BEIJING

北京

Postal Subscription Code 82-777

Published Monthly on the 25th Day

Issue January 2026

Telling Beijing's Stories

Treasures of the City

ISSN 2095-736X

北京
(BEIJING)
Issue 1, 2026 (Vol. 583)
Supervision
Publicity Department of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee
Sponsors
Information Office of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality
Beijing International Communication Center
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Photos Courtesy of
Xinhua News Agency; vcg.com; 58pic.com;
IC photo; tuchong.com
Distribution
The Beijing News
Address
F1, Building 10, Fahuananli, Tiyuguan Lu,
Dongcheng District, Beijing
Tel
+86 10 6715 2380
Fax
+86 10 6715 2381
Printing
Xiaosen Printing (Beijing) Co., Ltd.
Postal Subscription Code
82-777
Publishing Date
January 25, 2026
Price
38 yuan
International Standard Serial Number
ISSN 2095-736X
China National Standard Serial Number
CN10-1908/G0
E-mail
Beijingydxx@btmbeijing.net
Cover photos by
Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi, Zhao Shuhua
Contents photos by
Tong Tianyi

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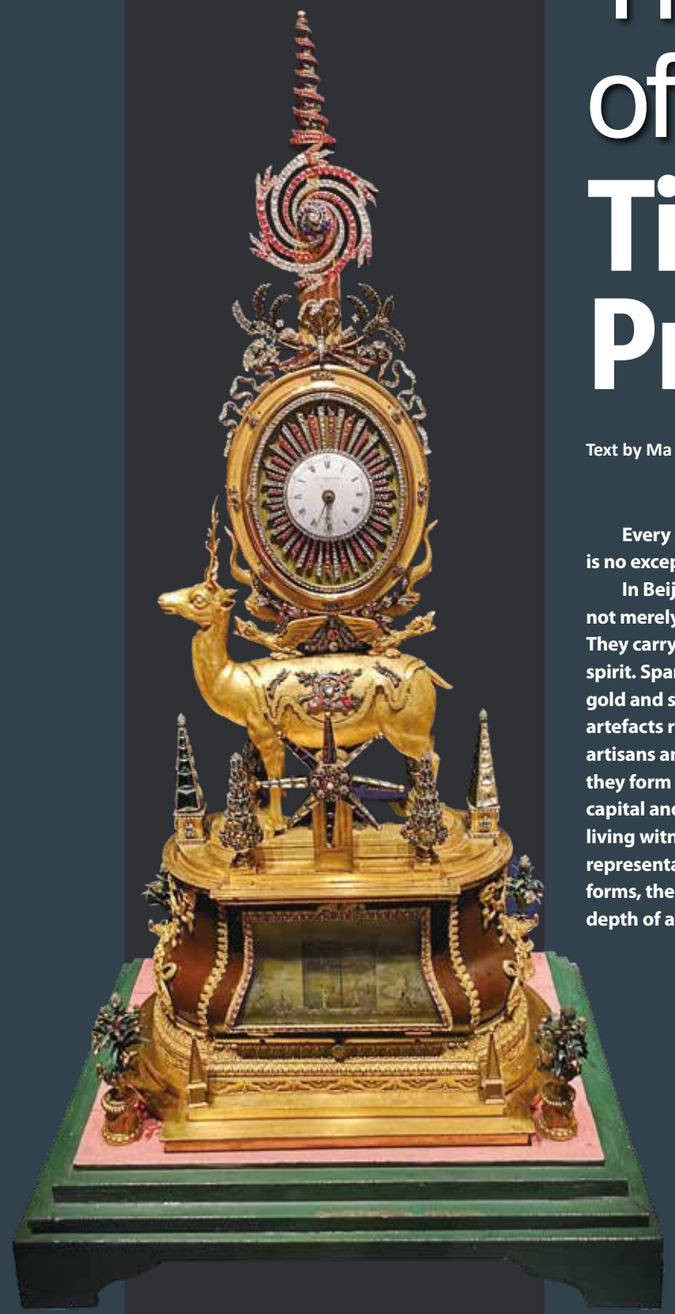


Treasures of the City: **Time Made Precious**

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Tong Tianyi

Every great city has its own unique treasures, and Beijing is no exception.

In Beijing's 3,000-year-long civilisation, artefacts emerge not merely as cultural relics but as the true treasures of the city. They carry historical memory, cultural lineage and the national spirit. Spanning categories such as bronzes, jades, ceramics, gold and silver wares, textiles, calligraphy and paintings, these artefacts reflect dynastic grandeur, embody the ingenuity of artisans and convey a profound humanistic spirit. Together, they form the spiritual foundation of Beijing as an ancient capital and cultural heartland of China. They also stand as living witnesses to Chinese civilisation and as the city's most representative cultural symbols. Through their textures and forms, the world can feel the warmth of history and grasp the depth of a civilisation.

▲ Visitors view the Figure of Avalokitesvara in Water Moon Form (Jingdezhen Ware)

▲ Boju Li (Bronze *Li* inscribed with"Boju")

The treasures of Beijing have borne witness to dynastic transitions and the unfolding of civilisation. As a world-renowned ancient capital, the city preserves imperial collections spanning multiple dynasties, together with the refined achievements of folk craftsmanship. Each artefact bears the imprint of its era and embodies the advancement of Chinese civilisation. From the ritual bronzes of the Shang (16th century–11th century BC) and Zhou (11th century–256 BC) to the imperial court treasures of the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911), these objects reveal China's institutional shifts, economic development and cultural vitality from antiquity to the modern era.

The discovery of bronze wares at the Liulihe site offers a revealing glimpse into Beijing's early history as the capital of the Yan state (11th century–222 BC). These bronzes not only exemplify the sophisticated casting techniques of the early Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century–771 BC) but also, through their inscriptions, trace the city's urban origins back more than 3,000 years. The stone sutras preserved at Shijing Mountain and Yunju Temple form another cultural marvel, often hailed as "Beijing's Dunhuang." Spanning more than a millennium, this monumental carving project—unmatched in both scale and duration—stands as a rarity in cultural history. Beijing has also produced numerous exceptional artistic treasures, among which Buddhist sculptures represents a pinnacle of artistic achievement. Temples and museums across the city house countless finely crafted statues whose dynamic forms and rich hues embody both spiritual devotion and artistic mastery. The murals of Fahai Temple mark the zenith of Ming Dynasty wall painting, rivalling the frescoes of Europe's Renaissance in artistic accomplishment. With their careful composition, intricate palette and refined brushwork, these murals possess outstanding historical, artistic and scientific value, standing as irreplaceable gems of Beijing's cultural heritage. Together, these national treasures and masterworks, spanning from the Yan state's capital to the splendour of imperial Beijing, form an unbroken thread of civilisation.

Beijing's precious artefacts embody the pinnacle of Chinese artisans' wisdom and artistic aspiration. Rooted in a long-standing tradition of craftsmanship, the city has attracted master artisans from across the country, giving rise to countless masterpieces. The making of these treasures involves a wide range of techniques, including casting, carving, firing, weaving and painting. Each craft has been refined over centuries of practice, attaining remarkable levels of artistic sophistication. From the piece-mould casting of bronzes to the intaglio and relief carving of stone sutra slabs, from carefully formulated pigments used in painted sculptures to the controlled brushwork and ink techniques of mural art, every detail reveals the ancients' spirit of innovation and unwavering dedication to craftsmanship.

The beauty of artefacts lies not only in technical mastery but also in the deliberate selection of materials. Artisans skilfully harnessed the inherent qualities of raw substances, uniting physical properties with artistic intent. The solemnity of bronze, the gentleness of jade, the simplicity of wood and the fluidity of ink were each pushed to their fullest expressive potential in the hands of master craftsmen, giving rise to distinctive artistic styles. Patterns and forms often embody aspirations for a better life, hopes for harmony and happiness, and an understanding of the universe and nature. In this way, artefacts become eloquent vessels in which refined craftsmanship converges with deeply rooted cultural values.

▲ Visitors watch a film at Fahai Temple Mural Art Centre's dome theatre

Beijing's treasures embody the spiritual aspirations and cultural sensibility of the Chinese nation. In traditional Chinese culture, artefacts have never been merely works of art or functional objects; they are infused with profound spiritual meaning. Ritual bronzes express the hierarchical order of ancient rites, the stone sutras of "Beijing's Dunhuang" stand as both an artistic and devotional miracle, and Buddhist sculptures convey an aesthetic ethos that, while shaped by religious practice, is deeply rooted in China's cultural heritage. These treasures not only reflect the inner world of Chinese civilisation but also provide enduring spiritual nourishment for future generations.

Beijing's treasured artefacts are being revitalised through the passage of time. The true value of cultural heritage lies not only in preservation but, more importantly, in transmission and active engagement. As the nation's cultural centre, Beijing has in recent years placed renewed emphasis on safeguarding and passing on its cultural relics, implementing a series of initiatives to allow them to shine again in the modern era. Conservators meticulously restore damaged relics, extending their physical presence and cultural vitality. Museums, meanwhile, through thematic exhibitions, digital presentations and the development of cultural and creative derivatives, are guiding these treasures out of storage vaults and into everyday public life, making heritage not only visible but resonant for contemporary audiences.

Digital technologies such as virtual exhibitions, high-definition imaging and three-dimensional modelling have broken through the limits of time and space, allowing audiences to engage with the city's treasures online anytime and anywhere. Carefully designed cultural and creative derivatives blend ancient artefact motifs with contemporary aesthetics, turning heritage into a trend embraced by younger generations. At the same time, a wide range of relic-themed exhibitions, lectures and educational programmes has brought cultural knowledge into schools and communities, fostering public appreciation of and identification with China's traditional culture. Through international cultural exchange initiatives, Beijing has presented these treasures on the global stage, vividly conveying the depth, breadth and distinctive allure of Chinese civilisation to the world.

Beijing's treasures stand as the most precious cultural wealth of the metropolis and luminous gems of Chinese civilisation. They bear witness to historical change, embody the wisdom and dedication of artisans across millennia and carry the spiritual aspirations of the Chinese nation. These treasures are not only Beijing's cultural calling card but also a core emblem of Chinese national identity, reminding people to honour their historical roots and uphold cultural confidence. As the nation's capital and a global centre of international exchange, Beijing also holds numerous precious state gifts from around the world. These gifts stand as vivid symbols of international friendship and mutual learning among civilisations, enriching the city's cultural treasures with an inclusive and cosmopolitan dimension.

In the journey of the new era, it is our shared responsibility and mission to protect, inherit and make active use of these cultural treasures. Taking artefacts as a medium, we draw wisdom from history and carry forward our cultural genes. We strive to ensure that Beijing's urban treasures continue to shine in the contemporary age, that the flame of Chinese civilisation is passed down from generation to generation, and that the stature and allure of Chinese culture are confidently presented to the world, ushering in a new chapter of cultural prosperity. These treasures of the city will continue to bear witness to Beijing's development, serving as enduring bonds linking the past, present and future, and gleaming within the vast constellation of Chinese civilisation.

Bronzes: A Testament to an Enduring Civilisation

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhao Shuhua

In 2025, following the inclusion of the Liulihe relic site in Fangshan District, Beijing, among China's top 10 archaeological discoveries of 2024, its nomination for UNESCO World Heritage status was formally incorporated into Beijing's recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan. Dubbed the "origin of Beijing," this site of an enfeoffed state from the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century–771 BC) has once again ignited wide-ranging imagination about the city's 3,000 years of civilisation. Among the cultural codes revealed by this ancient city, none shine more brightly than its bronze artefacts. These bronzes symbolise the authority of the Marquis of Yan, preserve traditions of ritual and music, testify to cross-regional cultural exchange, and above all, stand as the city's most radiant treasures passed down to later generations.

In ancient China, bronze was revered as an "auspicious metal" and regarded as the most precious material during the Shang (16th century–11th century BC) and Zhou (11th century–256 BC) dynasties. The bronze artefacts unearthed at the Liulihe relic site vividly reconstruct the cultural landscape of the Yan state (11th century–222 BC) in the early Western Zhou period, providing tangible evidence of Beijing's continuous urban history spanning more than 3,000 years.

Name: Jin Ding
Housed at: The Capital Museum
Period: Early Western Zhou Dynasty
Dimensions: Height: 62 centimetres (cm);
Rim diameter: 47 cm; Weight: 41.5 kilograms (kg)
Year of Unearthing: 1974

Ding and *Li*: A Perfect Pair Representing Strength and Beauty

Within the ritual and music system of the Western Zhou Dynasty, *ding* (three-legged round or four-legged rectangular vessels) and *li* (tripod cooking vessels) functioned not only as essential items but also as key instruments in ceremonial practice. Among the bronze artefacts unearthed at the Liulihe relic site, the Jin Ding and the Boju Li are widely regarded as outstanding masterpieces of their respective forms. Today, both are preserved in the Capital Museum, where they are counted among its most treasured possessions.

In 1974, a massive bronze *ding* was unearthed from Tomb M253 at the Liulihe relic site, causing a sensation within the archaeological community. Known as the Jin Ding, it is the largest and heaviest bronze ritual vessel ever discovered in Beijing and is justly hailed as the "colossus" of the city's bronze artefacts. At first glance, the vessel inspires awe with its imposing yet dignified presence: a folded rim with a square lip, a slightly inward-curving mouth, a pair of upright straight handles, a full, rounded belly and three robust beast-hoof feet that provide firm support. Its form is striking in its restraint and meticulous balance, free of excessive ornamentation yet imbued with a solemn grandeur. Notably, its stylistic features closely mirror those of *ding* vessels unearthed at Shang and Zhou sites along the Yellow River, offering compelling material evidence of the deep cultural connections between the region that makes up today's Beijing and the Central Plains more than 3,000 years ago.

