

北京

Postal Subscription
Code 82-777

Published Monthly
on the 25th Day

July 2024

Telling Beijing's
Stories

BEIJING

A Green City
The Echoes of Ancient Trees

ISSN 2095-736X
9 772095 736201 0.7



绿色之城
古树有声

BEIJING

讲述北京故事

每月一期

零售每份 12元

订阅电话 82-777

北京



Supervision
Publicity Department of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee

Sponsors
Information Office of the People's Government of
Beijing Municipality
Beijing International Communication Center
The Beijing News

Publisher
The Beijing News

Editor in Chief
Ru Tao

Executive Editors in Chief
An Dun, Xiao Mingyan

Editors
Zhang Hongpeng, Wang Wei,
[United States] Brad Green, [United States] Anne Ruisi

Photo Editors
Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi

Art Editors
Zhao Jinghan, Lyu Lianghua

Photos Courtesy of
Xinhua News Agency; veg.com; 58pic.com;
IC photo; tuchong.com;

Distribution
The Beijing News

Address
F1, Building 10, Fahuuananli, Tiyuguan Lu,
Dongcheng District, Beijing

Tel
+86 10 6715 2380

Fax
+86 10 6715 2381

Printing
Beijing QL-Art Printing Co., Ltd.

Postal Subscription Code
82-777

Publishing Date
July 25, 2024

Price
38 yuan

International Standard Serial Number
ISSN 2095-736X

China National Standard Serial Number
CN10-1908/G0

Contents

4

The Echoes of Ancient Trees

36

Green on Paper

10

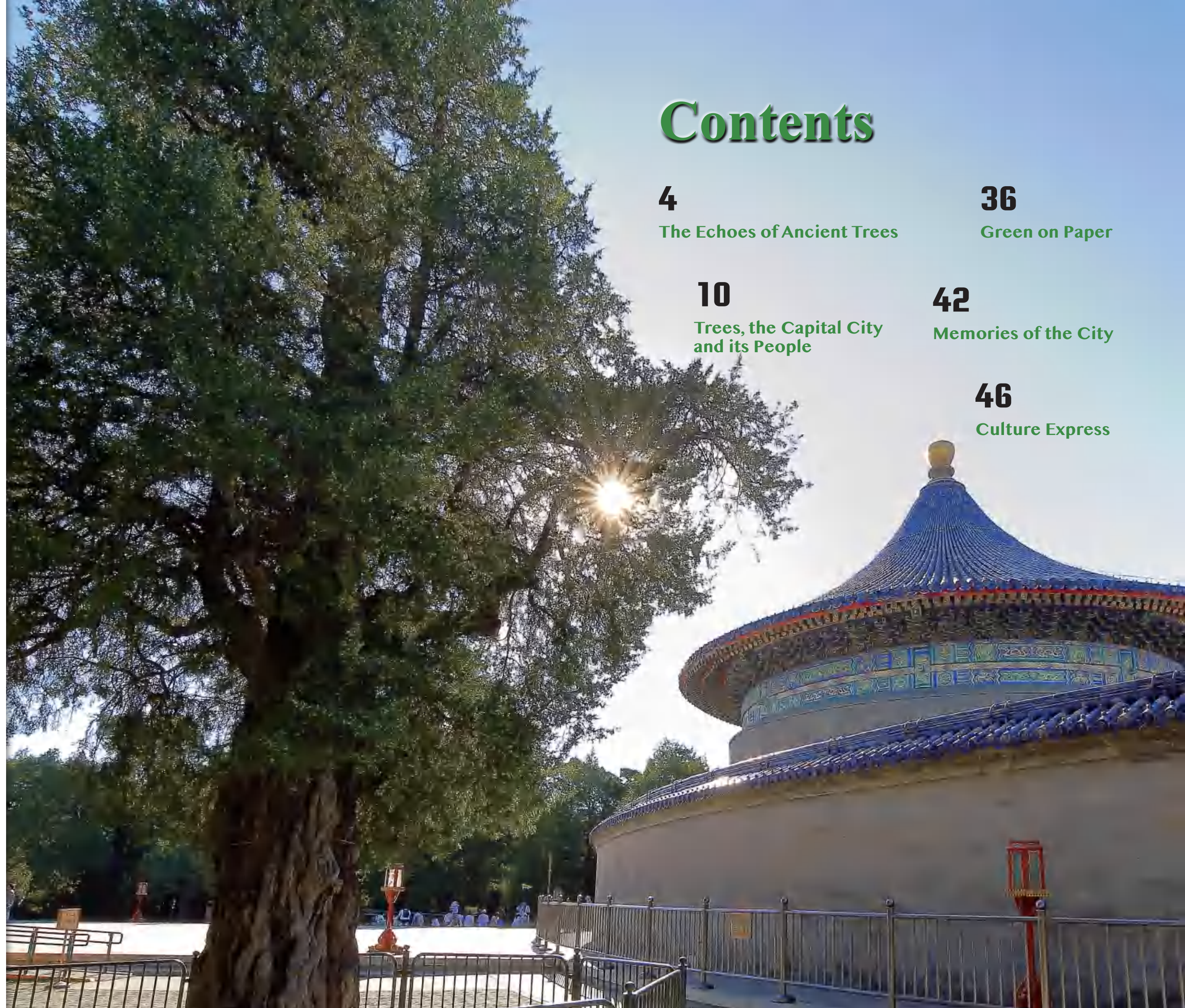
Trees, the Capital City
and its People

42

Memories of the City

46

Culture Express





The Echoes of Ancient Trees

Translated by Wang Wei | Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photo by Zhang Quanyue

Before Beijing was established as a city, this land teemed with abundant life, resonating with the sounds of trees and their dancing shadows.

According to experts, Beijing's oldest tree boasts a history of nearly 3,500 years. Each growth ring of this ancient tree serves as a testament to the city's transformation and progress. Scattered throughout Beijing, these ancient trees are akin to chronicles of the city's significant events and monuments honouring its history.

Beijing, blessed with more than 40,000 venerable and historic trees, stands as a city adorned with ancient arboreal treasures. Through the ages, these living cultural relics have etched their own narratives into the fabric of the city, eloquently recounting the storied history of the ancient capital.



▲ The Cypress of Identifying a Treacherous Minister at the Beijing Confucian Temple

As one traverses the streets, alleys, parks and temples of the city, the eyes are inevitably drawn to ancient trees along roadsides, marked with red or green signs indicating their age. Green signs denote trees with a history of over 100 years, while red signs signify those that have thrived for more than 300 years.

During the period from around 1600 BC to 1046 BC, the land that now encompasses Beijing, including Miyun District, was home to fertile soil where a small, unassuming tree thrived vigorously. The climate and environment of that era provided optimal conditions for its growth, allowing it to draw nutrients from the soil where mountains met plains. Over time, this tree flourished into a massive *Platycladus orientalis* (oriental arborvitae). By 1405 BC, when the city of Beijing was

established under the name “Ji,” this tree had already established deep roots in the area. It continued to tower alongside the villagers of present-day Xinchengzi in Miyun, becoming a symbol of ancient mystique and reverence, earning the title of the “divine arborvitae.”

The tree’s robust vitality is evident in its colossal stature. Unlike typical cypresses, its trunk is so thick that it would require many adults holding hands to encircle it. Adorned with a luxuriant crown, it boasts a total of 18 branches, ranging from mighty boughs to delicate twigs. As Beijing’s oldest surviving tree, it has stood witness to more than 30 centuries of history. Braced by several supports for its sprawling branches, it resembles a respected elder leaning on a walking stick, yet each gnarled texture on its trunk

radiates with sagacity.

Due to its exceptional longevity and unparalleled beauty, the oriental arborvitae was unequivocally included on the *Top 10 Most Beautiful Tree Kings List* in 2018. Also featured on this esteemed list are other ancient and remarkable representative tree species in Beijing, such as pagoda trees and ginkgoes. The city’s ancient and celebrated trees, imbued with historical significance, are predominantly represented by four native species: oriental arborvitae, Chinese pine, Chinese juniper and pagoda tree. Together, these four types of ancient trees exceed 38,000 specimens, comprising approximately 93 percent of Beijing’s ancient tree population.

In the distant past, the terrain within what is now the modern city

was somewhat rugged and reminiscent of a desert, where nature favoured resilient and tenacious tree species. These species thrived in the city, each displaying distinct characteristics. This natural selection process has given rise to Beijing’s iconic trees, adapted to its four distinct seasons and notable temperature variations. These trees have become synonymous with the city, enriching its natural environment and landscapes significantly. Beijing proudly hosts a diverse array of ancient and renowned trees of historical importance scattered throughout, making their presence accessible and appreciated by its residents.

Beijing stands out as one of the world’s cities boasting an extremely high number of ancient trees. Unlike regions

like Shaanxi and Yunnan provinces in China, renowned for their ancient trees mostly in remote mountainous areas, Beijing’s ancient trees are distributed widely throughout the urban landscape. They grace various districts, and can be found in the Forbidden City, former princes’ palaces, ancient temples, gardens, imperial tombs and ancestral halls. These revered trees also embellish residential areas, forging a close bond with the public and enriching the fabric of the ancient capital as a whole.

The founding of Dadu (“Grand Capital,” present-day Beijing) during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) was intricately linked to a significant tree. According to the *Annals of Xijin* by Xiong Mengxiang, a Yuan Dynasty scholar, during the city’s construction under the reign of Emperor Shizu (Kublai Khan, 1215–1294), the chief designer Liu Bingzhong (1216–1274) used a tree outside Lizheng Gate (near today’s Qianmen Arrow Tower) as a reference point to establish the capital’s Central Axis. This tree, known as the “General Tree,” was deeply cherished by Dadu’s residents. During festivals, it would be adorned with lanterns, and elaborate temple fairs were held beneath its branches. Unfortunately, due to enthusiastic local activities, the tree was frequently disturbed by swirling incense, leading to its rapid withering.

In Beijing, there are prominent ancient trees celebrated not just for their age but for the rich narratives they embody. For example, in present-day Jingshan Park, Emperor Chongzhen (reign: 1627–1644), the final ruler of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), ended his life by hanging himself on a tree with a thick, leaning branch, marking the conclusion of his reign and the dynasty. Today, a pagoda tree stands in its place, replanted to memorialise this poignant historical moment. In a city steeped in millennia of history, these ancient trees serve as living witnesses to pivotal moments that shaped the nation’s fate.

Amidst the weathered trunks of ancient trees and the rustling of their leaves, the history, culture and traditions

of the ancient capital have quietly integrated into the long passage of time, evoking a sense of nostalgia among the city’s residents.

Inhabitants of today’s Beijing hold a deep appreciation for its trees, particularly the ancient ones, which are meticulously cared for to ensure their well-being and longevity. Walking along the streets of Beijing, one cannot help but notice the city’s dedicated efforts to protect these ancient trees. For example, structures resembling silkworm pupae are often seen attached to the trees. These structures house *Chouioia cunea Yan*, a parasitic wasp that preys on fall webworms, thereby safeguarding the trees from potential damage. Moreover, some trees are equipped with hanging bottles containing nutrient solutions to help them withstand the harsh winter conditions of the city.

The scene from this street corner serves as a testament to Beijing’s steadfast commitment to preserving its ancient and historic trees. Protecting, restoring





and rescuing these trees require a comprehensive understanding of their detailed information. In recent years, a thorough citywide survey of ancient tree resources has been conducted, marking a crucial step in enhancing the management system for these invaluable plants. The survey meticulously documents essential details about the city's ancient and historic trees, including their species, age, geographical location, ownership, characteristics, height, crown width, growth environment and current condition. This information is essential for strengthening efforts in their identification, registration, documentation and protection.

Each ancient tree has undergone meticulous registration and received an "ID card" based on the compiled information. These documents not only feature unique identification numbers but also precise coordinates, measured to the centimetre using laser ranging and real-time differential GPS positioning devices. This comprehensive documentation enhances the city's ability to care for and manage its ancient trees effectively.

At Bodhi Square along the Tonghui River, a venerable Bodhi tree over 300 years old, identified as number 11010500035, faced a severe pest and disease outbreak several years ago. Responding swiftly, the local greening department initiated a two-year programme to control the pests and diseases plaguing this ancient tree. A special treatment involved wrapping the tree in clear cling wrap after applying agricultural chemicals to eliminate the possibility of pests permanently damaging its trunk. Following this, a rejuvenation process was undertaken, digging four trenches around its roots and nourishing it with traditional nutrients. These meticulous efforts have led to the Bodhi tree regaining its former splendour, with new shoots emerging from its trunk. By early summer of the current year, the ancient tree has entered its peak flowering period once more, adorned with clusters of silver-white blossoms on its towering frame exceeding 10 metres in height. As a gentle breeze wafts through, the air is filled with a delicate fragrance. The successful restoration of ancient and historic trees, such as the Bodhi tree by the river, stands as a testament to Beijing's dedicated preservation efforts.

