the temple's timeless charm and blossoming scenery, people can immerse themselves in the symphony of nature: the whispers of

the breeze, the patter of raindrops and the melodies of birdsong. Amidst the scenic views characterised by blossoms in bloom, the fragrance of spring is truly delightful, permeating the air with its sweet aroma. This nearly 600-year-old temple is adorned with nature's blooming beauties.

Situated at the east entrance of Lumicang Hutong in Dongcheng District, Zhihua Temple boasts a rich history dating back to the reigns of Emperor Yingzong (1435–1449, 1457–1464) of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). To reach the temple's main gate from the bustling Second Ring Road, one must meander through a labyrinth of hutongs (traditional Beijing alleyways) before arriving. Reflecting an old Chinese paradox, "The lesser hermit lives in seclusion in the countryside, while the greater hermit does so in the imperial court," the temple embodies the essence of spiritual retreat

amidst urban chaos. Beyond the main gate lies a sanctuary from the city's clamour, where one can embrace inner tranquillity at a leisurely pace. What evokes such emotion? Perhaps it is the fragrant breeze, the gentle cooing of doves, the warmth of the sun, the patter of raindrops, the luminous spring equinox moon or the delicate pear blossoms adorning the landscape during the Qingming Festival. Here, amidst the temple's ancient walls, spring unfolds in a symphony of nature. The swallows' melodies narrate the season's tale, shifting clouds mirror the ebb and flow of centuries, and the serene courtyard invites contemplative strolls. Working at the temple, I witness the passage of the four seasons alongside its enduring presence.

If one ponders the most striking view in the small courtyard at the moment, it is undoubtedly the succession of



blossoms from early to late spring. Take, for example, the pear blossoms that burst into radiant view with just a spring rain and a few sunny days at the temple.

According to the poet Lu You (1125–1210), pear blossoms possess a distinctive charm, their hues and fragrances embodying simplicity and tranquillity. The essence of worldly bliss mirrors the subtle joyfulness found in the full bloom of pear blossoms adorning the temple's courtyard.

The azure sky, white clouds, red walls, black tiles and deep green willows all contribute to the refreshing and noble beauty of the delicate pear blossoms. As they bloom, spring brings its gentle rains; as they wither, spring transitions into mud. Willow catkins dance in the light breeze, their soft touch devoid of any chill as they brush against one's face. With the arrival of swallows, a gentle rain often accompanies the pear blossoms. Every Qingming Festival (around April 5), the temple's courtyard, with the breeze as a companion, appears to be showered with the rain of pear blossoms, touching the soul. Their petals drift in the sky, fluttering around us, imprinting themselves in the memories of spring. As spring arrives and departs, blossoms bloom and fade, transforming everything into a picturesque tableau.

As one quietly awaits the change of seasons, observing the blossoms at the temple often elicits a heartfelt sigh, reminding me of the fortune of being enveloped in such tranquillity. Spring, ever swift, does not wait for anyone. Following the Qingming Festival and preceding the Grain Rain (between April 19 and 21), the exquisite Chinese flowering crabapples at the temple bloom steadfastly year after year, beautifully captured by the poet Yuan Haowen (1190–1257): "Fresh green leaves intertwine among the branches, with small buds concealing a few dots of red."

With the gentle caress of a spring breeze, the branches of the flowering crabapple trees are bedecked with exquisite blossoms. In this warm and hopeful April, these blooms seem to wear a soft and enchanting smile, like a *jieyuhua*—a beautiful woman who possesses sensitivity and understanding of any man's feelings. The poet Su Shi (1037–1101) eloquently captured this scene: "With the gentle east wind stirring the light clouds, the fragrance of the blossoms blends into the mist, and the night is quiet and beautiful." Su, not wanting to miss the peak bloom of the flowering crabapple blossoms, embarked on candlelit strolls to admire their flourishing beauty at night. Similarly, the flowering crabapple blossoms at Zhihua Temple reveal their true splendour under the evening's soft glow. Even in the late hours, their freshness persists, exuding a unique and captivating charm.

Following the enchanting display of flowering crabapple blossoms, the lilacs gracefully make their appearance. Amidst the clear air and vibrant scenery, a gentle breeze tenderly unveils the lilacs in full bloom, casting snow-white or purple-red hues against the backdrop of red and black walls. Their delicate petals sway with the breeze, infusing the temple's courtyard with their sweet, fragrant aroma.

