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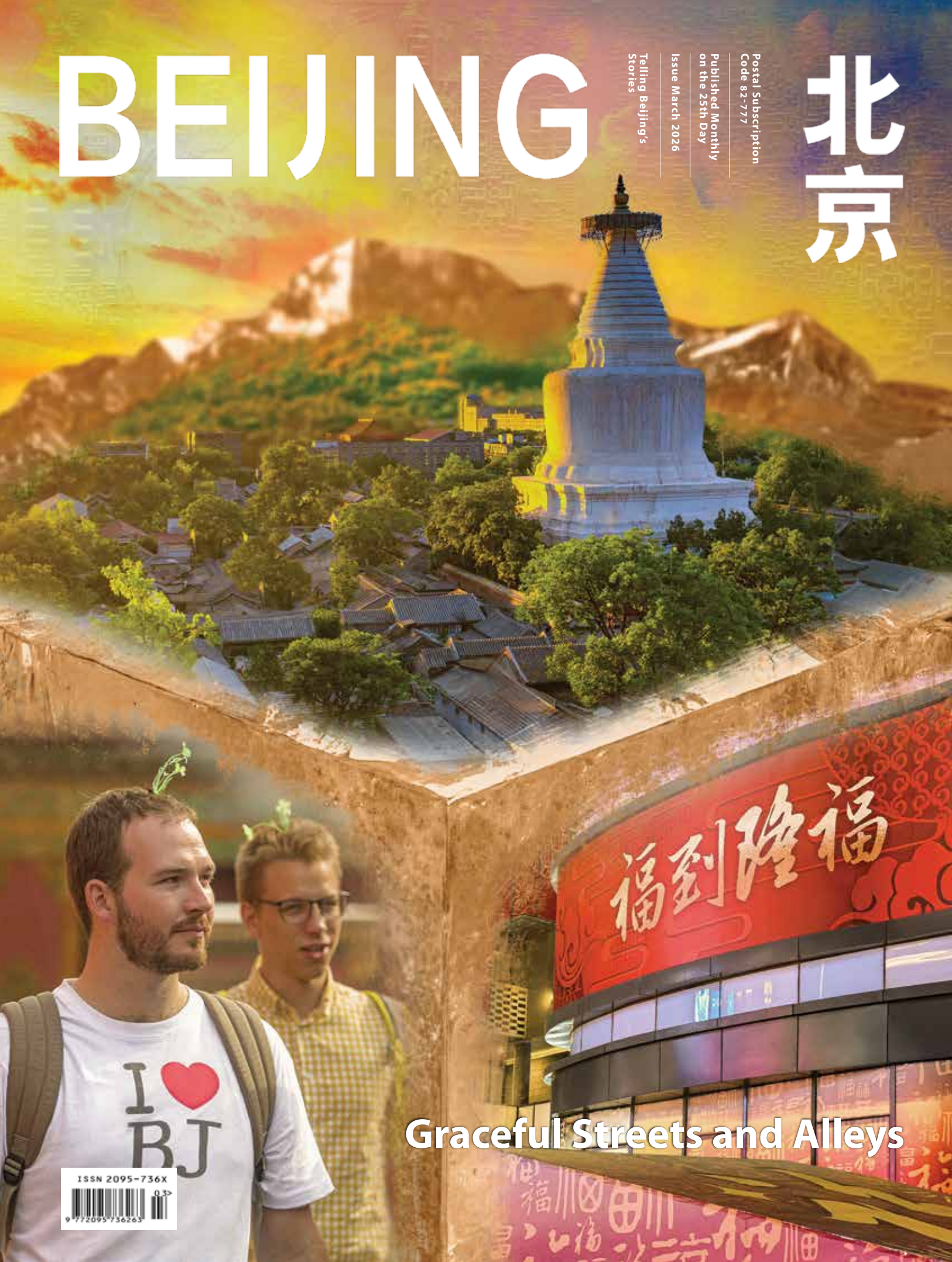
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Graceful Streets and Alleys

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Photo by Zhou Mingxing

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Graceful Streets and Alleys

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Zhao Lei, Li Xiaoyin, Jiang Litian



Entering an aged courtyard through its vermilion gate immediately immerses visitors in the historical fabric of old Beijing. Sunlight falls on azure bricks and grey tiles, casting shifting shadows across the walls, while the scent of old scholar trees and the distant calls of pigeons lend the air a quiet serenity. This balance of calm and subtle activity is part of Beijing's distinctive charm. The intricate network of streets and hutongs (alleys), like brushstrokes on a scroll, forms a microcosm of this ancient capital.

Having served as the seat of power during the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties and as the capital of the People's Republic of China since 1949, the city has steadfastly preserved its cultural heritage. Today, these storied streets and hutongs are designated historic conservation areas. Through careful preservation and modern ingenuity, these secluded spaces are being revitalised and transformed into celebrated scenic destinations.



▲ A section of the urban area of a model of Beijing on display at the Beijing Urban Planning Exhibition Hall

Digging for Deep Roots

Within the Beijing Planning Exhibition Hall stands a monumental bronze relief weighing 10 tonnes, depicting the cityscape of old Beijing as it appeared in 1949. The area represented, covering 62.5 square kilometres, is shown encircled by four concentric rings of defensive walls, interspersed with six broad lakes, eight waterways and nine sacrificial altars alongside eight revered temples. A prominent Central Axis stretches from the Bell and Drum towers in the north to Yongdingmen Gate in the south, while the streets and hutongs running between Dongdan and Xidan are carefully mapped out. Each bronze marker on the relief functions as a chronological and geographical reference point.

Having served as a capital for more than 870 years, Beijing possesses an inimitable character deeply rooted in its historic conservation areas. The latticework of its hutongs and the courtyard dwellings nestled within them represent far more than architectural legacies. They embody the tangible expression of classical Chinese ideas about human habitation. These everyday

scenes once shaped the city's most vibrant atmosphere. The presence of temples and guild halls, interwoven with the hutongs and courtyards in these areas, casts a warm glow across the urban fabric, serving as sanctuaries that preserve the memories and nostalgia of old Beijing.

However, alongside the city's rapid expansion, these areas encountered numerous challenges. Many courtyards developed crumbling walls and damaged roofs. Basic amenities had become outdated, with widespread wastewater discharge and hopelessly tangled overhead cabling. The once lively residential environments gradually lost their appeal due to the daily inconveniences they presented. As a result, some Beijingers felt compelled to move away from their hutongs. Meanwhile, several cultural and historical sites within these areas also began to lose their former brilliance. The pressing question the city faced was how best to protect this heritage while revitalising the ancient streets and hutongs.

Transformations

As the tide of urban development advanced, Beijing's historic conservation

areas have not been marginalised over the years; rather, they have undergone a subtle yet significant evolution. This transition avoids sweeping clearances or disruptive large-scale construction. Instead, the city adopted a guiding principle: restoring an original appearance through the minimum necessary intervention. Guided by a philosophy that emphasises "people-oriented co-construction and shared participation," the aim is to preserve the historical character while addressing developmental challenges. In this way, the ancient streets and hutongs are able to adapt to contemporary living, allowing their cultural heritage to endure through a continuing process of renewal.

This transformation began with a profound respect for the past and has been realised through legally mandated preservation efforts. The protection of the city's historic conservation areas represents not a series of isolated refurbishment projects but a systematic and integrated undertaking. Only through clear regulations can preservation proceed in a steady and sustainable manner. From the early *Regulations on the Protection of Beijing as a Historical and Cultural City* to the more recent *Regulations on the Protection of*

Beijing Central Axis as a World Heritage Site, the enactment of numerous local ordinances has placed the safeguarding of the city's historic conservation areas firmly on a legal foundation. These laws establish strict boundaries, rigorously prohibiting extensive demolition, construction and development that would damage the surrounding environment, thereby ensuring the authenticity and integrity of the historical characteristics. In 2024, "Beijing Central Axis: A Building Ensemble Exhibiting the Ideal Order of the Chinese Capital" was successfully inscribed on UNESCO's *World Heritage List*.

The turning point in this transition lies in resolving restoration challenges while encouraging proactive conservation. The regeneration of historic conservation areas presents considerable financial burdens. At the same time, the willingness of local inhabitants to participate in renovation can introduce uncertainty into the smooth implementation of plans. To address this issue, a policy known as "voluntary application for vacating" has been introduced in four Nanluoguxiang hutongs: Yu'er, Mao'er, Fuxiang and Suoyi. This approach imposes no compulsion and instead fully respects individual choice. Residents who choose to relocate voluntarily are guaranteed fair compensation and appropriate alternative accommodation. Those who decide to remain receive substantial financial support and expert technical assistance to renovate and upgrade their courtyards. The aim of this renewal has been to foster "new vitality within historic courtyards," allowing residents to preserve their cultural connections while enjoying the conveniences of modern living. Concurrently, a range of targeted incentives, including financial grants and tax relief, has been introduced to attract increasing levels of private investment into these historic conservation areas.

The policy highlights a strong commitment to the people who live in these areas. At the heart of preserving these areas lies a steadfast focus on everyday life, with a high-quality residential environment forming its essential foundation. Yaojiang Hutong, for example, was previously plagued by persistent standing water. After every heavy rainfall, the lower courtyards would flood, significantly disrupting the daily lives of residents. During the renovation process, an engineering solution was deployed to



▲ Foreign visitors experiencing Chinese gongs and drums at the Bell and Drum towers square



▲ Tourists posing at Beiluoguxiang



▲ Street decorations in Lanman Hutong

meticulously overhaul the subterranean pipe system, effectively eliminating the standing water problem. At the same time, the wider refurbishment introduced modern sanitary facilities in narrow courtyards, small pocket parks at lane intersections and vibrant artistic murals on exterior walls. The once waterlogged hutong has now been transformed into a far more desirable living environment, with residents' satisfaction steadily increasing. Similar improvements can be seen in Xizongbu Hutong, Sanyanjing Hutong and Beiluoguxiang.

To strengthen the professionalism involved in preserving cultural relics and historic buildings, and to ensure that the refurbishment of cultural spaces corresponds closely with the actual conditions of each area, specialist teams conduct detailed surveys of every courtyard and examine every site containing protected relics. They carry out thorough assessments of the current state of each element of cultural and historic heritage. By combining historical context, the distinctive stylistic characteristics of the locality and the practical needs of residents' daily lives, these teams develop tailored plans for the restoration and transformation of individual historic sites and spaces. In Dongsi, one such

professional team carefully preserved the original arrangement of festoon gates and stone-paved paths. They also carried out detailed restoration work on the former residences of notable figures in Dongsi, reinstating the original architectural layout of the buildings. Through this work, dwellings located deep within the hutongs have been transformed into shared cultural spaces integrated into community life. In Xuannan, expert teams have restored temples and guild halls, removed unauthorised structures that had encroached upon surrounding areas and reinstated the authentic historical atmosphere and outward appearance.

A New Chapter

Over the past decade, Beijing's historic conservation areas have undergone a remarkable rejuvenation, becoming more refined, vibrant and multifaceted. These areas now serve both as lively residential neighbourhoods and as engaging cultural destinations. Furthermore, they have strengthened their role as shared cultural spaces for the ancient capital.

The revitalised areas have retained both their authentic appearance and their historical essence. The guiding principle of

restoring original forms through minimal intervention reflects Beijing's careful respect for its past and has provided the foundation for the transformation of these areas. Each courtyard and hutong has been preserved in its original historical state as fully as possible. Illegal structures that once crowded the lanes have been removed, overhead electrical wiring has been placed underground and worn facades have been carefully restored. The rejuvenated streets and hutongs now reveal a simple, nostalgic scene of "blue bricks, grey tiles, green trees and vermilion gates." The uncluttered skyline further enhances the charm of the ancient capital.

The revitalised areas continue to exude a strong vitality and a richer texture of everyday life. Today, the refurbished hutongs are no longer associated with the "old, dilapidated and cramped" conditions of the past, but have become liveable spaces that harmoniously combine historical heritage with modern amenities. Newly installed kitchens and bathrooms, together with improved pipe networks, have made daily life far more convenient for residents. Pocket gardens at street corners are carefully maintained, with flowers in full bloom. When a breeze passes through, petals drift gently through the air, bringing a touch of colour to the

ancient hutongs. In community cultural centres, elderly residents gather to play chess and read, while children enjoy drawing and games. Their leisure time has become both diverse and fulfilling. Beijingers who have lived in hutongs for generations continue to cherish their familiar courtyards and lead contented lives. Meanwhile, newcomers quickly adapt to this lively environment, joining long-time residents in sustaining the distinctive charm of hutong life. In this way, the city's historic conservation areas remain among the most dynamic spaces of everyday life.

The public now have the opportunity to reconnect with the past and discover fresh interpretations of cultural heritage within revitalised areas. Here, history and culture are closely interwoven with modern life. These renewed areas have evolved into hubs for cultural exchange and lively incubators for imaginative new ideas. The Longfusi (Longfu Temple) area, a vital component of the "Cultural Golden Triangle" alongside the Forbidden City and Wangfujing, blends centuries of urban vitality with contemporary cultural innovation. For example, in the treasure-hunting exhibition launched by Beijing Daoxiangcun, visitors can scan QR codes with their smartphones to unlock the

stories behind traditional intangible cultural skills, transforming ordinary food retail into an engaging cultural experience. Further north, near the Bell and Drum towers, Hong'en Temple, with a history of more than 700 years, has been revitalised through careful conservation. It now serves as a multifunctional cultural venue. The complex also includes a post office themed around Beijing Central Axis, a distinctive bookshop and a shop specialising in cultural crafts. These ancient structures have become popular photographic backdrops for younger visitors and appealing destinations for those wishing to immerse themselves in local culture.

These newly restored areas are becoming beautifully maintained shared spaces, positioning residents as custodians of the city's cultural legacy. In Zhaozhuizi Hutong, residents, shopkeepers, property management teams and the local sub-district office jointly established a hutong council. Residents gather to propose ideas and plans for neighbourhood improvements, working together to address issues and ensure upgrades reflect genuine community needs. In Shijia Hutong, residents collaborated with academics and students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts on the

"Micro-Garden" initiative. Discarded items such as preserved vegetable jars, old bricks and flowerpots were creatively repurposed to form small green spaces. The heartwarming initiative received the International Landscape Society Award in 2020, drawing international attention to Beijing's approach to community-based neighbourhood governance.

Over the years, Beijing's designated historic conservation areas have achieved a careful balance between preserving the past and embracing progress.

Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, once remarked, "A city's essence resides in its history and culture; safeguarding its historical legacy is akin to valuing our own existence." The general secretary has walked the historic streets, hutongs and courtyards of the ancient capital on many occasions, offering clear guidance and shaping the strategic vision for preserving its heritage. Today, Beijing's historic conservation areas continue to flourish. Through sustained protection and careful renewal, their streets and hutongs are being revitalised, allowing the city's cultural legacy to shine with renewed vitality. This ongoing work provides a "Beijing model" for the preservation and development of historic conservation areas across the nation.

▼ Longfu Temple Historic Conservation Area



▼ Zhaozhuizi Hutong



▼ Hong'en Temple



Bustling Old Alleyways Take on a New Appearance

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

Beijing's morning bell once rang through the streets and alleys of Dadu, the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) capital that preceded present-day Beijing, pealed across the Forbidden City during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, and drifted into the lively alleys of today's historic neighbourhoods. In the eyes of Father Time, these old districts are breathing, living entities, evolving slowly over centuries before emerging, transformed, into the city we see today. Scattered across Beijing, each distinctive neighbourhood interprets the city's beauty in its own way, and stepping into them reveals the ancient capital's unique charm, concealed in its bricks and tiles and woven deeply into the fabric of daily life.