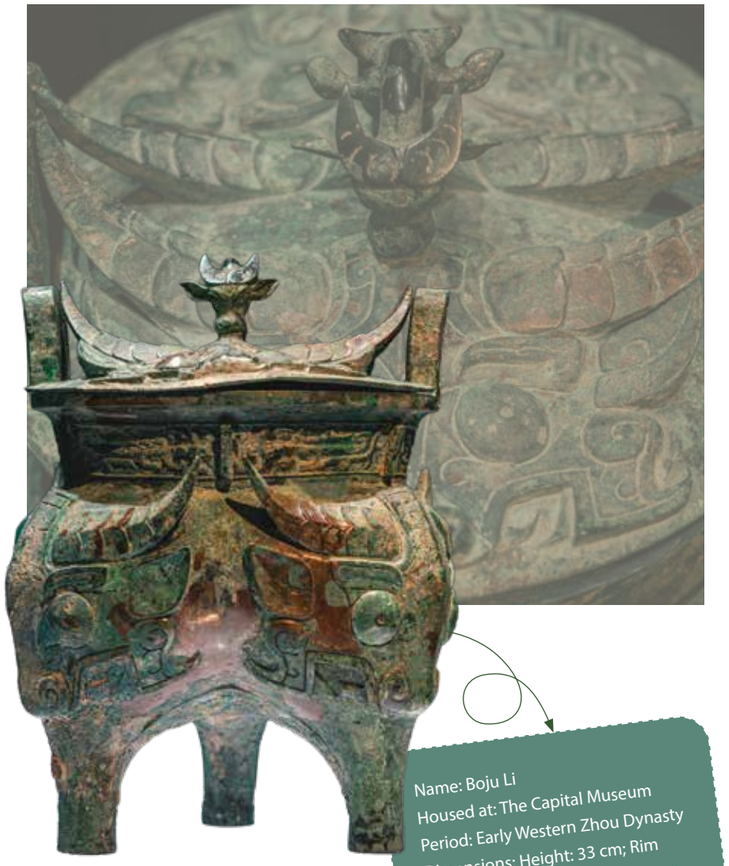
Though lacking intricate overall ornamentation, the decoration of the Jin Ding reveals meticulous craftsmanship in every detail. The outer faces of its two upright handles are adorned with a pair of graceful Kui dragon motifs, their heads turned inward toward the centre. Just below the rim runs a decorative band composed of six beast motifs, each symmetrically arranged around a raised central ridge that forms the nose and forehead, with bulging eyes and faintly exposed fangs. These designs retain the mysterious, awe-inspiring intensity characteristic of Shang Dynasty bronzes, while also imparting the refined elegance typical of the early Western Zhou Dynasty. At the base of each of the three massive beast-hoof-shaped feet, simplified beast-face patterns appear, accentuated by three raised bands that lend the already weighty legs an even stronger sense of solidity and power. Every motif on the Jin Ding adheres strictly to the ritual and musical codes of the Western Zhou Dynasty. Far from serving as mere decoration, these carefully carved designs formed a visual language, proclaiming the exalted status and noble lineage of the tomb's occupant.

The true value of the Jin Ding lies not only in its imposing scale but, more importantly, in the 26-character inscription cast on its inner wall, a milestone in Beijing's recorded history. The inscription recounts how the Marquis of Yan dispatched a nobleman named Jin to the Western Zhou capital, present-day Xi'an in Shaanxi Province, to present food offerings to the Duke of Shao (year of birth unknown, died circa 1000 BC). On the day of Gengshen, the duke acknowledged Jin's service and rewarded him with cowrie shells. To commemorate this distinguished favour, Jin used the bestowed shells to finance the casting of the *ding* itself.

From a technical perspective, the Jin Ding represents the pinnacle of bronze-casting technology in the early Western Zhou Dynasty. Three shallow circular indentations on the interior base, each precisely aligned with one of the vessel's three legs, mark the points where pins were used to secure the inner core during casting, reflecting both structural foresight and the artisans' exacting calculations. Producing such a massive bronze vessel required the assembly of multiple ceramic moulds, and every stage—from mould preparation and bronze smelting to pouring and finishing—demanded exceptional technical skill and closely coordinated teamwork. The successful creation of the Jin Ding not only confirms that the Yan state in the early Western Zhou had already developed large-scale mining and bronze-casting industries, but also demonstrates that the Beijing region had, by this time, attained a highly advanced level of material civilisation.

The Jin Ding is far more than a bronze vessel. It stands as a monumental testament to history, embodying the founding chapter of Beijing's more than 3,000-year urban legacy and bearing witness to the successful implementation of the Zhou Dynasty's enfeoffment system along its northern border area.

▼ Jin Ding (Bronze *Ding* Tripod Inscribed by Jin)



Name: Boju Li
Housed at: The Capital Museum
Period: Early Western Zhou Dynasty
Dimensions: Height: 33 cm; Rim diameter: 22.9 cm; Belly diameter: 24.2 cm; Weight: 7,500 grams (g)
Year of Unearthing: 1974

In contrast to the imposing grandeur of the Jin Ding, the Boju Li—also unearthed at the Liulihe relic site—represents a pinnacle of Western Zhou bronze artistry and is renowned for its exquisitely intricate decoration. Covered entirely with vivid, animated ox-horned beast motifs, the Boju Li has earned the epithet "treasure of bronze art" and has been designated a national treasure of the highest order, listed among China's cultural relics prohibited from overseas exhibition.

The breathtaking artistry of the Boju Li lies in its seven meticulously rendered ox-horned beast motifs, each distinct in form and expression. Atop the lid, the knob is shaped as two three-dimensional miniature ox-headed creatures standing back-to-back, their ears gently drooping in soft, fluid curves that almost suggest tactile softness. On either side of the lid surface, a beast head in relief rises prominently, each crowned with gracefully upturned ox horns adorned with raised, scale-like patterns, with mouths slightly agape to reveal four sharp fangs that radiate solemn authority. The true masterpiece, however, is found in the vessel's three bag-shaped legs, each dominated by a boldly sculpted ox head facing a different direction. These heads are substantial in scale, their horns dramatically flared outward and so exuberant they seem poised to press beyond the vessel's physical confines, creating a striking sense of three-dimensional dynamism.

The ox-horned beast motifs on the Boju Li exemplify a masterful synthesis of relief carving and fully rounded sculpture, producing rich visual layers and striking three-dimensionality. This emphasis on animal imagery can be traced back to bronze traditions of the Shang Dynasty.

The origin of the Boju Li is further clarified by its inscription. Identical 15-character texts are cast on both the inner surface of the lid and the interior of the vessel's neck. The inscription records that, on the auspicious day of Wuchen, the Marquis of Yan bestowed a gift of valuable cowrie shells upon the nobleman Boju, who then used this reward to cast the bronze *li* as a ritual vessel in honour of his deceased father, named "Wu."

At a Liulihe relic site-themed exhibition held at the Capital Museum in 2025, the Boju Li was presented in a dedicated display case, a singular honour that underscored its importance. Modest in scale yet extraordinary in impact,

this bronze *li* transcends its function as a ritual vessel to stand as a true artistic masterpiece. It brings together technical virtuosity and aesthetic brilliance, while interweaving symbols of political authority with profound spiritual belief, ultimately emerging as an iconic embodiment of the Yan state's bronze culture in the early Western Zhou Dynasty.

▲ Bronze *Ding* Food Vessel Inscribed with "Zuo Ce Huan"

▲ Bronze *You* Wine Vessel Inscribed with "Zuo Ce Huan"

▲ Bronze *Zhi* Wine Vessel Inscribed with "Zuo Ce Huan"

The History of City-Building Hidden in Bronze Inscriptions

The bronze ensemble known as Zuo Ce Huan, unearthed from Tomb M1902 at the Liulihe relic site, has revealed a core insight into the founding of the Yan state's capital during the Western Zhou Dynasty. This discovery played a pivotal role in securing the Liulihe relic site a place among China's top 10 archaeological discoveries of 2024. Most significantly, seven identical inscriptions, cast on the interiors, bases and lids of five bronze vessels, bear the four-character phrase "*tai bao yong yan*" (literally, "The Grand Protector built the walls of Yan"). These words fill a critical gap in historical records related to Bronze Age urban planning and provide concrete epigraphic evidence that Beijing's continuous urban history began more than 3,000 years ago.

It has been said that "Important things must be stressed three times," yet more than 3,000 years ago, the people of Yan considered the event of "*tai bao yong yan*" so momentous that they recorded it seven times. Although repeated inscriptions on Western Zhou bronzes are not unprecedented, the extraordinary frequency of seven castings highlights the event's exceptional significance at the time. The Zuo Ce Huan bronze ensemble, comprising five ritual vessels, namely a *zun* (wine vessel), a *you* (handled wine container), a *jue* (tripod vessel for warming wine), a *zhi* (wine cup) and a *ding*, may not display the most elaborate forms or the costliest workmanship. Yet it is precisely these repeated inscriptions that elevate the set to a "heavyweight" archaeological discovery, anchoring Beijing's 3,000-year urban legacy in tangible and authoritative textual evidence.

The occupant of the tomb containing the Zuo Ce Huan bronze ensemble was named "Huan," with "Zuo Ce" denoting his official title. During the Western Zhou period, a Zuo Ce served as an officer responsible for recording royal affairs, drafting official documents and overseeing ritual ceremonies, functions comparable to those of a scribe or historiographer. It was this very "scribe" who, through meticulously cast inscriptions, bequeathed to later generations an invaluable firsthand record of the founding and construction of the Yan state's capital.

Tomb M1902 is a small noble burial, measuring seven square metres (sq.m) in area, yet it yielded one of the most significant bronze assemblages in recent archaeological research. In 2021, as excavation team members carefully moved the bronzes indoors for cleaning, a moment of revelation occurred when they lifted the lid of a bronze *you* vessel. Clear inscriptions on both the inner lid and the interior base bore the unmistakable characters, "*tai bao yong yan*." As cleaning progressed, the team discovered that the same inscription appeared not only on the *you*, but also on the accompanying *zun*, *jue, zhi* and *ding*, seven times in total across the vessels. This deliberate repetition reveals just how deeply the tomb's occupant, Huan, valued this historical event. "*Tai bao yong yan*" was not merely a record of the past, but his most treasured memory and the central message he sought to pass down through time.

Though only four characters, the inscription "*tai bao yong yan*" carries profound historical weight, and its discovery marks a watershed moment in Chinese archaeology. While *Records of the Grand Historian* states that "King Wu of Zhou (year of birth unknown, died circa 1043 BC) enfeoffed the Duke of Shao in Beiyan after ousting King Zhou of Shang (died 1046 BC)," scholars long debated whether the Duke of Shao, also known as the "Grand Protector," ever personally travelled to the Yan region on the northern frontier. The inscription on the Zuo Ce Huan bronzes decisively resolves this question. It confirms that the Duke of Shao did journey to the Yan state and personally oversaw the construction of its capital, providing the earliest known documentary evidence of Beijing's urban origins. The inscription offers further detail. It records that after the city walls were completed, the Grand Protector conducted a ritual ceremony at the palace of the Marquis of Yan and bestowed cowrie-shell currency upon Huan, the scribe. Huan then used these very shells to fund the casting of the bronze ensemble, both as an expression of gratitude to the Grand Protector and as a lasting testament to his own status and honour. Together, these vessels provide the first direct, contemporary and epigraphic proof of Beijing's continuous 3,000-year history as a city, establishing them as monumental pillars of China's urban memory.

The inscription "*tai bao yong yan*" recorded on the Zuo Ce Huan bronzes is far more than a textual account; it has been powerfully corroborated by archaeological evidence. Excavations at the Liulihe relic site have revealed a clearly defined dual-walled city layout, with both the inner and outer walls accompanied by surrounding moats, outlining an urban footprint of approximately one million sq.m.

The excavation of the outer city wall and its accompanying moat stands as one of the most thrilling breakthroughs at the Liulihe relic site in recent years. Beginning in 2022, archaeologists spent three years fully revealing the layout of the outer city. Relics and artefacts recovered from the site indicate that the outer wall was constructed in the early Western Zhou period and abandoned before the mid-Western Zhou, meaning it was in use for less than a century. This dual-fortification system, with both inner and outer walls encircled by moats, is exceptionally rare among known Western Zhou enfeoffed-state sites. Its presence shows that the early capital of the Yan state was carefully planned with strong defensive capabilities and clearly defined urban boundaries, and more importantly, it highlights Yan's strategic importance in the early Zhou Dynasty.

The Duke of Shao's personal journey to the Yan state to oversee the construction of its capital was no accident. In the early years of the Western Zhou Dynasty, King Wu and his successors implemented a sweeping system of enfeoffment to consolidate control over the vast eastern territories. As a Ji-surname state, and thus a domain ruled by royal kinsmen, Yan occupied a strategic position on the northern frontier and was entrusted with the critical task of safeguarding the Zhou Dynasty's northern border. This geopolitical imperative required Yan's capital to be both substantial in scale and formidable in defence, a requirement vividly embodied in its rare dual-walled, moated design.