Purple lilacs, with their gentle and reserved blossoms, bear resemblance to a shy and smiling maiden, casting down her eyes while displaying a tender expression and exuding affection. In contrast, the white lilac blossoms, passionate and unrestrained, embody the essence of a spirited young man, brimming with vitality. These blooming lilacs possess the power to soften the passage of time and preserve all beautiful things. They are stunning yet not ostentatious, elegant but far from passionless. Though small, they contribute a touch of beauty to Beijing's spring landscape. Their graceful and delicate presence never fails to inspire anticipation for the future.

As night descends, the soft moonlight bathes the petals, casting a delicate glow upon them while a lingering fragrance permeates the air. When accompanied by a gentle drizzle, these blossoms seem to infuse the city's spring with a subtle sense of solemnity, inviting contemplation on the fleeting nature of beauty and the swift passage of time.

According to traditional Chinese culture, spring marks the ideal time to commence work for the year, symbolising new beginnings and the emergence of all things beautiful. With the return of spring, the earth undergoes rejuvenation, and life springs forth anew, instilling hope in all. Pear blossoms exude elegance, flowering crabapples emit a subtle charm and lilacs burst forth with vibrant energy, painting the season with a kaleidoscope of colours. Almost unconsciously, the ancient Zhihua Temple finds itself enveloped in the splendour of late spring. Here, one eagerly anticipates the blossoming of flowers and the flourishing of trees. In the temple's springtime, every moment becomes an opportunity to savour the season's delights, regardless of rain or shine.

In spring, I often find myself reflecting on it as a season that facilitates encounters with wise and kind-hearted individuals, as well as cherished friends. Perhaps, at this very moment, someone like me is thinking of the ancient temple, making their way from the alleyway's entrance to admire its springtime splendour, to behold its blossoms and to listen to the elegant melodies of Zhihua's Jing music, a treasured element of China's intangible cultural heritage. Though we may be strangers, we are bound to cross paths amidst the temple's most enchanting seasonal scenery.



Dates with Flourishing Blossoms across the City's Temples

Translated by Wang Wei Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi

Year after year, during the Spring Equinox, many people eagerly anticipate the sight of Yulan magnolia blossoms at ancient temples, their inexplicable longing for them growing stronger with each passing season.

"At times, thoughts of Dajue Temple randomly fill my mind, with its lush green pines, cypresses, Yulan magnolia blossoms and vines." These words, excerpted from "Dajue Temple" by the renowned scholar Ji Xianlin (1911–2009), encapsulate the picturesque scene at this ancient temple. Over the years, countless individuals have echoed similar sentiments, regarding the temple as a cherished refuge, a source of solace amidst life's chaos. The experience of admiring the elegant Yulan magnolia blossoms has evolved into an essential tradition for many during the spring.

When discussing the 300-year-

old ancient Yulan magnolia tree in the courtyard of the temple's Siyi Hall, its origins are inevitably intertwined with Prince Yong (Yinzhen) and Zen Master Jialing. Prince Yong later ascended the throne to become Emperor Yongzheng (reign: 1722–1735) of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Siyi Hall, named after Prince Yong's study in his former residence, became a significant structure within the temple due to his fondness to this Buddhist site. Master Jialing, a mentor of the prince, was appointed in 1720 to serve as the abbot of the temple, further cementing its historical significance. This pivotal event is documented in an inscription on a stele within the temple.

The exact moment in time when the magnolia tree was planted remains shrouded in uncertainty, with two conflicting viewpoints. One suggests that

the tree was personally planted by Zen master Jialing during his tenure as the temple's abbot. The alternative perspective proposes that the tree was transplanted from the south alongside Jialing's coffin after his passing. As a scholar immersed in historical inquiry, I tend to favour the former interpretation. Before assuming leadership at Dajue Temple, Jialing had spent three years overseeing Li'an Temple in Hangzhou, during which he received esteemed recognition and rewards from Emperor Kangxi (reign: 1661–1722) and Prince Yong. This period marked the pinnacle of Jialing's life, as he upheld the essence of the Linji sect at Li'an Temple. Consequently, upon his return to Beijing, it is believed that he planted the magnolia tree at Dajue Temple, symbolising the transmission of the sect's lineage. My visit to Li'an Temple for historical research left



me with a profound sense of connection and contemplation.

