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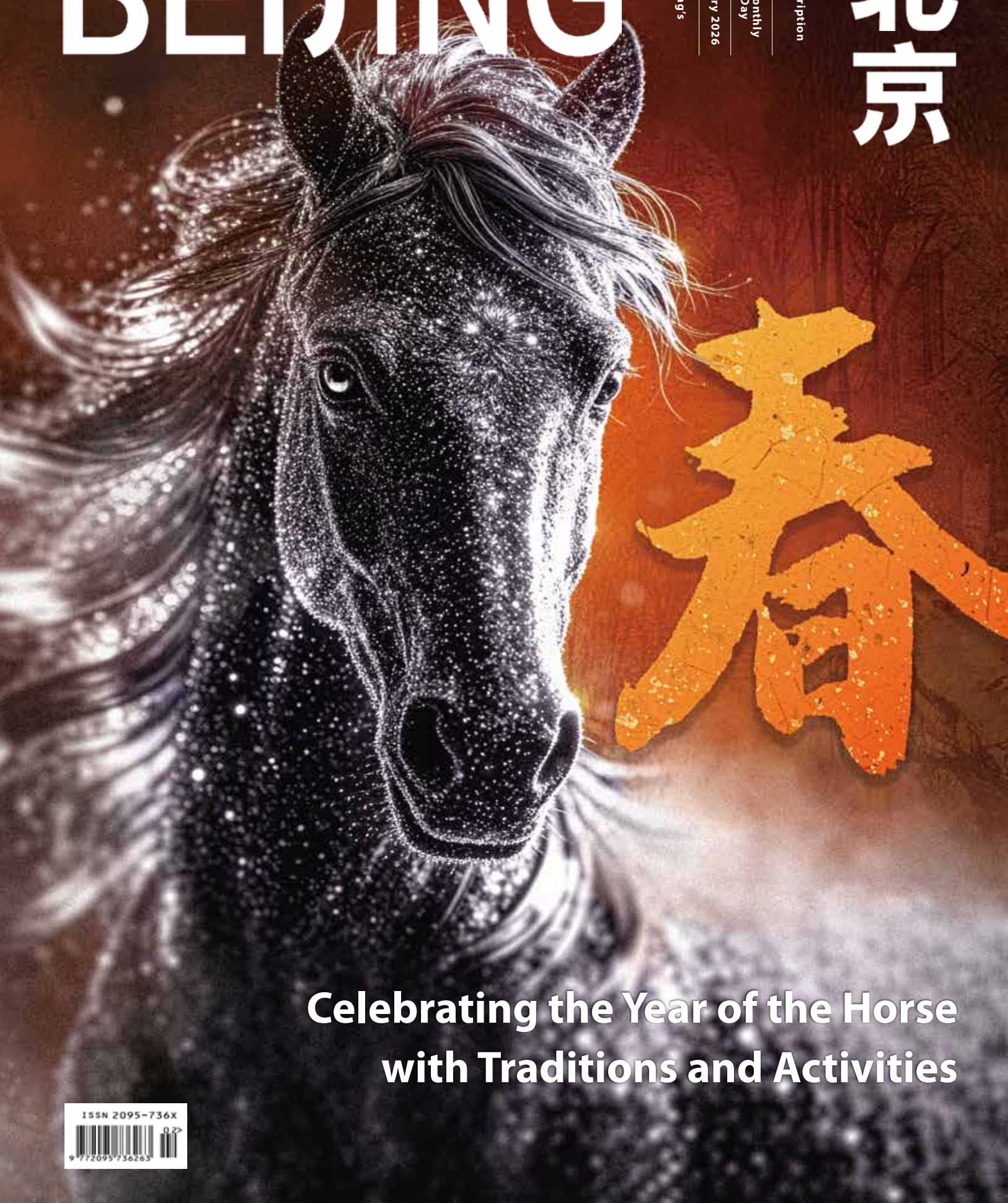
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**Celebrating the Year of the Horse
with Traditions and Activities**

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Celebrating the Year of the Horse with Traditions and Activities

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Tong Tianyi, Bu Xiangdong

As the Year of the Snake comes to an end, the Year of the Horse arrives. When auspicious Chinese idioms such as “*ma dao cheng gong*” (meaning, “instant success upon the arrival of the horse”), “*long ma jing shen*” (“a high and progressive spirit”) and “*jun ye chong long*” (“booming business like running steeds”) are heard with increasing frequency, Chinese New Year draws near. Streets and roads across Beijing are imbued with a jubilant festive atmosphere. In the cycle of the Chinese zodiac, the Year of the Horse returns along time’s path, radiating vitality once again after a 12-year cycle.

Since ancient times, the horse has stood as a vivid and enduring symbol in the spiritual landscape of the Chinese nation. From the hunting and farming practices of early ancestors to battlefields once ablaze with war, from the brushstrokes and scrolls of literati to the everyday hopes of ordinary people, the horse has consistently embodied ceaseless vitality, unwavering perseverance and aspirations for future success. When this auspicious symbolism converges with Beijing’s ancient capital heritage, the festive atmosphere takes on a character that is both uniquely profound and spirited.



▲ Part of a Ming Dynasty scroll depicting green mountains and waters

Several Thousand Years of Connections

Tracing the bond between the horse and the Chinese nation calls for a return to a distant, ancient era. In those primitive times of low productivity, the horse—valued for its speed and physical strength—became an indispensable companion to early humans in hunting, migration and defence. As civilisation progressed, the horse's importance gradually moved beyond pure utility, evolving into a symbol of power, courage and good fortune.

Archaeological discoveries further attest to this profound bond. From the majestic bronze chariots and horses unearthed in the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor to the stone carvings of the Six Steeds at Emperor Taizong (reign: AD 626–649) of the Tang Dynasty's (AD 618–907) Zhaoling Mausoleum, the image of the horse evolved across dynasties

while consistently embodying people's emotions and aspirations. During the Shang (16th century–11th century BC) and Zhou (11th century–256 BC) dynasties, horses signified noble status, with the sophistication of the chariot-and-horse system directly mirroring the hierarchical order of society. In the Qin (221–206 BC) and Han (206 BC–AD 220) dynasties, horses became central to military power, lending force to the bold declaration: "Those who dare offend the mighty Han shall be punished, however far they flee." By the Tang Dynasty, equine culture reached its height, as poets and painters immortalised the horse as an emblem of scholars' unrestrained joy and warriors' heroic spirit.

In folk beliefs and legends, the image of the horse is equally rich in meaning. Ranked seventh among the 12 zodiac animals, the horse corresponds to the "Hour of Wu," when the sun reaches its zenith, echoing the animal's spirited

stance and symbolising vigorous vitality and passionate drive. Unlike the dragon, a mythical totem, the horse is a living creature that exists in the real world; its resilience and forward momentum resonate more readily with human experience, making it a timeless spiritual symbol that transcends eras and endures through history.

The connection between horses and today's capital city follows a clear historical trajectory. During the Yongle era (1403–1424) of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the area around the Liangma River functioned as pastureland for the imperial stables, where courtly steeds were bathed and groomed. As their manes rippled in the wind, this practice gave rise to the name "Liangma River" (literally "Drying Horse River"), a vivid testament to Beijing's enduring connection with the animal. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), fine steeds kept in the Nanyuan Imperial Hunting Park became indispensable

mounts for emperors and nobles on hunting expeditions. Interwoven with imperial rituals and hunting traditions, equine culture took firm root, cementing its place as a vital component of the capital's cultural heritage.

Thus, horse culture has endured for millennia, passed down through word of mouth and brushstrokes, remaining ever vibrant and unceasing.



The Boom in the Year of the Horse

During the Spring Festival, Beijing transforms into an ancient capital illuminated by equine motifs. From horse-shaped artefacts in museums to dynamic, horse-themed installations in commercial districts, from intangible cultural heritage crafts showcased at temple fairs to divine horse imagery embedded in historic settings, equine elements scattered

across the city are woven together into a uniquely Beijing-style Chinese New Year tapestry for the Year of the Horse.

The Liangma River is an ideal starting point for exploring the festive spirit of the Year of the Horse. Having witnessed Beijing's transformation through the ages, the river carries in its very name a deep historical bond with horses. Though no longer a pasture for imperial steeds, it now glows with warmth in winter, as festive decorations illuminate both banks. Along the riverside promenade, rows of red lanterns adorned with zodiac horse motifs hang overhead—some depicting galloping stallions, others rearing proudly with spirited neighs, all rendered in fluid lines and lifelike detail. Shops along the river have likewise embraced equine imagery: windows are graced with intricately paper-cut silhouettes of "Horses Treading on Auspicious Clouds," while cheerful, cartoon-style steeds greet visitors

at doorways, their expressions brimming with joy and celebration.

Strolling from the Liangma River to the Sanlitun commercial district, one encounters a vivid fusion of modernity and tradition. Brands have rolled out Year of the Horse limited-edition collections that skilfully combine classic equine motifs with contemporary design, infusing minimalist aesthetics with a distinctly festive and fashion-forward flair. In the plaza, young people clutch bubble tea and candied hawthorn skewers, posing for stylish Chinese New Year-themed photos against a backdrop of festive décor and the rhythmic pulse of gongs and drums. Even late into the night, Sanlitun remains aglow—folk melodies and the aroma of wine drift through bar-lined streets, while lantern-lit shadows frame laughter and clinking glasses. Here, the Spring Festival moves beyond the conventional family reunion dinner, transforming into a lively,

▼ Year of the Horse festival stalls at Gongmei Emporium, Beijing



youth-driven celebration where old Beijing charm meets trendy elements, capturing a truly contemporary holiday spirit.

In winter, Beijing glitters with a luminous sea of lights that set a joyful, festive mood, while Year of the Horse motifs add an extra layer of exuberance. As night falls, landscape lighting systems illuminate the city on cue, with digital projections and intelligent arrays of coloured lights creating an immersive visual spectacle. In interactive photo zones, adults and children alike eagerly pose for pictures with zodiac horse projections—some striking riding poses, others circling galloping steeds rendered in light. Laughter and shimmering illumination intertwine, weaving one of the most vivid and lively Chinese New Year scenes imaginable.

In the Spring Festival lantern exhibition at the China National Arts and Crafts Museum, horse-shaped lanterns take centre stage. These luminous steeds, radiant bearers of auspicious meaning, leap vividly through shimmering light and shadow. Some are entirely gilded, their manes seeming to blaze like fire, hooves poised mid-stride atop clouds as if ready to surge forward; others are adorned with traditional auspicious patterns that emerge softly in the glow, as though

weaving the blessings of Chinese New Year into layers of silken colour. Even more enchanting are the “living” horse lanterns: within dynamic installations, lifelike stallions nod their heads and sway their tails, hooves tapping gently as if echoing through the air, bathed in warm golden light that recalls the graceful dynamism of “Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow.” Meanwhile, trendy, cute-style horse lanterns—with plump, rounded forms and endearing expressions glowing softly in the lantern haze—have become instant favourites among young visitors and an Instagram-worthy highlight on many festival bucket lists.



Fun Activities and Delicacies at Temple Fairs

During the Year of the Horse Spring Festival, Beijing has rolled out a wide array of cultural and tourism events. Dozens of major temple fairs, lantern festivals and garden parties unfold across the city, infusing traditional Chinese New Year customs with fresh and joyful creativity. At the Ditan Temple Fair, beyond the bustling “Snack Bazaar” featuring dishes and treats from across China, special attention is drawn to the newly revitalised Shenma

Enclosure, a historic structure originally built in 1530 to house imperial horses for sacrificial rituals during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Now reimagined as an immersive cultural space, the courtyard is anchored by a serene horse statue that quietly evokes centuries of ritual history. Here, visitors can pause with a cup of tea and experience firsthand the elegant convergence of ancient architecture and equine heritage.

As a national intangible cultural heritage event, the Changdian Temple Fair embodies the quintessence of Chinese New Year traditions in Beijing. Elements of the Year of the Horse are subtly woven into every detail: paper-cutting artisans deftly flick their fingers and, within moments, conjure a galloping stallion, drawing murmurs of admiration from gathered onlookers. Nearby, kite-makers craft “Horse Treading on Auspicious Clouds” kites on the spot, bending bamboo strips into flowing curves, pasting vibrant paper and carefully painting equine details with fine brushes until a lifelike “flying horse” takes shape. At stalls selling *chatang* (seasoned flour mush), vendors pour boiling water from long-spouted kettles with practised precision into bowls of sweet, fragrant *chatang*, while tiny horse-themed paper-cut decorations cling playfully to each rim. Meanwhile, the Honglou Temple Fair at Daguan Yuan Park offers its own distinctive charm: within the cultural and creative market, delicately crafted pastries inspired by the classic novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* sit alongside merchandise that reimagines Year of the Horse motifs through regional design. Paper bookmarks shaped like playful foals and ceramic horse figurines prove especially popular, becoming favoured souvenirs among young visitors, who find themselves immersed in both the literary elegance of a Chinese masterpiece and the joyful spirit of the Spring Festival.

Beijing’s festive charm also lingers in the warm, bustling atmosphere of its time-honoured brands. As soon as the 12th lunar month begins, long lines of



▲ Children hold horse-themed decorations at a small commodities market in Beijing



▲ A visitor views works at a Xu Beihong art exhibition

customers form outside Daoxiangcun stores. Newly launched for the Year of the Horse, the zodiac pastry “Dada Bing” (named after the rhythmic clip-clop of galloping hooves) features an embossed design of a steed bearing treasures amid layered auspicious motifs. Lightly sweet and distinctive in flavour, it delights the palate without becoming cloying. Also making their debut are the limited-edition “Fortune Foal” mousse cake and the freshly baked “Galloping Horse Brings Blessings” series, which thoughtfully combine Chinese auspicious symbolism with Western-style desserts and traditional baking techniques, achieving a balanced union of visual appeal, taste and festive meaning. At Laijinyuxuan in Zhongshan Park, the seasonal “Bao Nin Fu ‘Dao’” (puns on “assured fortune” and “Daoxiangcun pastries”) Chinese New Year set makes a timely return. Alongside lucky “red envelope” buns wrapped in festive limited-edition packaging, the menu now introduces exclusive Year of the Horse pastries, “Ma Shang You Fu” and “Ma Shang Xin Dong.” Paired with the delicate fragrance of Lan Xiang Gan Lu tea, the set has emerged as a favoured Chinese New Year gift among younger visitors. Meanwhile, at Fangshan Teahouse inside Beihai Park, the meticulously crafted “Ma Shang You Qian Gao” cakes—shaped like coins stacked neatly on a horse’s back—

not only showcase the refined artistry of imperial cuisine but also convey heartfelt blessings for the Year of the Horse in every bite.