Moreover, Professor Wu Xiaohong and her team from Peking University

conducted radiocarbon and isotopic analyses of skeletal and dental samples from the tomb's occupant, along with plant and animal remains recovered from the burial. Their findings place the most probable date of the tomb's formation between 1045 and 1010 BC. This scientifically derived chronology provides strong confirmation that the "*tai bao yong yan*" event took place more than 3,000 years ago, aligning precisely with the traditionally recognised timeline of Beijing's continuous urban history spanning three millennia.

Stories of the Capital of the Yan State in Bronzes

Beyond iconic masterpieces such as the Jin Ding, the Boju Li and the Zuo Ce Huan bronze ensemble, the Liulihe relic site has yielded a rich array of exquisitely crafted bronze vessels, each distinct in form, function and decorative style. Although they served varied ritual or practical purposes and reflect diverse artistic influences, these bronzes collectively convey profound historical narratives.

Ke He and Ke Lei: The First Generation 'Identity Card' of the Marquis of Yan

In 1986, two solemnly crafted bronze vessels, the Ke He (a spouted wine vessel) and the Ke Lei (a lidded wine container), were unearthed from Tomb M1193 at the Liulihe relic site. The burial features four ramped passageways, a configuration in Western Zhou funerary practice reserved exclusively for the highest ranks of society, typically Zhou kings or a small number of paramount nobles, immediately signalling the exceptional status of the tomb's occupant. The deeper significance of the Ke He and Ke Lei, however, lies in their inscriptions. Cast in near-identical form, with 43 characters on both the interior of the lids and the vessel rims, these texts explicitly identify the tomb's owner as Ke, the first Marquis of Yan in the early Western Zhou Dynasty, and crucially record the enfeoffment of the Yan state by the Duke of Shao.

The Ke He displays a striking and highly distinctive form. It features a flared mouth with a square rim, a forward spout for pouring and a loop handle at the rear. Its rounded belly tapers into a shallow crotch above a nearly flat base, supported by four cylindrical legs. The domed lid is topped with a semi-circular knob, the ends of which are adorned with stylised beast masks defined by protruding eyes and horns. A delicate yet sturdy chain links the knob to the handle, combining practical function with aesthetic refinement. In decorative terms, the Ke He is dominated by phoenix motifs: both the lid and the neck are encircled by four symmetrical phoenix designs, each set against a finely rendered ground of cloud-and-lightning patterns.

In contrast to the Ke He's dynamic elegance, the Ke Lei presents a more robust form. It features a contracted opening that narrows inward, a flat rim with a square lip, a short neck, rounded shoulders, a bulging belly and a ring foot. Its circular lid is topped with a round handle. Two semi-circular beast-head handles adorn the shoulders, each grasping a ring in its mouth, while a beast-head design appears on the lower belly. The decoration is relatively restrained: two raised string patterns encircle the neck, a horizontal groove runs around the upper belly, and the lid and shoulders are ornamented with four and six symmetrically arranged circular whorl motifs, respectively.

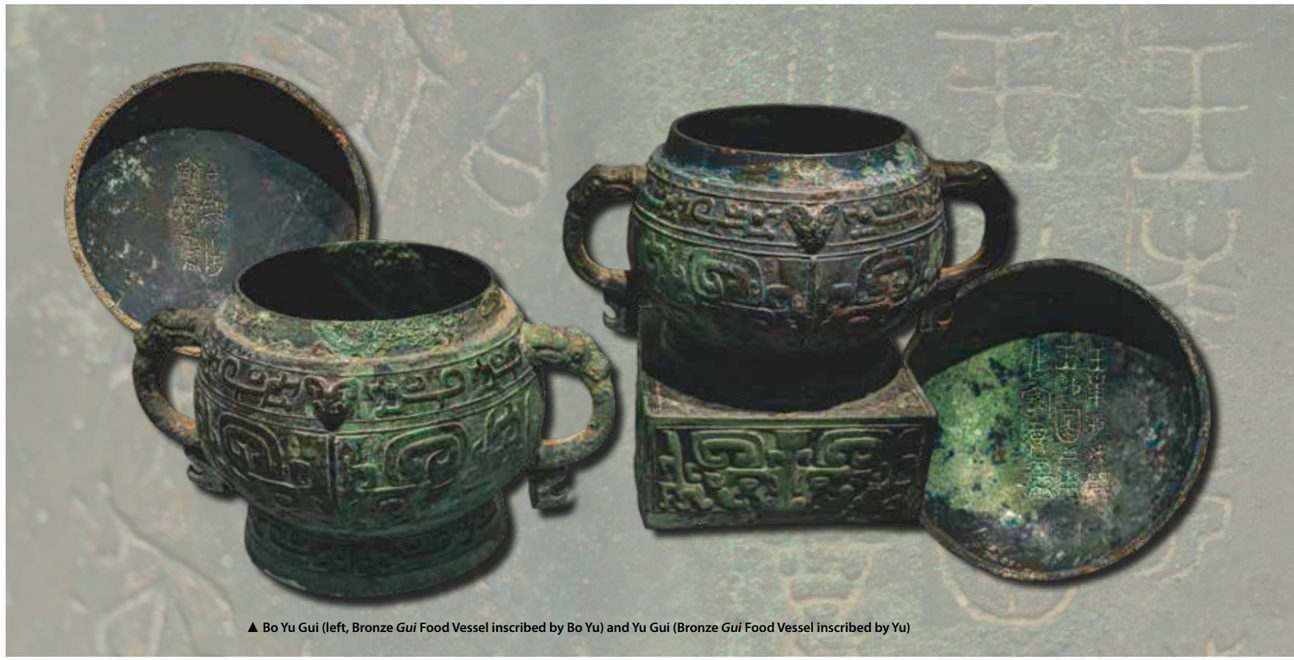
The inscriptions on the Ke He and Ke Lei record a decree from the Zhou king addressed to the Grand Protector, the Duke of Shao, which reads in essence: "Grand Protector, you are wise and discerning, serving your sovereign with unwavering loyalty. I am deeply pleased with your offerings. I now command Ke to go to Yan and assume rulership as its feudal lord. Ke has settled in Yan, taken charge of its lands and officials, and cast this precious vessel in commemoration."

The inscription clearly records the full process by which the Zhou king appointed Ke as the first Marquis of Yan, the son of the Duke of Shao. After the Zhou dynasty overthrew the Shang Dynasty, the Duke of Shao was granted the fief of "Northern Yan," but as he remained at court to assist the Zhou king, he dispatched his eldest son Ke to take up the enfeoffment in Yan. This historical account is precisely confirmed by the inscriptions on the Ke He and Ke Lei.

Yu Gui and Bo Yu Gui: A Beautiful 3,000-year-old Mistake

Among the bronzes unearthed at the Liulihe relic site, the paired stories of the Yu Gui and the Bo Yu Gui are particularly intriguing. The two vessels drew wide attention in the archaeological community because their lids had been mistakenly switched for more than three millennia, inadvertently preserving clear evidence of Western Zhou naming conventions, especially the distinction between a person's formal name (*ming*) and courtesy name (*zi*). At the 2025 "*tai bao yong yan*"-themed exhibition at the Capital Museum, the two gui are displayed side by side in their post-excavation configuration, inviting visitors to encounter this revealing and endearing historical mix-up firsthand.

The Yu Gui was unearthed in the 1970s from Tomb M253 at the Liulihe relic site, while the Bo Yu Gui was excavated in 2021 from the same burial, later renumbered as Tomb M1901. During cleaning, archaeologists were struck by



▲ Bo Yu Gui (left, Bronze *Gui* Food Vessel inscribed by Bo Yu) and Yu Gui (Bronze *Gui* Food Vessel inscribed by Yu)

▲ Composite Human-face Bronze Ornament

how closely the two vessels resembled one another. Both are round *gui* with flared mouths, bulging bellies, ring feet and circular lids fitted with loop-shaped handles, their bodies decorated with finely cast beast-face and Kui dragon motifs. More surprising still were their inscriptions, which proved to be "cross-matched." Under Western Zhou bronze-casting conventions, a vessel and its lid normally carry identical inscriptions, a system known as "*dui ming*," reflecting strict ritual norms. In this case, however, the inscriptions were reversed, showing that the lids and bodies had been mistakenly interchanged at burial. This unnoticed error endured for over 3,000 years, until the discovery of the Bo Yu Gui finally brought the "beautiful mistake" to light.

Composite Human-face Bronze Ornament: An 'Expressive Icon' of the City's Origins

Alongside ritual bronzes rooted in the Central Plains' system of rites and music, the Liulihe relic site has also yielded artefacts reflecting the distinctive cultures of the northern frontier. A prime example is the Composite Human-face Bronze Ornament, whose unusual form and enigmatic style differ markedly from Central Plains motifs, vividly revealing cultural exchange between the Western Zhou Yan state and northern nomadic groups.

The Composite Human-face Bronze Ornament is assembled from multiple parts to form an abstract human visage, with bulging eyes, a prominent nose, a slightly parted mouth and upturned corners that suggest laughter. Considered non-utilitarian, it was likely a ritual object or shield ornament, possibly associated with ancestral or nature worship among northern nomadic peoples.

During the Western Zhou Dynasty, the Yan state occupied a northern frontier zone bordering nomadic regions, a position that encouraged sustained cultural exchange. The Composite Human-face Bronze Ornament is a direct outcome of this interaction. It preserves the refined bronze-casting techniques of the Central Plains while absorbing the aesthetic preferences and spiritual concepts of northern pastoral peoples. This fusion vividly illustrates the multicultural character and inclusiveness of Yan culture.

Similar northern cultural elements appear in other bronzes from the Liulihe relic site, particularly in animal motifs that are bold, exaggerated and dynamically rendered, in clear contrast to the orderly refinement of Central Plains styles. Together, these artefacts show that while Western Zhou Yan adopted Central Plains ritual culture, it also absorbed northern frontier influences, shaping a distinctive regional civilisation marked by vibrant multicultural synthesis.

Each bronze unearthed at the Liulihe relic site stands as a witness to history. Cast in bronze, inscribed with lasting texts and adorned with symbolic motifs, these artefacts recount the early Western Zhou story of the Yan state, from enfeoffment and state-building to ritual traditions and cultural integration. Together, they offer compelling material proof of Beijing's more than 3,000-year continuous urban history.

Today, the Liulihe relic site has been named one of China's top 10 archaeological discoveries of 2024, and its nomination for World Heritage status has been incorporated into Beijing's recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan. The bronzes already uncovered have transcended material worth, becoming vital cultural bridges between past and present and forming a spiritual foundation of Beijing's urban civilisation.

Standing at a new historical juncture, looking back at the bronzes from the Liulihe relic site reveals far more than ancient craftsmanship and aesthetics. They embody the ritual order of a dynasty, the strategic vision of a frontier state and the deep foundations of an urban civilisation that has endured for more than three millennia.

Mysterious Symbols: Ornamental Motifs on Bronze Wares

Beast-face Motifs

In the past, these were referred to as *taotie* motifs, named after an ancient Chinese mythical creature regarded as one of the dragon's offspring. Said to be so gluttonous that it devoured even its own body, the *taotie* has long been used to describe the prominent animal-face imagery found on ancient Chinese bronzes. Traditionally, the term "*taotie* motifs" was defined narrowly as a "head without a body."

Bird Motifs

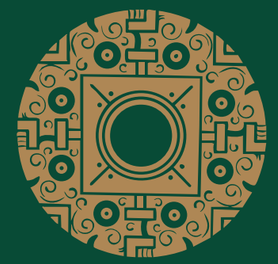
These are most readily identified by their distinctive downward-curving, hooked beaks and the horn-like crests atop their heads. The tail varies considerably, appearing as long trailing plumes, downward-drooping forms or split tails, and is often rendered with exaggerated, fanned-out feathers for dramatic effect. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, the phoenix motif flourished, distinguished by an especially ornate phoenix crown. This regal headdress sometimes cascades down over the bird's chest, or extends into elongated, flowing feathers that seem to float on air, embodying the ethereal grace and "celestial aura" of the mythical sacred bird.

Dragon Motifs

Dragon imagery appears in a variety of forms, including Kui dragons, coiled dragons and coiled hornless dragons. Rendered with fluid, sinuous lines or tightly wound into intricate spirals, these designs symbolise power and auspicious fortune.

Cloud-and-lightning Motifs

Composed of coiling lines and curving forms, these motifs evoke clouds and flashes of lightning. They are most often used as background patterns that complement the primary designs, though at times they appear independently, expressing a sense of order and aesthetic harmony.



Nailhead Motifs

Composed of regularly arranged raised circular dots, these motifs adorn the surfaces of bronze vessels either as primary decorative elements or as accents interspersed among other designs. They enhance a vessel's sense of solemnity and grandeur.

Silent Stones Preserving a Thousand Years of History

Text by Zhang Jian
Photos by Zhang Xin, Zhang Quanyue, Lü Lingwu, Jin Jianhui, Zhou Shijie

The Fangshan stone sutras are truly a treasure embedded in Beijing's cultural landscape.

From the Sui (AD 581–618) through the Tang (AD 618–907), Liao (AD 916–1125), Jin (1115–1234), Yuan (1271–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, the Fangshan stone sutras were carved over a span of 1,039 years. A total of 1,122 Buddhist sutras in 3,572 volumes, amounting to more than 35 million characters, were engraved on 14,278 stone steles, forming the world's largest and longest-lasting collection of stone Buddhist sutra steles.

This "epic on stone" is not only a testament to steadfast perseverance across more than a dozen centuries of civilisation, but also a living witness to the continuity of a city's urban context.

▲ Sutra caves of Shijing Mountain

Using Stone as Paper

In Fangshan District, located in the southwest of Beijing, is an inconspicuous mountain. It is difficult to imagine that this mountain bears a cultural heritage that has endured for thousands of years.

