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Bringing Surprises Home**

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Contents



4

Beijing Gifts:
Bringing Surprises Home

8

Furniture and Ornaments
in Elegant Rooms

16

Treasured Gifts from
a Scholar's Studio in
Beijing

24

The City's Timeless
Fashion

32

Playthings: Cultivating
Peace and Refinement

40

Refined Ancient
Charms Enhance
Modern Life

48

Culture Express

Beijing Gifts: Bringing Surprises Home

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin



“北京礼物”京味文化主题店

京——
京味拾光的烟火气
——独一无二的“微胡同”

胡同

胡同

微胡同

京味

京味拾光

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·BEIJING TIME·

京味拾光

Tourists visiting Beijing should never miss the chance to pick up some authentic “Beijing Gifts.”

More than just a well-known name for tourist souvenirs, “Beijing Gifts” serves as a cultural emblem proudly carrying the city’s identity. As tokens of goodwill, they encapsulate the rich heritage of this ancient capital, steeped in thousands of years of history. Through these offerings, visitors from around the world can experience Beijing’s harmony between historical depth and modern vitality, as well as the many captivating stories it holds.



▲ Zoo Gifts Store in Beijing Fun, Qianmen

The most memorable souvenirs are those that tell a story. During the 22nd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting held in Beijing in November 2014, a cloisonné enamel vase titled "Peace across the Four Seas" was presented to the leaders and representatives of the participating economies. The design of this gift is imbued with meaning: its widest point, measuring 21 centimetres, symbolises the 21 APEC member economies. The body of the vase features flowing water motifs in relief, representing both the "Four Seas" and the "Pacific Ocean." Together, these elements convey a message of world peace and shared development. The piece beautifully exemplifies the masterful artistry of cloisonné craftsmanship, one of the "Beijing Eight Imperial Handicrafts."

The "Beijing Eight Imperial Handicrafts" stand as a testament to the city's exceptional craftsmanship and are an important symbol of the "Beijing Gifts." Once created exclusively for the imperial household, these exquisite works have since found their way into daily life, becoming distinctive souvenirs for visitors to take home.

Beijing's exquisite craftsmanship reflects both the splendour of its imperial past and the everyday life of its people today. From home furnishings and the "Four Treasures of the Study" to apparel and *wenwan* (literally "cultural playthings"), the "Beijing Gifts" embody precious forms of intangible heritage. They provide a distinctive way to experience the legacy of the ancient capital, preserving and carrying its

traditions forward through the generations.

Beijing's cultural elegance graces its residents' homes, transforming them from mere living spaces into reflections of artistic refinement. Classical furniture, porcelain, tea sets, writing brushes, inksticks, paper and inkstones, as well as calligraphy, paintings and fans adorn interiors that mirror Beijingers' cultivated taste. Liulichang Ancient Culture Street remains a premier destination for traditional Chinese treasures. Here, time-honoured brands such as Rong Bao Zhai, Cathay Bookshop, Yi De Ge and Dai Yue Xuan offer immersive cultural experiences. Foreign visitors can also try their hand at woodblock printing, seal engraving, dough sculpting and Peking Opera facial makeup.

The lifestyle of Beijingers is also reflected in their attire and adornments. From the graceful *qipao* (cheongsam) offered by Refosian (Ruifuxiang) to the traditional cloth shoes crafted by Neiliansheng, from the resplendent jewellery of Caishikou

▼ Yi De Ge aromatherapy candles



Department Store to the refined leather headwear produced by Sheng Xifu, the clothing and accessories of Beijingers are both practical essentials and expressions of "embodied cultural confidence." They beautifully demonstrate how tradition and contemporary style coexist in effortless harmony. Having a bespoke *qipao* or Tang suit made at Hongqiao Market or Silk Street Market offers an ideal opportunity for international visitors to feel truly immersed in the spirit of Beijing, from head to toe.

Beijingers possess a refined ability to incorporate artistic principles into everyday life. A snuff bottle painted on the inside, for example, can capture an astonishingly intricate world within its tiny confines.



▲ Collectible toys

▼ Model toys of old Beijing buses



▼ Creative gifts



Objects such as paired walnuts, strings of bracelets or small gourds are often turned in the hand day after day, gradually acquiring a gentle patina. This quiet process marks the passage of time while reflecting the collector's cultivated temperament.

The distinctive memories and refined charm of Beijing are now captured in a range of easily accessible "Beijing Gifts," ideal for keeping as mementos or presenting to others. Each item reflects the city's deep cultural heritage.

As one of the world's most renowned tourist destinations, Beijing launched its official souvenir brand, "Beijing Gifts," in 2011. Initially featuring three iconic products—Quanjude roast duck, Daoxiangcun pastries and Beijing preserved fruits—the brand has since flourished into a diverse collection. Today, it encompasses nearly 1,000 items, ranging from traditional handicrafts and local specialties to commemorative pieces and innovative cultural and technological products. The 2025 collection, which includes Ming Dynasty phoenix coronet fridge magnets, Peking Opera-inspired jewellery, Forbidden City auspicious beast-themed trendy toys and Central Axis wood lamps, further solidifies "Beijing Gifts" as a defining symbol of the city's cultural and tourism industry.

A "Beijing Gifts" cultural shop on

Yangmeizhu Xiejie, near Qianmen Street, offers bespoke creative products such as bus stop sign fridge magnets and enamel mugs, which have become favourites among both locals and visitors. Gift shops at the National Museum of China and the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing also feature popular souvenirs infused with traditional Chinese culture, particularly appealing to younger audiences. At the Beijing Ancient Architecture Museum, located within the Altar of the God of Agriculture, the launch of Longfu Temple caisson fridge magnets proved so popular that they were often soon sold out. More recently, the Capital Museum of China introduced the inventive "One Mistake for 3,000 Years" fridge magnet. Inspired by a pair of Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century–771 BC) bronze vessels on display at the museum, the design features a cartoon *Yu gui* bronze ware whose expression changes from displeasure to amusement when its lid is turned.

Every city has its own story, and Beijing's tale is beautifully encapsulated in its "Beijing Gifts." These are more than elegant items; they are tangible memories, refined works of craftsmanship and "Beijing stories" to treasure. To own one is to take with you a fragment of the capital's artistry and spirit, allowing Beijing's timeless charm to thrive on a wider global stage.

Furniture and Ornaments in Elegant Rooms

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi, Li Xiaoyin, He Rong

The everyday life of Beijingers exudes a quiet, refined elegance—sturdy, finely crafted hardwood furniture, exquisite Jingcai (literally “Beijing coloured”) porcelain, aromatic jasmine tea whose fragrance drifts through the air and delicate folding fans that stir gently in the breeze. These objects quietly adorn traditional, graceful interiors, cultivating a sense of quiet sophistication that embodies the enduring charm of the ancient capital.



Each Piece of Woodwork Exemplifies Refined Elegance

On Yongdingmen Outer Street stands a museum steeped in the fragrance of wood. This is the Long Shun Cheng Jingzuo Museum of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Evolving from an imperial court woodwork supplier to a participant in national projects, artefact restoration and heritage innovation, the museum preserves the “top secrets” of classical Chinese furniture. It embodies the refined aesthetic philosophy of Chinese living and the sublime elegance of traditional Beijing-style furnishings.

Next to the museum is a cultural venue dedicated to woodworking, the Long Shun Cheng Woodworking Studio. The space is divided into two sections: a display area and an experience zone. The display area presents an impressive range of wooden artefacts, including grand architectural models such as the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests at the Temple of Heaven, Tian'anmen Gate (the Gate of Heavenly Peace) and the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City. Visitors will also find miniature rosewood furniture, traditional Chinese rosewood interlocking puzzles, red sandalwood official boxes, scholar's stationery sets and modern China-chic creations such as rosewood bracelets, pendants, necklaces and combs. The experience zone offers weekly workshops, from beginner woodworking lessons to advanced classes in mortise-and-tenon joinery and wood carving, attracting enthusiasts from all walks of life eager to master traditional Chinese craftsmanship.

Beijing-style hardwood furniture traces its origins to the imperial court. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, supported by the patronage of emperors and the upper elite, palace furniture integrated the nation's finest craftsmanship, raising traditional Chinese furniture to an unprecedented artistic height. These creations have borne witness to centuries of history, reflecting the rise and fall of dynasties and embodying the enduring spirit of Chinese civilisation.

A century-old and time-honoured



▲ Brush pot (a container for holding calligraphy brushes)

▲ Chinese chess

to prominence, earning the enduring title “Century-Strong.”

In the 1950s, Long Shun Cheng united with more than 30 woodworking workshops and family-run furniture shops once located in Luban Hutong and the Dongxi Xiaoshi area—many led by descendants of the Qing Imperial Workshops’ carpenters—to establish the Long Shun Cheng Woodworking Factory (Beijing Hardwood Furniture Factory). This partnership created a distinct business identity rooted in traditional craftsmanship, specialising in hardwood furniture production and antique restoration. In 2008, Long Shun Cheng’s art of Beijing-style hardwood furniture making was officially included in China’s representative list of State-level intangible cultural heritage items.

▼ Traditional Chinese study furnishings



Like other forms of traditional Chinese art, Beijing-style hardwood furniture combines historical and cultural depth with refined elegance and practicality. Take Long Shun Cheng’s classic *tuoni quanyi* (round-back chairs with a base frame), for instance. Its design exemplifies the profound Eastern philosophy underlying Chinese furniture craftsmanship.

The round-back chair stands as a quintessential masterpiece of Ming-style furniture. The *tuoni quanyi* evolved from traditional Ming designs, its structure reflecting the ancient Chinese philosophy of “heaven being round and earth being square.” The curved backrest symbolises heaven, while the square base beneath the seat represents earth; the person seated upright between them embodies humanity. Together they form the harmonious trinity of “heaven, earth and humankind,” a reflection of cosmic unity. The *tuoni*, a horizontal wooden beam connecting the legs below the seat, is secured through mortise-and-tenon joinery. This ingenious feature not only reinforces stability but also shields the chair from moisture and wear, seamlessly merging symbolic meaning with refined craftsmanship.

The enduring popularity of Long Shun Cheng’s *tuoni quanyi* lies in the perfection of its craftsmanship. Each of the four chair

legs and the four vertical posts supporting the armrests is formed using the “one-piece joinery” technique, in which multiple components are carved from a single block of wood. This sophisticated method not only strengthens the chair’s structure but also produces smooth, uninterrupted lines that heighten its aesthetic grace.

TIPS

Imperial Workshops

The Imperial Workshops, officially part of the Qing Imperial Household Department, served as the dynasty’s dedicated institution for crafting and restoring imperial artefacts and household items.

The Palace Museum is currently presenting the exhibition “Beneath the Ninefold Walls: Archaeological Discoveries from the Imperial Workshops Site in the Forbidden City.” The exhibition offers a comprehensive look at the crucial role the Imperial Workshops played, not only as the production centre for Qing Dynasty imperial artefacts but also as a significant site of cultural exchange and interaction between Chinese and Western civilisations.

▼ Traditional Chinese living room furnishings





▲ A foreign visitor captures exquisite Jingcai ("Beijing coloured") porcelain

It stands as a testament to the profound artistry and philosophy of traditional Chinese craftsmanship, where form, function and material achieve complete harmony.

This round-back chair design has been part of a historic, world-class occasion. In November 2014, during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting at the Yanqi Lake International Convention Centre in Beijing, 21 leaders and representatives from member economies convened for discussions. The 21 chairs placed around the circular table in the Jixian Hall were all Long Shun Cheng's round-back chairs. Embodying the refined spirit of Chinese design, these pieces introduced leaders to the elegance and craftsmanship of Beijing-style hardwood furniture. More than simple seating, the 21 chairs served as cultural ambassadors, quietly sharing the grace of Chinese aesthetics and traditional artistry with the world.

To meet the functional demands of the summit, Liu Gengsheng, the fifth-generation inheritor of Long Shun Cheng's Beijing-style hardwood furniture craftsmanship, led his team in refining the round-back chair with innovative precision. They discreetly added silent castors to the legs for smoother movement and introduced footrests and cushioned back supports for improved comfort and ergonomics. These thoughtful enhancements preserved the chair's timeless classical grace while incorporating modern



▲ A foreign tourist experiences painting Jingcai porcelain

practicality, achieving a harmonious balance between tradition and innovation.