A Warm and Vibrant Atmosphere

Beijing’s festive vibes are found not only in bustling attractions and shopping districts, but also linger warmly in the everyday alleys and courtyards of ordinary life. After the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month, the atmosphere of Chinese New Year deepens within the hutongs. Old Beijingers follow the familiar saying: “On the 23rd day, eat sticky malt candy; on the 24th day, sweep the house clean.” Busy figures weave through narrow lanes, brushing away dust and traces of the past, while children chase one another around ancient trees, clutching horse-shaped sugar figurines in their hands. The sweetness in the air, mingling with the crisp winter breeze, becomes the most unforgettable scent of the season.

Deep within the hutongs, inside an old courtyard, a scene of quiet warmth comes gently into view. An elderly grandmother sits on a small stool, scissors dancing across red paper as she swiftly cuts out several spirited steeds—manes flowing, hooves kicking up the wind—each framed by the auspicious phrase “*ma dao cheng gong*.” Nearby,

her husband carefully brushes ink onto crimson paper, composing a couplet: “Golden horses usher in spring with joy; vermilion phoenixes greet the rising sun, bringing auspicious omens.” His strokes are bold yet steady, infused with calm concentration. Once finished, he passes the scrolls to the children, who eagerly paste them on either side of the doorway. Neighbours exchange cheerful greetings of “*guo nian hao!*” (“Happy Chinese New Year!”), their voices drifting softly down the alley with the winter breeze, warming the cold season through simple, heartfelt connection.

This Year of the Horse Spring Festival, Beijing’s festive aura is diverse, vibrant and deeply resonant. It carries the historical depth of the Liangma River, the fashionable energy of Sanlitun, the bustling joy of temple fairs, the devoted craftsmanship of time-honoured brands and, above all, the tender warmth of hutong life. The spirit of the horse—forward-driving, loyal, energetic and steadfast—permeates every corner of the city, interwoven into daily life and becoming the touching undertone of the season. This Beijing-style Year of the Horse atmosphere has already been etched into people’s hearts, forming the warmest and most vivid memory of the festival. Carried by the enduring spirit of the horse, it will be passed down through generations, ever alive and unceasing.

▼ “Galloping Horse Brings Blessings” cakes from Daoxiangcun in Beijing



Civilisational Legacy: Enduring Imprints across Time

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi, [Greece] Georgios Doupas

Across China's long and rich history, the horse has maintained a profound connection with social evolution, appearing repeatedly in artistic expression. Serving as a steadfast companion to humankind, the animal embodies strength, swiftness and vitality. As the ages have unfolded, it has become interwoven with the human story, carrying people through migrations and wars, underpinning systems of governance and ceremony, and accompanying the lives and memories of generations, ultimately evolving into cherished artefacts.

Examples include the Li Ju Zun, a horse-shaped bronze wine vessel from the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century–771 BC), the Bronze Galloping Horse of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), the reliefs of the Six Steeds of the Zhaoling Tomb and the tri-colour glazed pottery horses of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), the stone horses lining the Sacred Way of the Ming Tombs and hybrid works such as the copper horse head from Yuanmingyuan (the Old Summer Palace), alongside horse-themed timepieces in the Palace Museum.

These relics, now preserved as museum exhibits, testify to the depth and continuity of Chinese horse culture. They invite the public to explore the animal's multifaceted roles across civilisation.





Li Ju Zun, a bronze vessel cast in the form of a lively foal, measuring 32.4 cm in height and 34 cm in length, and weighing 6.6 kilograms



National Treasures

As a highly institutionalised and ritualised symbol, the horse played a central role in shaping ancient Chinese civilisation. Beyond its functions in warfare and production, the animal was embedded in state ceremonies and the structure of the monarchy, emerging as a vital icon that embodied political authority and established social norms.

Over three millennia ago, during the Shang (16th–11th century BC) and Zhou (11th century–256 BC) dynasties, bronze horse-shaped artefacts emerged, functioning both as practical vessels and as sculptural works of art. These pieces exemplify a harmonious fusion of utility and aesthetics, embodying an enduring artistic appeal. A prime

example is the Li Ju Zun, a Western Zhou Dynasty bronze wine vessel of delicate and engaging form, now held in the National Museum of China.

The artefact measures 32.4 centimetres (cm) in height and 34 cm in length, weighing 6.6 kilograms (kg). It depicts a foal standing proudly, its head raised and ears alert. Compact in form, with sturdy, short legs, its powerful hooves radiate a sense of vitality. The lifelike modelling reflects the ancient artisan's deep affection for horses. The hollow abdominal cavity is fitted with a removable lid, while the surface is adorned only with two minimalist circular vortex patterns on the belly. These restrained motifs complement the horse's dynamic presence, making it a rare and treasured bronze masterpiece of the Western Zhou Dynasty.

Apart from its artistic and

decorative value, this cultural relic also served as a vital ritual vessel, or *zun*, in its own time.

The *zun* was an ancient Chinese ritual vessel used for holding wine. Historical records indicate that animal-shaped *zun* vessels were common during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but those modelled after foals were exceptionally rare. As a result, the surviving Li Ju Zun is regarded as being of particularly high value.

The artefact bears inscriptions of 9 lines totalling 94 characters on its chest, with a further 3 lines of 11 characters engraved inside the lid. Together, the 105 characters adorning the horse-shaped vessel record events connected to a royal ceremony for mature horses held during the mid-Western Zhou Dynasty.

During the Western Zhou Dynasty, horses were considered mature at two years of age. At this point, the foal would be separated from its mother and trained for service. Each year, the king of Zhou presided over a grand ceremony to honour the Horse Deity, demonstrating the mature horses' readiness for duty. This rite was known as the "Ceremony of Leading Away Foals." The inscription on the horse-shaped vessel stands as an authentic historical record of this ceremony, offering valuable insight into practices and beliefs from more than 3,000 years ago.

The artefact's inscription records that, during one Ceremony of Leading Away Foals, a nobleman named Li distinguished himself. In recognition of his service, the king rewarded him with two foals. To commemorate this honour and ensure it would be remembered by future generations, Li commissioned a set of bronze ritual vessels, including this horse-shaped artefact, as an expression of gratitude. In accordance with aristocratic custom at the time, he had an inscription added to the vessel. The lid bears an 11-character inscription noting that the king held the ceremony at Chi and bestowed the foals Yonglei and Zhuizi upon Li, while the 94-character inscription on the vessel's



▲ Bronze Galloping Horse

body records the ceremony and conveys Li's wish that this honour be preserved for posterity.

This horse-shaped bronze vessel represents the earliest known example of its kind discovered in China to date. It stands as a remarkable masterpiece, seamlessly uniting aesthetic refinement with practical functionality.

During the Western Zhou Dynasty, the horse primarily symbolised ritual systems and order. By the Han Dynasty, however, it had come to embody ideals of speed and strength, infused with a heightened sense of imagination.

One of the most celebrated bronze artefacts featuring horse imagery is the Galloping Horse from the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25–220), also known as "The Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow." This exquisite work integrates keen observation of equine form with philosophical reflections on speed and a sophisticated grasp

of balance. The result is a harmonious fusion of lifelike dynamism and imaginative elegance, securing its status as a timeless masterpiece.

Visitors encountering the artefact for the first time are often struck by its commanding presence. Though modest in size, standing just 34.5 cm tall and measuring 45 cm in length, it conveys a remarkable sense of motion and power. The horse's head is lifted in a spirited neigh, as if on the verge of breaking free from the bronze itself, while its muscular body appears coiled with restrained energy. Its tail streams behind like a billowing banner, reinforcing the impression of speed and momentum. The true marvel, however, lies in its balance: the full weight and forward thrust of the sculpture converge on a single hoof, which rests delicately on the back of a startled bird, a swallow or perhaps the mythical *longque* ("dragon-sparrow"). The bird's backward

glance further heightens the sense of breathtaking swiftness and fearless resolve, transforming the piece into a compelling fusion of technical mastery and dynamic expression.

The skill demonstrated in the creation of this bronze object is truly exceptional. It presents a lifelike stance rendered with striking realism. One naturally wonders how such an equine figure is able to maintain perfect balance atop a small bird, supported by a single point of contact. Examination using X-ray technology has revealed that an iron core was incorporated into the horse's supporting limb during the casting process. This method effectively produced what might be described as "bronze infused with iron reinforcement," comparable to the role of steel rods in modern concrete, and has ensured the stability of this remarkable sculpture for nearly 2,000 years. While verdigris has gradually

appeared on the artefact's painted surfaces over time, traces of red, white and black pigments observed at the time of its discovery hint at the vibrant creature it once represented. In 1971, the bronze horse embarked on a journey to Europe and the Americas, serving as a cultural envoy and generating considerable excitement within international cultural circles.

In 1983, the Bronze Galloping Horse was designated by the National Tourism Administration (today's Ministry of Culture and Tourism) as the official emblem of Chinese tourism. At the same time, it was endowed with layered symbolic meanings: the notion of "openness," evoking the convergence of the Silk Road; the idea of "progress," embodied in a steed ascending toward the heavens; and the spirit of "friendship," reflecting ongoing cultural exchange. As a result, the artefact came to stand as a quintessential Chinese image, encapsulating the essence of contemporary tourism.

Silent Guardianship

Warfare increasingly shaped the fate of nations in ancient times, and with it grew the importance of horses in historical developments. The elevated status of horses within the Qin army following Emperor Shihuang's unification of the six states is evident in the pits containing the Terracotta Army near his mausoleum. Likewise, the stone carving titled "Horse Trampling on the Xiongnu," positioned before the tomb of General Huo Qubing (140–117 BC) of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 24), stands as both a symbol of the dynasty's power and vigour and a testament to Huo's military achievements and patriotic spirit. Later, during the Tang Dynasty, Li Shimin, Emperor Taizong (reign: AD 626–649), accorded special honour to his six warhorses as part of his notable accomplishments. As a result, he commissioned stone carvings of these animals to be erected before his Zhaoling

Mausoleum, known today as the "Six Steeds of Zhaoling."

The "Six Steeds of Zhaoling" were named Shifachi, Qingzhui, Telebiao, Saluzi, Quanmaogua and Baitiwu. Historical accounts indicate that these horses accompanied the emperor on his military campaigns across the country, bearing witness to nearly the entire process of dynastic establishment. The emperor commissioned Yan Liben (AD 601–673) to paint their portraits, after which his elder brother, Yan Lide (AD 596–656), carved their images into stone reliefs based on these works. In addition, the emperor personally composed verses in praise of each steed, which were inscribed beside the images by Ouyang Xun (AD 557–641). This accomplished integration of painting, sculpture, poetry and calligraphy establishes the "Six Steeds of Zhaoling" as a consummate achievement in stone carving art.

Artistically, the "Six Steeds of Zhaoling" demonstrate a high-relief technique marked by accurate proportions and taut musculature. The artisans skilfully manipulated chisel depth to compensate for the stone's inability to convey mane colour, endowing each horse with a distinct character. Ranging from high-spirited galloping to



'Top-notch' Carriages from the Qin Dynasty

The bronze chariots and horses, Nos. 1 and 2, from the Mausoleum of Emperor Shihuang (reign: 221–210 BC) of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), now housed at the Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum, rank among China's most significant cultural treasures. These bronze artefacts, scaled to half the size of Qin Dynasty chariots and horses, represent the largest such discovery in China.

The bronze umbrella on Carriage No. 1 is fitted with a base incorporating a movable hinge and a crank-pin locking mechanism. A concealed groove allows it to be securely locked or easily opened, while a locking rod with a movable buckle on the handle stabilises the umbrella, preventing it from tipping during vigorous movement.

Carriage No. 2 is enclosed on all sides, but features a rear door with openable panels and windows at the front, left and right. After more than 2,000 years, these windows still operate smoothly. Perforated like screen windows, they provide cooling when open and warmth when closed, making this carriage a possible example of the world's earliest "air-conditioned carriage."

Bronze Chariot and Horses No. 1 from the Mausoleum of Emperor Shihuang of the Qin Dynasty



wounded in the chest, its head drooping and body recoiling, mouth agape and hindquarters tensed, vividly conveying pain and faltering strength. Qiu, clad in armour with sword and quiver, bends forward to extract the arrow. These "Six Steeds of Zhaoling" reliefs powerfully convey the courage and resilience of warhorses in battle, reflecting the high level of realism achieved in early Tang Dynasty art.

Each steed is associated with a

standing firm despite an arrow strike, the sculptures deftly balance movement and stillness within the stone medium.

Saluzi occupies a unique place among the six, as the only horse depicted alongside a human figure. *Book of Tang: Biography of Qiu Xingong* records that during a battle at Mangshan Mountain near Luoyang against Wang Shichong (died in AD 621), Li Shimin, later Emperor Taizong, was separated from his forces and accompanied only by Qiu Xingong (AD 586–665). When Li's horse, Saluzi, was struck in the chest by an arrow, Qiu offered his own mount and removed the arrow from the wounded horse. To honour the joint efforts of Qiu and Saluzi in protecting him, Li later commissioned this moment to be carved with the other reliefs at the Zhaoling Tomb. In the relief, Saluzi appears

▼ A stone relief of Saluzi, one of the "Six Steeds of Zhaoling"



specific battle, with Quanmaogua notably shown pierced by nine arrows. Having borne witness to Li's decisive victories over rival warlords, these horses came to symbolise the scale and significance of his military achievements.

Among ancient Chinese imperial tomb carvings, the "Six Steeds of Zhaoling" are unique in possessing distinct historical identities. Sadly, Saluzi and Quanmaogua were stolen and taken overseas in 1914, while the others are now housed in the Xi'an Beilin Museum (Xi'an Stele Forest Museum). Replicas of the two lost reliefs stand in their place, serving as poignant reminders of this cultural loss and drawing steady crowds to the museum's exhibition.

In ancient China, horses symbolised speed, strength and protection, far beyond mere travel. Battle-proven Six Steeds of Zhaoling during the Tang Dynasty were immortalised in stone, retaining their vigour. Serving varied roles, from warfare to silent presence, these animals bore diverse historical duties. Now in museums and ruins, they retain ancient memories of order, swiftness and spirit for modern observers.