In 1936, Aisin Gioro Puru, also known as Pu Xinyu (1896–1963), a member of the former Qing imperial family, penned two poems on the walls of the north corridor of Siyi Hall in Dajue Temple. One of these poems captures the springtime ambiance of the temple, expressing his emotions with a line: “Yulan magnolia blossoms are in full bloom, soothing my newfound sorrows.” Not long ago, Puru’s widow frequently visited the temple, where she reminisced about her late husband.

The act of appreciating flowers is imbued with emotional depth, rooted in the rich tapestry of traditional Chinese cultural elements. This tradition seamlessly weaves together historical narratives, poetry and literature, fostering a deep and timeless connection that transcends

generations. Through artistic expression, these cultural elements celebrate the harmony between humanity and nature, inviting individuals to explore the profound truths found among grasses and trees. In doing so, they evoke a sense of enduring elegance that resonates both in the past and the present.

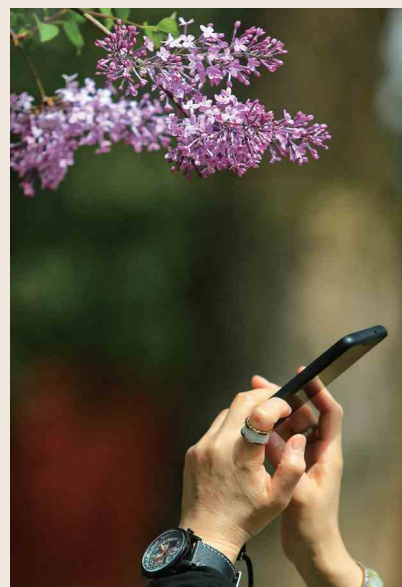
Visiting temples in spring to appreciate flowers has long been a cherished and refined pastime, dating back to ancient times. Throughout history, esteemed figures such as the poet Nalan Xingde (1655–1685) and scholars like Hu Shi (1891–1962), Guo Moruo (1892–1978), Zhang Boju (1898–1982) and Yu Pingbo (1900–1990) have graced Dajue Temple with their presence, immortalising their experiences and emotions through poetry and prose. Bibliophile Fu Zengxiang (1872–1949) captured the essence of the temple’s floral splendour in verse: “Only the annual floral viewing in Dajue is good, with twin trees bearing white blossoms like snow against the eastern wall.” Zhu Ziqing (1898–1948), with his characteristic wit, portrayed a vivid picturesque view of the Yulan magnolia blossoms in Dajue Temple: “The Yulan magnolia tree stands so tall that one’s hat would fall off if one was about to look up at it. The tree is rather towering, resembling a pagoda reaching for the sky, with stars and constellations at its peak. Its blossoms are akin to a myriad of bright candles, with each flame representing a Chang’e (Goddess of the Moon in mythology). The blossoms also look like sucking infants with chubby arms of fine skin as sweet and tender as honeydew, blinking their eyes and smiling with dimples. Surely, the Lord’s presence is here, as I quietly await to be caressed and touched.”

The Yulan magnolia tree at Dajue Temple is celebrated as the “King of Yulan” and holds the esteemed title of being the oldest white blossom tree in Beijing. Over its 300-year lifespan, it has been revered and cherished by emperors, generals, monks, literati and scholars alike. Alongside the peonies of Chongxiao Temple and the lilacs of Fayuan Temple, the Yulan magnolia of Dajue Temple once formed part of the trio known as the three great scenic venues for enjoying blossoms in the capital city.

Consequently, visiting Dajue Temple to marvel at the Yulan magnolia blossoms has become the preferred choice for many during the city’s springtime.

The Yulan magnolia tree’s age often raises concerns about its growth and whether its branches will flourish during the flowering season. However, it has consistently dazzled onlookers with its magnificence, never failing to deliver a spectacular display. Renowned geographer Hou Renzhi (1911–2013) made multiple visits to Dajue Temple to admire the Yulan magnolia blossoms, leaving behind inscriptions that praised the temple’s beauty and serenity. Two years ago, his son shared with me the final connection his father had with the temple under the tree. In his last days, they drove to the temple, quietly sitting in the car outside the main gate, capturing a photo with the gate in the background. This touching moment brought to mind a wise saying I once heard beneath the old Yulan magnolia tree: “Once gained means forever gained.” Indeed, those who have experienced the splendour of the magnolia blossoms undoubtedly hold that cherished spring day in their hearts forever.