Historic Charm Weaves a Splendid Composition

Following the successful inscription of the Beijing Central Axis as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the area around the Bell and Drum towers has gradually emerged as a popular tourism destination. Each day, visitors from around the world flock to admire the grandeur of the towers, capturing memorable moments on cameras and smartphones. The red wall west of the Drum Tower has become an especially sought-after photo spot, with tourists posing against the crimson façade or standing beside street signs for iconic shots with this historic landmark. Among them, visitors in *hanfu* (traditional Chinese clothing) are particularly eye-catching, their flowing robes fluttering gently as they stand by the red wall while camera shutters click incessantly, freezing moments where traditional aesthetics meet ancient architecture. Newlyweds frequently choose this location for their wedding photographs; some stand precisely on the central axis with the towers rising behind

them, others sharing tender moments by the red wall.

The urban plaza between the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower has become a beloved gathering place for locals and tourists alike. Its open, unobstructed views and traditional paving materials, chosen in keeping with the historic character of the towers, lend the square a quality that is both aesthetically pleasing and deeply functional, with benches and patches of greenery offering visitors a place to rest and linger. Residents from nearby neighbourhoods come daily to showcase their talents, practising tai chi, kicking shuttlecocks and twirling colourful ribbons. This authentic slice of Beijing life draws curious foreign visitors, who pause to watch and capture the scene on their cameras. Some, unable to resist joining in, step forward with questions, and with patient guidance from locals they tentatively mimic tai chi postures or attempt to kick a shuttlecock, drawing warm, good-natured laughter from the crowd.

Within the Drum Tower, the ground-floor vaulted arches, carefully restored through conservation efforts, are now fully

open to the public, housing the thematic exhibition "The Story of Time." Through digital immersion, interactive installations and dynamic light-and-shadow displays, the exhibition brings vividly to life the timekeeping legacy of the Bell and Drum towers and the broader cultural significance of the Beijing Central Axis. Visitors can virtually strike the drum and ring the bell, listening to the resonant echoes of "evening drums and morning bells." In the virtual reality zone, they follow Xiao Long Zi, a playful animated roof beast, on a journey back to the Yuan Dynasty capital of Dadu, uncovering the origins of the Central Axis and the deep currents of Chinese wisdom embedded within it. On the second floor, 25 historic time-announcing drums and other ancient timekeeping instruments are displayed, and at each full hour a live drumming performance fills the space with deep, rolling tones. At the top of the tower, visitors are rewarded with a sweeping view across the vast expanse of grey-tiled hutongs and bustling streets below, enjoying the spectacle of the north terminus of the Central Axis.



▲ An exhibition hosted on the Drum Tower



▲ A shop in Lingdang Hutong

Leaving the Bell and Drum towers behind, visitors can hop aboard a traditional cycle rickshaw for a leisurely ride through the winding hutongs towards the Shichahai area, immersing themselves in the timeless charm of old Beijing. Most cycle rickshaw drivers are native Beijingers who pedal at an unhurried pace while enthusiastically sharing stories of the alleys they pass, tales of historic courtyards, legendary residents and cherished neighbourhood lore. With a gentle jingle of the bell, the rickshaw glides over stone bridges and through narrow lanes, drawing together the solemn grandeur of the Bell and Drum towers and the relaxed, lakeside ease of Shichahai into a single, seamless journey.

During the 2026 Spring Festival, the Bell and Drum towers drew throngs of visitors with their rich festive atmosphere, but if one were to name Beijing's most popular Chinese New Year photo spot, the answer was undoubtedly Longfu Temple. The story of Longfu Temple reaches back to the Ming Dynasty, when it stood as an imperial monastery nestled in the heart of the capital. Through the Qing Dynasty and into the Republic of China period (1912–1949), the Longfu Temple Fair rose to prominence, earning the title "Crown of All Markets" for its specialisation in books and

high-end art and acquiring a reputation as Beijing's foremost "Scholarly Temple Fair." After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Longfu Temple area became one of Beijing's central commercial districts, with the Dongsì People's Market leaving a lasting impression on the collective memory of generations of residents. In the 1980s, the rise of Longfu Building firmly established the area as a premier shopping destination for ordinary Beijingers.

From imperial monastery to bustling temple fair, from old Beijing's beloved "playground" to a barometer of urban commerce, Longfu Temple has witnessed a century of transformation in the city's commercial and cultural landscape. Today it re-emerges with a renewed identity, once again a vital landmark that weaves together the warmth of Beijing's traditional street life and the vibrancy of contemporary style.

In July 2022, Longfu Temple stood out among 210 citywide projects to win the inaugural "Beijing Urban Renewal Best Practice Award." Now, four years on, the seeds of urban renewal have blossomed in full splendour, reaching their most vibrant expression during the Spring Festival in the Year of the Horse.

In the Longfu Temple commercial area, the most conspicuous sight is the

winding queue, snaking outside Beijing Daoxiangcun No. 0 Store. President Xi Jinping's visit to the area just before the Spring Festival added fresh momentum to the already bustling destination. Inside the store, crowds gather around the festive "trio" snack counter featuring *kaihuazao* (jujube-sized fried dough balls coated in sesame seeds), *misandao* (fried cakes glazed in malt sugar) and cream-flavoured fried dough twists. These three traditional Beijing treats have long been local favourites, but with the added allure of being the snacks sampled by President Xi, they have become this season's most coveted purchases. Shoppers from across the country queue daily to buy them, and even international visitors find themselves unable to resist.

The allure of Longfu Temple has never been limited to food; it lies even more deeply in its rich cultural fabric. Among its highlights is the refurbished Cathay Bookshop branch within the Longfu Temple commercial area. This bookshop features a thoughtfully organised layout in which vintage and new books occupy distinct zones, allowing readers to browse without distraction and find what they seek with ease. In the antiquarian section, classics such as the 1979 Zhonghua Book Company edition of *Collected Works of Bai Juyi* sit alongside well-

▼ A foreign martial arts enthusiast demonstrates Chinese kung fu at the Bell and Drum towers square ▼ Foreign tourists visit a hutong near the Bell and Drum towers



▼ Streetscape decor in phase II of the Longfu Temple Historic Conservation Area



▲ Foreign tourists visit the Longfu Temple Area

preserved treasures including a Republic of China edition of *Three Hundred Tang Poems* and 1980s translations of classical literature, drawing book lovers who linger contentedly over every page. The new books section pulses with contemporary vitality, showcasing carefully selected titles across the humanities, social sciences, literature, art and folklore. Signed first editions and untrimmed books with deckle edges command particular attention, and newly released titles such as a series of cultural books on the Beijing Central Axis have quickly become bestsellers. The cultural and creative products zone adds another layer of ingenuity, offering exquisitely crafted items inspired by ancient texts and

calligraphy, from glazed ceramic series and book-cover-inspired fridge magnets to bookmarks, notebooks and seals adorned with classical motifs.

In contrast to the classical gravitas of Cathay Bookshop, the bookstore Zuo Shu embraces a youthful, literary-aesthetic identity, establishing itself as a distinctive cultural destination within the Longfu Temple commercial area. Its clean, minimalist design and soothing atmosphere invite visitors to read, relax and unwind at their own pace.

Beyond the lingering scent of ink and paper, Donggong Cinema and Funfly China, which was transformed from the former Changhong Cinema, embody a vivid dialogue

between past and present. Donggong Cinema preserves the nostalgic charm of the classic Beijing picture house, its wooden seats and vintage screen evoking generations of cherished cinematic memories. Funfly China, meanwhile, has shed the skin of its predecessor entirely, offering immersive aerial flight-simulation films that have made it a magnet for young visitors.

Although the once-majestic Longfu Temple complex has long since vanished, its architectural crown, the exquisitely crafted caisson ceilings, survives. The temple's Tiangong (Celestial Palace) Caisson and Panlong (Coiled Dragon) Caisson, now treasured as masterpieces of ancient Chinese craftsmanship, are housed in the Beijing Ancient Architecture Museum at the Altar of the God of Agriculture. The Tiangong Caisson is particularly celebrated for a six-tiered wooden structure assembled entirely with mortise-and-tenon joints. Its apex bears a star map of more than 1,400 stars, set in harmonious alignment with surrounding sculptures of the Twenty-Eight Mansions and miniature celestial pavilions. Today, within the Zhenyuan Art Museum in the Longfu Temple area, a full-scale replica of the Tiangong Caisson has returned to its original neighbourhood in new form. Inside the gallery, visitors may examine the intricate joinery and celestial architecture at close quarters.

Perched atop Longfu Building, the Longfu Cultural Centre is the crowning jewel of the area's revitalisation. Stepping out of the elevator, visitors are greeted by a breathtaking open space: four red-walled, golden-roofed classical pavilions and three serene courtyards suspended more than 30 metres above street level, evoking the ethereal grandeur of a celestial palace. This elevated cultural oasis hosts a dynamic roster of events, from intimate concerts and art exhibitions to fashion shows. The centre also offers one of the rarest luxuries in Beijing's old city: sweeping panoramic views. From the west viewing platform, the Forbidden City, Wanchun Pavilion on Jingshan Hill and the White Pagoda of Beihai Park unfold along the Beijing Central Axis in majestic sequence, while to the east the

skyline of Beijing's modern CBD rises in a gleaming forest of towers. Here, ancient capital and global metropolis converge in a single seamless vista, a place where history and the future meet at eye level.

The City's Tradition Remains as its Style Evolves

Exiting from the southeast entrance of Caishikou Station on Beijing Subway Line 4, visitors are welcomed by a charming ensemble of ancient-style architecture and bustling crowds, marking their arrival at Zhonghai Dajixiang, a newly designated cultural district that came to prominence following the successful UNESCO inscription of the Beijing Central Axis. Once a vibrant hub of shops and entertainment venues, this area has nurtured centuries of commercial heritage, its mercantile roots stretching back hundreds of years.

Long celebrated as a "siheyuan (traditional courtyard house) commercial district," Dajixiang reveals its true character only upon entering: this is no mere imitation of the past, but a living fusion of history and contemporary life. At every turn, century-

old time-honoured brands and trendy new boutiques coexist in delightful harmony. The undisputed centrepiece of the alley is the former site of Bianyifang, the oldest Peking roast duck restaurant in Beijing, at 29 Mishi Hutong. This elegant two-storey, recessed "U-shaped" building retains the architectural splendour of its Qing Dynasty heyday, its beams and columns adorned with meticulously restored polychrome paintings by veteran artisans, glowing once more with their original lustre. Just steps away, a café blends retro green tiles with vintage radios, its rich coffee aroma mingling with the sweet scent of taro balls drifting from the neighbouring dessert shop.

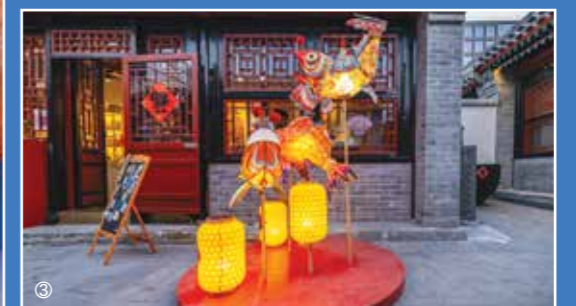
Most impressive among these are the meticulously preserved historic and cultural structures, foremost among them the Nanhai Guildhall, the primary Beijing residence and reform-planning base of Kang Youwei (1858–1927), a leading figure of the late Qing reform movement. Kang lived intermittently for 16 years in the Qishutang courtyard in the northern part of the guildhall, witnessing at close quarters the tumultuous events of the Hundred Days' Reform. "In 1894, in the 20th year of the Guangxu era (1875–1908), Kang Youwei

resided here during the 'Gongche Shangshu' (the joint petition of imperial examination candidates to the emperor)," reads one inscription, "In 1926, Kang visited Beijing for the last time and came here to mourn late friends." Before these engraved chronicles of the guildhall's history, many visitors pause with heads bowed in quiet contemplation, moved by the accumulated weight of time and memory.

Continuing deeper into the neighbourhood, one encounters fishbone-patterned hutongs connecting clusters of courtyard houses in grey brick and tile, where every eave and weathered wall embodies a tangible thread of history. Then, through a delicate moon gate, the scene transforms in an instant, as gleaming glass towers and a bustling commercial pedestrian street rise into view.

Modelled on the atrium courtyards of Fujian *tulou* (literally, Fujian earthen buildings), the Heart of Dajixiang has become the complex's most popular photo spot and a cherished destination for photographers. Its heart-shaped atrium features layered, staggered spaces that ascend gracefully from underground to ground level, opening upward to a framed

▼ ①②③ Various artistic decorations at Daji Xiang





▲ A courtyard wall decoration in Lanman Hutong

slice of sky. The floor is inlaid with a replica map of Dajixiang's streetscape from the Republic of China period, while tiered garden plazas flank both sides, unfolding in gentle steps adorned with lush greenery, making every casual snapshot worthy of social media acclaim. Scattered around the plaza are the adorable "Daji Cat" mascots, lounging or standing in endearing poses that add an irresistible charm to the scene. Whether posing alongside these playful figures or framing street views around them, visitors find it effortless to capture images brimming with atmosphere and delight.

As afternoon settles in, Dajixiang comes alive with vibrant energy. The sunken plaza fills with crowds as immersive theatrical performances, close-up magic shows, live band sets and anime-character pop-up appearances unfold in spontaneous succession. At any turn along the lanes, a captivating scene awaits.

Stepping out through "Daji Gate," the iconic eastern entrance of the

neighbourhood, and pausing to look back, one takes in a panorama where past and present converge in easy harmony, a view rich with lingering charm. "This place is truly unlike any ordinary shopping mall," is a sentiment echoed by nearly every visitor to Dajixiang. "It preserves the soul of old architecture while blending in contemporary style, all elevated by cutting-edge cultural design, making it not only beautiful to behold but delightful to explore." Tucked just west of the southern section of the Beijing Central Axis, this historic district is quietly redefining the urban commercial street through the lens of "scenic aesthetics."

Dajixiang is far more than a commercial street; it is a living microcosm of Beijing's historic neighbourhood evolution. What makes it truly exceptional is that it does not stand in isolation, but blends seamlessly with the cultural fabric of the surrounding alleys, their lifelines intertwined in shared urban warmth. Nestled beside Caishikou, a landmark district in southern Beijing, it

neighbours hutongs such as Nanbanjie, Lanman and Xizhuan that still preserve the authentic character of old Beijing. To the west lies Fayuan Temple, renowned for its fragrant lilacs, and beyond that stretches Niujie, the city's most celebrated halal food street in the southern quarter.