The mountain is named after "Shijing," or "stone sutras."

Over 1,400 years ago, Jingwan, an eminent monk, forged a profound connection with Shijing Mountain. The history of the Fangshan stone sutras began here.

It was during the Sui Dynasty that Chinese Buddhism was revived after two large-scale persecutions of Buddhists during the Northern Wei (AD 386–534) and the Northern Zhou (AD 557–581) dynasties. Jingwan recognised that if Buddhist sutras were burned, the inheritance of thought would be completely disrupted. For him, the true vulnerability lay not in the form of religion but in the sutras themselves. Given the technological conditions of the time, paper was prone to decay and woodblocks could easily be destroyed. As such, only stone could withstand the test of time. Thus, an almost extreme yet visionary plan was conceived: to engrave all Buddhist sutras on stone and hide them within the mountain, so that they could be retrieved again after the "Persecution of Buddhists."

Jingwan led his disciples, believers and friends to the then-unknown Shijing Mountain. There, they discovered a type of stone that was extremely hard yet fine in texture, making it an ideal material for engraving sutras. From the Daye era (AD 605–618) of the Sui Dynasty, under harsh conditions, monks and believers carved Buddhist sutras into cold yet enduring stone steles.

In AD 616, the first batch of Fangshan stone sutras and the "Leiyin Cave" on Shijing Mountain were completed. Carved by Jingwan and his disciples, the stone sutras were securely embedded in the cave walls. To convey a sense of solemnity, Jingwan excavated a stone niche at the centre of the Leiyin Cave to "place three bone relics of the Buddha," praying that Buddhism and the stone sutras would endure forever.

Not long after he embarked on this monumental endeavour, the Sui Dynasty was supplanted by the Tang Dynasty. He and his disciples excavated seven stone caves in the mountain and filled them with engraved stone sutra steles.

In AD 634, a complete edition of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was engraved within the caves of Shijing Mountain. Before the neatly stacked stone steles that filled the cavern, with the entrance sealed by a stone door and further reinforced with molten iron, Jingwan placed a commemorative inscription above the cave entrance. It read: "Jingwan respectfully writes to all sentient beings of the future: As the Dharma continues to decline, the six realms are shrouded in darkness. People lack the wisdom to escape, and liberation becomes difficult to attain. To seek understanding in such times brings sorrow and heartbreak. Today, in this mountain, we carve a copy of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* within a stone chamber, impervious to the flames of catastrophe, so that for millennia the lamp of wisdom may continue to shine; and after ten thousand generations, the torch of the Dharma shall remain alight. This sutra is intended as a source of teaching for the future, when the Dharma faces hardship. If there are any sutras in the world, may they not be opened lightly."

Buddhist sutras are vast in number, and even a single engraved copy of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* represents only a drop in the ocean. Jingwan clearly understood that such an undertaking could not be finished within one generation. In AD 639, Jingwan passed away, leaving a will stating that his relics should not be placed in a stupa but set upon a stone platform, in the hope of "overseeing the engraving of Buddhist sutras" and urging future generations to carry forward and complete the unfinished work.

In 1093, all the caves on Shijing Mountain had been sealed and filled with exquisitely engraved Buddhist sutras, marking what could be regarded as the completion of the undertaking begun by Jingwan. Yet another monk, Tongli, soon appeared at the mountain and introduced significant reforms to the engraving process. He replaced large steles with smaller ones, standardised the titles, volumes and numbering of sutras, and relocated their storage from the mountain caves to the underground crypt of Yunju Temple, situated to the southwest of the mountain. During the Liao and Jin dynasties, more than 10,000 stone sutra steles were preserved in the underground crypt of Yunju Temple, corresponding with those housed in the mountain and forming a dual system described as "one stored in the mountain and the other hidden in the crypt."

In the late Yuan Dynasty, Huiyue, an itinerant monk from Goguryeo, arrived at Shijing Mountain to pay homage.

By that time, Shijing Mountain had endured many years of exposure to wind and rain. Huiyue discovered that some of the stone sutras in the Leiyin Cave had already been damaged or lost. He resolved to seek donations from court officials and remained on the mountain, carefully restoring the engravings and relocating them within the Leiyin Cave.

In 1592, Zibo Zhenke (1543–1603), also known as Master Daguan, discovered the Buddha's relics buried by Master Jingwan in the Leiyin Cave and presented them to Emperor Wanli (reign: 1573–1620) and Empress Dowager Cisheng. The discovery caused a sensation throughout the imperial court and wider society. The attention of the imperial family revitalised Shijing Mountain, which had remained quiet for many years. Dong Qichang (1555–1636), the renowned painter and calligrapher, also made a special visit to pay his respects and inscribed two Chinese characters along with a commemorative text, which were later engraved outside the cave where the sutras were concealed.

The engraving of stone sutras, though marked by periods of interruption, was never truly brought to a halt. These stone sutras gradually

▼► Leiyin Cave and an inscription reading "Buried Treasures" on Shijing Mountain

accumulated into a cultural treasure, one that stands comparison with the Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang.

Looking back on this history, the Fangshan stone sutras are not merely a product of religious devotion. Using stone as paper, they wrote for people living a thousand years in the future. This, ultimately, is the deepest significance of the Fangshan stone sutras.

Building the Temple for Sutras

Yunju Temple stands at the southwestern foothills of Shijing Mountain. Unlike many renowned temples that emerged because of geographic elevation or geomantic significance, the existence of Yunju Temple is derived almost entirely from the stone sutras. The temple rose for the sake of the sutras, and the sutras, in turn, safeguarded the temple. Bound together in mutual dependence, this unique relationship shaped the destiny of the temple, setting it apart from more conventional famed temples.

Yunju Temple was established around the late Sui Dynasty and the early Tang Dynasty. In its early years, the temple was modest in scale and served primarily as a support base for the engraving of stone sutras. It provided living quarters for monks, channels for donations from believers, and the organisational framework and manpower required for the engraving, sealing and safeguarding of the stone sutras. As the reputation of the Fangshan stone sutras gradually expanded, the temple underwent successive renovations across later dynasties. By the reign of Emperor Shengzong (AD 983–1031) of the Liao Dynasty, the temple comprised five courtyards and six halls, and had become one of the most complete Buddhist temple complexes in the southwestern mountainous region of Beijing.

However, unlike the serenity of Shijing Mountain, Yunju Temple has long been subject to the ebb and flow of human affairs. Wars, fires and the passage of successive eras have all left their marks upon the temple. Its most profound turning point came in the first half of the 20th century.

▲ Pagoda of Master Jingwan

During the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, Yunju Temple stood near a vital transportation route and was subjected to repeated bombings. By 1942, the temple's main buildings had been almost completely destroyed, leaving behind only shattered walls and a handful of ancient stone pagodas. Amid these ruins, the most symbolic guardians of the temple endured—the stone archway and the twin pagodas.

The stone archway of Yunju Temple is an arched structure composed of 11 pieces of white marble. During the War of Resistance, Yunju Temple endured several large-scale bombings between 1938 and 1942. After the war, the temple's main buildings were virtually annihilated, leaving only a few fire-resistant masonry pagodas and this scarred stone archway.

Standing alongside the stone archway are the twin pagodas of Yunju Temple.

Built in 1117, the South Pagoda was an octagonal brick structure in a style characterised by dense eaves and distinguished by its solemn appearance. It suffered severe damage during the war and was later forcibly dismantled. An unexpected collapse during the demolition caused the bricks to shatter completely, rendering them unusable.

Like the South Pagoda, the North Pagoda also dates to the Liao Dynasty. Its distinctive form combines three architectural types: pavilion, stupa and vajrasana. Structurally, it is a two-story, pavilion-style brick pagoda, crowned with a stupa body and a 13-layer spire. The upper section is bell-shaped, the middle section drum-shaped and the lower section resembles a pavilion. Owing to this unusual configuration, local residents refer to it as the "Bell and Drum Tower." The pagoda rests on an octagonal Sumeru pedestal, intricately carved around the waist with dancers and musicians, reflecting the cultural legacy of the Liao Dynasty. At each corner of the base stands a small square pagoda dating to the Tang Dynasty.

Beyond its distinctive form, the pagoda's eight-faced base is inlaid with 176 bricks engraved with Buddhist maxims, rich in symbolic meaning and widely regarded as one of the most striking features of the North Pagoda.

In 1985, the relevant authorities initiated a large-scale restoration project at Yunju Temple. Rather than simply returning the site to an earlier state, the restoration involved a careful reconfiguration of the temple's functions, grounded in thorough historical research. The original stone archway was preserved and incorporated into the newly constructed Hall of Heavenly Kings, where it continued to serve as the temple's main entrance. The pagodas and the underground crypt were likewise protected and designated as the core cultural spaces of the temple.

The rebirth of Yunju Temple does not signify a return to any single historical moment, but rather a rearticulation of its purpose centred on the stone sutras. It is no longer merely a site for religious practice, but has evolved into a public cultural space that preserves and conveys the memory of civilisation.

From construction to destruction, and from guardianship to restoration, the fate of Yunju Temple has always been closely bound to the stone sutras. It is these deeply buried stone sutra steles that enabled the temple to retain the potential for renewal, even in the bleakest of times.

The temple stands because of the sutras, and it endures because of them as well.

Bringing Heritage to Light

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the state undertook a comprehensive survey and systematic organisation of important documentary heritage scattered across the country. By the mid-1950s, formal archaeological excavations had been launched at Shijing Mountain and Yunju Temple.

In the spring of 1956, archaeologists entered Shijing Mountain to conduct systematic excavations of the sutra-storage caves. There are a total of nine such caves on the summit of the mountain. Although these caves were frequently mentioned in historical records, they had long remained sealed. At the time, only the Leiyin Cave, where Master Daguan had once discovered the Buddha's relics, was accessible. When archaeologists and scholars cautiously stepped into the Leiyin Cave, they encountered an interior as spacious as a grand hall. Inside stood four stone pillars carved with more than 1,000 Buddhist figures. In addition, there was a staggering number of stone sutra steles: some stood upright, others lay flat or were stacked layer upon layer, nearly filling the entire cave.

Excavation was not the ultimate aim; protection and systematic organisation were the true priorities. Temporary sheds were erected outside the caves, where each stone sutra stele was numbered, cleaned and rubbed. The rubbing process required the utmost precision—if an inscription became damaged, restoration would be extremely difficult. Most of those involved were highly experienced craftsmen and researchers, who treated every placement of paper and every application of ink with a level of caution comparable to that of archaeological excavation itself.

The excavation continued for more than a year. By early 1958, all nine sutra-storage caves on the summit of Shijing Mountain had been fully excavated. A total of 4,196 stone steles were recovered, all of them precious stone sutra steles dating to the Sui and Tang dynasties. After careful preservation and the completion of rubbings, the steles were returned to their original locations and arrangements, and once again sealed within the caves. This principle of "organising without disturbing" reflected a high level of

▼ The main entrance of Yunju Temple

▲ Underground Sutra Palace entrance at Yunju Temple

maturity in heritage conservation philosophy at the time.

Compared with the discoveries at Shijing Mountain, the revelation of the underground crypt at Yunju Temple marked an even more pivotal turning point. In the spring of 1956, an archaeological team composed of experts such as Huang Bingzhang and Zeng Yigong arrived at the mountain to begin excavation work. During their research, the team consulted extensive historical and textual materials related to the temple and encountered records describing the stone sutras as being stored in a pattern of "one stored in the mountain and the other hidden in the crypt." This indicated that, in addition to the stone sutra steles concealed in mountain caves, a substantial number should also be buried within the temple grounds themselves. Yet the phrase "one stored in the mountain and the other hidden in the crypt" was imprecise, and the temple had been completely destroyed by warfare, leaving no visible surface features to serve as clues. The exact location of these mysterious stone sutra steles therefore remained unknown. The experts immersed themselves in historical documents, scrutinising every line for traces of evidence, but achieved little progress. This state of uncertainty continued for more than a year.

A breakthrough finally came in the summer of 1957. While visiting nearby villages, archaeologists unexpectedly discovered a stone stele that had been reused as building material in a private residence. The inscription on the stele clearly recorded the precise location of the underground crypt at Yunju Temple and noted the quantity of stone sutra steles buried there.

In August of the same year, the

▲ Stone sutra steles

▲ An exhibition showcasing precious cultural relics from Yunju Temple

archaeological team began excavations near the site of the South Pagoda at Yunju Temple. Within just a few days, they confirmed the location of the underground crypt and unearthed 10,082 stone sutra steles from the Liao and Jin dynasties, which had remained buried for 840 years. Together with the stone sutra steles housed in the mountain caves, these finds form a coherent sequence in content, layout and craftsmanship, offering a complete picture of the thousand-year developmental trajectory of the Fangshan stone sutras.

At this point, the full picture of the Fangshan stone sutras comes into view: those preserved in the caves represent the earlier stone sutra steles, while those buried in the underground crypt beneath the temple were engraved at a later stage. Complementing one another, the two together form the largest and most complete collection of stone Buddhist sutras in the world.

Over the following decades, the organisation and study of the Fangshan stone sutras continued to deepen and expand. Rubbings were systematically catalogued, scholarly findings were published in succession and the significance of the stone sutra steles was continually re-evaluated. They serve not only as foundational source materials for Buddhist studies, but also offer a rich body of primary evidence for research in history, linguistics, calligraphy and social history.