An Artistic World of Colourful Horses

As the era shifted towards stability and prosperity, the symbolism of horses in tomb carvings evolved. No longer solely emblems of imperial dignity, they became accessible to common people as burial objects. Within this context, graceful tri-colour glazed pottery horses emerged, reflecting a changing cultural landscape in which once-exclusive imperial symbols entered broader social life.

The *sancai*, or tri-colour glazed pottery horse, is a quintessential subject of Tang Dynasty tri-colour glazed pottery. A remarkable example, housed at the National Museum of China, stands out for its striking design. Measuring 67.2 cm in height and 78.2 cm in length, the Black-

Glazed Horse exudes vigour and power. Its face, mane, tail and hooves are accented with white glaze, evoking the image of "four hooves trampling on snow."

The artefact's value lies in its distinctive black glaze, a rarity among Tang Dynasty tri-colour glazed pottery. Achieving this hue was technically demanding, as black could not be fired directly at the time. Craftsmen carefully applied layers of brownish-red or dark brown glaze, then subjected the piece to a second firing to produce the black effect. The process was highly unpredictable: excessive heat risked cracking or deformation, while insufficient heat caused the glaze to melt and flow

unevenly. Success depended heavily on chance, rendering black-glazed pottery exceptionally rare. Today, only two such pottery horses are known to exist in China, highlighting both their scarcity and the skill behind their creation.

The exquisite artefact, discovered in a Tang Dynasty tomb at Guanlin in Luoyang, reflects the city's role as the eastern terminus of the Silk Road. Luoyang received fine horses as tribute from the Western Regions, including present-day Central Asia, inspiring this work, which is modelled on a Tujue breed from that area. The saddle and cushion beneath it show the influence of the Sassanid Empire, underscoring the

depth of cultural exchange between East and West during the Tang Dynasty. As trade and interaction along the Silk Road intensified, Central Asian horses were increasingly introduced to China. The dynasty's esteem for horses rose accordingly, with their population increasing from fewer than ten thousand at its outset to several hundred thousand at its height, providing abundant inspiration for tri-colour glazed pottery.

Among the many Tang Dynasty tri-colour glazed horses, a particularly striking example is held in the Palace Museum collection. The piece was donated by Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958), a pioneer in China's cultural heritage preservation, and stands as an elegant embodiment of the Tang Dynasty's flourishing culture.

This magnificent glazed horse, though unsigned and undated, radiates a strong sense of opulence and authority. Crafted from fine, robust white pottery—likely produced at a kiln in Gongxian County, Henan Province, or Yaozhou, Shaanxi Province—it demonstrates exceptional control of firing temperature, with no visible cracking or warping. Every finely rendered detail reflects the remarkable skill and precision achieved by Tang Dynasty artisans.

The pottery horse displays a striking tri-colour glazed palette, built on a white base and animated by rich green, brown and yellow tones. During firing, the glazes melt and intermingle, producing a distinctive "kiln transformation" effect that lends visual depth. The saddle and bridle gleam in emerald green, while the mane is subtly accented in brown, creating a bold yet balanced contrast that captures the vibrant artistry of the Tang Dynasty.

The decorative techniques employed in this piece display remarkable artistry, with the headstall and other fittings formed through moulding and applique. Delicate details, including apricot-leaf motifs and floral knots, are rendered with striking three-dimensionality, lending them a vivid presence. The saddle's cushion and mudguards, positioned along the horse's flanks, meticulously reproduce woven fabric textures through precise engraving, reflecting the Tang artisans' steadfast pursuit of refinement in even the finest details.

The pottery horse is defined by powerful shoulders and neck, a straight back and sturdy, upright legs. Raised ears, wide eyes and a slightly parted mouth suggest movement, as if mid-neigh, while the tail is elegantly knotted. The overall stance conveys energy tempered by poise. A striking feature is the mane, arranged in the distinctive "three-braid" pattern, a hallmark of the Tang court, lending solemnity and grandeur. The saddle, modelled on mudguards used by Tang nobility in travel, balances practicality with opulence, enhancing the horse's



▲ Part of a tri-colour pottery horse

presence and reflecting an era where artistry and function converged.

This Tang Dynasty artefact masterfully blends lifelike representation with artistic flair, moving beyond the rigidity of earlier creations. Representing the zenith of sculptural achievement during this flourishing era, the pottery figure stands as evidence of the dynasty's sophisticated management of horses. At the time, horses were not merely instruments of warfare or transport, but also symbols of cultural exchange between China and other countries. Fine steeds introduced from the Western Regions along the Silk Road influenced both the form and ornamentation of Tang tri-colour glazed horses, vividly illustrating the mutual learning and interaction between Tang and the Western Regions.

Currently, the elegant statue is displayed in the Sculpture Museum within the Palace of Compassion and Tranquility in the Forbidden City. As a treasured artistic relic of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, it bears witness to a significant historical era and carries forward its cultural legacy, enabling visitors to admire its splendour while sensing the wealth and grandeur of that period.

▼ Part of a tri-colour black-glazed pottery horse





Other Tri-colour Glazed Horses with Rich Shapes



Tri-colour Pottery Horses Unearthed from An Pu's Tomb

Housed at: Luoyang Museum

Brief Introduction: Four exquisite tri-colour horses were unearthed from the tomb of the Tang Dynasty nobleman An Pu. Among them is a black-glazed pottery horse, one of only two known Tang Dynasty examples of its kind in China. Now housed at the Luoyang Museum, it is regarded as the institution's most prized possession. The horse is coated primarily in a lustrous black glaze, with white accents on the head, mane, back, tail and hooves, vividly evoking the image of a "divine steed treading on snow." A bright green-glazed saddle blanket

adds contrast, while the raised tail and poised stance convey dynamic energy. The remaining three horses are a tri-colour white-glazed figure, a white-glazed horse decorated with apricot-leaf motifs and a tri-colour red-glazed statue distinguished by green mudguards.

Historical accounts record that Tang Emperor Xuanzong was accompanied by ten thousand horses during his ceremonial procession to worship at Mount Tai. Organised into herds by mane colour, the massed steeds formed a distant spectacle likened to a flowing expanse of richly patterned brocade. This imperial grandeur is echoed in the four tri-colour glazed pottery horses unearthed from the tomb of An Pu. With their full, powerfully rendered musculature, the figures seem momentarily paused in motion, as if caught mid-gallop, serving as silent witnesses that bridge the present with the splendour of the Tang Dynasty.



Tri-colour Glazed Horses with Three Mane-Braids

Housed at: Shaanxi History Museum

Brief Introduction: The "Three Mane-Braids" style refers to a distinctive Tang Dynasty grooming technique in which a horse's mane was carefully shaped into three crenellated sections. Favoured by the imperial court and aristocracy, it symbolised both equine excellence and elevated status. The "Six Steeds of Zhaoling" also display this feature, which appears frequently in Tang Dynasty art, from painting to sculpture.



Tri-colour Pottery Figure of a Central Asian Man Riding a Galloping Horse

Housed at: Xi'an Museum

Brief Introduction: Measuring 52 cm in length and 38 cm in height, this piece is composed primarily of two elements: a pottery figure of a Central Asian man mounted on a galloping horse. The work is characterised by stable glaze tones, graceful contours and fluid lines. The young rider sits astride his cherished mount, urging it forward with a swinging whip and capturing a moment of vigorous motion. His sense of exhilaration evokes the feeling of "savouring spectacular views whilst journeying beyond vast, distant mountains."

Tri-colour Glazed Pottery Horse and Groom

Housed at: Henan Museum

Brief Introduction: This artefact depicts a horse of 77.8 cm in height and a groom standing 63 cm tall. Its body is rendered in a rich reddish-brown, with a thick white mane flowing over its powerful neck, face and back, giving the piece a vivid, lifelike presence under the light. The groom, a man from the Western Regions with a high nose and deep-set eyes, wears a solemn yet natural expression. He appears to be taming the horse or preparing it for a demanding journey.





Cultural Integration between China and Other Nations

The Silk Road gave rise to evolving equestrian sculptures whose cultural significance transcended civilisational boundaries. From Tang Dynasty portrayals of horses from the Western Regions to Qing court artworks that blended Chinese and foreign styles, the horse

became a vehicle for mutual learning and exchange. The bronze horse head from Yuanmingyuan stands as a compelling example of this Sino-Western artistic integration within an imperial context.

A fountain showcasing the 12 zodiac animals, positioned before Haiyantang in the Western-style Xiyanglou area of Yuanmingyuan, formed a monumental collaborative artwork created by Chinese and foreign craftsmen for the Qing imperial garden. Its conception arose from Emperor Qianlong's (reign: 1735–1796) deep fascination with European architecture, water features and mechanical ingenuity. Influenced by books describing continental palaces and sculpture, the emperor envisioned an exotic landscape within Yuanmingyuan and enlisted foreign

missionaries skilled in mathematics, astronomy, hydraulics and painting arts to undertake the project.

Chinese zodiac animal signs were ingeniously integrated into the fountain's design. Twelve bronze figures, each with a human body and an animal head, were arranged beside the water feature according to the traditional Chinese *shichen* timekeeping order, spouting water to mark the hours. At midday, all 12 heads sprayed water simultaneously, creating a highly ceremonial visual effect. This inventive substitution replaced the nude figures typical of Western fountains with distinctly Chinese cultural emblems. While drawing on Western hydraulic and mechanical expertise, the installation fully realised Chinese aesthetic and ritual principles, standing as a prime example of adapting foreign concepts for local use. Among these sculptures, the copper horse head is especially refined, with its



◀ ▼ Copper horse head of Yuanmingyuan (upper left) and a section of a fountain featuring the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac signs



mane rendered in layered, flowing lines that attest to exceptional casting skill. Produced in a single lost-wax cast from red copper, the piece displays precise proportions and seamless transitions, preserving its vivid surface over centuries.

The sculpted head, which seamlessly fuses Chinese and Western artistic elements, is currently on display in the Wenshu Pavilion of the Yuanmingyuan Museum.

During the Qing Dynasty, Western timepieces featuring dynamic and intricately rendered horse motifs were introduced into the imperial court.

The Qing court's collection of timepieces was largely produced in the United Kingdom. At the time, British-made clocks, often presented by missionaries, functioned as diplomatic gifts and demonstrations of Western technology and craftsmanship.

Among these timepieces, equestrian motifs appear with notable frequency. One striking example is an 18th-century British gilded copper clock, standing 143 cm tall, depicting two knights leading horses. Crafted primarily from gold-plated copper, it features a white enamel dial set against a multi-tiered backdrop. The base is adorned with a gem-studded, floral-patterned curtain that conceals a mirror, enhancing visual depth and opulence. Within the square case, a finely calibrated mechanical system powers both the clockwork and the animated scene transitions.

When the mechanism is activated, the curtain slowly rises to reveal a dragon in flight. Beneath swaying palm trees, knights lead silver steeds adorned with brightly gem-set saddles and harnesses. The horses, captured in natural poses, appear suspended mid-stride. This "horses in motion" spectacle seamlessly combines European chivalry, Eastern visual sensibilities and mechanical ingenuity, transforming the horse from a means of transport into a vehicle for narrative expression.

An exceptional 18th-century British horological masterpiece is a copper-gilded clock adorned with four horse

figures, a simulated waterfall and floral motifs. The timepiece is supported by four sturdy, brocade-covered horses that convey strength and stability. Its intricately layered body includes a musical box at the base, with windows on all sides revealing miniature buildings, figures and a flowing waterfall effect. Above, lions support a pergola crowned by cranes. The central crystal-clear glass rods (a simulated waterfall) are encircled by a dancer, while the crowning tower-shaped rotating flowers and mounted riders animate the scene when the mechanism is triggered.

When activated, the simulated waterfall begins to cascade as figures dash, ships sail, knights gallop and flowers spin. Within this animated design, the horses function both as structural supports and as essential elements of the unfolding narrative, symbolising strength, order and a sense of perpetual motion.

From the copper horse head of Yuanmingyuan to the dynamic horse-themed installations found in the Forbidden City's timepieces, the horse has been continually reimaged through exchanges between China and other cultures. It retains traditional Chinese associations of strength, speed and communication while incorporating the realism and mechanical aesthetics of Western art, emerging as a powerful symbol of cross-cultural dialogue and interpretation.

It is through tangible and vivid cultural artefacts that people today can appreciate that exchange between civilisations is more than an abstract idea; it is made real, preserved and carried forward through motifs such as the horse, through objects, and through acts of collaborative creation.

The 2026 Chinese lunar year—the Year of the Horse (or the Year of Bingwu in the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches system)—has inspired the mascots for China Media Group's 2026 Spring Festival Gala: Qiqi, Jiji, Chichi and Chengcheng. Each one draws on iconic equine imagery from Chinese history. Qiqi takes its form from the Li Ju Zun, with a colour scheme

reflecting the character *qi*, a bluish-black horse. Jiji embodies the Han Dynasty's Heavenly Horse, echoing the posture of the Bronze Galloping Horse. Chichi represents the Tang Dynasty's Horse with Three Mane-Braids, epitomised by the Six Steeds of Zhaoling, long regarded as the highest standard of horses in the Tang Dynasty. Across history, the horse has been continually reimaged, evolving into a vivid and enduring symbol of China's cultural heritage.



▲ Copper-gilded clock adorned with four horse figures, a simulated waterfall and floral motifs

Horse-related Places on the Map of Beijing

Text by Zhang Yan Photos by Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi, Zhao Lei, Hu Shengli, Lu Zhengming

If Beijing is viewed as a historical map layered over time, place names are among the marks most resistant to erasure. Interestingly, many toponyms associated with horses serve as revealing clues to understanding the city's past and present.

Throughout China's long feudal era, horses were far more than simple means of transport; they played essential roles in mobility, military logistics and the circulation of goods. They passed ceaselessly through Beijing's city gates, galloped along post roads and moved through bustling markets, sustaining the rhythm of everyday life. Today, horses no longer occupy a central place in Beijing's urban landscape. Subway tunnels run deep underground, cars stream along elevated highways and the once-familiar clatter of hooves by city gates, riverbanks and ancient routes has been replaced by the steady hum of traffic. Yet the horse has not disappeared from Beijing's narrative—it has merely withdrawn from daily life and settled into the city's enduring cultural memory.

