

BEIJING

北京

Postal Subscription
Code 82-777

Published Monthly
on the 25th Day

Issue August 2025

Telling Beijing's
Stories



Archaeological Discoveries in Beijing

ISSN 2095-736X





Photo by Zhao Shuhua

北京
(BEIJING)

Issue 8, 2025 (Vol. 578)

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

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The Beijing News

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YGYM Translation Service Co., Ltd.

Photos Courtesy of

Xinhua News Agency; vcg.com; 58pic.com;

IC photo; tuchong.com;

Administration Centre of the Ming Tombs

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The Beijing News

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F1, Building 10, Fahuananli, Tiyyuguan Lu,

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Printing

Xiaosen Printing (Beijing) Co., Ltd.

Postal Subscription Code

82-777

Publishing Date

August 25, 2025

Price

38 yuan

International Standard Serial Number

ISSN 2095-736X

China National Standard Serial Number

CN10-1908/G0

E-mail

Beijingydx@btmbeijing.net

Cover photo by

Zhang Xin

Contents Photos by and Courtesy of

Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Qu Bowei,

the official website of the National Museum of China

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Archaeological Discoveries in Beijing: Decoding the Past and Echoing Across the Years

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Zhang Xin, Zhao Lei, Qu Bowei

Archaeological sites are among the most recognisable cultural symbols of any city. In Beijing, they play a key role in discovering the city's origins. Through pottery shards, bronze artefacts, exquisite jade wares and grand city walls, these once-buried heritage resources—spanning time and space—reveal the cultural foundations of the city and the evolution of its civilisation.



More than a century ago, the archaeological excavation at Dragon Bone Hill in Zhoukoudian, located in today's Fangshan District of Beijing, lifted the veil of mystery surrounding Peking Man (*Homo erectus pekinensis*), ushering in the era of modern archaeology in the ancient capital's boundaries. In doing so, Beijing made a lasting impact on the development of Chinese archaeology.

Today, over a century later, a wealth of heritage resources has emerged from the earth. These include inscriptions on bronze artefacts unearthed from the ruins of the Yan State (1044–222 BC) capital in Liulihe, Fangshan District; the *huangchang ticou* burial structure in a Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) tomb at Dabaotai, Fengtai District; wells at the ancient seat of Luxian County in Tongzhou District; the Water Gate of Zhongdu (Central Capital) from the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234); and the urban axis of Dadu (Grand Capital) from the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). These ongoing archaeological discoveries and related scientific advances offer compelling physical evidence for understanding Beijing's history—its more than 3,000 years as a city and over 870 years as a capital—revealing the path by which it evolved into the modern metropolis we know today.

Distinct from historical records, each artefact unearthed from an archaeological site stands as a tangible witness to history. These heritage resources allow people today to feel the pulse of Beijing's past and hear the stories that once unfolded on this remarkable land.

Each story centres on a protagonist and unique legacy. For instance, around 10,000 years ago, a young girl from what is now Donghulin Village in Zhaitang Town, Mentougou District, enjoyed adorning herself with a necklace made of spiral shells and an ox-bone bracelet. Members of her clan also created what is currently the earliest known pottery in northern China. Another figure was a noble named Ke from a vassal state, enfeoffed in the capital of the Yan State of the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century–771 BC), located in today's Liulihe, Fangshan District. The bronze ritual vessels, which he commissioned, offer modern viewers today a glimpse into the early origins of Beijing. Over 2,000 years ago, Liu Jian (died 45 BC), the prince of Guangyang from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 24), built an elaborate tomb chamber for himself, following the burial practice of “treating the deceased as if still living.” This demonstrates the highest burial standards of the period and

underscores the importance of the region that is now Beijing within the Han Dynasty's territory. As early as 1,700 years ago, during the Western Jin Dynasty (AD 265–316), a glass bowl from ancient Persia found its way into the daily life of a noblewoman in Youzhou (an ancient region that included modern-day Beijing), bearing witness to the cultural exchanges among Asian civilisations.

The ongoing discovery and excavation of archaeological sites continues to enrich the history of Beijing, a capital both ancient and modern. Archaeological findings at Jin Zhongdu reveal how the Jurchen people of the north drew inspiration from the layout of Bianjing (modern-day Kaifeng, Henan Province), the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty (AD 960–1127), in establishing the first dynastic capital in Beijing—marking the beginning of its 870-plus-year history in that role. The city's orientation, urban planning and water management systems from the Jin Zhongdu era, as revealed archaeologically, all reflect the integration and harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures in ancient China.

Archaeological research on Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty has confirmed the visionary planning concept of its designer, Liu Bingzhong (1216–1274): “to imitate

the heavens and the earth.” This principle reflects the ancient practice of aligning urban design with celestial patterns, either by using the movement of heavenly bodies to determine building orientation or by echoing cosmic forms in the city's layout. Through excavations at key sites such as Chengqing Water Gate and Wanning Bridge, archaeologists have revealed how the water system designed by Guo Shoujing (1231–1316) from the Yuan Dynasty coursed through the capital, linking it to the Grand Canal and sustaining its vital role as a transportation hub. Research on the Beijing Central Axis, the foundational remains of the city walls and the original hutongs and alleys has further illuminated the ideal capital city model described in *The Rites of Zhou · Kaogong Ji*: “The Ancestral Temple on the left of the Palace City and the Altar of Land and Grain to the right; the court in front of the Palace City and market behind it.” This traditional layout laid a systematic foundation for Beijing's development through the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Ultimately, each generation of planners and builders has reinterpreted the city through inherited wisdom and innovative ideas, and archaeological sites continue to reveal how those transformations unfolded.

Over time, Beijing has evolved from a fiefdom and a prefecture into a major northern city, later a secondary capital and the capital of northern ethnic regimes, and ultimately the national capital it is today. Each phase of this transformation, from frontier outpost to a capital city, has left behind a rich array of cultural remains beneath the surface. The steady pace of archaeological discoveries continues to awaken long-buried memories, shedding light on the secrets of Beijing's urban development. Over the past century, these findings have not only broadened our understanding of Beijing's role in the history of Chinese civilisation but also enhanced its importance in that history. They underscore the city's contributions to the integration of China's diverse ethnic groups and serve as a key part of its cultural identity and a vital intellectual property (IP) asset.

The Peking Man Site at Zhoukoudian, one of China's first UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites, remains a globally significant landmark in the study of human evolution, both for its scientific value and symbolic meaning. The excavation of the Liao Dynasty (AD 916–1125) mining and metallurgical complex at Dazhuangke, in Yanqing District, has unearthed remarkably preserved furnaces and workshops that reveal the advanced

iron-smelting technology of northern nomadic groups. Over 3,000 exquisite artefacts unearthed from the Ming Dynasty's Dingling Tomb demonstrate the artistic and cultural sophistication of that era. Meanwhile, the ruins of Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer Palace) turn national memory into a tangible historical lesson, with remnants like the Xiyanglou Area and Dashuifa Site standing as enduring witnesses to the past.

The strength of Beijing's archaeological IP lies in its ability to transform abstract history into tangible experiences. When visitors immerse themselves in the grandeur of the Han Dynasty's imperial tomb complex at Dabaotai, admire the intricate patterns on bronzewares from Liulihe at the Capital Museum of China, or explore the Jin Dynasty's Zhongdu Ruins Park and the Yuan Capital earthen wall relics, they are engaging with more than relics—they are witnessing the city's enduring search for its roots. Through these archaeological sites, people today connect with the cultural essence of Beijing, a city with over 3,000 years of history, experiencing its brilliance, its triumphs and tribulations, and its resilient, deeply-rooted cultural identity.

Beijing's archaeological discoveries are waiting to be explored.

▼ Cultural relics on display at the Dabaotai Museum of the Western Han Dynasty Tomb, Beijing



▼ A visitor at the Chinese Archaeological Museum



The First Chapter of Civilisation

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Zhao Lei, Zhao Shuhua

As the first ray of morning sun pierced the thin mist, the sound of a trowel gently scraping the soil already echoed from the archaeological excavation pit at the Liulihe site in Beijing's Fangshan District. Kaitlyn, an anthropology student from the United States, was squatting at the bottom of the pit, trowel in hand, gently brushing away the loose surface soil with steady pressure. As the soil gradually changed colour, a faint boundary line began to emerge. This marked her third week participating in the 2025 International Field Archaeology Summer Programme at the Liulihe site. The fieldwork had become part of her daily routine of "communicating" with the Yan State (11th century–222 BC) of the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century–771 BC).

The site served as a capital city during the Western Zhou Dynasty, and today it helps archaeologists more fully understand and redefine the history of Beijing. From its initial discovery in 1945 to its selection as one of China's top 10 archaeological discoveries in 2024, each excavation at the Liulihe site functions as a spatiotemporal calibration of Beijing's urban civilisation intellectual property (IP).

Surfacing: A Discovery Journey from Pottery Shards to a City

The story began more than half a century ago. In 1945, the chimney of the Fangshan Liulihe Cement Factory had long stopped emitting smoke. As the factory planned to resume operations, it sent representatives to negotiate a loan with the Bank of China. While accompanying them through Dongjialin Village, bank manager Wu Liangcai noticed fragments of pottery scattered at his feet. Influenced by his elder brother Wu Jinding (1901–1948), an archaeologist, he crouched down and picked up one of the shards—its greyish-black surface marked with crisscrossed cord patterns. Although the edge had been damaged by a footstep, it retained a rustic charm.

That day, Wu Liangcai's bag held not only the loan contract but also a heavy bundle of pottery shards. After returning to Beiping (present-day Beijing), he went to the Institute of History and Philology at the Beiping Research Academy to consult archaeologist Su Bingqi (1909–1997). Su's eyes lit up immediately with joy and excitement: "These shards are undoubtedly from the Shang (16th century–11th century BC) or Zhou (11th century–256 BC) dynasties!"

However, in those years, archaeological teams struggled to secure enough funding for excavations due to social unrest. Su placed the shards in a wooden box and wrote the Chinese characters, "*fang shan dong jia lin*" (meaning "Dongjialin Village in Beijing's Fangshan District"), on the label to mark their origin. Many years later, when the elderly man recalled the incident, he would often say that what Wu Liangcai had picked up was not just pottery fragments, but the key to unlocking the ancient capital city of the Yan State.

In the history of Beijing's archaeology, the excavations at the Liulihe site resemble a vast volume of history written over more than half a century. In terms of both the number and continuity of excavations, only the Peking Man Site at Zhoukoudian rivals Liulihe. Excavations resumed in the summer of 1962.

At the time, Su was director of the Archaeological Education and Research Office at Peking University and was responsible for assigning fieldwork locations to students. He suddenly recalled the pottery shards from Dongjialin Village. "Let's go to Fangshan District," he told his colleagues. "Those pottery fragments Wu picked up there a few years ago might hold some big secrets."

Coincidentally, historian and archaeologist Zou Heng (1927–2005) happened to be conducting fieldwork in Fangshan. Later celebrated as the "number one archaeologist of the Shang and Zhou dynasties," Zou had spent several days leading students at Liulidian, Huangtupo and Dongjialin villages. At a mound north of Dongjialin Village, they unearthed rammed yellow earth that confirmed the presence of manmade walls. Zou was also thrilled by the discovery of pottery shards sifted from the rammed earth, noting that they closely resembled pottery from the Central Plains during the Western Zhou Dynasty.

"Here is probably the origin of the Yan State," Zou remarked as he examined the pottery fragments. While carefully inspecting the rope patterns and textures, he added, "Look at the leg of this *li* (an ancient cooking tripod with hollow legs). It's typical of pottery vessels from the early Western Zhou Dynasty. According to *Records of the Grand Historian*, the Duke of Shao (dates of birth

and death unknown) was granted the fief of Yan in the north. I believe the Yan region lies hidden beneath this yellow earth."

Since the 1960s, the Liulihe site has served as a long-standing base for archaeological teams. Following several major excavations, the capital city of the Yan State was gradually revealed. In the excavation pit, layers of rammed-earth walls are clearly visible. At the burial site, several bronze ritual vessels gleam beneath the soil.

In 1973, archaeologists in Beijing conducted the first scientific excavation of Western Zhou Dynasty tombs at the Liulihe site. When the burial chamber of a nobleman's tomb was uncovered, the green patina on the bronze objects sparkled like gemstones in the sunlight. Inside a bronze *ding* (ritual cauldron), two legible Chinese characters, "*yan hou*" (meaning "the Marquis of Yan"), were inscribed on the inner wall. Additional artefacts bearing "*yan hou*" inscriptions were later discovered, confirming this site as the original fief of the Yan State.

Today, in Dongjialin Village, the once unpaved road where Wu Liangcai discovered pottery shards has become a smooth asphalt street. Yet the pottery fragments, bronze items and rammed earth buried underground for 3,000 years still quietly recount the story of the city—one that, at times, begins with an ordinary individual bending down to pick something up.

▼ A photograph of members of Feng Yuxiang's Taishan Reading and Research Office at Puzhao Temple on Taishan Mountain; Pictured are Song Feiru (front row, far right), Su Bingqi (front row, second from right), Zhao Chengzhi (front row, third from right) and Chen Dingmin (back row, far right)



An Epic of Bronze: Homeland Memories Engraved in Inscriptions

On November 29, 1986, cold winds swept across the Liulihe site. It was the final day before the archaeological team's fieldwork was due to end. As the excavation of tomb M1193 reached its base, snow

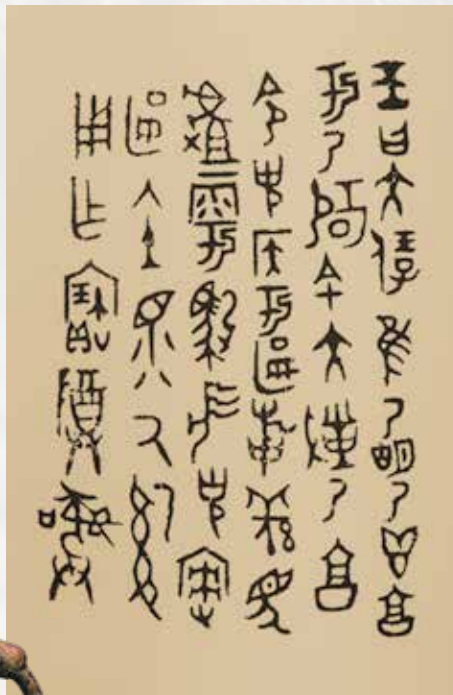


▲ The Ke Lei vessel

suddenly began to fall. With the ground at risk of freezing, the team accelerated their work to complete the clearance in time.

When the clearance reached the burial chamber, a hole over three metres in diameter was uncovered. The chamber was in disarray—areas that should have held burial objects were filled only with disturbed silt, and even the coffin had been shattered.

At that moment, the team member clearing the southeastern section of the tomb pit suddenly shouted, "Wait! What's this?" The tip of his probing trowel had struck a hard object. As the soil was carefully brushed away, the outlines of two bluish-green artefacts gradually emerged. When the surface mud was wiped off, the workers saw the rounded belly of a bronze *lei* (wine



▲ Inscription on the Ke Lei vessel

vessel) and the short, stout spout of a bronze *he* (ritual wine vessel). Both artefacts were intact. Even more excitingly, faint inscriptions appeared to be visible on their inner walls.

"Inscriptions," someone cried out. In that moment, the snowflakes seemed to freeze in mid-air. As they landed on the green patina of the bronzes, they melted into tiny droplets—like tears shed by the artefacts after 3,000 years.

That same night, the two bronze artefacts, still covered in mud and water, were placed in a wooden box inside a warehouse at the construction site. It was not until two months later that experts, working under the lights in the cultural relics restoration room, began carefully scraping away the corrosion with bamboo tools. Eventually, 43 characters in bronze script were revealed on the inner walls of the vessels.

"Marquis Ke is ordered to rule in Yan." When this sentence was deciphered, the entire restoration room fell silent. Scholars generally believe that "Ke" refers to the first Marquis of Yan, founder of the Yan State. He was the son of Shi, the Duke of Shao, an important minister who assisted King Wu of Zhou (date of birth unknown, died 1043 BC) in overthrowing the Shang

Dynasty and establishing the Zhou Dynasty. As Shi remained in the capital Haojing to manage state affairs, he sent his son to establish a new state in the northern fief. These two artefacts were likely ritual vessels specially cast by Ke upon his arrival in Yan to commemorate his inaugural ceremony. Accordingly, they were named Ke Lei and Ke He. The bronze Ke Lei bears two beast-shaped ring handles on its shoulders, the beasts' heads turned backwards as if guarding the secrets within. The handle of the bronze Ke He takes the form of a beast's head, from whose mouth one can almost hear the clink of wine being poured in ancient times. Remarkably, the inscriptions on both vessels are identical in content, differing only slightly in line arrangement—like two copies of a contract.