The beauty of classical Chinese furniture lies in its ability to go beyond simple imitation of the past, continually evolving within the traditions of craftsmanship and cultural philosophy. Long Shun Cheng's *tuoni quanyi* retain essential elements and the mortise-and-tenon joinery technique, while incorporating modern innovations that meet contemporary needs—striking a seamless balance between heritage and progress.

Each Porcelain Item or Fan Displays Allure and Elegance

Jingcai porcelain, also known as Beijing antique-style porcelain, distinguished by its



▲ Jingcai porcelain wares

elegance, intricate craftsmanship and vivid colour palette, is a distinctive branch within China's long and rich ceramic tradition. Since its emergence, Jingcai porcelain has adorned the homes and halls of Beijingers, reflecting their pursuit of beauty and cultural sophistication. Beyond mere ornamentation, these works embody centuries of artistry, allowing each piece to radiate the quiet grace and refinement of Beijing's timeless aesthetic.

Located in the Guang'anmenwai area of Xicheng District, the Jingcai Porcelain Museum is renowned as the "premier kiln of the capital." Formerly known as the Beijing Arts and Crafts Factory, it was once devoted exclusively to producing Jingcai porcelain for the city's elite. Today, it remains the only site in Beijing that preserves the imperial porcelain-making tradition, where the art of hand-painted ceramics continues to be passed down through generations.

Jingcai porcelain traces its origins to the porcelain-making and painting techniques of

the Qing Dynasty Imperial Workshops. Over three centuries ago, this art form—combining refined methods such as *fencai* (soft enamel) and *fangcai* (cloisonné enamel)—flourished within the imperial court and became known as the "Imperial Secret Delight." Created solely for artistic appreciation, it united the era's most accomplished craftsmen, with no expense spared, to produce masterpieces of extraordinary beauty and luxury. Through its exquisite detail, brilliant colours and meticulous craftsmanship, Jingcai porcelain earned its enduring reputation as "the most luxurious art in the world."

In the early 20th century, following the decline of the Qing Dynasty, the Imperial Workshops were disbanded, and imperial artisans returned to civilian life. Consequently, Jingcai porcelain gradually transitioned from the confines of the imperial court to the public domain. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the establishment of the Beijing Arts and Crafts Factory ensured the systematic preservation and transmission of this craft. Today, Jingcai porcelain stands as both a living testament to Beijing's rich cultural heritage and a vibrant force in contemporary artistic creation, continuing to reflect the city's enduring elegance and creative spirit.

Deep within the exhibition halls of the Jingcai Porcelain Museum stands a magnificent reproduction of the polychrome "Hundred Deer" vase from the Qianlong

era (1736–1796), radiating a quiet yet commanding grandeur. This large ceremonial masterpiece, deeply favoured by Emperor Qianlong, is not only a quintessential example of Jingcai porcelain's imperial aesthetic but also a vivid embodiment of traditional Chinese auspicious symbolism—the deer representing prosperity. As such, it has long been regarded as a vessel of blessings and good fortune.

Within the Extraordinary Jingcai Cultural Creativity Space at the Jingcai Porcelain Museum, the porcelain's vivid hues come alive on canvas, while traditional motifs grace bespoke tea sets. Here, every visitor with a love for Chinese culture can take home a unique piece of Jingcai craftsmanship. As a signature "Beijing Gift," Jingcai porcelain now serves as a colourful and tangible bridge between cultures, enabling both domestic and international visitors to experience, appreciate and share the artistic spirit and cultural soul of Beijing.

The beauty of Jingcai porcelain resides in every brushstroke and fine line, in the flames and kilns that transform clay into timeless art. In much the same way, the intangible heritage of handcrafted fan-making enchants the world, as each brushstroke, each graceful fold and unfold reveal the serene elegance and refined harmony of Eastern aesthetics.

Chinese fans are not merely practical objects but also finely crafted works of art. Blending traditional calligraphy, painting and

seal carving, they have become enduring cultural symbols that embody the spirit of Chinese artistry across the ages. Handmade folding fans, enriched by this heritage, continue to be treasured by admirers both in China and around the world.

On the bustling third floor of Hongqiao Market, a modest 50-square-metre shop named Taohuawu Shanzhuang draws visitors in. While it offers a variety of handicrafts including cloisonné enamel, clay facial masks, lacquerware, bamboo chopsticks and silk dolls, its centrepiece is a striking collection of elegant, antique-style folding fans. The shop's owner, Liu Jun, a recognised inheritor of the Dongcheng District-level intangible cultural heritage project Handcrafted Folding Fan Craft, keeps this traditional art alive through his dedication and skill.

As one of the earliest merchants to establish himself in Hongqiao Market, Liu Jun has run his shop for over 30 years. At its height, his flourishing fan business inspired numerous neighbouring stalls to start selling fans as well. Liu often jokes that he is "Beijing's first person to make fan sales a household name."

Every Flower and Leaf Has a Distinctive Scent

The gentle fragrance of jasmine tea often drifts through Beijing homes. As a world-renowned "Chinese calling card," tea holds a

▼ Folding fans with floral motifs



▼ Openwork folding fans



cherished place in the city's culture. Among all varieties, Beijing's jasmine tea, celebrated for its floral aroma and mellow taste, has long been a favourite of locals.

Beijingers have long cherished jasmine tea, affectionately calling it “*xiang pian*” (fragrant slice). Its flavour is mellow yet full-bodied, complemented by the sweet, heady aroma of jasmine blossoms. Flower-scented tea is a uniquely Chinese tradition that originated in the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279), developed in the Ming Dynasty, and reached its height in the Qing Dynasty. In Old Beijing, residents began blending jasmine flowers with green tea to mask the harsh, bitter taste of well water. Over time, this practical adaptation evolved into a beloved cultural custom. Time-honoured tea houses such as Zhangyiyuan and Wuyutai Tea have preserved their century-old jasmine tea-making techniques, now recognised as national-level intangible cultural heritage.

Founded in 1900, Zhangyiyuan opened its third branch in 1910 on Dashilar Street in the Qianmen area. At this very location, the tea house has flourished for more than a century and now serves as the brand's headquarters. Passing through its ornate, intricately carved entrance, visitors are greeted by the delicate fragrance of freshly brewed tea that seems to linger in the air. The three-storey shop is spacious and lively,

filled with the hum of conversation and the rhythmic rustle of tea being weighed and packed by hand. Customers often line up patiently, eager to take home Zhangyiyuan's famed blends. Among the neatly arranged shelves of elegant tea gift sets, the flagship “Zhangyiyuan Longhao” remains the undisputed star. Introduced in 2016, it became the brand's first product to exceed 100 million yuan (US\$14.08 million) in sales, earning instant acclaim and capturing the hearts of Beijingers. Regarded as a signature “Beijing Gift,” it epitomises the city's refined tea culture.

Founded in 1887, Wuyutai Tea House established its flagship store in Beixinqiao, Dongcheng District. Together with Zhangyiyuan, it dominates Beijing's jasmine tea tradition—hence the saying, “Zhangyiyuan in the south, Wuyutai Tea in the north.” For generations of Beijingers, a visit to Wuyutai Tea is far more than a simple errand, it is a beloved ritual, woven into the rhythm of everyday life.

Many people adore jasmine tea yet have never seen the delicate flower behind its fragrance. The secret lies in the vital step of its production—scenting. This time-honoured process requires repeatedly blending tea leaves with freshly picked jasmine blossoms, allowing the leaves to gradually absorb their floral essence through carefully controlled oxidation. Each round of scenting deepens

TIPS

How to Brew Jasmine Tea

When brewing jasmine tea, a glass cup or lidded bowl works best. Preheat the vessel, add 3 to 5 grams of tea leaves, and pour in water heated to 85–95 degrees Celsius. Let it steep for 30 to 50 seconds before enjoying. For each subsequent infusion, extend the steeping time by around 10 seconds, which allows for 5 to 6 flavourful brews.

the fusion between the tea's natural aroma and the blossoms' sweet fragrance, producing a layered, lingering scent. After several cycles, the result is authentic jasmine tea—its fragrance rich yet refined, its flavour balanced and mellow, a testament to both patience and artisanal mastery.

All grades of Wuyutai Tea's jasmine tea undergo several rounds of scenting, with the renowned “Gonghao” variety enduring up to nine. To preserve the blossoms' fullest aroma, key scenting stages are performed overnight, immediately after the jasmine is freshly picked.

▼ Learning the art of tea



▼ Fresh tea leaves



This meticulous timing captures the flowers at their most fragrant, allowing the tea leaves to fully absorb their essence. The result is a brew of remarkable richness and floral intensity, its fragrance lingering long after each sip.

To achieve its distinctive flavour profile, the brand combines premium teas from several famed regions with jasmine blossoms in carefully measured proportions. This meticulous process, guided by generations of expertise, has preserved Wuyutai Tea's exceptional quality and earned its enduring reputation over the past century.

While preserving its traditional craftsmanship, Wuyutai Tea has also embraced modern tastes. From trendy tea-flavoured ice cream to tea-infused cakes, cookies, mooncakes and *zongzi* (sticky rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves with various fillings), the 138-year-old brand continues to reinvent itself.

Today, visitors from near and far take home a package of jasmine tea—carrying not only its refined fragrance, but also their own cherished memories of Beijing.

Each Clay Figurine Embodies the Good Wishes of Ordinary People

At the eastern end of Yangmeizhuxiejie Street stands a small shop marked with a sign reading “Old Beijing Tu'er Ye.” Inside, rows of shelves display Tu'er Ye (Lord Rabbit) figurines in every size and pose. The owner, Zhang Zhongqiang, a fifth-generation inheritor of the clay sculpture (Beijing Tu'er Ye) tradition, hand-paints each figure with care. His creations, both powerful and endearing, radiate a lively spirit and unmistakable charm.

In the past, during the Mid-Autumn Festival, Beijingers would make offerings to Tu'er Ye. Ironically, this deity—perhaps the least recognised in the Chinese celestial pantheon—was merely a humble attendant to Chang'e, the Moon Goddess. Yet he was also the guardian deity of the ancient capital. In reverence of his divine role, locals have long said, “Don't treat Tu'er Ye as anything less than a god.”

How did Tu'er Ye become Beijing's



◀ Sculptures of Lord Rabbit, including a special Beijing Central Axis edition (front left)

guardian deity? According to legend, a plague once ravaged the city, leaving nearly every household stricken while no medicine could bring relief. Moved by the people's suffering, Chang'e sent her jade rabbit to the mortal world to heal them. The rabbit descended upon Beijing in the form of a young girl, offering cures and saving countless lives, thus becoming venerated as the city's divine protector.

The people were deeply grateful to the jade rabbit and offered it gifts, but it refused everything except clothing. Wherever it went, it would put on different outfits, appearing at times as a man, at others as a maiden. To reach more patients, it rode on horses, deer, lions and tigers, journeying across Beijing until the plague was finally eradicated. When its mission was complete, it returned to the Moon Palace, yet its benevolent image remained deeply rooted in the people's hearts. To commemorate its kindness, Beijingers

began moulding clay figures of the rabbit—rabbit-headed and human-bodied, wearing armour or red robes, seated on deer, riding phoenixes or lions—each figure unique, endearing and dignified. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, families would place fresh fruits, vegetables and beans on their altars to honour it and give thanks for its healing grace. Though the ritual worship of Tu'er Ye has gradually faded, its image lives on as a beloved folk craft and a cherished decorative piece in homes, its bright colours and gentle expression continuing to watch over Beijing.

Tu'er Ye is a form of clay and painted sculpture, featuring a clay core coated with bright pigments. While continuing the traditional Beijing-style Tu'er Ye, Zhang Zhongqiang has introduced innovations to suit modern tastes, designing new creations such as Tu'er Ye in Twelve Zodiac Signs and Tu'er Ye Adorned with Motifs of Landmarks along the Beijing Central Axis. He decorates his figures with Beijing's signature symbols—like sugar-coated hawthorns on a stick and the Zhengyangmen Archery Tower—transforming each piece into a vivid portrait of the city's heritage. Through these playful, modern interpretations, Zhang allows visitors to explore Beijing's timeless culture through the spirited and endearing image of its most iconic guardian.

▼ Pouring tea from a long-spouted teapot



Treasured Gifts from a Scholar's Studio in Beijing

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

Some say that to truly understand a city, a person must first understand its culture. And to grasp that culture, they need only touch its vessels, such as the objects found in a scholar's studio. Beijing's stationery tradition is deeply rooted in the historical fabric of the ancient capital, preserving the refined spirit of classical scholarly implements while blending them with the city's distinctive cultural charm. These items are far more than mere desktop ornaments. These time-honoured gifts rich with history and legend serve as Beijing's cultural invitation to the world.