With a history spanning several centuries, Lanman Hutong takes its name from the dye workshops of the Ming Dynasty, when vibrantly coloured fabrics once draped the alleyways. "Lanman," meaning resplendent and variegated, perfectly captures the spirit of this ancient lane. Stepping inside, the first delight to greet visitors is the wall art, playful and expressive murals that serve as the hutong's living "emoji." On one gable wall, a girl in a blue cap tenderly waters flowers at her feet; around a corner, the Little Prince hides quietly, awaiting a serendipitous encounter. The "Meet Lanman" rose wall and heart-shaped floral benches offer romantic nooks where passersby are tempted to pause and linger. Along the eaves and alleyways, whimsical cartoon cats and dogs lend a sweet, gentle charm to the atmosphere. At the hutong's entrance, a yellow-and-blue glass façade on the pigeon loft is inscribed with lines from the modern poem "The Pigeon" by the renowned Chinese scholar Hu Shih (1891–1962). Aptly echoing the homophone for "romantic," Lanman Hutong truly lives up to its name, with romance waiting quietly at every turn.

The floral adornments throughout the hutong are equally thoughtful. Fayuan Temple has long been celebrated as the "temple of flowers," and Lanman Hutong gracefully echoes its seasonal blooms by painting corresponding floral silhouettes along its walls: crabapple in spring, roses in summer and ginkgo in autumn. Even café windowsills feature potted crabapples to match those in the temple grounds.

While hutongs and *siheyuan* (Beijing-style courtyard residences) are universally recognised as Beijing's iconic architectural forms, the old city's seemingly uniform streetscape holds unexpected delights. Heading east from Dajixiang, passing the bustling Hufangqiao intersection and

turning onto the tranquil Renshou Road, one encounters a striking two-storey building in the *shikumen* style (literally, "stone-framed gate") standing proudly at the corner, an architectural form emblematic of old Shanghai. Its grey-and-white façade is elegant and orderly, with the bold characters "Tai'an Alley Culture and Art Center" prominently displayed on the second floor. This is Beijing's only surviving *shikumen* complex from the Republic of China period. Though modest in scale, it once stood at the heart of Xiangchang New District, the city's pioneering urban renewal zone in the early 20th century and the equivalent of today's CBD core. At its zenith, Xiangchang boasted paved asphalt roads, streetlights, public

telephones and traffic signals, infrastructure that was cutting-edge for its time. It was here that Beijing saw its first integrated shopping complex, first rooftop garden, first privately operated luxury hotel, first modern theatre and even its inaugural taxi service. Tai'an Alley endures as one of the most representative architectural legacies of this ambitious urban experiment.

In 2023, this century-old building reopened with a new identity as the Tai'an Alley Culture and Art Center.

Stepping inside feels like entering a different realm entirely. A 70-metre-long alley divides 6 two-storey buildings into 2 orderly rows, with lush greenery and decorative stonework breathing life into the



▲ ▼ Tai'an Alley



semi-open courtyard. *Shikumen* gateways, sky-lit atriums, dormer windows, wooden staircases and vintage furnishings conjure the ambiance of 1920s Shanghai at every turn. “Shikumen Era” stands as Tai’an Alley’s most distinctive multicultural experience zone, not merely a restaurant but a living gallery of Shanghainese culture. Vintage gramophones, retro rickshaws and lifelike pomegranate trees adorn every corner with careful, considered detail. On weekends, Tai’an Alley transforms into a cherished gathering place for Beijing’s artistically minded youth, a pocket of Shanghai charm during the Republic of China period without the need for a long journey.

Households Thrive within the Old Quarters

In the Gongmenkou Dongcha and Gongmenkou Xicha hutongs of the Baitasi quarter in Xicheng District, the everyday bustle of old Beijing blends naturally with contemporary urban flair. At the heart of it all stands the White Dagoba at Miaoying Temple, a 700-year-old monument rising with serene majesty above the surrounding alleyways. More than a spiritual landmark, the pagoda embodies a profound chapter of cultural exchange between China and Nepal: designed and built under the supervision of the Nepalese architect Araniko during the Yuan Dynasty, it endures as a precious architectural relic and a testament to the deep friendship between the two nations.

Today, Gongmenkou Dongcha and Gongmenkou Xicha hutongs have been thoughtfully revitalised while preserving their residential character and vibrant street life, emerging as a model of historic lanes in harmony with contemporary urban culture. Over 50 distinctive shops now call the neighbourhood home, their fresh energy breathing new vitality into the ancient lanes. Among them, Polonio Coffee has become a local favourite, a tucked-away café whose second-floor terrace offers an unobstructed view of the White Dagoba, making it a top choice for visitors seeking that iconic rooftop shot. For a more contemplative experience,

the neo-Chinese style tea house Yi Zi Diao exudes quiet elegance within a century-old building, its carefully positioned seating offering guests a serene, sheltered view of the pagoda, framing history in comfort, one tranquil sip at a time.

Alongside its popular new shops, the neighbourhood has thoughtfully preserved a tapestry of everyday old-school businesses, tailor shops, barbershops, bicycle repair stalls and sundry stores, that remain essential to residents’ daily lives. These unpretentious,

community-serving storefronts safeguard the authentic pulse of old Beijing while continuing to meet the practical needs of local households, ensuring that amid renewal, the soul of the hutong remains rooted in lived experience.

The *siheyuan* represents the deepest emotional anchor for old-school Beijingers, a vision of “home” etched into their bones. In the Guanyinsi area of Dashilan, centuries-old courtyards once housed prosperous merchants and wealthy families, their orderly layouts bearing silent witness to

bygone opulence. Today, these historic compounds have been sensitively restored, with roofs, walls and windows retaining their traditional forms and architectural grace. Within this preserved shell, modern infrastructure, central heating, gas lines and updated plumbing, have been seamlessly integrated, endowing the old residences with contemporary liveability. Residents now live in harmony with history, enjoying modern comforts while surrounded by the timeless beauty of their ancestral courtyards.

Scattered throughout the neighbourhood, multiple “courtyard symbiosis spaces” serve distinct functions yet share a common warmth. The cultural corner, lined with books, newspapers and vintage photographs, has become a gathering spot where residents read, chat and reminisce about hutong life of days gone by. The leisure garden bursts with greenery and blooming flowers, its stone tables and benches inviting residents to play chess and savour moments of quiet repose. The children’s play area, equipped with slides, rocking horses and other safe amenities, offers younger residents a dedicated space for laughter and discovery. Together, these communal courtyards gently dissolve the boundaries between

private residences, rekindling the spirit of neighbourly connection that once defined hutong living, and ensuring that this historic district thrives not merely as restored architecture, but as a community reborn.

Hidden within this historic neighbourhood is Beijing’s first outdoor marriage registration site. The Ming-era Huguo Guanyin Temple, meticulously restored through professional conservation, reopened in recent years as a marriage registry. This space exudes a unique blend of solemnity and warmth. At the courtyard’s centre, an open-air certification platform encircled by fresh flowers and red banners bearing the character “囍” (“double happiness”) stands before an ancient temple hall, a red carpet underfoot, harmoniously merging architectural heritage with matrimonial joy. A nearby photo spot invites couples to capture memories, while an interactive projection zone illuminates the air with phrases such as “eternal blessed union” and “a hundred years of harmony,” complementing the exhibition on marriage culture within the Guanyin Hall. On auspicious dates such as May 20 or the Qixi Festival, the courtyard comes alive with traditional wedding customs, lantern riddles and the pasting of “囍” characters,

infusing the occasion with cultural charm. Many couples arrive in *hanfu* attire, and beneath carved beams and painted eaves, accompanied by classical melodies, they receive their marriage certificates in a ceremony both solemn and tender. Nestled beside Jingshan Park, the Sanyanjing area is a dense network of courtyards whose residents, many of them elderly Beijingers whose families have lived here for generations, hold deep emotional ties to these hutongs. After careful restoration, the historic dwellings have been revitalised with modern amenities.

The infusion of culture has lent the Sanyanjing area a poetic elegance all its own. Carved modestly at the hutong entrance, five simple characters “hutong mei shu guan” (“Hutong Art Gallery”) extend a quiet invitation into this realm reawakened by craftsmanship and time.

In Beijing’s historic neighbourhoods, history has never receded and the future is quietly taking root. Embracing a renewed spirit, this ancient capital blossoms with ever more captivating grace at the convergence of past and present, where every resident feels the warmth of the old city and every visitor can read the stories woven into its streets and courtyards.



▼ The White Dagoba Temple Historic Conservation Area



▲ A couple poses for a moment at the Huguo Guanyin Temple

▼ Sanyanjing Hutong



Architectural Legacies along Historic Streets and Hutongs

Text by Zhang Jian

Photos by Tong Tianyi, Hu Fei, [United States] Jay Brousseau, Zhang Baoqi, Li Xiaoyin, Zhao Shuhua, [Pakistan] Muhammad Jahangir Khan

Beijing is a city best explored on foot.

The capital's historic conservation areas form an intricate, criss-crossing network distributed across the city, each possessing a unique identity. Whilst some exude an air of gravitas and grandeur, others are defined by their vibrant everyday vitality. Together, however, they chronicle the evolution of this illustrious cultural capital as it has navigated the shifting tides of history. Within these historic conservation areas, the centuries-old architecture stands as the most steadfast witness to this ongoing narrative.



▲ Guozijian (Imperial College)

Enduring Cultural Heritage

Found within the Andingmen area of Dongcheng District, Guozijian Street measures less than 600 metres (m) in length, yet commands an exceptional standing among the capital's historic conservation areas. As the only street in Beijing to preserve the traditional archway architectural style along its entire length, the route is officially recognised as a protected cultural relic.

This street owes its origins to the establishment of the Confucian Temple and the Guozijian during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). In 1287, Kublai Khan (Emperor Shizu, reign: 1260–1294) decreed the founding of Guozixue, the precursor to the Imperial College, near Chongren Gate (now Dongzhimen) in Yuan Dadu. The emperor appointed officials bearing titles such as Jijiu and Siye to oversee 100 students, with all provisions and academic materials provided by the court. In establishing this premier national centre of learning, the

dynasty laid the cultural and educational foundations upon which Guozijian Street as we know it today was built.

Construction of the Confucian Temple began in 1302, reaching completion four years later to the west of the Guozixue, establishing the classic Chinese architectural layout of “temple-school integration.” By situating the sanctified space for Confucian rites to the left and the supreme national academy to the right, a natural thoroughfare took shape along their southern perimeter. The street soon became the primary route for scholars and officials moving between these two vital institutions.

Initially, the street had no formal designation. It was not until the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1735–1796) of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) that imperial authorities designated it as “Chengxian Street,” a name intended to reflect the aspiration of drawing scholars from across the nation. Subsequently, in 1965, a comprehensive review of street and hutong nomenclature led to the road being



▲ A statue of Confucius

renamed Guozijian Street, better reflecting the area's prominent historical character.

Since its completion during the Yuan Dynasty, the Confucian Temple has stood as the street's most solemn and enduring landmark. In 1473, Emperor Xianzong (reign: 1464–1487) of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) ordered a grand expansion of the complex, with records of this restoration preserved on site to this day. The temple's Dacheng Hall houses a celebrated plaque bestowed by Emperor Kangxi (reign: 1661–1722) of the Qing Dynasty, honouring Confucius as the “Model Teacher for All Ages.” Set among imperial calligraphy on all sides, these artefacts offer vivid testimony to the profound reverence accorded to Confucianism across dynastic history. At once calligraphic masterpieces and historical documents, they speak to the immense weight placed upon state memorial ceremonies and the deep, abiding influence of Confucian teaching at the heart of the imperial capital.

The Confucian Temple embodies the profound reverence accorded to Confucius, while the adjacent Guozijian served as the nation's paramount centre of higher learning across three dynasties, establishing itself as an aspirational spiritual beacon for scholars throughout the realm.

Constructed in 1783, Biyong Hall stands as the centrepiece of the Guozijian. Designed for imperial lectures, this 34-m-tall square wooden pavilion is encircled by water, its yellow glazed tiles and gilded multi-angled roof reflecting the ancient cosmological belief in a “round sky and square earth” and reinforcing the strict ritual hierarchies of the court. The interior boasts a column-free dome and “golden brick” flooring, crafted from quality clay and adorned with exquisite dragon and flame motifs representing the era's highest decorative standard. Today, the hall retains its original white marble railings and circular moat, alongside inscriptions by Emperors Qianlong, Daoguang (reign: 1820–1850) and Xianfeng (reign: 1850–1861). It endures as

a profound architectural testament to the grandeur of China's imperial educational legacy, embodying the fusion of scholarly tradition and sovereign authority.

In 1785, Emperor Qianlong delivered his inaugural lecture at Biyong Hall, an event celebrated as the grandest in Guozijian's history. On the day of the ceremony, he addressed an audience of over 3,000 officials and students gathered within the hall and spilling into the adjacent courtyards, stretching all the way to Chengxian Street. Envoys from Korea, Annam and other tributary states were in attendance, lending the occasion considerable diplomatic weight. The lecture affirmed both the emperor's personal commitment to education and the Qing court's deep reverence for Confucian tradition, cementing the street's standing as a hub of cultural exchange. Though Qianlong lectured here on several occasions, this inaugural event remains the most celebrated.

In 1905, the 31st year of Emperor Guangxu's reign (1875–1908), the Qing court officially abolished the imperial examination system, bringing to a close Guozijian's centuries-long role as the nation's foremost institution of higher learning. It was subsequently repurposed

as the Department of Learning, transitioning from its former eminence while continuing to serve an educational function. Though no longer the pinnacle of academic life, it maintained its legacy in fostering the development of education.

Over the years, the area has undergone numerous preservation efforts. In 1984, Guozijian Street was designated a municipal-level cultural relic protection site, and around 2006, a major restoration initiative was launched focusing on the conservation of its ancient architecture. More recently, motor vehicles have been prohibited from parking along the street, allowing the bluestone pavement to remain free from the wear of traffic.

Flanking the street on either side, the Confucian Temple and the Guozijian stand as a timeless anchor connecting this historic corridor to the city's cultural identity across more than seven centuries. The archway inscribed with “Chengxian” carries with it the faint echoes of scholarly ambition and imperial examinations from ages long past. Stepping eastward beneath this gateway, visitors sense a gradual but unmistakable shift in atmosphere, as the solemnity of ritual and learning gives way to the drifting scent of incense. Here begins another storied

▼ A ceremony at the Confucian Temple in Beijing





▲ A copper lion statue at Yonghegong Lama Temple



▲ Tourists take a selfie at a Laba porridge event at Yonghegong Lama Temple

thoroughfare, Yonghegong Street, leading towards the venerable grounds of the Lama Temple.

The Symbiosis of Diverse Cultures

Today, Yonghegong Street is best known as the final approach to the celebrated Yonghegong Lama Temple, serving as the primary pathway for tourists and pilgrims alike as they make their way to this renowned Tibetan Buddhist sanctuary.

During the Ming Dynasty, however, the site served as an official residence for eunuchs. In 1694, Emperor Kangxi granted the property to his fourth son, Yinzhen, who constructed a mansion known as Beile Zhen's Residence. When Yinzhen was elevated to Prince Yong, the estate was expanded into a grand, formally laid-out princely compound. In 1722, Yinzhen ascended the throne as Emperor Yongzheng (reign: 1722–1735) and, upon moving to the Forbidden City, converted his former home into a temporary palace, naming it Yonghe Palace. The complex also holds distinction as the birthplace of his successor, Emperor Qianlong, who revered the location as "a truly blessed place for the future emperor

and for the Buddha to be enshrined forever." Woven into the lives of two emperors, the site stands as a place of profound imperial memory and one of Beijing's most significant architectural legacies.