These inscriptions act as a key, unlocking the passage in *Records of the Grand Historian* that speaks of "granting the Duke of Shao the fief of Yan in the north." When experts translated the text into modern Chinese, it was as if a scene from over 3,000 years ago came to life: the king of the Western Zhou Dynasty standing in court, holding a jade tablet, solemnly announcing the appointment to Ke, who knelt before him; Ke then accepting the decree, turning and departing for the north—followed by six clans of Shang people.

Even more remarkably, these inscriptions helped determine the year Beijing was first established as a city. *Records of the Grand Historian* notes that after King Wu of Zhou overthrew King Zhou of Shang (date of birth unknown, died 1046 BC), he enfeoffed the Yan State. Yet for more than 2,000 years, scholars—from Liu Xin (date of birth unknown, died AD 23) of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 24) to modern historians—have proposed over 40 different dates for the event known as "King Wu's conquest of the Shang Dynasty." It wasn't until the discovery of Li Gui, an ancient bronze sacrificial vessel unearthed in Lintong, Shaanxi Province, bearing an inscription about the appearance of a comet during King Wu's campaign, that a clearer picture began to emerge. This inscription provided a crucial clue for narrowing down

the possible dates of the historic event.

Using this astronomical clue, researchers worked backwards: Halley's Comet appeared in 1910, and with an orbital period of roughly 76 years, tracing back 40 cycles leads to 1057 BC. Combined with lunar phase records found in the *Book of Documents*, the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project ultimately dated King Wu's conquest of the Shang Dynasty to around 1046 BC. Based on this timeline, the enfeoffment of Marquis Ke of Yan marks the beginning of Beijing's recorded history as a city—spanning exactly 3,070 years.

Today, in a display case at the Capital Museum, Ke Lei and Ke He hold prominent positions, with their 43-character inscriptions enlarged and printed on the adjacent exhibition panels. It's common for children to point at the character "匱" and ask, "What does this mean?" The museum guides always smile and reply, "This is the earliest form of the character '燕', the first known name for Beijing."

Standing before these two national treasures, one can almost hear the echoes of

bronze casting from 3,000 years ago. When Marquis Ke of Yan arrived in the Liulihe area with these vessels, built the city walls and established his state, he could never have imagined that the name of his fief, inscribed on bronze, would lie buried in the yellow earth for 3,000 years only to re-emerge as the starting point and symbol of a great city.

Establishing the Capital: the City of Beijing's Original Appearance

Why is the Liulihe site considered the origin of the city of Beijing? Because it not only contains the city's earliest known ruins, but also serves as a seed of civilisation, carrying the culture gene blueprint of later Beijing. For example, the layout of its city walls influenced the axis-based symmetrical design seen in later periods; the bronze casting techniques developed at the site laid a strong foundation for the high-quality weapons of the Yan State during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC);

and its geographical location aligned with the principles that guided the selection of present-day Beijing—nestled between mountains and water.

Additionally, the Liulihe site has reshaped people's understanding of Beijing's history. In the past, it was commonly believed that the city's history began during the Qin (221–206 BC) or Han (206 BC–AD 220) dynasties. However, the Western Zhou Dynasty city walls and bronze vessel inscriptions found at Liulihe insert a new chapter into the historical record. As early as the 11th century BC, Beijing already existed as the capital of a state. This discovery extended the city's known civilisational history by nearly 1,000 years and granted it a "qualification certificate" as an ancient capital—placing it on equal footing with historic capitals such as Xi'an and Luoyang.

The excavations at the Liulihe site have played a crucial role in studying the enfeoffment of Yan during the early Western Zhou Dynasty, offering a glimpse into the original form of the city of Beijing. Within the site's long archaeological record,

▼ Liulihe site



one unresolved debate lingered: earlier excavations had confirmed only a single city enclosure, yet some scholars argued that the capital of the Yan State must have concealed a more expansive layout—an as-yet-undiscovered outer city. This hypothesis received a remarkable answer after 2019, when archaeological tools stirred the sleeping loess and continuous city walls and moats appeared along the northern and eastern edges of the inner city. Like two silent Chinese dragons, they extended the settlement's footprint from 600,000 square metres (sq.m) to over 1 million sq.m.

The discovery of this outer city has fundamentally reshaped academic understanding of urban planning at the Liulihe site. It reveals that the capital of the Yan State was not enclosed by a single, isolated wall but consisted of at least two interconnected layers. Who's to say a third layer of city walls won't be uncovered in the future? This "inner city, outer rampart" layout stands as a solidified epic of construction—echoing the structure of the Zhouyuan site and embodying the wisdom of ancient city-building. It vividly illustrates the Western Zhou strategy of "widely enfeoffing feudal lords to shield the Zhou." Here at Liulihe, Beijing's role as the political centre of a feudal state finds its most compelling evidence.

Even more astonishing are the

rammed-earth foundation ruins of large building complexes—the largest and most complete architectural group discovered to date among Western Zhou feudal states. These silent ruins reflect the urban aesthetics of this Zhou-era city: within its square, chessboard-like layout, the palace complex occupies the central position, functioning like a heart that steadily drives the city's vitality—perfectly in line with the urban planning principles of the Zhou Dynasty.

The presence of large tombs with passageways is another powerful testament to the history of a ruling family. In terms of quantity, these tombs rank just behind the Lingpo tombs at the Duke of Zhou Temple and the burial site of the Marquis of Jin among Western Zhou Dynasty feudal states. Their arrangement quietly encodes the lineage of the marquises of Yan. Both the forms and layout of the tombs mirror those found in other feudal states, resembling a strict ceremonial manual that reflects the rigid hierarchy of Western Zhou society.

Among all the artefacts unearthed, the most striking are four Chinese characters—"tai bao yong yan"—inscribed on bronze vessels once owned by a clerk named Huan. These characters record the journey of Shi, the Duke of Shao, to the Yan region to lay the groundwork for establishing the capital of the Yan State. This inscription not only affirms

the kinship between the Yan region and the Central Plains, but also offers a glimpse into the city's significant role on the early political map of the Western Zhou Dynasty.

When the city walls, palace buildings, burial objects and inscriptions on bronze vessels underground come together, the Liulihe site is no longer just an impersonal archaeological location; it allows people to envision a thriving capital during the Western Zhou Dynasty. Through the texture of rammed earth and the gleam of green patina, the site offers a vivid glimpse into the splendour of the Yan State as a prominent feudal outpost on the frontier of the Western Zhou realm.

A Vision of the Future: Civilisations in Dialogue at the Archaeological Site Park

The full-scale development of an archaeological site park at Liulihe is ushering in a new chapter of history. From the viewing platform, visitors can clearly see the outlines of the two concentric city



▲ Detail of the Jin Ding cauldron

◀ The Ke He vessel



► The Boju Li tripod vessel



▲ Foreign students taking part in the 2025 International Field Archaeology Summer Programme at the Liulihe site

walls, aided by camera drones. The inner city's moat channel is wide and level, the foundation trench of the outer city wall lies like a dormant dragon and the rammed-earth foundations of the high-grade building complex glisten beside modern archaeological shelters. Now listed for development as a "national archaeological site park," this ancient city wall site is using digital technology to recreate the splendour of the Yan State's capital as it stood 3,000 years ago.

According to the plan, the site park will include a new museum, an archaeological experience hall and a virtual reality (VR) restoration area. The proposed museum will use digital twin technology to recreate the architectural appearance of the Marquis of Yan's palace. The archaeological work cabin will enable the public to remotely observe excavations through real-time video transmission. This integrated model of "archaeology-protection-display" is transforming how the public engages with ancient civilisations. Moreover, the International Field Archaeology Summer Programme will be expanded to countries along the Belt and Road, cultivating more cross-cultural archaeological talent.

"Archaeology is not about digging for treasure, but about having a dialogue with

history," Kaitlyn wrote in her completion report. Every shard of a pottery tripod, every bronze ornament and every DNA sequence is a "time capsule" left by our ancestors—awaiting future generations to unlock them with the keys of technology and culture.

From the accidental discovery of pottery shards in 1945 to the regular operations of the International Field Archaeology Summer Programme in 2025, the excavation of the Liulihe site mirrors the broader evolution of Chinese archaeology. This journey has advanced from "rescue excavations" to "multidisciplinary collaboration," achieved academic breakthroughs from "corroborating documents" to "redefining history" and taken on the cultural mission of "bringing relics to life." Each handful of earth, each pottery fragment and each piece of bronze at the site tells the same story: Beijing did not emerge overnight—it was built, layer by layer, by generations over more than 3,000 years. When we touch the yellow earth with its rammed layers, it feels as though we are shaking hands with our ancestors. Today's people and the residents of the Yan State 3,000 years ago live on the same land and are touched by the same wind.

Tips

Talking Bronze Artefacts

All bronze artefacts from the Liulihe site are exceptional "storytellers." The restored Boju Li, a three-legged bronze ritual vessel, features seven ox head motifs on its lid and body, each with long horns and wrinkled noses. According to the inscription inside the lid, the *li* was cast by Boju to commemorate receiving gifts from the Marquis of Yan.

The bronze vessel once owned by the clerk Huan bears four characters, "*tai bao yong yan*," recording the Duke of Shao's founding of the Yan State capital at that location. Tests reveal that the bronze used for the vessel originated in Zhouyuan, Shaanxi (present-day border between Qishan County and Fufeng County). Interestingly, the casting technique employed reflects the style of the Shang Dynasty.

The most legendary bronze vessel is a *gui* that was mistakenly paired with the wrong lid. Unearthed in 2021, this vessel shares identical patterns and designs with another *gui* discovered over 40 years earlier. Archaeologists speculate that the two bronze vessels were originally crafted as a matching pair but were mismatched when buried—resulting in the lid being incorrectly paired with the vessel.

Miraculous Bronze and Strangely Shaped Objects

In international archaeological circles, China is known as a “land of bronze,” with examples ranging from the primitive bronze *jue* (a type of ritual vessel) from the Xia Dynasty (16th century–11th century BC), to the ritual bronze sets from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and the ceremonial implements and artefacts from the Qin and Han dynasties. Over more than 3,000 years, bronze objects have been woven into the fabric of Chinese civilisation, becoming one of its most distinctive cultural symbols. These precious items—cast from copper, tin and lead—include ritual vessels for sacrifices to heaven and earth, weapons, and wine and food containers for daily use. Together, they have borne witness to the brilliant evolution of Chinese civilisation from its earliest stages to maturity.

The wonder of Chinese bronzeware lies not only in its exceptional craftsmanship, but also in the creative imagination ancient people poured into it. These millennia-old artefacts reflect their romantic interpretations and timeless vision of the world. Even today, they retain a mystical charm that transcends time and space.



Yachou Yue

The Yachou Yue, a bronze ceremonial axe-blade bearing Yachou tribal inscriptions, features a human-faced motif and has been nicknamed “the bronze edition of SpongeBob” by netizens. With a hollowed-out face on the blade, it has wide, staring eyes, upturned corners of the mouth and teeth resembling battlements—giving it the look of a giant smile. Despite its playful appearance, the axe-blade was a genuine ritual implement used over 3,000 years ago during the Shang Dynasty. Its exaggerated design and “ya chou” inscriptions suggest an artefact of aristocratic rank. Two examples of the Yachou Yue survive today: one is housed in the National Museum of China, and the other in the Shandong Museum.

Bronze Zun with Deity-Face Pattern

This bronze artefact is truly captivating at first sight. Its facial design is highly distinctive, with bright, expressive eyes whose eyelids closely resemble those of humans, clearly showing the eyelids, eye sockets, eyeballs and pupils. The curved eyebrows are made up of vertical lines, like two crescent moons. The nose is prominently raised, with wide, rounded nostrils that resemble those of a human nose. The entire deity-like face is vivid, three-dimensional and full of life. Its unusual artistic style, combined with a rare blue patina on parts of the surface, gives the piece a strange and striking appearance. It is currently housed in the Suizhou Museum.



Bronze Zun and Pan of Marquis Yi of Zeng

This “luxury duo set” from the Warring States Period consists of a *zun* (wine vessel) and a *pan* (plate). At first glance, the set appears to be decorated with soft, cloud-like patterns along the edges. But a closer look reveals that these “clouds” are actually intricate openwork formed by countless intertwined dragons and coiling *chi* (hornless dragons), creating a dazzling effect. Four leopards climb the neck of the *zun*, each turning its head back with its tongue extended, their bodies adorned with dragon and *chi* motifs. The four handles of the *pan* are also intricately shaped from intertwined dragons and snakes. With its ornate form and complex craftsmanship, this piece stands as a masterpiece of Chinese bronze art. It is housed in the Hubei Provincial Museum.

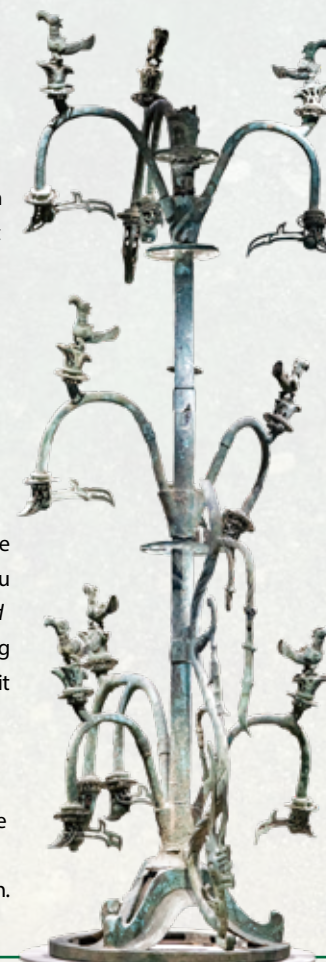
Bronze Sacrificial Animal-shaped Zun

This “celestial steed,” complete with two horns and two wings, features animal “hitching spots” across its chest, neck, back and tail. A tiger stands on its neck, coiled-tail dragons rest on its chest and tail, and a phoenix perches on the lid—turning the vessel into a kind of luxury express for mythical beasts. The entire surface is adorned with elaborate dragon and tiger patterns, along with small lightning bolt motifs. It is housed in the Chinese Archaeological Museum.



Shang Dynasty Bronze Sacred Tree

Among all bronze artefacts discovered in China to date, the massive Bronze Sacred Tree (referred to as Tree No. 1) is the largest in size. It comprises three main parts: the tree itself, a dragon and a base, reaching a total height of 3.96 metres. The tree has three levels, each with three branches, and each branch holds a divine bird. Along the side of the tree, a rope-like braided copper dragon winds its way down. The base, symbolising a “sacred mountain,” features an openwork design with sun and cloud motifs. Some believe the tree was inspired by the Jianmu tree in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, serving as a ladder connecting heaven and earth. Others suggest it represents a cosmic tree reflecting the worldview of the ancient Shu people. Whatever the case, this bronze tree preserves the romance and mystery of the ancients. It is housed in the Sanxingdui Museum.



A Shang Dynasty Bronze Mask with Protruding Eyes

Among the bronze masks unearthed at the Sanxingdui site, this one stands out as the most distinctive in design. Its cylindrical eyes protrude 16 centimetres outward, as if capable of seeing a thousand miles; its wide-set ears flare outward, as though capable of hearing sounds from all directions. The short nose bridge, upturned cow-like nostrils and slightly curling lips—hinting at the tip of a tongue—give the face both a sense of authority and a touch of mystery. A square hole on the forehead may once have held an ornate decorative inlay, enhancing its presence. It’s no surprise that it has been nicknamed “Thousand-Mile Eye” and “All-Hearing Ear.” The mask, housed in the Sanxingdui Museum, is a striking display of the imaginative power of the ancient Shu civilisation.



The Elegance of the Han Dynasty

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Zhao Shuhua

On May 18, 2025, the Ruins Park of the Ancient Seat of Luxian County officially opened to the public, together with the Heritage Site Museum located within the same grounds in Beijing's Tongzhou District. This marked the launch of the city's first archaeological site complex that integrates both a museum and a landscaped park. Two days later, the Dabaotai Museum of the Western Han Dynasty Tomb in Beijing's Fengtai District reopened under a new name as the Dabaotai Branch of the Beijing Archaeological Site Museum, now encompassing three distinct locations.

