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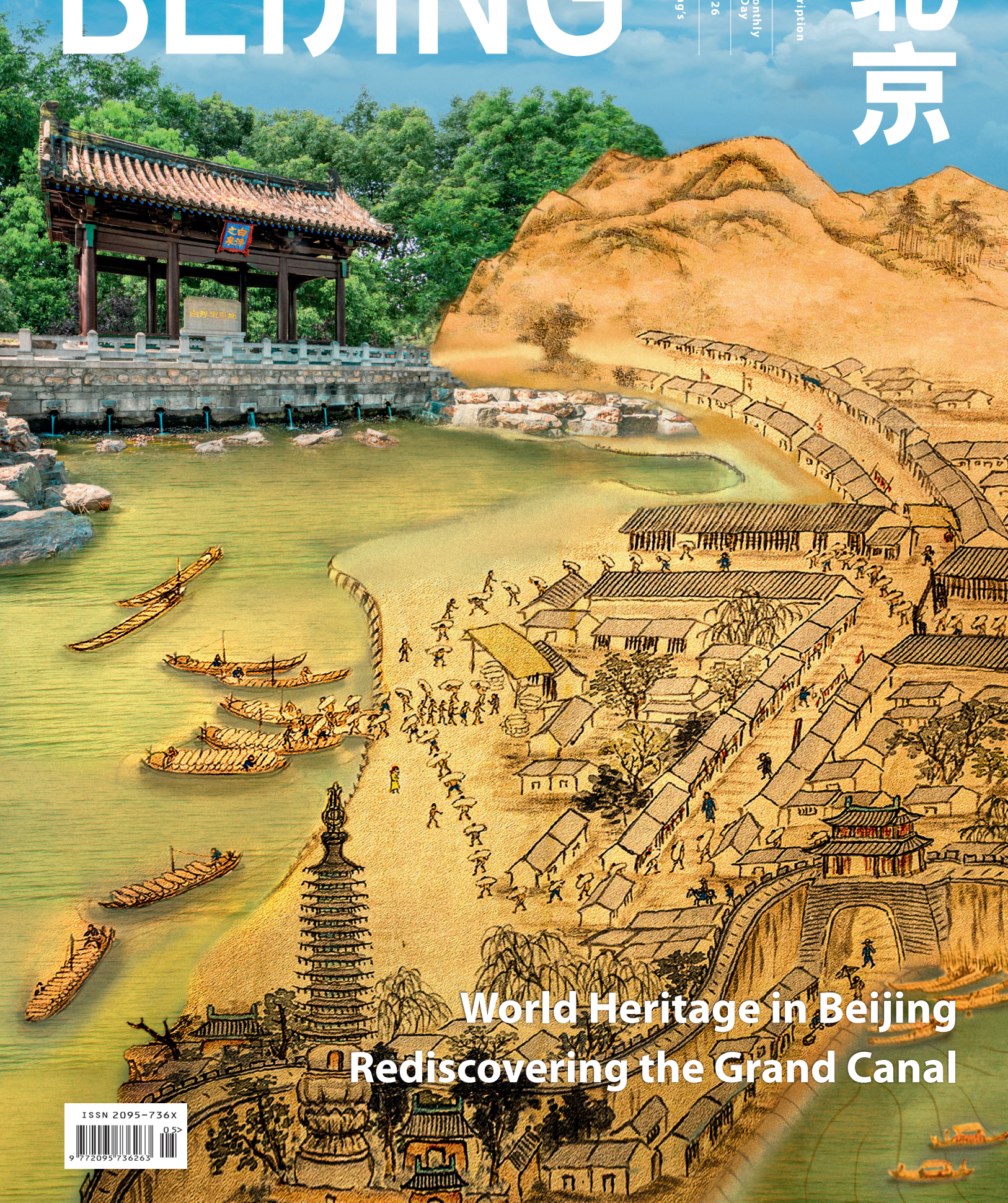
# 北京

Postal Subscription  
Code 82-777

Published Monthly  
on the 25th Day

Issue May 2026

Telling Beijing's  
Stories



## World Heritage in Beijing Rediscovering the Grand Canal

ISSN 2095-736X



9 772095 736263



北京国际财富中心  
Beijing International Fortune Center

Qianhe Xielu Bridge over the Grand Canal

北京  
(BEIJING)

Issue 5, 2026 (Vol. 587)

Supervision

Publicity Department of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee

Sponsors

Information Office of the People's Government of  
Beijing Municipality

Beijing International Communication Center

The Beijing News

The issue supported by

Publicity Department of

the CPC Beijing Tongzhou District Committee

Publicity Department of

the CPC Beijing Changping District Committee

Publisher

The Beijing News

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Photos Courtesy of

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

IC photo; tuchong.com; AIGC

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The Beijing News

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Dongcheng District, Beijing

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Printing

Beijing Dida Colored Printing Co., Ltd

Postal Subscription Code

82-777

Publishing Date

May 25, 2026

Price

38 yuan

International Standard Serial Number

ISSN 2095-736X

China National Standard Serial Number

CN10-1908/G0

E-mail

Beijingydx@btmbeijing.net

Cover Photos by

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# A Flowing Epic with Immortal Chapters

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Wu Hui, Yang Jianguo, Gong Yuexian, Zhang You

The Grand Canal of China, comprising the Beijing–Hangzhou Canal, the Sui–Tang Canal and the Zhedong Canal, is an engineering marvel stretching nearly 3,200 kilometres (km) and spanning more than 2,500 years of history. It stands as the world’s earliest, largest and longest canal system. Like the Great Wall, it testifies to the heights of ancient Chinese engineering and has profoundly shaped the nation’s development.