Upon ascending the throne, Emperor Qianlong enshrined the coffin of his father, Yongzheng, in the prince's former bedchamber for the memorial service. He then renovated the halls with imperial yellow tiles and vermilion walls, elevating the former private mansion to a venue of comparable grandeur and ceremonial weight to the Forbidden City itself.

In 1744, Emperor Qianlong transformed Yonghegong into a Tibetan Buddhist temple, a deliberate move to promote ethnic unity, stabilise border regions and strengthen ties between the central government and outlying territories through cultural and religious exchange.

A visit to Yonghegong Lama Temple immerses visitors in a living legacy of cultural exchange and integration. The temple complex originally comprised eastern, central and western sections, its architecture blending Han, Mongol, Tibetan and Manchu styles in masterly fashion. The eastern sector housed the East Academy, a courtyard-style academic

building, while to the south stood barracks-style structures of blue brick and tiled roof serving as living quarters for lamas and students. Most strikingly, the western section was originally dedicated to Guan Yu, the Martial Sage revered in Confucianism, as a guardian deity, a remarkable symbol of cultural integration within a Tibetan Buddhist temple.

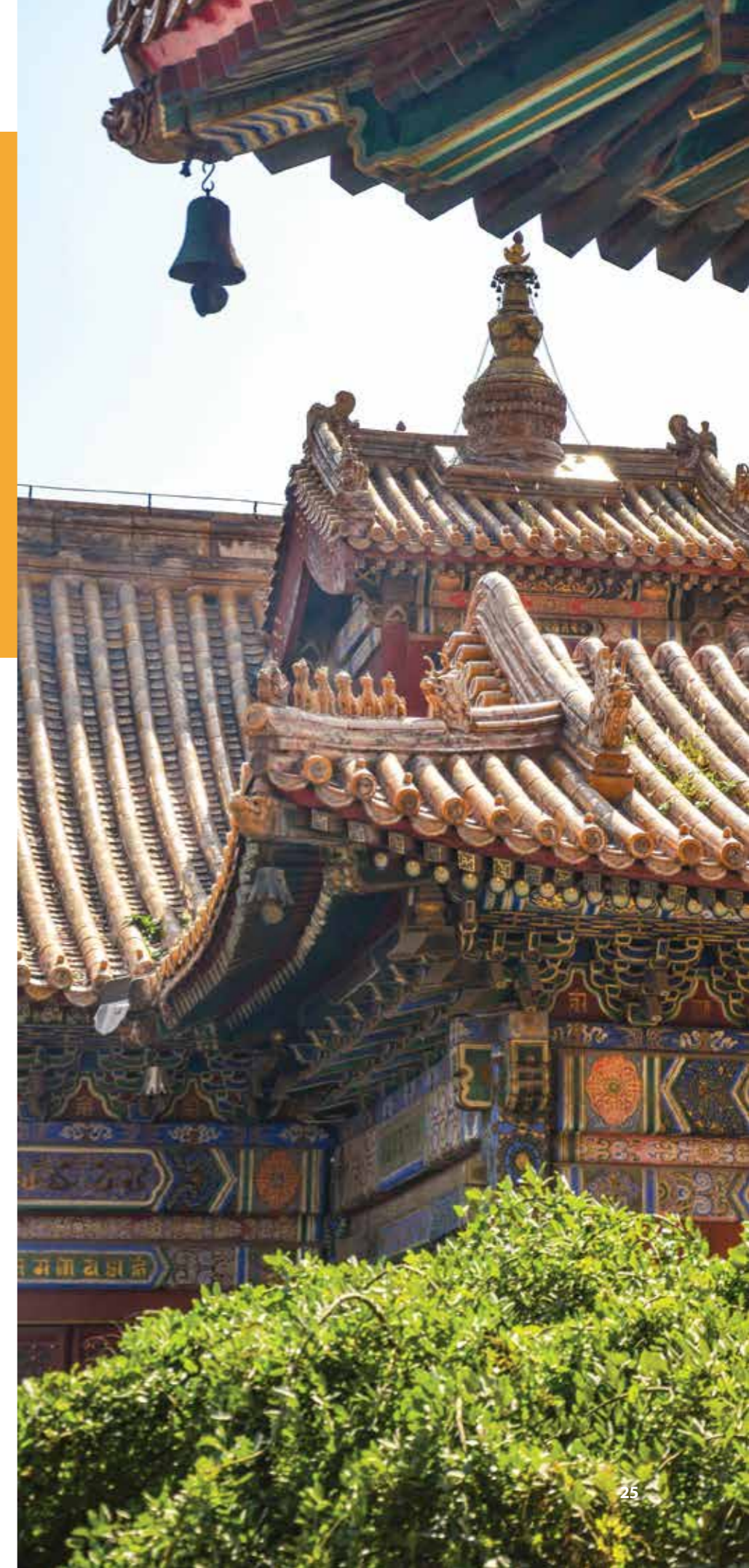
Today, only the buildings along the central section survive as the temple's main structure, comprising five principal halls and seven courtyards. The entrance is marked by three parallel archways, each standing over 10 m tall, beyond which a brick-paved path leads north to the Zhaotai Gate, flanked by Bell and Drum towers. Further inside lies the Heavenly Kings Hall (Yonghe Gate), a five-bay structure housing a statue of the Maitreya Buddha, commonly known as the Laughing Buddha, and the Four Heavenly Kings, with an Imperial Stele Pavilion standing directly behind it. At the heart of the temple is the Great Buddha Hall, enshrining the Buddhas of Three Periods, its walls lined with the Eighteen Arhats rendered in dynamic, lifelike poses that lend the hall a powerful spiritual grandeur.

Wanfu Pavilion houses a towering

statue of Maitreya Buddha carved from a single white sandalwood log, with the pavilion itself built around the pre-erected figure. Flanked by the Yongkang and Yansui Pavilions and interconnected by elevated corridors, the complex forms a distinctive pen-rack structure, a masterly example of traditional Chinese timber architecture.

In 1961, Yonghegong Lama Temple was designated a National Key Cultural Relic Protection Unit. Following its reopening in the 1980s, it reclaimed its standing as one of Beijing's most revered destinations for blessings and spiritual devotion.

Yonghegong Street stretches south from Beixinqiao to the North Second Ring Road, pulsing with authentic local life and linking historic hutongs such as Beixinqiao Toutiao and the celebrated Guozhijian Street. A walk along this kilometre-long avenue reveals a living architectural chronicle: Ming and Qing courtyard residences, traditional shopfronts and early 20th-century buildings stand companionably side by side, their layered eras lending the street its unique and evolving character. Legendary establishments such as Yong'an Hall Pharmacy, once a rival to Tongrentang in fame, and Tongrisheng, Beijing's last state-run grain store, anchor the area in deep



historical continuity. More than a mere approach to the temple, Yonghegong Street is a true neighbourhood where history and the rhythms of daily life merge seamlessly.

Heading west from the temple, the dense streets and crimson walls give way to expansive waterways and sprawling hutongs.

This is Shichahai.

A Legendary Qing Imperial Mansion

Since the Yuan Dynasty, Shichahai—comprising Qianhai, Houhai and Xihai—has served as a vital hub for Grand Canal trade. Southern cargo ships laden with grain, silk and regional goods once moored here, transforming the area into a bustling commercial centre. Though canal transport eventually declined, the waterways, docks and surrounding streets have been preserved, forming a distinctive historic waterside quarter at the heart of modern Beijing.

Prince Kung's Mansion, Beijing's largest and best-preserved Qing imperial

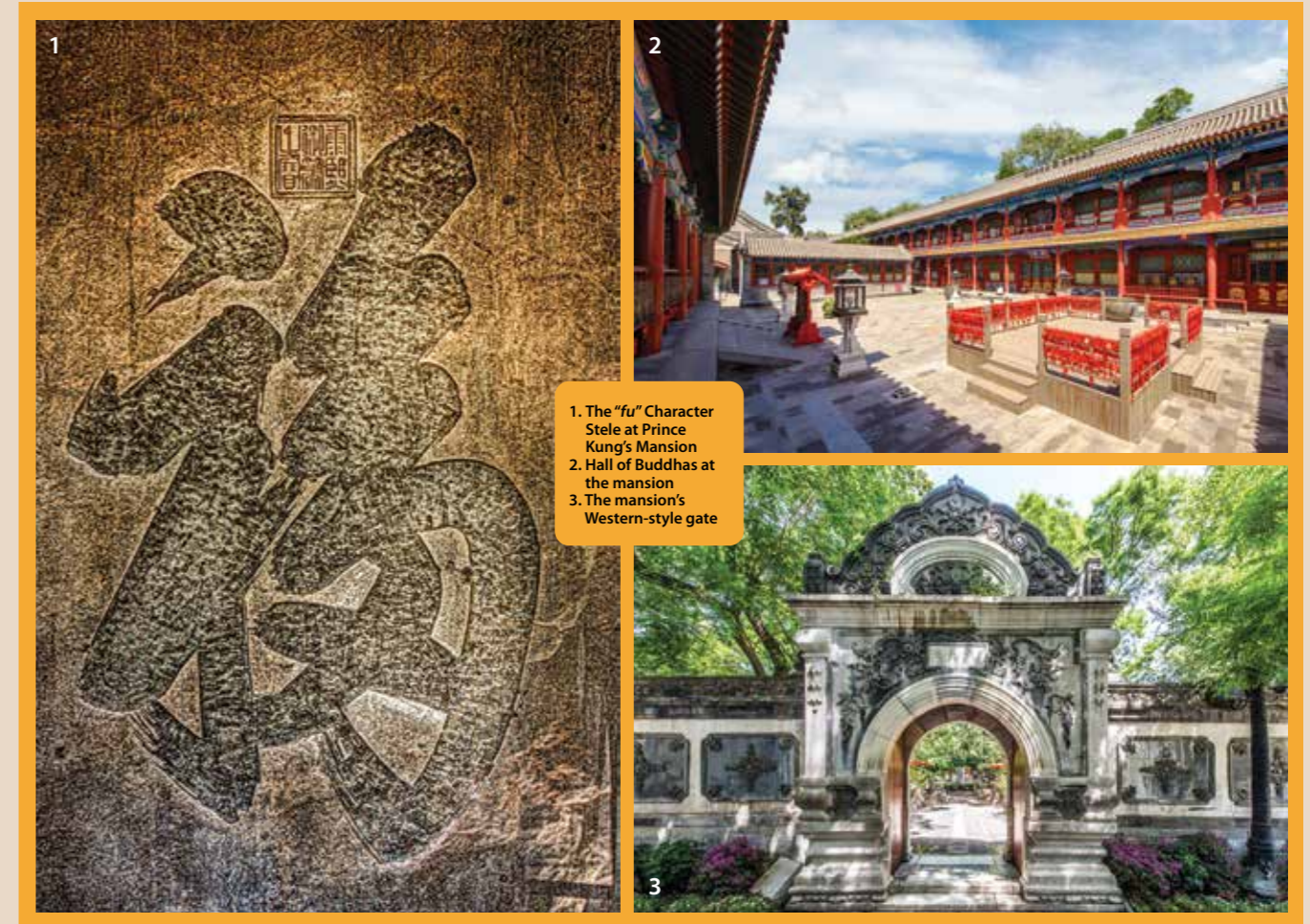
estate, stands along Qianhai West Street. The waterfront complex comprises southern living quarters and a northern garden, and was designated a national key cultural relic protection unit in 1982. It offers invaluable insight into the lifestyle of Qing nobility and the architectural conventions of the imperial mansion.

Commissioned in 1777, the 41st year of the Qianlong Emperor's reign, Prince Kung's Mansion was initially established as the residence of the imperial official Heshen (1750–1799). Wielding vast influence at court, Heshen embarked on an ambitious construction project that saw his estate exceed the scale and ornamentation typically permitted for non-imperial residences. Upon completion, the complex was organised into three distinct parts: a central ceremonial zone flanked by eastern and western residential wings, a layout that largely corresponds to what visitors see today. Crossing the main threshold, one arrives at the Yin'an Hall, the most significant structure along the central axis. Although the original building was

destroyed by fire in the early Republic of China (1912–1949) period, the present structure is a faithful reconstruction based on archaeological evidence and historical records, offering modern visitors a vivid impression of its former grandeur.

The structures in the western quarter are celebrated for their opulent architectural character. Notable among them is the Xijin Studio, a dwelling of particular lavishness, famed above all for its interior eaves clad in fine *nanmu* (*Phoebe zhennan*) timber. Its intricately carved partitions and lattice windows create a series of nested spaces, producing a design described as “a large room enclosing smaller rooms.” As this style of ornamentation was traditionally reserved for the imperial household, its presence in Heshen's private residence formed one of the formal accusations levelled against him at the time of his downfall.

At the northern extremity of the three zones stands the Rear Building, a structure extending over 160 m that marks the boundary between the living quarters and the garden. Containing more



1. The “fu” Character Stele at Prince Kung's Mansion
2. Hall of Buddhas at the mansion
3. The mansion's Western-style gate

▼ Shichahai at night



than 100 rooms and featuring scores of uniquely shaped fanlight windows, it is popularly known as “99-and-a-half rooms.” Folklore holds that this was once Heshen's vault, with each distinct window design representing a different category of stored treasure. Though these tales lack historical corroboration, they lend the estate a satisfying air of myth and intrigue.

In 1852, the estate passed into the ownership of Prince Kung (Yixin). A prominent political figure of the late Qing Dynasty, Yixin led a career marked by dramatic reversals of fortune.

Covering 27,000 square metres, the garden at Prince Kung's Mansion presents a harmonious blend of Southern Yangtze landscaping, Northern Chinese architectural planning and Western structural elements. The design of the grand theatre stage is particularly refined, with the forward section using

a minimal number of columns to support the elaborate roof frame and transverse beams, thereby maximising the performance area.

Throughout the mansion, the theme of “fu,” representing good fortune, pervades every corner of the garden. In traditional Chinese thought, the concept transcends mere wealth, status and vitality, encompassing aspirations for familial prosperity and a deeply fulfilling existence. The mansion weaves these benedictions into almost every feature. Because the Chinese word for “bat” is a homophone for “good fortune,” the creature has long served as an emblem of joy and auspiciousness, and bat motifs appear throughout the ornamentation, from painted beams and lintels to the intricate woodwork of window lattices, each one a harbinger of enduring prosperity. The estate's pond, widely known as the “Pool of

Good Fortune,” is shaped like a gold ingot to signify abundance and affluence. The most celebrated feature of the grounds, however, is a stone stele tucked within a rockery grotto, bearing an inscription of the “fu” character in the hand of Emperor Kangxi. Rendered in bold, vigorous calligraphy, it is widely acclaimed as the pre-eminent “fu” in the world, its specific form said to symbolise “many children, fields, talent and longevity.” For this reason, the estate transcends the status of a mere imperial architectural complex, serving instead as a living scroll of stone and timber, imbued throughout with auspicious symbolism.

Heading west out of the Shichahai, travellers encounter a network of parallel hutongs and tightly packed courtyards arranged in the orderly fashion of an ancient chessboard.

This is Xisi.