Two major Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) archaeological sites in Beijing have captured public attention, shining like “two stars” on the cultural map. One offers a glimpse into the everyday lives of ordinary people, while the other reveals the intricately arranged afterlife of a vassal prince. They serve as twin mirrors reflecting the richness of the city's cultural intellectual property (IP) and historical legacy. Together, they illuminate the essence of the ancient capital as it stood 2,000 years ago.

The Rebirth of a Han Dynasty City: the Ancient Seat of Luxian County

In 2016, as preliminary construction for the Beijing Municipal Administrative Centre got underway, archaeological work began alongside it. This “supporting effort” led to a major breakthrough in the study of Beijing's Han Dynasty past: the gradual unearthing of a complete county seat site from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 24). The site was eventually identified as the ancient seat of Luxian County.

Luxian, an important county under the jurisdiction of Yuyang Prefecture, was established in 195 BC, the 12th year of Emperor Gaozu's reign (206–195 BC) during the Western Han Dynasty. Geographically, it lay to the west of Jicheng, bordered Yuyang to the north and was located east of Jieshi. At the time, Luxian County served as both a key transport hub and a strategically significant military post.

Archaeological findings reveal a nearly square county seat enclosed on all four sides. The remains of the city walls measure approximately 550 to 600 metres (m) per side and were originally surrounded by moats. Inside the settlement, essential features such as streets, water wells, kilns and cemeteries were identified, covering an area of around 350,000 square metres. The ruins reflect a compact, well-structured layout, typical of a county-level administrative centre during the Han Dynasty over 2,000 years ago. Remarkably, the site preserves a complete layout of a small Han Dynasty city, making it an extraordinary discovery for Han Dynasty urban archaeology in Beijing.

In addition to the city's urban layout, the details of daily life unearthed from its cultural layers are especially compelling. Archaeologists unearthed pottery shards with maker's marks, ash deposits, iron farming tools and wooden boards from ancient wells—ordinary items of the time that provide vivid evidence of everyday life during the Han Dynasty.

The ruins of Luxian County have revealed evidence of handicraft production, including iron smelting and pottery making. Archaeological finds range from eave tiles and furnace walls to slag deposits, mould fragments and even an entire pottery workshop area. Most remarkable are the iron smelting sites discovered southwest of the ancient county seat, believed to have been privately operated smelting and casting workshops.

One particularly noteworthy discovery is a cluster of over 200 Han Dynasty water wells. Their wide distribution and diverse designs provide valuable insight into the county seat's water supply system and daily life. The most remarkable of these is Well No. 8, which has a diameter of 5.55 m, making it the largest Han Dynasty well of its kind ever unearthed in Beijing.

Archaeologists also unexpectedly uncovered a well-preserved earthen pot put inside a Western Han Dynasty well with earthen walls. It is believed the pot was accidentally dropped while someone was drawing water. This “lost item” offers a tangible connection between past and present, prompting reflection: Did the owner linger near the well after losing it? Could the person ever have imagined that the fallen pot would one day become a cultural artefact, offering people two thousand years later a glimpse into everyday life during the Han Dynasty?

Funerary objects that reflect daily life offer valuable insights into the society of the time. The Heritage Site Museum at the Ancient Seat of Luxian



▲ Clay figurine and iron ratchets unearthed from the ruins of the ancient seat of Luxian County

County features charmingly simple clay chickens and ducks, along with figurines in soft hats shown sitting or kneeling as they cut vegetables. From floor tiles inscribed with phrases like “pursuing high officialdom for lasting auspiciousness and prosperity” to thimbles and dressing cases used by Han Dynasty women, each artefact emerges from everyday life, offering a vivid glimpse into the daily lives of people at that time.

The museum also displays an earthen pot stamped with the Chinese character “亭” (“ting”), offering a record of the Han Dynasty's “Shiting System.” Under this system, all goods entering the market were required to be inspected and marked by an official titled “ting.” This official stamp of regulation serves as a tangible example of how national policies were implemented at the local level.

Craniotomy might seem out of place in the context of the Han Dynasty, yet evidence shows the procedure was performed on a woman more than 2,000 years ago during the Western Han Dynasty. A skull displayed in the museum bears a precisely cut, oval-shaped opening measuring 30 millimetres (mm) in length and 15 mm in width. This represents the earliest known case of craniotomy in Beijing,



▲ Restored scene of daily life at the ruins of the ancient seat of Luxian County



▲ Earthen pot stamped with the Chinese character "亭" (ting)



▼ Skull showing signs of craniotomy



highlighting the advanced level of medical practice during the Han Dynasty.

At the ruins park and museum, visitors are transported back 2,000 years in time. One can almost picture the scene: a county official ringing a bell to open the government office, streets slowly coming to life, women carrying water, children laughing and playing, and smoke curling up from earthen stoves. These imagined

moments from Han Dynasty life are made vivid through reconstructed roads, restored rammed-earth walls, courtyard gates, wooden fences, wells, stone mills and everyday utensils—bringing the past to life in a way that feels real, tangible and close at hand.

On the museum's second floor, a

"Han Dynasty Cultural Living Room" offers interactive archaeological experiences. Visitors can sample pastries shaped like clay ducks, browse Han Dynasty texts and purchase distinctive cultural and creative products in a dedicated area. This blend of archaeological findings, museum exhibits and park space reflect Beijing's innovative approach to cultural heritage preservation. It not only brings cultural relics to life, but also allows history to connect meaningfully with the public and merge with the rhythm of modern city life.

Echoes of an Underground Palace: a Han Dynasty Tomb at Dabaotai

In contrast to the everyday artefacts unearthed at the Luxian County seat site, which reflect the lives of ordinary people during the Han Dynasty, the Han Dynasty Tomb at Dabaotai offers a different perspective—revealing how a vassal state prince understood and envisioned the themes of "extinction and eternity" more than 2,000 years ago.

The tomb belonged to Liu Jian (died 45 BC), Prince of Guangyang Qing during the Western Han Dynasty. Historical records show that he was the grandson of Emperor Wu (reign: 141–87 BC) and the son of Liu Dan (died 80 BC), Prince of Yan. The discovery of Liu Jian's tomb in 1976 caused a stir in the archaeological community, as it was the first fully intact Han Dynasty tomb found in China to feature a *huangchang ticou* structure.

The *huangchang ticou* burial system was a highly prestigious funerary practice during the Han Dynasty, originally reserved exclusively for emperors. The term *huangchang* refers to strips of cypress heartwood with the bark removed. These strips, characterised by a pale yellow hue, were said to resemble yellow intestines, hence the name *huangchang*, meaning "yellow intestines." The term *ticou* describes the method of stacking these long cypress

strips together with their root ends facing the coffin. As a result, the *huangchang ticou* structure forms a wooden wall system built by layering these yellow cypress strips around the coffin, effectively creating a protective barrier that resembles the outer walls of a city. This meticulously constructed arrangement represented the highest level of funerary ritual during the Han Dynasty, symbolising the constant guarding and spiritual protection of the deceased.

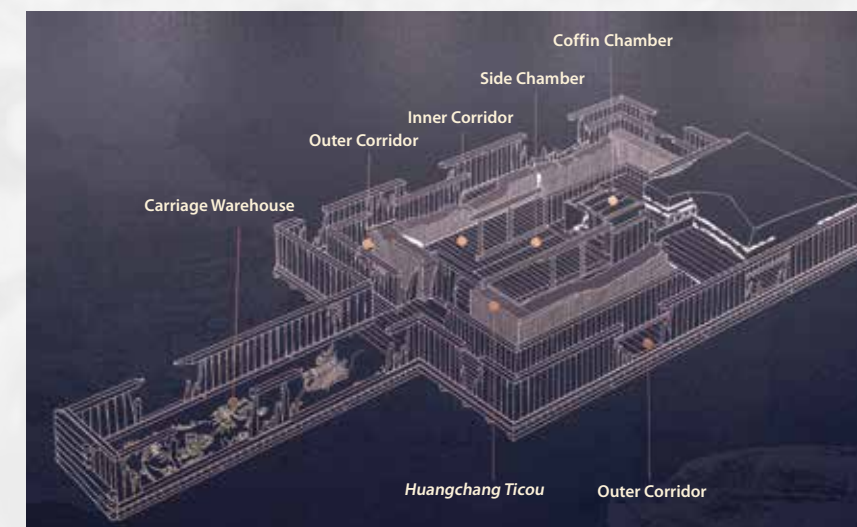
The *huangchang ticou* structure within the Han Dynasty Tomb at Dabaotai features imposing wooden walls on the east, west and north sides, built up to 30 layers high. Each layer is composed of more than 100 cypress heartwood strips. The south side, by contrast, includes a door-shaped opening, believed to allow the soul of the deceased to pass through. More than 10,000 tightly packed cypress strips form solid wooden walls that reflect not only the high status of the tomb's occupant, Liu Jian, but also his beliefs about the afterlife. In ancient China, death was not seen as an end but as the beginning of life in another realm.

Just as there was a palace in life, so too was one required in death; and just as rituals marked life, even more elaborate ones marked death. In this sense, the Han Tomb at Dabaotai was more than a burial site—it was the "palace" where Liu Jian was expected to continue enjoying honour and prosperity in the afterlife.

More than just a burial site, the Han Dynasty Tomb at Dabaotai was a meticulously constructed subterranean

"palace." At its heart stood the *huangchang ticou* structure, containing five nested coffins as the central resting place. Surrounding this were a front chamber, a rear chamber and a corridor, all arranged in a layout that was both grand and clearly defined.

The tomb's passage leads into the front chamber, evoking the atmosphere of officials arriving to pay their respects. This space functioned as a living room, with two large, lacquered platforms placed on either



▲ Schematic diagram of the interior layout of the Han Dynasty tomb at Dabaotai

▼ Partial view of the *huangchang ticou* structure in the Han Dynasty tomb at Dabaotai



side and a substantial stone table at the centre, serving as a tea table. Reflecting Liu Jian's lifelong love of hunting and sharing his game, the corridor next to the front chamber was used as an armoury, stocked with bows,

Tips

Artefact: Jade Dancer

Period: Western Han Dynasty

Dimensions: 5.4 cm in length, 2.6 cm in width, 0.4 cm in thickness

Place of Excavation: Tomb No. 2, Tomb of Prince of Guangyang (Western Han Dynasty), Dabaotai, Fengtai District, Beijing

This jade dancer is carved entirely from translucent, lustrous white jade, using openwork carving and double-sided line engraving techniques. It captures the elegant figure of a Han Dynasty performer, with delicate features and a slender waist. She wears a traditional cross-collared gown, tightly belted at the waist. Her body is gently turned, one arm raised with a flowing sleeve brushing her head, while the other arm rests lightly at her waist. Her billowing sleeves and trailing skirt ripple like drifting clouds, evoking a sense of poised, graceful motion.

The piece vividly portrays the Han Dynasty ideal of the dancer with graceful skills and stands as a remarkably artistic example of Han jade craftsmanship.

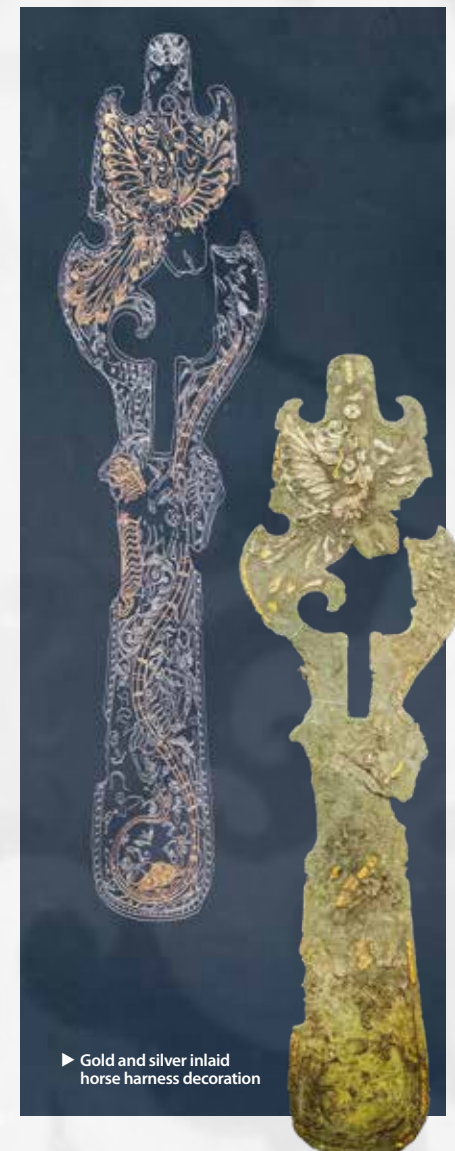


arrows, sabres and spears. Plates and jars in the front chamber contained dried remains of wild geese, swans, hares, wild boars, deer and sheep. The stone table was adorned with elegant wine vessels and ivory chess pieces, creating the impression that Liu Jian was simply resting—dining, drinking and playing chess. In the afterlife, etiquette was still observed, and the rituals of social interaction continued just as they had in life.

The rear chamber forms the core of the entire “underground palace.” Here, Liu Jian rested in the innermost coffin, surrounded by four additional outer coffins. He was buried in a jade burial suit, which was painstakingly assembled from jade pieces and bound with gold wire. His head lay on a bronze pillow shaped like a dragon's head, inlaid with jade and precious stones. He also wore a range of jade ornaments. A large number of bronze coins lined the bottom of the coffin. Altogether, these elements reflected the vassal prince's ultimate luxury in the afterlife, closely mirroring the burial standards of the Han imperial family.

The Han Tomb at Dabaotai yielded a wide array of funerary objects, including a jade dancer figurine, a gilded bronze knocker base, a jade pendant featuring a dragon-like creature, a bronze mirror adorned with star and cloud patterns and an archer's thumb ring decorated with dragon

▼ Chicken-blood red sardonyx



▼ She-shaped pendant with dragon and phoenix patterns



Tips

Artefact: Jade Xi with the Phoenix Head

Period: Western Han Dynasty

Dimensions: 11.8–11.9 cm in length, 2.4–2.5 cm in width, 0.4–0.5 cm in thickness

Place of Excavation: Tomb No. 2, Tomb of Prince of Guangyang (Western Han Dynasty), Dabaotai, Fengtai District, Beijing

The jade xi was a common pendant type during the Han Dynasty, typically made in matching pairs with identical size, shape and decoration. This particular pair was likely part of a larger set of jade pendants. In traditional Chinese culture, the xi symbolised

a person's ability to resolve difficult problems, carrying the meaning of dispelling chaos and restoring order. As such, emperors and nobles often wore jade xi to reflect their governing capability.

The jade ornament, carved in the shape of a phoenix head, is fang-like, flat and slender. It features an openwork design of a phoenix turning its head back, its curved body ending in a sharp, awl-shaped tail. Fine intaglio lines detail the eyes, feathers and other features. Carved on both sides with remarkable skill, the piece is both lively and delicately crafted, showcasing a vivid and lifelike posture.



and phoenix motifs. These artefacts formed a symbolic bridge between the world of the living and the afterlife within the underground palace.

Liu Jian's philosophical outlook on life and death was deeply shaped by the cultural context of his time. During the Han Dynasty, the belief in “treating the deceased as if still living” was of central importance. This profound view, “death is the beginning of a new life,” reflected a deep-rooted understanding of eternity. As a result, every detail of the vassal prince's tomb was carefully designed to embody courtesy, order, habitation and honour. While the intensity of this culture and its focus on the afterlife may be difficult to grasp today, it is precisely this pursuit of eternity that defines the distinctive appeal of Han Dynasty funerary traditions. It offers a rare glimpse into ancient Chinese perspectives on death, ritual and belief from over 2,000 years ago.

The revitalised Dabaotai Museum of the Western Han Dynasty Tomb is more than a repository of cultural relics. It functions as an immersive theatrical space that spans time itself. Its inverted square funnel-shaped exterior echoes the form of a Han Dynasty tomb. Inside, the sunken exhibition hall uses light and shadow effects, multimedia elements and realistic reconstructions to contrast life and death, the realms above and below ground, and the era's ritual systems and spiritual beliefs. Together, these elements present a vivid and layered portrait of the lives and inner worlds of Han Dynasty nobility.

The legacy of the Han Dynasty endures, and the thread of ancient civilisation remains unbroken. As early as the Western Han Dynasty, the land of Yan, present-day Beijing, was already nurturing the roots of culture. More than two thousand years later, archaeological sites and the artefacts they yield continue to surface, preserving the cultural identity and living heritage of this historic capital in the modern era.