In the 21st century, heritage conservation philosophy has undergone further refinement. Following scientific renovation, the underground crypt at Yunju Temple now provides a sealed preservation environment with stable temperature and humidity, in which the air is replaced with inert gas to slow the weathering of the stone sutra steles to the greatest possible extent.

From their secluded burial in the mountains to systematic modern protection, the re-emergence of the Fangshan stone sutras was not simply an archaeological discovery, but a cultural relay spanning the ages. It connects the foresight of the ancients with the responsibilities of the present, while allowing words once carved into stone to re-enter the shared record of human history.

The reappearance of the stone sutras does not mark an endpoint, but rather a new beginning. It is through this process that the Fangshan stone sutras complete their transformation from religious relics into national documentary heritage, becoming a civilisational achievement shared by the whole of society and oriented toward the future.

Today, the underground crypt at Yunju Temple is open to the public as a visitor attraction. As visitors enter the crypt, the first sight to greet them is a massive stone wall, interrupted only by a few small glass-covered windows. Through these windows, large numbers of sutra steles can be seen neatly stacked within the underground space. At closer range, the finely carved characters on their surfaces become clearly visible.

Blooming with Glory

Yunju Temple, originally established for the engraving of stone sutras, is now flourishing once again through the preservation and display of its remarkable collection of sutras.

The treasures of Yunju Temple extend far beyond the stone sutras alone. The paper sutras of the Ming Dynasty, the *Chinese Buddhist Canon* woodblocks of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and the stone sutras together form the "Three-Sutras Cultural Wonder." Beyond the stone sutras, Yunju Temple houses more than 22,000 volumes of Ming Dynasty paper sutras. Rarely matched nationwide, the collection includes the *Avatamsaka Sutra* written by Monk Zuhui using a mixture of cinnabar and blood drawn from the tip of his tongue, also known as the "True Sutra Written with Sacrificial Blood."

Yunju Temple also preserves the *Chinese Buddhist Canon*, often referred to as the "wooden sutras." The engraving of the sutra began in 1735 and was completed in 1738. The complete collection comprises over 77,000 pieces, with richly layered content that represents the culmination of Buddhist translations over 2,000 years since Buddhism entered China.

Regarded by scholars as a unique documentary treasury, the Fangshan stone sutras preserve over 50 Buddhist sutras that survive as the only extant copies in the world. Among them is the earliest version of the *Heart Sutra* translated by Xuanzang (AD 662–664) under imperial order during the Tang Dynasty. Over 6,000 colophons engraved on


Cleaning a wooden sutra block


Restoring a piece of paper sutra


Staff inspecting a piece of restored paper sutra

the sutra steles record social life, economic activity and popular beliefs in ancient China.

From being praised as a "treasury" by Dong Qichang to being lauded by Zhao Puchu (1907–2000) and Ji Xianlin (1911–2009) as the "Great Wall of Culture" and the "Dunhuang of Beijing," this cultural gem has moved from the remote mountain into public view, and from history toward the future, revealing Beijing's profound cultural heritage and a thousand-year dialogue between an ancient capital and its civilisation.

On International Archives Day 2025, the Fangshan stone sutras were officially included in the sixth batch of the *List of Documentary Heritage of China*, the highest level of national recognition for archival documentary heritage and an authoritative affirmation of this treasure of Chinese civilisation.

In related statements, the National Archives Administration of China noted that the Fangshan stone sutras preserve the original forms of many important Buddhist texts, reflect the evolution of Buddhist scriptures, and serve as authoritative versions for collation across dynasties.

In the recently released *Recommendations of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the Fifteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of Beijing*, Yunju Temple's sutras were explicitly listed as a key project nominated for UNESCO's *Memory of the World Register*.

While strengthening protection, Yunju Temple has also expanded public access, enabling more citizens and visitors to experience the enduring appeal of millennia-old stone carvings.

Walking into Yunju Temple, one encounters an ancient complex restored to order: a central axis, tiered courtyards and pagodas arranged with measured clarity.

Beside the Hall of Great Compassion are the most precious Buddhist relics enshrined at Yunju Temple: the relics of Sakyamuni Buddha. These relics were unearthed on November 27, 1981, when archaeologists excavating the Leiyin Cave on Shijing Mountain discovered a stone chamber beneath a worship stone. Inside were five nested caskets: an outer white-marble casket, followed by bluestone, white jade, silver and finally a tiny jade casket. Within them were two relics of the Buddha. Together with the Buddha's finger relic at Famen Temple in Shaanxi and the Buddha's tooth relic at Badachu in Beijing, they are known as the "Three Treasures of China," and are the only relics of Buddha preserved in a cave rather than a stupa.

The South Pagoda of Yunju Temple was rebuilt to its original appearance over five years and completed in 2014. It marked China's first attempt to reconstruct an ancient pagoda using only a small number of historical photographs. After eight rounds of revision and State Council approval, the restoration plan was finalised.

The rebuilt South Pagoda, based on photographs dating from 1901 to 1923, faithfully replicates the original 11-tiered, dense-eaved brick structure, using materials that meet the original specifications. Modern technologies were adopted for waterproofing, seepage prevention, seismic resistance and fire protection. All blue bricks used were specially commissioned from manufacturers in Beijing and other regions. Standing with dignified presence and finely detailed carvings, the South Pagoda echoes the North Pagoda, adding a sense of solemn grandeur to Yunju Temple.

Attentive visitors will notice the smaller Sutra Pressing Pagoda of the Liao Dynasty beside the South Pagoda. This octagonal, seven-tiered structure, approximately 5 metres (m) high, is modest yet significant, commemorating the engraving of stone sutras and marking the sutra storage site. Resting on a Sumeru pedestal adorned with intricate motifs, it features an upturned lotus supporting the pagoda body. Each face bears the *Inscription on the Stone Sutra Pagodas*, recording Master Jingwan's purpose, imperial support from the Liao Dynasty and Master Tongli's engraving reforms, including reduced stele sizes and underground crypt storage.

On a raised platform facing the Sutra Pressing Pagoda stands the column pagoda of Master Jingwan. A surviving work of the Liao Dynasty, it is constructed entirely of stone and rises to about six metres, with the inscription "Pagoda of Master Jingwan" carved on its front. With its rigorous structure and solemn form, the column pagoda commemorates the eminent monk and symbolises the spiritual origin of the stone sutras.

In April 2025, the 1,000-m-long walkway linking Yunju Temple and Shijing Mountain was completed, realising the integrated opening of "the temple and the mountain."

From inclusion in the *List of Documentary Heritage of China* to nomination for the *Memory of the World Register,* the Fangshan stone sutras have become a shared memory of mankind and a lasting civilisational foundation for Beijing.

Bearing a thousand years of history, the Fangshan stone sutras stand as a treasured legacy of Beijing.


North Pagoda of Yunju Temple

Vibrant Statues Demonstrating Fine Craftsmanship

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhao Shuhua

Beijing's historic temples and magnificent museums house captivating Buddha statues, exuding either majesty or tranquillity. These artistic masterpieces reflect shifting aesthetic ideals and broader cultural changes across the centuries.

China's Buddhist statuary evolved alongside the spread of Buddhism, gradually shifting from Indian and Central Asian influences to incorporate distinctly Chinese aesthetics. This artistic progression mirrors broader processes of civilisational exchange. In Beijing, such statues became enduring spiritual symbols, merging with local culture to enrich the ancient capital's cultural heritage.

Artistic Treasures in Museums

The enduring Buddhist statues of Beijing, dating from the Northern Wei Dynasty (AD 386–534) to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), were crafted from a wide range of materials, including stone, wood, copper, jade and porcelain. Together, these artefacts illustrate the full evolution of Buddhist statuary art within the city.

The Taihe Statue, a stone-carved Buddha displayed at the Capital Museum of China, has long been a highlight of the museum's collection. Created in AD 499, the 23rd year of the Northern Wei Dynasty's Taihe era (AD 477–499), it is recognised as Beijing's earliest and best-preserved stone-carved Buddha. This remarkable artefact provides a pivotal reference for the study of Northern Wei Buddhist statuary art, and dates back over 1,500 years.

The statue depicts a standing Sakyamuni, measuring approximately 1.65 metres (m) in height, with bare feet resting on a lotus throne atop Mount Sumeru. The figure presents a slender, upright posture with carefully balanced proportions. The Buddha is characterised by a serene expression, relaxed eyebrows and calm, contemplative eyes. The high ushnisha, elongated ears reaching the shoulders and slightly forward-tilted head embody the defining aesthetic features of Northern Wei Dynasty Buddhist carving, often described as "slender bones and clear images." Statues from this period are distinguished by their tall, upright forms and subtle, restrained expressions.

The Buddha's kasaya is rendered with subtly raised lines. Though simple in form, the fabric's texture exhibits a distinct rhythmic quality, its curves flowing with an innate sense of grace and fluidity. The garment fully covers the left shoulder, while the right remains bare. The folds of the kasaya cascade naturally, following the contours of the figure beneath. On closer inspection, visitors can observe that the Buddha is depicted wearing a pair of silk-like trousers. The upper section of the trousers is adorned with intricate, evenly spaced chrysanthemum motifs. This meticulous attention to detail reflects the ancient craftsmen's precise understanding of how contemporary dress intersected with Buddhist iconography of the period, lending an everyday dimension to the imposing stone figure.

The statue is set against a striking, solid stone screen-like structure with a halo motif, animated by vivid, dynamic flame patterns that curl and undulate. Interwoven among them is the softer yet enduring honeysuckle motif, symbolising life and perpetuity. Encircling the central figure are 31 Gandharva musicians—some beating drums, others playing flutes or zithers—their robes billowing in motion. Although each figure is posed differently, they interact in harmony, forming a cohesive scene of music and dance. These static stone carvings seem to pulse with rhythm, evoking the imagined beauty of celestial melodies suspended in the air.

The reverse side of the halo screen is equally compelling. One hundred and twenty-four miniature Buddha figures are meticulously arranged across 12 distinct tiers. Despite their small scale (the tallest measuring barely 10 centimetres [cm] and the smallest only a few), each retains a clearly defined structure and an individualised expression within the limited space. This composition, both densely layered and carefully ordered, demonstrates exceptional carving skill while revealing the refined aesthetic sensibilities and precise planning of the ancient artisans.

▼► Detail of Taihe Statue (Stele with Standing Buddha and Attendant Bodhisattvas) from the Northern Wei Dynasty

This statue represents more than an early masterpiece of Buddhist art; it embodies a millennium-long continuum, tracing the journey from the stone-carving techniques of Northern Wei Dynasty artisans to its present-day reappraisal within the museum. It stands as one of the oldest surviving testaments to Beijing's enduring tradition of sculptural Buddhist artistry.

In another hall of the Capital Museum of China resides a Water Moon Guanyin (Avalokitesvara) statue from the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), crafted with a blue-white glaze from a Jingdezhen kiln. The soft hue of the glaze, combined with the figure's relaxed posture, lends it an air of quiet composure under the gallery lighting. Resembling the moon's clear, subtle reflection upon water, the statue invites viewers into a moment of contemplation.

This 67-cm-high porcelain figure was discovered in 1955 near the west entrance of Dingfu Street in Beijing's Xicheng District. The sculpture depicts an Avalokitesvara wearing a crown that originally featured a small Buddha motif. Although now incomplete, the Avalokitesvara's overall form remains compelling. The facial features are full, conveying both grace and solemnity. With a broad forehead, softly lowered eyes and brows and a faint smile, the figure appears serene and focused, deeply absorbed in meditation.

The seated figure adopts the classic Water Moon Avalokitesvara posture: the body gently turns to one side, the right knee is raised to support the right arm and the left leg hangs freely. This relaxed yet dignified stance contrasts with the rigid symmetry of earlier Buddhist statuary, favouring natural posture and movement. Through this pose, Avalokitesvara conveys a compassionate, gentle presence that transcends mere solemnity.

The detailing shows Avalokitesvara adorned in a kasaya and flowing robes. The garment's smooth, supple lines create layered yet uncluttered drapery. Beaded ornaments accent the chest, the front of the kasaya and the hem, while ornamental bands encircle the wrists. Though ornate, these embellishments harmonise with the figure's form, enhancing—rather than overwhelming—Avalokitesvara's dignified and graceful presence.

▲ Figure of Avalokitesvara in Water Moon Form, Jingdezhen Ware

The craftsmanship required for porcelain Buddhist statues far exceeded that of ordinary ceramics. Their intricate designs demanded exceptional skill in clay shaping, careful control of drying and precise management of firing temperatures. Even minor miscalculations could result in warping, cracking or uneven glazing during firing. As a result, flawlessly executed porcelain Buddhist statues have always been uncommon, with fully intact surviving examples exceedingly rare.

The remarkable Yuan Dynasty porcelain statue of the Water Moon Avalokitesvara in the Capital Museum of China stands as a rare and exquisite example of its kind.

Beyond these two museum highlights, the collection includes Buddhist statues from a wide range of historical periods across ancient China. Visitors can observe how these figures not only embody the evolving craftsmanship and aesthetic ideals of their respective eras but also foster a quiet sense of connection through tranquil gazes and meticulous detail, creating a dialogue that spans over a thousand years of civilisation.

As "a city of museums," Beijing not only preserves the legacy of ancient Buddhist statuary but also brings together Buddhist art treasures from across China, representing a wide range of historical periods.

Outstanding Buddhist Statues in Beijing

Beijing's Buddhist statues are not only displayed in major museums but also remain within the city's historic temples. Among these, several monumental figures are particularly striking.