In the past, the rescue and rejuvenation of the city's ancient trees were considered remedial measures taken after issues had already occurred. To address potential issues proactively rather than reactively, the capital city has implemented the nation's first regional physical examination programme for its ancient and historic trees. This initiative involves routine inspections to meticulously assess the growth status of each tree throughout the city. Based on these assessments, individual physical examination reports and health records are created for

every ancient tree, ensuring comprehensive monitoring and timely intervention where needed.

Many ancient trees, despite their outward appearance of health, may actually be experiencing unseen issues, such as internal hollowing and decay, which can lead to their gradual decline in health and eventual death. Detecting these problems is challenging without specialised methods. The physical examination of such trees in Beijing employs techniques reminiscent of traditional Chinese medicine, integrating observation and olfaction. Initial observations identify external abnormalities like leaning, trunk splits, bark damage or sparse foliage, indicating potential internal issues. Subsequent "auscultation" involves tapping the trunk to detect abnormal sounds. Further detailed examinations assess underground roots, identifying water deficiencies, root damage and soil conditions using tools like ground-penetrating radar, chlorophyll fluorometer and plant photosynthesis meter. These scientific methods encompass both above-ground and underground components, allowing dendrologists to comprehensively and promptly evaluate the dynamic health status of ancient trees.

To ensure the preservation of Beijing's precious ancient trees, dendrologists have employed various methods, such as cutting, grafting and tissue culture to propagate descendants from 70 ancient and historic trees that have retained their unique genetic makeup. One notable example is the oldest tree in Beijing, revered for its rich history and cherished by generations of residents. This tree now has a cloned seedling with identical genes, strategically poised to perpetuate its genetic heritage. In the event of the oldest tree's demise, this seedling will be planted in its original location, thereby continuing the legacy of its elder. This young seedling serves as a symbol of hope, ensuring the ongoing preservation of the genes, history and cultural significance embodied by Beijing's ancient trees.

In Beijing, ancient and historic trees flourish under meticulous care, boasting luxuriant foliage and a diverse array of postures. Their aged yet sturdy trunks and branches create a visually striking sight, enhancing the city's urban landscapes and tourism appeal with enduring beauty. These trees serve as guardians of the capital's natural environment, chroniclers of its evolution and progress and symbols of its residents' deep-rooted sentiments. Protecting these ancient trees is not merely about preserving the plants themselves but also safeguarding the memories and emotions of the city's people.

In the ever-changing historic yet modern capital city, ancient trees have firmly established their roots, serving as enduring and unwavering spiritual emblems and cultural symbols.





Trees, the Capital City and its People

Translated by Wang Wei, Zhang Hongpeng Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi Photos by Zhang Xin, Zhang Quanyue,
Yao Yongmei, Zhou Mingxing, Hu Shengli, Zhang Dianying, Li Bin, Zhu Tianchun, He Rong

Encountering ancient trees in Beijing may be an unexpected occurrence, yet it is also quite common. With over 40,000 ancient and historical trees, often referred to as “living cultural relics,” scattered throughout every corner of the capital city, they impart a unique charm to its ancient architectural clusters. These trees, with their enduring lifespans, bear witness to the passage of time, and the winds and rains. They not only recount legendary tales and preserve anecdotes but also forge deep connections with luminaries from ancient times, leaving behind a rich tapestry of legacies.

Today, the ancient trees stand in silent reverence, cherished by the city’s residents as treasures, much like one would proudly speak of their family’s prized possessions.



Evergreen Pines and Cypresses Thrive throughout the Year

In Beijing, which experiences four distinctive seasons, pines and cypresses have always held prominent positions among its ancient trees.

Pines and cypresses, evergreen throughout the year and resilient even in severe cold, have been held in high esteem among the Chinese since ancient times. In traditional Chinese culture, they symbolise “exemplary conduct and nobility of character,” as well as “longevity and steadfastness.” From the Liao (AD 907–1125) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties to the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, pines and cypresses adorned Beijing’s imperial gardens, tombs and temples consistently. Over time, they have matured into “elders,” bearing witness to the city’s historical ebbs and flows, as well as the joys and sorrows of its inhabitants, enduring various weather conditions with unwavering resilience.

The ancient trees strewn across Beijing are inseparable from the city’s urban evolution. Today, numerous ancient trees thrive in the city’s historic and picturesque locales. Beijing’s urban landscape traces its roots to Dadu, the Yuan Dynasty capital, with a history spanning 700 years. Most well-preserved architectural complexes in the city date back to the Ming Dynasty. Consequently, many clusters of ancient trees survived from this era, planted at

key historical sites such as the Forbidden City, Beihai Park, Jingshan Park and the Temple of Heaven. While a few ancient trees from earlier periods like the Liao, Jin and Yuan dynasties occasionally exist within these clusters, they are scarce. Hence, the seven ancient cypresses in Zhongshan Park, each boasting a millennium-long history, stand out as exceptionally rare and precious specimens, emblematic of Beijing’s enduring historical grandeur.

The history of the park’s ancient cypresses dates back to the 10th century when Beijing served as the secondary capital of the Liao Dynasty, known as “Nanjing.” Today’s Zhongshan Park once housed the Xingguo Temple during the Liao Dynasty, where seven ancient cypresses were prominently planted. Consequently, these trees are often referred to as the Seven Cypresses of Liao. They are arranged in a straight line spanning 200 metres (m) from east to west, positioned in front of the southern gate of the Altar of Land and Grain.

The first of the Seven Cypresses of Liao, starting from the east, stands slightly northwest of the statue of Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925). Despite having the smallest diameter at breast height among the seven, this tree remains a striking feature in the park. Moving westward, the second cypress is notable for its main trunk displaying spiral growth and branches starting

around two metres high. Continuing further west, there are two other ancient cypresses, planted during the Ming and Qing dynasties respectively. Adjacent to them is the third cypress and its trunk appearing split from the ground, resembling deer antlers in shape. The fourth cypress, next to the third, is the thickest among the seven. Lastly, the fifth cypress stands at the southeast corner of the intersection in front of the southern gate of the Altar of Land and Grain.

The Seven Cypresses of Liao are situated flanking the southern gate of the Altar of Land and Grain, with five located to the east and two to the west. To see the sixth and seventh ancient cypresses, one must move westward from the southern gate. The sixth tree, celebrated for its graceful posture, is distinguished by its significant ornamental value. The seventh tree, positioned farther westward, reaches to the southwest corner of the altar wall, marking the westernmost point of the 200-m-long row of ancient cypresses.

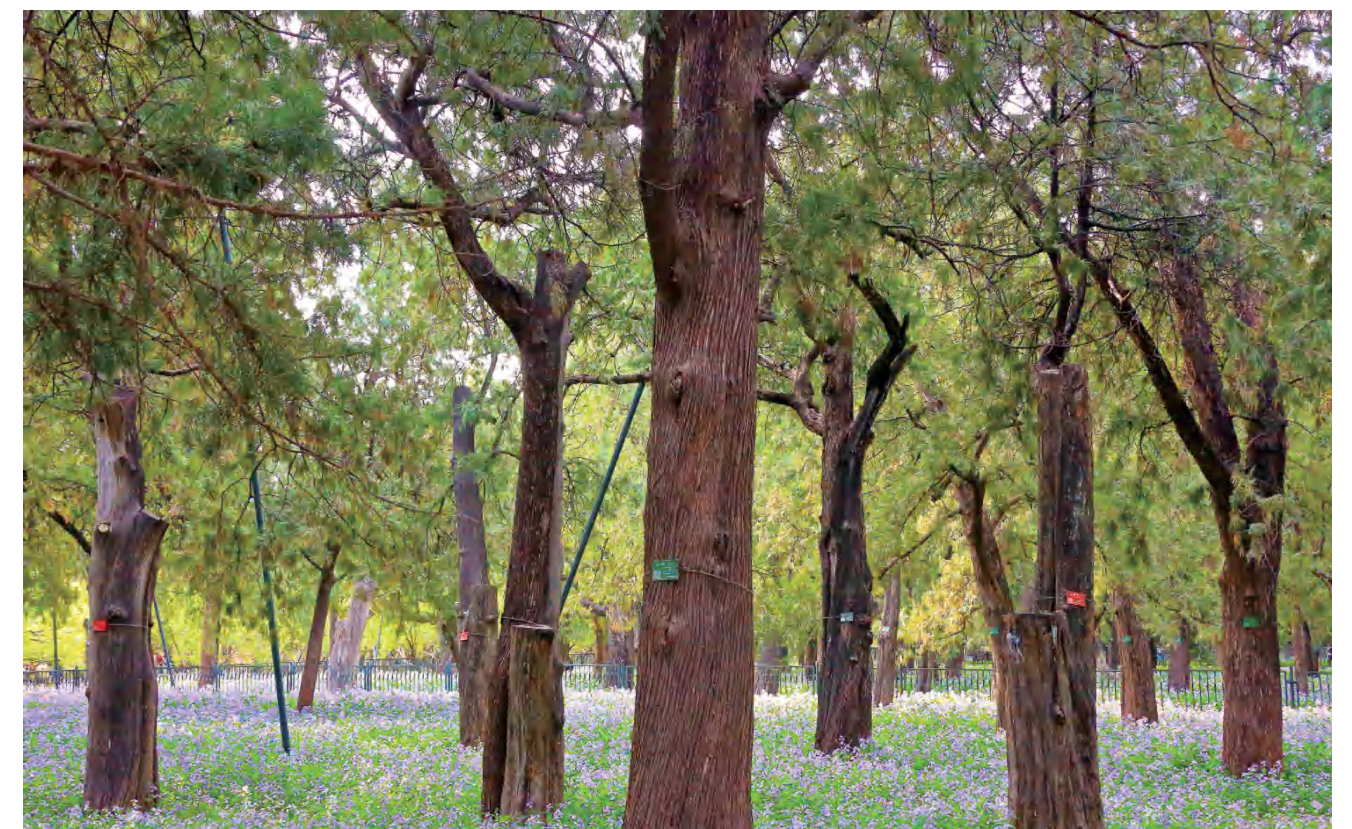
Although it may not appear as robust as the first six trees, it still stands as a sizable ancient tree within Zhongshan Park.

In contrast to the Seven Cypresses of Liao, celebrated for their distinct beauty, the ancient cypress clusters in the Beijing Working People’s Cultural Palace, a prominent public park in the city, evoke a sense of classical literature, eliciting diverse emotions among viewers.

Situated on the east side of Tian’anmen Square, the Beijing Working People’s Cultural Palace originally served as the Imperial Ancestral Temple where Ming and Qing dynasty emperors conducted ancestral sacrifices. Its construction dates back to 1420, the 18th year of Emperor Chengzu’s reign (1403–1424) during the Ming Dynasty. While a plaque above its main entrance today bears the park’s current name, locals commonly refer to it as Taimiao (Imperial Ancestral Temple). The ancient cypresses, now thriving groves, were predominantly planted during the temple’s initial

establishment, with a small portion replanted during the Qing Dynasty.

Among the cypresses in the Imperial Ancestral Temple, the Divine Cypress is the most celebrated. Legend has it that this ancient cypress was the first tree planted by Emperor Chengzu of the Ming Dynasty at the temple’s inception. Historical records indicate that during the initial construction of the temple,



▲ An ancient cypress grove at the Temple of Heaven



of wind and rain, these two ancient trees have become the venerable elders among the cypresses in the park, witnessing the vicissitudes of the Ming and Qing dynasties together.

Outside the southern wall of the Imperial Ancestral Temple stands a unique cypress with a double trunk and intertwined branches, forming a harmonious balance on both sides, reminiscent of the shape of the Chinese character “北” (“*bei*,” meaning north).

Emperor Chengzu ordered the planting of cypresses on a large scale, symbolising evergreen pines and cypresses as a gesture of respect for ancestors and a prayer for national stability. However, three consecutive attempts at planting failed due to poor soil conditions. An experienced gardener identified the issue and proposed a solution: replacing the temple’s sand and soil with fertile soil from the northeast corner of the Forbidden City. Following this advice, the emperor personally planted the tree. Eventually, the sapling thrived, earning the name “Divine Cypress” and becoming renowned for its history and significance.