Within these archaeological sites, we glimpse the lives of ancient people and the grandeur of their times. The everyday world of ordinary people from the Han Dynasty, brought to light through modern archaeological discoveries, offers vivid insight into their daily experience and



Tips

Artefact: Gilded-Bronze Knocker Base

Period: Western Han Dynasty

Dimensions: 24.6 centimetres (cm) in length, 19.9 cm in width

Place of Excavation: Tomb No. 1, Tomb of Prince of Guangyang (Western Han Dynasty), Dabaotai, Fengtai District, Beijing

This gilded-bronze knocker base is shaped like a dragon's head, topped with a boshan-style crown adorned with sacred trees and spiritual herbs. Its two large horns rise sharply, surrounded by swirling cloud patterns. The figure's features are boldly exaggerated and imposing, with wide eyes and bared teeth, creating a vivid yet intimidating image. Used as a decorative fitting on doors or vessels, the piece held not only practical value but also symbolic meaning. It was believed to protect the home and ward off evil, reflecting the Han Dynasty's deep respect for mystical powers.

reflects the brilliance of that era. In Beijing, a city of ever-deepening historical significance, we are reminded that true cultural greatness comes from understanding and honouring the profound roots of civilisation. Authentic cultural confidence is not about proclaiming “how glorious we were,” but about asking “why we have become who we are today.”

This connection is precisely what gives the splendour of the Han Dynasty its enduring significance for Beijing today.

The Silhouette of Youzhou

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi

This is a story about integration and inheritance.

Modern archaeological excavations are gradually revealing the secrets buried in the strata through the experts' careful use of their tools. Like two open windows, the discoveries of the tomb of Hua Fang (AD 271–307) from the Western Jin Dynasty (AD 265–316) and the tomb of Liu Ji (AD 757–810) from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) offer illuminating glimpses into the past. A wealth of information has emerged—from a glass bowl echoing ancient Persian grandeur and vivid Tang Dynasty murals to sorrowful epitaphs and dignified stone carvings honouring family and country. Thanks to meticulous excavation and restoration, new light is being shed on life in Youzhou (an ancient region encompassing modern-day Beijing), the lifestyles of the elite, interactions between ethnic groups and the region's long-buried memories.

These unearthed relics offer people today a renewed understanding of ancient Beijing's culture and history. While contemporary Beijing has evolved from its early role as a frontier hub, millennia of ethnic integration and cultural convergence have shaped the city's enduring inclusiveness, broad outlook and natural capacity to facilitate the meeting of civilisations.

History perpetually echoes across the land of Beijing.



An Epitaph Serves as a Testament to an Era

In July 1965, construction on Beijing Subway Line 1 revealed a secret that had lain undisturbed for 1,700 years. A brick-chamber tomb from the Western Jin Dynasty was discovered approximately 500 metres (m) west of the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery in Shijingshan District. This tomb, identified as belonging to Hua Fang, was subsequently hailed as a “milestone in the archaeological discoveries of the Wei (AD 220–265) and Jin (AD 265–420) dynasties in Beijing.”

Hua Fang's tomb chamber is relatively modest in size, measuring 5.6 m from north to south and 2.7 m from east to west. In the northeast corner lies a well-preserved bluestone epitaph, which serves as a vital key to understanding the history of Youzhou during the Jin Dynasty.

The epitaph, entitled “The Epitaph of Lady Hua,” contains a total of 1,630 Chinese characters. It is inscribed on both sides of the stele, arranged across 39 lines. Not only does it feature the most characters among all Western Jin Dynasty epitaph discovered to date, but it was also authored by Hua Fang's husband, Wang Jun (AD 252–314), a notably controversial figure of the era.

The *History of the Jin Dynasty* depicts Wang Jun as a harsh and ruthless political figure, leading later generations to brand him “a traitor who brutalised the common people.” Yet after the death of his wife, Hua Fang, he composed a heartfelt elegiac text that revealed his deep sorrow and respect. He wrote, “My wife governed our household with benevolence and tolerance, demonstrating exceptional skill in managing domestic affairs. The influence of her moral character extended beyond the confines of our family.” These words not only praise her domestic abilities and adherence to traditional female virtues, but also reveal a more personal and tender side of a high-ranking official's family life.

The significance of Hua Fang's tomb

extends beyond the inscription on her epitaph. The Capital Museum of China, which mainly features cultural relics discovered and preserved in Beijing, displays a striking green glass bowl unearthed from her tomb. When first discovered, the bowl was fragmented. Cultural relic experts carefully reassembled the pieces, restoring the bowl to its original form. It is brilliantly clear, with a spherical body, slender neck, exceptionally thin walls and raised decorative elements. Its elegant and refined design marks it as a masterpiece of glass craftsmanship from its time. Component analysis revealed its origin: it was an imported artefact from the Sassanid Dynasty (AD 224–651) on the Iranian Plateau, dating back 1,700 years.

While Chinese glassmaking was still in its early stages, glassware from the Sassanid Dynasty was already highly prized by the nobility in ancient China for its crystal clarity and radiant beauty. As the wife of Wang Jun, Governor of Youzhou, Hua Fang used this Persian glass bowl in her daily life—a reflection of the elite's preference for imported luxury goods and an insight into the cultural integration between China and the West in Youzhou. More importantly, it reveals a key insight for scholars: by the early fourth century, the region that is now Beijing was already actively engaged in broad exchanges with Persian civilisation.

In that era, the principle of “serving the deceased as if they were still living” was deeply valued. People went to

great lengths to replicate aspects of the deceased's daily life, including the objects they once used, in the hope that their dignity and refinement could continue in the afterlife. Alongside the green glass bowl, a beautiful silver bell is also on display. This spherical bell, with a diameter of 2.6 centimetres, is adorned with eight finely crafted musicians formed from silver wire. Arc-shaped circular patterns fill the spaces between the figures, divided into four groups: two play panpipes, two hold pipes and trumpets, and two appear to beat drums with both hands—one with a small drum at his waist. The remaining two seem to be playing other instruments. The eight performers are vividly rendered, dressed in tall hats and poised in dynamic stances as they sing and dance, offering a vivid glimpse into the musical culture of the Western Jin Dynasty.

Hua Fang's tomb yielded a rich collection of Jin Dynasty artefacts beyond the glass bowl and silver bell. Numerous daily utensils and artworks, such as copper incense burners and lacquer plates, were unearthed. These objects offer a window into the lives of the nobility at the time,

▼ Glass bowl unearthed from Hua Fang's tomb

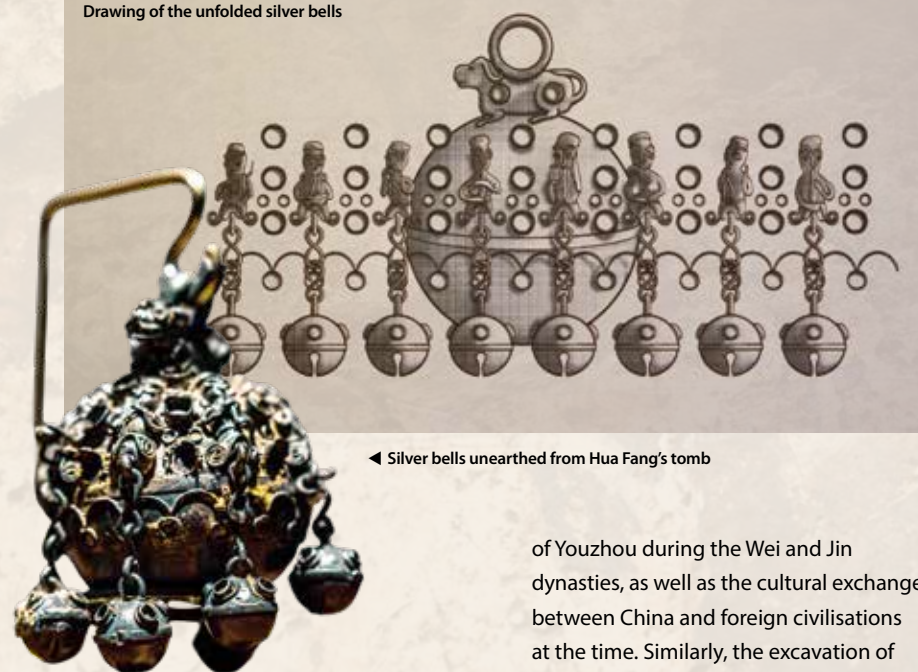


Tips

Hua Fang

Hua Fang's great-grandfather was Hua Xin (AD 157–232), a powerful minister during the Wei Dynasty. Her grandfather and father also held high-ranking official posts, making the Hua clan a prominent family during the Western Jin Dynasty. As a result, Hua Fang received an excellent education from an early age. At the age of 18, she became Wang Jun's second wife. During their 19-year marriage, she meticulously upheld traditional feminine virtues and fulfilled her duties with diligence and grace. She passed away at the age of 37 due to illness. Despite her short life, she was highly praised for her virtuous character. Deeply grieved by her death, Wang Jun spared no expense on her elaborate burial and had her life story carved in stone.

Drawing of the unfolded silver bells



◀ Silver bells unearthed from Hua Fang's tomb

evoking scenes of grand mansions where incense was burned, elaborate feasts were held and refined gatherings unfolded to the accompaniment of elegant music.

As early as 1,700 years ago, Youzhou was home not only to the governance of local elite families but also to the active presence of ethnic minorities such as the Xianbei and Wuwan. Wang Jun, for example, strategically married his daughter to Wu Wuchen (died AD 311), a Xianbei chieftain, to gain political advantage. While his decisions were criticised by later generations, they undeniably contributed to deep ethnic integration, transforming Youzhou into a dynamic hub of multi-ethnic exchange. In this region, Confucian and Buddhist traditions from the Central Plains merged with the nomadic cultures of the northern frontier, creating a unique cultural tapestry. The artefacts and cultural trace preserved in Hua Fang's tomb stand as compelling evidence of this historical convergence.

Murals Narrate a History of Rise and Fall

The epitaph and burial objects unearthed from Hua Fang's tomb offer valuable insights into the political landscape

chamber feature murals of musicians, maids, horses and peony blossoms, providing a vivid depiction of noble life during the Tang Dynasty. The horses are shown with full manes and strong frames, capturing a sense of energy and grace that hints at Liu's fondness for them. The maids, dressed in fine clothing with elaborate hairstyles and gentle expressions, reflect the era's prevailing aesthetic ideals for women of the Tang Dynasty. Notably, peony motifs appear repeatedly on door frames, tomb passages and epitaph edges, combining elements of boldness, elegance and luxury. These designs not only reflect the character of the deceased but also express the Tang people's pursuit of wealth, prosperity and beauty.

The murals within the tomb suggest that Liu Ji lived a life of peace and prosperity, but this lifestyle was not without its share of danger.

Historical records reveal that Liu Ji came from one of the "Four Great Clans" of Youzhou, a family with long-standing military and political influence in the region. Liu served as the Military Governor of Youzhou (Lulong) for 25 years, during which time the area evolved from a strategic frontier outpost into a key place dominated by regional warlords. He was not only a political leader, but also a general with religious conviction and cultural refinement. Records note his devout Buddhism, reflected in his passion for scripture engraving and preaching. In a sutra repository cave at Yunju Temple in Beijing's Fangshan District, more than 100 stone engravings of the *Heart Sutra*, commissioned by Liu, have been well preserved, representing a significant legacy in China's Buddhist stone carving tradition. He also promoted Confucianism by establishing schools and donated his own residence for the construction of Chongxiao Temple, in what is now Beijing's Xicheng District. Despite his political achievements, as one of the military governors of ancient China's three major frontier regions, he was far from guaranteed a peaceful and luxurious old age.

Perhaps political success could not



▲ Partial view of a mural in the west chamber of Liu Ji's tomb

withstand the vagaries of fate. Despite his notable achievements, Liu Ji was unable to escape internal clan strife and its consequences. When he launched a campaign against Chengde (whose military governor controlled present-day Zhaoxian County, Yixian County, Dingzhou City and Shenzhou City in Hebei Province), he appointed his eldest son, Liu Gun (died AD 810), to be in charge of defending Youzhou, while his second son, Liu Zong (died AD 821), accompanied him on the campaign. This arrangement implied that Liu Gun was the chosen successor, a decision that stirred resentment in Liu Zong. In response, Liu Zong propagated rumours claiming that the central government was displeased with Liu Ji's prolonged illness and intended to replace him with Liu Gun.

During the reign of Emperor Xianzong (AD 805–820) of the Tang Dynasty, the court's increasingly strict policies to curb the power of military governors left Liu Ji unable to calmly assess the rumours or make sound

decisions. Already weakened by illness, Liu Ji grew furious upon hearing that his elder son was allegedly plotting to seize power with the support of the central government. He refused all food and drink in despair. One day, when Liu Ji asked for water, Liu Zong took advantage of the moment and poisoned him, leading to his death.

It may have been due to these circumstances that archaeologists found an "unfinished project" upon entering the tomb chamber. The two lowest layers of the stone coffin platform were decorated only with ink outlines, lacking completed reliefs. Even the carvings on the middle two layers were relatively shallow. Only the top layer, adorned with intricate animal face motifs, displayed the exquisite craftsmanship expected. The hurried nature of Liu Ji's burial may have left the tomb incomplete.

Following Liu Ji's death, Youzhou was plunged into further turmoil. His successors failed to maintain the prosperity he had achieved, eventually vanishing from the historical stage as the era of regional warlords evolved. Yet the subterranean tomb where Liu Ji and his wife were buried together endures. As one of the largest and best-preserved Tang Dynasty tombs unearthed in present-day Beijing, it stands as a lasting testament to a historical

moment shaped by regional warlordism and cultural integration.

Deep within the tomb chamber, the unfinished reliefs and unpainted stone patterns seem to whisper the secrets and sorrows of a bygone era. In the murals, graceful dancers, gentle maids and blooming peonies appear to revel in Youzhou's springtime, unwilling to fade into history.

The significance of an archaeological excavation extends beyond reconstructing an individual's life. It lies in brushing away the dust of time to reveal the evolution of a city, the roots of a culture and the complex tapestry of ethnic integration. Youzhou, a historically significant region in the north, has been repeatedly illuminated, recorded and redefined through the lives of figures such as Hua Fang and Liu Ji.

From Hua Fang to Liu Ji, spanning over six centuries from the Western Jin to the late Tang dynasties, two ancient tombs lying silently beneath the earth tell parallel stories on the same land. Through epitaphs, murals, artefacts and inscriptions, they recount not only the triumphs and tragedies of two historical figures but also reflect the cultural landscape and social structure of ancient Youzhou, including what is now Beijing, during their respective eras.

▼ Figural reliefs on the epitaph cover of Liu Ji's wife



The Origins of the Capital City

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi, Yan Yusheng, He Rong

In an enclosed and unremarkable courtyard at Fenghuangzui Village in Beijing's Fengtai District stands a weathered section of rammed earth wall. These are the remnants of the city walls of Zhongdu (Central Capital) from the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), a historical relic that effectively serves as the “birth certificate” of Beijing's status as a capital. Today's Beijing, an international metropolis, once served as a frontier stronghold. The city rose to prominence during the Liao (AD 916–1125) and Jin dynasties, but these two periods are less well known in the public consciousness today.

The heritage resources buried beneath Beijing reveal a profound and layered cultural history. The legacy of the Liao and Jin dynasties forms a vital chapter, serving as a bridge between earlier and later periods in this historical continuum. From Taoranting Park to the northern shore of Beihai Park, from the banks of the Yongding River to the foot of Jade Spring Hill, archaeologists have been discovering the cultural remnants of the Liao and Jin dynasties with their tools in the ancient capital. Heritage from these dynasties, dormant for over 1,000 years, has gradually stirred. Like scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, these archaeological findings have come together to reveal the remarkable evolution of the city from a frontier military town to the capital of imperial dynasties.

Nanjing of the Liao Dynasty: the City's Evolution Under Warfare

In AD 938, Yelü Deguang, known as Emperor Taizong (reign: AD 927–947) of the Liao Dynasty—established by the Khitan people—took control of Youzhou (which includes present-day Beijing). He renamed this former Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) border military region as Nanjing Xijin Prefecture. The renaming was intentional: “Xijin” resembled place names from the Central Plains, mostly inhabited by Han people, while subtly revealing the Khitan's ambitions. At that time, Nanjing (Southern Capital) served as a strategic outpost on the Liao Dynasty's southern frontier, with Khitan nomadic cavalry to the north and Han-led regimes such as the subsequent Northern Song Dynasty (AD 960–1127) to the south. From atop the city tower of Nanjing, people of the era could hear the war drums echoing from both directions.