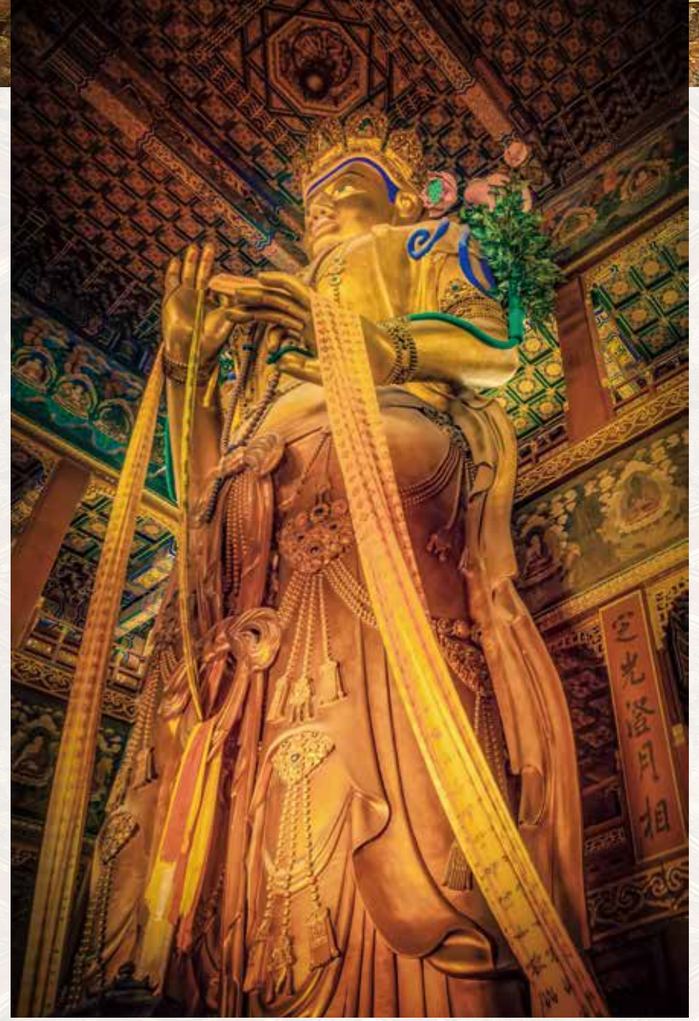
Nestled within the China National Botanical Garden, Shifang Pujue Temple (often referred to as Wofo Temple, or Temple of the Reclining Buddha) stands as an ancient sanctuary in western Beijing. Established during the Zhenguan era (AD 627–649) of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), the temple

has undergone several renovations over the centuries. Its most striking feature remains the colossal copper reclining statue of Sakyamuni, enshrined within the Reclining Buddha Hall.

The reclining Buddha statue, cast in 1321 during the Zhizhi era (1321–1323) of the Yuan Dynasty, measures 5.4 m in length and weighs 54 tons, making it China's largest surviving copper reclining Buddha statue. The statue lies on its side facing south, with the right hand supporting the head, depicting Sakyamuni at the moment of his passing with a serene and composed expression. Its creation reflects the Yuan Dynasty's advanced copper-smelting techniques and substantial material investment. Historical records note that Emperor Yingzong (reign: 1320–1323) of the Yuan Dynasty mobilised large numbers of craftspeople to smelt vast quantities of copper for the casting. The statue's proportions are harmonious, exuding a sense of fullness without appearing cumbersome. Smooth, rounded facial features, gently closed eyes and slightly upturned lips express a tranquillity that transcends life and death. The garment is simply rendered, with its folds flowing naturally along the contours of the body. Surrounding the reclining Buddha are statues of his 12 attendants, each in a unique pose with solemn, sorrowful expressions, vividly evoking the scene of Sakyamuni's passing.

Beyond the celebrated copper reclining Buddha in western Beijing, the monumental wooden Buddha enshrined in Wanfu Pavilion of Yonghegong Lama Temple stands out as another unmissable marvel.

Situated at the northernmost point of the temple complex, Wanfu Pavilion serves as the final grand hall within the grounds. This entirely wooden structure features an impressive octagonal design, with side pavilions linked by overhead corridors. The overall arrangement is carefully planned yet rich in variation. The pavilion houses an astonishing 10,000 small Buddhist statues, giving rise to its name, "Ten Thousand Buddhas." Its most striking



▲ Wooden statue of Maitreya at Yonghegong Lama Temple

feature, however, is the towering standing statue of Maitreya, carved from a single trunk of white sandalwood. The statue reaches a total height of 26 m, with 18 m visible above ground and the remaining 8 m concealed below. Maitreya's face is smooth and rounded, with gently arched eyebrows and eyes. The drapery of his robes flows naturally, cascading in layered folds that follow the contours of his form. The statue achieves a perfect balance of ornamentation and restraint, exuding a sense of steadfast majesty that inspires reverence.

Among the "Three Wonders" of Yonghegong Lama Temple, this monumental wooden Buddha statue is widely regarded as the pinnacle of Qing Dynasty woodcarving artistry. Maitreya's towering form rises almost to the ceiling, creating an imposing presence. Viewed from the ground floor, visitors must crane their necks to take in the statue at close range. As they move up to the second and third floors and observe the Buddha from the surrounding corridors, the refined details of his face, chest and flowing robes gradually come into clearer view. This gradual revelation of craftsmanship narrows the distance between viewers and the statue, fostering a more intimate connection within the sacred space.

Another artistic masterpiece within the temple is a Buddhist niche crafted from precious *nanmu* wood (*Phoebe zhennan*). Standing 5.5 m tall and 3.5 m wide, the niche was meticulously carved to match the dimensions of the Zhaofo Tower. Behind the Buddha, a screen-like structure features a finely carved halo motif. Both the niche and the halo are fashioned from *nanmu* with remarkable precision. Rising from the ground to the rooftop, the three-tiered niche is adorned on all sides with delicate cloud and water patterns. At its summit, 99 golden dragons are rendered using open-work carving, their forms so finely detailed that they appear almost lifelike.

Standing before a Buddhist statue, visitors are invited not only to admire the exquisite craftsmanship of ancient artisans but also to engage in a silent dialogue with civilisation and art. To the west of Beihai Park's southern gate, nestled beside the lakeside, lies Tuancheng Fortress, one of the world's smallest fortresses, a compact yet striking complex covering less than 5,000 square metres. Chengguang Hall is the main structure of Tuancheng. Within its walls stands a white jade Buddha, whose luminous, pristine surface and storied past make it one of Beijing's most iconic embodiments of sacred art.

Crafted entirely from pure white jade, the statue exudes a warm, refined texture and a soft, understated lustre. Standing several metres in height, the Buddha sits in serene meditation on a lotus platform, his expression calm and composed. Draped over his left arm is a golden kasaya, its folds rendered in smooth, natural lines. Both the head and the kasaya are adorned with gemstones that, under the hall's gentle lighting, emit a delicate shimmer. This restrained sparkle enhances rather than detracts from the jade's inherent purity and tranquillity. A rare artistic treasure and a celebrated highlight of Tuancheng Fortress, this white jade Buddha stands as Beijing's largest and most exquisite example of its kind.

Stone, porcelain, copper, wood and jade have all been used to create Buddhist statues, reflecting the shifting aesthetic ideals of different periods in ancient China. Approaching these works, each shaped by its own historical context, visitors can observe not only variations in material, form and expression but also the deep accumulation of civilisation over time. This enduring continuity transcends temporal boundaries, establishing Beijing's Buddhist statues as irreplaceable artistic and cultural treasures.

Identifying the Various Types of Buddhist Statues

Buddhism was introduced to China during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), bringing with it the tradition of Buddhist statuary, which has endured for thousands of years. Although countless precious statues have survived to the present day, distinguishing between their various types—such as the Buddha, Bodhisattvas and Nryanas—can be challenging. Identifying a statue's category, however, does not require extensive specialist knowledge. By observing certain key details, observers can begin to recognise the identity it represents. Even the most intricate figures follow established conventions, the most straightforward of which is to determine the type by its posture.

Buddhist statues depicted reclining on one side invariably represent Sakyamuni entering Nirvana beneath the sal trees, with a group of disciples typically arranged behind him. For this reason, reclining Buddhist statues are almost always portrayals of Sakyamuni. Among the most renowned examples in China are the copper statue at Shifang Pujue Temple, the wooden reclining Buddha in Fayuan Temple, the stone-carved reclining Buddha in Dunhuang and the wooden and clay reclining Buddha at Dafo Temple in Zhangye.

A seated figure in which the body gently turns to one side, the right knee is raised to support the right arm and the left leg hangs freely is likely a depiction of Water Moon Avalokitesvara. Notable examples of this form include the Yuan Dynasty bronze Water Moon Avalokitesvara in the Palace Museum and the statue of Water Moon Avalokitesvara from the Wuyue-era in the collection of the National Museum of China.

If a statue's posture is not immediately apparent, observers can instead focus on what it holds or leans against.

Statues holding a medicine bowl or vessel for healing herbs are typically representations of Bhaisajyaguru, or the Medicine Buddha. Notable examples include the copper Medicine Buddha statues in the collections of the Capital Museum of China and the China Three Gorges Museum.

A statue mounted on a lion depicts Manjusri Bodhisattva, while one set upon a white elephant represents Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. Figures holding a precious pearl in the left hand and a monk's staff in the right are commonly identified as Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Recognising such basic attributes provides an accessible entry point for contemporary audiences to begin appreciating the depth and richness of Buddhist statuary art.

Vivid and Intricate Wall Art

Text by Gao Yuan
Photos by Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi, Zhao Lei, Zhao Shuhua

As an ancient capital, Beijing shares a deep and enduring bond with Buddhism. The city is home to many temples and Zen monasteries, where a wealth of artistic masterpieces—including carved stone scriptures, Buddhist sculptures and murals—have been preserved to this day. Despite the inevitable passage of time, these treasures continue to radiate a quiet and captivating splendour.

Among the city's magnificent and well-preserved historic temples, one located in the western suburbs on Cuiwei Hill is particularly noteworthy for its profound influence on the history of painting and art.

This site is Fahai Temple, which houses a remarkable collection of nationally recognised artistic treasures.

National Treasures within a Remote Hill

Whether assessed by its founding timeline or its scale, Fahai Temple could be described as "compact and refined." Yet nearly six centuries ago, a group of highly skilled artisans created several hundred square metres (sq.m) of exceptional murals here. Indeed, from antiquity to the modern era, few Buddhist murals can rival the quality of those at Fahai Temple.

The temple was financed and constructed in 1439 by Li Tong, an influential eunuch favoured by Emperor Yingzong (reigns: 1435–1449, 1457–1464) of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Legend has it that when the temple was first conceived, Li Tong dreamt of a celestial realm, which he later described to the emperor. He subsequently discovered Moshikou, an area whose landscape precisely mirrored this vision. Sparing no expense, Li Tong mobilised a division from the Ministry of Works, responsible for imperial construction, together with skilled artisans drawn from the general populace, to undertake the design and building. Nearly 100 craftspeople assembled on site, and the entire project took four years and eight months to complete. Upon its inauguration, Emperor Yingzong bestowed the title "Fahai Zen Temple," signifying that the vastness of Buddhist doctrine is as immense and profound as the ocean.

Upon the temple's completion, the murals adorning the walls of the Great Buddha's Hall were also finished. They constitute a rare body of imperial temple artwork in China that contemporary visitors can view at close range. Executed jointly by court artists and folk painters, the murals integrate established painting traditions of the Tang (AD 618–907) and Song (AD 960–1279) dynasties with innovations characteristic of the Ming Dynasty. This synthesis conveys expansive Buddhist concepts and imagery within the physical limits of the hall's interior. The paintings articulate both the exceptional grandeur and the layered history of the imperial temple, achieving a striking union of architectural space and classical Chinese painting. Moreover, these murals not only represent the pinnacle of Ming Dynasty mural art but also help to offset the relative scarcity of similar works among the Dunhuang Frescoes.

As an imperial temple, Fahai Temple once stood in resplendent grandeur. Yet, owing to its secluded location, it gradually faded from public awareness after the late Ming Dynasty. It re-entered the public eye in 1933, when Hedda Morrison, a German photographer, paid a visit. Equipped with a camera and a bicycle, this perceptive young woman with a keen interest in Eastern art photographed Fahai Temple, capturing the 18 Arhats that once stood before the murals nearly a century ago.

Another notable visitor to Fahai Temple was the British journalist Angela Latham. In addition to photographing the site, she authored the article "Discovering Fahai Temple," published in a London-based pictorial in 1937. In the text, she praised the murals as among the greatest in the world, noting that she had never encountered paintings of their kind with such a compelling style. Latham's enthusiastic appraisal, together with the accompanying photographs, played a significant role in drawing the attention of international scholars to the temple.

▼ The Great Buddha's Hall at Fahai Temple

In the turbulent years of war that followed, Fahai Temple once again slipped into obscurity. Due to seismic activity and prolonged neglect, all of the temple's structures collapsed, with the sole exception of the Great Buddha's Hall, where the murals remained intact.

▲ Animal motifs, part of the Fahai Temple murals

Three-Dimensional Artwork from Six Centuries Ago

The murals within the Great Buddha's Hall represent Fahai Temple's most precious legacy. They are carefully arranged across the fan-shaped wall, the eastern and western gable walls and the rear wall of the hall, forming a total of 10 distinct areas that together cover more than 230 sq.m. Based on their placement within the architectural structure, these murals can be divided into four clearly defined sections.