The Divine Cypress stands proudly on the southwest side of Liuli Gate outside the Imperial Ancestral Temple, while its counterpart, planted by the emperor, mirrors it on the northwest side of the temple. Enduring over 600 years

While exploring the Imperial Ancestral Temple, visitors should not overlook any ancient cypress they encounter. Continuing north from the cypress shaped like the Chinese character “*bei*,” they will soon come upon a celebrated tree. This particular cypress is famous for its remarkable sub-trunks and branches sprouting approximately one metre above the ground, resembling nine dragons with their heads held high. Due to its unique appearance, this botanical marvel within the temple is known as the Nine-*Dragon Cypress*, narrating a captivating tale of the temple’s history through its distinctive form.

Throughout the city’s cultural sites, ancient cypresses with a distinctive nine-dragon shape can be discovered. The most renowned among them is the Nine-*Dragon Cypress* in the Temple of Heaven Park. Positioned on the northwest side of

the Imperial Vault of Heaven, this ancient cypress with lush green leaves and an aged trunk vividly showcases its extensive history. Upon closer inspection, its trunk reveals swirling patterns resembling nine large dragons coiling around its body, which explains its name. The rugged bark, remarkably lifelike and magical, is not artificially carved or drawn but rather a natural marvel shaped by the tree itself over an extended period.

The Temple of Heaven served as a crucial venue for the emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties to conduct sacrificial ceremonies honouring heaven. Encompassing an area of 2.73 million square metres, equivalent to four times the size of the Forbidden City, it ranks among the world’s largest surviving ancient sites with sacrificial buildings. Within this vast complex, cypresses have traditionally been planted as symbolic trees. Over time, alongside more than 3,000 other ancient cypresses, they have formed the largest grove of their kind in Beijing, becoming a prominent feature of the Temple of Heaven. From a bird’s-eye view, observers can imagine the lush ancient cypress grove within the historical site playing a significant role in enhancing the sacrificial ceremonies conducted at the Circular Mound Altar.

The ancient cypresses scattered throughout the city are not just natural wonders but also integral parts of its cultural heritage. Over time, they have forged a deep connection with humanity and come to symbolise the aspirations of the people. Within the Beijing Confucian Temple, one particular ancient cypress stands as if imbued with the ability to discern loyalty from treachery, influenced by centuries of exposure to Confucius’ teachings. Every visitor to this cultural site will encounter the remarkable tale associated with this venerable tree.

Yan Song (1480–1567), a powerful

minister during Emperor Jiajing’s reign (1521–1567) in the Ming Dynasty, was widely condemned for his numerous crimes, which included embezzlement and framing loyal ministers to the emperor. Legend has it that Yan once visited the Confucian Temple on behalf of Emperor Jiajing to make offerings to Confucius. According to ritual protocol, the emperor should personally worship Confucius in the temple’s Dacheng Hall. If a prince performed the ceremony, it would be conducted under the eaves of the hall. A minister representing the emperor should stand at the foot of the steps leading to the main gate of the hall. Despite representing Emperor Jiajing during the sacrificial ritual, Yan, known for his arrogance and disregard for protocol, entered the hall, asserting his authority in a manner deemed disrespectful by traditional standards. His actions angered accompanying ministers, who, despite their unease, were too afraid to confront him directly. Suddenly, the clear sky darkened with heavy clouds, and a strong wind swept through the temple grounds. The branches of a venerable cypress tree near the steps swayed violently, and Yan’s black gauze hat (worn by officials in ancient China) was lifted from his head and fell to the ground. Startled and visibly embarrassed, Yan hurriedly left the hall, never to return to the Confucian Temple again. Consequently, this ancient cypress tree, witnessing the dramatic event, became known as the *Cypress of Identifying a Treacherous Minister*. This legend, passed down through generations, symbolises people’s innate



yearning for justice and their deep disdain for deceitful individuals who abuse their power. The story of the cypress continues to resonate in Chinese culture, reminding people of the enduring importance of integrity and humility in leadership. Despite its legendary associations, the ancient cypress remains revered as a symbol of loyalty and righteousness by many, reflecting timeless moral values upheld in traditional Chinese society.

Today, the cypress still stands at the base of the stone steps of the hall, adorned with lush foliage and thick branches. Its trunk is so thick that it requires two or three adults holding hands to encircle it. As one approaches, a prominent branch extends towards the stone steps of the hall. According to legend, this very branch lifted Yan’s official hat during the infamous incident.

Jingshan Park is also home to a pair of ancient cypresses that intertwine nature and history, much like the cypress in the Confucian Temple. These trees, known as the *Two Generals*, are situated near the east gate. These robust and towering ancient cypresses earned their name from a legendary tale. Emperor Kangxi (reign: 1661–1722)

of the Qing Dynasty, keen on preserving the tradition of horseback riding and archery among the children of the Manchu’s Eight Banners, regularly assessed their prowess in these disciplines in front of Jingshan’s Guande Hall, often personally demonstrating his skills. Furthermore, to uphold values of loyalty and bravery, the emperor personally inscribed a plaque with the Chinese characters reading “*zhongyi*” (“Loyalty and Righteousness”) for the Temple of Lord Guan located east of the hall. The two ancient cypresses

near the shooting field were then bestowed the title “Two Generals.” Since that time, these ancient cypresses have symbolised loyalty, bravery and the embodiment of martial prowess.

These two ancient cypresses have stood side by side for over nine centuries. Despite enduring a tumultuous journey, they continue to thrive, their foliage lush and vibrant, warmly greeting each visitor to the park. Standing beneath their canopy, one can witness their branches and leaves swaying gently in the breeze, evoking the enchanting tales of their storied past.

The tradition of conferring official titles upon trees originated with Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BC) of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), who bestowed the title “Five Senior Officials” upon pines. Subsequently,

Chinese emperors continued this practice by granting official titles to their favoured plants. In addition to the Two Generals, an ancient, white-barked pine and an ancient Chinese red pine in the Round City in Beihai Park were notable recipients of imperial titles. Emperor Qianlong (reign: 1735–1796) of the Qing Dynasty conferred the titles “White Robed General” and “Marquis Shade” upon these respective trees.

White Robed General is a majestic ancient white-barked pine, standing tall and elegant like a formidable general adorned in a white campaign robe, overseeing the Round City in Beihai Park. Emperor Qianlong honoured this impressive tree with its title.

Marquis Shade in the Round City is a robust and sinuous Chinese red pine, distinguished by its meticulously pruned

and expansive canopy. Legend has it that Emperor Qianlong took a rest under this tree, enjoying its cool breeze and comforting shade during a moment of respite. Delighted by this experience, he bestowed the imperial name upon it. Supported by an iron pillar, the tree resembles an elderly nobleman leaning on a walking stick, radiating an enigmatic presence. Despite passing tourists who may not fully grasp the significance of these ancient pines, the revered White Robed General and the esteemed Marquis Shade steadfastly continue to watch over the Round City.

Marquis Shade, believed to be approximately 800 years old, was once thought to be the oldest ancient Chinese red pine in Beijing. However, its status as the premier specimen was

challenged when the Guest-Greeting Pine in Che’erying Village, confirmed to have a history exceeding 1,000 years, earned the title of the “King of Chinese Red Pines in Beijing.”

The Guest-Greeting Pine serves not only as a natural treasure but also as a cultural icon in Che’erying Village. This venerable pine silently oversees every corner of the village, embodying the beliefs and aspirations of its residents. Its enduring history and resilience through harsh winters have rendered it a symbol of longevity and good health among locals. The tree’s three principal branches, known as the Three Protective Deities of Fortune, Prosperity and Longevity, symbolise the villagers’ hopes and aspirations. In Che’erying Village, there is a belief that by paying respects to and admiring the pine, one can attain success in both career and life, prospering day by day. While this belief may be regarded as just a wish, it underscores the community’s profound respect for the ancient tree and their aspirations for a brighter future.

The ancient pine, with its aged appearance, graceful shape, remarkable poise, verdant foliage, magnificent presence and unwavering vitality,



▲ The pine White Robed General at Beihai Park

captures the hearts of all who approach it. Adjacent to the pine stands a modest Temple of Lord Guan. The presence of both Lord Guan and the pine attracts numerous villagers who gather to offer incense and prayers on the first and 15th days of each lunar month.

In the presence of ancient pines, individuals not only encounter the power of nature but also appreciate the unique solemnity of ancient life. Jietai Temple, a renowned ancient temple in Beijing, harmoniously blends the grandeur typical of northern temples with the serene and elegant allure of gardens found in regions south of the Yangtze River. This temple is renowned for its distinguished pines, which have held prestigious status in Beijing since the Ming and Qing dynasties. Each of these ancient pines possesses distinctive characteristics that rival the forces of nature itself, exuding an unparalleled charm that has captivated numerous literati and scholars over the centuries.

Among the most celebrated ancient pines at Jietai Temple are the Active Pine, Free Pine, Nine-Dragon Pine, Hugging a Pagoda Pine and Crouching-Dragon Pine. Of these, the most exceptional is the Nine-Dragon Pine. This white-barked pine, planted during the Liao Dynasty, stands as Beijing’s oldest of its kind and is among the oldest of its species in China and the world. Despite its rugged bark, the tree exudes vitality. Rising to a height of 20 m with a majestic presence, its main trunk divides into nine branches that resemble dancing silver dragons, hence its name. Revered as nine divine dragons, the ancient pine symbolically guards the temple, imparting an aura of mystique to its surroundings.

Standing beside the ancient tree and gazing up at its robust branches, visitors may find themselves deeply influenced by the tranquillity and solemnity it exudes, perhaps enhanced by the sounds of Buddhist music emanating from the temple.



A City Infused with the Fragrance of Pagoda Tree Flowers

Ancient pagoda trees are deeply intertwined with Beijing's history and cultural identity, evolving alongside the city from its inception to maturity. These majestic trees not only beautify the natural landscape but also embody the soul of the city itself. Standing amidst the foliage of these ancient pagoda trees, one can hear echoes of history and feel the vibrant pulse of Beijing's rich cultural heritage.

If one were to inquire which is the "god of longevity" among the ancient pagoda trees in urban Beijing's "kingdom of ancient pagoda trees," the answer undoubtedly points to a pagoda tree from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) located in Beihai Park. This tree, over 1,000 years old, predates the former temporary imperial palace built during the Liao and Jin dynasties within the park.

The old pagoda tree stands at the southwest corner of Huafang Study's Guke Courtyard in Beihai Park. Its grey and black trunk has hollowed over time, its original crown withering away and replaced by a new canopy with luxuriant foliage. Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty held a deep affection for this pagoda tree, prompting the construction of the exquisite Guke Courtyard. The name "Guke Courtyard" translates to "courtyard for ancient trees," derived from a poem composed by the emperor himself: "The courtyard is under an old pagoda tree, so it is named Guke." Thus, the ancient pagoda tree from the Tang Dynasty formed a profound bond with the Qing imperial family. Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) and Emperor Guangxu (reign: 1875–1908) also cherished this ancient tree, frequently visiting the courtyard to admire its beauty.

In the 21st century, the pagoda tree continues to exude its charming and captivating presence. Virginia Stibbs

Anami, an American Japanese scholar, holds a deep affection for Beijing's ancient and renowned trees. During her time in the city, she visited numerous ancient trees and crafted one of her masterpieces, *Witnesses to Time: The Magnificent Trees of Beijing*, focusing on these venerable landmarks. In the summer of 2002, Anami encountered the ancient pagoda tree in Guke Courtyard while attending a ceremony for the reopening of Huafang Study. Upon first sight, she was struck by the tree's "green crown and thick branches," as well as its "austere aura." Among all the old trees she had seen in Beijing, only a few impressed her with such a presence. Reflecting on the reasons behind this attribute, she surmised that its aura might stem from its historical connection with imperial families.

Over the years, the ancient trees of Beijing have stood as silent witnesses to the tumultuous passages of time, each harbouring stories—short or long—

that resonate deeply. Yet, perhaps the most renowned among them is one "sinful" pagoda tree, situated on the east slope of Guanmiao Pavilion in Jingshan Park. According to legend, during the late Ming Dynasty, after the peasant rebel leader Li Zicheng (1606–1645) captured Beijing, Emperor Chongzhen (reign: 1627–1644), known personally as Zhu Youjian, hanged himself from this pagoda tree, marking the downfall of the Ming Dynasty. Following the establishment of the Qing Dynasty's capital in Beijing, Emperor Shunzhi (reign: 1644–1661) ordered the tree to be bound with iron chains and named it the Sinful Pagoda Tree. Additionally, all members of the Qing imperial family were required to dismount and walk past the tree as a sign of respect whenever they passed by its location.