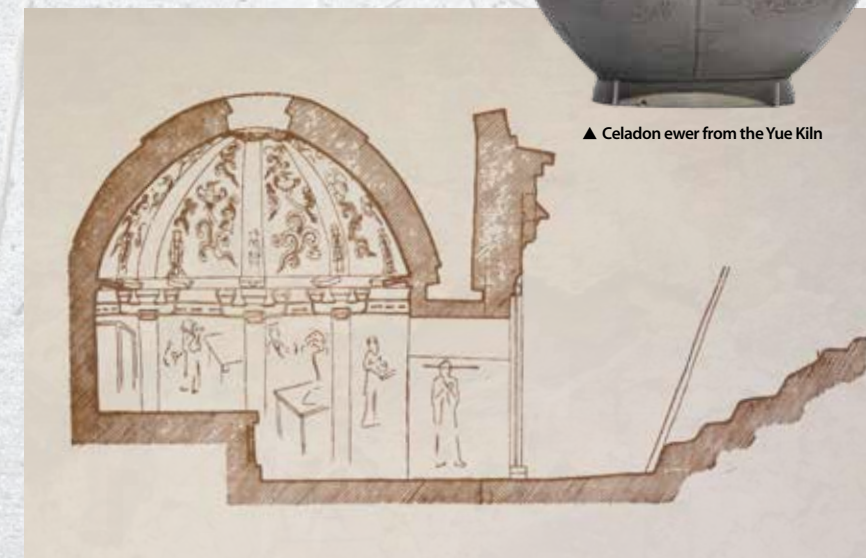
Although Nanjing of the Liao Dynasty served as a military stronghold, its residents enjoyed a rich and lively existence. As described in Louis Cha Leung-yung's renowned novel *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*: “Xiao Feng entered the city and saw that the streets of Nanjing were wide and the markets were bustling, far surpassing those of Shangjing. The total circumference of Nanjing was 36 *li* (one *li* equals 0.5 kilometre [km]) and had eight gates along the city walls.” While the characters are fictional, this passage offers a glimpse into Nanjing's layout: a large city for its time, with a circumference of 36 *li* (18 km)—though some accounts suggest 27 *li* (13.5 km)—rectangular in shape, longer from north to south and narrower from east to west, with eight city gates. Its eastern boundary reached modern-day Lanman Hutong, its western boundary extended near Xiaomachang, the southern approached Baizhifang and the northern bordered Fuxingmen Street. The northern gate of Nanjing, called Gongchen Gate, meaning “facing the Big Dipper,” symbolised the city's dutiful protection of

the Liao Dynasty emperor to the north.

Nanjing of the Liao Dynasty seemingly echoed the layout of the Tang Dynasty's capital, retaining its neighbourhood system. Twenty-six grid-like residential areas were neatly divided by main roads such as Tanzhou Street (now Guang'anmennei Street). The population of Liao's Nanjing reached up to 300,000, surpassing the liveliness of many European cities of the



▲ Celadon ewer from the Yue Kiln



▲ Cross-sectional view of Han Yi's tomb

time. The *Annals of the Khitan Kingdom* described the inner palace as supremely magnificent, with buildings featuring grand upturned eaves, intricate *dougong* brackets and brilliantly glazed tiles. Every carved beam and painted pillar radiated elegance and majesty. The northern market bustled with activity, with an endless stream of horse-drawn carriages and busy merchants. Goods from all directions were piled like hills, creating a vivid scene of prosperity. Remarkably, the city was filled with countless Buddhist temples, their bells ringing throughout. The scale and number of these temples were rarely matched in cities across the north. Even more exquisite were the embroidery works of local artisans. Silk threads flowed effortlessly between their fingers, while embroidered birds seemed ready to take flight. This unparalleled craftsmanship, the crowning

glory of Nanjing's artistry, developed from silk weaving techniques that began in the Tang Dynasty and peaked during the Liao's Nanjing era. The *Annals of the Khitan Kingdom* praised the artisans' exceptional skill, stating, “The splendid embroidered techniques within the city are second to none in the world.” Beijing embroidery, now one of the Eight Imperial Handicrafts and a source of pride for locals, traces its roots to Nanjing of the Liao Dynasty.

If architecture represents a moment of frozen history, then unearthed cultural relics are a stream of flowing memory. In 1981, a large Liao Dynasty tomb was discovered in Beijing's Shijingshan District, belonging to Han Yi, a prominent figure in Liao's Nanjing. The ceiling of his circular tomb chamber resembles an inverted dome, with lotus flowers radiating from the centre. Murals wrap around the chamber



▲ Shuiquangou Ruins, part of the Dazhuangke mining and metallurgical site cluster

like a scroll, depicting vivid scenes: maids holding objects, their postures as graceful as butterflies in flight, and utensils on the square table seeming to retain the warmth of a past feast, preserving daily life from a thousand years ago in timeless stillness. Nearly 60 cultural relics were unearthed from the tomb, captivating today's observers. Among them, nine porcelain pieces from the Yue Kiln (in modern-day Zhejiang Province) are especially striking, thanks to the ancient, mysterious formula used in their glaze. The celadon ewer gleams with a glaze like emerald mist on a mountain peak, glowing warmly under the light. The bowls and plates have simple, elegant shapes, their glazes smooth and even like the surface of a lake touched by morning dew. These artefacts, having journeyed thousands of *li* from the south, offer tangible proof of the cultural exchange between northern and southern China in ancient times.

Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty: Fully Establishing the Capital's Ambiance

In 1153, Wanyan Liang, Prince of Hailing (reign: 1149–1161) of the Jurchen-established Jin Dynasty, moved the capital



▲ Jade ornament featuring a gyrfalcon design

from distant Shangjing (present-day Acheng, Harbin, Heilongjiang Province) to Yanjing (now Beijing), renaming it "Zhongdu," or "Central Capital." Although Wanyan Liang was actually the fourth emperor of the Jin Dynasty, he was later assassinated, posthumously stripped of his imperial title and demoted to Prince of Hailing. At the time, his decision to move the capital sparked considerable upheaval and was strongly opposed by Jurchen nobles. Nevertheless, Wanyan Liang remained adamant. He even declared that dissenters would be thrown into the river, a reflection of his fierce temperament and bold actions. This pivotal decision profoundly reshaped Beijing's historical course. Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty, expanded from the foundation of Liao's Nanjing, marked the first time the city served as the capital of a dynasty in northern China. Archaeological finds of palace ruins



Tips

The Oldest 'Above-ground Resident' in the Urban Areas of Beijing

As twilight gilds the traffic flowing along Beijing's Second Ring Road, the towering Pagoda of Tianning Temple stands distinctly above the city's bustle. The pagoda stands on a square platform, featuring a lofty Sumeru pedestal at its base. Around its midsection are finely carved Buddhist-style door motifs. At each corner stands a formidable Vajra warrior, muscles bulging and eyes wide with fierce intensity. Three layers of lotus petals support the pagoda's main structure, forming a decorative belt encircling it. From the lowest level upward, the eaves of each tier become increasingly refined. Standing at the foot of the pagoda and gazing up, visitors may feel a strange sensation, as though the entire structure is softly breathing. The grandeur of the Sumeru pedestal, the elegance of the lotus petals, the dynamism of the eaves and the distinctive apex were all masterfully embedded into the bricks and stones by the artisans of the Liao Dynasty, composing an epic without sound or script.

and market sites from the Jin Zhongdu era together portray the city's grandeur and architectural style.

The imperial edict relocating the capital served as a sharp scalpel, reshaping Beijing's historical path. Unlike its role as a secondary capital during the Liao Dynasty, Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty was, from the outset, tasked with serving as the dynasty's political centre. The city walls of Zhongdu expanded eastward, westward and southward, building upon the existing structure of Liao's Nanjing. Archaeological findings reveal that Zhongdu adopted a multi-ring layout: the Outer City enclosed the Imperial City, with the Palace City at its heart. This design, resembling the Chinese character "回" (*hui*), clearly drew from the urban layouts and ritual principles of Han-established dynasties in the Central Plains. The layout—with the Imperial City surrounding the Palace City, aligned along a central axis running from Fengyi Gate (southern gate) to Yingtian Gate (palace gate)—signified a new stage in the planning of ancient Chinese capitals.

In 1990, roadwork at the southwest corner of Beijing's Second Ring Road led to the accidental unearthing of a large stone carved with dragon motifs. Archaeologists swiftly arrived on the scene, launching excavations that unexpectedly unearthed palace ruins from Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty. The most striking feature of the site was a massive rammed-earth platform, measuring approximately 70 m from north to south and over 60 m from east to west. A row of large stones bordered the platform, with neatly spaced pits still visible—originally used to anchor Yongding Pillars. Later, a commemorative monument was erected on the site to mark Beijing's establishment as a capital city for a dynasty. Carved into the base of the monument is "The Record of the Establishment of Beijing as the Capital," written by historian Hou Renzhi (1911–2013).

During a 2024 archaeological excavation, the remains of Duanli Gate, located southwest of Zhongdu's Outer City, were unexpectedly unearthed, completing a key piece of the historical puzzle of this long-lost capital. Ongoing excavations gradually revealed the outline of the city gate and unearthed architectural secrets hidden within its base. At the original site, archaeologists found that both sides of the pier platform featured three layers of densely packed bricks, compacted layer by layer like a staircase. This advanced foundation-building technique is unprecedented among other ancient city ruins. It not only adds a vivid and valuable chapter to the architectural history of ancient Chinese capitals but also offers a striking demonstration of the extraordinary craftsmanship of artisans from nearly 1,000 years ago.

The most remarkable site associated with Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty is the water gate ruins located in You'anmenwai. This subterranean structure, built from bricks, stones, iron clasps and wooden stakes, tells the nearly 1,000-year-old story of a dynasty capital's harmonious relationship with water. The entire water gate resembles a giant whale submerged beneath the surface, composed of more than 2,000 bluish-grey stone slabs. The culvert at its base flares into a trumpet shape, formed by layer upon layer of precisely arranged slabs. Each stone is carved with accurate mortise and tenon joints, ensuring a seamless interlocking fit. The gate's distinctive structure—with brick and stone slopes extending outwards like the pectoral fins of a great whale—was designed not only to disperse the impact of floodwaters but also to cleverly direct the flow of water. The discovery of the Zhongdu Water Gate Ruins has revealed the path of a river buried for over 800 years: a waterway that once flowed from West Lake (now Lotus Pond Park), winding like a green silk ribbon diagonally across the capital



▲ Monument Commemorating Beijing's Establishment as the Capital

◀ Green-glazed cockscomb flask with embossed decoration

from northwest to southeast, before merging into the moat. This was the Liangshui River, which still runs through Beijing today.

Why did the Prince of Hailing devote such significant effort to the river that flowed through the city? The answer lies in the cosmological beliefs of the ancients regarding capital development. In traditional Chinese architectural philosophy, a river flowing through a capital city played a role in mirroring the Milky Way on Earth. It symbolised the connection between imperial power and the mandate of heaven, captured in the imagery of “the Milky Way flowing into the capital city” and reflected reverence for the capital as the centre of heaven and earth. The river, seen as this celestial

reflection, became the lifeblood of Zhongdu. From the moment the Prince of Hailing relocated the capital, the water gate served as a time-travelling ferry, witnessing the city's grandeur as it evolved from Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty to Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty, and eventually to the capitals of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The story of “the Heavenly River reflecting the capital” remains etched in every water-worn stone slab.

Today, visitors can explore the ruins of Zhongdu's city walls, remnants from Beijing's early days as a capital. The journey may also lead to Lotus Pond Park, located in Guang'anmenwai. Nearly a thousand years ago, this very lake was already celebrated for its clear waters and enchanting ripples. Years of archaeological excavation have gradually revealed the urban structure of Zhongdu. With each new “jigsaw” piece unearthed, the story of this ancient capital becomes increasingly vivid, casting a timeless brilliance in the eyes of people today.

The role transformation of Beijing, from Nanjing of

the Liao Dynasty to Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty, spanned a total of 215 years. During the Liao Dynasty, urban planners laid the foundational framework for the city with a primary military function, inadvertently planting the early “seeds of the capital.” These seeds would later flourish under the hands of Jin Dynasty designers, who expanded and enriched the city's functions, nurturing it into a thriving and complex metropolis. The subsequent rise of Dadu during the Yuan Dynasty, followed by Beijing's development during the Ming and Qing dynasties, all built upon this enduring foundation, layer by layer, shaping the capital we know today. Within the area now enclosed by the city's Second Ring Road, the directional layout of hutongs from the Liao and Jin dynasties still persists, and the present-day moat also traces its origins to those dynasties. Back then, even the waters of the Lugou River flowed into the early channels that would one day define Beijing's urban landscape.

Today, many Beijing residents still refer to the city as the “Four-Nine City.” The

term “four” denotes the four city gates of the former Imperial City, while “nine” refers to the nine gates of the old Inner City. In fact, the capital city's genetic blueprint had already begun to take root during the Liao and Jin dynasties. The water system visible today in Lotus Pond Park—a valuable heritage resource left by the Liao people—was later transformed by the Jin people into an elegant imperial garden. During the Liao Dynasty, governance was divided into two systems: the Northern Administration, which managed affairs related to the steppe and nomadic tribes, and the Southern Administration, which governed the settled Han population. This innovative model of dual governance, developed by the Khitan, later inspired the Jurchen to adopt Han administrative structures during the Jin Dynasty. Even the central axis of Yuan Dadu echoes the symmetrical urban layout of Liao's Nanjing. These enduring legacies are witness to Beijing's transformation—from a regional city into a dynasty capital and, ultimately, into today's national capital—marked by inclusiveness, integration and sustained evolution.

Tips

The ‘Beijing Gene’ in Historical Heritage

Today, nearly all the surviving heritage from Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty is preserved within the Capital Museum of China, where each artefact is not only a valuable relic but also carries its own vivid and compelling historical narrative.



Bronze Sitting Dragon

Unearthed in 1990 at the site of Da'an Hall, the main structure of the palace in Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty, located in today's Guang'anmenwai, Beijing, a bronze sitting dragon serves as a striking testament to Beijing's 870-plus-year history as a capital. This dragon statue, covered in intricate scales, assumes a posture reminiscent of a drawn bow. Its distinctive features include a precious pearl held in its mouth, wings extending from its ribs, five sharp talons and a tail curling outward. The design blends traditional patterns from the Central Plains with traits of grassland winged beasts, forming a vivid and powerful symbol of cultural exchange and ethnic integration.

The Iron Lion of the Eighth Year of Taihe

This iron lion, Beijing's oldest extant example of its kind, was cast in 1208, the eighth year of the Taihe period during the reign of Emperor Zhangzong (1190–1208) of the Jin Dynasty. Nearly a metre in height, the squatting lion holds its head high, displaying sparse, curly mane, wide and open eyes, and a roaring mouth that conveys strength and authority. A ribbon with a bell adorns its chest, while its limbs appear robust and powerful. Dynamic cloud patterns embellish the base of the statue. The sculpture not only continues the bold casting style of the Tang Dynasty but also reflects the rugged and unadorned aesthetic of Jurchen craftsmanship. It offers a vivid demonstration of the Jin Dynasty's advanced smelting and casting techniques, as well as the cultural integration that emerged from the interaction of diverse ethnic groups.



Golden-Threaded Phoenix Coronet

Discovered in 2002 at the site of the Jin Dynasty Imperial Tombs in Fangshan District, Beijing, this phoenix coronet was fashioned from pure gold and served as the framework to support and shape the empress's ceremonial headwear. Although the silk fabrics and other interior and exterior decorations had decomposed by the time of discovery, the surviving gold-thread woven structure—featuring elements such as water drop-shaped designs, eight-petal flowers and other floral motifs—still allows observers to visualise the magnificent “floral coronet” described in the *History of the Jin Dynasty · Record of Chariots and Clothing*.



▼ Ruins of the Water Gate of Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty



The Establishment of Dadu

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin

The old city of Beijing was once praised as “one of the greatest individual projects of mankind on the Earth’s surface” and described as “deeply immersed in ritual norms and religious consciousness.” Yet the precise origins of its layout remain unclear. Drawing on surviving records from the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, experts can broadly determine the location and boundaries of the Yuan Dynasty’s outer city of Dadu (Grand Capital, present-day Beijing). However, most references to Dadu’s urban form in these documents are fragmented, making it especially difficult to form a complete picture of the city’s overall planning.