The first section depicts auspicious clouds. Upon entering the hall, visitors are initially greeted by three cloud-filled areas adorning the partition wall (fan-shaped wall) directly opposite the entrance. These clouds once formed the backdrop for the statues of the Three Buddhas that were originally housed within the hall and are now lost. Layers of swirling, rolling clouds create the illusion of transporting pilgrims and visitors into a celestial realm, inviting them to participate in a Buddhist assembly.

The second section presents three Bodhisattvas positioned behind the auspicious clouds. The murals depict the Water Moon Guanyin (Avalokitesvara), Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. Among them, the centrally placed Water Moon Avalokitesvara is widely regarded as the masterpiece of the temple's murals.

The Avalokitesvara is traditionally attributed to the renowned Tang Dynasty painter Zhou Fang. The Avalokitesvara's

Sprinkling Powder and Heaping Gold

This traditional Chinese painting technique bears a resemblance to contemporary cake decorating. Pigment powder is mixed into a paste and placed inside a small pouch. Held with both hands, the artisan gently squeezes the paste through the opening, applying it to the wall along a pre-drawn outline. Once the paste reaches an appropriate level of dryness, an adhesive is applied and gold leaf is affixed to the raised lines, creating patterns that stand off the wall's surface. This process is used on ushnishas, armour, necklines, jewellery, ceremonial objects and sacred banners adorning Buddhist statues, producing a magnificent, ornate finish and a pronounced sense of dimension.

▲ Part of a Fahai Temple mural depicts Water Moon Guanyin (Avalokitesvara)

seated posture is described by the specialised term "sitting in a leisurely posture." This representation has long been one of the most beloved and influential forms of Avalokitesvara in China.

In this Ming Dynasty mural, Water Moon Avalokitesvara is shown with softly open eyes and a gentle downward gaze. The Avalokitesvara's face is elegantly rounded, conveying kindness and tranquillity. The veil is itself a masterpiece of artistry: viewed from a distance, it appears as delicate as a cicada's wing, almost imperceptible. On closer examination, it reveals a fine lattice of lines, adorned with hexagonal petals rendered using the "sprinkling powder and heaping gold" technique, which imparts a subtle golden radiance. Ancient painters employed ultra-fine brushes to depict each petal, with 48 radial threads in every flower. Thousands of such blossoms combine to form the veil, its translucency so skilfully achieved that the skin beneath remains visible. This remarkable precision reflects the pinnacle of Ming Dynasty painting. Behind Avalokitesvara, a grand halo further deepens the sense of reverence and calm.

Flanking Water Moon Avalokitesvara are Manjusri Bodhisattva on the left and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva on the right, in strict accordance with traditional Buddhist iconography. Each Bodhisattva is shown with the appropriate mounts and attendants. Manjusri Bodhisattva is accompanied by a cyan lion, while Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is attended by a six-tusked white elephant. At the lower left of Manjusri Bodhisattva and the lower right of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva stands a follower, arranged symmetrically from east to west. One elder gazes upward while holding a staff, while the other presses his palms together in quiet contemplation. The contrast between movement and stillness, together with their varied expressions, highlights the ingenuity of this section of the mural.

The third section, depicting the gathering of the Buddhas, is located on the east and west gable walls of the hall and is divided into two parts. The murals present swirling auspicious clouds, with a celestial realm above and the human world below. The celestial realm is populated by Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other divine beings, while the earthly realm is embellished with springs and flowers. Beneath the auspicious clouds and before the springs and flowers once stood statues of the 18 Arhats. This harmonious convergence of the celestial and human worlds, the Arhats and the Buddhas and the murals and sculptures formed a seamless artistic ensemble. Regrettably, the original statues of the Arhats have not survived.

The fourth section features the temple's main mural, depicting Indra and Brahma paying homage to the Buddha and safeguarding the Dharma. It is located on the east and west sections of the rear wall of the hall and is divided into two parts by the rear door. The mural portrays 20 Dharma-protecting deities, including Indra and Brahma, making it the most content-rich composition. The figures and animals are vividly rendered, appearing almost ready to step beyond the wall. The Buddha is shown with solemn dignity, adorned with splendid ornaments. Each Bodhisattva wears a Buddhist-style necklace and flowing celestial robes, while the Heavenly Kings are equipped with armour and weapons. Celestial maidens, guardians and other deities advance from both sides towards the centre in orderly formation, their garments seemingly rippling across the surface. The extensive

▲ A partial figure of the Fahai Temple murals

use of the "sprinkling powder and heaping gold" technique on attire and accessories lends the mural a refined and elegant quality. Among the deities are lively animals, including wild boars, leopards and white elephants, their fur painted with remarkable precision. Details such as bristles and subtle facial expressions are carefully observed. Even fierce beasts appear gentle and approachable, conveying a distinctly Buddhist spirit of compassion and harmony.

The annals of Chinese history often overlook the identities of the skilled craftspeople behind its most remarkable works of art. Against this backdrop, the survival of the names of Wan Fuqing and other mural painters is especially noteworthy. Their extraordinary artistry has left an enduring and radiant imprint on the art history of China and the wider world.

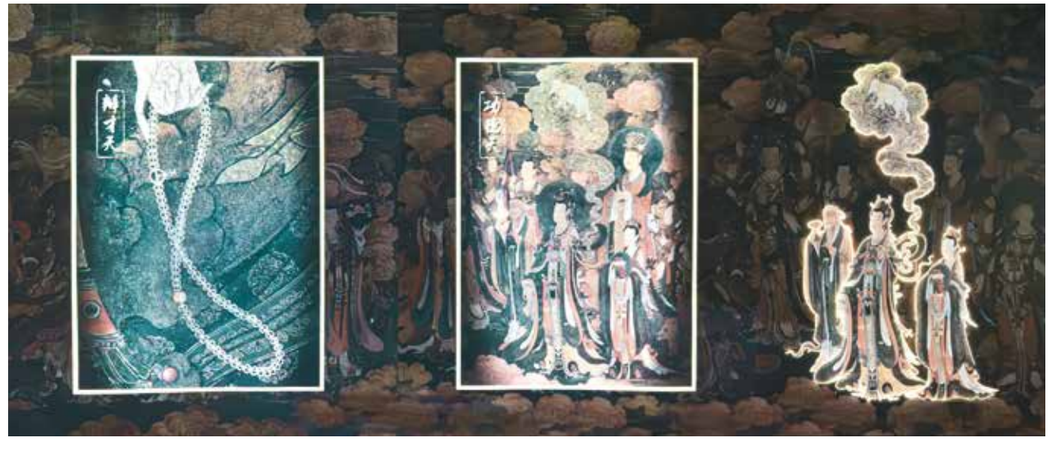
Digital Editions of the Murals of Fahai Temple

After restoration, Fahai Temple reopened in 2008. To protect the murals from environmental damage, the Great Buddha's Hall is kept free of ambient light, and visitors are provided with cold light torches for viewing. Unlike modern murals, these masterpieces remain largely in darkness, their sense of mystery heightened by the strict preservation measures that safeguard them.

The inauguration of the Fahai Temple Mural Art Centre in 2023 marks the emergence of digital technology as an alternative way to experience the murals, while also providing a platform for expert interpretation and deeper exploration of the artworks' historical development.

A 4K display screen presents the original mural at full scale while digitally enlarging key details, enabling visitors to closely examine the intricate brushwork. This display reveals the enduring craftsmanship and distinctive techniques that have withstood the passage of time.

▼ Digital displays at the Fahai Temple Mural Art Centre reveal details of the murals



▲ Digitalised murals on display at the Fahai Temple Mural Art Centre

The exhibition hall features eight screens, each dedicated to a central theme drawn from the murals. These range from character depiction and textile design to painting techniques and ritual objects. Three of the screens trace the visual evolution of nine celestial beings, including Brahma, Indra and the Four Heavenly Kings.

A dome cinema uses 360-degree full-surround technology to immerse viewers in the film *Dream • Fahai*, which recounts the story of Wan Fuqing, the artist responsible for the murals at Fahai Temple.

After completing Fahai Temple's Great Buddha's Hall, Wan Fuqing was entrusted with painting its murals. Burdened by high aspirations, he endured many sleepless nights. One night, he dreamed of ascending to a celestial realm filled with radiant light, where the Jade Pool mirrored earthly beauty and mythical creatures roamed freely, while Skanda offered guidance. Upon awakening, Wan Fuqing realised his struggle arose from an obsession with perfection. By releasing this fixation, he found a freer, more expansive style, transforming creative constraint into murals of enduring grandeur.

The film's characters and creatures, inspired by the murals, transport viewers back to the temple's origins through the painters' distinctive visual language. Within the dome cinema, which measures eight metres in diameter, audiences encounter vividly rendered celestial figures and mythical beasts that appear strikingly lifelike.

Today, visitors can appreciate Fahai Temple's original murals while also exploring their digital interpretations at the adjacent art centre. The Great Buddha's Hall presents the originals in awe-inspiring detail, while the exhibition spaces reveal their stories and artistic context, uniting tradition with modern technology. As both treasured cultural relics of Beijing and works of global spiritual heritage, these murals offer a richly layered experience for lovers of art and history alike.

Other Vibrant Murals in Beijing

Within Beijing, two Ming Dynasty temples are also renowned for their magnificent murals. One is Zhihua Temple, which houses the mural "Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Preaches." The other is Cheng'en Temple, where two mural sections are preserved: one depicting the "Emperor and Empress Releasing Caged Birds," and the other illustrating the "Emperor and Empress Releasing Captured Aquatic Animals." In addition, at the Three Hills and Five Gardens Cultural and Art Centre in Haidian and the Heritage Site Museum at the Ancient Seat of Luxian County in Tongzhou, visitors can view important excavated tomb murals dating from the Tang and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties that were discovered within Beijing.

Highlights of China's Surviving Ancient Murals

China's mural art has a long history. The Frescoes of Dunhuang in Gansu, the Yongle Palace murals in Shanxi, the Pilu Temple murals in Hebei and the Fahai Temple murals in Beijing are recognised as ancient China's four great mural treasures. Spanning grottoes, temples and tombs, these works reflect the breadth and vitality of classical Chinese art.

Dunhuang Frescoes

From the 4th to the 14th centuries

Covering an area of about 50,000 sq.m

Brief Introduction: The Dunhuang Grottoes comprise the Mogao Caves and the Western Dunhuang Thousand-Buddha Grottoes, the Yulin Grottoes in Guazhou, the Eastern Guazhou Thousand-Buddha Grottoes and the Subei Grottoes. Among them, the Mogao Caves stand out for their earliest construction date, largest scale and longest period of development. Excavation began in AD 366, and after more than a millennium, 735 caves remain, containing about 45,000 sq.m of murals and 2,415 sculptures. Together, these works record over a thousand years of history and reflect the cultural exchange along the Silk Road.

Yongle Palace Murals in Shanxi

From the Yuan Dynasty

Covering an area of 1,000 sq.m

Brief Introduction: Established between 1247 and 1368 in Ruicheng, Shanxi Province, Yongle Palace is recognised as China's most extensive and best-preserved early Taoist temple. Its murals are distributed across three principal halls, among which the most renowned is the "Painting of the Heavenly Court" in Sanqing Hall.

Furthermore, the murals in Chunyang Hall depict a wide range of settings, including halls, residences, tea houses, restaurants, clinics and natural landscapes, along with figures from all walks of life. To a significant extent, these works offer a vivid glimpse into everyday life of the period, revealing the creative realism characteristic of Taoist artistic expression.

Pilu Temple Murals in Hebei

From the Ming Dynasty

Covering an area of about 200 sq.m

Brief Introduction: Pilu Temple, located in the northwestern suburbs of Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province, was originally founded between AD 742 and 756 during the Tang Dynasty and underwent later renovations in subsequent dynasties. The surviving structures, namely Sakyamuni Hall and Pilu Hall, date to the Ming Dynasty and preserve richly coloured murals.

The most remarkable features are the murals within Pilu Hall, noted for their vivid imagery. Their subject matter is extensive, featuring nearly twice the number of figures found in the celebrated "Painting of the Heavenly Court" at Yongle Palace in Shanxi.

Across Mountains and Seas, Shared Beauty Endures

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Zhao Lei

As an ancient Eastern capital, Beijing stands as a testament to China's profound cultural heritage. At the same time, it has a long and rich history of interaction and mutual enrichment with diverse cultures, evidenced by many notable examples of exchange between Eastern and Western civilisations. Its grand architectural landmarks, the artistic treasures preserved in museums and the precious state gifts presented by countries around the world all narrate compelling stories of cross-cultural dialogue. Together, these elements form the city's treasured assets, shaping a distinctive image of Beijing as a vital centre for global cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

Architectural Remains of Diverse Integration

Situated within a bustling urban setting, the White Dagoba at Miaoying Temple is the earliest and largest surviving lama dagoba in China. It also stands uniquely as the only intact cultural relic dating from the Dadu period of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). For over seven centuries, this remarkable structure has symbolised ethnic harmony and borne witness to sustained cultural exchange between China and Nepal.

With the establishment of the Yuan capital at Dadu (present-day Beijing) in 1271, the dynasty's founder, Kublai Khan (1215–1294), a devout Buddhist, specifically invited the Nepalese craftsman Arniko (1244–1306) to design a white dagoba to enshrine relics of Sakyamuni. Arniko devoted eight years to the design and construction of this towering structure. Upon its completion, historical records offered evocative praise, describing it as "a Jade Dagoba in the Golden City" and noting that "its brilliance illuminates the Capital City." Beyond adding spiritual radiance to Dadu's skyline, the dagoba embodied aspirations for national security and lasting tranquillity. Incorporating Indian, Nepalese, Mongolian, Tibetan and Han artistic elements, this architectural form became a foundational model for similar structures across China. Having withstood centuries of historical upheaval, the dagoba remains a prominent landmark of Beijing today. Arniko later travelled to Wutai Mountain in Shanxi Province, where he constructed another important white lama dagoba closely resembling the original.