While historical documents do not substantiate Emperor Chongzhen hanging himself from the Sinful Pagoda Tree, scepticism persists among many.

Nevertheless, the pagoda tree remains deeply intertwined with historical events, regarded by people as a symbol and witness to significant moments. Today, the Sinful Pagoda Tree thrives lush and green, drawing tourists to Jingshan Park who come to reflect on its historical significance. It is important to note, however, that the current tree is not the original. In 1970, a young pagoda tree was planted at the same spot after the original tree withered. Initially, the young tree bore little resemblance to its predecessor. Subsequently, a 150-year-old pagoda tree from near Jianguomen was transplanted to the location, giving the tree its present appearance.

The oldest pagoda tree in Jingshan Park isn't the Sinful Pagoda Tree but rather Pagoda within Pagoda Tree, meaning "a pagoda tree within another pagoda tree." This ancient tree, over 1,000 years old, stands to the west of the front hall of Yongsu Hall. From this vantage point, it overlooks the grand gate of the Forbidden



The Sinful Pagoda Tree at Jingshan Park



▲ The Hunchbacked Pagoda Tree at the Imperial College in Beijing

City to the south and stands adjacent to Shouhuang Hall, which houses portraits of Qing Dynasty emperors. Through centuries, this pagoda tree has silently witnessed the rise and fall of dynasties and the passage of time. While its trunk appears vibrant from a distance, closer inspection reveals it is hollow and decayed, with only the old bark supporting its crown and vitality. The growth of another pagoda tree within this hollow trunk presents a mystery, creating a unique and enchanting sight known as “a pagoda tree within another pagoda tree” in the city. Together, these two pagoda trees contribute to the city’s allure with their mysterious and captivating presence.

Similar to the Pagoda within Pagoda Tree, Beijing boasts numerous remarkable tree combinations. One such natural wonder is Pagoda Tree and Cypress Tree Embracing Each Other, located in

Zhongshan Park. This unique pair stands on the eastern side behind the bronze statue of Sun Yat-sen. The ancient cypress is over 500 years old, while the pagoda tree sprouting from a gap in the cypress is more than 200 years old.

The origin and growth of such tree combinations can be described as follows: Seeds from one tree species are deposited into tree holes or cracks in branches by wind or birds. Over time, with the accumulation of soil and rainfall, these seeds sprout, grow into saplings and eventually develop into large trees, creating the spectacle of a tree combination. A “single” tree thus takes on two distinct forms of branches and leaves. In the case of the cypress and pagoda tree in Pagoda Tree and Cypress Tree Embracing Each Other, they have shared their lives together for over 200 years. This isn’t merely a romantic tale of two trees whose destinies

have intertwined for centuries. It’s understandable why people are moved when they encounter Pagoda Tree and Cypress Tree Embracing Each Other.

Other renowned ancient pagoda trees in Beijing include Revived Pagoda Tree and Hunchbacked Pagoda Tree, located in the Imperial College. While they may not be as famous as the Cypress of Identifying a Treacherous Minister in front of Dacheng Hall of the Beijing Confucian Temple these two pagoda trees are notable attractions within the Imperial College, attracting many tourists who come specifically to see them.

On the western side and in front of Yilun Hall of the Imperial College stands the remarkable Revived Pagoda Tree, towering at about 15 m in height. The tree’s distinctive feature lies in its two trunks, which resemble a pair of twins standing side by side, making

it visually striking, even from a distance. Planted during the Yuan Dynasty, the Revived Pagoda Tree has an intriguing legend associated with it. According to lore, the tree withered during the late Ming Dynasty. However, in the early summer of 1751, to the astonishment of many, new leaves sprouted from its seemingly lifeless branches, marking a miraculous revival that surpassed ancient beliefs. This extraordinary phenomenon was not lost on the teachers and students of the Imperial College, who viewed it as a profoundly auspicious event and spread the news far and wide. In the same year, Jiang Pu (1708–1761), a scholar-official, was commissioned to make offerings at the Beijing Confucian Temple, adjacent to the Imperial College. To verify the miraculous revival of the Revived Pagoda Tree, Jiang Pu spent a night at the college. Being skilled in painting, he depicted the revived ancient pagoda tree in a masterpiece for Emperor Qianlong. Delighted by the tree’s resilience, the emperor composed a poem commemorating its revival. This event further garnered attention, with civil and military officials also composing poems to celebrate the pagoda tree’s return to life after centuries of obscurity. Thus, from being an ordinary pagoda tree in the Imperial College, it soon gained fame and came to be known as the Revived Pagoda Tree, becoming a cherished attraction within the college grounds.

The tradition of ascribing beautiful cultural meanings to plants has been a longstanding romance in Chinese culture. Pagoda trees, with their exuberant vitality, are believed to bring good fortune and happiness to people, which is why they are often planted in front of and behind houses. The Imperial College in Beijing holds a special place as the oldest school in the city and the premier academic institution in China during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. It attracted the brightest students from across China, who studied diligently to pursue political careers. Consequently, the grounds of the Imperial College are adorned with many ancient pagoda trees. Over the centuries, more than two hundred pagoda and cypress trees were originally planted there during these dynasties. Today, more than 40 of these ancient pagoda and cypress trees still stand. Among these ancient pagoda trees, alongside Revived Pagoda Tree, another notable tree gained prominence due to its association with the celebrated historical figure Liu Yong (1719–1805).

To the west of Biyong Hall and beside the circular pond, stands Hunchbacked Pagoda Tree with a distinctive shape resembling a “hunchback.” Its trunk bends towards the south, and on the north side, there’s a conspicuous scar where a hump was once removed. While not imposing, this tree has become a charming attraction in the Imperial College because of its unique





▲ The dragon's claw locust at the Forbidden City's Imperial Garden

appearance. Growing by Biyong Hall, the pagoda tree has had the privilege of witnessing ancient scholars' lectures. Its trunk, leaning like a scholar pondering deeply with a tilted head, evokes the image of a learned figure immersed in literary pursuits at the Imperial College.

According to legend, after Biyong Hall was completed, Liu Yong accompanied Emperor Qianlong and other officials on an inspection. When they reached the west of the hall and saw the "hunchbacked" pagoda tree, the emperor remarked that the tree lacked elegance and proposed cutting it down. Liu Yong intervened, explaining that the ancient pagoda tree held significant historical value and could serve as an inspiring example for diligent students who gathered to listen to lectures under its branches every day. Persuaded by Liu's reasoning, the emperor rescinded his order to cut down the tree. The story is so compellingly told that first-time listeners might mistake it for a historical fact. However, historians familiar with Liu Yong's life and career recognise it as a myth. The emergence of this rumour is closely linked to popular perceptions of Liu Yong's personal image. According to folk accounts, Liu Yong, despite being

tall, developed a hunched back due to his posture while writing and reading. The pagoda tree's trunk also exhibited a similar hump. This physical resemblance inspired people to fabricate the story of Liu Yong saving the tree, expressing their affection for both the tree and the scholar. Today, the connection between Liu Yong and the ancient pagoda tree continues to be a source of both fascination and confusion. Despite its fictional origins, the tree has acquired a rich and endearing folklore, endowing it with a unique soul that resonates with many admirers.

Among all ancient pagoda trees in Beijing, the *longzhaohuai*, or dragon's claw locusts, boast the most distinct shapes. In ancient China, the Chinese dragon symbolised emperors, making it the favoured symbol of rulers. Consequently, all dragon-related images and objects were exclusively controlled by the imperial court. *Longzhaohuai*, characterised by their Chinese dragon-shaped branches, could only be cultivated in imperial palaces, becoming bonsai trees exclusively owned by imperial families. Today, behind the Qiongyuan East Gate of the Imperial Garden in the Forbidden City, visitors can admire Coiled Dragon Pagoda Tree, the quintessential *longzhaohuai* in Beijing.

This ancient pagoda tree, a premier example among Beijing's ancient trees, is approximately 400 years old. Its crown, resembling a giant umbrella, showcases several large branches extending horizontally like flying Chinese dragons in the sky, while numerous small branches curve like dragon claws. At first glance, the tree naturally evokes thoughts of Chinese dragons.

The pagoda tree, akin to an elderly person leaning on walking sticks for support, relies on pillars to remain standing. Originally erected during the Qing Dynasty and again in 1962 (all replaced with steel pillars in 2015), these supports are integral to the tree's stability. Despite their practical function, the pillars have become an inseparable part of the tree's aesthetic and cultural significance. They symbolise the enduring efforts of generations to preserve and protect this ancient pagoda tree, enhancing its allure and adding a layer of historical continuity to its story.

In reality, besides the dragon's claw-shaped pagoda trees, other types were also cultivated within the Forbidden City. Throughout history, pagoda trees have been esteemed as auspicious and held a privileged status. Dating back to the

Zhou Dynasty (11th century–256 BC), these trees were planted exclusively in imperial palaces, earning them the name "*gonghuai*," or "pagoda trees of imperial palaces." Today, besides the Coiled Dragon Pagoda Tree, the cluster of 18 pagoda trees near Duanhong Bridge remains a notable attraction within the Forbidden City.

The 18 pagoda trees within the Forbidden City trace their origins back to the Yuan Dynasty, making them older than the Forbidden City itself. While historical records do not specify the exact individuals responsible for planting these trees or the precise dates of their planting, they have silently witnessed numerous significant historical events. These include Li Zicheng's self-proclamation as emperor in the Hall of Martial Valour, Dorgon's regency in the same hall and Empress Dowager Cixi's journeys to the Summer

Palace. Throughout the dynastic changes, rises and declines within the Forbidden City, these 18 pagoda trees have stood witness to them all.

Clusters of ancient pagoda trees in central Beijing have long been an integral part of the cityscape, steeped in historical significance and cultural richness. Despite their venerable status, they are not the oldest pagoda trees in the capital. That distinction belongs to the Han Pagoda Tree.

In the east of Baiyachang Village, on the western bank of the upper reaches of Yanqi Lake in Beijing's Huairou District, the Han Pagoda Tree stands as a testament to history, having survived for 2,000 years and witnessed numerous dynastic changes. Despite enduring two fires that severely damaged it, the ancient tree miraculously regenerated, with a new crown emerging around its trunk,

symbolising resilience and renewal.

The hollow trunk of the Han Pagoda Tree has become emblematic, embodying the ancient adage that "thousand-year-old pines and ten-thousand-year-old cypresses are not as old as hollow ancient pagoda trees." Despite relying on just half of its body for support, the tree continues to thrive, enduring through the ages. Today, it serves not only as a witness to history but also as a cherished legacy of the city. Its presence invites contemplation of the city's rich history and the relentless passage of time. Standing before it, one can almost feel a profound connection to the past, as if the tree itself whispers ancient tales of bygone eras.

For millennia, ancient pagoda trees have silently and peacefully accompanied the old capital. The remarkable bond forged between these trees and the city endures to this day.



The cluster of 18 pagoda trees in the Forbidden City



▲ The ancient ginkgo tree along the western section of Wanshou Road

Captivating Golden-Yellow Autumnal Views

In autumn, Beijing shines with its vibrant ancient ginkgo trees.

Before gracing the city's autumnal tapestry, the ginkgo tree has borne witness to Earth's evolution over several hundred million years. Enduring through the ages, ginkgoes survived a near-extinction event over 2 million years ago during the tumultuous Quaternary Period, marked by global glacial activity. In China, pockets of ginkgoes persisted in the warm, humid climates of the southern mountains and forests, safeguarding the species. Ancient Chinese people later discovered and cultivated these resilient trees, fostering their spread across the nation.

The ginkgo tree's elegant appearance has held sway since ancient

times. Following the introduction of Buddhism to China, ginkgoes took on a solemn role, captivating monks who journeyed from distant lands. These trees were revered as "sacred trees" and were meticulously planted symmetrically beside the main halls of nearly every temple, symbolising the sanctity of the grounds and the profound teachings of Buddhism. Over centuries, ginkgoes nurtured by ancient Chinese hands grew into majestic specimens, integral to the serene landscapes of Buddhist temples. Beijing, among China's ancient capitals, boasts a wealth of historic temples. Enduring dynastic upheavals, many temples have weathered the ages, their ginkgoes seemingly receiving special

reverence. These resilient trees thrive in revered temples like Tanzhe Temple and Dajue Temple, and in the remnants of ancient temple sites, embodying the city's rich cultural heritage and profound historical legacy.