In 2024, the publication of the *Archaeological Report on Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty (1964–1974)* finally provided a “portrait” of Dadu, a city lost to history for over seven centuries. The archaeological findings detailed in the book reveal the layout of the ancient city and offer glimpses into the everyday emotions and experiences of its inhabitants over 700 years ago.

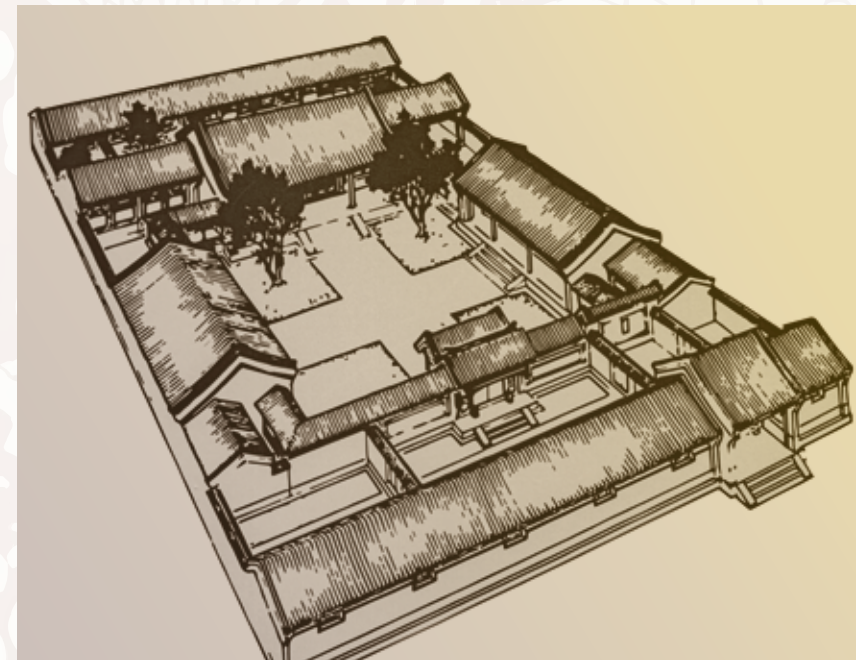


Delving into the Ruins

Dadu, the capital of the Yuan Dynasty, was a major city in northern China, following in the legacy of Chang’an and Luoyang during the Han (206 BC–AD 220) and Tang (AD 618–907) dynasties, as well as Bianjing during the Northern Song Dynasty (AD 960–1127). It holds an exceptionally important place in the developmental history of ancient Chinese capitals.

According to historical records, the city of Dadu was built over a span of 26 years, from 1267 to 1293. It eventually developed into a large city with three distinct sections: the Palace City, the Imperial City and the Outer City. The city featured 11 gates and a central north-south axis that ran through its length. In 1368, Xu Da (1332–1385), a general of the Ming Dynasty, captured Dadu, abruptly altering the city’s destiny. Continuous reconstruction and expansion during the Ming and Qing dynasties led to two-thirds of Dadu’s original area being overlaid by what later became Beijing. As a result, the city’s precise layout was gradually lost. Until the 1960s, there was no accurate map of Dadu’s site, nor had any formal archaeological excavations been carried out. For centuries, Dadu’s presence existed only as a fragment in historical records and legends.

In 1963, to support a map compilation project, the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Cultural Relics Work Team of Beijing Municipality jointly established the Working Group for the City of Beijing’s Historical Map and the Team for the Archaeology of Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty. The aim was to study Beijing’s urban history and reconstruct its planning, while also providing scientific data for the mapping effort. Seizing this opportunity, the archaeological team focused on systematic investigation—combining historical records with archaeological drilling and small-scale excavations of Dadu’s Outer city, Palace city, Imperial city, city gates, streets and water systems including rivers and lakes. This enabled experts to determine their locations and configurations, ultimately resulting in the production of a site map



▲ Drawing of a Beijing courtyard house

of Dadu. Later, in coordination with the construction of the Beijing Subway, over 10 types of Yuan Dynasty residential sites were excavated. A large quantity of ceramics, ironware, architectural components, daily utensils and valuable documents from the Yuan Dynasty were unearthed, vividly reflecting the living conditions of residents across different social classes at the time.

Following a decade of archaeological excavations, a comprehensive image of Dadu was finally presented in the *Archaeological Report on Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty (1964–1974)*. One of the book’s most remarkable achievements is the “urban portrait” of Dadu, reconstructed using unearthed data on city walls, streets and alleys, water systems and residential sites. According to this portrait, a central north-south axis extended from Lizheng Gate in the south to today’s Drum Tower at the centre. Neighbourhoods, altars, temples and government offices were symmetrically arranged on either side of this axis. Historically, Dadu had a multi-walled layout, with the Palace City enclosed by the Imperial City, both surrounded by the Outer City. The city had 11 gates, and its streets and alleys were clearly defined. Wide, straight avenues connected opposing gates. East-west hutongs were evenly spaced on both sides of

the north-south thoroughfares. The distance between adjacent hutongs was consistent—50 Yuan Dynasty paces, or approximately 77 metres. The widths of the main and minor roads were also carefully proportioned. Even today, in places like Dongdan, Xidan, Dongsi and Xisi, people can still feel the grandeur of this masterful urban planning.

Dadu affirmed the alignment between ancient urban planning ideals and their practical application. *The Rites of Zhou · Kaogong Ji* prescribes: “For the layout of a capital city, nine north-south and nine east-west streets should form a well-ordered grid. Each street should be wide enough for nine carriages to travel side by side. The Imperial Ancestral Temple should stand to the left of the Palace City, and the Altar of Land and Grain to its right. Government offices should be located south of the palace, and the market should be situated to its north; the government offices and the market should each occupy an area of 100 *mu* (6.67 hectares).” Dadu fulfilled this ideal layout: the Imperial Ancestral Temple stood to the east of the Palace City, the Altar of Land and Grain to the west, government offices were concentrated south of the Imperial City or “the imperial court in front of it” and the bustling market district was located to the

north of the Imperial City—known as the “market behind it.”

The archaeological research on Dadu has enabled us to rediscover the outline of this ancient capital, long buried by time, within the streets and alleys of modern Beijing. It has opened a dialogue between “above-ground Beijing” and “underground Dadu,” revealing glimpses of life as it was more than 700 years ago through archaeological discoveries.

Palace and Imperial Cities within the Outer City

If the restored map of Dadu can be seen as an outstanding urban portrait, then the residential ruins scattered deep within today's hutongs represent the tangible historical scenes unfolding behind that portrait.

In the spring of 1972, the ruins of a Yuan Dynasty courtyard house were unearthed. Archaeological excavations revealed that this residential site, later named Houyingfang, was a large and elaborate residence with clearly defined spatial functions. Although different from the typical quadrangle courtyards of the Ming and Qing dynasties, it had already taken on a recognisable courtyard house form.

The archaeologists were struck not only by the architecture itself but also by the everyday objects left behind in the ruins. These included a Yuan Dynasty blue-and-white porcelain plate decorated with floral motifs, a white-glazed porcelain vase bearing the inscription “内府” (*neifu*, meaning “warehouse”), a Longquan celadon covered jar, a Duanzhou inkstone engraved with the Chinese characters “元章” (*yuanzhang*, conveying auspicious meanings in Chinese) and agate Go stones scattered across the floor. These artefacts strongly suggest that the residents left in haste, without time to pack their belongings or retrieve personal items. Archaeologists speculate that after the Ming army captured Dadu, they quickly built

a new northern city wall within the old capital to guard against enemy retaliation. This rapid construction resulted in the collapse and burial of many residential buildings. As a result, numerous Yuan Dynasty dwellings, including this courtyard, were buried under rammed earth.

Such “forced termination” residential sites are not uncommon in Dadu's archaeological record. The Houtaoyuan Ruins, located near Houyingfang, fall into the same category. Although less well-preserved than Houyingfang, the site still yielded a significant

number of household items and artworks. One particularly striking find is a vase from the Jun kiln, notable for its twin handles and openwork base. Its vivid glaze, blending blue and purple tones, exemplifies the celebrated “Jun ware with red glaze” and is regarded as an exceptional artefact. Now housed in the Capital Museum of China, it is classified as a first-class national cultural relic.

Furthermore, archaeologists have unearthed a range of residential remains reflecting the architectural styles of different social classes. In addition to large compounds like Houyingfang, they found medium-sized courtyards, as well as compact, densely packed residences made up of rows of single rooms—some measuring less than eight square metres. Though not luxurious, these homes reveal the resourcefulness of the era's residents. They offered protection from the elements, maximised natural light in winter and ensured good ventilation and coolness in summer. Many featured a front yard with trees, promoting warm and neighbourly interactions.

According to the *Archaeological Report on Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty (1964–1974)*, “it is believed that the architectural forms of today's hutongs and quadrangle courtyards in Beijing's inner city follow the style of residential courtyards in Yuan Dynasty Dadu.”

The report also states that “the street layout of Dadu, which originated over 700 years ago, has persisted to this day, demonstrating the rationality of its design. It continues to meet the traffic requirements of a modern city and represents a genuinely valuable legacy in Chinese urban planning, forming the foundation of the cultural heritage embodied by Beijing's hutongs.”

Although Dadu served as the capital for only a century, its urban planning principles, street and alley layouts, and residential culture have endured, shaping the city's development for generations. The reconstruction of Beijing during the Ming and Qing dynasties did not erase Dadu's foundational framework. The charm of Beijing (Beijing) during the Republic of China period (1912–1949) still echoed Dadu's straight streets and alleys, while today's hutongs and quadrangle courtyards continue the architectural style established in 1267—an enduring legacy.

Once buried beneath layers of yellow earth, Dadu has been rediscovered through a newly published research report. Once sealed under the foundation of later city walls, it has now been revealed through archaeological findings. History can be rediscovered; it simply awaits time and the enduring efforts of people to resume a dialogue with it.



► Porcelain flask from the Cizhou Kiln of the Yuan Dynasty

▲ Porcelain jar with lotus-shaped lid and brown floral design from the Cizhou Kiln



▼ A section of stone wall at the Yuan Capital Earthen Wall Relics Park



Tips

A National Treasure: Restored from 48 Porcelain Shards

On an early October morning in 1970, archaeologists Yu Jie (1928–1992) and Huang Xiuchun hurried along Old Drum Tower Street in Beijing, heading to a construction site. The day before, a worker had reported unearthing over 10 pieces of blue and white porcelain during excavation. When they arrived, the ground was strewn with porcelain shards. After carefully piecing together 48 fragments, they restored a porcelain vessel of epoch-making significance in Chinese history: a blue and white phoenix-headed flask from the Yuan Dynasty, produced at the Jingdezhen Kiln.

This artefact is now housed at the Capital Museum of China. Its spout features a raised phoenix head, while the curling tail of the phoenix forms the handle. The phoenix's body is painted on the upper half of the round flask, with its wings extending gracefully down the sides. The lower portion is adorned with blooming peonies, depicting a phoenix soaring among flowers. This exquisite composition reflects a blend of diverse manufacturing techniques: the spout was moulded, the handle shaped by hand and the body created through carving and inlaying.

Before its discovery, no definitively identified surviving examples of Yuan blue and white porcelain had been found in China. As such, this artefact from the Jingdezhen Kiln, along with other Yuan Dynasty blue and white porcelain pieces unearthed at the same time, holds groundbreaking significance in the study of Chinese porcelain history.

An Amazing Underground Palace

Text by Zhang Yan Photos by Zhang Xin, Pang Meiyun

In Changping District, Beijing, there is a stately solitude surrounded by landscape, the Ming Tombs, the destination of thirteen emperors of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Against Tianshou Mountain and facing the offshoot of Yanshan Mountains, the vast imperial tomb area not only witnessed a dynasty's ups and downs, but also hid the secrets and glories of the imperial family over the centuries. For hundreds of years, the "otherworld Forbidden City-like" tomb complex co-slept with the earth silently, until a world-shaking archaeological excavation broke the slumbering silence. In 1957, as the Dingling Tomb's Underground Palace was opened for the first time, three coffins of the emperor and his empresses, together with thousands of valuable cultural relics, re-unveiled the Ming Dynasty to the public. Today, by simply stepping into the Dingling Tomb, visitors can enter the reunion across time and space, where there are an imperial crown woven with gold filigree, the harem affection embroidered in the motifs of 100 boys, and the loneliness and dignity of empresses sealed quietly in the underground palace. All the imagination started from the moment when the imperial tomb was discovered after sleeping for over 400 years.

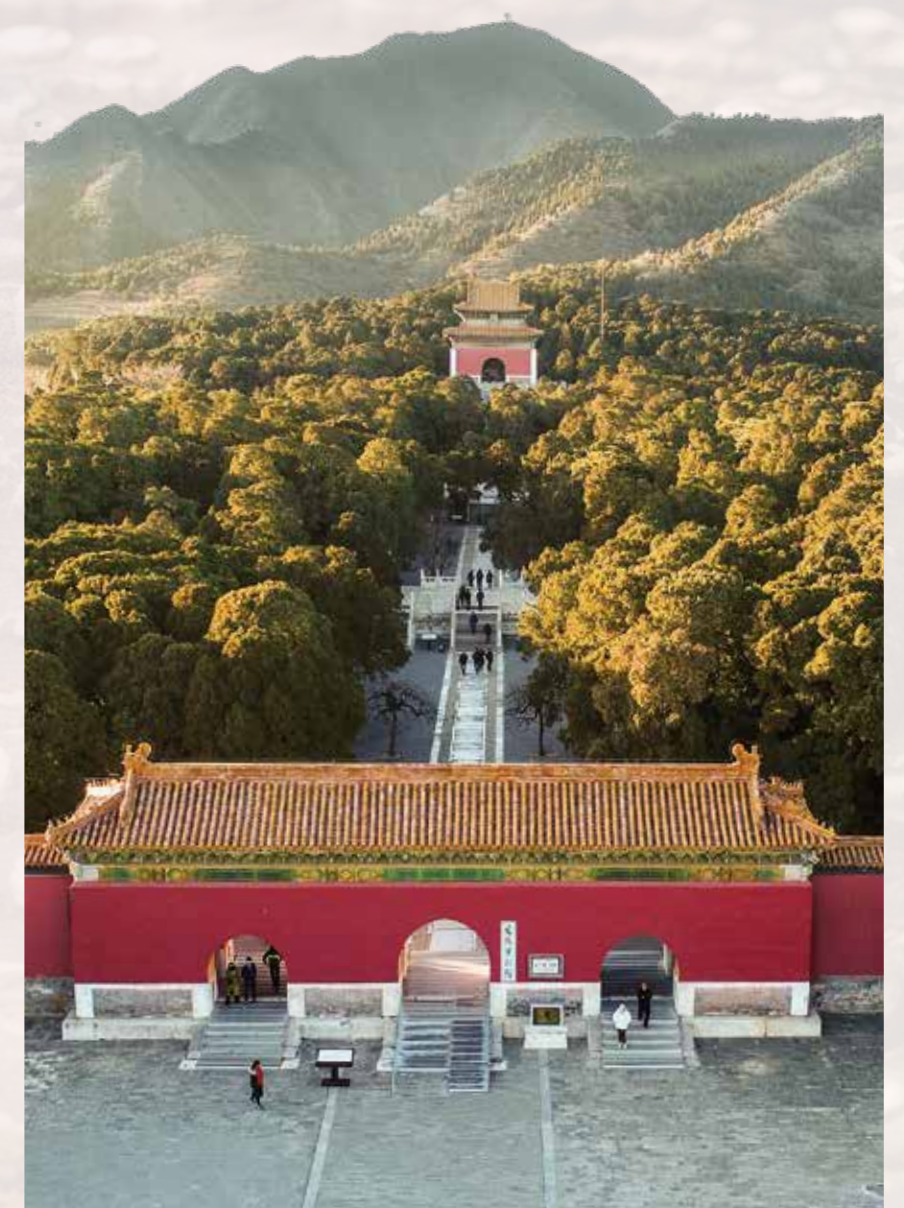


Imperial Burial Place: Excavation Unveiled the Story

The Ming Tombs at the northern foot of Tianshou Mountain, Changping District, Beijing, is the place of eternal rest of thirteen Ming emperors. The tomb complex is nestled in the landscape, demonstrating in-depth harmony between humankind and nature from siting to construction. Over the centuries, the bodies of emperors have long since been blended with the universe, into the woods, winds and clouds, into the landscape surrounding the imperial tomb complex. Ling'en Halls, ramp walkways on the square castles, rows of imperial stone steps, all manifest the majesty of the Ming Dynasty. As famous urban planner Edmund Bacon (1910–2005) said, "The entire valley is devoted to commemorating the deceased monarchs, what magnificent momentum."