Discovering a Time-honoured Stationery Street

On the western side of the Beijing Central Axis lies a distinctive old street lined with charming stationery shops, their traditional façades adorned with carved beams and painted rafters. These shops offer scholar's stationery, antiques, paintings, calligraphy and rare books. This is Liulichang Street, Beijing's foremost cultural thoroughfare, celebrated for its specialised cultural businesses. Stretching 800 metres, it is divided into eastern and western sections by South Xinhua Street. Along its length stand many long-established shops, including Rong Bao Zhai, Cathay Bookshop, Cui Wen Ge, Yi De Ge, Dai Yue Xuan, Huai Yin Shan Fang, Ji Gu Ge and Qing Mi Ge, each preserving distinctive craftsmanship and rich cultural heritage.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), Liulichang Street stood as a testament to the golden age of scholar's stationery. The scholar's studio (or study) was where intellectuals read, wrote, received guests and exchanged ideas, and the refined tools within it were treasured above all. Although Chinese literati historically used dozens of elegant stationery items, the core set was always the "Four Treasures of the Study," a term dating back to the Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD 420–581). These four—brush, ink, paper and inkstone—were the essential instruments of Chinese calligraphy and painting, each embodying centuries of artisanal mastery. Their origins varied by region and era: Hu brushes, first produced in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, were famed for their exquisite craftsmanship and superior quality; Hui ink sticks came from Shexian County, Anhui Province, were



1. Traditional Chinese writing brushes from Dai Yue Xuan in Liulichang
2. Hongxing-branded Xuan paper
3. Liulichang Street

known for their rich fragrance and deep, lustrous blackness; Xuan paper, made in Xuancheng, Anhui Province, was prized for its smooth texture and remarkable durability; and Duan inkstones from Zhaoqing (formerly Duanzhou), Guangdong Province, were celebrated for their fine-grained stone and intricate carving. On Liulichang Street during the Qing era, these "Four Treasures" reached their height of refinement. Examination candidates hurried down the lanes clutching newly purchased Hu brushes, while literati lingered in inkstone shops, gently caressing freshly acquired Duan inkstones—not bargaining from thrift, but from reverence for these cherished tools. Yet the scholar's desk held far more than the Four Treasures alone: bronze paperweights anchoring yellowed pages, celadon or jade brush washers rippling with water and seals carved with bold, vigorous characters, all combined in harmony with the "Four Treasures" to create the poetic world of the traditional Chinese study.

During the Tongzhi era (1862–1874) of the Qing Dynasty, a new fragrance began to waft through Liulichang Street—the scent of Yi De Ge ink. Its founder, Xie Songdai, revolutionised traditional ink-making by developing a storable and ready-to-use liquid ink infused with aromatic ingredients such as borneol and musk. Dark as lacquer, delicately fragrant and remarkably smooth to write with, this type of ink was hailed as a "writing marvel" of its time. Scholars across China soon kept a bottle on their desks, not merely for convenience, but as a reflection of a more graceful, unhurried approach to writing. By the Republic of China period (1912–1949), Dai Yue Xuan brush shop



▲ Inkstones

had risen as a new star on Liulichang Street. Craftsmen from Huzhou sat by basins of clear water, meticulously hand-sorting bristles. The shop's brushes were crafted from the neck and underarm hair of Jiaying goats, the winter tails of yellow weasels from eastern Liaoning Province and the soft fur of nimble wild hares from the Jiangnan region (south of the Yangtze River). From roughly 10,000 hairs, a single brush tip was formed—each strand perfectly matched in length, thickness and elasticity. The Dai Yue Xuan brushes mentioned frequently in the diaries of renowned writer Lu Xun (1881–1936), as well as the Dabaiyun brushes favoured by painter Qi Baishi (1864–1957) for his depictions of prawns, were all crafted here. For literati and artists alike, fine calligraphy and painting required not only the perfect brush and ink, but also premium paper. A pilgrimage to Liulichang Street to select 100 sheets of superior Xuan paper (rice paper) was therefore an essential ritual. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Hongxing-branded Xuan paper became widely celebrated on Liulichang Street for its "supple yet durable texture." The production of Xuan paper follows more than 100 ancient, intricate steps—from raw material preparation to the finished sheet—



▲ Ink, prepared on the spot, for sale at Yi De Ge



▲ Brush pot (a container for holding calligraphy brushes)

and demands years of natural ageing. These time-honoured shops are far more than commercial spaces; they remain enduring symbols of Beijing's scholarly heritage.

A Harmonious Blend of Tradition and Modernity

The stories of Liulichang Street are steeped in centuries of history. Its unmistakable aura of scholarly elegance continues to draw visitors, making it an essential stop for anyone exploring Beijing.

Rong Bao Zhai, a time-honoured shop renowned for its calligraphy, paintings and stationery, dominates half the street with its elegant, stately architecture.

Rong Bao Zhai's woodblock printing is

a legendary art form based on the ancient technique of carving designs onto wooden blocks. Originating in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) and perfected during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties, the craft has been further refined by Rong Bao Zhai. From line drawing and wood engraving to multi-layered colour printing, every step demands extraordinary precision and patience. Draftsmen use the finest weasel-hair brushes to replicate original works on translucent paper with near-perfect accuracy. Carvers then transfer these drawings onto wooden blocks, delicately chiselling each line to retain the expressive vitality of the original. Printers, in turn, must align each block with meticulous care, layering hues with subtle gradations to reproduce the depth and texture of the artwork. Woodblock printing requires immense patience, with each edition taking several months, sometimes more than a year, to complete. Artisans carefully select pigments that match those of the original masterpieces and source paper or silk from the same regions as the historic works. Through their unwavering dedication to authenticity, they achieve reproductions that capture the originals' rich layers of colour, fine lines and exquisite detail. Rong Bao Zhai's mastery of this technique remains

unmatched among all modern printing methods. Thanks to this art, precious paintings such as the Tang Dynasty's "Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers" and "The Night Revels of Han Xizai" from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (AD 907–979) have been flawlessly reproduced, allowing viewers to appreciate these masterpieces up close. Today, this intangible cultural heritage extends beyond artistic reproduction—it inspires a new generation of cultural and creative works. Letter paper modelled after *Beiping Jianpu* (*Beiping Letter Paper Album*) evokes nostalgia for Old Beijing, while fans printed with Qi Baishi's masterpiece "Chrysanthemums" pair elegantly with celadon teacups, infusing any study with autumnal calm. At Rong Bao Zhai's workshop, visitors can even try their hand under a master's guidance—carving traditional motifs or printing small flower-and-bird designs—and take home their own handmade creation.

Looking back on the evolution of scholar's stationery in Beijing, people find a careful balance between preserving tradition and embracing innovation. In today's Guochao (China-chic) era, the time-honoured brands along Liulichang Street are reinventing themselves: some introduce stylish new products to attract younger customers, while others reach audiences through live-streaming platforms. Through these fresh approaches, these historic brands have found renewed vitality.

Even black ink can be infused with playful creativity. Yi De Ge has collaborated

with the new perfume brand Black Paw to launch a series of co-branded products that blend the aromatic scent of ink with the fragrance of perfume, creating distinctive gifts beloved by young people. At the 10th Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a lifestyle collection inspired by five tones of ink (charred, dense, heavy, light and clear) made its debut, featuring scented candles, hand sanitiser and hand lotion. Other ink-inspired cultural and creative items, such as bottled water named Duli You Moshui'er (literally, "Ink-Infused Water"), sparked curiosity among attendees, offering international guests unfamiliar with brush writing a glimpse into Chinese ink culture. Dai Yue Xuan, too, has launched a variety of innovative products that meet modern needs through traditional craftsmanship. It has also designed pieces for different occasions: its "Student Calligraphy Starter Kit" combines brush, ink and paper in a practical all-in-one set, making calligraphy accessible to schoolchildren. For weddings, the brand introduced the "Husband-and-Wife Hair-Infused Brush," which weaves strands from the bride and groom into a custom Hu brush—a tender symbol of lifelong unity. Other scholar's stationery items have been revived through creative reinterpretation. Brass paperweights feature delicate silhouettes of landmarks along the Beijing Central Axis, ceramic brush washers bear elegant designs inspired by Peking Opera's water sleeves and seal carving now offers personalised

designs with hutong-style door numbers or family names in classical seal script. Inkstone craftsmanship, while honouring traditional relief carving, now embraces refined, modern lines. A Duan inkstone engraved with the outline of the National Stadium ("Bird's Nest"), for example, becomes a distinctive gift bridging ancient heritage with contemporary Beijing. In this gentle fusion of time-honoured artistry and modern sensibility, scholar's stationery finds its deepest resonance—honouring the past while gracefully fitting into present-day life, turning every piece into a meaningful, living legacy.

▼ A foreign tourist shows the watermark woodcut print he made



▼ A woodcut print of "Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers"



Stationery and Ornaments on the Scholar's Desk

In a thoughtfully arranged modern study, the eye is immediately drawn to a desk adorned with a full set of Beijing-style scholar's stationery, its presence infusing the space with a deep cultural warmth. On the wall hangs a calligraphy piece, adding an air of refined artistry, while exquisitely crafted desk ornaments lend subtle charm to the room. In moments of leisure, the owner sits at the desk, unfurls a sheet of Xuan paper, picks up a brush, dips it into ink and lets the strokes flow freely. In this fast-paced age, such a ritual offers a rare reprieve—a gentle invitation to slow down, embrace stillness and rediscover inner calm.

Scholar's stationery also possesses exceptional collectible value, thanks to its craftsmanship, cultural resonance and often limited production. Each piece, crafted through time-honoured techniques and imbued with Beijing characteristics, is more than a practical object; it is a work of art that carries both historical weight and the spirit of cultural continuity. Limited-edition releases are highly prized by collectors, their rarity transforming them into cherished artefacts that bridge heritage and connoisseurship.

▼ A typical set of the "Four Treasures of the Study"



The allure of scholar's stationery lies not only in its cultural significance and refined aesthetic but also in its remarkable versatility. This makes it an ideal gift. Regardless of budget, the true spirit of a scholar's offering lies in thoughtfulness: a handwritten calligraphy note tucked into an antique brocade box, a custom motif reflecting the recipient's personality or a personalised inscription adding layers of meaning. Such careful details transform a simple inkstone, seal or brush set into a profound cultural token imbued with respect, warmth and intention. In business settings, a Rong Bao Zhai stationery set, complete with woodblock-printed letter sheets, a brass paperweight, a fine brush and an inkstone, is more than a gift; it is a statement of discernment and cultural sophistication. Among friends and family, a weasel-hair brush printed with the silhouette of Nanluoguxiang or a notebook embossed with a Temple of Heaven watermark is reminiscent of Old Beijing. Even for international guests, scholar's stationery serves as a cherished "cultural ambassador." When a foreign friend presses a brass paperweight onto Xuan paper and tries their hand at calligraphy, the ink that blossoms across the page conveys more than words—

it reveals the rhythm and spirit of Eastern aesthetics. When their fingers trace the Great Wall motif carved into an inkstone, they touch not merely stone but centuries of Beijing's layered history. In this way, brushes, ink, paper and inkstones transcend their practical origins to become emissaries of culture. Through every gift, the soul of Beijing's scholarly heritage continues to live, breathe and inspire.

Chinese Calligraphy and Paintings

Chinese calligraphy has a long and distinguished history, its evolving scripts giving rise to a wealth of diverse yet equally captivating artistic expressions. Over centuries of refinement, calligraphy has come to embody the essence of Chinese culture and has been officially inscribed on the UNESCO list of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."