Enthusiasts of Beijing's history are likely familiar with the saying "Tanzhe Temple was founded first, then the city of Beijing." Situated facing south, this ancient temple retains its grandeur with hundreds of halls and structures spread across its eastern, central and western sections. Due to its extensive history, a diverse array of ancient trees dot the landscape around the temple's halls and other buildings. Among these, a pair of ancient ginkgoes located in the backyard

of the Great Buddha's Hall have long enjoyed great popularity as significant historical landmarks in the city.

Since ancient times in China, trees in temples have often been planted in pairs for symbolic and aesthetic reasons. One ancient ginkgo, distinguished by its large size and a history of over 1,000 years, was personally named the Emperor Tree by Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty. Adjacent to it, a slightly smaller ginkgo to the west was replanted and later dubbed the Emperor Tree's Spouse. This honorary title, though not officially bestowed by the emperor and devoid of any true imperial significance, underscores the cultural reverence for symmetry and balance in temple landscapes. Both

trees are male ginkgoes, incapable of pollination or fruit-bearing. Nonetheless, visitors drawn to admire the paired ginkgoes can visit the God of Wealth Hall, where two ginkgoes planted during the Ming Dynasty stand. Positioned opposite each other—one male and the other female—they symbolise a harmonious couple in the human world.

The Emperor Tree towers at a majestic height of 24 m, commanding a presence that exudes nobility among its species. Its counterpart, the Emperor Tree's Spouse, stands at a still impressive 16 m. These ancient ginkgoes, with their towering stature and imposing presence, symbolise longevity and strength.

Adding to the scene are two sal

trees, known for their sturdy postures and rugged barks, standing in parallel with the ginkgoes and complementing their gracefulness. Capturing the full grandeur of these magnificent trees, especially the pair of ginkgoes, presents a daunting challenge. The sheer size and scale make it nearly impossible to frame all four trees in a single shot.

In comparison to the esteemed Emperor Tree and its counterpart Emperor Tree's Spouse, the Millennial Ginkgo at Dajue Temple maintains a more understated presence. However, this ancient tree carries a rich and significant history of its own.

First established during the Liao Dynasty, Dajue Temple originally bore

the name Qingshuiyuan or Clear Water Temple. The Liao Dynasty, founded by the Khitans, an ancient ethnic group in China, held a profound reverence for the sun in the east. Reflecting these strong ethnic characteristics, the temple was oriented towards the east and the rising sun. During the Jin Dynasty's rule in Beijing, under Emperor Zhangzong (reign: 1189–1208), the temple was one of the eight temples situated in the Western Hills, also known as Lingquan Temple or Intelligent Spring Temple. In 1428, during the Ming Dynasty under Emperor Xuanzong (reign: 1425–1435), Empress Dowager Xiaozhao proposed the reconstruction of Lingquan Temple, which was subsequently renamed Dajue Temple. Over the following centuries, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Dajue Temple underwent continuous expansion, eventually reaching its current grand scale. It has solidified its

position as a significant Buddhist site on the outskirts of Beijing.

Dajue Temple is renowned in the capital city for its natural beauty, particularly celebrated for its eight wonders, which enhance its reputation. Among these wonders, five are intricately intertwined with the natural landscapes: the Ancient Temple's Orchid Fragrance, Millennial Ginkgo, Old Vine Integrating into Cypress, Dahurian Buckthorn Growing with Cypress and Pine and Cypress Embracing the Pagoda. These plants harmoniously complement the ancient architecture, collectively imbuing the temple with a solemn and profound ambiance that reflects its enduring history. Inside the temple, a distinct stone tablet bears an inscription dating back to 1068 during the Xianyong period (1065–1074) of the Liao Dynasty. It is titled "Record of the Qingshui Temple's Sutra Collection on Yangtai Mountain."

The Millennial Ginkgo stands proudly on the right side of the Hall of Amitayus Buddha within Dajue Temple. The temple's ancient architectural layout follows a symmetrical axis, divided into central, northern and southern sections. Beginning at the main entrance, the central section features a rectangular Merit Pool crossed by an ancient bridge. Positioned in a north-south orientation, the Bell Tower faces the Drum Tower. Behind these towers, the Hall of the Heavenly Kings, the Great Buddha's Hall and the Hall of Amitayus Buddha are sequentially arranged along the mountain slope. The Millennial Ginkgo is believed to have been planted during the Liao Dynasty, dating back to the temple's construction. Likely nourished by mountain spring water, this ancient ginkgo thrives, its lush and vibrant crown resembling a giant umbrella that overlooks the Hall of Amitayus Buddha.

Next to the Millennial Ginkgo proudly stands a slender ginkgo tree. Despite its youthful appearance, this ginkgo is actually the same age as the Millennial Ginkgo. The main trunk of the slender ginkgo has long since perished, but numerous new

branches have sprouted from its roots. It has transformed into a lush and vigorous ginkgo, exhibiting the plant's resilient vitality and unwavering character.

In the old days, in front of the Hall of Amitayus Buddha, the Millennial Ginkgo once stood amidst the fragrant mists of Buddhist incense, resonating with the sounds of morning bells, evening drums and the recitation of Sanskrit scriptures. Over the centuries, this ginkgo has cultivated a dignified and majestic presence, akin to that of a venerable monk who embodies a deep understanding of Buddhism.

In Zhenjue Temple, two ancient ginkgo trees exude a profound sense of reverence for visitors.

Zhenjue Temple, renowned for its distinctive structure—the Vajrasana ("diamond throne") adorned with five small pagodas—is also celebrated as the Five-Pagoda Temple. The architectural style of the Vajrasana foundation, reminiscent of the Bodhi Gaya Temple in India, features intricate Buddhist stone carvings, making it a masterpiece of ancient architectural art with profound historical and artistic value. During the Ming Dynasty, in 1473, under the reign of Emperor Xianzong (1464–1487), the main structure was erected. To enhance the solemnity of the pagodas, two majestic ginkgo trees were ceremoniously planted in front, further emphasising the temple's reverence for its architectural heritage.

Since their planting centuries ago, the two ginkgo trees have steadfastly stood alongside the pagodas, enduring wind and rain. Their presence embodies the harmonious integration of nature and humanity. The majestic, upright ginkgoes complement the solemn, dignified structures of the pagodas, creating a picturesque scene. In autumn, their leaves turn a radiant golden yellow, gleaming in sunlight and enhancing the splendour of the temple's pagodas. As visitors pause to gaze upon the Vajrasana foundation and its Five Pagodas, they embark on a journey through space and time, experiencing the serenity and sanctity of



▲ The Emperor Tree at Tanzhe Temple

this ancient temple.

Through the currents of time, ancient ginkgo trees have not only graced the city's revered temples with breathtaking autumnal beauty but have also embodied a "living heritage," preserving the very essence of the city's memories. Along the western extension of Chang'an Avenue, standing proudly in front of Tsinghua University Yuquan Hospital and facing the Beijing International Sculpture Park, loom two colossal ginkgo trees. These ancient giants have steadfastly endured for nearly seven centuries, once serving as silent witnesses to the existence of Lingfu Temple. Historical chronicles unveil a fascinating tale: during the Yuan Dynasty, Emperor Shizu (Kublai Khan, reign: 1260–1294) personally oversaw the temple's construction and planted these revered ginkgo trees in homage to the venerable Monk Haiyun.

Today, Lingfu Temple has vanished from existence, leaving only the two ancient ginkgo trees standing sentinel over the site. Elderly residents nearby remember that after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the

temple's buildings were repurposed as warehouses. Tragically, a devastating fire razed the halls of the ancient temple, yet miraculously spared the two ginkgo trees. The mystery of their survival remains unexplained to this day.

The two ancient trees have borne witness to the city's evolution since the founding of the People's Republic of China. During the construction of Beijing Subway Line 1, they stood at the proposed location of Yuquan Road Station according to initial plans. A department suggested their removal to facilitate station construction. Upon receiving this proposal, Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) personally intervened, directing modifications to the subway plans. This included relocating one station entrance and extending the distance between Yuquan Road Station and Babaoshan Station to protect the ancient trees. This incident has since become a legendary tale in the city's history of conserving ancient and historical trees. Today, the branches of the two ginkgo trees stretch gracefully, displaying vibrant colours through every season. They stand as a

testament to the dedication of countless advocates for ancient trees and the city's steadfast commitment to preserving its rich historical and cultural heritage.

In the film *Coco*, it is portrayed that death is not the ultimate end of one's existence; rather, death occurs when one is forgotten by others. This concept resonates poignantly with the current situation of the ancient ginkgo trees and Lingfu Temple. While the temple itself no longer stands, the two ancient ginkgo trees endure as silent witnesses to its past existence. Their presence naturally evokes memories of the ancient temple in the minds of those who see them. Through these trees, the city continues to cherish and preserve its profound historical heritage and memories.

In the western section of Wanshou Road in Haidian District, just outside the southeast gate of the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences' Institute of Geomechanics, stands yet another ancient ginkgo tree. Rising to a height of 17.4 m, it commands attention with its robust trunk and luxuriant branches and leaves, captivating passersby who

often find themselves gazing upwards. Legend has it that this venerable tree is the sole surviving relic of Zhenguo Temple from the Yuan Dynasty, serving as a tangible link to the past for present-day inhabitants.

Zhenguo Temple once stood as a magnificent and awe-inspiring Buddhist site, drawing numerous monks and enveloping its surroundings in fragrant incense. According to the book *Studies of Hearsay of Old Matters from under the Sun*, in the third lunar month of 1328, one thousand monks were engaged in Buddhist practices at Zhenguo Temple. The ginkgo tree planted at the temple over 700 years ago has remained in its original location without ever being moved. Even during the construction of the later Wanshousi Road, special measures were taken to divert the road around the tree to ensure its preservation. Today, the ancient ginkgo

is enclosed by a spacious fence, with a small park developed around it, honouring its enduring presence and historical significance.

The ancient ginkgo holds profound value not only as a natural marvel but also as a steadfast witness to history. Legend has it that in 1644, during the fall of the Ming Dynasty, rebel leader Li Zicheng captured Beijing. Seeking shade, he purportedly tied his war horse to the ancient ginkgo's trunk, leading to its moniker as the "Ginkgo Hitching Post." This enduring legend has solidified the tree's historical significance. Today, when the breeze stirs its leaves, it evokes reflections on the legendary tales associated with Li Zicheng. During the early Qing Dynasty, the tomb of Gan Wenkun (1632–1674), a key figure in suppressing the Revolt of the Three Feudatories and posthumously appointed Minister of War by Emperor Kangxi (reign: 1661–1722), lay near the

ancient ginkgo. In more recent history, following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the residence of geologist Li Siguang (1889–1971) was located nearby. Li frequently strolled under the tree, finding solace and inspiration. From its origins near a Yuan Dynasty temple to the proximity of Gan Wenkun's Qing Dynasty tomb and Li Siguang's former residence, the ancient ginkgo encapsulates myriad stories and memories. Each gnarled texture of its bark seems to narrate a journey of hardship it has endured over time.

The ancient trees of the city stand as both a historical legacy and modern-day urban landmarks. They embody not only the continuity of history but also witness the unfolding times and urban growth of the city. Many of these venerable trees have quietly contributed to the city's ongoing development.

Located at the southeast corner

of the intersection of Jinchengfang Street and Financial Street in Xicheng District, the central square of Financial Street is adorned with a diverse array of vegetation, providing a green oasis amidst the towering buildings of the area. Within this square, five ancient trees, each boasting a history of over 100 years, stand prominently. Among them, three ancient ginkgo trees have become celebrated landmarks, drawing visitors who flock to admire their vibrant foliage during the city's autumn and winter seasons. These ginkgos not only enhance the square's charm but also serve as enduring witnesses to the city's rich history.

Over the past 30 years, Financial Street has evolved into the preeminent central hub of China's financial industry. Its development commenced in 1992, marking the city's inaugural large-scale integrated and specialised zone dedicated to finance. The choice of this

location for development is deeply rooted in its historical significance. As early as 1912, numerous banks were established in the area, earning it the nickname "Bank Street." Going further back in history, during the Yuan, Ming and early Qing dynasties, it flourished as a bustling commercial and financial centre, accommodating operations such as *yinhao* and *jinfang* of traditional Chinese private banks, alongside a diverse array of business activities.