Beyond the White Dagoba, the Xiyanglou area in Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park stands as a vivid testament to 18th-century Sino-Western architectural exchange. It exemplifies a sophisticated fusion of Chinese and Western garden traditions that characterised the era.

Missionaries such as the Italian Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), Frenchmen P. Michel Benoist (1715–1774) and Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–1768), and the Czech artist Ignatius Sichelbart (1708–1780) played key roles in shaping the design of Xiyanglou and guiding its construction by Chinese artisans. The area comprised over 10 architectural complexes, including Xieqiqu and Haiyantang. To commemorate the project's completion and its innovative blending of design traditions, Emperor Qianlong (reign: 1735–1796) commissioned the copperplate etchings "Twenty Scenic Spots of Xiyanglou in Yuanmingyuan," which preserve the artistic vision of Yuanmingyuan (the Old Summer Palace). These Qing Dynasty works are invaluable for the study of Sino-Western cultural exchange and architectural history. One of the most striking features was the water clock in front of Haiyantang, where 12 zodiac animal heads spouted water in sequence according to the traditional Chinese *shichen* system, all jetting simultaneously at noon. Today, a surviving shell-shaped stone pedestal offers a glimpse of Xiyanglou's former splendour amid its ruined state.

While the White Dagoba at Miaoying Temple and Xiyanglou at Yuanmingyuan exemplify the fusion of Chinese and Western architectural traditions, the Beijing Ancient Observatory offers an equally compelling account of technological and cultural dialogue between East and West. Erected in 1442, the observatory served as China's primary astronomical institution throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties and remained in continuous use for celestial observation until 1929, spanning nearly five centuries. The elevated platform preserves eight bronze astronomical instruments, including the ecliptic armilla conceived under the supervision of the Belgian missionary Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) and the azimuth theodolite designed by the German missionary Kilian Stumpf (1655–1720). Also displayed are a celestial globe inlaid with 1,876 gilded copper stars, a scale instrument shaped like an arc and a quadrant decorated with dragon motifs. Despite centuries of exposure to wind and weather, these instruments retain their exquisite beauty. They functioned not only as scientific devices for measuring the heavens but also as refined works of art and enduring testaments to the historical technological and cultural interchange between Eastern and Western civilisations. At this site, Western missionaries such as Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592–1666) and Ferdinand Augustin von Hallerstein (1703–1774) worked closely with Chinese officials, jointly observing the skies and advancing astronomical knowledge. Although now surrounded by modern high-rise buildings, visitors today can still appreciate the profound cultural legacy once used in observing the universe.

Amazing Artefacts Combining Chinese and Western Elements

After Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) arrived in Beijing in 1601, Western missionaries served within the Forbidden City for more than two centuries. Over time, these envoys gradually introduced Western technologies and aesthetic ideas, subtly influencing the development of Eastern court art.

As chinoiserie gained popularity in Europe, the Qing court likewise developed a growing interest in Western artefacts. Emperor Yongzheng (reign: 1722–1735), for instance, collected Western spectacles, while Emperor Qianlong showed a strong preference for intricate Western timepieces, often embellished with Chinese-style

▼ Dashuifa site at the Xiyanglou area in the Yuanmingyuan Ruins Park

pavilions and terraces. Rococo-style famille rose porcelain blended lotus motifs with Western decorative elements, creating a refined visual harmony. Enamelling flourished during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722), aided by the technical expertise of missionaries, and evolved further under Yongzheng and Qianlong as imported techniques were adapted to local materials. The resulting ceramics combined Western imagery with Chinese poetry, calligraphy and seal carving, forming a distinctive hybrid style. Together, these examples highlight the Qing court's active engagement with Western technology and art, illustrating a dynamic process of cultural exchange that enriched both traditions.

The painting artistry of this period likewise deserves particular attention. Several distinguished foreign artists held positions at the Qing court, including Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignatius Sichelbart, Andrea Amici (who died in 1781) and Jean-Denis Attiret. Among them, Castiglione exerted the greatest influence and produced the largest body of work. This Italian missionary possessed a deep understanding of Western principles of perspective and the use of light and shadow. Yet throughout his life in China, he devoted himself to painting with traditional Chinese brushes, working on silk and using mineral-based pigments. As a result, he enjoyed considerable favour within the imperial household. The European painting methods he had mastered, grounded in geometric perspective and the structure of chiaroscuro, were applied across hundreds of works commissioned by the Qing court, particularly during the reign of Emperor Qianlong. By combining Chinese and Western approaches, Castiglione developed a distinctive painting style characterised by its precision and lifelike realism. He also instructed imperial painters in European techniques, leading to the adoption of focal perspective and its gradual integration with established Chinese brushwork and ink traditions. This process of mutual borrowing and adaptation fostered an emerging trend in painting that successfully unified Chinese and Western elements. The work titled "Emperor Qianlong and the Imperial Family Celebrate the Lunar New Year" stands as a representative example of this artistic convergence. In the composition, the image of Emperor Qianlong was painted by Castiglione, while the children, architectural features and plant motifs were executed by Chinese artists such as Shen Yuan (1736–1795). Within a single painting, Chinese and Western techniques coexist in balanced harmony. Moreover, in the Juanqin Studio of the Palace of Tranquil Longevity and the Sanxitang Studio of the Hall of Mental Cultivation in the Forbidden City, visitors can still observe examples of trompe l'oeil painting. These murals, produced through collaboration between Castiglione and Chinese painters, depict scenes of Chinese gardens enhanced by perspective-based realism. The effect creates an almost miraculous sensation, giving viewers the impression of standing indoors while simultaneously experiencing the openness of the outdoors. This style has since come to be recognised as a defining example of the fusion of Chinese and Western influences within Qing court painting.

▲ A gold-plated copper clock featuring an eight-column structure with enamel and rhinestone decorations

▲ A scene from the painting "Emperor Qianlong and the Imperial Family Celebrate the Lunar New Year"

Foreign artefacts in Beijing, including porcelain, paintings, enamels, clocks and scientific instruments, demonstrate the East's adoption of Western science, technology and art. These relics embody processes of cross-cultural exchange and mutual learning between civilisations.

Precious State Gifts from around the World

As China's cultural capital, Beijing has long played a key role in global exchange, a position further strengthened since the founding of the People's Republic China. The Central Gift and Artefacts Centre houses national gifts that testify to China's diplomacy and international friendships. Exchanged between Chinese and foreign leaders since 1949, these include diplomatic artefacts, regional artworks and refined handicrafts. Some reflect foreign craftsmanship, while others embody Chinese cultural heritage, together forming a diverse collection centred on mutual respect and cultural dialogue.

In 1949, filmmakers from the Soviet Union arrived in China to document pivotal moments, including the founding of the People's Republic of China. Their footage captured historic ceremonies and scenes of urban life in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, preserving everyday moments from decades ago. In 2019, to mark the 70th anniversaries of the People's Republic of China's founding and Sino-Russian diplomatic relations, Russia presented the colour film of the 1949 ceremony, a gesture symbolising enduring friendship. Another notable diplomatic gift commemorates the 1972 US-China rapprochement. During President Nixon's landmark visit, he presented a porcelain swan sculpture depicting two adults with three cygnets. Celebrated for its refined craftsmanship, the piece also marks the dawn of normalised relations, uniting artistic beauty with historical significance.

In many Asian countries, including China, elephants symbolise good fortune. Thailand, Sri Lanka and Mongolia have all presented elephant-themed state gifts to China. Thailand's teak carving depicts Thais living in harmony with elephants. Sri Lanka's silver-inlaid wooden elephant reflects a deep cultural reverence for the animal. Mongolia's silver sculpture, showing an elephant, monkey, rabbit and francolin beneath a fruit-laden tree, conveys aspirations for peace and coexistence.

The mother-of-pearl inlay technique, which originated in China, is evident in state gifts from East Asia. Notable examples include the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's lacquer box adorned with shell inlay and Vietnam's lacquer screen depicting the One Pillar Pagoda. This shared artistic heritage now supports ongoing regional dialogue and cooperation, with a focus on safeguarding traditional craftsmanship while encouraging modern creative practices. Other works further illustrate the rich exchange between local traditions and Chinese culture, such as Malaysia's tin vases carved with the "Four Gentlemen" motif, Tunisia's "Tai Chi Diagram" mosaic and Seychelles' wooden model of Zheng He's famed treasure ship, each reflecting meaningful cultural synthesis. Mexico's "Tree of Life" pottery sculpture is particularly striking for its inventive fusion. Beyond its national symbolism, it incorporates classic Chinese cultural elements, including the Great Wall, Peking Opera, the *pipa*, *weiqi* and the lion dance. Inlaid with the Five-starred Red Flag, a floral and butterfly wreath, and solar and lunar motifs, the piece conveys a powerful message of enduring friendship.

The friendship tokens China presents at domestic multilateral events are likewise rich in meaning. At the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, for example, the painted copper plate with carved motifs titled "Silk Road in Blossoms" was presented. At the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, guests received the silk brocade painting "Along the River during the Qingming Festival." Other examples include Dehua white porcelain displayed at the BRICS Summit in Xiamen and cloisonné artworks created for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing. Each artefact vividly conveys the distinctive appeal of China's traditional culture, making these gifts enduring records of the country's major diplomatic events.

Across its long historical continuum, Beijing, a city that is both ancient and modern, has continually shaped compelling narratives of intercultural exchange. The urban treasures found within the city, with connections spanning continents, stand as vivid testimony to the harmonious blending of cultures and the shared aesthetic values that unite diverse civilisations.

▼ Wooden elephant with jeweled silver covering, presented by Sri Lanka

Culture Express

舞剧《牡丹亭》

2026 年 1 月 29 日 –2 月 1 日北京保利剧院上演舞剧《牡丹亭》。该剧以汤显祖原作为基础，将五十五回的原作改编为上下两本。全剧分为上下半场“梦卷”和“画卷”，上半场聚焦杜丽娘从春情萌动到离魂的历程，下半场展现柳梦梅与杜丽娘对抗命运的主线。该剧以“步入粉墙，踏上金砖”八字凝练苏州基因，构建视觉符号；大量使用“水雾”作为道具，构建虚与实、生与死的多维空间；将“花神”群体从原著中功能性角色转化为自然与生命力量的意象，象征着杜丽娘自由意志的觉醒与生长；舞台上的“牡丹亭”也不仅是一座园林，“是那处曾相见”的梦境，也是打破世俗旧礼的乐园。

The Dance Drama *The Peony Pavilion*

From January 29 to February 1, 2026, the dance drama *The Peony Pavilion* will be staged at the Poly Theatre in Beijing. Adapted from Tang Xianzu's (1550–1615) celebrated masterpiece, the production compresses the original 55-chapter work into two parts, "Dream Scroll" and "Painting Scroll." The first traces Du Liniang's passage from romantic awakening to her death brought on by lovesick longing, while the second follows Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang as they defy fate to reunite. Suzhou's cultural sensibility is distilled in the phrase "Step through the pink walls, tread upon golden bricks," which serves as a central visual motif. Onstage, veils of water mist blur the boundary between reality and illusion, life and death, creating a layered poetic atmosphere. The Flower Spirits—peripheral figures in the original text—are reconceived as vivid symbols of nature and vitality, reflecting Du Liniang's growing self-awareness and desire for autonomy. The Peony Pavilion itself also shifts in meaning, emerging as the dreamlike realm of "Where we once met," a sanctuary where love ultimately overcomes social constraint.

“色彩之巅！法国蓬皮杜中心馆藏艺术大师特展”

“色彩之巅！法国蓬皮杜中心馆藏艺术大师特展”于 2026 年 1 月 24 日 –4 月 15 日在北京民生美术馆举办。展览将呈现 100 余件作品，汇聚了法国蓬皮杜中心馆藏中 20 世纪的大师作品，并加入中国现当代艺术家的作品，展现色彩的现代史及中西对话。展览聚焦七个单色空间，搭配作曲家罗克·里瓦斯（Roque Rivas）与音乐和声学研究中心（IRCAM）合作的声音创作，以及亚历克西斯·达迪耶（Alexis Dadier）携手花宫娜香水公司（Fragonard）打造的香氛装置。展览以“色彩”为核心主题，围绕“现代主义的演变轨迹”，呈现现代艺术的革新与探索历程，涵盖野兽派、立体主义、超现实主义、抽象主义、新现实主义、波普艺术、极简主义、观念艺术等关键流派。

The Exhibition ‘Colors! Masterpieces from the Centre Pompidou’

The exhibition "Colors! Masterpieces from the Centre Pompidou" will be held at Beijing Minsheng Art Museum from January 24 to April 15, 2026. Presenting more than 100 works from the Centre Pompidou's 20th-century collection, the exhibition is complemented by works from Chinese modern and contemporary artists, tracing the development of colour in modern art while fostering dialogue between Eastern and Western aesthetics. Organised around seven monochromatic exhibition spaces, the show incorporates immersive sound compositions by composer Roque Rivas, created in collaboration with IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique), alongside olfactory installations developed by Alexis Dadier in partnership with Fragonard. Centred on the theme of "colour," the exhibition examines the evolution of modernism, mapping artistic innovation across major movements including Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstractionism, Nouveau Réalisme, Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art.