Place names bearing the character “ma” (“horse”) are scattered across the city like enduring markers, each linking Beijing to its equestrian past. Tracing these names reveals not only the hoofprints left by horses over centuries but also the evolving imprint of a city continually reshaped by time.



▲ An illustrated reconstruction of Guanma Hutong during the Qing Dynasty



Traces of Horse Farms

If horses were an indispensable source of power in ancient Beijing, then the stables and horse farms scattered across the city formed the capital's earliest "logistics network." In an age without engines or fuel, horses shouldered the vital demands of transport, communication and military coordination, making their stables and training grounds essential components of urban life.

Guanma Hutong, located south of Guangqumen Inner Street in today's Dongcheng District, is one of the alleyways born of Beijing's horse culture. Originally known as "Guanma Juan" (literally, "Horse-Watching Enclosure"), it took shape during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) as a site for keeping horses. Historical records indicate that it once contained more than 20 stables, housing nearly 100 horses at its height. In 1748, the 13th year of the Qianlong era (1736–1795), the site was officially designated "Guanma Juan"

("Official Horse Enclosure"). This name remained in use for over two centuries until 1965, when a citywide renaming campaign changed it to Guanma Hutong.

Compared with Guanma Hutong, the history of Xiaomachang is more complex. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), this area lay on the south-western outskirts of Dadu, the predecessor of present-day Beijing. After Kublai Khan established the Yuan capital here, he introduced equestrian practices favoured by the Mongol nobility, including horse racing and galloping exercises, and built several racetracks on the city's periphery, one of which was located in the Xiaomachang area. The Qing Dynasty later continued the tradition of mounted archery, and horse-racing events were still occasionally held there. By the late Qing period, however, horse racing had declined, and the racetrack was abandoned.

Although the racetrack fell into disuse, the site was never completely neglected. Owing to its proximity to Baiyun Temple, the area became a regular stopping point

for carts, horses and donkeys travelling to and from western Beijing, where animals were tethered and rested. Over time, Xiaomachang developed into a hub for livestock trading, animated by lively street activity. After the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), Western-style horse racing was introduced to Beijing, and entrepreneurs converted the former racetrack into a new racecourse. Because of its relatively small scale, it was known as "Xiaomachang" (小马场, literally "small horse ground"). The name was later altered to the homophonic "Xiaomachang" (小马厂, "small horse yard"). Horse racing continued during the Republic of China period (1912–1949), and even after the sport declined, the place name remained in use.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, residential neighbourhoods were established in Xiaomachang. In 1965, Xiaomachang Road and several adjoining lanes were officially designated.

Machang Hutong, west of Jiugulou Street in Xicheng District, differs from Xiaomachang in its origins. Its name evolved from the former Yangmachang Hutong. Historical records note that during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), multiple horse-raising yards were established within Beijing to breed and keep horses for official use, and Machang Hutong was one of them. By the late Ming and early Qing periods, these stables gradually disappeared, and residential lanes began to take shape in the area. During the Yongzheng era (1723–1735) of the Qing Dynasty, the site was divided into Qianmachang ("Front Machang") and Houmachang ("Rear Machang") hutongs, later becoming the residence of the Zhongyang family, a Qing-dynasty noble household. Today, Qianmachang Hutong forms a distinctive "厂"-shaped layout extending more than 400 metres (m). A short walk along the alley leads to a T-junction, where turning north brings one to Houmachang Hutong. Neither lane is wide, and both are lined with ordinary residential neighbourhoods. Their names preserve the memory of

Beijing's once-thriving imperial horse administration system.

Beyond Beijing's urban core, memories of horse pastures take on distinctly local features. In Puwa Township of Fangshan District lie the Mata Ridges, also known as Damata and Xiaomata. Local legend links their name to Liu Heita, a rebel leader of early Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) who is said to have raised and trained horses here. According to the story, he established a breeding site on the hill north of Puwa, instructing his troops to sort horses by age: younger horses trained on the eastern ridge, mature warhorses kept on the western slope. Over time, the two hills acquired their respective names and became known collectively as the Mata Ridges. Although this account survives mainly in local gazetteers and folk tradition and is difficult to verify, it

reflects the region's enduring imagination of wartime life.

From official horse enclosures and racetracks within the city walls to mountain pastures and open grasslands beyond them, horse-related place names trace Beijing's shifting spatial organisation and functional roles across different historical periods.



Managing Warhorses and Commanding Troops

In addition to places for keeping horses, a range of horse-related administrative offices were established in ancient times and formed an indispensable part of Beijing's urban operations. Today, the city still preserves several hutong and lane names linked to imperial horse agencies, including Maxiang, Bingmasi and Beibingmasi hutongs,

as well as Qianbingma and Houbingma streets. These locations once housed the administrative bodies responsible for managing warhorses and directing troops during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

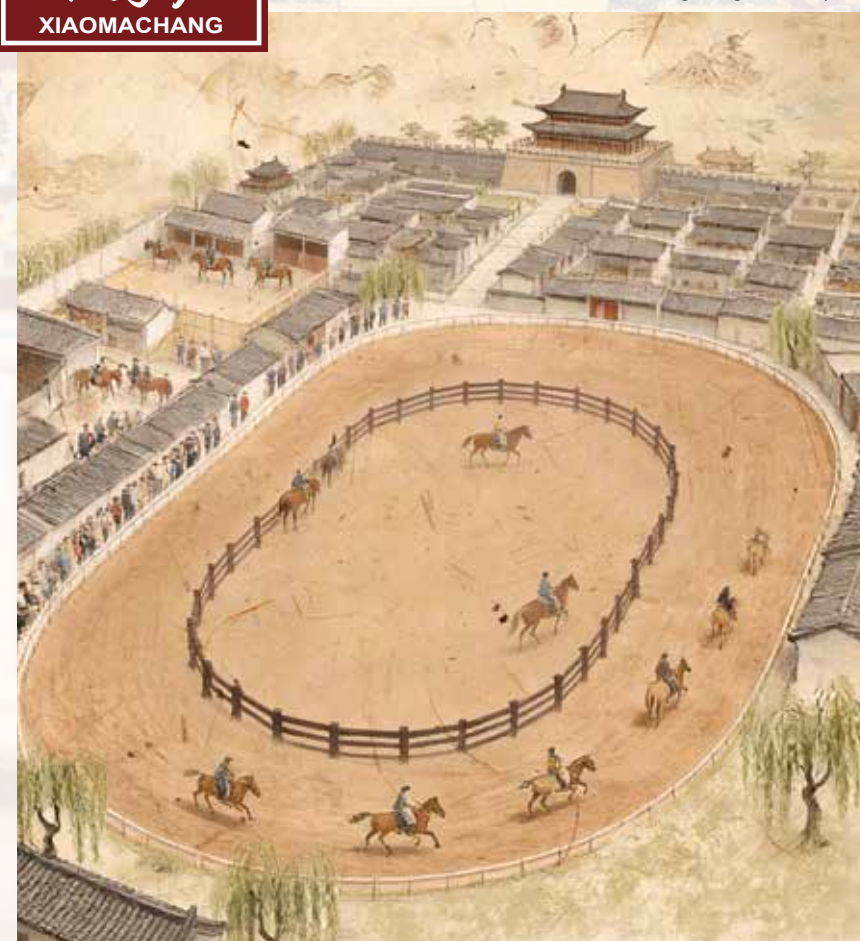
Maxiang Hutong, north of Xizhimen Inner Street in Xicheng District, is a historic alley named after the site of the ancient "Sima Zhangbing," the government department responsible for managing warhorses and commanding troops. Stretching 400 m, it functions as an important passage linking Xinjiekou with the Xizhimen commercial area. The hutong's name traces back to the Ming Dynasty's Yuma Jian ("Imperial Horse Office"), an institution tasked with overseeing imperial horses and supplying fodder. At the time, the area was known as Yuma Jian Guanfang Hutong ("Imperial Horse Office Official Quarters Alley"). After the Qing Dynasty abolished the Yuma Jian, the name gradually evolved into Maxiang Hutong ("马香胡同"). During the Republic of China period, the character "香" was further refined through homophonic adjustment into "相" (meaning "minister" or "to assist"), producing the current name "Maxiang Hutong," a subtle yet enduring trace of Beijing's equestrian administrative past.

Starting in 1272, the ninth year of the Zhiyuan era (1264–1294), the Yuan Dynasty introduced the Bingmasi ("Troop and Warhorse Command") system in Dadu, setting up southern and northern Bingmasi offices under the authority of a commander-in-chief. Under the Ming Dynasty, Beijing's Inner City was reorganised into five districts—East, West, South, North and Central—each overseen by its own Bingmasi, staffed by a commander and several deputy commanders. This administrative framework continued into the Qing Dynasty.

The name "Bingmasi" can be somewhat misleading. Although it contains the characters for "troops and warhorses," the institution did not directly command military forces. Instead, it was charged with maintaining public order in the capital, overseeing matters such as crime suppression, fire prevention and street management. In function, it more closely resembled a modern public security system

小马厂 XIAOMACHANG

▼ An illustrated reconstruction of Xiaomachang during the Yuan Dynasty



than a conventional military body.

Bingmasi Hutong is located on the west side of Xisi South Street in Xicheng District. It links Fengsheng Hutong to the south and runs parallel to Zhuanta Hutong (often described as the “oldest hutong in Beijing”) to the north. Its location clearly indicates that this area once housed the Western Bingmasi during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In 1901, the five district-level Bingmasi offices were abolished and replaced by the Engineering and Patrol Bureau. Four years later, in 1905, this bureau was dissolved and succeeded by the Department of Patrol Police, leaving the former Western Bingmasi site vacant. It was soon repurposed as the headquarters of the Geological Survey of China, an institution that later became a cornerstone of early geological research in the country and earned notable international recognition in the early 20th century. Chinese educator Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) praised it as “China’s first true scientific research institution.”

After its establishment, the Geological Survey quickly became a focal point for geologists. Li Siguang (1889–1971), a Chinese geologist and then a professor in the Department of Geology at Peking University, frequently visited to conduct research and take part in academic exchanges. In 1921, Johan Gunnar Andersson, a Swedish scholar, discovered the world-renowned Yangshao Culture. In 1929, researcher Pei Wenzhong (1904–1982) unearthed the



兵马司胡同
BINGMASI HUTONG

▲ Former site of the Geological Survey of China

Peking Man skullcap. These and other landmark discoveries, unfolding one after another, formed a remarkable chapter in the history of Chinese geological and paleoanthropological research, earning the institution at 15 Bingmasi Hutong the reputation of a “Sanctuary of Science” in China’s scientific history.

Beibingmasi Hutong is located in the north-western part of Dongcheng District and was the site of the Northern Bingmasi during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The hutong runs from Jiadaokou South Street in the east to Nanluoguxiang in the west, flanked by Dongmianhua Hutong to the south and Qinlao Hutong to the north. Set amid a cluster of historically rich alleyways, it retains a strong sense of old Beijing character.

At the eastern entrance of Beibingmasi Hutong stands Beibingmasi Theatre, adjacent to the National Theatre of China and the Central Academy of Drama. Originally known as the Little Theatre of the China Youth Art Theatre, it was taken over by the Central Academy of Drama in 2005 and renamed the Northern Theatre of the Central Academy of Drama, commonly referred to as the Northern Theatre. Since then, it has functioned as both a teaching space and a performance

venue for the academy’s students.

Though modest in scale and set back from the main streets, Beibingmasi Theatre enjoys a reputation that far exceeds its modest appearance. It has staged influential productions such as *Rhinoceros in Love*, *Millennium Teahouse* and *A Doll’s House*, and frequently works with foreign embassies to present international performances, including the Swedish play *Strindberg’s Monologue* and British contemporary dance. For many Beijing theatre lovers, it is a cherished cultural landmark, affectionately known as “Beijuchang” (“Northern Theatre”).



A River for Washing and Drying Horses

Among Beijing’s many horse-related place names, the Liangma River stands out as particularly distinctive. It is not only a tangible, flowing waterway but also a thread of historical memory that has been continually told and retold. Unlike hutongs or market streets, rivers possess an inherent continuity: their currents carry stories across time, reshaping yet never fully washing them away.

The origin of the name “Liangma River” has long been the subject of varied

interpretations. One widely accepted view holds that its name—the characters “晾马河” “literally translating to “horse-drying river”—was derived from its history as a major cart route outside Dongzhimen Gate. Due to its position in a low-lying area where rainwater accumulated during flood seasons, a seasonal watercourse was created. By the late Yuan Dynasty, abundant groundwater and numerous nearby springs gradually converged, transforming this former thoroughfare into a permanent stream.

Beginning in the Yongle era (1403–1424) of the Ming Dynasty, this area, favoured for its ample water and lush grass, was designated as the Imperial Horse Pasture where eunuchs were assigned to oversee the royal stables. Situated east of

the capital, it became widely known as the “Eastern Imperial Horse Yard.” Whenever the imperial court required horses, eunuchs would arrive in advance to notify the pasture staff. Selected horses were then led to the river to be thoroughly washed, carefully groomed—especially their manes—and fitted with saddles, stirrups, bridles and other tack. After bathing, the horses were left to dry in the open air; as a result, the adjacent Nanba River came to be known as “Liangma River.” Over time, through phonetic evolution, the name shifted to its present form, “Liangma River” (Chinese characters “亮马河,” literally “bright horse river”).

Another account offers a slightly different origin for the name “Liangma River,” yet it likewise centres on the washing and drying of horses. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, merchant caravans and horse teams arriving from eastern and north-eastern regions often paused here before entering the city, washing their weary mounts after long journeys. The horses were then led onto the riverbanks to dry and rest before proceeding into the capital. Over time, local residents began referring to the waterway as “Liangma River” (“Horse-Drying River”). Through gradual shifts in pronunciation and written usage, “Liangma” (“晾马”) was homophonically transformed into “Liangma” (“亮马”), the name that remains in use today.

Today, the Liangma River has shifted from a functional waterway into a lively urban landscape. With renewed embankments and lights shimmering on the water, it has become one of Beijing’s most accessible waterfront spaces and among those with the strongest international character. Lined with embassies, the surrounding area serves as a meeting point for cultures from around the world, encouraging the growth of international hotels and commercial districts nearby. A full day here scarcely feels sufficient: dining, drinking, entertainment, sightseeing, leisure and shopping are all vividly present. The Beijing Lufthansa Center and Solana stand opposite one another, their

contrasting yet complementary offerings long regarded as indicators of high-end retail and fashion in the city. When fatigue sets in, nearby food streets, like Haoyun and Liangma River, offer a diverse range of global flavours. As night falls, lights trace both banks, revealing a dynamic portrait of contemporary Beijing, where history, diplomacy and cosmopolitan life flow together as naturally as the river itself.