The development of Financial Street brought about significant changes, prompting the careful preservation of ancient trees, which were transplanted to the central square's green space. Among them, three ancient ginkgo trees are prominently located on the south side of Jinchengfang Street, arranged in a west-to-east sequence. The first ginkgo tree features two trunks originating from its root system, reaching a towering



height of 12 m at the top. The second tree also bears two trunks from its roots, spaced noticeably apart, creating the illusion of two independent trees at first glance. In the eyes of Li Qingzhao (1084–1155), a celebrated poet from the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279), a ginkgo with twin trunks symbolises profound love between a couple enduring turbulent times. Li Qingzhao once composed a poignant poem extolling the beauty of such a ginkgo, likening it to the lasting love of a devoted couple. With delicate and meticulous observation, she vividly portrayed the graceful posture of the ginkgo and its stunning autumn scenery. During a tumultuous period when the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) army invaded the southern regions of the Song Dynasty, Li Qingzhao and her husband departed their hometown. Along their journey, they encountered a beloved ginkgo tree, which she imbued with passionate emotions in her poetry. Since then, a ginkgo with twin trunks has symbolised mutual dependence and unwavering commitment between husband and wife, embodying enduring love amidst adversity.

The revered ginkgo trees in the central square of Financial Street embody a profound historical reflection within the ancient yet modern metropolis. As graceful symbols of the city's past, they steadfastly observe its ongoing development and promising future. This relationship serves as a microcosm, illustrating a bond of mutual dependence and enduring commitment between the city, its ancient trees and its people.



The two ancient ginkgo trees in front of the Vajrasana at Zhenjue Temple



A City Adorned with the Blossoms of Ancient Trees

Ancient trees in Beijing are not only characterised by their expansive crowns and lush beauty but also by their stunning blossoms. Among all the flowering ancient trees in the city, ancient catalpa trees hold a special distinction due to their long history and designation as a species of living fossil tree in China.

In ancient times, the colour purple held great significance to imperial families and was revered as an auspicious hue. The catalpa tree, known for producing pink and purple flowers, earned the prestigious title of the “heavenly tree.” This admiration for catalpa trees by imperial families is reflected prominently in the Forbidden City, which boasts the largest concentration of ancient catalpa trees in Beijing. Among the city’s 30-plus ancient catalpa trees, more than 10 thrive within the Forbidden City. These majestic trees adorn various

areas including the Imperial Garden, the Qianlong Garden of the Palace of Tranquil Longevity, and the garden of the Palace of Compassion and Tranquillity. Notably, the ancient catalpa tree located in front of the Bower of Ancient Catalpa in the garden of the Palace of Tranquil Longevity holds the highest status and enjoys widespread renown.

In 1772, Emperor Qianlong issued a decree to renovate the garden of the Palace of Tranquil Longevity. However, the presence of three catalpa trees in the original garden posed a challenge to the renovation plans. Of particular concern was the easternmost tree, which stood exactly where a newly planned five-bay bower was to be constructed. Known for his deep appreciation of ancient trees, Emperor Qianlong chose not to order the tree’s removal but instead adjusted the location of the bower to accommodate it. Upon completion, the emperor named the newly constructed bower after the ancient catalpa tree. Inside the bower, a pair of couplets composed by Emperor Qianlong adorned two

pillars. The inscriptions read “*mingyue qingfeng wujincang, changqiu gubai shijiapeng*,” which poetically translates to “the bright moon and cool breezes are hidden here; catalpa and cypress trees are my friends.” These couplets not only reflected the emperor’s profound affection for ancient trees but also highlighted his deep enjoyment of being surrounded by nature. Thanks to Emperor Qianlong’s dedicated efforts to protect and integrate the ancient catalpa trees into the garden’s design, today the lush catalpa trees and the historic Bower of Ancient Catalpa together create a stunning and harmonious landscape within the Palace of Tranquil Longevity.

In the past, elderly locals in Beijing ventured to the city’s renowned scenic spots to indulge in flower appreciation. For them, this activity was not merely about admiring flowers; it encompassed delving into myths, legends and historical tales, and experiencing Beijing’s distinctive cultural ambiance. Among the most favoured spots for flower appreciation were the ancient temples, where flowers took on an enchanting allure set against the backdrop of ancient temple structures. The most popular destinations for admiring catalpa tree flowers include Guanhua Temple, Long’an Temple and Miaoying Temple (White Pagoda Temple). Here, the blossoms of catalpa trees are celebrated as the most beautiful spring flowers in the city.

North of the White Pagoda in Miaoying Temple stand four ancient catalpa trees, each over 200 years old. These venerable trees have stood witness to the historical changes of the city and the world’s fluctuations. When these catalpa trees bloom, their exquisite blossoms blend harmoniously with the White Pagoda’s serene presence and the surrounding red walls, creating a lively and picturesque landscape.

In Beijing, aside from ancient temples, former residences of luminaries

are also cherished destinations for flower appreciation. The ancient and renowned trees found within these residences are revered not only as embodiments of their original owners’ characters but also as witnesses to the myriad legends and stories that unfolded within their grounds.

In his prose “Autumn Night,” well-known Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) begins with the lines, “From my backyard, people can see two trees outside the wall. One is a jujube tree; another is also a jujube tree.” These two jujube trees mentioned in the prose stand outside the wall of his former residence in Beijing. When Lu Xun crafted this piece in 1924, the New Culture Movement was facing challenging





times. As a staunch advocate for social progress within the movement, Lu Xun often felt disheartened by setbacks and obstacles. Despite these challenges, he remained unwavering in his resolve as a cultural warrior, never abandoning his ideals.

In "Autumn Night," Lu Xun used the imagery of the two jujube trees to symbolise the courage and spirit of a progressive thinker.

In the Ancestral Temple of Prime Minister Wen at 63 Fuxue Hutong, Dongcheng District, there stands another jujube tree symbolising tenacity. The ancestral temple was originally established in 1376 on the site where Wen Tianxiang (1236–1283) was imprisoned. Legend holds that Wen planted the jujube tree himself during his captivity. Despite enduring capture, torture and the fall of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) to the Yuan Dynasty, Wen Tianxiang refused to surrender and harboured a steadfast desire to return southward. After Wen's passing, the jujube tree began to lean slowly towards the south. Over time, it leaned to a 45-degree angle, directly pointing towards the south. Wen once penned a poignant line in his poem "Yangtze River," stating, "I have a heart like a magnetic needle, which will point to the south forever." The jujube tree thus became a living embodiment of this sentiment. Legend has it that Yu Qian (1398–1457), a prominent official during the Ming Dynasty, greatly admired Wen's patriotism. Inspired by Wen's example, Yu also planted a jujube tree in his own courtyard. He would often practice martial arts under its shade.

In Beijing, numerous jujube trees hold deep connections with the lives of ordinary people, often evoking memories of significant periods in history. At the end of bustling Xidan Road stands an ancient jujube tree, believed to be over 600 years old. This location was once the site of the Mongolian and Tibetan School, established nearly a century ago. During that time, revolutionary pioneers such as Li Dazhao (1889–1927) and Ulanhu (1906–1988) frequently engaged in discussions with students from ethnic minorities about life, education and Marxism under the comforting shade of this jujube tree, which provided a gentle shield from the scorching sun.

In Dongcheng District's Huashi Zaoyuan neighbourhood, many residents reminisce about late spring and early summer, filled with the fragrance of small yellow-green jujube flowers. This memory is linked to an ancient sour jujube tree there, standing 15 m tall with a crown diameter of 11 m. Research indicates the tree is over 800 years old. In 2018, it earned recognition as "China's Most Beautiful Sour Jujube Tree."

In Beijing, Persian silk trees are notoriously challenging to care for, especially the ancient varieties. A few ancient Persian silk trees thrive in specific locations such as the Imperial Garden of the Forbidden City and the former residence of Soong Ching Ling (1893–1981). These trees, dating back to



▲ A Persian silk tree in Beihai Park

the Qing Dynasty, receive meticulous care from designated gardeners, ensuring their continued flourishing. Each June and July, these ancient Persian silk trees burst into bloom with stunning pink flowers, casting a dreamlike and enchanting landscape.

Persian silk trees are distinguished by their thin and elongated leaves that gracefully droop and curl up at night, reminiscent of the delicate and charming mimosa. The tree's distinctive fluffy flowers are particularly admired, resembling a mass of pink smoke, bird feathers and unfurled folding fans when in bloom.

Due to their distinctive appearance, Persian silk tree flowers are regarded as "auspicious flowers" in traditional Chinese culture. In Chinese customs, people often plant Persian silk trees in their courtyards. Known as "*hehuan*" in Chinese, meaning "collective happiness," these trees symbolise

harmonious marital relations and happy families in China.

The flowers of Persian silk trees and fringe trees each possess a distinct and unique appearance, evoking different aesthetic experiences. While the flowers of Persian silk trees impart a sense of hazy beauty to viewers, those of fringe trees are dazzling and striking. Fringe tree flowers are characterised by their white, thin and elongated petals, resembling the fringes found on traditional Chinese attire. Set against oval leaves, these flowers exude elegance and grace. During their peak bloom in May, fringe trees are transformed into a spectacle as they become fully adorned with numerous small white flowers. The canopy of these trees, shaped like a mushroom, bears a striking resemblance to a silver-haired elderly man. As the white flowers cascade over the branches, their slender

petals gently sway in the breeze, resembling fringes in motion. The entire tree appears as if blanketed in snow, creating a serene and picturesque scene.

Beijing has only two ancient fringe trees, and therefore, they are highly cherished for their cultural significance. One notable ancient fringe tree stands on the eastern side of Hualou in Chengzeyuan Township, Yanyuan Sub-district, Haidian District. This tree has stood adjacent to Peking University for over 200 years, imbuing it with a rich cultural aura. Another ancient fringe tree can be found in Sujiayu Village, Xinchengzi Town, Miyun District. According to local legend, this tree was planted in honour of a beloved physician who served the villagers with dedication. Known for treating diseases and gathering medicinal herbs from remote mountains, the physician earned the admiration and love of



▲ Blooming fringe tree flowers at Peking University

the local community. Eventually, his exceptional healing skills led to his appointment as an imperial physician. In gratitude and remembrance, the villagers planted the fringe tree to commemorate his legacy after he departed from the village.

Today, a 580-year-old ancient fringe tree stands in Sujiayu Village, Xinchengzi Town, Miyun District. This tree reaches a height of 10 m with a trunk circumference of 3 m, branching into two major limbs at 1.3 m height, forming a large, flourishing crown. Each early May, it blooms for about 10 days, filling the small village with bright snow-white flowers and new leaves, enhancing its serene beauty and vitality.

During the annual blooming of the ancient fringe tree, a gathering takes place under its branches. Writers and literature enthusiasts from across the city join local students to recite poems

and prose dedicated to the fringe tree, celebrating the deep bond between the villagers and this ancient symbol. This cultural tradition allows people to connect with the tree in a literary manner, transforming its blooming into both a natural spectacle and a cherished cultural landscape event.

In summer, the blooming chestnut trees adorn the landscape with clusters of yellowish flowers. These flowers, stacked layer upon layer against the backdrop of green leaves, create a picturesque scene reminiscent of snow or a delicate veil draped over emerald hues. Visitors are captivated by the enchanting beauty of the chestnut trees in full bloom. Several ancient chestnut trees, known as Gongli or Tributary Chestnuts, grace the hillsides near Yanshou Temple in Changling Town, Changping District. Over the centuries, these trees have adorned the temple and its surroundings with their vibrant

yellowish flowers, imbuing the area with a strong fragrance and a sense of vitality.

According to *Annals of Fruit Trees in Beijing*, China has a rich history of cultivating chestnut trees, and Beijing has long been renowned as a major chestnut-producing region. Among the various regions of Beijing, Yuyang (today's Miyun District) is particularly noted for producing the sweetest chestnuts. Consequently, the suburbs of the city, especially areas like Miyun and Huairou districts, become the focal points for the blooming of chestnut flowers. In these regions, chestnut flowers thrive at the foothills, on hillsides and along streams.

In Huairou District's Bohai Town, nestled at the foot of the Yanshan Mountains, lies a farm of ancient chestnut trees steeped in history. Legend has it that during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), when Ying

Zheng (259–210 BC) ascended to the throne as the King of Qin (later known as Qin Shi Huang), envoys from the State of Yan presented chestnuts from the Yanshan Mountains as gifts. Initially unimpressed, King Ying Zheng passed them to Prime Minister Lü Buwei (291–235 BC). Upon inspecting the chestnuts, Lü discovered their shiny shells and golden kernels, along with their delightful taste. Impressed, he returned them to Ying and recommended the king taste them himself. Ying realised their superior quality compared to chestnuts from other regions, and thus began the tradition of Yanshan Mountains chestnuts being tributary offerings to emperors.