The fragrances of blossoms wafting from ancient temples scattered across the capital city offer unique encounters in each flowering season. Do not wait, or even hesitate, lest you miss the fleeting beauty of springtime in Beijing.



Delving into the History of Ancient Chinese Coins at Wanshou Temple

In late March, the Beijing Art Museum opened an exhibition featuring a curated selection from its impressive coin collection at the Hall of Great Completeness in Wanshou Temple. This exhibition provides visitors with a unique opportunity to delve into the rich history of ancient Chinese coins while simultaneously exploring the historical significance of the ancient temple.

The exhibition features an impressive array of over 250 coin-related artefacts from the museum's collection, encompassing more than 20 precious cultural relics, ceramics and various other collections. Through the dual lenses of history and art, the exhibition provides a succinct overview of ancient Chinese coins, showcasing the fusion of diverse cultural influences from various ethnic groups across different periods. Moreover, the exhibition delves into the artistic intricacies of coins, highlighting elements such as Chinese calligraphy, characters and the motifs adorning them. These elements reflect ancient Chinese values, epitomising the pursuit of a peaceful, prosperous and harmonious existence.

One of the standout artefacts in the exhibition is a colourful ceramic tile titled "Sons and Grandsons Pervaded the Hall." At the centre of the upper section of this tile, an elderly couple are seen

with their benign and smiling expressions. Surrounding them are six men on each side, while the lower section features 10 children against a white backdrop. Notably, one child stands out, adorned in a round-collared robe and clutching a silver ingot and a traditional Chinese writing brush, symbolising auspicious significance. In traditional Chinese culture, coins are revered as symbols of wealth and are counted among the five good fortunes. Throughout ancient China, ordinary coins and silver ingots held auspicious connotations in daily life, embodying a desire for prosperity and fulfilment.

Scheduled to run until March 2025, the exhibition will also feature a series of related lectures, educational activities and culturally inspired creative products.



Rediscovering the History and Culture of Xuannan

The Xuannan Culture Museum is currently hosting a meticulously designed exhibition that showcases the rich history and culture of Xuannan, drawing a large number of visitors.

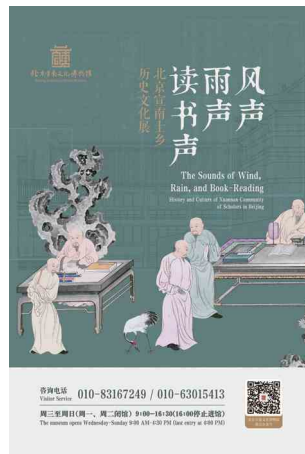
Situated within the historic Changchun Temple, which traces its roots back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the Beijing Xuannan Culture Museum opened to the public on November 30, 2005. It has since been recognised as a national AAA-level tourist attraction and stands proudly as one of the capital city's patriotic education bases.

The museum's permanent exhibition is divided into five sections: "This is Xuannan," "Scholars Gathered in Xuannan," "A Place with Unique Culture," "First Focusing on the Affairs of the Nation" and "Revitalisation of Xuannan." These sections unfold sequentially the urban landscape of Xuannan, vividly depicting the living environment of the scholarly community, their academic pursuits and spiritual endeavours, providing a comprehensive insight into Xuannan culture and the ideological traits of the scholars who gathered there in the past. Highlighting their academic research, literary works and artistic creations, the exhibition illuminates the profound humanistic spirit of Xuannan scholars during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

Xuannan holds a profound historical significance as the cradle of Beijing's urban development. From Ji City of the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) and the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) to Youzhou of the Sui (AD 581–618) and Tang (AD 618–907) dynasties, and from Nanjing of the Liao Dynasty (AD 916–1125) to the Central Capital of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234),

the central areas of these cities gradually merged to form what we now recognise as Xuannan. The emergence of the Xuannan community in Beijing during the Ming Dynasty marked the genesis of "Xuannan" as a specific urban spatial name. Throughout the Qing Dynasty, Xuannan underwent a transformative evolution from merely a community designation within administrative divisions to embodying a unique urban cultural space rich in humanistic heritage. Scholars and gentry residing in Xuannan wielded significant cultural influence and played pivotal roles in shaping the cultural landscape. They eagerly advocated for practical learning, championed the prevailing spirit of the times, spearheaded reforms and paved the way for modernisation efforts aimed at strengthening the nation, resisting foreign aggression and driving social transformation—especially amidst the tumultuous late Qing Dynasty.