As a strand of urban memory, the Liangma River has lifted the image of the horse from everyday life into the city’s place names, allowing Beijing, even as it continually renews itself, to keep casting a quiet glance back toward its origins.



Old Stories about Horse Markets

Among Beijing’s many horse-related place names, “Mashi” (“Horse Market”) stands out as a particularly revealing lens on the city’s daily operations in imperial times. Its constant bustle and varied crowds offer a vivid glimpse into the rhythms of everyday life in ancient Beijing.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, numerous horse markets operated both within and beyond Beijing’s city walls, serving official demands as well as civilian trade. The Madian area outside Deshengmen Gate, situated in the northern suburbs with open terrain and ample water and grass, was particularly well suited to grazing and feeding horses. From the Chenghua era (1465–1487) of the Ming Dynasty onward, it gradually developed into a major centre for livestock exchange. Horses driven in from beyond the Great Wall and from north-western regions were brought here to be inspected by officials of the Shangsi Yuan, the imperial agency charged with selecting mounts for court use. After this official selection process, the remaining horses were sold on the local market, sustaining a lively trade that made Madian one of the capital’s most active and prosperous horse markets.

By the Kangxi era (1662–1722) of the Qing Dynasty, a village had taken shape in the area, with most residents still earning their livelihoods through horse trading.

北兵马司胡同
BEIBINGMASI HUTONG



▲ Entrance sign at the Central Academy of Drama

Accordingly, it acquired the colloquial name “Madian” (“马店”, literally “Horse Shop”). Later, as water frequently accumulated across the low-lying land, the name shifted from “Madian” (“马店”) to “Madian” (“马甸”), using the character “甸”, meaning grassland. This revised name has remained in use ever since.

Another place name inscribed on today’s Beijing map through the legacy of horse trading is Luomashi Street (“Horse and Mule Market Street”). This thoroughfare forms part of Liangguang Road, a collective name for an east–west artery made up of several connected roads linking Guang’anmen and Guangqumen. Owing to its proximity to Qianmen, Chongwenmen and Xuanwumen (collectively known as the “Three Front Gates”) and its convenient transport connections, the area was well suited to large-scale commerce. Almost the entire street once functioned as a busy marketplace, lined with specialised wet markets for vegetables, pigs, sheep and flowers. Echoes of this commercial



▲ A traditional Chinese painting titled “Washing Horses Below a Willow”

past survive in present-day place names such as Zhushikou (formerly “Pig Market Entrance,” now “Bead Market Entrance”), Caishikou (“Vegetable Market Entrance”), Guozixiang (“Fruit Alley”) and Langanshi

(“Pole Market”). Luomashi Street, once the centre of horse and mule trading, is part of this enduring urban memory.

Over time, Luomashi (“Horse and Mule Market”) developed into Beijing’s largest centre for livestock trading. As commerce in horses and other animals gradually waned, shops selling rice, flour and cloth began to line both sides of the street. In 1965, during Beijing’s citywide standardisation of place names, nearby lanes such as Hufang Hutong, Tanchang Hutong and Caishi Street were incorporated into the main thoroughfare, forming today’s Luomashi Street.

Today, many historic buildings still line the street, including the Huguang Guild Hall and the Luomashi Post Office Branch. Other landmark sites nearby, such as the Caishikou Execution Grounds and locations associated with workers’ gatherings during the May Fourth Movement, remind people of the city’s layered past. In this way, the street continues to narrate the lived realities of Beijing’s past with a new and enduring voice.



Time-Honoured Horse Paths

Among Beijing’s many horse-related spaces, horse paths are distinguished by their quiet atmosphere and simple appearance. In ancient Beijing, although they lacked the bustle of horse markets, these routes—worn smooth by repeated passage and everyday use—became subtly woven into the city’s daily rhythms, functioning as essential arteries of ordinary life.

Beijing has many ancient horse paths scattered across the city and its outskirts. Among them, the Jingxi Ancient Road is one of the most renowned. Historical records show that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, caravans of horses and camels regularly travelled this route between Beijing and the Western Hills. To pray for the health and safety of their draft animals—horses, mules and camels—locals built a temple to honour the Horse God (*mashenmiao*) in 1743, the eighth year of the Qianlong era, at a key junction along the trail in the Western Hills, in what is now the area north

of Fucheng Road in Haidian District. The temple was dedicated to the Horse God, also known in folk belief as the Horse King, a protective deity of livestock. Inside the main hall stood a solemn clay statue of the Horse God, depicted with three eyes and four arms, flanked by statues of the Water God and the Grass God. In front rose a memorial archway and the main gate. Before setting out, carters, grooms and caravan leaders came here to offer sacrifices, praying for safe journeys and healthy mounts. Today, only the place name “Mashenmiao” remains, quietly preserving the memory of the Jingxi horse path and the ritual culture that once animated these routes.

Unlike the trade routes used by merchant caravans, another horse path with a distinct purpose existed in the south-western part of Xicheng District. Built during the Ming and Qing dynasties, this path was specifically designed for officials to ride horses up to the city rampart for guard duty and inspection tours. Located east of Guang’anmennan Shuncheng Street in present-day Xicheng District, it originally

extended dozens of metres. Horse paths were constructed on both the north and south sides of Guang’anmen Gate Tower; because this one lay to the south, it became known as “Nanmadao” (“South Horse Path”). After the Republic of China period, as Beijing’s defensive role diminished, the ramp was levelled and residential buildings gradually filled the area, transforming it into an ordinary alleyway. Despite these changes, the name “Nanmadao” has been preserved to this day.

Many of these ancient paths, once resonant with the sound of hooves, have since been absorbed into Beijing’s urban fabric. Yet one horse path continues to thrive in a different guise. Maliandao, located near the West Third Ring Road, is widely known as “Beijing’s Tea Street,” celebrated for its dense concentration of tea shops and its vibrant tea culture.

Many people mistakenly assume that Maliandao is a remnant of the ancient Tea Horse Road, but this is not the case. The history of Maliandao dates back to the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), when it lay just

马甸桥 MADIANQIAO

▼ Madian Flyover at night



▼ A pleasure boat cruises along the Liangma River (Liangmahe)

亮马河 LIANGMAHE



inside the western wall of Zhongdu (the Jin Dynasty's capital), serving as a key access route into the city from western Beijing. The name "Maliandao" derives from the herbaceous plant *Iris lactea var. chinensis*, commonly known as *malin* or *malian*, which once grew abundantly in the area. As urban development advanced, the native *malian* grass gradually disappeared, and over time, through phonetic simplification in local speech, "Maliandao" ("马莲道") evolved into its present form, "Maliandao" ("马连道").

As times changed, so did Maliandao's role. Today, it stands as one of northern China's most important tea distribution hubs. In 1998, the Beijing Tea Corporation was established here, marking Maliandao's rise to prominence. Soon afterwards, tea merchants from Fujian and other regions moved in, opening shops and sales outlets that firmly established the area's reputation as a centre for tea trading. Today, the street is lined with numerous time-honoured tea brands, the aroma of brewed leaves drifting through its lanes—a living testament to traditional tea culture and a quiet source of elegance and leisure within the city.

In recent years, Maliandao has become the core site of Xicheng District's Pilot Zone

for Data Infrastructure Systems, giving this tea-scented street a striking new identity as China's first "Data Street." The ancient horse paths, therefore, have not vanished amid urban renewal. Instead, they endure, preserved in name and inherited in alignment, continuing to shape the city's evolving landscape.

Shining Spears and Armoured Horses

Throughout history, countless battles have unfolded in Beijing's surrounding

suburbs. These campaigns not only generated legendary tales but also left behind a rich constellation of horse-related place names, scattered across nearby hills, rivers and valleys.

The Juma River, in southern Fangshan District, takes its name from an ancient battle in which a smaller force overcame a much larger army. According to legend, during the Western Jin Dynasty (AD 265–316), the Qiang leader Shi Le advanced eastward and, in AD 308, the second year of the Yongjia era (AD 307–311), led a massive force toward the Laishui River. The Western Jin court ordered

General Liu Kun to intercept him. Unable to confront the enemy head-on, Liu devised a plan: his troops drove tree stumps into the riverbed and strung ropes between them just below the water's surface. When Shi Le's army attempted to cross, their horses became entangled or tripped by the submerged obstacles, throwing the ranks into chaos. Shi Le himself was trapped in the river, unable to advance or retreat, allowing Liu to secure a decisive victory. In commemoration of this event, the Laishui River was renamed "Juma River" ("Horse-Restraining River"), a name that later evolved through homophonic usage into the present "Juma River" ("Horse-Repelling River").

Wangmatai Village, in north-eastern Pinggu District, is said to have been named after Emperor Taizong (reign: AD 626–649) of the Tang Dynasty, Li Shimin. According to legend, during his eastern campaign against Koguryo, Li passed through this area and was suddenly delayed by a torrential rainstorm. Deeply concerned for the safety of his thousand warhorses, he braved the downpour and climbed a large earthen platform to survey the surroundings. Only after seeing that the horses were safely sheltered did he feel at ease. Three days

later, the rain subsided and the skies cleared, allowing Li to resume his eastward march. Because of this act of ascending the mound to look for his horses, the platform became known as "Wangmatai" ("Horse-Watching Platform"). In later years, families surnamed Wang and Yan from Hongtong County in Shanxi Province settled here and established a village, naming it Wangmatai after the historic site.

Among Beijing's horse-related place names, few convey the majesty of a noble steed as vividly as Baima Pass in northern Miyun District. Legend traces its origin to Yang Yanzhao (AD 958–1014), a renowned general of the Northern Song Dynasty (AD 960–1127). According to the tale, a fierce white wild horse in nearby Yema Valley frequently attacked travellers. Passing through the area, Yang recognised the animal as an exceptional mount and, after repeated struggles, succeeded in taming it. The white horse thereafter accompanied him on campaigns across China, earning formidable renown. Soldiers of the Liao Dynasty (AD 916–1125) were said to flee at the sight of Yang's white horse. Later, when Yang marched north amid renewed conflict, he left the horse stationed at the pass to

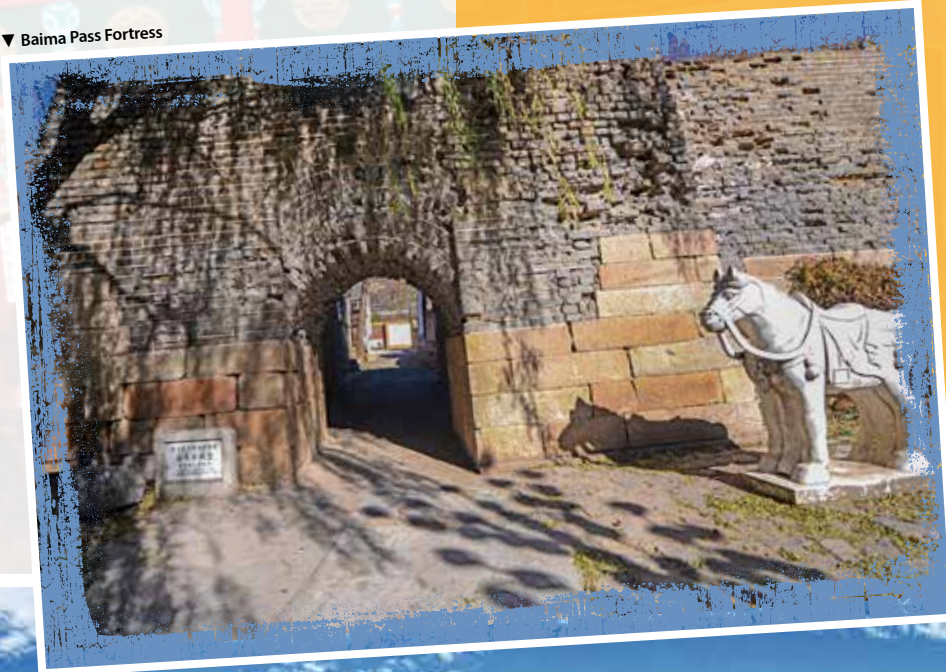
deter invasion. Seeing the white horse and believing Yang himself to be present, Liao troops withdrew, thus giving rise to the name "Baima" ("White Horse") Pass.

As the capital of multiple dynasties, Beijing long stood on the front line of military defence. During the Ming Dynasty, troops were stationed along the Great Wall to guard against the remnants of the Yuan Dynasty. Warhorses were therefore indispensable, prompting local governments to establish stables and specialised equine clinics. One such clinic was located in what is now Laimazhuang, east of Xiaotangshan Town in Changping District, where sick horses were treated by veterinarians. When a village gradually took shape during the Qing Dynasty, it adopted the name Laimazhuang. This name is used to this day.

When the neighing of horses faded into history, the place names associated with them remained like rivets, firmly anchoring the past to the city's map.

Today, horse-related place names still remain across the city, evoking memories of the vigorous horses of the past. Within these seemingly ordinary streets and alleys, Beijing's stories are quietly preserved.

▼ Baima Pass Fortress



▼ The Juma River and surrounding mountains



Galloping through the Ages: the Horse in Chinese Culture

Text by Zhang Jian, Zhang Yan Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Zhao Lei

The presence of the horse is ubiquitous in traditional Chinese culture, traversing the realm of lived reality and galloping through the space between imagination and description. Since the age of myth, this creature has been endowed with a power and significance exceeding reality. In the annals of ancient China, it was entwined with warfare, struggles for dominance and the shaping of individual destinies. Across literature and art, the horse has been continually reimagined as a powerful spiritual metaphor and a paragon of aesthetic value.

The horse's influence permeates Chinese culture. It appears in legends of winged steeds, in the figurative meanings embedded in verse and set phrases, in historical chronicles of renowned figures and their noble mounts and in enduring depictions in literature and art. It embodies not only a longing for speed and strength but also spiritual virtues for fidelity, liberty and aspiration.

The Horse in Chinese Language

Across China's vast landscape, early societies interpreted the origins of the world and all things through mythological narratives. The horse emerged as one of the earliest creatures conceived in mythology and elevated to divine status.