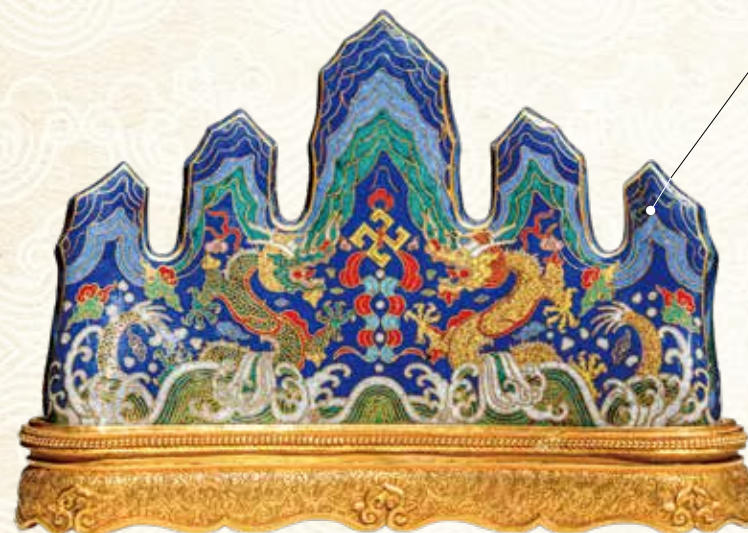
Chinese painting is a unique art form. Its techniques are generally divided into two main styles: *gongbi* (fine-line painting) and *xieyi* (freehand or expressionistic painting). Paintings are often complemented by inscribed poetry and seals, together evoking a refined Eastern aesthetic.

Other Studio Accessories

Beyond the “Four Treasures” (brush, ink, paper and inkstone), traditional Chinese scholar’s stationery includes a rich variety of complementary tools such as brush rests, brush washers, brush pots, ink droppers, water pots, wrist rests, paperweights, seal boxes and seals. Though these accessories may not be the centrepieces of the scholar’s desk, they are remarkably diverse in form, often distinctively shaped and finely carved. Serving both practical and aesthetic purposes, they are not only functional tools for writing but also refined objects of contemplation and collectible art. Usually no larger than a foot and often just a few inches in size, they fit neatly on a desk or rest comfortably in the hand. Through their subtle details, they bring elegance, ease and poetic grace to the everyday rituals of reading and writing.

Brush Rests

A brush rest, also known as a brush holder or brush stand, is used to cradle writing brushes during breaks in calligraphy or painting. Commonly shaped like miniature mountain peaks with notches to hold the brushes, it also appears in forms inspired by figures, animals or gnarled sections of aged tree roots, the latter especially prized for their natural grace. Placed upon the scholar’s desk, the brush rest prevents the delicate brush tip from splaying or touching the surface, thereby avoiding ink smudges. Crafted from materials such as coral, agate, crystal, jade, wood or porcelain, it serves as both a practical tool and a refined ornament, embodying the literati’s appreciation for beauty in everyday utility.



Paperweights

A paperweight is a practical desk accessory used to hold paper flat and prevent it from shifting while reading or writing. Usually crafted in elongated bars, though also found in square, round or figurative forms, it is most commonly made from stone, metal or wood. Despite its simple function, the paperweight brings a quiet sense of grounded calm to the scholar’s desk. When not in use, it serves as an elegant ornament, subtly enriching the study’s aesthetic. In its calm presence, the paperweight captures the Chinese ideal of harmonising usefulness with beauty—where everyday objects embody grace, order and cultural refinement.



Brush Pots

The brush pot, a vessel for holding brushes, seamlessly combines utility with aesthetic grace. While typically cylindrical, it can also take square, polygonal or organic forms, its dimensions thoughtfully designed to suit brushes of different lengths. Traditionally fashioned from bamboo, wood, porcelain or jade, modern examples now incorporate resin, metal and other contemporary materials, balancing practicality with refined design. Beyond simple storage, many brush pots transcend function through intricate carvings, hand-painted motifs or calligraphic inscriptions that imbue them with cultural significance. As both a functional object and a collectible artefact, the brush pot epitomises the literati ideal of harmonising everyday practicality with enduring beauty.

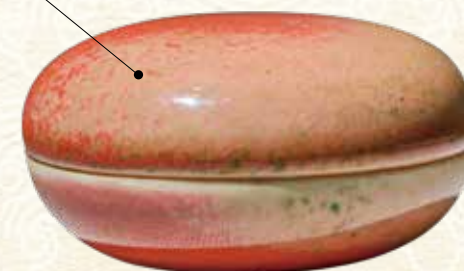
Water Pots

The water pot, or *shuicheng*, is a small, exquisitely crafted vessel used to hold and dispense water for moistening the inkstone during grinding. Blending practicality with artistic grace, it has long been celebrated as the “Fifth Treasure” of the scholar’s studio. Made from a wide range of materials, including porcelain, jade, stone, Yixing purple clay, bronze and bamboo, its forms vary from minimalist to whimsical or symbolic. Finer examples are often paired with a tiny bronze or jade spoon, reflecting the meticulous attention to detail characteristic of classical Chinese literati culture. Though modest in size—small enough to fit in the palm—the *shuicheng* holds great cultural resonance. More than a simple tool, it serves as an elegant desk ornament that subtly reveals the owner’s taste, refinement and poetic sensibility, standing as a timeless emblem of scholarly grace.



Seal Boxes

A seal box is a specialised container designed to store seals and seal paste, uniting practical protection with refined beauty. It safeguards the seal while preserving the paste from drying, oxidation and moisture. Typically composed of two tightly fitted parts—a lid and a base—it forms an airtight enclosure that shields the contents from environmental exposure, ensuring the paste remains soft and vibrant. Crafted mainly from porcelain, jade, wood, lacquer or bamboo, the box often bears delicately carved inscriptions, name seals or miniature ink-wash paintings on its surface. These artistic touches transform the simple act of opening the box into a moment of quiet pleasure, an elegant ritual reflecting the literati’s appreciation for order, precision and grace in scholarly life.



Brush Washers

A brush washer is a small vessel used to rinse ink from brushes, admired for its compact form, varied shapes and refined elegance. Many surviving examples are considered rare works of art in their own right. Typically shaped like bowls or basins with open mouths, flared rims, broad bodies, straight walls and flat bases, the design is both graceful and practical for holding water. Brush washers are fashioned from a range of fine materials, including blue-and-white porcelain, jade, agate and enamel, all valued for their craftsmanship and beauty. Among these, porcelain brush washers remain the most common and enduring variety.

The City's Timeless Fashion

Text by Zhang Yan Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Li Xiaoyin, [Thailand] Waranun Chutchawantipakorn, Zeng Qin, Qu Bowei, Ma Ke

Beijingers possess a natural flair for sophisticated dressing. Their attire shifts effortlessly with the changing seasons, exuding an aura of elegance and dignity. This reflects not only an inherited aesthetic sensibility but also a deep confidence in their way of life.

The elder generation of Beijingers holds a deep affection for time-honoured brands. A felt hat from Sheng Xifu, silk satin from Refosian (Ruifuxiang) or cloth shoes with thousand-layer soles from Neiliansheng perfectly capture the essence of Beijing style. This tradition continues into the modern era at Silk Street Market (Xiushui Street Market) and Hongqiao Market, where classic elements find new life. *Mamianqun* (literally “horse-faced skirts”), traditional Chinese jackets and reimagined *qipao* (cheongsam) now grace display windows with contemporary appeal. Meanwhile, gambiered Guangdong gauze jackets, silk jackets and pearl accessories have become emblematic of “Beijing Gifts,” a popular choice among international visitors. From time-honoured brands to emerging designers, and from artisan studios to bespoke boutiques, these styles retain a sense of freshness and vitality. The deep-rooted heritage of the ancient capital and the pulse of modern creativity are woven into every fabric and stitch. Beijing's clothing culture has evolved far beyond preservation; today, it is a living art, in dynamic conversation with the world.





▲ Sheng Xifu hats

Beijing's Time-Honoured Brands: Elegance in Every Stitch

For Beijingers, clothing and accessories are more than necessities for warmth and modesty. They are outward expressions of character and social grace. A *qipao*, a casual hat and a pair of cloth shoes together embody the city's characteristic poise and refined aesthetic.

A well-known Beijing maxim stated: "A gentleman's hat should be from Sheng Xifu, his garments from Ruifuxiang and his shoes from Neiliansheng." This saying perfectly captured the prestige and elegance that Beijing's elders prized in their attire.

Sheng Xifu is, without question, the most renowned name in Beijing's hat-making tradition. More than a storied brand, it evokes nostalgia for the distinctive headwear once favoured by Beijingers. At the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and the dawn of the Republic of China period (1912–1949), people began to move away from wearing skullcaps and embraced new styles of clothing and hats. It was during this period that Sheng Xifu was founded in Tianjin, introducing fashionable felt hats from the United Kingdom, France and the United

States. By breaking with convention, it rose to prominence as a leader in Beijing's hat-making industry and went on to influence styles nationwide.

Sheng Xifu has long been celebrated for its superbly crafted leather hats, sea dragon hats (a type of fur hat) and top hats. Its exceptional quality attracted patrons from all walks of life, both in China and abroad. The brand's broad appeal was built not merely on reputation, but on the uncompromising excellence of its craftsmanship.

Crafting a fur hat involves a complex process comprising dozens of precise steps. From fur selection to cutting and sewing, every stage is carefully controlled. The fur must follow a uniform direction, with consistent length, thickness, density and colour. Cutting requires specialised tools such as top, Y-shaped and crescent knives, which artisans handle by experience and feel to ensure perfect proportions. Stitch spacing follows strict standards, and even unseen components, like the lining, are finished with meticulous care.

Sheng Xifu's sea dragon hat stands as a hallmark of its enduring craftsmanship. Made from dense, supple dark brown fur, its upright hairs shimmer under the light. The brand has not only held a leading

position in the domestic market but has also gained broad international recognition, with exports to the US, Germany, France, Canada and Singapore. Having registered trademarks in both the EU and the US, Sheng Xifu is now recognised worldwide as a premier Chinese brand.

Sheng Xifu's hats have long surpassed their practical purpose, becoming expressions of personal style and cultural identity. No longer worn solely for warmth, choosing a hat now reflects one's attitude to life. While retaining its classic silhouettes, Sheng Xifu has thoughtfully introduced a range of new designs—from fashionable shorn sheepskin hats favoured by young people to plush styles for the elderly, as well as knitted options for women and colourful collections for children. Each piece skilfully combines traditional craftsmanship with modern aesthetics, keeping Sheng Xifu both timeless and contemporary.

When visiting Beijing, tourists often step



▲ A cultural experience for the wives of ambassadors held at Refosian (Ruifuxiang) during the 2025 Global Leaders' Meeting on Women

into Sheng Xifu's shops to select a hat from this authentic, time-honoured brand. What they take home is more than a hat—it is a cultural keepsake, a gift from Beijing itself.

Having explored items for the head, attention naturally turns to what is worn on the body. For Beijingers, Ruifuxiang is a name of profound significance. Established in 1893, this long-standing brand is renowned for its exquisite silks and finely tailored traditional Chinese garments. Its craftsmanship in producing traditional Chinese attire has been recognised as China Intangible Cultural Heritage. A notable historical connection further enhances its prestige: Ruifuxiang produced the earliest five-starred red flag that was raised over Beijing during the founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This remarkable legacy has made it a silk brand deeply trusted and cherished by generations of Beijingers.

Ruifuxiang excels at showcasing the beauty of the East through its refined craftsmanship. Its traditional Chinese garments, distinguished by delicate embroidery and intricate knot buttons, embody the essence of its century-old techniques. Continuing the legacy of Manchu court attire from the Qing Dynasty, the brand incorporates exquisite Beijing embroidery styles such as the knot stitch



▲ Ruifuxiang knot button with bird and floral motifs

and gold-and-silver thread stitch, while also drawing inspiration from Suzhou and Guangdong embroidery traditions. Each traditional Chinese outfit, defined by its smooth, graceful lines, is created through a meticulous process involving 9 key stages and over 100 detailed steps. These elegant garments stand among the most iconic gifts from Beijing.

As one of China's most renowned silk brands, Ruifuxiang has long specialised in luxurious bespoke garments. Its hand-embroidered *qipao* are celebrated for their vibrant colours and intricate detail. The most exceptional pieces can command prices of up to 100,000 yuan, making them true luxuries among traditional Chinese attire. Many visitors, drawn by Ruifuxiang's prestige, choose silk scarves, handkerchiefs, accessories or smaller cultural and creative



▲ The Ruifuxiang store in Qianmen

items as keepsakes, even if they forgo bespoke tailoring. These delicate pieces, though modest in size, are exquisite and carry profound cultural significance.

The Global Leaders' Meeting on Women recently concluded in Beijing. As part of this important event, Ruifuxiang hosted an immersive cultural experience titled "Golden Autumn Elegance" for the spouses of ambassadors from 28 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. The distinguished guests gathered to learn about the evolution of Chinese silk and to try their hand at crafting the traditional knot buttons used in Beijing-style *qipao*. They were deeply engaged in the intricate process of threading the needle and shaping each button by hand. Every goldfish-shaped knot button, symbolising "abundant wealth and many offspring," was meticulously made, reflecting exceptional craftsmanship. From the *qipao* buttons to the floral motifs adorning the garments, every detail conveyed Beijing's rich cultural heritage. The refined, understated beauty of the Eastern aesthetic left a lasting impression on the participants, who later donned elegant *qipao* and posed for photographs against scenes inspired by classical Chinese gardens, capturing a

moment of timeless grace in China.