In Bohai Town, the farm of ancient chestnut trees boasts over a dozen 600-year-old specimens that continue

to thrive. Each autumn, these centuries-old chestnut trees bear a plentiful harvest of chestnuts. Once revered as tributary offerings fit for emperors, these chestnuts are now enjoyed by ordinary people.

Flowers adorning ancient trees in Beijing not only enhance its distinctive landscapes but also symbolise the enduring bonds between the city and its inhabitants. Each ancient tree stands as a venerable sentinel, silently safeguarding the city's history and culture. Within their growth rings lie the memories of generations past, woven into the fabric of their existence. As these ancient trees bloom and shed their petals, they bridge the past with the present, illustrating the harmonious coexistence of nature and humanity within the city.



▲ The garden of chestnut trees from the Ming Dynasty at the Huairou Waterside Great Wall Scenic Area



Green on Paper

Translated by Wang Wei, Zhang Hongpeng Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photos by Zhang Quanyue, Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin

Trees, among the oldest plants on Earth, exhibit remarkable longevity and continuous growth. Throughout history, humans have harboured a deep-seated connection marked by attachment, trust, admiration and awe towards these majestic beings.

The bond between writers, artists across various eras and trees is profoundly deep-rooted. Whether through contemplation, physical contact or integration into their surroundings, these individuals have fostered intimate connections with trees. Trees have evolved into a wellspring of artistic inspiration, enabling artists to express emotions, find inner peace and draw strength.

Inspiration

Standing beneath a tree, running one's hand over its rough bark, one can feel the profound energy it embodies, capable of lifting human spirits. Across history, numerous gifted and contemplative individuals have intertwined their thoughts and ideas with the intricate roots of ancient trees, creating works as grand and vibrant as these venerable plants.

Beijing, celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, has long inspired numerous talented individuals who draw upon the city's ancient trees to create enduring literature. Located within the China National Botanical Garden, just outside the Heavenly King Hall at Wofo Temple, stands an ancient wintersweet tree renowned as the "top wintersweet in the capital." According to legend, this tree, once nearly withered, miraculously sprouted new buds and flourished even more vigorously with the arrival of another spring. Its remarkable resilience earned it the nickname "regenerated wintersweet." In the classic novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, a masterpiece of ancient Chinese literature, there is a storyline where a Chinese flowering crabapple tree in Yihong Court blooms anew the following year after a period of decline, captivating the admiration of Jia Baoyu's grandmother and others. Enthusiasts of the novel, well-versed in Beijing's culture and history, often speculate whether this narrative is inspired by the tale of the "regenerated wintersweet" at Wofo Temple.

In ancient China, not only scholars but also many painters drew inspiration from observing ancient trees. In traditional Chinese landscape paintings, where mountains and water often take centre stage, trees have played a vital supporting role. Surviving ancient artworks depict these plants on cliffsides or beside pavilions, exuding vitality and strength with their lush and verdant forms. Trees enrich the natural ambiance of artistic compositions, lending a uniquely enchanting charm to these paintings.



Pines occupy a significant place in traditional Chinese landscape paintings. Zhang Zao, a renowned Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) painter, was celebrated for his mastery of portraying pines. Zhang was fascinated by the steadfast and noble qualities of these trees, depicting their twisting branches to exude a majestic aura imbued with ancient elegance. Legend has it that Zhang had the remarkable ability to paint pines simultaneously with a brush in each hand. Through his dedicated observation and portrayal of these natural subjects, Zhang advanced an artistic theory that emphasised exploring the beauty of Mother Nature for creative inspiration. This theory encouraged artists to deeply engage with nature, seamlessly blending its grandeur with their innermost thoughts. Revered by Chinese painters throughout history, this approach prompts artists to convey the splendour of nature on paper through their personal emotions and inner reflections.

Numerous celebrated literary and artistic works from ancient times endure, though their gifted creators have long passed. Meanwhile, the trees that once offered them profound enlightenment and inspiration still stand quietly in their original locations, seemingly reflecting and contemplating their enduring existence. These trees narrate the ever-changing history of the world to every contemplative individual who pauses beneath their branches.

Emotion

In his article "A Record of the Xiangji Studio," Gui Youguang (1506–1571), a litterateur of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), concludes with a poignant reflection: "In my courtyard stands a loquat tree, planted by my wife who passed away that very year. Its lush canopy now graces the space with an elegant poise." These simple yet profound lines evoke a melancholic atmosphere, allowing every reader to empathise with the author's deep grief, like tumultuous waves on the sea.

Gui's entire article unfolds in simple

and clear language, akin to a tranquil film, detailing the everyday events within his study, Xiangji Studio, where he spent his days and nights. The article culminates in a poignant and powerful conclusion. Despite the emotional complexities woven throughout, Gui's expressions remain subtle. Reflecting on his wife's passing, he subtly shifts focus to the growth of a tree, refraining from directly mentioning nostalgia for days gone by. Yet, this indirect reference deepens the sense of longing. The loquat tree, a tangible presence, symbolises his concrete emotions, authentically conveying his sorrow in the article's conclusion.

Gui was not the only writer to convey emotions through trees. Throughout history, many authors have employed trees as a means to articulate profound ideas and intertwine their emotions with these natural symbols.

In a modern context, similar emotions were expressed by writer Shi Tiesheng (1951–2010). In his essay, "The Pink Silk Tree," dedicated to his mother, Shi recounted fragments of memories from different stages of his life: at 10, 20 and 30 years old. These recollections trace his journey from health to disability and his mother's journey from life to passing. In the latter part of the essay, Shi recalled how his mother planted a small sapling, initially mistaken for a *Mimosa pudica* (sensitive plant), which gradually grew into a graceful *Albizia julibrissin* Durazz (pink silk tree).

Shi wrote: "Three years after the tree

was planted, it sprouted leaves again, becoming lush. My mother was overjoyed for days and saw it as a good omen. She took meticulous care of it, never daring to be careless." At that time, Shi was already ill. The "good omen" his mother perceived undoubtedly symbolised a turning point in her son's health and career. Through her meticulous care of the young sapling, she invested her hopes for her son in the tree, wishing for his growth and vigour to mirror that of the plant.

Thus, the tree became a symbolic link between Shi and his mother. However, unlike his mother, Shi did not share the same fondness for the tree. He even avoided entering the small courtyard where it stood. His accomplishments, much like the towering tree with its thick branches and lush foliage, had grown and flourished, becoming increasingly vibrant. Yet, neither the majestic tree nor his literary successes could be witnessed by his mother. Shi then condensed his regrets, remorse and reflections into the tree, turning it into a receptacle for his emotional transfer.

An individual's life can be likened to a tree, with the tree itself reflecting the journey of life. This shared journey of growth between trees and humans has inspired many writers to use trees as potent metaphors and emotional conduits. By observing the passage of time through the growth of trees, these writers articulate limitless ideas and achieve profound and enduring artistic effects in their works.





Symbiosis

Contemporary Chinese writer Xiao Fuxing documented stories about Beijing's renowned ancient trees in his prose, "Beijing's Trees." Instead of solely describing the famous trees in well-known gardens or temples, the writer delved into the tales and legends surrounding trees in the city's old hutongs, *siheyuan* (courtyard residences) and guildhalls. These aged trees hold intimate connections with people's lives in Beijing, enriching the cultural tapestry of the city.

In Beijing's historic courtyards, a harmonious symbiosis between residents and trees is a common sight. These old trees have long been inhabitants of their surroundings, seamlessly blending into the natural environment. Locals have developed a deep affection for these trees, and children frequently play games like hide-and-seek under their branches or climb them to gaze into the distance. Adults seek refuge from the summer heat in the cool shade provided by these trees. Over time, the residents of these courtyards have grown accustomed to the presence of these trees, which have become an integral part of their daily lives.

Towards the end of the prose, the author fondly recalled an elderly woman residing in a courtyard. Despite the

scorching summer heat, she preferred to stay outdoors rather than move into air-conditioned rooms. When asked about this choice, she remarked, "What courtyard residence doesn't have trees? Every tree is covered with countless leaves. Each leaf can be like a fan. When there is a breeze, every leaf fans the wind towards you." Elderly residents in Beijing often express gratitude for trees, cherishing their companionship and welcoming their presence in their daily lives.

In the Beijing-style family comedy soap opera *The Happy Life of Talkative Zhang Damin*, a tree becomes an integral part of people's lives. This television series is based on Chinese writer Liu Heng's novella of the same name. When the novella was adapted into a film, it was titled *A Tree in House*, emphasising the significant role that the tree plays within the narrative.

When Zhang Damin constructs his new house, he decides to include the courtyard's pomegranate tree, planted by his father, within its confines. Despite his efforts to fit a bed frame into a small room, he finds that the presence of the tree prevents him from placing the bed board on the frame. In a creative solution, Zhang saws the board in half and creates a semicircular hole in each half. He then assembles the board around the tree, effectively integrating

the pomegranate tree into Zhang Damin's family home.

Good-hearted Zhang does not feel bothered by having the tree at the centre of his bed. Moreover, to ensure it isn't hindered in its growth, he frequently crawls into the narrow space beneath the bed to water it. When Zhang becomes a father and names his son Zhang Shu ("*shu*" meaning "tree" in Chinese), it symbolises robust vitality and potential growth within a confined space. Thus, the tree and the child named after it embody the family's hopes. This portrayal of the tree in the novella showcases the writer's ingenious creativity, revealing Beijing residents' resilience and optimism through the narrative.

In Beijing, it's common to see residents preserving ample space for old trees within courtyard residences. Some roads have even been rerouted to accommodate these ancient trees. Furthermore, many restaurants and cafes are intentionally built around these old trees, contributing to a distinctive cityscape. Customers enjoy dining or gathering with friends in the shade of these trees. When petals or leaves fall onto dining tables, patrons simply brush them off without concern. Beijingers hold a profound affection for trees, and scenes depicting harmonious coexistence with trees frequently appear in cultural, artistic and literary works.





Memories of the City

▲ The 3,500-year-old cypress in Xinchengzi Village, Miyun District

An Ancient Cypress: A Local Chronicle

Translated by Zhang Hongpeng Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi Photos by Hu Shengli, Cao Bing

Do you know what “*jiulou shibacha*” means? This term describes an ancient tree: “*jiulou*” signifies the tree’s immense girth, while “*shibacha*” denotes its 18 branches. Essentially, “*jiulou shibacha*” can be interpreted as “a colossal tree so large that nine adults holding hands would barely encircle its trunk, with 18 sprawling branches.” Its dense canopy resembles a vast natural cloud, resiliently enduring the forces of wind, rain, thunder and lightning.

The millennium-old wonder stands

proudly between the land and the sky, between heaven and earth.

Having survived for 3,500 years, the tree is much older than the city of Beijing itself.

One day, Shi Hai, an expert on ancient trees, and I visited an ancient cypress to study its history, habitat and conditions. Three thousand five hundred years are not merely a number; they are etched in the tree’s growth rings. As we stare at these rings, we feel as if we are standing in

the warmth of the sun from the Xia (21st century–16th century BC), Shang (16th century–11th century BC) and Zhou (11th century–256 BC) dynasties, the snowflakes of the Yan state, a major state in northern China from the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century–771 BC) to the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), the misty air of Youzhou (a prefecture in northern China from 106 BC to the 10th century), the thundering hooves of Mongolian warhorses under Genghis Khan (1162–1227) and the

troops of the Eight Banners led by Nurhaci (1559–1626), also known by his temple name Emperor Taizu of Qing.

The ancient cypress is a chronicle. While history is documented in books and preserved on cultural relics, living history resides within the growth rings and branches of this ancient tree.

Local elders hold a deep reverence for the ancient cypress, considering it a divine tree. In times past, its branches were adorned with red cloth and silk ribbons, symbolising wishes of the people for happiness and good health. Families would often worship the ancient tree as a foster parent when celebrating the birth of a newborn baby. Across generations,

people have continued this tradition of worship, perhaps contributing significantly to the tree’s enduring survival.

Shi Hai pointed to the ancient cypress and explained that all trees grow from the inside out, meaning that the youngest growth ring can be found at the exterior, next to the bark, while the oldest can be found in the centre, at the tree’s core. The cambium, a tissue layer providing partially undifferentiated cells for plant growth, generates new wood cells that accumulate outside older wood cells. Within a tree’s trunk, the cambium—which is thin and protected by bark—is vital, while other components like bark and xylem consist of inert cells that shield the tree’s vital tissues

and maintain trunk stability. The trunk functions as a conduit, transporting water and nutrients from the roots all the way to the leaves, primarily through the sapwood, the outer layer of secondary wood tissues where this water transport occurs.