Ancient Chinese myths frequently feature "divine horses" that transcend the mundane, most notably the Heavenly Horse and the Dragon-Horse. The winged Heavenly Horse was said to traverse both heaven and earth. Chosen as the imperial mount of the Celestial Palace, it violated heavenly law, leading to its wings being clipped and its confinement at the foot of the Kunlun Mountains. After centuries of captivity, it regained its freedom, descended to the mortal realm and began serving humankind.

This narrative is more than mere fanciful invention. To people of antiquity, the horse's inherent swiftness, vigour and nimbleness far surpassed human capacity, naturally leading them to regard it as an "exceptional being."

In addition to the Heavenly Horse, Chinese mythology also recounts the legend of the Dragon-Horse. According to this tale, the Dragon-Horse emerged from the Yellow River bearing the *Hetu* ("Yellow River Chart") on its back, while a divine turtle appeared in the Luo River carrying the *Luoshu* ("Luo River Writings"). From the *Hetu* and *Luoshu*, Fuxi, founder of Chinese culture as shaped by the nation's myths and legends, derived the Eight Trigrams to explore the principles of heaven, earth and the nature of all things. Later generations came to regard this moment as the origin of writing and civilisation itself. In this context, the horse transcended its mythological role, contributing directly to the founding of civilisation. For this reason, ancient Chinese viewed both the horse and the dragon as auspicious beings, seeing them as spirits of the Yellow River and embodiments of the Chinese people.

The reverence inspired by these myths has deeply permeated Chinese writing and language, cultivating a shared imagination of vitality, enterprise and strength. To this day, during every Year of the Horse, one of the



▲ A painting of the Heavenly Horse

most popular greetings among the Chinese is "*long ma jing shen*" or "the spirit of the Dragon-Horse," signifying "full of vitality."

Among these myths, the horse consistently appears alongside themes of heaven, dragons and deities, thus establishing its place in Chinese culture. It is not merely a domesticated animal but a being endowed with profound spiritual significance.

Subsequently, the horse came to feature extensively in everyday language. Idioms, proverbs and allegorical sayings offer valuable insight into the animal's cultural significance.

In *jiaguwen* (oracle bone script), the Chinese character "马" (*ma*) for "horse" had already taken shape, depicting the animal's long face, mane, tail and four legs. This vivid image laid the foundation for the character's later evolution. In *jinwen* (bronze script), the character preserved this basic structure, while in *xiaozhuan* (small seal script), it retained the distinctive features of the horse's mane and tail, forming the prototype of today's

character. In a typical Chinese dictionary, more than 100 characters include "马" as a component. While some have fallen out of everyday use, others remain common.

In Chinese proverbs and idioms, expressions such as "*qian li ma*" ("a horse that travels a thousand *li* or 500 kilometres per day"), "*lao ma shi tu*" ("an old horse knows the way") and "*yi ma dang xian*" ("to gallop at the forefront") consistently reflect ideas of ability, experience and efficiency. Among these, "*qian li ma*" is particularly notable, as it not only describes an exceptional horse but has also come to symbolise outstanding talent in a broader sense.

Numerous horse-related idioms in Chinese culture trace their origins to historical anecdotes. During the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC), Bo Le, a legendary judge of horses, recognised a steed of exceptional quality despite its apparent frailty. Though unimpressive in appearance, this horse (*qian li ma*) possessed the spirit to traverse vast distances. Only after being recognised did



▲ The evolution of the Chinese character "马" (*ma*, "horse") from left to right: oracle bone script, bronze script, small seal script, clerical script and regular script

it reveal its true potential, aiding a general in battle and achieving remarkable feats. This story highlights the importance of discerning talent, placing individuals in suitable roles and recognising that genuine ability will not remain hidden. Another well-known tale, "*sai weng shi ma*" ("the old man from the frontier lost his horse"), reflects on the shifting relationship between fortune and misfortune, encouraging a balanced view of life's uncertainties. Likewise, the idiom "*lao ma shi tu*" ("an old horse knows the way") stems from a story in which an experienced steed guided an army through confusion, underscoring the value of wisdom gained over time. Together, these idioms, expressed through the image of the horse, convey lasting human insights and enrich its symbolic role within Chinese cultural identity.

Within everyday expressions, the image of the horse is closely interwoven with daily experience. The emphasis of "*ren kao yi zhuang ma kao an*" on outward presentation is often highlighted through the adage suggesting that a person is judged by their attire just as a steed is judged by its tack. Likewise, "*lu yao zhi ma li, ri jiu jian ren xin*," the phrase conveying that a long journey reveals a horse's stamina, mirrors the way prolonged experience exposes an individual's true integrity. Moreover, "*hao ma bu chi hui tou cao*," the saying that a fine horse does not return to old grazing grounds, serves as a vivid analogy for a resolute character unwilling to look back. Together, these traditional expressions draw clear parallels between the qualities of the horse and those of humankind, creating meanings that are both direct and striking.



▲ A creative Tang tri-colour pottery foal

Chinese witty remarks featuring "horse" through homophones are particularly intriguing. For instance, a saying about shoeing a horse's back refers to straying from the main topic, as the words for "hooves" and "subject" share the same pronunciation in Chinese, conveying the idea of speaking or acting off-point. Such expressions infuse everyday experience into vivid language. Rooted in daily life, these sayings acquire deeper cultural resonance over time. In Chinese culture, the horse is more than an animal of burden or battle; it is woven into patterns of thought and habitual modes of expression.

In the age of cold weapons, the horse was vital to military success, enhancing a rider's speed and chances of survival and thus becoming a symbol of status. For rulers, fine steeds were indispensable military assets. During the reign of Emperor Wu (141–87 BC) of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD



Longma Futu Temple (Temple of Dragon-Horse Bearing Hetu)

Longma Futu Temple at Leihe Village in Luoyang City, Henan Province, is believed to have been first established in AD 348 during the Jin Dynasty (AD 266–420) as a sacred site honouring Fuxi, the founder of Chinese culture as shaped by the nation's myths and legends, and his achievements. With a history spanning more than 1,600 years, the temple is also renowned as the birthplace of Chinese *Yijing* (*Classic of Changes*) studies and one of the popular tourist attractions in the city. A Dragon-Horse statue is located near Fuxi Hall within the temple.





▲ A painting of General Guan Yu riding his horse, Chitu

220), the Ferghana horse from the Western Regions, known as the “Heavenly Horse,” was introduced and highly prized for its stamina. The dynasty’s pursuit of these animals reflected an ambition for national strength and cavalry supremacy, embodying imperial resolve and a spirit of exploration.

▼ White Dragon Horse depicted in the mural “Tang Monk’s Journey to Obtain Buddhist Scriptures” at Qinglong Temple, Shanxi

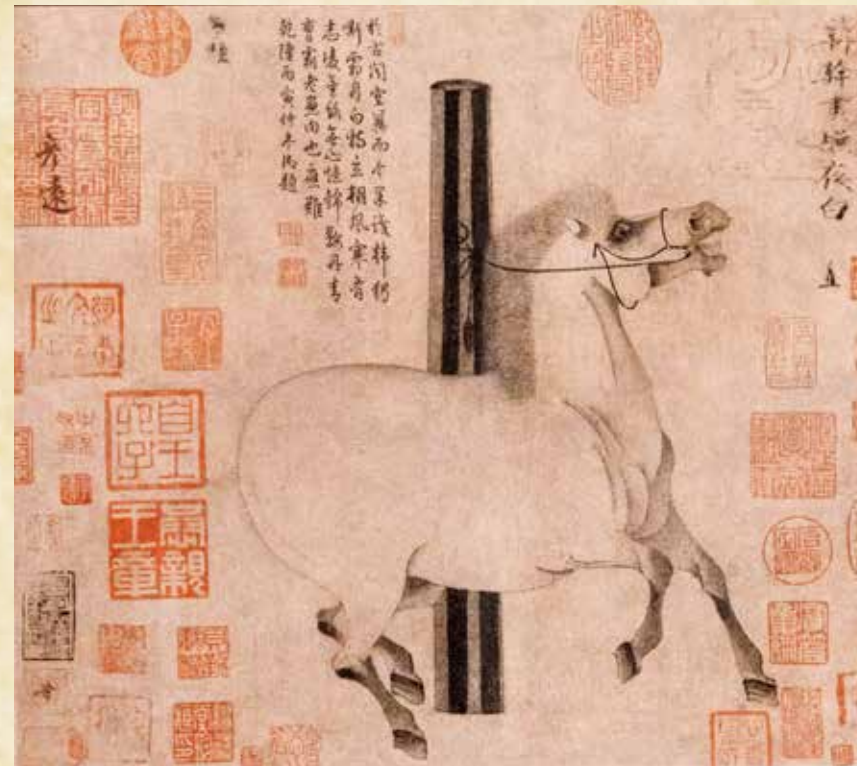


In tales of fate, notable horses are closely linked with heroic figures. Wuzhui, the steed of the Hegemon-King of Western Chu, Xiang Yu (232–202 BC), shared his battles until final defeat. After Xiang Yu committed suicide, the loyal horse refused to serve another master and died, giving rise to the legend “Wuzhui never dies.” During the Three Kingdoms era (AD 220–280), Chitu, the mount of the general Guan Yu (died in AD 220), came to symbolise loyalty and righteousness, becoming a martial spirit honoured in Chinese literature.

Dilu, the famed steed of Liu Bei (AD 161–223), the six steeds of Emperor Taizong (reign: AD 626–649) of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), carved as statues before his tomb, and the warhorses of Genghis Khan (1162–1227) were far more than mere mounts. They shared moments of life and death with their riders and bore witness to the sweeping changes of history. Consequently, across the ages, the horse has consistently symbolised unwavering loyalty and profound courage.

Apart from historical accounts, the horse flourished in literature as an emblem of heroism, fidelity and prevailing spirit. Millennia of historical change furnished abundant material for creative expression, propelling famed horses from battlefields into verse, narrative and painting and securing their enduring cultural significance. In fiction, the horse often mirrors the traits of its human counterparts. Consider the White-Dragon-Horse from the novel *Journey to the West*. Originally the third prince of the Western Sea Dragon King, he was transformed into the Tang Monk’s steadfast companion on the quest for Buddhist scriptures. Silent yet wholly devoted, he was ultimately honoured with the title “Dragon Horse of the Eight Heavenly Sections.” Today, this figure continues to permeate diverse cultural fields, including traditional Chinese opera, television productions and gaming.

Since their debut in 1980, China’s zodiac stamps have become important national cultural symbols. The horse has featured on these stamps on multiple occasions, its majestic posture vividly conveyed within a tiny space. To mark the Year of the Horse in 2026, China Post released two stamps titled “Galloping toward Grand Aspirations” and “Myriad



▲ “Night-Shining White” by Han Gan

Steeds Herald Blessings.” These designs encapsulate energetic aspirations for the Lunar New Year, continuing the long-standing tradition of celebrating the Chinese zodiac.

Occupying the seventh position among the Chinese zodiac animals, the horse embodies an energetic and resolute spirit. This quality has long been interwoven with the national character, serving as a cultural impetus that encourages the Chinese people to move forward with courage.



Horses in Chinese Paintings

Selecting the most representative horse in Chinese painting inevitably brings to mind Han Gan’s “Night-Shining White.” This steed is not depicted charging across open plains or dominating battlefields. Instead, it stands firmly tethered to a wooden post, its immense power fully restrained. It is precisely this tension that endows the work of art with extraordinary dynamism, securing its place as a masterpiece in a millennium of artistic history.

“Night-Shining White” by Tang Dynasty painter Han Gan (AD 706–783) is a colour painting on paper measuring 33.5 centimetres (cm) in length and 30.8 cm in width. It is currently housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, USA. The subject is not an ordinary animal but Zhaoyebai (“Night-Shining White”), the imperial horse belonging to Tang Emperor Xuanzong (reign: AD 712–756). This steed was reputedly pure white, appearing to reflect light after dark, hence its evocative name.

The composition of “Night-Shining White” is strikingly simple. A horse stands to the right, tethered to a straight post behind it. Despite the taut reins, the animal appears restless, its mane flying, eyes and nostrils wide, hooves lifting as if on the verge of breaking free. Han Gan employed fine, vigorous ink lines to outline the steed, applying light ink only to the head, neck, chest, abdomen and limbs. This approach not only conveys volume and texture but also maintains clarity and restraint. Relying primarily on lines with minimal embellishment, the

work exemplifies the distinctive “*baimiao*” style of the Tang Dynasty.

Han Gan’s genius lies in capturing latent energy within stillness. The horse radiates tension, poised on the brink of movement. The rigid post contrasts sharply with the animal’s restlessness, creating a palpable struggle that seems to echo with neighs, and this tension carries deeper symbolic weight. Emperor Xuanzong revered horses, naming his Ferghana steeds from the Western Regions Yuhuacong and Zhaoyebai, and commissioning court artists to depict the finest of his stables. It was within this context that Han Gan served at court—unlike his mentor Cao Ba (AD 704–770), who fell from favour. Therefore, Han had to meticulously gauge the emperor’s aesthetic will. The painting thus transcends its immediate subject: the bound horse embodies both a legendary steed and Han’s own constrained ambition, talent yearning for freedom yet tethered by power.

Experts suggest that Han Gan personally painted only the horse’s head, neck and forequarters, with later artists likely repainting the rear. In addition, its tail has been lost over time. Yet this very incompleteness enhances the work’s allure, transforming it into a relic spanning 1,000 years. “Night-Shining White” thus transcends mere portraiture, becoming an artefact that carries the weight of centuries. In one of his poems, Du Fu (AD 712–770) praised Han’s “divine brushwork.” Though the horse is tethered, its spirit seems to leap free, galloping endlessly in the viewer’s mind.

“Horse Herding in Autumn Countryside” by Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) contrasts sharply with Han Gan’s “Night-Shining White.” Painted during the reign of Emperor Renzong (1311–1320) of the Yuan Dynasty, it presents a vision of harmony between humans and nature. A tranquil autumn scene unfolds, featuring a shallow stream, sparse trees and an official in red standing by the water as he guides 10 horses—some drinking, others neighing or playfully chasing one another. The herdsman’s gaze extends beyond the frame, suggesting unseen

horses and an expansive, infinite space.