Vibrant Urban Daily Life in Hutongs

Xisi Hutong extends from Fuchengmennei Street in the south to Ping'anli West Street in the north, and from Zhao Dengyu Road in the west to Xisi North Street in the east. Within this historic conservation area, eight east-west hutongs run in parallel from south to north, sequentially designated Xisibei Toutiao ("North Alley No. 1 of Xisi") through to Xisibei Batiao ("North Alley No. 8 of Xisi"). These grey-walled alleys represent the deep roots of old Beijing, preserving the alley plan of Yuan Dadu alongside the distinctive clusters of quadrangle courtyards characteristic of the Ming and Qing periods.

When Dadu was constructed, the entire city adhered to a unified and exacting blueprint, and the eight hutongs, with a history spanning seven centuries, were established in tandem with the development of the Yuan capital. The stretches from Xisibei Toutiao to Batiao, laid out according to this rigorous plan, have endured to the present day, making them a rare surviving reflection of Yuan Dadu's original urban design. This is precisely why the hutongs of Xisi often attract less attention than dedicated scenic or heritage sites; their significance

lies in the unbroken continuity of everyday life, and it is this enduring quality that forms the very foundation of the historic conservation area.

Wandering at a leisurely pace along Xisibei Toutiao, visitors may chance upon narrow side lanes running north to south. One such passage is Yaojia Hutong, an unassuming alley that nonetheless holds a deep connection to the history of modern Chinese scholarship. Within it once stood a courtyard serving as the later-life residence of Chen Sanli (1853–1937), a poet of the late Qing dynasty, where his son, the eminent historian Chen Yinke (1890–1969), also resided there briefly.

Chen Sanli, a central figure of the Tongguang School of poetry, was celebrated as "China's last classical poet." In 1934, then over the age of 80, he left his former home to settle in Beijing with his son Chen Yinke, who was at the time a lecturer at Tsinghua University. Chen Yinke arranged for Courtyard No. 3 in Yaojia Hutong to be rented for his father's use, with Chen Sanli taking the main bedroom on the eastern side of the principal hall. During the working week, Chen Yinke and his family remained in university housing, but returned to the hutong each weekend and holiday to spend time with his father, staying in the smaller eastern courtyard.

Xisibei Santiao was formerly known



▲ The "fu" character calligraphy and part of a couplet on a courtyard gate in Xisibei Toutiao

as Baozi Hutong, and Courtyard No. 39 within it served as the former residence of the celebrated Peking Opera artist Cheng Yanqiu (1904–1958). In 1938, Cheng acquired the property and, following minor renovations, made it his home until his death. The persimmon trees in the courtyard were planted by Cheng Yanqiu and his family, and beneath the southern eaves a neatly arranged collection of stone gate steps and aged roof tiles, gathered by Cheng and his sons, can still be seen today.

Nestled among Xisibei Santiao, Sitiao and Wutiao lie the historic grounds once occupied by a Banner School and ancestral halls. Towards the close of the Qing Dynasty, the Eight Banners Official School was relocated to this area and gradually transformed into a modern educational institution, establishing a tradition of scholarship that has endured for well over a century.

Tucked away in historical records, Xisibei Sitiao was originally named Shupi Hutong after a leather workshop that once



▲ Xisibei Sitiao Primary School (Jingshi Primary School Affiliated to Beijing Normal University)

operated there, before acquiring the rather less appealing designation of Choupi Hutong, meaning "Unpleasant Smell Alley," and later being renamed Shoubi Hutong during the Republic of China period. In 1883, the ninth year of Emperor Guangxu's reign, the Plain Red Banner Official School was relocated to the vicinity of Baozi Hutong, eventually evolving into the Eight Banners Higher Primary School. A branch campus established in Shoubi Hutong in 1905 was subsequently renamed the Fourth Public Primary School of the Capital. Through many changes of name and circumstance, the site has maintained an unbroken tradition of education.

Shoubi Hutong once housed memorial halls honouring Wu Luzhen (1880–1911) and Cai E (1882–1916), and the celebrated painter Qi Baishi (1864–1957), together with Ji Kanyi (1877–1953), a descendant of the Qing dynasty scholar Ji Xiaolan (1724–1805), also co-founded a private primary school within the hutong. In 1950, this institution became the First Affiliated Primary School of Beijing Normal School, and in 1972

it was renamed Xisibei Sitiao Primary School. Today, the school spans Xisibei Santiao, Sitiao and Wutiao, still occupying traditional courtyard buildings.

A short distance north, in Xisibei Wutiao, lies a courtyard with a particularly storied past. During the late Qing Dynasty, the warlord Zhang Zongchang (1881–1932) acquired a residence on this site, which following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, became a cradle of film education, nurturing the nation's first generation of cinematic talent.

Over the years, these courtyards have served many purposes, from grand residences to educational institutions and back to private homes, yet the structures themselves have endured. They stand as timeless vessels, preserving within their walls the layered stories of many eras.

Strolling between Xisibei Toutiao and Batiao, visitors will notice that this area lacks the bustling energy of Nanluoguxiang or the open expanses of Shichahai, maintaining instead a quiet, understated character that preserves

“ Nestled in Xisibei Sitiao, Xisibei Sitiao Primary School is Beijing's oldest hutong primary school, still operating from within a traditional courtyard complex where the sounds of children's laughter and recitations echo among the blue brick, grey-tiled buildings. ”



▼ Brick-carved decorations on the main gate lintel of a courtyard in Xisibei Santiao



more of the authentic rhythm of daily life. Many courtyards retain their traditional layout, with gate towers and screen walls appearing unexpectedly along the lanes, not as museum exhibits but as living spaces still in active use.

Wandering through Xisi is to journey back through time. The urban layout of the Yuan Dynasty, the courtyard homes of the Ming and Qing periods, the schools established during the Republic of China period and the communities that took shape after the founding of the People's Republic of China all coexist within the same space.

Strolling through Beijing's ancient neighbourhoods, history reveals itself in layers, along streets and hutongs and behind courtyard doors. Some residents have lived here for generations; others merely pass through. Turning from a main road into a hutong feels like stepping into the past, where history suddenly feels close enough to touch.

Strolling Beijing's streets and hutongs, visitors traverse not just space but time itself, witnessing the city's cultural legacy endure with quiet and abiding grace.



Guildhalls and Luminaries' Residences in Beijing

Text by Gao Yuan | Photos by Zhang Xin, He Rong, Hu Shengli, Zhao Shuhua

Beijing's historic and cultural districts embody the profound heritage of this millennia-old capital. These neighbourhoods not only bear witness to the city's illustrious past but also preserve a wealth of cultural resources. Guildhalls that once echoed with homesickness and regional dialects along bustling alleys have now been transformed into vibrant performance venues, bringing renewed vitality to tradition-rich neighbourhoods. Tucked deep within the alleyways, the former residences of notable figures and hutong-themed museums breathe new life into historical memory, drawing younger visitors eager to explore and capture photo-worthy moments. Revitalised through careful preservation and thoughtful renewal, these treasured sites stand as living testaments to the enduring continuity of Beijing's cultural heritage and its evolving urban landscape.



▲ ①②③④ Various activities at guildhalls

Cultural Experiences and Trends in Diversity

As one of the neighbourhoods most emblematic of authentic Beijing culture, the Dashilan commercial area of Qianmen Street has long been a vibrant hub in the capital. During the Spring Festival in this Year of the Horse, this historic district once again captivated visitors with its lively celebrations.

Drawing on five historic guildhalls—Yanliao, Wuhu, Huanggang, Shaozhou and Dehua—the Guildhall Grand Reopening Spring Festival Intangible Cultural Heritage event transformed each courtyard into a distinctive cultural setting. Through imaginative staging, visitors explored intangible cultural heritage in lively, interactive ways, with every guildhall revealing its own atmosphere, like opening a series of cultural treasure boxes.

During the seven-day festival, visitors carried exclusive stamp-collecting booklets as they travelled between the guildhalls, unlocking a series of cultural “treasure boxes” through interactive experiences. Yanliao Guildhall presented the theme “Radiant Hues,” celebrating Eastern colour aesthetics through intangible cultural heritage crafts such as Nantong homespun

fabric weaving, Ruichang bamboo weaving from Jiangxi, Yellow River clay sculptures, Lu School inner painting and cloisonné enamelware. Wuhu Guildhall adopted the theme “Harvest,” bringing together cultural and creative goods and time-honoured delicacies like Daoxiangcun pastries, alongside lively games that immersed visitors in the festive spirit of abundance. Huanggang Guildhall focused on “Wellness,” highlighting traditional health culture through classical incense blends and herbal teas, while riddle-guessing activities transformed knowledge of Chinese medicinal herbs into playful discovery. Shaozhou Guildhall centred on auspicious blessings, inviting visitors to touch dancing lion heads and hang plaques of good fortune. Dehua Guildhall celebrated the aesthetics of craftsmanship, displaying Jingcai porcelain and ethnic minority woven works that reflected remarkable artisanal skill.

From handcrafted artistry to culinary delights, the guildhall cluster in Dashilan has offered residents and visitors a cultural experience that is “visible, tangible and portable,” bringing renewed vitality to historic neighbourhoods through creative approaches while filling the old streets with a warm, festive spirit.

Beijing is often regarded as the capital

of guildhalls. Guildhall culture, an integral part of the city’s historical heritage, forms a living tapestry of regional identities woven into the urban fabric. Since the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, scholars, officials and merchants from across China established “hometown enclaves” within Beijing’s alleyways. These spaces served as way stations for candidates taking the imperial examinations, meeting halls for merchant associations and cultural refuges where dialects and shared memories were preserved. Over the centuries, they evolved into vibrant crossroads where diverse regional traditions met and flourished—a vivid testament to the ancient capital’s inclusive spirit and enduring cultural diversity.

Tucked deep within Qingyun Hutong beside the Sanli River in Qianmen lies the 400-year-old Yanliao Guildhall. Once a gathering place where Shanxi merchants trading in pigments and tung oil convened to discuss business, reminisce and enjoy opera, it now resonates with refined melodies. It is a rare haven of tranquillity and elegance amid the bustling Dashilan historic and cultural district.

Built during the Ming Dynasty, Yanliao Guildhall is one of Beijing’s oldest surviving commercial guildhalls. In recent years, following careful restoration and

revitalisation, it has been recognised as a “Beijing Performing Arts New Space” and a “Beijing Cultural Tourism Experience Base.” With its diverse programme of performances, it has also become a popular photo-worthy destination among younger visitors and online influencers.

Every week, a variety of performances are presented here on a regular schedule, reliably drawing devoted audiences. Since 2021, Yanliao Guildhall has hosted more than 400 shows, including Kunqu Opera, Pingju Opera, Hebei *bangzi*, Quju Opera, Yueju Opera, folk arts, acrobatics, crosstalk and stage plays. While continuing to stage classic repertoire, the venue has also introduced immersive productions, winning favour among younger audiences through its innovative approach of “integrating drama into the setting and blending performance with environment.”

Beyond the stage, visitors can savour speciality dishes and enjoy quiet moments of reading in this refined and tranquil retreat. At Yue He Yan, a contemporary Beijing-style restaurant in the second courtyard, popular tea snacks such as “Pigment Flow-Sand Cake” and “Sanli River Koi” creatively incorporate the guildhall’s history and the surrounding scenic charm into edible art. In the third courtyard, Luolan Book Store hosts intangible cultural

heritage activities such as ink rubbing and traditional architectural painting, transforming the space into a multifaceted cultural destination.

Not far from Yanliao Guildhall, Linfen Guildhall presents a distinctly different character. As Beijing’s first guildhall-themed exhibition hall, it offers a comprehensive overview of the city’s guildhall history—covering their origins, architectural features, imperial examination culture and opera traditions—while also highlighting successful conservation efforts and innovative reuse practices. Owing to its more intimate performance space, Linfen Guildhall specialises in “small yet refined” shows, such as monkey opera, comedic sketches and face-changing performances.

Emphasising distinct character through adaptive reuse and adopting a “one-guildhall-one-approach” strategy has become a guiding principle in Beijing’s revitalisation of historic guildhall sites, infusing traditional neighbourhoods with a more contemporary and diverse cultural appeal.

Revival of Elegant Traditional Opera after a Century

Guildhalls have long been places “filled with opera.” Since their establishment,

theatrical performances have been central to their function, providing fertile ground for the flourishing of Peking Opera. Many guildhalls in Beijing once featured elaborately decorated opera theatres with carved beams, painted pillars, whitewashed walls and colourful stage settings. Among them, the theatres of Huguang Guildhall, Anhui Guildhall, Yangping Guildhall and Zhengyici Temple (the Zhejiang Yinhao Guildhall) were especially renowned, collectively known as the “Four Great Guildhall Theatres.” Today, these historic stages continue to host a series of refined, intimate performances that are small in scale yet rich in artistry and charm.

At the southwest corner of the Hufangqiao intersection stands Beijing’s Huguang Guildhall, a graceful historic complex of grey bricks and dark-tiled roofs.

In the past, this site served as a gathering place for scholars and merchants from Hunan and Hubei provinces travelling to Beijing. Today, it functions as a key venue in Beijing’s cultural initiative “Guildhalls with Traditional Opera.” It has been designated as Beijing’s 100th museum: the Beijing Opera Museum.

For more than two centuries, Huguang Guildhall has borne witness to many pivotal moments of social transformation. It hosted the 60th birthday celebration of



▲ Huguang Guildhall

▼ Foreign tourists visit Huguang Guildhall



Note: Piaofang

Piaofang (literally “ticket room”) refers to a gathering place where Peking Opera enthusiasts rehearse, perform and pass on the art form. When Huguang Guildhall reopened in 1996 after years of dormancy, the *piaofang* was revived as well. Since then, it has been jointly run by professional actors and dedicated amateurs, and to date has staged more than 1,000 performances.

the late Qing statesman Zeng Guofan (1811–1872); served as a meeting place for progressive figures during the Hundred Days’ Reform and the May Fourth Movement; and was the venue where Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) presided over the founding assembly of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party). Peking Opera masters such as Tan Xinpei (1847–1917), Yu Shuyan (1890–1943) and Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) also performed here.

In February 2024, after its fifth major renovation in two centuries, Huguang Guildhall reopened to the public.

Amid the lingering echoes of the ancient theatre and along the winding corridors of the guildhall, vivid scenes of Beijing-style cultural life unfold. Children encounter the vibrant colours of Peking Opera masks for the first time in intangible cultural heritage workshops; domestic and international visitors journey through historical mists in the immersive musical *Till We Meet Again*; young people appreciate contemporary aesthetics at the “Dian Jiang Chun” teahouse; and local opera enthusiasts find kindred spirits and a sense of belonging in the “Geng Yang Ji” amateur performance salon.

This year, Huguang Guildhall unveiled its “Huguang Cultural Performance Hub” initiative, marking another milestone in the revival of this century-old venue. At the core of the plan is a reimagining of the functions and cultural value

of its “Three Towers and One Hall,” with the aim of seamlessly integrating exhibitions, performances, learning, dining and shopping into a cohesive cultural journey.

Just over a kilometre from Huguang Guildhall stands the former Yin hao Guildhall, better known by its more familiar name, Zhengyici Temple.