Additionally, the venerable Neiliansheng captivated the ambassadors' spouses with its exquisitely crafted traditional Beijing cloth shoes. The fusion of classic embroidery and contemporary charm delighted the guests, with the wives of the Jordanian and Belgian ambassadors purchasing pairs as treasured mementos. Observing a master artisan demonstrate the "thousand-layer sole" cloth shoe-making technique, an item of intangible cultural heritage, gave them deeper insight into the intricate process. When they tried sewing the soles themselves, they were amazed by the precision required for each 35-layer construction and found the experience both enlightening and memorable.

Neiliansheng shoes are distinguished by several defining features: the use of pure, natural materials, hand-crafted multi-layered soles and uppers meticulously stitched to the base. The creation of these layered soles is the brand's most distinctive yet time-consuming and labour-intensive process. The technique demands exceptional precision and intricate. For the standard "straight sole," 81 stitches are made per square *cun* (approximately 11.11 square centimetres), amounting to more than 2,000 stitches for a single pair. The "cross sole," a

more intricate and refined design, features denser stitching and a more elegant shape, requiring over 4,000 stitches per pair. This entirely manual craft has been carefully preserved to this day. From forming the soles to shaping the finished shoes, each pair takes a skilled artisan at least four to five days to complete.

At the same time, Neiliansheng continues to balance tradition with contemporary style. In 2013, the company announced its intentional "return to fashion." Since then, it has launched a series of popular collaborations, ranging from Disney princess and Mickey Mouse collections to partnerships with the film *Big Fish & Begonia* and the video game *Honour of Kings*. Each collaboration has attracted strong interest among younger audiences. In 2018, Neiliansheng's pop-up store at Taikoo Li Sanlitun proved to be a remarkable success, drawing over 20,000 visitors in a single day and generating widespread excitement on social media.

Neiliansheng cloth shoes are increasingly appealing to younger generations. In collaboration with the Palace Museum's design team for its Taobao store, the brand has launched a line of culturally inspired footwear. Featuring auspicious floral patterns drawn from

ancient art and antique-style upturned toe caps, these designs pair beautifully with *hanfu* (traditional Han Chinese clothing). Their debut has been warmly received by *hanfu* enthusiasts, who consider the shoes the perfect complement to their attire—combining aesthetic grace with comfort and wearability, and uniting cultural heritage with modern sensibility.

Neiliansheng's charm also reaches international customers, who view its offerings as emblematic of Eastern craftsmanship. The brand is especially admired for its exceptional tailor-made shoes. A significant number of foreigners with an appreciation for Chinese kung fu visit to order shoes, specifically requesting embroidered Chinese characters for "kung fu" or "martial arts" on the uppers. Basketball fans, meanwhile, request personalised designs featuring their jersey numbers or basketball motifs. Once a mark of prestige, Neiliansheng footwear has evolved into a contemporary fashion statement, where heritage meets individual expression.

▼ A cultural experience for the wives of ambassadors held at Neiliansheng during the 2025 Global Leaders' Meeting on Women



▼ Making the "thousand-layer sole" for a Neiliansheng cloth shoe



▼ Neiliansheng



▲ Improved Chinese-style qipao

Distinctive Beijing Gifts: Creative Clothing and Accessories

Beyond the city's well-known time-honoured brands, contemporary Chinese fashion, a fusion of heritage with modern flair, has become a major draw for visitors to Beijing. Silk Street Market, a truly global shopping destination, hums with a symphony of languages: English, French, Russian, Japanese and even Serbian. Travellers from around the world, dressed in diverse styles, weave through the bustling aisles. Many journey here specifically to experience this renowned market, often highlighted in travel guides from their home countries.



▲ Qipao (cheongsam)

The market has grown into a vibrant cultural, tourist and shopping landmark in the capital, embodying the essence of both "Beijing Gifts" and "China Gifts." New traditional Chinese clothing, such as elegant horse-faced skirts, traditional jackets, *qipao* and *hanfu*, has become particularly popular among visitors. In one scene, a young Westerner eagerly tries on a jacket made from fine gambiered Guangdong gauze, while nearby, an international couple delight in choosing a Chinese-style vest for their infant child.

Beyond traditional Chinese attire, many shoppers share a special fondness for silk items imbued with distinctively Chinese charm. The market features a remarkable selection of silk goods, ranging from elegant scarves and ties exuding Eastern refinement to smooth, sand-washed silk jackets. Overseas traders often visit to source silk ties that seamlessly combine professional sophistication with an unmistakable Eastern aesthetic.

For visitors in search of distinctive pieces and superior craftsmanship, bespoke tailoring offers a truly elevated experience. Inside the market, skilled tailors stand ready to create custom garments. One such tailor, a man in his fifties, deftly uses a tape measure to capture precise dimensions, adjusting the fabric to suit an overseas client. As he carefully refines the pleats along the shoulder seams, he speaks softly in English, encouraging the customer to study their reflection in the mirror. "My shop has some recognition abroad," the grey-haired tailor says with pride. "A considerable number of foreign patrons make a specific journey here to commission clothing, often following recommendations from relatives and friends who have previously experienced our services."

Since most visitors spend only a short time in Beijing, bespoke garments must not only fit perfectly but also be made with impressive speed. Ahead of the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Summit, distinguished international guests flocked to the market in search of "Beijing Gifts" or custom-made outfits for the event. Among them, the President of Seychelles, his wife and their delegation commissioned a total of 15 sets of clothing. One customer from Cameroon expressed surprise, remarking that a bespoke outfit from here costs merely a quarter of the price that a patron would expect to pay abroad. He was equally impressed by the efficiency, remarking that an order placed one day could be completed the next—a true reflection of both speed and craftsmanship.

In this market, where a diverse clientele gathers, vendors artfully narrate “China stories” through fabric, needle and thread. The market continually introduces premium brands that embody “China chic,” while also emerging as a haven for enterprises dedicated to intangible cultural heritage. As a result, it has evolved from a lively shopping hub for international visitors into a comprehensive tourism and consumption centre that showcases traditional Chinese culture, as well as a creative incubator for Beijing’s distinctive fashion identity. Today, many returning international customers are struck by the transformation: elegant interiors, boutique-style displays and artfully tailored sample garments now recall the refinement of Parisian department stores like Galeries Lafayette. However, the abundance of Chinese-style apparel, handicrafts and designs featuring signature Beijing motifs serves as a reminder that they are indeed still in Beijing.

In the lead-up to the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Summit, foreign dignitaries not only visited Silk Street Market but also flocked to Hongqiao Market, both locally and internationally, to select their preferred “Beijing Gifts.” Among the most celebrated “Beijing Gifts” found here are pearls. For some senior Beijingers, Hongqiao Market stirs deep nostalgia. Its origins date back to the Hongqiao Farmers’ Market, established



▲ International tourists shop for cultural and creative gifts

in the late 1970s beside the outer wall of the Temple of Heaven Park. Rebuilt and reopened in 1995, Hongqiao Market has, over the decades, evolved into what is now celebrated as the “Capital City’s Premier Pearl Market.”

Hongqiao Market is known by many names. In addition to being hailed as the “Capital City’s Premier Pearl Market,” it is also fondly referred to as “Beijing’s Endless Jewellery Fair” and simply “Hongqiao Pearl Market” by its global clientele.

Within Hongqiao Market, Fanghua Pearls, established by the renowned “pearl queen” Bai Rufang (1970–2025), enjoys a legendary reputation. Some three decades ago, former British Prime Minister Margaret

Hilda Thatcher (1925–2013) visited Bai’s stall and remarked that a single strand of pearls seemed too small. In response, Bai devised an inspired solution, intertwining several strands into a magnificent, vintage-style necklace that immediately caught Mrs. Thatcher’s eye. She purchased the piece, along with several others. During a subsequent visit to China, Mrs. Thatcher even sent her bodyguards to escort Bai to the British Embassy, where she purchased more of Bai’s jewellery. Since that memorable encounter, Hongqiao Market has increasingly drawn foreign dignitaries and notable figures from around the world.

What draws foreign visitors to return time and again to purchase “China Gifts” from



▲ A pearl shop at Silk Street Market

this market? Bai Rufang was of firm conviction that quality is the foundation of both survival and success. Many other vendors share the same philosophy: to offer only the finest China gifts to their international clientele. While this goal appears simple, the devotion it demands is anything but. Decades ago, when Finnish President Tarja Kaarina Halonen visited Bai’s shop, Bai thoughtfully suggested an elegantly understated necklace and a pair of substantial stud earrings. Knowing the Nordic preference

for simplicity and superior quality, she helped select perfectly spherical Chinese freshwater pearls, prized for their rarity and lustre. Bai’s sincere attentiveness left a lasting impression, forging an unexpected bond with the Finnish President. In 2010, Halonen wore the same necklace she had purchased years earlier, proudly showing it to Bai and admiring its enduring brilliance, remarking that it looked even more radiant than before. She later extended a personal invitation for Bai and her family to visit Helsinki.

Roughly 70 percent of the market’s visitors are foreign tourists. Beyond its exceptional quality and competitive prices, a major appeal lies in the vendors’ steadfast integrity and warm hospitality. Nearly all merchants can speak English and uphold a traditional Chinese business philosophy encapsulated in the saying, “even if no deal is made, friendship remains.” Guests are often invited to sit for tea and conversation, whether or not they buy anything. Over time, many international visitors have formed lasting bonds with the market, returning again and again. They are drawn not only by the fine craftsmanship but by the genuine friendliness and sincerity of the people who work here.

Visitors to Hongqiao Market, whether to shop or simply explore, invariably leave with a sense of delight. In one pearl boutique, a young foreign woman tries on a necklace

while video calling her mother, eager to share her excitement. Some shops also host interactive experiences, encouraging tourists to learn simple phrases in the Beijing dialect, displayed on posters, in exchange for small souvenirs. In this way, cultural exchange unfolds naturally and warmly. Though pearls themselves are small, they play a meaningful role in strengthening bonds of friendship between China and the wider world. Today, the market has evolved far beyond a mere trading hub, becoming a vibrant crossroads where cultures meet and connect.

Today, Beijing proudly displays both the enduring artistry of its time-honoured brands and the dynamic creativity of contemporary Chinese fashion. The hats of Sheng Xifu, the silk creations of Ruifuxiang and the cloth shoes of Neiliansheng—together with the stylish Chinese-style apparel and elegant silk offerings from Silk Street Market and the gleaming pearls of Hongqiao Market—compose a rich “panorama of clothing and accessories” that defines the ancient capital’s character. For Beijingers, this evokes a comforting sense of nostalgia; for international visitors, it offers an approachable glimpse of Eastern elegance. Some may pause to admire a hat, others to marvel at a *qipao*, while many come to understand Beijing’s culture and spirit through the cherished keepsakes they select as “Beijing Gifts.”

▼ A variety of “Beijing Gifts”



▼ One of many silk stalls at Silk Street Market



▼ International tourists shop at Silk Street Market



▼ Shopping for pearl necklaces at Hongqiao Market





Playthings: Cultivating Peace and Refinement

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Tong Xizheng, Yuan Bo, Jiang Litian, Wu Hui

Beijing is a city known for its dynamic and fun-filled offerings.

The people of this city have a remarkable talent for turning everyday objects into art. Whether it's a stone, a piece of dough, a kite, a pair of walnuts or a teapot, Beijingers imbue it with a distinctive charm. It's often said that the creativity of Beijingers is found within these "knick-knacks." They skilfully blend the city's heritage, history and artistic sensibility, infusing each creation with cultural depth. The result is a collection of unique "Beijing Gifts" that perfectly embody the spirit of the capital.

From the timeless toys of childhood and the *wenwan* (literally "cultural playthings") once cherished by scholars to the trendy collectibles favoured by today's youth, these objects—rooted in long-standing tradition and diverse forms—convey profound meaning through their intricate details and artistic craftsmanship. Whether locals or visitors from afar, all are captivated by these creations, each infused with the distinctive spirit of Beijing.



▲ Kites fly over one of the Forbidden City's corner towers

Memories of Children's Toys

Children's toys unique to Beijing stand as a vibrant testament to the history of its folk art.