Where Zhao Mengfu's "Horse Herding in Autumn Countryside" presents a scholar's tranquil vision of rural repose, Giuseppe Castiglione's (1688–1766) "One Hundred Steeds" reaches new artistic heights through monumental scale and technical brilliance. This silk scroll, nearly 8 metres (m) long and 1 m wide, stands as one of the most iconic works of the Qing imperial court, depicting 100 fine horses and 11 herders. The composition unfolds from right to left, revealing a meticulously constructed landscape: ancient pines reach skyward, their gnarled branches framing partially concealed tents where herdsman recline or sit in quiet repose, accompanied by watchful dogs. Nearby, white horses stand as spotted ones graze. Beyond, the meadow comes alive—horses rest in sunlit patches, others bound playfully among rocks and slopes, mares nurse their foals and stallions rub against tree trunks to ease their itches. The scene broadens as a tranquil lake emerges, its surface rippling with swaying reeds. Herdsmen wash horses by the water's edge, reflections shimmering below. The scroll

concludes with a mounted herdsman, lasso in hand, guiding the harmonious movement of the herd. Though the horses roam freely, they follow human order, their gathering and dispersal forming a vast yet balanced panorama of imperial herding.

Castiglione was renowned for his mastery of Western painting techniques and his deep understanding of Qing imperial aesthetics. As a result, he seamlessly blended these traditions in his "One Hundred Steeds." He employed fine, short lines to define the texture of the horses, emphasising anatomical structure, scale and proportion, with musculature and tendons rendered in striking clarity. To align with Chinese artistic sensibilities, Castiglione softened the Western emphasis on light and shade, instead adopting a flatter, blended approach. The surrounding landscapes, including mountains, rocks and trees, are executed using traditional ink and brush techniques, with pine needles and grasses celebrating the beauty of line. His spatial composition is equally innovative, combining focal and scattered perspectives to create a dynamic, layered rhythm as the scroll unfolds. This

approach lends the work a sense of measured order, inviting viewers to move through the scene as if traversing a vast, meticulously organised landscape. The horses depicted are more than mere subjects; they symbolise the harmony between a prosperous era and the natural world.

In the realm of modern and contemporary Chinese art, few artists have left as enduring a mark as Xu Beihong (1895–1953), particularly through his depictions of horses. Among these works, "Galloping Horse" stands as an iconic expression of his artistic vision, capturing the spirit of an era and becoming a cultural symbol. The painting depicts a horse in full gallop, head held high and all four hooves suspended in mid-air, a dynamic pose that highlights Xu's mastery of form and movement. "Galloping Horse" exemplifies Xu's integration of Chinese and Western artistic traditions. Rooted in Chinese ink and wash techniques, he incorporated elements of Western realism, especially in the treatment of anatomy and structure. The bones, muscles and force dynamics of the animal are rendered with clarity, capturing

the moment when the body leans forward and the hind legs push off the ground, infusing the work with a strong sense of speed and vitality. However, Xu's realism never diminishes the expressiveness of Chinese ink painting. Through variations in ink density and dry-brush technique, the horse appears natural and vivid. The mane and tail, painted with dry brush, flow like wind, amplifying the rhythm of the gallop, while the body, rendered in ink and wash, conveys power and movement.

In Chinese culture, the horse has long symbolised strength, courage and loyalty, with artists across eras imbuing it with layered spiritual meaning. Xu Beihong's "Galloping Horse" builds on this tradition while anchoring it in historical reality. Created in the autumn of 1941, during one of the most arduous phases of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the painting reflects Xu's deep concern for his nation's fate. While living in Southeast Asia, Xu organised an art exhibition in Malaysia to raise funds for the war effort. Upon learning of the escalating war at home, he painted "Galloping Horse" in a single night. The work is not merely a depiction of an animal but an expression of anxiety, resolve and hope. Unlike earlier portrayals of horses as symbols of imperial authority or refined sentiment, Xu's steed embodies the resilience and spirit of the Chinese nation in a time of crisis.

Xu Beihong's "Galloping Horse" continues to captivate audiences today, its enduring appeal reflected in its frequent appearance on stamps, postcards, handicrafts and other media.

The horse, an animal capable of traversing vast distances, has long been an enduring presence in China's cultural history. In modern times, the cultural significance of the horse extends beyond its physical form, serving as a spiritual link between past and present.



▲ "Galloping Horse" by Xu Beihong

▼ "One Hundred Steeds" by Giuseppe Castiglione



Spirited Horses Gallop in Elegance and Energy

Text by Ma Kai
Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang You

In traditional Chinese culture, the horse embodies strength, loyalty and forward momentum, carrying a legacy shaped over millennia as it gallops through time. Beyond symbolism, the animal holds a lasting place in intangible cultural heritage crafts, cultural works, exhibitions and folk celebrations. This Year of the Horse, Beijing's streets, alleys, museums, shopping districts and markets are filled with equine imagery, forming a dynamic cultural tapestry that draws past and present together in a harmonious celebration.





▲ Horse-themed Paper-cuts



Horse-themed Traditional Festive Ornaments and Elements

Pasting Spring Festival couplets is a cherished Chinese New Year tradition and, in the Year of the Horse, these couplets blend equine symbolism with auspicious meaning. Inside long-established stationery shops along Liulichang Culture Street, red Xuan paper lies spread across desks, carrying the rich scent of ink. Calligraphers guide their brushes across the paper, writing phrases such as “the wise snake bids farewell to the old year; the noble steed ushers in spring’s fortune.” “Writing couplets for the Year of the Horse requires special care,” explained one calligrapher, setting down his brush and pointing to the character for “horse.” “First, emphasise the animal’s noble qualities, using characters like *jun* (“steed”) or *ji* (“thoroughbred”). Second, incorporate auspicious New Year wishes, such as ‘may success come as swiftly as a galloping horse’ or ‘dragon-horse spirit’. Finally, ensure tonal balance and parallel structure when the lines are read aloud,” he said.

This year, alongside elegant classical couplets, playful versions infused with online buzz phrases have also emerged, such as

“May wealth come ‘horse’-ily; daily joy is what truly matters.” These modern couplets have become a distinctive cultural hallmark of the Year of the Horse.

Chinese New Year prints and paper-cuts are among the most folkloric art forms in Chinese tradition, with the horse motif a core symbol of Spring Festival customs. “Chinese New Year prints—you can’t celebrate Lunar New Year without these pictures,” goes a popular saying. At the Nianhua Museum in Yangliuqing Town, Tianjin, the zodiac-themed print for the Year of the Horse, titled “Ma Dao Cheng Gong” (“Success Arrives on Horseback”), features a bold red *fu* (“happiness”) character as its backdrop. A fiery-maned steed rears to one side, its powerful form rendered with clarity and force, while a treasure basin and bow-and-arrow motifs subtly express wishes for prosperity and protection. The horse’s posture draws inspiration from Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) tri-colour glazed pottery horses and Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279) polo paintings, blending classical references with a modern visual sensibility.

In Yuxian County, Hebei, paper-cutting artisans are crafting Year of the Horse designs. With nimble fingers and quick blades, they carve vivid red paper to reveal a spirited steed rearing on its hind legs. Motifs along its

back recall caravans on ancient North Shanxi trade routes, while pomegranate patterns on the saddle signal the wish for “many children and abundant blessings.” Flecks of gold at the hooves highlight Yuxian’s dye-painted paper-cutting technique, capturing both festive energy and folk warmth in every cut and hue.

The classic motif “Ma Shang Feng Hou” (“Immediate Promotion to Marquis,” a homophonic pun linking “horse” and “immediately”) is central to Chinese New Year prints and paper-cutting, reflecting long-held social ideals. In prints, a noble steed carries a monkey holding an official seal or standing amid auspicious clouds, rendered in vivid colours and dense compositions. In paper-cuts, the horse appears freer and more dynamic, galloping or soaring. Today, these works circulate beyond heritage markets, reaching younger audiences through livestream shopping during the festive season celebrations.

Among traditional Beijing handmade toys, Rongbu Tang, the Tang family renowned for crafting velvet toys, stands out as a time-honoured and distinctive folk art. In the first half of the 20th century, the second day of Chinese New Year saw Wuxian Caishen Temple outside Guang’anmen Gate become one of Beijing’s liveliest sites, filled with families paying respects to the God

of Wealth and “inviting” a token home. What devotees sought, however, was not the deity himself but a golden plush colt standing proudly on its hooves. This treasured horse was made by Rongbu Tang. Documented since the mid-Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the craft was refined across generations of the Tang family and reached its height under the fourth-generation inheritor, Tang Qiliang. His signature creation, the golden colt, was beloved for its charming form. Especially favoured by merchants, it became a talisman of prosperity and a hallmark of old Beijing’s Spring Festival traditions.

Creating a Rongbu Tang golden colt involves six steps: shaping, paper pasting, shell removal, sanding, gilding and decoration. Artisans first model the horse’s head and body from clay, which is dried to form a mould. Layers of paper—over 20 for small pieces and more than 100 for larger ones—are pasted onto the mould, with thickness and angle judged by touch. After the paper shell hardens, the clay core is removed and the surface sanded smooth. The form is then coated with a mixture of gold powder and glue, before being adorned with velvet pom-poms, silk ribbons and details. A piece can take months to finish. Though the craft no longer enjoys its former popularity, it has been revived by inheritors. Today, the golden colt is recognised as an intangible cultural heritage treasure.



Revitalisation of Crafts through Cultural Creation

Intangible cultural heritage crafts form the “roots” of horse culture, while cultural and creative products become its spreading “branches and leaves,” reworking age-old equine motifs and integrating them into everyday life. This shift moves tradition beyond museums and workshops into ordinary homes, making heritage tangible, playful, and truly inheritable in the contemporary era.

This winter’s most sought-after cultural and creative product is undoubtedly “Ma Dwen Dwen,” the Year of the Horse special edition of Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics mascot Bing Dwen Dwen. In the cultural and creative sections of Beijing Gifts stores, the “Ma Dwen Dwen” series consistently takes centre stage. Departing from earlier zodiac “Dwen Dwen” figures posed upright, this edition makes a striking appearance in a dynamic running stance. Inspired by six legendary steeds—Chitu, Qingzong, Taohua, Bailong, Wuzhui and Feihuang—the series features varied colourways, from fiery red and soft pink to cool green and silvery white, each with its own character. Every design links a specific horse archetype with auspicious meaning: the crimson Chitu version echoes the idiom “Chitu chasing the wind,” symbolising swift success and career progress; the Taohua figure, in gentle pink and white, suggests



Ma Dwen Dwen



Creative stamps for the Year of the Horse



Creative foal-themed bags



A tri-colour black-glazed pottery horse and a horse-themed desk calendar



▲ Year of the Horse lantern decorations in front of the Beijing Friendship Store



▲ A visitor pats a cartoon horse at Lanman Hutong

romance and happy unions; the Qingzong design conveys perseverance and courage through bold lines; while the Bailong “Ma Dwen Dwen,” its coat gleaming like silver, draws from *Journey to the West*, representing academic success and fulfilled ambitions. Even the base incorporates landscapes and auspicious cloud motifs, subtly expressing the wish to “rise steadily to great heights.”

This Year of the Horse, Beijing’s major museums have drawn on their collections to reinterpret equine motifs from ancient artefacts, creating a rich range of cultural and creative products that combine historical depth with everyday use and bring the spirit of horses into contemporary life. Among them, the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing, the east branch of the Capital Museum, has emerged as a rising force, launching nearly 100 horse-themed items spanning heritage-inspired jewellery, home decor and playful collectibles. The museum has become a true treasure trove of equine creativity, with its most notable highlight the innovative reimagining of a prized Tang Dynasty tri-colour glazed pottery horse, reborn through modern design.

The “Sancai Nafu” (literally, “Tri-colour Blessings”) gift box for the Year of the Horse draws inspiration from the colours and form of Tang Dynasty tri-colour glazed pottery horses, combining tea sets, bookmarks and pendants to convey wishes for “swift

success and smooth fortune.” The ingot-shaped horse figurine blends the dignified posture of Tang steeds with Song Dynasty brocade craftsmanship, expressing refined elegance. Meanwhile, the “Mighty Tang, Playful Charm” fridge magnets reimagine the robust tri-colour horse as an endearing, whimsical character.

The National Museum of China’s “Dark Horse” series has drawn attention, inspired by a prized artefact, the tri-colour black-glazed pottery horse. From building blocks and fridge magnets to jewellery and functional calendars, the collection reinterprets the dark horse motif in contemporary forms. Especially popular are the plush dark horse pendant and mini crossbody bag, both playful and fast-selling favourites. Beyond the national museum, Baita Temple’s “Miaoying Fengma” fridge magnet pairs a white horse with the White Pagoda, symbolising “wind-borne horses delivering blessings.” The Natural History Museum of China offers a different approach, transforming specimens of Przewalski’s horse and the Ryland thoroughbred into “Subway Ponies,” plush keychains that combine animal education with charming design. Meanwhile, the Beijing Gold Lacquer Inlay Art Museum presents lacquer-painted horse pendants, each formed through the natural flow and settling of lacquer on water, then refined by artisans to unite organic pattern with the

grace of a galloping horse. Together, these museum-led creations carry equine imagery across millennia, reshaping it as cultural accents woven into everyday life.



Citywide Horse-themed Decorative Installations

The spirit of the Year of the Horse has spread throughout Beijing. More “celestial steeds” are galloping into daily life, carrying the auspicious wish of “setting off on horseback” while inspiring new consumer trends. In many forms, horse motifs now fill urban spaces, creating a festive atmosphere and quietly rooting equestrian culture in people’s hearts as winter’s warmest cultural presence.

Recently, a striking 16-metre-long, three-storey-tall black horse installation debuted in the second-floor atrium of GR Shopping Mall. With its sleek form and dynamic stance, the sculpture echoes the bronze horse head from Yuanmingyuan Park while drawing inspiration from the Qing Dynasty painting “Emperor Qianlong Reviewing His Troops.” Standing beneath it evokes the grandeur of an imperial military review, transporting viewers to a moment of historic majesty.

This monumental horse anchors the exhibition “Bronze Animal Heads Welcoming

the New Year, Peace and Prosperity: The Yuanmingyuan Art & Culture Exhibition.” Its design invites visitors to step inside the sculpture, where light and shadow frame replicas of four zodiac bronze heads—Horse, Tiger, Dog and Goat. Exiting the interior, they encounter the remaining eight heads arranged in sequence, completing the zodiac cycle and evoking a sense of reunion that bridges folk tradition and historical memory. Meanwhile, at Seasons Place shopping centre, the exhibition “Swift Hooves in the Spring Breeze: The 2026 Xu Beihong Art Exhibition” brings Xu Beihong’s galloping horses into the mall environment. Posters and sculptures appear in elevator lobbies and corridors, echoing the ink-and-brush works on display. Between shopping and leisure, visitors are naturally drawn into an ongoing dialogue with the enduring spirit of horse culture.