The museum has curated exhibitions titled "The History and Culture of Changchun Temple," "Xuannan Bookstores," introducing the history of the bookstores in Baoguo Temple, and "Xuannan 870," showcasing cultural relics and historical sites in the Xuannan region to mark the 870th anniversary of the establishment of the Jin Dynasty Central Capital.



Exploring Colourful Ming Architectural Decorations at Zhihua Temple

The Beijing Cultural Exchange Museum (the Administrative Office of Zhihua Temple) presents “Brilliant Colours,” a meticulously curated exhibition hosted at its Dazhi Hall. This showcase focuses on the research and restoration of colourful painting techniques from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

Colourful paintings on ancient buildings serve multiple purposes, including protecting structural components, decorating structures and showcasing social status, thereby becoming a prominent feature in the embellishment of ancient Chinese architecture. Zhihua Temple, completed in 1444 during the Zhengtong period (1436–1439) of the Ming Dynasty, proudly displays well-preserved early Ming colourful paintings on the interior structures of its buildings. These vibrant decorations inherit characteristics from the Song (AD 960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties while also embodying typical Ming Dynasty styles. The historical significance of Zhihua Temple, with its distinctive features, laid the groundwork for the development of colourful paintings during the Qing Dynasty.

Vivid paintings adorning the ceilings of various halls, including the caisson ceiling of the Depository of Buddhist Sutra, predominantly feature Sanskrit characters in the Ranjana style. Intertwined with motifs such as lotus flowers, treasure vases and the eight traditional Chinese auspicious symbols, these paintings convey clear religious symbolism and feature a well-organised spatial layout.

Characterised by stable and elegant hues, as well as sophisticated techniques like *jielin* gold-leaf and glazing, the colourful decorations at



Zhihua Temple exemplify the exquisite craftsmanship and superior skills of ancient artisans, standing as a testament to the unparalleled beauty of Ming-style colourful painting techniques.

The exhibition, stemming from research conducted by the Beijing Cultural Exchange Museum from 2021 to 2022, is divided into two sections: “Splendid Colours, Diverse Styles” and “Inheritance of Craftsmanship, Continuing the Legacy of Song and Introducing Qing Features.” With a focus on 10 replicas of Ming paintings from Zhihua Temple, the exhibition delves into the pigment composition, painting process and unique production techniques employed in the temple’s colourful decorations. This immersive experience provides visitors with an opportunity to gain a more intuitive understanding of the artistic heritage of ancient Chinese architecture.

Encountering Faust

From May 9 to 12, the Poly Theatre in Beijing will host a stage play adaptation of *Faust*. Directed by Lithuanian director Rimas Tuminas (1952–2024), this rendition premiered in China in 2019, garnering both critical acclaim and commercial success.

In 2024, the play returns to the capital city with a refreshed look and cast. *Faust*, the seminal work of German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), has been interpreted in various art forms worldwide.

Tuminas meticulously curated evocative passages from the original work, condensing over 10,000 lines of poetry

into a three-hour stage performance that vividly portrays Faust’s emotional and spiritual evolution as he traverses the world and encounters a diverse array of characters. Audiences will feel as though they too have embarked on a transformative journey alongside Faust and Mephistopheles.



Re-presenting The Miser

L'Avare, or *The Miser*, an important comedic work by French playwright Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, 1622–1673), delves into the intricacies of human nature and introduces audiences to the iconic character of the miser Harpagon. Recently, this comedic masterpiece was restaged by the Beijing People’s Art Theatre.

The Miser holds deep roots with the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, serving as a timeless classic in its repertoire. In 1959, the theatre presented the play as one of the tribute performances commemorating the 10th anniversary of the founding of the

People’s Republic of China. Notably, this year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and France. Through this performance, audiences have the opportunity to gain insight into French culture and witness the exchange and dialogue between the theatrical traditions of both countries. The performance will run until May 12.