Kites, bristle dolls, silk figures and dough sculptures—once simple playthings for Beijing's children have now become works of art, displayed in museums and international exhibitions. However, for Beijingers, they remain beloved “playthings” at heart.

Kites hold a special place in the hearts of Beijingers. When spring arrives and warm breezes return, the skies come alive with a vibrant display of these airborne toys. Among the many styles, the “*zhayan*” or “*shayan*” kite, modelled after the swallows commonly seen in Beijing, is particularly iconic. These birds, which return north each spring, symbolise renewal and good fortune. For Beijingers, crafting and flying these swallow-shaped kites expresses their aspirations for happiness and prosperity.

The swallow-shaped kite features an ingenious and captivating design. Its head, a stylised and flattened version of a swallow's, is adorned with arched brows and

bright, expressive eyes that imbue it with character. With its scissor-like tail, the kite vividly evokes a swallow in graceful flight. The collection includes many variations: sturdy swallows, slender ones and even pairs symbolising devoted couples. Some depict different stages of growth, from nestlings and juveniles to semi-mature birds, known respectively as the “nestling,” “young” and “semi-thin” kite forms.

Beijing was once home to two time-honoured kite-making families, the Has and the Jins, whose traditions date back to the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The Ha family was celebrated for its delicate colour schemes and balanced designs, while the Jins favoured bold artistry set against dark backgrounds. Though their styles differed, both were known for crafting durable frames and achieving superb flight performance.

In Beijing, kite flying is more than a pastime: it is a cherished tradition that embodies regional culture and a sense of seasonal observance.

Beyond these, the range of traditional toys for Beijing's children stretches even further. Among them, one of the most exceptional examples of artisanal skill is

undeniably the Beijing-style silk figurine.

Silk figurines date back to the Tang (AD 618–907) or Song (AD 960–1279) dynasties, with a history spanning over 1,000 years. Artisans skilfully craft lifelike figures from silk, cotton and bamboo, using techniques such as tying, pasting, painting and embroidery. The craft, however, was once lost. In the mid-1950s, as China prepared for an international doll fair in New Delhi, artisans undertook extensive research and experimentation, creating five figurines depicting women from ethnic minorities. This pivotal project revived the art of silk figurine making in Beijing, giving rise to a new generation of creations enriched with distinctive national character.

Beijing silk figurines draw inspiration from ancient Chinese folklore, classic literature and, most notably, iconic Peking Opera scenes. A prime example is Mu Guiying from *Mu Guiying Takes Command*—depicted in full armour, holding a command flag and wearing a determined expression that embodies the valiant heroine.

Beyond Mu Guiying, Beijing silk figurines bring to life a host of beloved characters such as Zhao Yun, the Monkey King (Sun Wukong), Imperial Concubine



1. Dough sculptures
2. Bristle figurines
3. Silk figurines



Yang, Bai Suzhen and Zhang Fei. Each figure features expressive detail and elaborate costume design. Serving as both exquisite ornaments and enduring symbols of Beijing's cultural heritage, they make elegant additions to any desk or bookshelf.

Beijing bristle dolls are another lively example of traditional folk toy, once a familiar sight at temple fairs. These dolls, performing scenes from Peking Opera atop a copper plate, never failed to draw a crowd. Their creation, closely tied to the Peking Opera, required artisans to master its characters and gestures. While adults appreciated the artistry, children were entranced by the spectacle. With a shake of the plate and the rhythmic sound of

gongs and drums, the dolls would spring into motion in a charming interplay of movement and stillness that delighted audiences with its inventive artistry.

Today, this craft is recognised as part of Beijing Intangible Cultural Heritage. At certain heritage exhibitions, visitors can still watch senior artisans bring these dolls to life. On the copper plate “stage,” the bristle dolls showcase not only remarkable craftsmanship but also Beijingers' enduring love for the lively elegance of operatic art, infused with a quiet sense of joy and fulfilment.

In “Beijing Gifts” shops across the city, large and small, visitors can often find a display plate featuring charming bristle dolls standing upright. These finely crafted figures

evoke a sense of the boundless workmanship and emotion they embody.

Dough sculptures, one of Beijing's most beloved traditional folk toys, are as captivating as bristle dolls. Commonly known as “dough figures,” they were once a familiar sight at temple fairs. Before fascinated onlookers, artisans would skilfully shape lifelike figures of people, birds and animals. This lively demonstration never failed to draw a crowd, eager to witness the artistry and purchase these delightful handmade creations.

As a celebrated form of traditional



▲ Thumb ring



▲ Collectible walnuts



▲ A Bodhi mala bead bracelet and incense container

Beijing folk art, Beijing dough sculptures encompass several famous styles, including “Dough Sculpture Tang” and “Dough Sculpture Lang.” Using dough as their medium, artisans shape vivid portrayals of historical figures, deities and Buddhas, infusing each creation with a distinctive charm that is at once refined and deeply captivating.

The toy embodies a delightful duality. It is both “playable and appreciable.” Transforming simple food into art, dough figurines bring beauty and creativity into everyday life. Humorously nicknamed “edible ones,” they capture the playful spirit of Beijing’s children.

The Refined Tastes of Scholars

When it comes to Beijingers’ capacity for “enjoyment,” it extends far beyond childhood amusements. The playful spirit born in youth evolves over time, finding new expression in the refined pastimes of adulthood—such as having fun with walnuts, Buddhist prayer beads and purple clay teapots.

Wenwan, or cultural playthings, revolve around “maintenance.” The more they are handled, the glossier and smoother they become. Beijingers have masterfully transformed these small trinkets into expressions of culture. With patient care, walnuts can shine like red jade, while Rudraksha beads can evoke a sense of Zen.

In the hands of Beijingers, walnuts are by far the most common cultural plaything.

Collectable walnuts are no ordinary nuts. They must form a perfect pair, matching in texture, size and shape. Enjoying them requires skill and technique. A fine pair feels smooth and cool like jade, emanating a lively energy when rotated in the hand. Beijingers select walnuts that fit comfortably in the palm, spending time rubbing and rotating them. Adjusting pressure produces a pleasing, crisp sound. Originally light brown, they gradually darken with months of handling, acquiring a rich, glossy sheen. Elder Beijingers often say, “Rubbing walnuts benefits the mind.” Gentle rubbing can induce one’s inner calm.

For Beijingers, walnuts are more than mere playthings; they embody the rhythm of daily life. In places like the Temple of Earth Park or Panjiayuan Flea Market, it’s common to see elders chatting while deftly turning their walnuts in hand. When asked about the price, an elder people might smile and reply, “Not for sale. I simply enjoy them.”

Beijingers’ love of leisure has become more sophisticated, evolving from the collection of walnuts to the appreciation of Buddhist prayer beads.

Though seemingly simple, Buddhist prayer beads, whether Bodhi or Rudraksha, reflect the collector’s discernment. Once used as ritual tools for counting recitations, they have become spiritual sanctuaries of

their collectors. Rubbing the beads is not only a habit but also a mindful practice, a pursuit of inner peace found in their steady, rhythmic motion.

Rudraksha mala bracelets, recognisable by their distinctive angular form, develop a deep sheen and smooth texture through prolonged rubbing. The dotted patterns carry a profound symbolism, embodying the phrase, “If the moon does not rest, neither do I; if the stars do not rest, neither do I.” Especially cherished by scholars, the act of gently rubbing the beads transfers the warmth of the hand to them, fostering a sense of serenity and focus with every turn.

Younger generations also enjoy mala beads, though their preferences reflect more individual tastes. Some favour verawood bracelets paired with amber, while others choose phoenix eye Bodhi seeds or pure amber strands. These pieces blend modern style with timeless appeal. Shops in Nanluoguxiang and Shichahai offer an array of options. When asked about a lustrous strand, a vendor smiled and said, “No oil matches the warmth of the hand.”

While walnuts and Buddhist prayer beads offer a quiet way to cultivate peace of mind, thumb rings and purple clay teapots add an extra layer of refinement and gracefulness.

Originally used in archery to protect the thumb when drawing the bow, thumb rings gradually evolved into cultural ornaments admired by scholars and literati. The Manchu people of the Qing Dynasty wore them widely, even in daily life. These rings are typically made from jade, agate or sandalwood, each with its own appeal. Jade rings are treasured not only for their value but also for the way they reflect the wearer’s character.

Among the many cultural playthings, purple clay teapots stand out as the most distinctive. They serve a dual role of brewing tea and providing leisurely enjoyment. Often called “breathing artworks,” these teapots gradually take on a soft sheen as tea seeps into the clay, giving them a jade-like glow over time. Beijingers treasure their teapots and take great joy in their care. A pot long



▲ A birdcage hangs outdoors



▲ Purple clay teapot

used and well-loved develops a mellow lustre, seeming to harmonise with its owner’s spirit. Cradling a pot of fragrant tea and watching light dance across its surface is, in itself, to savour time’s gentlest flow.

Beyond static objects, the world of cultural playthings also includes a more dynamic pursuit—bird keeping.

Beijingers have long held a fondness for birds, displaying a special passion for keeping them. Birdcages are more than mere enclosures—they offer a glimpse into the leisure activities favoured by older generations of Beijingers. During the Qing Dynasty, birdcage craftsmanship reached its height, turning them into exquisite works of art. Even today, senior Beijingers can often be seen strolling through the hutongs, carrying their finely crafted cages or hanging them

along alley walls, as the joyful songs of their birds drift through the tranquil air.

The tradition of keeping birds and taking them out for strolls has long been an established cultural tradition. To some extent, a person’s birds and their ornate cages also reflect their cultural identity and aesthetic taste. In parks, enthusiasts gather to enjoy the melodious chirping while exchanging insights on bird care.

The cultural playthings of Beijing, though seemingly mere amusements, actually nurture one’s state of mind. Beijingers devote time to caring for these objects, which in turn subtly shape and refine their owners.

Today, this spirit of playful engagement is being renewed and wholeheartedly embraced by younger generations.



▲ MOLLY

A Realm of Trendy Toys

While children's toys and traditional cultural playthings reflect the spirit of old Beijing, trendy toys mark its evolution and continuation in the modern age.

Today's young Beijingers have carried this playful spirit into new territory—creating their own unique “world of playthings” through collectable toys and blind boxes.

When it comes to the most popular amusements among young Beijingers today, blind boxes are undeniably at the forefront. Shopping centres in Wangfujing, Sanlitun and Xidan are home to numerous shops filled with colourful displays of these boxes. Lined neatly on the shelves are identical, sealed packages from brands such as POP MART, each one hiding a delightful surprise waiting to be revealed.

Founded in Beijing, POP MART has risen to international prominence within just a decade. The brand transforms toys into a form of art, turning “play” into a lifestyle. Figurines such as MOLLY, DIMOO and LABUBU, with their charming and distinct

▲ POP LAND

designs, have become enduring icons of global collectable culture.

Young Beijingers are captivated by blind boxes, drawn not only to their adorable contents but also to the lasting sense of anticipation they inspire. An unopened blind box mirrors the unpredictability of life itself. Once opened, whatever the outcome, the emotions it evokes are sincere. For today's urban dwellers, the “surprise” of unboxing offers a brief yet cherished moment of delight.

At POP MART's POP LAND in Chaoyang Park, this sense of anticipation reaches its peak. Covering over 40,000 square metres, the park invites visitors into a fully immersive world. Attractions such as MOLLY Castle, the LABUBU Adventure Forest, a whimsical realm inspired by THE MONSTERS family and The Yum Explorer at the DIMOO Yacht Restaurant allow guests to revel in themed experiences. Here, trendy toys become an amusement park and a distinctive expression of urban culture.

Adding to the excitement are the “Beijing Limited Editions.” POP MART often releases blind boxes featuring LABUBU plush toys and pendants available exclusively at POP LAND or select Beijing outlets.

Unlike the standard vinyl figures, these plush versions offer a softer, more inviting tactile experience. The limited editions not only attract avid collectors but also leave visitors with the satisfying sense of having discovered something truly special.

While POP MART sparks amusement, LEGO inspires creativity and reflection. At Beijing's LEGO flagship store, visitors of all ages immerse themselves in building—each brick a connection, each model a memory. The 2022 LEGO Beijing Postcard set vividly captures the city's skyline with miniature landmarks such as the Great Wall and the Summer Palace, adorned with cloud motifs and Chinese character decals. This three-dimensional set, infused with the charm of the ancient capital, invites imaginative display and serves as a tangible, memorable souvenir.