If horse motifs in commercial districts present a grand, awe-inspiring artistic

statement, those tucked into Beijing’s hutongs offer a warmer, more grounded expression of festive joy, infusing traditional alleyways with a distinctly local Spring Festival atmosphere. Against grey roofs, red doors and dark-framed windows, equine decorations add a note of gentle whimsy. At Xuannan Bookstore, near the southern entrance of Lanman Hutong in the Fayuansi neighbourhood, cartoon window decals proclaiming “2026: Wealth on Horseback!” and “Happiness Right Away!” have appeared on the storefront, blending literary charm with holiday cheer. On the second-floor rooftop, a plump white horse sculpture leans playfully over the edge, its front hooves cradling a bright red *fu* character. Its endearing, slightly comic presence softens the hutong’s quiet dignity, turning the spot into a favourite photo stop for young visitors who now make special trips to pose with this “Lucky Little Horse.”

Strolling further along Lanman Hutong,

at its intersection with Qijing Hutong, visitors encounter a playful pink-and-white inflatable cartoon horse. With its head tilted and body askew, the horse bears bright pink handprints and the cheeky slogan “Pat the horse’s rump—everything will go smoothly!” Smiles come easily, and young visitors eagerly pose for photos, turning light-hearted amusement into shared New Year blessings. Along the lane, locust trees are decorated with red ornaments printed with phrases such as “Dragon-Horse Spirit” and “Success on Horseback,” enlivening the quiet hutong with festive colour. Nearby, in Lumicang Hutong, several cafés have embraced the Year of the Horse. One cosy, granary-themed café displays a red paper-cut reading “Golden Horse Brings Fortune” at its entrance. Inside, a handcrafted rocking horse stands beside a bold Spring Festival couplet, forming a charming photo spot that draws locals dressed for the season.

Beyond shopping districts and

▼ A giant black horse art installation at GR Shopping Mall





▲ "Herd Galloping" by Xu Beihong

hutongs, Beijing's main roads, parks, scenic sites and public transport networks have also embraced equine motifs, creating a citywide "horses everywhere" festive atmosphere. Subway and bus stations have joined in, with horse-themed posters appearing in lightboxes that greet commuters with cheerful blessings. Along sidewalks, cultural boutiques and convenience stores display horse-inspired items, from festive *fu* characters and Spring Festival couplets to collectible mystery boxes and bag pendants. From transit hubs to neighbourhood corners, the city feels awakened by horse imagery, radiating a warm and unmistakably festive spirit.

Artefacts and Exhibits at Museums

This Year of the Horse, venues across Beijing have introduced equine-themed exhibitions that combine traditional artistry with modern technology. These shows honour centuries-old craftsmanship while using digital innovation to connect past and present. Through this fusion, horse culture is presented with renewed vitality, offering audiences an immersive journey through history, tradition and

contemporary expression.

To mark the Year of the Horse, the National Museum of China has unveiled the exhibition "Gallop Forward: An Exhibition Celebrating the Year of the Horse." Focusing on the horse as a cultural symbol, it presents more than 120 artefacts drawn from the museum's own collection and loans from 6 major institutions, including the Gansu Provincial Museum and the Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum.

The exhibition features ceramics, gold and silver ware, jade, calligraphy and paintings, each bearing the imprint of its era and master craftsmanship. A tricolour black-glazed Tang Dynasty horse, noted for its warm glaze and lively posture, is the exhibition's highlight, reflecting the era's love for fine steeds. Also featured is a robust warhorse sculpture from the Qinshihuang Mausoleum Site Museum. Other significant exhibits include a vibrant Song Dynasty hunting painting, a wooden lacquered horse from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 24) and horse-and-chariot fittings linked to Silk Road exchange. They together trace the horse's evolving role across Chinese civilisation, inviting visitors into a single, awe-filled encounter with history today.

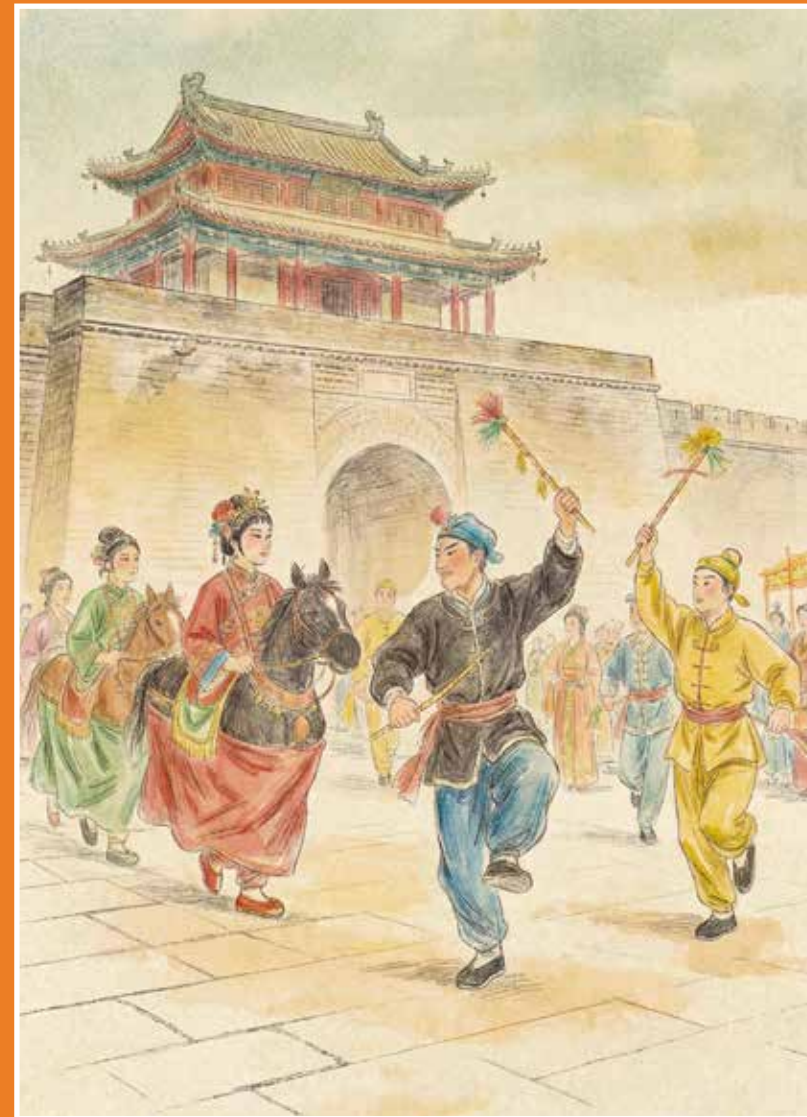
When discussing equine-themed art, the galloping horses of Chinese painter Xu Beihong (1895–1953) stand as iconic masterpieces. On New Year's Day 2026, the Xu Beihong Memorial Museum opened the exhibition "Gallop Forward: Masterpieces on the Theme of Horses in the Museum." For the first time, it brings together Xu's collection of rare horse-themed works from the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties alongside more than 30 of his own paintings, creating a cross-temporal artistic dialogue centred on the enduring image of the horse.

In the gallery, iconic works such as "Herd Galloping (Renwu Midsummer)" and "Group of Horses" take centre stage. Xu's horses are drawn with iron-strong lines and finely balanced ink tones, their motion so vivid they seem ready to leap from the paper. The images convey the force of "chasing wind and lightning" alongside an uplifting spirit of resilience and aspiration. More than artistic achievements, these works embody the ethos of their era. In a war-torn China, Xu used the horse as metaphor, transforming the galloping steed into a symbol of national strength and forward resolve.

At the Great Hall of Exalted Mystery in

the Palace Museum, the exhibition "Gallop Forward: Digital Reimagination of Horse Art and Culture" blends modern technology with traditional heritage. Drawing on horse-related artefacts, historical documents and classical imagery from the Palace Museum's collection, the exhibition uses virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and immersive light projections to create interactive experiences. Visitors can wear VR headsets to journey to Han Dynasty battlefields and witness galloping warhorses beneath fluttering banners, or use AR to examine the glaze of tri-colour pottery horses and the carvings of jade steeds.

▼ An illustration of the Bamboo Horse Dance at Nanguan



Bamboo Horse Performances

In Nanguan Village, Yongning Town, Yanqing District, the 500-year-old Nanguan Bamboo Horse Dance is revived for the Year of the Horse. Tracing its origins to Tang Dynasty "horse formations" and introduced during the early Ming, the dance centres on "Zhaojun's Journey Beyond the Frontier," expressing ideals of ethnic unity, patriotism and the vigorous spirit of northern folk art.

The Nanguan Bamboo Horse Dance features 18 performers, each assigned a distinct role, with costumes that meticulously

recreate scenes from the Han Dynasty. Leading the procession is the "horse leader," wearing a yellow headscarf, Han-style robes and carrying a horsewhip to guide the group. He is followed by two guards in official attire, swords at their waists. At the centre rides Wang Zhaojun, draped in a red cloak and crowned with a pheasant-feather headdress, flanked by two maids in blue. Behind them come a wedding envoy dressed as a celestial official, six Han-clad soldiers in formation and, at the rear, two envoys in Xiongnu dress riding bamboo camels to welcome the bride. Every costume, prop and gesture follows traditional conventions. During the performance, actors ride finely crafted bamboo horses, moving through set formations to drums, cymbals, gongs and other percussion instruments. The sharp beat of the *huban* wooden clapper mimics galloping hooves, precisely synchronised with movement and music.

For centuries, the Nanguan Bamboo Horse Dance has endured the passage of time, from performances staged for Empress Dowager Cixi's (1835–1908) birthday during the Guangxu era (1875–1908) of the Qing Dynasty to its present role as a highlight of Yanqing's Lantern Festival. Generations of inheritors have preserved its precise choreography and bamboo horse craftsmanship, refining details while maintaining tradition. This Year of the Horse, the dance returns to the Lantern Festival stage, drawing on its long history to retell familiar stories and express enduring ideals of ethnic unity and cultural harmony.

The cultural tapestry of the Year of the Horse weaves together the depth of tradition and the warmth of modern life. Each horse-themed creation pays tribute to heritage, while every equine-inspired event echoes the spirit of the present. In the golden glow of the Rongbu Tang colt, centuries of craftsmanship endure; from Xu Beihong's brushstrokes comes strength and resolve; in the rhythms of the Bamboo Horse Dance, collective memory lives on. As ancient horse culture meets contemporary life and traditional artistry converges with innovation, cultural continuity gives rise to renewed vitality.



话剧《萃锦园》

2026年3月20-22日，北京保利剧院上演话剧《萃锦园》。故事定位于清光绪二十四年（1898年）春夏之交的京城。风雨欲来，瀛台孤灯映着帝王的焦灼，颐和园的花影藏着权力的暗涌，而什刹海畔的萃锦园，成了晚清命运的关键棋局。

萃锦园内，叔侄的私房话藏着家国忧思；卤煮摊前，市井的闲谈映着世事冷暖；紫禁城里，《定国是诏》的颁布点燃变革的烈焰，却也引来了雷霆反噬。从变法的热潮到戊戌的血凉，从义和团的喧嚣到八国联军的铁蹄，帝王的抱负、权臣的权衡、百姓的浮沉，都在历史的洪流中交织碰撞。当鸽哨划破天际，老汤卤煮依旧飘香，而那段风雨如磐的岁月，早已在萃锦园的光影流转中，沉淀为永恒的回响。

The Drama Cuijin Garden

Cuijin Garden will be staged at the Beijing Poly Theatre from March 20 to 22, 2026. Set in Beijing during the spring-to-summer transition of 1898, under the reign of Qing Emperor Guangxu (1871–1908), the drama unfolds in Cuijin Garden beside the lakes of Shichahai, a pivotal setting closely intertwined with the fate of the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

At the garden within Prince Kung's Palace, private conversations among members of the imperial family reveal their deep concern for the nation's future, while public exchanges at snack stalls echo the era's growing unrest. The narrative follows the issuance of the emperor's Wuxu Reform decree, its suppression by conservative forces and the chain of events that followed, from the Boxer Uprising to Beijing's occupation by the Eight-Power Allied Forces. Interweaving imperial ambition, ministerial manoeuvring and the lives of ordinary people, the drama captures these forces converging in a moment of historical importance.



徐悲鸿、齐白石、张大千精品展

“徐悲鸿、齐白石、张大千精品展”于2026年1月22日-3月10日在嘉德艺术中心开展。本次展览甄选了三位大师的80件精品力作，其中既有徐悲鸿的“追风奔马”、白石老人的“游嬉青虾”，也有张大千的“彩墨山水”，亦将展出他们之间鲜为人知的合作珍品与互赠佳作。三位大家亦师亦友，以画传情。齐白石曾为徐悲鸿刻赠“知己有恩”印，感念知遇之情；徐悲鸿亦绘《千里驹》贺白石老年得子。本次展览展出的多幅合作画作，正是他们艺术默契、笔意交融与深厚情谊的见证。

Exhibition of Masterpieces by Xu Beihong, Qi Baishi and Zhang Daqian

The Exhibition of Masterpieces by Xu Beihong, Qi Baishi and Zhang Daqian is on display at the Guardian Art Centre from January 22 to March 10, 2026. Bringing together 80 works by three legendary artists, the exhibition features highlights such as Xu Beihong's "Galloping Horse," Qi Baishi's "Playful Shrimps" and Zhang Daqian's "Colourful Ink Landscape." Visitors can also view collaborative pieces and personal gifts exchanged between the masters. Xu Beihong (1895–1953), Qi Baishi (1864–1957) and Zhang Daqian (1899–1983) shared a close bond as mentors and friends, expressing their regard through art. Qi Baishi once presented Xu Beihong with a seal inscribed with characters of gratitude, while Xu responded by painting "A Thousand-Li Steed" for Qi, who had welcomed a son in his later years. The collaborative works on view vividly reflect their artistic affinity, fluid brushwork and enduring friendship.