In the afterglow of the dynasty, the Dingling Tomb undoubtedly occupies a special status. It is not only the first, but also the only imperial tomb officially excavated by the state and recorded in detail so far. What's more, the tomb's occupant, Emperor Wanli (reign: 1573–1620) and the historical background of the era he reigned in make it a critical sample of studies on the Ming Dynasty and even the peak of feudal society, the imperial court life.

Emperor Wanli reigned for 48 years, the longest during the Ming Dynasty. Despite his controversial life, it's acknowledged that since the reform assisted by Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582), a powerful minister earlier in the reign, national strength rose rapidly, once creating a reviving pattern. So to speak, Emperor Wanli's reign was the heyday of national strength during the Ming Dynasty. At that time, national finance was abundant and people lived and worked in peace and contentment. Such a stable and affluent social pattern not only brought industrial and commercial



▲ Dingling Tomb

prosperity, but also brought aesthetic levels, artistic tastes, the development of handicraft and manufacture industries to their peak. The artefacts from that era are exquisite, whose combination of art and technique can be called representative of imperial court craftsmanship, being both imposing and delicate. Such ultimate craft aesthetics were deeply imprinted on each burial relic in the Dingling Tomb. The imperial tomb is the most concentrated and authentic "historical archive" of this heyday, embodying the gorgeous style and cultural climate unique to the late Ming Dynasty.

That's why archaeologists cast their

gaze here in the 1950s. In 1956, Guo Moruo (1892–1978), Wu Han (1909–1969) and other scholars formed an archaeological team, preparing to start the scientific excavation of the Ming imperial tomb complex. That marked the first imperial tomb's excavation led by the government in Chinese archaeological history. After long-term precise surveys and structural analyses, team leader Zhao Qichang (1926–2010) finally found in the north side of Baocheng (or Treasure City, rounded walls encircling the burial mound) of the Dingling Tomb that several bricks subsided from the rampart over three metres (m) above the

ground, which exposed a round hole whose diameter was around 0.5 m. After excavating inwards for a while, a stone slab built into the rampart appeared, which was inscribed Tunnel Gate.

The excavation from Tunnel Gate to the Dingling Tomb's Underground Palace was full of twists and turns. To ensure safety in the tomb, the excavation work of trench exploration advanced with extreme caution. Archaeologists progressed and dug laboriously in the dim and narrow paths, as if making an underground pilgrimage. Finally, on May 17, 1957, the historic moment came. The archaeological team eventually excavated the outer wall of the tomb, Jin'gang Wall or Diamond Wall (a kind of reinforced brick wall). The most exciting news was, in the centre of the Diamond Wall, there was a brick trapezoid archway, which was very likely the entrance of the Underground Palace. At that time, it astonished the entire archaeology world.

The archaeological team somewhat

dreaded the following archaeological work. The most widespread tales in the unofficial history are on burial devices. Before this, none had truly entered ancient imperial tombs, thus what danger lay ahead remained unknown. Wearing gas masks, with flashlights in hand, and ropes around their waists, they carefully dismantled the Diamond Wall, and opened the once closed entrance of the Dingling Tomb's Underground Palace behind the brick wall. Much to their relief, their worries seemed unnecessary, and there was no scary device or concealed weapon in the tomb.

With the entrance opened, the archaeological team entered the front hall of the Dingling Tomb's Underground Palace. A total of 20 m ahead, another gate stopped them from entering the central hall. With the experience from opening the first gate, opening the second gate was much easier. Illuminated by gas lamps, the



► Gold hairpin decorated with gemstones

◀ Belt ornament decorated with gemstones

▼ Dingling Tomb's Underground Palace



archaeologists found that the central hall they were in was flanked by side halls and joined by a rear hall. Their exploration in side halls did not result in much gain. So the team concentrated on the gate to the rear hall. Several young members tried to open the gate first, but were too nervous to insert the L-shaped lever key with trembling hands, until senior archaeological expert Bai Wanyu (1901–1971) took the key and opened the gate successfully.

As the rear hall opened, the three dust-laden vermilion coffins of Emperor Wanli and two empresses entered their view, and a slumbering imperial family reappeared before the public. Meanwhile, thousands of gold, silver and jade objects, fabrics, burial objects and inscribed volumes came into view. These cultural relics are the most confidential and truest embodiment of a dynasty. The archaeologists cleaned, numbered, registered and preserved them one by one, and recorded and sorted out the entire excavation work of the Dingling Tomb meticulously, which resulted in a particularly valuable, professional archaeological report. The excavation not only enriched the physical materials on ancient China's imperial tombs, but also initiated imperial tomb excavation in modern Chinese archaeology, hence becoming a paragon in the archaeology world.

The significance of excavating the Dingling Tomb lies in not only unearthing the underground treasures, but also proving the material civilisation and aesthetic system of the heyday of the Ming Dynasty. The costumes and wares with complex emblazonry and exquisite crafts give people today a glance into the dynasty's grace and creativity in its heyday, and serve as firsthand information for the studies on Ming court regimes, etiquette, crafts and aesthetics. More than 400 years since the Dingling Tomb was sealed, it was not consigned to oblivion, but shed light on history once more with a stunning look.



▲ Dragon-head-like drainage spouts adorn the Dingling Tomb's Ling'en Hall

Overground and Underground, Ingenuity in Emblazonry

Nowadays, countless tourists visit the Ming Tombs from around the country and the world, immersed in the echo of history here. The grand scale of the imperial tomb complex's architecture gives a sense of fantasy, as if the Ming Tombs were a Forbidden City lying in the wild from another time and space. These palace-style tombs were built centuries ago by craftspeople at the foot of the mountain, away from the urban hustle and bustle, modelled after the imperial palaces. Maybe in another time-space dimension, Ming emperors were still in their underground palaces, leading the same noble life as before.

Though the Ming Tombs are all imperial tombs, each has a different look. The Changling Tomb of Emperor Yongle (Zhu Di, reign: 1402–1424) is famous for its Ling'en Hall with a *Phoebe zhennan* structure. The Zhaoling Tomb of Emperor Longqing (Zhu Zaiji, reign: 1567–1572) took the lead in building Crescent City, and formed a complete "Dumb

Courtyard" institution, which the later imperial tombs could continue to use. The Siling Tomb of Emperor Chongzhen (Zhu Youjian, reign: 1627–1644) has a different scale from other tombs, due to the special historical background. Among the thirteen similar but different tombs, since the state was rich during Emperor Wanli's reign, the Dingling

▼ Jinsi Yishan Guan



Tomb has an especially luxurious scale. The construction took six years, from 1584, the 12th year of Emperor Wanli's reign, to 1590, at a cost of over 8 million taels of silver. It covers an area of around 180,000 square metres, with a spacious courtyard in the front, lofty Baocheng behind, and an imposing white marble bridge across the main entrance. In the tomb area, there are over 300 buildings in total, including ancestral halls and slaughter pavilions. The entire tomb was built by the mountain, in the layout of "square front and round rear," with vigorous momentum.

The above ground relics of the Dingling Tomb have two main features. First, the grand scale of architecture. It should have been modelled after the Zhaoling Tomb of Emperor Longqing, father of Emperor Wanli, but was actually modelled after the Yongling Tomb of Emperor Jiajing (Zhu Houcong, reign: 1521–1567), grandfather of Emperor Wanli. Some buildings were even more exquisite than those of Yongling. Second, the superior building materials, including not only *Phoebe zhennan*, white marble and piebald stones, but also rampart bricks made specially for the Dingling Tomb, Shougong bricks



▲ Coronet adorned with six dragons and three phoenixes

and gold bricks in the Underground Palace. The broad space and luxurious construction impress upon people the lingering charm of Wanli's reign.

Meanwhile, the burial objects in the Underground Palace further extend the "Forbidden City" from overground to deep underground. During the excavation process of the Underground Palace, a moderate-sized round box to the right of Emperor Wanli's head did not

attract archaeologists' attention at first. When the box was opened, it turned out to be a gold crown, the well-known Jinsi Yishan Guan or Golden Filigree Winged Goodness Crown. Though it was only part of the emperor's everyday attire, the superb and rare headpiece amazed people. The entire crown was woven with gold filigree as thin as 0.2 millimetre in diameter. On the crown's arched ridge are two gold filigree "rabbit ears," between which a sun-like bright pear is suspended and two golden dragons climb across, as if chasing the sun through clouds and raising their heads to play with the pearl. The golden dragons' heads, bodies, claws and dorsal fins were all crafted separately before being welded and assembled as a whole. The dragon scales on the crown required 8,400 pieces. Besides being made wholly of gold filigree, the preciousness of this gold crown also lies in the overall superb craftsmanship, including wire drawing, weaving and welding. To date, it's the only gold crown unearthed in China, and regarded as a national treasure.

The empress' phoenix coronets are another epitome of court craftsmanship. Empress Xiaojing (Lady Wang, 1565–1611) buried in the Dingling Tomb's Underground Palace, had a humble

origin, and never received fair treatment from Emperor Wanli, whether alive or dead. Emperor Tianqi (Zhu Youjiao, reign: 1620–1627) pitied the neglect of his grandmother, honoured her as empress and relocated her tomb to the Dingling Tomb. Additionally, he customised two exclusive empress phoenix coronets for her, between which the Twelve Dragons and Nine Phoenixes Coronet is more delicate. On the phoenix coronet, dragons and phoenixes are in various shapes, some head up and soaring, some stand on all fours, some wander through clouds and still some dance in the sky. Beneath these dragons are five emerald phoenixes made with crafted kingfishers. Beneath the dragons and phoenixes are beaded flowers, with gems as stamens and pearls as petals. The gold rim of the coronet is also encircled by beaded flowers, to form a resplendent jewellery ornament. The 121 gems and 3,588 pearls in this coronet embody the descendants' filial piety and comfort for Empress Xiaojing. Nonetheless, throughout her life, she lived on tenterhooks in the palace, and never saw or wore her own phoenix

coronet. The gorgeous phoenix coronets eventually became a gift to "compensate her dignity."

Among the four phoenix coronets unearthed in the Dingling Tomb, the most ornate one is the Six Dragons and Three Phoenixes Coronet, a burial object of Empress Xiaoduan (1564–1620). Six dragons woven with gold filigree are situated magnificently on the coronet, heading up, ready to soar. Below them are three phoenixes adorned with kingfisher feathers, wings spread, ready for flight. The dragons and phoenixes all hold strings of gems in their mouths, pass and play through peonies decorated with pearls and gems of all sizes, kingfisher feathers crafted cloud and flower motifs. The six wings behind the coronet spread out on both sides, like colourful spreading phoenix tails. This coronet is bedecked with jewels, with 128 rubies and sapphires altogether and more than 5,400 pearls, weighing 2,905 grammes. According to *Dynastic Statutes of the Ming: Empress Regalia*, in both the third year of Emperor Hongwu's reign (1368–1398) and the third year of Emperor Yongle's reign,

the regulations were the Nine Dragons and Four Phoenixes Coronet. Yet the phoenix coronets unearthed from the Dingling Tomb had long surpassed the former regulations in both quantity and ornamentation, declaring the evolution of etiquette systems in the later Ming Dynasty. Each crown, coronet and finery excavated in the Dingling Tomb's Underground Palace are valuable materials for studying the imperial regulations during the Ming Dynasty.

In September 1958, the burial objects from the Dingling Tomb were moved from the Underground Palace, and debuted to the public at Shenwu Gate in the Forbidden City. Just a year later, the Dingling Tomb Museum was established. The silk fabrics, gold wares and jade ornaments hidden for hundreds of years underground now glitter under light, arousing an infinite reverie for the prosperous dynasty. Across time and space, the cultural relics open another gate of history, through which the later generations can glimpse the figures of emperors and concerns of empresses from afar.

▼ A crouching stone beast



▼ Siling Tomb



Exploring the Heritage of a Celebrated Garden

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin

A clear, rippling lake reflects drifting clouds; lush pines frame elegant pavilions; undulating hills cradle murmuring brooks; ancient, towering trees line the lakeshores and wooded slopes. Birds sing, flowers bloom and scattered pavilions, terraces and arched stone bridges with winding balustrades grace the landscape. This is Yuanmingyuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness), also known as the Garden of Gardens or the Old Summer Palace.

In 1860, Yuanmingyuan suffered an unprecedented catastrophe, as its many halls, pavilions and terraces were consumed by fire.

Fortunately, archaeological discoveries still enable people today to explore its history. After years of clearing, repair, excavation, preservation and restoration, the park—built upon the remnants of its former splendour—has taken on a unique landscape. It now fuses historical traces with the renewed vitality of a restored garden, becoming an important symbol of intellectual property (IP) assets tied to Beijing's urban identity.



▲ Gilded bronze elephant head

If an Artefact Could Talk

Every archaeological artefact unearthed at Yuanmingyuan carries a story, each preserving a fragment of its rich history.

In April 2014, during excavations at the Grand Palace Gate site in Yuanmingyuan, archaeologists unearthed a hardened clump of mud buried in the silt of the Imperial River. Its unusual weight raised suspicions that it might encase a bronze vessel.

After 15 days of meticulous cleaning, the team's excitement mounted as they realised the find was a rare and precious gilded bronze elephant head, dating back to the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1735–1796) of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

In traditional Chinese culture, the elephant symbolises good fortune and peace. The Chinese character *xiang* (meaning “elephant”) sounds similar to another Chinese character for “auspiciousness,” giving the animal a positive connotation in ancient times. In Buddhism, the elephant is also the mount of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra and represents the highest form of merit. As a result, elephants were commonly used as decorative motifs in imperial halls. The gilded elephant head that was unearthed showcases the exceptional casting and gilding techniques of the Qing Dynasty.

Gilding, an ancient craft, dates back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States

periods (770–221 BC). The technique involves mixing gold with mercury to form a gold-mercury amalgam, which is then applied to the surface of a bronze object. The piece is heated, causing the mercury to evaporate and leaving behind a layer of gold fused to the surface. Gilded bronze artefacts exhibit a brilliant golden sheen, enhancing the object's inherent wealth and grandeur. In addition, gilding helps prevent bronze from oxidising, which explains the remarkable preservation of many surviving gilded pieces.

Given that it was likely meant for display in a main hall, the discovery of the gilded bronze elephant head in the river raises questions. The answer may lie to the north. At the Grand Palace Gate, the main northern entrance to Yuanmingyuan, a golden water bridge arches over a crescent-shaped river. The elephant head was found buried in the silt beneath this bridge. In October 1860, after the Anglo-French Allied Forces invaded Yuanmingyuan, they established their headquarters in the Hall of Rectitude and Honour. Looted treasures, possibly including the gilded elephant, were collected there. Archaeologists believe that while the statue was being removed, its head may have struck the railing of the Golden Water Bridge and fallen into the river. There it remained buried in the silt for over 160 years until its recovery, when archaeologists carefully removed the accumulated silt and dirt, restoring its original lustre.



▲ Changxin Palace lantern

Thirty-nine Artefacts Restored from a total of 100,000 Shards

From its construction in 1707 to its destruction by fire in 1860, Yuanmingyuan, an imperial garden complex, stood for more than 150 years. Over several generations, Qing emperors dedicated immense financial and material resources to creating this peerless garden, which came to represent the height of traditional Chinese garden art. It earned titles such as the “Garden of Gardens” and the “model of all garden-making arts.” The complex consisted of Yuanmingyuan, Changchun Garden (Garden of Eternal Spring) and Qichun Garden (Garden of Elegant Spring), collectively known as the “Three Gardens of Yuanming.” Spanning more than 5,200



▲ Yellow-glazed bowl with green dragon motifs from the reign of Emperor Kangxi

▲ Blue and white tile with eight traditional Chinese motifs

▼ Famille rose tile

mu (approximately 350 hectares [ha]), the complex was five times the size of the Forbidden City and included over 100 scenic spots and over 240 ha of land.

This vast former imperial garden, with its countless unearthed cultural relics, offers both an irreplaceable historical trove and a daunting task for archaeologists and restorers. Two figures illustrate the immense scale and difficulty of restoring cultural relics at Yuanmingyuan. The first is 100,000—the number of porcelain shards recovered from the site during excavations and repair efforts. The second is 39—the number of complete porcelain pieces successfully reassembled from those fragments. This striking contrast highlights the painstaking journey involved in restoring Yuanmingyuan's cultural legacy.