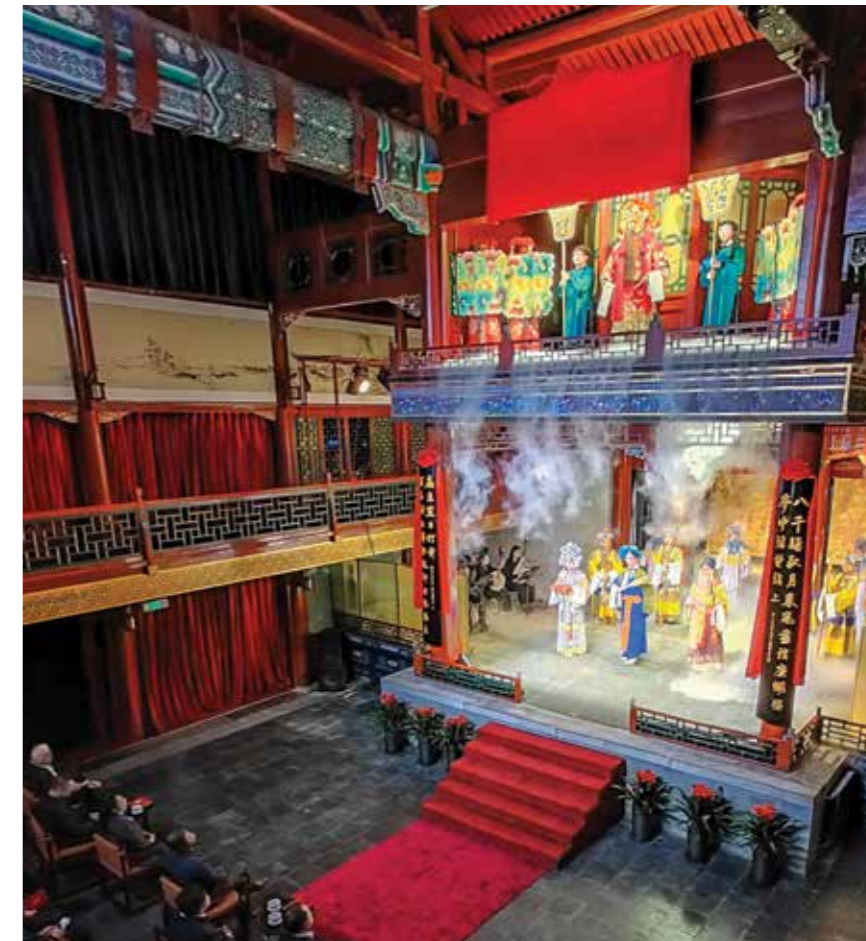
Zhengyici Temple is the oldest and one of the best-preserved all-wooden opera houses in China, long hailed as a “living fossil of Chinese theatre architecture.” Today, revitalised under Beijing’s “Guildhalls with Traditional Opera” cultural initiative, it has regained its vitality and stands as one of the city’s most distinguished cultural landmarks.

This predominantly wooden structure is believed to have originated as an ancient temple dating back to the Ming Dynasty, later rebuilt as a theatre during the Kangxi era (1662–1722) of the Qing Dynasty. At that time, Zhejiang merchants conducting business in Beijing pooled their funds to purchase the site and renamed it “Yin hao Guildhall” (“Bankers’ Guildhall”). While most theatres in Beijing were clustered around the Qianmen area and were generally modest in scale, Zhengyici Temple Theatre stood out for its imposing size and distinctive architectural design.

In its heyday, legendary Peking Opera masters such as Cheng Changgeng (1811–1880), Mei Qiaoling (1842–1882), Lu Shengkui (1822–1889), Yang Xiaolou (1878–1938) and Mei Lanfang all graced the stage of Zhengyici Temple Theatre. On September 11, 1919, the renowned performer Yu Shuyan hosted a private banquet and performance there to celebrate his mother’s birthday.

Attending a performance at Zhengyici Temple Theatre was once among the most fashionable cultural entertainments in Beijing, and it remains so today. Following a comprehensive restoration, the theatre celebrated its grand reopening in April 2022 and has since regained much of its former splendour. This 300-year-old theatre has been revitalised as a dynamic new stage where audiences can experience exceptional performances.

The restoration and upgrade provided



▲ Zhengyici Temple Theatre

the essential physical foundation for the “rebirth” of Zhengyici Temple Theatre, while the establishment of the Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre has ensured a steady stream of high-quality, sustainable performances. The production *The World Is Blessed* was specially created for this historic venue—preserving the aesthetic spirit of Kunqu Opera while reinterpreting it through contemporary sensibilities and the theatre’s classical atmosphere. With lyrical melodies enhanced by atmospheric lighting, mist effects and refined stage design, the performance offers audiences a deeply immersive experience rich in historical resonance.

Among Beijing’s many guildhalls, Anhui Guildhall stands out for both its remarkable origins and impressive scale. Construction began in February 1868, in the seventh year of the Tongzhi era (1862–1874), on the west side of what is

now Liulichang Cultural Street. The project lasted three years and was completed in August 1871, giving rise to the grand Anhui Guildhall—hailed as the “Premier Guildhall of the Capital.” The undertaking was spearheaded by Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), a native of Feidong County in Anhui and one of the “Four Great Ministers” of the late Qing Dynasty.

Upon completion, Anhui Guildhall set a new standard of grandeur, surpassing all other guildhalls in the city in scale. Lavish yet refined, it was a rare example of a garden-style complex within the old city. Its theatre, renowned from the outset for staging high-calibre productions, quickly gained fame throughout the capital. Though compact and exquisitely crafted, the theatre featured three-sided balconies adorned with vermilion railings. When Anhui opera troupes such as Sanqing and Sixi entered Beijing in the late Qing



▲ Beijing Xuannan Culture Museum



▲ An immersive performance at the Beijing Xuannan Culture Museum

Dynasty, it was largely through Anhui Guildhall that they established a foothold in the city. During the Tongzhi and Guangxu (1875–1908) periods, masters such as Cheng Changgeng, Liu Gansan (1816–1894) and Tan Xinpei frequently performed there, cementing the venue’s central role in the flourishing of Peking Opera.

The meticulously restored Anhui Guildhall now stands quietly deep within the hutong, its red doors gently closed and its courtyards calm and serene.

Plays by Cultural Museums Help Visitors Experience Xuannan Culture

If one seeks the richest soil of Beijing’s ancient culture, Xuannan (the area south of Xuanwu Gate) is unrivalled. Historically, this district served as a vibrant hub where guildhalls from across the country gathered, scholars convened and traditional opera flourished, making it a dynamic centre for regional cultures and artistic exchange.

“Xuannan” is not an administrative district, yet it embodies the meaning behind the saying: “Half of Beijing’s history

lies in Xuannan.” As a cradle of the ancient capital, this area witnessed the rise of Ji City more than 3,000 years ago and later served as the foundation for Zhongdu, the capital of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) over 800 years ago.

Today, the Xuannan area extends from Xuanwu Gate to Guang’anmenwai (literally, “outside Guang’an Gate”), encompassing distinctive historic districts such as Liulichang, Fayuan Temple, Naoshikou and Nanxinhua Street. Together, these neighbourhoods form a rich cultural tapestry. For those seeking a comprehensive understanding of Xuannan’s historical roots and cultural legacy, the Beijing Xuannan Culture Museum offers an immersive, one-stop introduction.

The Beijing Xuannan Culture Museum, housed within Changchun Temple—a Ming Dynasty Buddhist monastery with more than 400 years of history—is a specialised museum devoted to the scholarly and regional heritage of the Xuannan area. In 2023, this once low-profile institution drew widespread attention with the launch of the play *Scholars of Old Xuannan*, China’s first immersive guided theatrical experience. The production quickly gained popularity

among younger audiences and sparked a growing interest in “lesser-known museums.”

Set against the broader historical backdrop of Xuannan culture, the play follows Hongsheng, a young provincial scholar who arrives in Beijing during the Guangxu era of the late Qing Dynasty to sit for the imperial examination. Upon entering the Xuannan scholarly quarter for the first time, he encounters Shi Egong, an enigmatic immortal, who leads him on a transformative journey spanning more than two decades of intellectual and moral growth. Actors portray historical figures such as Lin Zexu (1785–1850) and Tan Sitong (1865–1898), guiding the audience through real settings within the ancient Changchun Temple to vividly recreate pivotal moments including the “Gongche Shangshu” (the joint petition of imperial examination candidates to the emperor) and the Hundred Days’ Reform. For viewers, this becomes more than a performance; it is an immersive journey into history itself.

In recent years, the emergence of museum-produced plays has begun to reshape visitors’ traditional perceptions of museums, adding a fresh and engaging dimension to cultural exploration.

As museums increasingly embrace theatrical art, audiences are discovering more innovative and immersive ways to experience history and cultural heritage.

Tucked away from the bustle of Naoshikou Middle Street, deep within Wenhua Hutong, stands a quiet courtyard enclosed by grey walls and dark-tiled roofs. Inside, a solemn bronze bust of Li Dazhao (1889–1927, cofounder of the Communist Party of China) stands in dignified stillness, silently evoking the turbulent and heroic chapters of history.

Li Dazhao and his family lived in this courtyard for nearly four years, from the spring of 1920 to January 1924, making it the residence where he spent the longest period with his family outside his hometown. This modest dwelling stands as an important witness to the early spread of Marxism in China and served as the starting point for a series of pivotal revolutionary activities.

In 2023, the immersive guided theatrical production *Mr. Shouchang*—inspired by Li Dazhao’s life story and recollections from his descendants—premiered at this historic site. Audiences are no longer passive observers; instead, they step into the role of visitors calling upon “*Mr. Shouchang*,” encountering and interacting with actors portraying Li Dazhao’s family members and students within the authentic setting of his former residence, thereby experiencing firsthand



▲ The Former Residence of Li Dazhao

the rhythms of Li Dazhao’s daily life and work in this very home.

Following the actors’ footsteps, audiences embark on a carefully choreographed journey through the residence. The west wing served as both a meeting room and study, its desk neatly arranged with books Li Dazhao once read and manuscripts he had written; the north room was the modest yet orderly bedroom shared by Li Dazhao and his wife; and the east wing housed Li Baohua (1909–2005), Li Dazhao’s eldest son. Through subtle guidance and natural dialogue, the performers skilfully transform the home’s furnishings and spaces into a continuous narrative, making history

tangible, vivid and deeply relatable.

Thanks to its innovative and distinctive performance format, *Mr. Shouchang* has been enthusiastically embraced by younger audiences. Since its premiere, the production has staged more than 200 public performances and attracted over 30,000 viewers.

The Xuannan area is also home to another landmark of revolutionary culture: the *Jingbao* Office. This site was once the residence of Shao Piaoping (1884–1926), founder of *Jingbao*, a prominent progressive newspaper during the Republic of China period (1912–1949). Guided by the creed “Iron shoulders bear the cause of justice; sharp pens write with moral courage,” Shao used this very place to disseminate progressive ideas, embodying the integrity and spirit of Chinese journalism over the past century.

Inside the museum, three exhibitions—“*Jingbao* and the *Jingbao* Office,” “A Century of Red Newspapers,” and “The Life and Deeds of Shao Piaoping”—quietly recount the turbulent history of a progressive newspaper, the remarkable life of a legendary journalist and the enduring struggle and development of red journalism in China. In 2021, following comprehensive restoration and renewal, the former *Jingbao* Office reopened to the public, bringing Shao’s iconic motto “iron shoulders, sharp pen” and his extraordinary legacy more vividly into public awareness.

▼ The *Jingbao* Office



Luminaries' Former Residences in the Shichahai Area

Throughout history, Beijing's dense network of hutongs has been closely intertwined with the lives of cultural luminaries. Countless influential figures once walked these narrow alleys, leaving behind a wealth of former residences that now stand as memorial sites for remembrance and reflection.

The Shichahai area is one of the neighbourhoods most emblematic of old

▼ The Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling



▼ Children play at the Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling



Beijing, where a rich tapestry of traditional charm continues to unfold. Tucked among its winding, interconnected hutongs are numerous former residences of prominent figures, most notably the Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling and the Guo Moruo Memorial Museum.

Soong Ching-ling (1893–1981, honorary president of the People's Republic of China) lived in Beijing for more than 30 years, with her longest residence at 46 Houhai Beiyuan. She moved there in April 1963 and remained until her passing on May 29, 1981. On May 29, 1982, her former

residence was officially opened to the public as the Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling.

This site was originally the garden of the mansion of Prince Chun, Zaifeng, the last regent of the Qing Dynasty. It carries deep historical and cultural significance, reflecting both the splendour of the imperial era and the layered legacy of modern Chinese history.

For more than four decades since opening to the public, the Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling has welcomed over 8 million visitors from China and around the world. On the west side of the residence stands an exhibition hall displaying artefacts related to her life and legacy. Arranged chronologically, the exhibition—featuring photographs, personal belongings and historical documents—presents a comprehensive portrait of Soong Ching-ling's extraordinary life journey. The "Exhibition on the Life of Soong Ching-ling" has toured widely across the Chinese mainland as well as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, serving as an important window through which audiences at home and abroad can better understand her ideals, achievements and enduring spirit.

Across a lake from the Former Residence of Soong Ching-ling stands the Guo Moruo Memorial Museum. The site was originally part of the garden estate of Heshen, a powerful Qing Dynasty official during the Qianlong era (1736–1795). In 1963, it became the residence of the Chinese scholar Guo Moruo (1892–1978), who lived and worked there until his death in 1978, spending the final 15 years of his life at this address. Today, the memorial museum preserves the layout of Guo Moruo's living and working spaces much as they appeared during his lifetime. The main hall once functioned as his reception room, study and bedroom, while the east and west wings and the rear annex have been converted into exhibition galleries. These spaces host thematic displays such as "Guo Moruo's Literary World" and "Guo Moruo and Chinese Historiography," presenting a rich collection of manuscripts, books from his personal



▲ The Former Residence of Guo Moruo



▲ Tourists capture photos of the persimmon trees at Lao She Memorial

library, rubbings, correspondence and everyday household objects. Together, these exhibits offer visitors an intimate glimpse into the intellectual pursuits and daily life of one of modern China's most influential cultural figures.

The renowned Chinese writer Lao She (1899–1966) shared a deep attachment to the Shichahai area, especially the neighbourhoods around Jishuitan and Shichahai, which remained the Beijing landscape he treasured most throughout his life. Located at 19 Fengfu Hutong on

Dengshikouxi Street, the Lao She Memorial was the residence he occupied for the longest time and the place where he produced the largest body of his literary work. At the end of 1949, Lao She returned to China from the United States at the personal invitation of Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976). The following year, he used the income from his writing to purchase this modest courtyard home, which became both his refuge and his creative base for nearly two decades.

Lao She lived in 10 different residences

during his years in Beijing, and the courtyard that now houses the Lao She Memorial remains the best-preserved and most intact in its original layout. In July 1997, his widow, Hu Jieqing (1905–2001), together with their children, donated the residence along with part of the family's collection to the State. On the occasion of Lao She's 100th birthday in 1999, the memorial hall, established at the site of his former home, was officially opened to the public.