The craze for collectable toys in Beijing is not simply an imported trend; it has deep local roots and a character all its own.

Beijing's 798 Art District and Caochangdi are home to thriving toy studios where designers devote themselves to meticulously crafting contemporary collectibles. Though distinct from traditional crafts such as dough figurines or kite



▲ A LEGO toy

tradition. As one designer put it, “Beijing is both an ancient and a modern city. Our role is to create a dialogue between tradition and contemporary trends through toys.”

Collectable toys featuring traditional Chinese motifs can also be found in the cultural and creative shops of Beijing's major museums such as the National Museum of China and the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing. Ancient bronze artefacts are reimagined as whimsical little monsters, while Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) brick reliefs inspire blind box designs. Visitors can take these creations home both as souvenirs and memorable cultural experiences.

Collaborations between time-honoured brands and trendy toys are

cake” and persimmon cake.

Beijing artfully transforms its rich traditions and culture into a wide range of new creations, marked by subtlety and refinement.

Trendy toys, though seemingly playful, carry deeper meaning. They help people reconnect with their inner child or find comfort in the act of collecting—a modern reflection of “rubbing walnuts” or “flying kites.”

Cultivating inner serenity through play and expressing one's spirit in fine detail represents the most refined form of “delight” that Beijing offers. These vibrant, emotionally resonant and engaging trinkets are, indeed, among the most pleasing gifts bestowed by this city.

▼ Cultural and creative stalls at 798 Art District



making, their work draws deeply from Beijing's cultural heritage. Some artists blend Peking Opera facial makeup into modern designs, while others transform hutong door knockers, bronze lions and palace lanterns into endearing cartoon figures. Even the lattice windows of traditional courtyards find new life as creative backdrops for souvenirs. These stylish, modern creations carry profound cultural significance.

These designers see trendy toys not only as amusements, but also as forms of self-expression. Their creations appeal across generations and are unconstrained by

creating fresh styles. Daoxiangcun's Store No. Zero, known for its culturally inspired dim sum, has become popular among young people, resembling a small cultural museum. Its “Treasure Hunt” blind boxes feature dim sum shaped like bronze artefacts such as tripods and phoenix-patterned ewers, evoking discovery and surprise. Designs draw on Beijing culture, like the “hutong doorplate cake” with a specific address, “No. 152, Dongsì North Street,” or the “dragon-head door ring cake” with hazelnut filling. Other creations include the “gate pier with lion decorations



► Cultural and creative products at the Capital Museum of China

Refined Ancient Charms Enhance Modern Life

Text by Zhang Jian

Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Zhao Shuhua, Feng Yongguo

The Beijing Eight Imperial Handicrafts, iconic emblems of the city's intangible cultural heritage, represent enduring gifts to the world, with cycles of both prominence and decline. Once reserved exclusively for the imperial family, these exquisite crafts were seldom seen by ordinary people. At one point, they faced a severe downturn, coming close to being lost to history. However, these remarkable crafts are now experiencing a revival. In a revitalised form, they are proudly displayed in museums and made accessible to the public. They have become a fashionable aesthetic among younger generations and have been transformed into esteemed state gifts, gracing the global stage with their unique artistry.

Having evolved from treasures of the imperial court into cherished "Beijing Gifts," the Eight Imperial Handicrafts proudly declare to the world that Beijing continues to be a city of exceptional craftsmanship, radiating timeless vitality through its enduring artistry.

Art of the Imperial Court

Beijing, formerly known as “Yanjing” among other names,” boasts over 3,000 years of urban history and more than eight centuries as a capital, long serving as a gathering place for exceptional talents, including skilled artisans. During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the demands of imperial life and court etiquette led to the creation of 12 supervisory agencies, 4 divisions and 8 bureaus, collectively known as the “24 government offices.” In the early Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), Emperor Kangxi (reign: 1661–1722) established the Imperial Workshop of the Court, attracting the nation’s most skilled craftspeople to Beijing and nurturing a distinctive imperial artistic style. The workshop eventually grew to include 42 sub-workshops and more than 200 master artisans. By blending regional folk traditions with imperial craftsmanship, they forged a uniquely refined aesthetic. The Beijing Eight Imperial Handicrafts, also called the “Eight Wonders of Yanjing,” stand as a testament to this legacy and showcase the refined skills that defined the era’s imperial artistry.

The Eight Imperial Handicrafts are filigree inlay, cloisonné enamel, ivory carving, jade carving, carved lacquer, gold lacquer inlay, Beijing embroidery and palace carpets.

Filigree inlay holds the most esteemed position among the Eight Imperial Handicrafts. With deep historical roots, this craft was predominantly employed in the creation of imperial adornments. From the majestic crowns of emperors and the delicate hair ornaments



▲ Gold lacquer inlaid eight auspicious symbols box set

of empresses to the ornate golden belts worn by dukes, generals and ministers, filigree inlay was an essential feature of aristocratic life in ancient China.

The creation of a filigree inlay piece requires over 20 steps. Gold threads, finer than a strand of hair, are intricately woven into elaborate patterns and then embellished with gemstones, jade or vibrant bird feathers. The result is a work of dazzling brilliance that perfectly embodies the splendour of the imperial court. A remarkable example of this artistry is the Golden-threaded Yishan Crown of Emperor Wanli (reign: 1573–1620) from the Ming Dynasty.

Among the Eight Imperial Handicrafts, both cloisonné enamel and filigree inlay were regarded as imperial techniques. While filigree inlay was closely associated with the emperor’s personal accoutrements, cloisonné enamel was primarily used for crafting household furnishings and ritualistic artefacts.

Cloisonné, also known as copper-wire enamel, originated in the Arabic and Persian regions and was introduced to China during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). After merging with native Chinese bronze and ceramic techniques, it achieved its zenith during the Jingtai period (1450–1457) of the Ming Dynasty. The craft reached exceptional heights in artistry, distinguished by its refined forms, intricate motifs and rich colour palettes. Notably, new advancements in blue glazes, including sky blue, cobalt blue and sapphire blue, became the dominant tones, leading to the designation of this distinctive hue as “Jingtai blue.”

The core technique in cloisonné involves the precise structuring of copper wires. Fine, pliable copper strands are expertly shaped to trace the design’s outline and carefully fixed onto a copper base, forming elegant, fluid contours. The enclosed spaces are then filled with colourful enamel glazes. After this, the piece undergoes firing, polishing and gold plating. This complex production process encompasses over 100 individual steps, where any lapse in quality at any stage can jeopardise the work’s perfection, preventing it from achieving its intended exquisite effect.

Cloisonné is admired not only for its intricate lines and vivid hues but also for its unique three-dimensional texture and significant ornamental appeal. Whether crafted into a vase, plate, box, lamp or incense burner, each piece embodies both considerable practical utility and profound artistic merit.

Lacquerware is another brilliant treasure among the Eight Imperial Handicrafts. Beijing’s lacquerware tradition began developing as early as the Tang (AD 618–907) and Song (AD 960–1279) dynasties. During the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, master artisans from across China gathered in the capital, enabling the city to absorb and refine the best regional techniques. This convergence elevated Beijing lacquerware to its peak, securing its unrivalled status in the nation’s lacquerware craft.

Within Beijing’s lacquerware repertoire, carved lacquer and gold lacquer inlay stand out as the most influential and

accomplished forms. The creation of carved lacquer is a predominantly manual undertaking, proceeding through seven principal stages: forming the base, applying successive layers of lacquer, painting, intricate engraving, careful polishing and associated finishing, supported by over 150 smaller, detailed steps. Its artistic repertoire is expansive, embracing as many as 1,000 distinct patterns and designs. Building upon classical craftsmanship while incorporating inlay techniques, artisans bring forth innovative carved lacquers with renewed vitality. The range of Beijing carved lacquer is notably diverse, encompassing replicas of ancient bronze vessels, three-dimensional animal forms, models of traditional architecture and refined everyday items such as boxes, bottles and screens.

Gold lacquer inlay represents another pinnacle of Beijing’s lacquerware craftsmanship. Originating in the Yuan Dynasty and flourishing during the Ming and Qing dynasties, this technique possesses a long and illustrious history. The term “gold lacquer” historically referred to natural lacquer in certain ancient Chinese regions. The Ming Dynasty compilation *Xiushi Lu* explains: “Yellow lacquer is termed ‘gold lacquer,’ but the public calls lacquer mixed with gold powder ‘gold lacquer.’ Lacquerware painted with gold powder is therefore known

as gold lacquerware.” The most common creations include screens, tables and desks. This technique seamlessly integrates painting with relief carving, building layered patterns on a lacquer base before inlaying gold and silver foil, which is finally coated with a layer of clear lacquer. The resulting effect is a resplendent and magnificent scene revealed beneath the surface, offering a refined artistic presentation.

Beijing ivory carving, which originated in the imperial courts of the Ming and Qing dynasties, is renowned for its elegant, solemn style and exquisite craftsmanship. Artisans delicately engrave intricate motifs on ivory surfaces, depicting flowers, figures, pavilions and animals. Owing to ivory’s natural curvature, texture and lustre, flat surfaces are transformed into vivid three-dimensional compositions. This artistry imbues creations with remarkable vivacity, from the layered delicacy of peony petals and the intricate latticework of pavilion windows to the fluid, elegant folds of garments. Through this mastery of detail and depth, the viewer is seemingly transported into the very world conjured by the carving.

However, the ivory trade has devastated African elephant populations over the past 50 years, leaving only an estimated 415,000 individuals, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature. Since 2009, illegal trading has intensified, pushing elephants into one of their most severe survival crises, as documented by the Elephant Trade Information System. In response, China’s State Council issued a directive on December 30, 2016, ordering the gradual cessation of ivory processing and sales. By December 31, 2017, China had fully prohibited the trade and circulation of ivory products. As a result, these unique artistic skills are now exclusively preserved for appreciation within museums.

Similar to ivory carving, the creation of Beijing jade carving is an intricately detailed process with deep historical significance. The “Jade Carving Workshops”—a series of 12 paintings by Qing Dynasty artist Li Chengyuan—offers a vivid glimpse into Beijing’s jade carving studios of the time. Beijing jade carving encompasses a diverse range of works, from grand decorative pieces such as screens and tables to smaller items like seals and pendants. Each reflects the exquisite artistry and refined taste once favoured by the imperial court. Larger creations often feature layered reliefs that create depth and dimension, taking advantage of the jade’s natural texture and subtle hues. The scenes carved may depict landscapes, figures, flora, fauna or birds. Smaller pieces, meanwhile, emphasise refinement and precision, with every line and motif pursued to perfection—a testament to the artisan’s meticulous craftsmanship and aesthetic mastery.

Beijing embroidery, also referred to as palace embroidery, is widely regarded as the pinnacle of the craft. Distinguished by compositions that are rich yet uncluttered, it features dignified forms and an elegant, balanced palette. Artisans typically use fine silk threads, enhanced with gold and silver, to achieve intricate details through techniques such as cord stitch, knot stitch and plain stitch. The fusion of these lustrous threads infuses motifs of flowers, birds, dragons and phoenixes with radiant depth and vitality,

▼ Carved lacquer





▲ A filigree-inlaid horse and other jewellery

giving each piece a refined brilliance and an almost lifelike energy that exemplifies the grace of imperial craftsmanship.

Beijing embroidery is distinguished not only for its precision and craftsmanship but also for its masterful use of colour. Historically, imperial embroidery pieces were created on silk or satin bases, adorned with silk, gold and silver threads and occasionally sequins. This combination enabled artisans to achieve remarkable depth and radiance through subtle contrasts of hue and sheen. The dominant palette featured rich reds, yellows, greens and blues, complemented by softer transitional tones, resulting in an aesthetic that was elegant, luxurious and harmoniously balanced. Today, Beijing embroidery continues to adorn garments and shawls, as well as home furnishings such as screens, curtains and tablecloths.

A vital representative of Ming and Qing dynasty court artistry, the palace carpet, like Beijing embroidery, focuses on decorative embellishments and colour harmony. Palace carpets feature an exceptionally rich variety of patterns, with symmetry and balance regarded as essential throughout the design process. By using colour gradients, layered patterns and sectional arrangements, each piece achieves a sense of order and aesthetic appeal. The main colours include red, blue, yellow and green, and are often enhanced by lighter transitional tones, creating an overall effect that is both grand and harmonious.