I listened so attentively to Shi’s explanations that I forgot to jot down notes in my notebook.

Shi continued, “A tree’s maximum height and the time it takes to reach that height depend on its genetic makeup. Additionally, factors such as soil quality, climate, sunlight and neighbouring trees also influence a tree’s height. Trees absorb carbon dioxide from the surrounding air to meet the growth

requirements of their leaves, roots and branches. However, in addition to carbon dioxide, trees also require adequate space, water and nutrients."

As we spoke, a man emerged from behind the cypress. Of average height, he sported closely cropped hair, a weathered complexion and numerous wrinkles on his forehead. His name is Hu Yumin, and he works as the head of the Xinchengzi Forestry Station. After graduating from Beijing Agricultural School (now Beijing University of Agriculture) in 1986, Hu has devoted 39 years to the forestry station since his assignment. On his first day, Hu, then barely 20 years old, commemorated the occasion with a photograph beside the ancient cypress.

Hu recounted how, in the early days of his career, to the northwest of the ancient cypress were the ruins of Guandi Temple, which were littered with grey bricks and stones. During gales, rainstorms or hail, he often worried about the ancient cypress's well-being, necessitating frequent visits to reassure himself only after seeing the tree's good condition. Like people, the old tree is prone to disease. Pests attack the cypress in turn, creating holes in the trunk, consuming leaves or nesting in the bark to consume tissues, thereby threatening the tree's health. Hu devoted much effort to preventing and controlling diseases and pests, advocating for biological methods over chemical treatments to maintain the tree's ecological balance.

A colony of wasps frequently hibernated and created holes in the cypress's trunk, causing damage to the tree. Some suggested using insecticide sprays to eliminate the wasps, a simple and convenient solution. However, Hu dismissed this idea, emphasising that while wasps posed a threat to the cypress, they served as pollinators for other plants. Moreover, as carnivorous insects, they also preyed on other pests. Hu believed in preserving the biological chain and avoided indiscriminate killing of creatures. Instead, he used wild mugwort to smoke the wasps out of their nests, a method he found effective.

In previous years, the cypress suffered severe damage from longhorn beetles, notorious leaf-eating pests. After careful observation, Hu opted for a natural solution: employing "insects to cure insects." He introduced an artificially bred parasitoid (*Sclerodermus guani*) to parasitise the larvae or pupae of the longhorn beetles, effectively neutralising them by consuming their vital tissues. This method not only avoids environmental pollution but also prevents the use of pesticides that could harm other organisms indirectly.

As a routine measure to prevent and control longhorn beetles, Hu and his colleagues annually release two rounds of *Sclerodermus guani* beneath the ancient cypress. Each round involves releasing 600 *Sclerodermus guani* from six jars. These releases typically occur in May and June and again in July and August. Thanks to these efforts, the population of longhorn beetles has been effectively managed.

The protective wall of the Songcao Highway, stretching from Songshuyu to Caojialu and constructed in the 1970s, encroaches closely upon the ancient cypress, limiting its root expansion and ability to absorb air and water. In recent years, the tree's western branches have shown signs of withering. Hu grew increasingly concerned about the tree's condition and implemented several revitalisation measures. However, these efforts only treated the symptoms rather than addressing the root cause, and the cypress's decline proved irreversible. Upon inspection by experts, it became clear that to rejuvenate the tree, the road and surrounding structures would need to be relocated.

In October 2020, the local government made the decision to dismantle 195 metres (m) of the road's protective wall and shift the road 15 m eastward. Furthermore, they relocated certain buildings belonging to the highway supplies station and town health centre, which had previously encroached upon the cypress's root space. These efforts were undertaken to create more

room and alleviate pressure on the ancient cypress.

The Xinchengzi Forestry Station devised a dedicated plan to safeguard the ancient cypress. Nine pillars were installed beneath the tree's crown to support its trunk and stabilise the canopy. Hu emphasised, "When nurturing trees, root care is paramount." They enhanced the soil beneath the ancient cypress, constructed wells to rejuvenate deep roots, scientifically guided root growth into the underground, promoted root expansion, and improved the air and water permeability of soil. These efforts successfully revitalised the tree's root system.

When autumn arrives and the seeds of the ancient cypress ripen, Hu diligently collects them under the tree using plastic water bottles. Each year, he manages to fill three to four bottles with cypress seeds, and in some particularly fruitful years, he collects five or six bottles. Hu treasures these seeds, viewing them as valuable repositories of the 3,500-year-old tree's unique "codes of life" that explain its longevity. He believes these seeds may hold the key to unlocking the tree's secrets. Hu's dedication bore fruit when seeds he collected were sent to forestry research institutes, resulting in the successful cultivation of several seedlings, a moment that brought a gleam of satisfaction to his eyes.

Centred around the ancient cypress, a park named Ancient Cypress Park has been established. Nestled against a mountain, it spans 21.3 hectares and includes footpaths, steps, stone walls, flowerbeds, lawns, shrubs and forests. The ancient cypress stands prominently as the centrepiece of the park. Adjacent to the park's entrance on the western side is a tree guard house, equipped with a duty room and lounge. Tree guards maintain a 24-hour watch, overseeing patrols, watering, weeding, soil cultivation, monitoring, fire prevention, pest control and daily upkeep. The park is open to visitors at no cost. Although not crowded, the park is frequently visited by small groups of people enjoying its serene environment.

On sunny days, chipmunks and azure-winged magpies are often spotted amidst the leaves of the ancient cypress. The emergence of new branches and buds symbolises the enduring vitality of the ancient tree.

To protect the ancient cypress from lightning strikes, a 15-m-tall pylon-shaped lightning conductor has been installed 10 m away from the tree. Additionally, surveillance cameras have been discreetly positioned to the north and south, providing a 360-degree view for monitoring. Each camera has a specific role: one records the tree's growth, while the other monitors its surroundings. These cameras are capable of capturing activities such as the movements of birds and squirrels, and even falling leaves around the tree.

Miyun District lies 70 kilometres (km) northeast of Dongzhimen in Central Beijing, while Xinchengzi Village is located another 70 km northeast of urban Miyun District. The ancient cypress stands approximately 130 m northeast of Xinchengzi Village. Known as Beijing's "ancient cypress king," the tree stands 12 m tall, with a trunk circumference of 8.2 m and an average crown diameter of 17.4 m. It has been acclaimed as the most splendid ancient tree by the National Greening Commission. In scorching heat, the shade provided by the ancient cypress offers a remarkably cool respite, creating an almost mystical atmosphere around the tree.

Within the ancient cypress, one may glimpse the secrets of life itself. Over 3,500 years, this cypress has cultivated a complete ecological world of its own. It has borne witness to the passage of time, climate shifts, disasters, unrest, wars, the evolution of civilisation and social progress. Laden with vital information on life's evolution, the ancient cypress invites us to explore the intricate relationship between nature and humanity, offering a broader perspective on human history and societal change. Moreover, it encourages contemplation of our current era and invites us to envision our potential futures.

American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "A city's existence depends on memory."

However, I will say, "Ancient trees can preserve memories of eras. Things in memories include thoughts, legends, emotion and love."



An ancient cypress at the Imperial Ancestral Temple

Culture Express

A Different Li Bai, a Different Qiang Jin Jiu

From August 2 to 4, the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center will stage *Qiang Jin Jiu (Invitation to Wine)*, a musical in which the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) poet Li Bai takes the leading role.

The musical primarily portrays Li's upbringing and experiences during his childhood and teenage years in Jiangyou, Sichuan Province. Through depicting Li's life and education, the play vividly captures the local landscapes, customs and human emotions of ancient Sichuan and Jiangyou. In the musical, poetry, wine and swords collectively form Li's spiritual essence, with martial arts being a prominent feature.

To portray Li Bai as a skilled swordsman, the musical includes numerous martial arts performances with meticulously choreographed movements and weaponry. Dance sequences integrate classical, imperial, traditional and modern



elements that correspond to different plots and historical periods. Romantic choreography and grand dances combine to recreate the majestic atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty. Advanced stage technology, including artificial intelligence, enhances the production with immersive scenes such as lush bamboo forests, vibrant Chang'an cityscapes, bustling streets, rugged Sichuan landscapes, and moonlit mountains and rivers. LED displays, lamplight, sets and props are employed to create a cinematic experience, offering audiences a visually captivating journey.



The Self-Redemption Journey of Mythical Hero Yang Jian

As the fourth instalment in the "New National Style" musical series, *God of War* is scheduled to run at the Beijing Comedy Theatre from August 2 to 4.

Drawing inspiration from renowned mythological tales such as "Splitting up the Mountain to Save Mother," "Sanshengmu and Liu Yanchang" and "A Heavenly Dog Consumes the Moon," the musical *God of War* reinterprets the fascinating stories of Yang Jian and Chenxiang. Through a broad perspective and innovative narrative approach, the characters are enriched with deeper personalities and vibrant qualities, exploring the interplay between ancient mythology and modern themes. While rooted in a distant past beyond historical records, *God of War* aims to resonate with



contemporary audiences by offering a unique perspective on human nature, morality and society through the lens of a heroic journey.

Throughout the unfolding storyline, the audience accompanies Yang Jian on his journey of growth amidst mountains, seas and wilderness. From the courageous act of splitting the mountain to save his mother to his battles against formidable demons, each trial he faces forces him to confront his doubts, inherent flaws, past transgressions and apprehensions about the future. Through these challenges, the audience witnesses the hero's steadfast commitment to his values and his idealistic spirit, providing a glimpse into his journey of self-redemption and the resilience of his soul.

The Drama *A Lifelong Journey* to Be Staged at the Century Theatre

From August 30 to 31, the modern drama, *A Lifelong Journey*, adapted from Liang Xiaosheng's Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning novel of the same name, will grace the stage at the Century Theatre.

The storyline of *A Lifelong Journey* spans from the 1970s to the present day, depicting historic social events and developments over the past 50 years. Centred around the lives of the Zhou family's children in the capital city of a northern province, the narrative unfolds the fluctuating destiny of the family over five decades. The novel portrays both the glory and dreams of China's social development, as well as the challenges and complexities encountered during the reform and opening-up process. The play, *A Lifelong Journey* serves as a visual portrayal of Chinese lives and the evolution of society over the past half-century. It



traverses from urban to rural settings, from the frigid landscapes of Northeast China to

the expansive lands of the southwestern region. It captures the diverse experiences of common people, officials, migrant workers and employees, reflecting the varied social conditions of the era. The play is a precious representation of Chinese societal development and the journey of its people, bringing the rich tapestry of real-life experiences onto the stage, akin to a historical scroll spanning nearly fifty years.

As an epic realist drama, *A Lifelong Journey* boasts a formidable production team comprising top designers and actors from prestigious institutions such as the Beijing People's Art Theatre, the National Theatre of China, and the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater. This collaboration is dedicated to crafting a masterpiece of Chinese drama, honouring both the resilience of society's marginalised and the enduring spirit of China itself.

Transporting back to the Prehistoric Era of Dinosaur Supremacy

Recently, the Dinosaurs Unearthed—200 Million Years of Earth's History special exhibition, featuring dinosaur fossils, was on display at the Meet You Museum · 798 Beijing Flagship Museum.

As soon as visitors step into the exhibition hall, they embark on an unparalleled journey back through time, whisked away to the magnificent era of ancient dinosaurs. From the intricate footprints left by the earliest dinosaurs to the elegant presence of feathered species and the awe-inspiring presence of tyrannosaurs, visitors can completely immerse themselves in the realm of prehistoric creatures that once dominated our planet. Showcasing nearly 500 rare fossil specimens, including many never before seen by the public, along with 10 newly discovered species awaiting detailed examination, this exhibition provides a unique opportunity to delve



into the Earth's memories from 200 million years ago, painting a vivid portrait of ancient life before the eyes of visitors and

unveiling a profound glimpse into our planet's ancient history.

This exhibition seamlessly blends scientific and artistic installations, immersive multimedia displays and interactive touch-based experiences. Visitors can delve into diverse ecological scenes spanning from the Mesozoic era to the present day, observing the Earth's climate changes over time. Furthermore, the exhibition recreates natural processes such as volcanic ash deposition and river sedimentation that contribute to fossil formation. Through the meticulous work of palaeontologists in restoring and assembling fossils, visitors can witness the emergence of new or previously studied species' skeletons from the stones. Overall, this exhibition offers an immersive prehistoric journey, providing an enriching experience for all.

The exhibition is scheduled to run until October 7.