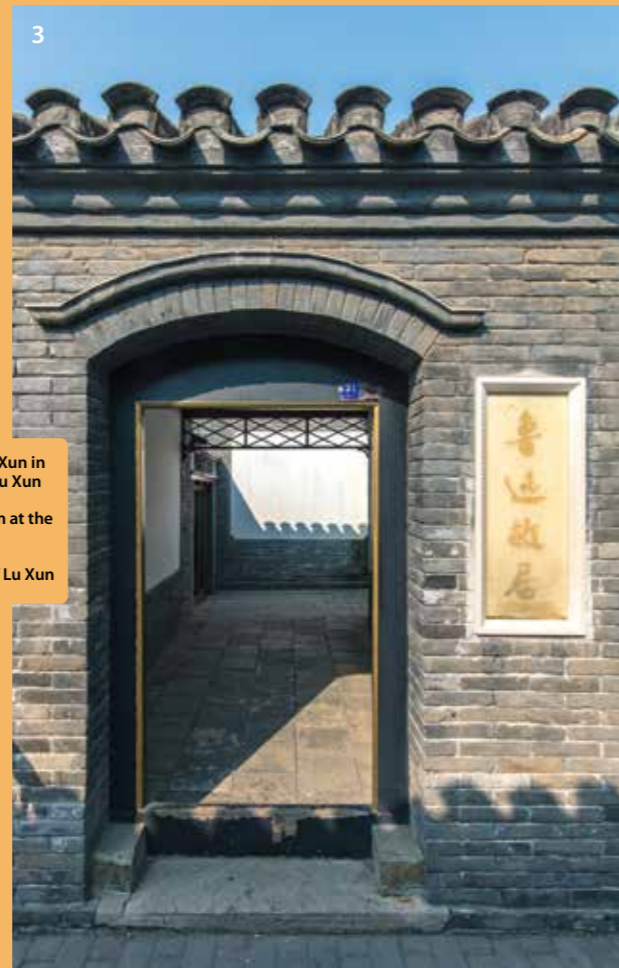
Lao She cherished this tranquil courtyard. Nestled within the heart of the city yet radiating quiet elegance, it was a true oasis of calm amid the urban bustle. Today, a bronze bust of Lao She stands in the yard beside the very fish tank where he once kept goldfish, which still glide calmly through the water. In front of the main house grow two persimmon trees that Lao She transplanted from the Western Hills, now tall and flourishing. His wife, Hu Jieqing, fondly named the courtyard "Danshi Xiaoyuan" (Crimson Persimmon Courtyard), a poetic title that later became the memorial's most beloved nickname. The east and west rooms now serve as exhibition spaces displaying photographs, manuscripts and personal objects that illuminate Lao She's life, literary achievements and lasting legacy.

Renovated Neighbourhoods Studded with Luminaries' Former Residences

Former residences of luminaries, like scattered stars, dot the hutongs and lanes of Beijing's historic core, each standing as a quiet beacon of memory, culture and enduring legacy.

Fuchengmennei Street in Beijing's Xicheng District, once praised by Lao She as the "most beautiful street" in the city, dates back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). At the western end of this historic thoroughfare, tucked within a quiet hutong, stands the former residence of Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881–1936).

This is one of four residences where



1. A bust of Lu Xun in the Beijing Lu Xun Museum
2. An exhibition at the museum
3. The Former Residence of Lu Xun

Lu Xun lived during his years in Beijing, and today it remains the best preserved among them. It houses a rich collection of manuscripts and personal artefacts and has been carefully maintained to retain its original layout and appearance. Each spring, the courtyard comes alive with white lilacs, yellow roses and pink peach blossoms.

The courtyard was redesigned by Lu Xun himself, its most distinctive feature being a small extension built behind the three north rooms. Because of its position at the rear, it became known as the “Tiger’s Tail”; Lu Xun fondly referred to it as the “Grey Shed.” Within this modest eight-square-metre room he lived and wrote, producing several of his most influential works. Today, the space remains preserved much as it was, with furnishings carefully maintained to evoke his daily life. This humble courtyard now forms part of the Beijing

Lu Xun Museum, the People’s Republic of China’s first biographical museum devoted to an individual.

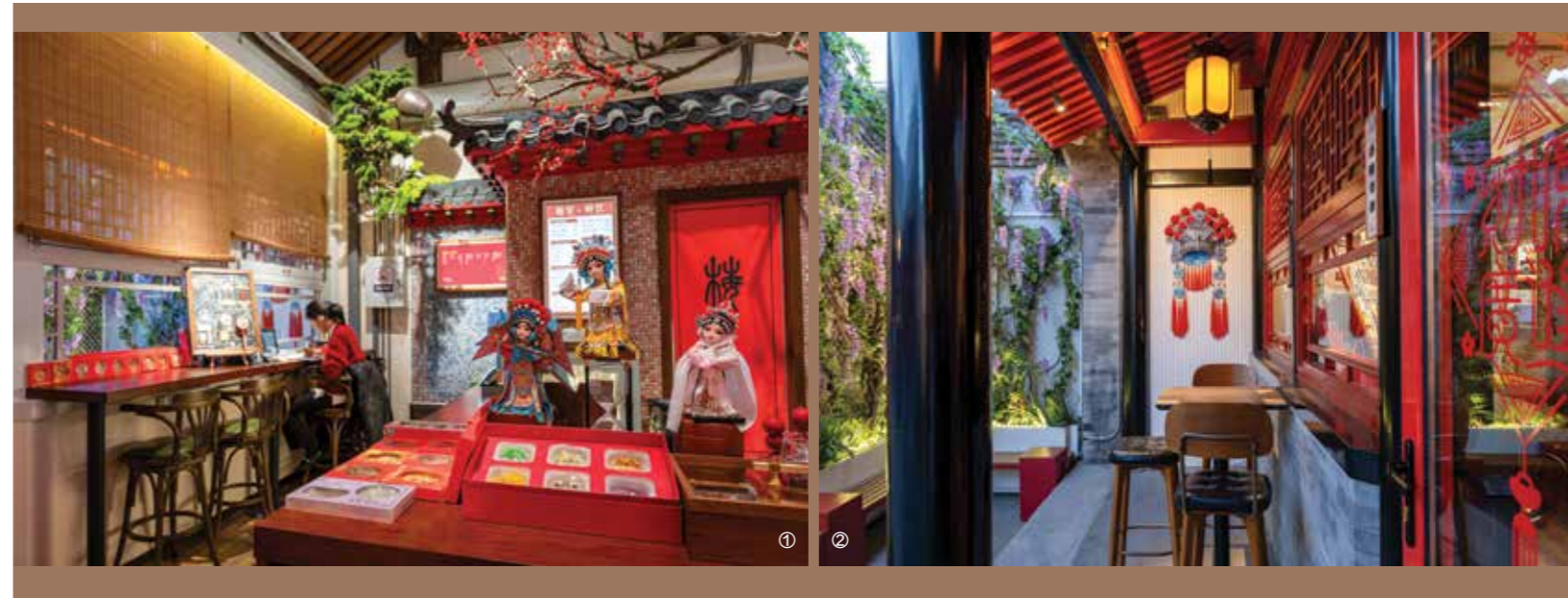
In 2025, after a comprehensive renovation and upgrade, the Beijing Lu Xun Museum reopened with two new temporary exhibition halls. It introduced a series of culturally rich and diverse exhibitions, including “Once Again, the New Moon: A Joint Exhibition of Xu Zhimo and Bian Zhilin” and “Treasures from the Book Sea: Traditional Culture-Themed Ex Libris Exhibition.” The permanent exhibition “Lu Xun’s Life” was also fully reinstalled and reopened.

As urban renewal continues across historic neighbourhoods, new venues and innovative cultural experiences are steadily emerging within Beijing’s hutongs, enriching residents’ daily lives while further strengthening the cultural fabric of the old city.

Deep within the hutongs of Liulichang, a century-old black gate has recently reopened. At 101 Tieshu Xiejie stands a modest courtyard that once witnessed a pivotal chapter in the history of Peking Opera and is now honoured as the “artistic origin” of the legendary master Mei Lanfang.

This residence was originally purchased by Mei Lanfang’s grandfather, Mei Qiaoling, and it is the very place where Mei Lanfang was born. The courtyard witnessed the lives of several generations of the Mei family. From the family motto engraved on the entrance gate to the layered immersive experiences throughout the courtyard, visitors gain deeper insight into the Mei family’s values, artistic heritage and the cultural roots that shaped Mei Lanfang’s remarkable career.

At the entrance of the courtyard stands a tall sign, clearly bearing names



▲ ①② The Ancestral Residence of Mei Lanfang

such as “Peking Opera Aesthetics Gallery,” “Liyuan Tea & Café,” and “Jinghe Hall Salon,” elegantly introducing the distinctive cultural experiences found within.

Pushing open the gate reveals a classic two-courtyard *siheyuan* (Beijing-style courtyard residence), its layout arranged along a central axis—orderly, harmonious and steeped in traditional elegance. The doorposts display a poetic couplet: “May fragrance and fortune grace this hall; may peace and prosperity bless this home.” Original stone steps and weathered brick walls remain intact, while the bluestone gateway and drum-shaped door stones have been carefully restored to their historic form. Every detail reflects the quiet charm distinctive to old Beijing courtyard homes.

This ancestral residence stands as a living testament to four generations of the Mei family’s legacy in Peking Opera. The walls display the Mei family genealogy and a chronicle of their theatrical lineage, recounting the distinguished history of this Peking Opera dynasty. Mei Lanfang’s grandfather, Mei Qiaoling, was among the renowned “Thirteen Stars of the Tongzhi and Guangxu Eras.” It was here that Mei Lanfang spent his formative childhood years, every brick and tile quietly nurturing the beginnings of his future artistic brilliance.

Today, the ancestral residence has

been transformed into the Mei Lanfang Aesthetics and Art Exhibition Centre. In the Peking Opera aesthetics gallery, visitors encounter iconic stage images of Mei Lanfang, original paintings by his hand and authentic theatrical props that reveal his artistic vision. Throughout the courtyard are carefully designed photo spots, including themed sculptures and installations.

Here, visitors can not only appreciate Mei Lanfang’s stage aesthetics but also step into his world through immersive costume experiences, posing in meticulously recreated “Mei School” attire to capture their own iconic moment. They may sip coffee in the courtyard or visit the Mei Family Kitchen to savour dishes reflecting Master Mei’s refined, north-south-inspired palate.

The coffee cups at Mei’s residence feature auspicious motifs drawn from Peking Opera costumes and props, alongside Mei Lanfang’s iconic portrayal of Yang Guifei in *The Drunken Concubine*. Since its debut, the visually striking “*Guifei Zuijiu*” latte—named after the classic opera—has quickly become a signature favourite.

For a city, guildhalls and historic residences are living vessels of cultural memory, witnesses to urban change and enduring carriers of humanistic spirit. Emerging from history, these spaces now intertwine with contemporary life,

enriching Beijing’s identity as a cultural capital through the resonance of past and present, tradition and innovation.

Exploring Luminaries’ Former Residences

-  Former Residence of Song Ching-ling
Address: 46 Houhai Beiyuan, Xicheng District, Beijing
-  Guo Moruo Memorial Museum
Address: 18 Qianhai Xijie, Xicheng District, Beijing
-  Former Residence of Li Dazhao
Address: 24 Wenhua Hutong, Xicheng District, Beijing
-  Former Residence of Shao Piaoping
Address: 30 Weirai Hutong, Luomashi Dajie, Xicheng District, Beijing
-  Former Residence of Lu Xun
Address: 21 Gongmengkou Xisantiao, Fuchengmen, Xicheng District, Beijing
-  Lao She Memorial
Address: 19 Fengfu Hutong, Dengshikou Xijie, Dongcheng District, Beijing
-  Former Residence of Mei Lanfang
Address: 101 Tieshu Xiejie, Xicheng District, Beijing



An Enduring Journey of Taste

Text by Zhang Yan Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Zhao Shuhua, [Türkiye] Beyhan Özdemir, Gong Yuexian, Qu Bowei



»»» The vibrant essence of Beijing is reflected in its cuisine, with culinary memories woven throughout its hutongs (alleys) and streets. As one wanders through these neighbourhoods, time-honoured food brands line the streets, set against a backdrop of traditional blue bricks and grey tiles. The city offers a diverse range of flavours, from the iconic crispy-skinned Peking roast duck to delicate imperial pastries and spicy late-night crayfish. These dishes honour time-tested methods while adapting to contemporary tastes. Here, historical depth meets modern energy, creating a richly layered culinary landscape. Together, these streets and alleys reveal Beijing's flavourful stories, embodying both its history and modern daily life. «««

Timeless Flavours along an Ancient Street

Qianmen Street stands as one of Beijing's most historically significant thoroughfares and remains an essential destination for visitors. Its legacy spans more than five centuries, giving the area a deep cultural resonance. The street is also the historic home of many of Beijing's renowned time-honoured brands, including Quanjudu, Donglaishun, Duyichu and Zhangyiyuan. Strolling along Qianmen Street offers an immediate sense of an authentic local marketplace atmosphere. The remarkable variety of dining options is especially captivating. If hungry, visitors can easily step into a small eatery for a satisfying bowl of fried sauce noodles, a plate of quick-fried tripe or a savoury meat pie. Casual snacks are equally plentiful, perhaps a fried starch sausage or candied hawthorn skewers, or a

stop at a venerable tea house for jasmine-flavoured ice cream. On this historic avenue, where many genuine Beijing flavours converge, these snacks go beyond simple nourishment; they reflect the culture and everyday life of old Beijing. Indeed, patrons seem to savour history and tradition in every delicious bite.

Among the many traditional Beijing treats found on Qianmen Street, Duyichu Steamed Pork Dumpling Restaurant holds a special distinction, largely because of its storied link with the Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong (reign: 1735–1796). Duyichu traces its origins to 1738, when it was first established as a tavern by Wang Ruifu, a native of Shanxi. The tavern stood on the south side of Xianyukou on Qianmen Street. Legend has it that on Lunar New Year's Eve in 1752, Emperor Qianlong was travelling incognito back to the Forbidden City after a visit to Tongzhou. Passing through

Qianmen Street, he noticed that every other establishment had closed, while Wang's tavern remained open. The emperor and his retinue stepped inside, drawn by the inviting aromas of food and drink. When he learned that the tavern did not yet have an official name, the emperor personally bestowed the title "Duyichu," meaning "the only one in the capital," as it was indeed the sole establishment open at that late hour. He later sent a plaque bearing the inscribed name to the tavern. Consequently, Duyichu gained widespread popularity, attracting numerous dignitaries and officials and enjoying flourishing trade.

Today, Duyichu enjoys a widespread reputation across the capital for its distinctive *shaomai*, or steamed pork dumplings. Initially, however, this food was simply a commonplace offering and had not yet attained the status of a signature dish. It was during the Republic of China period (1912–1949) that Duyichu's steamed pork dumplings gradually became more refined. Preparing these dumplings involves 16 distinct stages, from making the dough to the final presentation. The technique used to flatten the dough with a rolling pin is particularly skilful. This method produces precisely 24 pleats, symbolising the 24 solar terms. Beyond its striking visual appeal, the process also creates a finished dumpling with a unique shape, resembling a flower about to bloom. With more than a century of continuous operation, Duyichu continues to attract customers from around the world, supported by the imperial plaque bestowed by Emperor Qianlong and the recognition of its culinary craft as part of the national intangible cultural heritage.

To the east of Qianmen Street lies Xianyukou, a historic street even more widely known than its neighbour. Rich in culinary

▼ A foreign tourist shows the *shaomai* (steamed pork dumpling) she made



traditions and local anecdotes, Xianyukou traces its origins to the Zhengtong era (1436–1449) of the Ming Dynasty. Originally called Xianyu Alley, the name referred to a fresh fish market located near a canal loading point. During the Qing Dynasty, the street was renamed Xianyukou. Today, it stands as an important commercial area in southern old Beijing, home to numerous eateries, including many establishments that have been operating for over a century.