Beyond their formal beauty, palace carpets hold profound cultural meaning. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, they were mainly used in important areas such as main halls and bedrooms, with motifs symbolising good fortune, dignity and power. The making of a palace carpet is a painstaking and time-consuming process, often requiring months or even years to complete one piece. Each of the Eight Imperial Handicrafts reflects the enduring charm of imperial court art. Over time, these handicrafts, once resplendent within the palace walls, have not faded into history.

▼ A filigree-inlaid flying dragon



Beyond the Imperial Palace Walls

The Beijing Eight Imperial Handicrafts, once exclusive treasures of the court, now represent more than the city's craftsmanship. Listed as part of China Intangible Cultural Heritage, these exquisite works, rooted in ancient techniques, are preserved in museums and woven into everyday life, continuing to tell the story of Beijing's artisanal spirit.

The Beijing Eight Imperial Handicrafts Museum stands as a vivid reflection of this transformation. Housed within Cheng'en Temple, originally built during the Zhengde period (1506–1521) of the Ming Dynasty, the museum features nine exhibition halls and a physical bookstore arranged according to the temple's layout, displaying hundreds of exquisite imperial artworks.

Upon entering, visitors are immediately drawn to a magnificent gold lacquer inlay screen, its soaring dragon motifs once adorning the VIP lounge of Beijing's National Aquatic Centre (the "Water Cube") during the 2014 APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting. Further inside, silver-ingot-shaped boxes decorated with eight auspicious symbols sit alongside a cloisonné enamel masterpiece depicting "three rams bringing bliss," together evoking completeness and good fortune. The Ming Dynasty carved lacquer



▲ A cloisonné enamel piece

"dragon plate" powerfully showcases the depth and precision of this art form. Nearby, a Qing Dynasty jade carving of "Avalokitesvara," a Beijing embroidery "dragon robe" and a palace carpet titled "Prosperity" complete the display.

Departing from tradition, the museum includes master studios where visitors can observe artisans demonstrating ancient techniques such as copper wire shaping, enamel filling and carved lacquer work in real time, bringing these ancient crafts vividly to life. Visitors are also invited to participate hands-on, creating their own personalised keepsakes while developing a deeper appreciation for the skill and artistry behind the imperial handicrafts.

The museum's cultural and creative shop offers a captivating window into the revival of traditional craftsmanship. Among its highlights is a beautifully carved lacquer bead brooch, an elegant emblem of autumn, that adds a touch of sophistication to coats, jumpers or scarves. Here, ancient carved lacquer artistry is seamlessly fused with contemporary design, reinterpreted in jewellery boxes, phone covers and other

daily objects. Their refined patterns and soft, lustrous finish exude understated beauty. Delicate cloisonné bracelets and radiant gold lacquer inlay ornaments, shimmering in a play of colour, further enchant visitors. Each "Beijing Gifts" item is a modern reimagining of the Eight Imperial Handicrafts, their allure nearly impossible to resist.

To delve deeper into the history of cloisonné enamel, visitors should not miss the Cloisonné Art Museum of China on Anlelin Road in Dongcheng District.

Located within the Beijing Enamel Factory Co., Ltd, the museum opened to the public in 2012 and features cloisonné masterpieces from various historical periods on its third floor. Notable exhibits include replicas of the bronze carriage unearthed from the Shihuang Tomb of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC) and the "Zun of Peace." In addition to admiring these remarkable works, visitors can also observe the entire cloisonné-making process firsthand.

On the first floor, the museum features a cultural and creative centre where visitors can design their own cloisonné plates.

The Beijing Gold Lacquer Inlay Art Museum is a prominent showcase of intangible cultural heritage in Chaoyang District. It displays tools, design drafts and over 300 exquisite works of carving, painting and inlay art, allowing visitors to appreciate the craftsmanship up close.

Through their efforts, museums have transformed the Eight Imperial Handicrafts from

exclusive treasures of the imperial court into cultural assets appreciated by all.

Cloisonné enamel stands at the forefront of this revival. At the Jingfa Art Garden Workshop Store, located behind the Cloisonné Art Museum of China, visitors encounter a dazzling array of creations, from large statement pieces to smaller delights such as earrings, necklaces, tea sets, bookmarks, stationery and clocks. The vivid colours and lively designs never fail to captivate visitors, adding a delightful touch of joy to everyday life.

Since 1992, Beijing Enamel Factory Co., Ltd has championed

▼ A cloisonné enamel piece titled "Three Rams Bringing Bliss"



▼ The making of cloisonné enamel art



the idea of “keeping pace with the times and embracing everyday life,” a concept favoured by younger generations. By fusing European and American art with abstract lines and modern forms, cloisonné enamel has evolved from an imperial craft into one with global appeal. Departing from its traditional palette, it now features bold contrasts and innovative designs. Over three decades of innovation have seamlessly integrated this ancient art into the fabric of urban fashion.

In the Cloisonné Art Museum’s craft interaction area, visitors can try their hand at wire shaping and enamel filling. After firing at high temperatures, the glaze melts into a smooth, lustrous finish once polished. This hands-on process reveals that art truly lies within reach. Before leaving, guests can take home their handcrafted bookmarks—small yet meaningful mementoes capturing the joy of engaging with intangible cultural heritage.

Another imperial craft, gold lacquer inlay, has also adapted creatively to contemporary trends. Next to the Beijing Gold Lacquer Inlay Art Museum, a craft shop displays an enchanting range of small, colourful ornaments: tiger-patterned lacquer bead bracelets, mother-of-pearl

inlaid jewellery boxes, brooches adorned with lacquer beads and more. Though compact, each piece is crafted with remarkable intricacy.

Filigree inlay is finding renewed expression in modern design. At the Beijing Dongfang Yizhen Filigree Inlay Base in Tongzhou District, visitors can admire the breathtaking all-filigree “Randeng Pagoda.” Standing 1.1 metres tall and composed of over 2,000 finely crafted parts, the piece took 22 months to complete. The result is a radiant and structurally intricate miniature pagoda—an ancient form reimagined by contemporary artisans through the delicate artistry of gold and silver filigree.

An 18K gold necklace featuring a pendant of phoenix and peony motifs gleams brilliantly. This auspicious pairing, symbolising good fortune and prosperity, is infused with contemporary flair, making it especially popular among younger consumers. It is complemented by earrings and brooches inspired by “China chic” aesthetics, alongside numerous contemporary jewellery items designed to enhance the wearer’s allure.

Carved lacquer, like cloisonné enamel and filigree inlay, is finding renewed purpose

in everyday life. Beyond grand artworks such as screens, it now adorns practical items including table lamps, plates, clock cases and even suitcases. These pieces feature smooth, durable surfaces and elegant patterns, transforming ordinary objects into expressions of artistry.

Once reserved for the imperial family within the Forbidden City, these traditional crafts have undergone a remarkable transformation. Though they retain their noble elegance, they have become increasingly accessible, now gracing shopping areas such as Wangfujing and Shichahai, as well as specialist markets. Visitors can bring these treasures home as meaningful gifts from Beijing.

As handicrafts become integrated into everyday life, they expand their reach and resonance. Their presence on the global stage allows people worldwide to discover Beijing and gain a deeper appreciation of China. Diplomatic gifts, long regarded as symbols of national image, reflect this spirit, with the Eight Imperial Handicrafts standing as proud embodiments of Chinese artistry. On important diplomatic occasions, the selection of a gift often conveys a country’s position, its friendly intentions

▼ Jade carvings



▲ Beijing embroidery

and its heartfelt sentiments.

The “Peace across the Four Seas” cloisonné vase, adorned with deep-sea blue and cloud motifs, embodied China’s wish for harmony during the 2014 APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting. Also showcased was the “China Rose” filigree inlay handbag, presented to the female spouses of the participating economies’ leaders. Merging imperial craftsmanship with contemporary design, the handbag illustrated how tradition can remain effortlessly stylish, winning appreciation for its enduring allure. While diplomatic discourse often relies on careful words, a finely crafted handbag or vase can express courtesy and sincerity with striking clarity. The cloisonné “Zun of Peace,” now housed at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, exemplifies this. Its serene blue glaze and dynamic dragon motifs convey China’s heartfelt wish for global harmony. Other notable works, including a vase adorned with floral designs and gilded handles, as well as the “Boat of Friendship,” have been exchanged with world leaders.

In their diplomatic role, the Eight Imperial Handicrafts convey grandeur imbued with depth rather than opulence. Their strength lies in symbolism, achieved through restraint rather than excess. Numerous works created with these refined techniques have accompanied pivotal national occasions. For instance, a gold lacquer inlay screen adorned with “hundred treasure” motifs in the Forbidden City’s Pavilion of Pleasant Sounds (Changyin Ge) served as the backdrop for a meeting between Chinese and



▲ The making of Beijing embroidery



▲ Detail of a palace carpet titled “Prosperity”

US leaders. Similarly, another screen, “May your life’s duration be eternally extended,” bore witness to talks between Chinese and British leaders at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. Pieces showcased at the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, distinguished by their dignified grace, quietly yet unmistakably project China’s cultural confidence.

Art extends beyond diplomacy, flourishing on the global stage of sport. During the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, China presented a piece of Beijing embroidery to International Olympic Committee President Count Jacques Rogge (1942–2021). The exquisite artwork depicts Tang Dynasty women spiritedly playing polo, their horses galloping swiftly as they wield mallets, a vivid testament that the Chinese grasped the spirit of sport long ago.

The Eight Imperial Handicrafts are undergoing a spirited revival, finding new expression in modern life. These ancient arts have adapted to contemporary tastes, blending traditional materials with relatable emotions. No longer confined to the pages of history, imperial craftsmanship now thrives among the public, seen on the subway, in shopping centres, at festivals and even on the global stage.



民族舞剧《铁道游击队》

为纪念中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利 80 周年，国家大剧院与北京舞蹈学院联合出品、制作新版经典民族舞剧《铁道游击队》，于 2025 年 11 月 26-30 日在国家大剧院 - 歌剧院上演。

这部源自文学经典、深植于民族记忆的英雄故事，将以当代舞台美学重新诠释那段铁轨上的烽火传奇，再现英雄辈出的壮丽篇章。该剧立足于真实历史，融合现代舞台表达，致力于打造一部兼具历史深度与当代审美的舞台力作。创作团队以强化叙事张力与人物塑造为核心，同时注重舞蹈语汇与舞台视觉的创新表达，力求在传承红色基因的基础上，实现艺术语言的当代转化，让这段英雄故事在今天的舞台上焕发新的感染力与生命力。

The National Dance Drama *Railway Guerrilla*

To commemorate the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War, the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) and the Beijing Dance Academy jointly present a new production of the classic national dance drama *Railway Guerrilla*. The performance will be staged at the NCPA Opera House from November 26 to 30, 2025.

Deeply ingrained in national memory, the story will be reimagined through new stage aesthetics, presenting a succession of heroic figures. The creative team is committed to crafting a production that unites historical authenticity with contemporary artistry. The work intensifies narrative engagement and character development while incorporating innovative dance and visual design. Through its artistic interpretation of the enduring revolutionary spirit, the heroic tale will resonate with contemporary audiences, carrying renewed appeal and vitality.

原创话剧《金中都》

国家大剧院将陆续推出《金中都》《元大都》《紫禁城》三部原创话剧，以“北京建都三部曲”的系列原创作品完整呈现北京从北方重镇跃升为大国之都，并最终成为举世闻名的历史文化名城的发展脉络。2025 年 12 月 13-22 日国家大剧院 - 戏剧场上演《金中都》。为探寻北京作为历史古都的文化根基与精神源流，作为三部曲的首部作品，话剧《金中都》聚焦 1153 年金朝第四任皇帝完颜亮将都城从黑龙江上京（今哈尔滨市）迁至金中都（今北京市）这一重大历史转折，首次在戏剧舞台上系统展现北京作为都城的历史开端。

The Original Drama *Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty*

The National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) will debut three original dramas: *Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty*, *Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty* and *The Forbidden City*. This trilogy traces Beijing's transformation through the ages—from a prominent northern hub to the nation's capital and, ultimately, to a globally celebrated historical and cultural metropolis. The first instalment, *Zhongdu of the Jin Dynasty*, will be staged at the NCPA Theatre from December 13 to 22, 2025. The play focuses on the pivotal year 1153, when Wanyan Liang (reign: 1149–1161), the fourth emperor of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), moved the capital from Shangjing (present-day Harbin) to Zhongdu, now Beijing. This production marks the first stage portrayal of Beijing's beginnings as a dynastic capital.