The most challenging restoration effort centred on a yellow-glazed bowl adorned with green dragon motifs, dating back to the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722) of the Qing Dynasty, unearthed at the Quyuanyang site. The bowl had suffered severe damage, and before restoration could begin, experts had to identify its fragments from among 479 pieces. The smallest shard was no larger than a fingernail. Based on historical records, restorers determined that the original design featured two green dragons playing with a flaming pearl. They then painstakingly

sorted and pieced together the fragments of the dragons' bodies, heads and the pearl. After a careful process of cleaning, bonding, filling and polishing, the delicate porcelain bowl, produced in a dedicated kiln for the government and boasting a distinctive design, was finally returned to its former splendour.

A fragment of a famille rose tile provides insight into how the residents of Yuanmingyuan kept warm. Unearthed at the Ruyuan site in 2017, the tile was badly damaged when discovered, its surface blackened in places by smoke. After careful restoration, its vibrant colours and intricate designs were revealed, captivating visitors with a striking glimpse of its former beauty. Particularly fascinating was the tile's double-layered structure, featuring a hollow centre and lateral round holes. The cavity was filled with sand when found. Archaeologists believe the tile likely served a heating function, indicating that it once formed part of a heated chamber where the emperor would rest.

A blue-and-white tile adorned with eight-treasure motifs, unearthed at Siyong Studio in Changchun Garden, served the same heating function as the famille rose tile. Such artefacts offer a vivid glimpse into the lavish interior decor of Yuanmingyuan at its peak, where even the flooring was executed with meticulous detail. Buildings were not

only paved with golden-coloured bricks but also featured porcelain floor tiles in various glazes. The production of these porcelain tiles demanded greater skill, expense and value than that of the golden bricks themselves.

In 2017, during excavations at the Jingxiang Pond site in Ruyuan, archaeologists made a remarkable discovery: 11 black seeds were found at the bottom of the pond. Later analysis identified them as lotus seeds that had remained buried underground for over a century.

Ruyuan, where the ancient lotus seeds were discovered, was a celebrated garden within Yuanmingyuan. Commissioned by Emperor Qianlong, it was modelled on Zhan Garden in present-day Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. Praised as “the No. 1 Garden in Jinling (Nanjing),” Zhan Garden is one of the four most famous gardens from Jiangnan or the regions south of the Yangtze River. Deeply impressed during his southern tours, Emperor Qianlong visited it often. In 1767, the 32nd year of his reign, he ordered a replica to be built in the southeast corner of Beijing's Changchun Garden, naming it Ruyuan—meaning “like Zhan Garden.” The signature lotus pond landscape typical of gardens from Jiangnan was also incorporated into Ruyuan's Jingxiang Pond, making it a prominent scenic feature of the garden.

During Yuanmingyuan's catastrophic destruction, the lotus pond in Ruyuan was also damaged. As a result, some lotus seeds became buried beneath the debris, entering a long period of dormancy.

In 2019, after careful cultivation by researchers, the ancient lotus seeds, dormant for over a century, were brought back to life, restored at the lotus planting centre in Yuanmingyuan. A second generation of these ancient lotuses, cultivated in 2020, has since bloomed, enchanting countless visitors with its beauty. The flowering of these lotuses is not only a botanical wonder but also a meaningful link between history and the present.

The Secret of the Xiyanglou Area

Although it accounts for only 2 percent of Yuanmingyuan's total area, one distinctive section of the former imperial garden has captured the public's imagination. While not included among the famed Forty Scenic Views of Yuanmingyuan, its image remains deeply resonant and is now arguably the garden's most iconic symbol.

▼ Ruins of the Dashuifa Site in Yuanmingyuan



▲ “One of The Forty Scenic Views of Yuanmingyuan—Jiuzhou Qingyan”

This is the Xiyanglou Area, or the Western Mansions—the first large-scale European-style architectural complex ever built within a traditional Chinese imperial garden.

Situated in the northern section of Changchun Garden, the Xiyanglou Area is arranged in a “T” shape. Construction began in 1747, the 12th year of Qianlong's reign, and gradually advanced from west to east. By 1760, the 25th year of his reign, most of the area had been completed, comprising more than 10 architectural groups, including Xieqiqu, Haiyantang, Dashuifa and Yuanyingguan.

The most striking feature of the entire

area was the water clock fountain in front of Haiyantang, which displayed the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. These bronze zodiac heads would spray water in sequence, following the traditional Chinese *shichen* system (dividing the day into 12 two-hour periods), with all spouting together at noon in a dramatic display. Today, a stone sculpture of a shell and waves stands in front of the original site of Haiyantang. These timeworn ruins offer a glimpse into the former splendour of the Xiyanglou Area.

To commemorate the completion of this architectural marvel blending Chinese and

Western styles, Emperor Qianlong devised a distinctive idea: he carefully commissioned a set of refined copperplate etchings, known as the famous “Twenty Scenic Views of the Xiyanglou Area in Yuanmingyuan,” celebrated both in China and abroad. Alongside the “Forty Scenic Views of Yuanmingyuan,” these etchings serve as key visual records from Qing Dynasty court paintings, preserving the architecture and garden design of Yuanmingyuan. Together, they form an invaluable resource for studying the site’s heritage, architecture and the cultural exchange between China and the West.

Today, the Xiyanglou Area appears in greyish-white tones. However, archaeological findings reveal that it was once richly coloured. Excavations uncovered glazed elements in six distinct hues: yellow, green, yellow-green, cyan, blue and purple. The widest range of colours was found in the glazed components from Xieqiqu. These tiles were used not only for roofing but also for wall decoration, turning the Xiyanglou Area into a vibrant visual spectacle.

These vibrant glazed components are now on display in the Yuanmingyuan Exhibition Hall, located within the Xiyanglou Area, offering visitors a

glimpse into the former splendour and magnificence of Yuanmingyuan.

Telling the Stories of Yuanmingyuan

On December 1, 2020, the highly anticipated Ceremony for the Handover of the Bronze Horse Head Statue to Yuanmingyuan was held at Zhengjue Temple within Yuanmingyuan. After spending more than a century abroad, the bronze horse head became the first major cultural relic to be officially repatriated to the site.

The return of cultural relics to Yuanmingyuan continued. On October 13, 2023, seven white marble pillars from the Xiyanglou Area—lost overseas for over a century—were brought back to China and unveiled at Zhengjue Temple in Yuanmingyuan. Following the repatriation of the bronze horse head statue, these pillars mark another significant group of relics restored to their original home.

The return of the bronze horse head statue and the stone pillars from the Xiyanglou Area, transforming them from

imperial possessions into cultural heritage shared by the people, stands as a symbol of successful cultural repatriation in the new era. It also offers an opportunity to tell the stories of Yuanmingyuan and foster a sense of national unity. In addition, with the aid of modern technologies such as remote sensing



▲ Yuanmingyuan Museum

mapping, 3D laser scanning and digital restoration, the original appearance of the “Garden of Gardens” is gradually coming back into view.

At the Yuanmingyuan Museum, located within the grounds of Zhengjue Temple, artefacts recovered from the ruins are on display, offering visitors a clearer glimpse into both the former splendour and later decline of the imperial garden. The museum features three main exhibitions: “Inheritance and Guarding: Exhibition of Cultural Relics Protection Achievements of Yuanmingyuan,” “A Century of Dream Realisation: Exhibition of the Return of the Bronze Horse Head Statue of Yuanmingyuan” and “Exhibition of the Return of the Stone Pillars of Yuanmingyuan.” These exhibitions showcase progress in restoration work, archaeological excavations, site preservation, artefact repair, academic research and the recovery of lost treasures. The museum also enhances visitor engagement through interactive features, appealing to a wider range of visitors.

Today, Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park, steeped in national memory and historical significance, uses digital virtual technology to offer visitors a vivid sensory experience and deeper cultural engagement through the

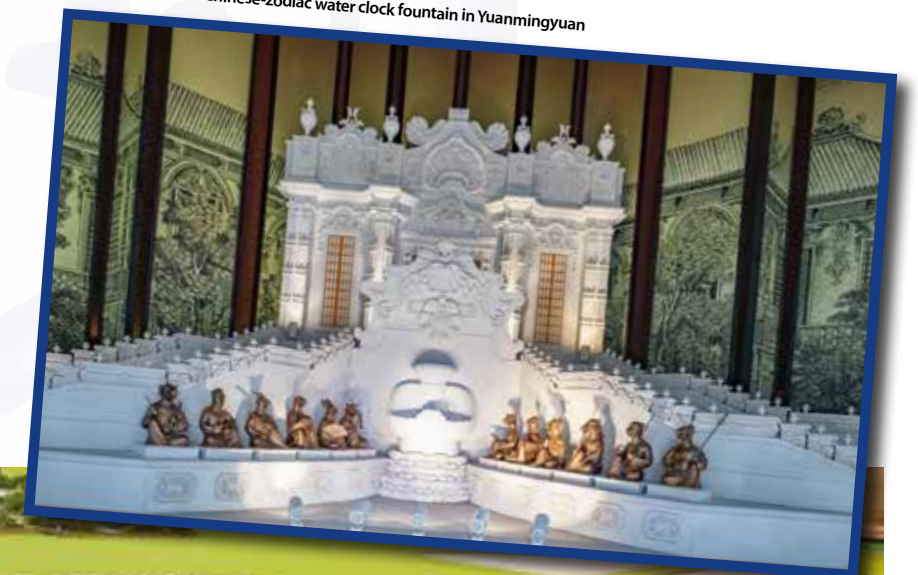
fusion of culture and technology. Visitors can wear VR headsets and embark on a virtual journey, “Dreaming Back to Yuanmingyuan,” exploring the former imperial garden as if they were truly there. Alternatively, they can board a “time-travel spaceship” to enter a virtual world and enjoy a panoramic view of Yuanmingyuan’s grandeur at its peak. This immersive experience offers insight into the site’s past and present.

Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park, one of the first national archaeological parks in China, has been strengthened by years of archaeological work, establishing a strong foundation for the site’s scientific preservation. Evolving from an imperial garden to a

deserted landscape and finally into a public heritage park, the ruins now stand as a rich tapestry woven from traditional culture and modern civilisation.

Today, Yuanmingyuan not only holds irreplaceable national memories and historical-cultural value, but also forms a vital part of Beijing’s distinctive city IP asset. It reflects the commitment to sharing the benefits of cultural relic preservation with the broader public, safeguarding the heritage of the ancient capital, preserving historical memory and contributing to Beijing’s role as a national cultural centre, thereby carrying forward the essence of traditional Chinese culture in the new era.

▼ Model of the 12-Chinese-zodiac water clock fountain in Yuanmingyuan



▼ Panoramic model of Yuanmingyuan at its height

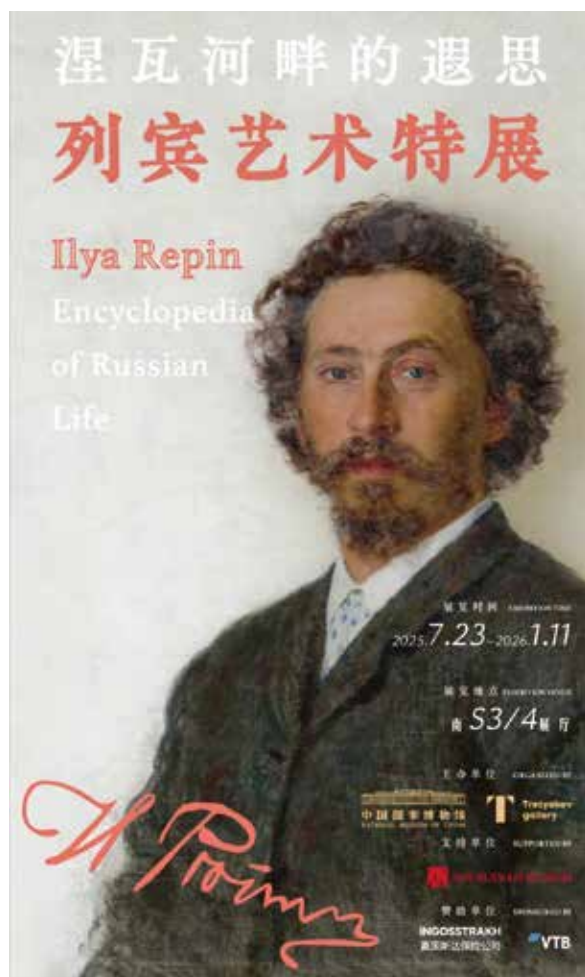


涅瓦河畔的遐思——列宾艺术特展

值此“中俄文化年”之际，由中国国家博物馆与俄罗斯特列季亚科夫画廊共同主办、俄罗斯国家博物馆支持的“涅瓦河畔的遐思——列宾艺术特展”，2025年7月23日—2026年1月11日在中国国家博物馆南3、南4展厅对公众展出，这是首次在中国大规模呈现列宾艺术全貌。本次展览是“中俄文化年”的重点项目，通过“河畔船歌：艺术之旅的开始”“广袤大地：现实主义的求索”“时代史诗：民族灵魂的光辉”“暮色沉思：晚年的自由之境”四大篇章，以92件油画和素描作品，系统梳理这位巡回展览画派巨匠的艺术生涯，全面揭示其创作中“理性与激情共生”的独特美学逻辑，真实呈现其笔下一个民族的觉醒与一个时代的温度，为观众打开一扇理解俄罗斯文化艺术的窗口。

伊利亚·叶菲莫维奇·列宾（Илья Ефимович Репин）（1844—1930）出生于丘古耶夫，早年在家乡学习圣像画技艺，后考入圣彼得堡皇家美术学院深造。1873年，他完成了备受赞誉的《伏尔加河上的纤夫》，一举奠定其在画坛的地位。1873—1876年，他获得公费留学三年，先后游历意大利和法国，深入研究欧洲古典及近代美术。1878年，他正式加入巡回艺术展览协会。

纵观列宾的艺术生涯，他一生创作了大量的历史画、风俗画和肖像画，其作品深度挖掘并生动展现了俄罗斯民族独特的精神力量，堪称俄罗斯艺术史上的一座丰碑。他是19世纪俄国杰出的批判现实主义画家和巡回展览画派重要代表人物。他的艺术成就不仅深刻影响了俄罗斯艺术的发展，还在世界范围内引起震动，特别是对20世纪以来的中国现实主义艺术发展产生了重要影响。



The Exhibition Ilya Repin: Encyclopedia of Russian Life

To celebrate the China-Russia Years of Culture, the exhibition Ilya Repin: Encyclopedia of Russian Life—a collaboration between the National Museum of China and the Tretyakov Gallery, with support from The Russian Museum—opened to the public on July 23, 2025, in the South 3 and South 4 Exhibition Halls of the National Museum of China. Running until January 11, 2026, it marks the first time Repin's art has been presented in China on such a grand scale. As a highlight of the China-Russia Years of Culture, the exhibition is arranged into four sections: "Riverbank Song: The Beginning of an Artistic Journey," "Vast Land: The Quest for Realism," "Epic of the Times: The Radiance of the National Soul" and "Contemplation at Dusk: The Realm of Freedom in the Later Years." Together, these systematically chart the artistic path of the Peredvizhniki (a group of Russian realist artists, also known as The Wanderers) master Ilya Yefimovich Repin (1844—1930). On display are 92 representative works, including both oil paintings and sketches.

Repin was born in Chuguyev, and began his artistic training in his hometown, studying icon painting before enrolling at the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg for advanced studies. In 1873, he completed the widely acclaimed "Barge Haulers on the Volga," which instantly secured his place in the art world. The idea for the painting arose from a journey he took with a classmate on the Neva River. The shimmering waves reflected not only Repin's dedication to his craft but also the spark of his boundless creative passion. From 1873 to 1876, he received a three-year government scholarship to study abroad, travelling to Italy and France to immerse himself in European classical and modern art. In 1878, he officially became a member of the Society of Wandering Exhibitions.

Throughout his career, Repin created an extensive body of historical paintings, genre scenes and portraits. His works delved deeply into, and vividly conveyed, the unique spiritual strength of the Russian people, securing his place as a landmark figure in Russian art history. As a prominent critical realist of 19th-century Russia and a leading representative of the Peredvizhniki, Repin profoundly shaped the course of Russian art with his achievements, resonating worldwide and notably influencing the development of realistic art in China since the 20th century.