Bianyifang Peking roast duck stands as a distinguished example of Beijing's celebrated roast duck tradition. Established in 1416, this respected establishment is located in Xianyukou. Over time, Bianyifang's roasting technique has been refined by successive generations of culinary masters, gradually forming what is known as the "three distinct features": a uniquely sealed oven, the careful selection and initial shaping of the duck and the precise process for roasting and carving. The restaurant gained particular prestige when its name was bestowed by the Ming official Yang Jisheng (1516–1555), and it subsequently attracted numerous officials and scholars. Even today, Bianyifang's Peking roast duck—famous for its tender meat and crisp skin—continues to draw diners from around the world.

Adjacent to Bianyifang stands a captivating two-storey building that retains an enduring charm. Outside, a sign displays the Chinese characters identifying it as Tianxingju Restaurant. Established in 1862, this historic eatery originally specialised in stir-fried dishes. It was only around 1900, when it began serving its signature stewed pork liver dish, that the restaurant gained widespread popularity among the many competing establishments in Xianyukou. The key ingredients of Tianxingju's celebrated speciality include pork liver and intestines, enhanced with spring onions, ginger, garlic, soy sauce and a starch-based sauce. The resulting dish, with tender liver and soft intestines immersed in a rich broth infused with garlic, offers a deeply satisfying flavour.

In addition to its signature stewed pork liver, Tianxingju's steamed stuffed buns are also highly recommended. These buns have exceptionally soft dough casings that enclose fillings that are fresh, aromatic and notably succulent. With the first bite, the palate is immediately filled with the rich flavour of the sauce. The restaurant's popularity is evident in its daily sales of around 150 kilograms (kg) of these buns, rising to over 300 kg during public holidays and festive periods.

Xianyukou is home to several other venerable establishments. Situated immediately beside Tianxingju is Jinfang Snack Restaurant, a well-regarded halal eatery on the street. Beijingers consider its cream fried cakes, brown sugar sesame buns and *aiwowo* (steamed rice cakes with sweet filling) among the most authentic offerings available. Jinfang is perhaps best known, however, for its *yuanyao*



▲ Slicing Peking roast duck



▲ Sliced Peking roast duck with traditional accompaniments

(glutinous rice balls traditionally eaten during the Lantern Festival); a long queue forms outside the shop every year during the festival season.

Xin's Fried Cakes focuses exclusively on a traditional Beijing snack, wrapping a sweet red bean paste filling in soft fermented dough. Fried at high temperature, the cakes develop a beautiful golden colour, with a crisp exterior, soft interior and a pleasant sweetness.

The long-established Lili Restaurant also stands nearby and once received a plaque bearing its name inscription along with a commendatory poem from the scholar Guo Moruo (1892–1978). Although it does not serve traditional Beijing cuisine, the restaurant has won the favour of local diners with its Sichuan specialities, including Sichuan cold noodles, *dandan* noodles (noodles dressed in chilli sauce) and *longchaoshou* (Sichuan wonton soup).

After sampling the diverse savoury dishes of Xianyukou, visitors may conclude their culinary tour at Zhang's Golden Cakes, a shop known for hawthorn cakes and sweetened hawthorn rolls. These sweet and tart hawthorn treats are said to aid digestion and help cut through any lingering richness.



▲ Wandouhuang (pea cakes)

▶ Deep-fried dough rings



▲ Ludagunr (glutinous rice rolls filled with red bean paste)



Authentic Beijing-Style Snacks

Within Beijing's gastronomic landscape, traditional snacks hold undeniable significance. From mung bean milk and deep-fried dough rings to *ludagunr* (glutinous rice rolls filled with red bean paste) and *wandouhuang* (pea cakes), these offerings alone can provide an entire day's worth of varied flavours. If visitors ask where to find the most complete selection of authentic Beijing snacks, most Beijingers would readily suggest a single place: Huguosi Snack Restaurant. Located on Huguosi Street, the restaurant has long been regarded as a quintessential destination for Beijing snacks, serving both as an inheritor and a vivid showcase of these traditional delicacies.

The restaurant traces its origins to Huguosi (Huguo Temple) Street, whose name derives from the now-vanished Huguo Temple that once stood in the area. Historically, the Huguo Temple Fair was a major event in the capital. During the festivities, vendors arranged their stalls in a continuous line stretching from the temple entrance to the main hall, offering a wide variety of snacks. Authentic Beijing treats, including buckwheat cakes, bean jelly, fried starch sausages and braised bean balls, were all readily available. In 1956, the Huguo Temple Fair ceased operation.

To preserve the distinctive snacks traditionally associated with the fair, well-known brands such as Ying's tea soup, Nian's buckwheat cakes and Wang's sweet potato were invited to establish and operate Huguosi Snack Restaurant.

For decades, building on the essence of Beijing's traditional snacks, the restaurant has continually refined and expanded its offerings. To this day, its selection of classic Beijing snacks—including *aiwowo*, *wandouhuang*, *mimahua* (sugar-coated, ear-shaped twists), mung bean milk, deep-fried dough rings and seasoned millet mush—continues to draw a steady stream of visitors from both home and abroad. Mung bean milk remains the most contentious of Beijing's traditional beverages, inspiring both strong affection and firm dislike. When drinking mung bean milk, it is customary to accompany it with finely shredded pickled vegetables dressed in chilli oil, along with a crispy deep-fried dough ring. The interplay of sour, spicy, sweet and salty flavours creates a lively feast for the palate.

The freshly baked sugar sesame buns appear brown and glossy, seemingly unremarkable at first glance. However, once bitten into, they prove remarkably satisfying. The sweet filling, a blend of sesame paste and brown sugar,



▲ Spicy crayfish

immediately fills the mouth, releasing a rich, fragrant sweetness. Beijingers often keep them on hand as a convenient snack. Even when cooled, they retain their distinctive flavour, becoming increasingly aromatic with every chew. At Huguosi Snack Restaurant, *lūdāgunr* is completely coated in a golden layer. A single bite releases sticky red bean paste at the corners of the mouth. The aroma of the soybean flour tempers the sweetness of the red bean paste, producing a flavour that is soft, glutinous and pleasantly light rather than greasy. When freshly prepared, it is warm, tender and glutinous, almost sticking to the teeth. As for *wāndouhuāng*, it displays a bright amber colour. A spoonful melts instantly in the mouth, suffused with the pure fragrance of beans and a perfectly balanced sweetness.

Strolling less than 100 metres along the street from Huguosi Snack Restaurant, visitors will come upon Fuhuazhai Bobo Shop, a well-known representative of Beijing-style pastry specialities. The shop's entrance

stands out with its striking combination of red and gold tones. A couplet displayed at the entrance neatly captures the spirit of its offerings: "Imperial pastry snacks inherit Manchu-Han flavours, and a variety of delicacies present tastes from both north and south." This inscription suggests that the shop's principal products are Manchu-Han steamed snacks originating from the capital.

Fuhuazhai Bobo Shop specialises in reviving Qing imperial pastry-making techniques through a traditional mentor-apprentice system. Through this approach, it has successfully restored classic Manchu-Han delicacies such as Sunni Efen white cakes and rose pastries. The name Sunni Efen originates from the Manchu language: "Sunni" means "white," while "Efen" means "cake." Legend holds that it was a favourite of Empress Fucha, consort of Qing Emperor Qianlong. The emperor reportedly kept 25 cows to produce the milk-rich base used in its preparation. The cake offers a creamy, cheese-like texture

accompanied by a lingering sweet dairy fragrance. Fuhuazhai's crisp cakes feature feather-thin, layered exteriors that encase a delicately melting filling.

Fuhuazhai's elegant imperial-style pastries are complemented by an equally refined dining atmosphere, one that evokes the setting of a Qing palace drama. By enjoying Empress Fucha's afternoon tea set, guests today can experience something of the luxury and sophistication that once characterised life at the imperial court.

A Sleepless and Vibrant Food Street

Every Beijinger likely carries a unique culinary map in mind. Among its landmarks, Guijie Street stands out as a destination that is impossible to overlook. Stretching for 1.4 kilometres, this lively thoroughfare is home to more than 300

restaurants, cultivating a vibrant food street culture that thrives around the clock. At any hour, the street pulses with the energy of everyday life. When evening falls, the brilliant lights and constant buzz of conversation create a scene that has become one of the most recognisable symbols of modern Beijing's nightlife.

At the eastern end of Guijie Street, near the bridgehead of the Dongzhimen Flyover, stands a bronze *gui* (ceremonial food vessel with loop handles) that serves as the street's emblem. This might lead some visitors to assume that the street shares a deep historical connection with ancient bronze ware. In reality, such vessels were luxurious food containers used by the nobility during the Shang (16th–11th century BC) and Zhou (11th century–256 BC) dynasties, designed to hold cooked food while symbolising rank and authority. An ancient saying notes that "the emperor used nine *ding* and eight *gui*," reflecting the strict ritual hierarchy observed in ceremonial banquets. Today, this ancient symbol has been reinterpreted as a shared culinary icon. While vessels of this kind once held the meals of aristocrats, Guijie Street now satisfies the appetites of the modern public. From ancient bronze vessels to contemporary cuisine, humanity's enduring devotion to food remains unchanged.

When considering the signature dishes of Guijie Street, spicy crayfish undoubtedly occupies a prominent place. Among the many establishments specialising in this delicacy, Huda Restaurant enjoys the greatest popularity. At almost any hour, passersby will find a long queue stretching from its entrance. The scene becomes especially lively late into the night, reflecting the restaurant's enduring appeal, which has remained undiminished for decades.

This vibrant, crimson-hued spicy crayfish presents a striking visual display even before it is tasted. Once the shell is carefully removed, the succulent flesh is revealed, tender and finely textured. Its flavour offers a compelling balance of heat and fragrance, created by ingredients such

as dried chillies, Sichuan peppercorns and broad bean paste, which enhance the dish's natural sweetness and freshness while eliminating any hint of fishiness. Spicy crayfish has long been regarded as a quintessential delicacy. Nevertheless, the culinary landscape surrounding this dish on Guijie Street continues to evolve, with variations including Beijing-style scallion braise, thirteen-spice seasoning, curry, garlic paste and versions simmered with bamboo shoots in oil. This spirit of innovation has even produced iced Maotai crayfish, lending the dish a subtle, spirituous aroma.

The nightlife on Guijie Street extends far beyond its famed crayfish. A wide array of Sichuan specialities is available, including boiled fish, spicy crab, frog stir-fried with chilli and tripe with sliced meat simmered in chilli sauce and duck blood. Diners often pair these vivid dishes with bottles of chilled beer, creating a lively evening of food and conversation with family and friends. With each cool draught, the atmosphere warms and the bonds of friendship grow stronger.

For those wishing to sample authentic Beijing cuisine, Guijie Street offers an impressive range of options. Near the western end of the street stands Kaorouwan Restaurant, a time-honoured establishment with a history spanning more than three centuries. The restaurant is celebrated

for its mastery of traditional Beijing-style roasted meat, cooked on a distinctive large iron griddle known as *zhizi*. Prepared in this way, the meat becomes exceptionally tender and smooth, delivering rich flavour without any trace of gamey odour. There are two principal ways to enjoy this dish. In one, the chef pre-cooks the mutton before serving it at the table. In the other, diners roast the meat themselves. Guests gather around the stove, holding a bowl of dipping seasonings in one hand and chopsticks in the other. Thin slices of mutton are dipped in the condiments before being placed on the hot griddle. Served with sweet garlic paste or crisp cucumber slivers, the dish becomes even more delicious.

Today, Guijie Street serves as a vibrant hub where diverse culinary traditions converge, including Sichuan, Guangdong and halal cuisines. The street's significance has grown far beyond its reputation for distinctive dining. It now stands as one of the defining symbols of Beijing's lively nightscape and its rich food culture.

Beijing's food culture continues to evolve, moving seamlessly from deep-rooted tradition through development to modern innovation. The city's many culinary streets warmly welcome visitors, offering distinctive flavours that guide them on a journey through both time and space, where the capital's vibrant contemporary energy meets its rich historical legacy.

▼ Beijing-style roasted meat, cooked and served on an iron griddle (*zhizi*)



威尔第歌剧《阿依达》

2026年4月8-12日国家大剧院-歌剧院演出威尔第歌剧《阿依达》。该剧的故事是凄美爱情与家国大义的血泪交织。在古埃及与埃塞俄比亚战争的宏大背景下，埃及将领拉达梅斯与埃塞俄比亚公主阿依达的爱情，卑微而炽热。威尔第用其天才的笔触，将古埃及的异域风情、战争的壮烈、爱情的缠绵与命运的悲怆，全部编织进不朽的旋律之中。

作为国家大剧院长演不衰的经典剧目之一，时隔三年，《阿依达》再度“凯旋归来”，本轮演出特别邀请到世界著名指挥家平夏斯·斯坦伯格，与国家大剧院歌剧演员队、国家大剧院管弦乐团、合唱团、辽宁芭蕾舞团以及中外两组顶级阵容共同演绎。两组阵容星光熠熠，实力碰撞，为中国观众奉献两版各具魅力、同样精彩的“凯旋”盛宴。



Verdi's Opera *Aida*

Verdi's opera *Aida*, a story that poignantly intertwines a tragic love affair with sweeping historical upheaval, will be staged at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) from April 8 to 12. Set against the war between ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, the love between the Egyptian general Radames and the Ethiopian princess Aida is both humble and deeply passionate. Verdi's genius weaves the exotic splendour of ancient Egypt, the spectacle of war, tender love and cruel fate into an immortal score.

After a three-year hiatus, this NCPA classic returns to the stage. The production features world-renowned conductor Pinchas Steinberg leading NCPA's own opera troupe, orchestra and chorus, together with the Liaoning Ballet. Two star-studded casts, one Chinese and one international, will perform in rotation, offering audiences two equally compelling and triumphant interpretations of this magnificent opera.

跃马扬鞭——马年新春文化展

2026年1月30日-4月30日中国国家博物馆“跃马扬鞭——马年新春文化展”展出。本次展览汇集与马相关的珍贵文物120余件/套，以中国国家博物馆馆藏为基础，并得到甘肃省博物馆、甘肃简牍博物馆、秦始皇帝陵博物院、陕西省考古研究院（陕西考古博物馆）、青州市博物馆、绵阳市博物馆6家文博机构的鼎力支持。通过“马”这一生动载体，系统呈现其在中华文明长卷中的千姿百态，展示中国历史悠久的马文化，从而感悟中华民族自古以来不断进取、自强不息的精神气质。



Galloping Forward—an Exhibition Celebrating the Year of the Horse

An exhibition celebrating the Year of the Horse, titled “Galloping Forward,” opened on January 30 and will continue until April 30 at the National Museum of China. Drawing largely from the museum's own collection, the exhibition brings together more than 120 precious cultural relics associated with the horse. It has also received substantial support from six cultural institutions: the Gansu Provincial Museum, Gansu Bamboo Slips Museum, Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum, Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology (Shaanxi Archaeology Museum), Qingzhou Museum and Mianyang Museum. Through the vivid motif of the horse, the exhibition explores the animal's many roles within the long narrative of Chinese civilisation. It highlights China's rich equestrian culture, offering visitors insight into the enduring spirit of perseverance and self-improvement that has characterised the Chinese nation since ancient times.