As the Grand Canal’s northernmost city, Beijing has been inextricably linked to it for nearly 10 centuries. The waterway continuously supplied the capital with essential materials such as bricks, stone, timber and grain. Beyond fostering economic prosperity, the canal also encouraged cultural exchange and integration, shaping the city’s distinctive regional architecture, cuisine and folk customs while serving as a vital thread in preserving collective memory.

For Beijing, the Grand Canal is a unique scenic corridor intertwining nature, commerce and culture, and remains one of the city’s most distinctive and dynamic symbols. It is both a geographical and cultural river, gleaming like a brilliant pearl within the vast heritage of world civilisation.

## An Engineering Wonder Connecting the North and South

The story of the Grand Canal is closely tied to three pivotal historical figures: King Fuchai (reign: 495–473 BC) of the State of Wu (12th century–473 BC), Emperor Yang (reign: AD 604–618) of the Sui Dynasty (AD 581–618) and Kublai Khan (reign: 1260–1294), founder of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

King Fuchai of Wu was the first ruler to initiate the excavation of the Grand Canal. In 486 BC, he ordered the construction of the Han Canal from present-day Yangzhou to Huai'an, creating the earliest section of the waterway. Over time, the canal network was continually expanded and dredged, laying the foundation for later rulers to further extend and develop the system.

During the Sui Dynasty, Emperor Yang dredged existing waterways, excavated new channels and linked them with natural rivers to form the Sui–Tang (AD 618–907) Canal, which stretched nearly 2,700 km. Centred on Luoyang, it connected Yuhang (present-day Hangzhou) in the south with Zhuojun (including present-day Beijing) in the north. This vital waterway transformed Beijing from a remote northern outpost into a significant player on the historical stage.

By the end of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), sections of the Sui–Tang Grand Canal had fallen into disrepair because of accumulated silt. Before long, however, the waterway drew the attention of new pioneers emerging from the steppes.

In 1272, Kublai Khan selected Yanjing (present-day Beijing) as the site of his capital, Dadu, placing great confidence in the planned Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal. The new waterway promised efficient transport for the capital's growing needs. Guo Shoujing (1231–1316) oversaw this crucial undertaking.

In 1262, Guo Shoujing paid a formal visit to Kublai Khan at Shangdu, in present-day Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, marking an important milestone in canal history. There, he presented a groundbreaking water-management



▲ A section of the old waterway of the Yuhe River



▲ Qingfeng Bridge

strategy comprising six key proposals.

This period provided Guo Shoujing with the opportunity to demonstrate his expertise and forge the crucial link in the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal, resolving Dadu's transport challenges. Over three decades, this water-management expert redirected the flow of Yuquan, constructed the Bahe River, excavated the Tonghui River, designated Baifu Spring as the canal's water source and oversaw Jishuitan. The opening of the Tonghui River in 1293 completed the north-south Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal. This Yuan Dynasty waterway became what is

commonly known today as the Grand Canal.

Unlike its Sui–Tang predecessors, this canal bypassed Luoyang, creating a far more direct route between Beijing and Hangzhou. This major alteration shortened the journey by nearly 1,000 km. Vessels from the south first reached Tongzhou before continuing north along the Tonghui River. After passing Wanning Bridge, they arrived at the bustling Jishuitan wharf, where scenes of extraordinary activity unfolded, with "numerous vessels with sails that almost covered the sunlight" becoming a common sight.

## An Ever-Flowing Economic Artery

Throughout Chinese history, grain and other essential commodities were transported to the capital via the canal system. During periods such as the Ming and Qing dynasties, canal transport was regarded as the country's "economic artery" and "lifeline." It was far more than a means of moving goods; it formed the essential infrastructure underpinning dynastic governance.

As the imperial capital of China's final three dynasties—the Yuan, Ming and Qing—and the northernmost city along the Grand Canal, Beijing shared a profound interdependence with the waterway. Each year, the Grand Canal transported approximately 4 million *shi* (*dan*) of grain from the canal-side provinces to the capital, equivalent to around 240 million kilograms in modern terms. Construction materials and skilled artisans from across the nation were likewise brought to Beijing. This constant influx not only enabled the construction of monumental structures such as the Forbidden City but also contributed to the

development of the city itself. Consequently, people came to say that "Beijing was floated here along the Grand Canal."

By the end of the Qing Dynasty, imperial authority had weakened, leading to corruption in river management and persistent problems along the waterways, which gradually caused the Grand Canal to fall into disrepair. In 1901, the Qing government officially halted canal transport. Having long served as a crucial military passage, transportation artery and economic lifeline, the Grand Canal eventually receded from historical prominence amid dwindling water resources and the rise of modern transportation.

This monumental waterway, with its millennia-long legacy, has not faded into the annals of history. Instead, it has evolved into an enduring cultural heritage, a "living cultural heritage corridor" that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. The story of the Grand Canal extends far beyond water management alone, becoming an epic inscribed across China's landscape. Each surviving artefact stands as a historical marker within the vast sweep of time, reflecting the rise and decline, as well as the

enduring continuity, of civilisation.

On June 22, 2014, at the 38th session of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee held in Doha, Qatar, the Grand Canal of China was formally inscribed on the *World Heritage List*. According to the committee, the canal is the world's longest and oldest artificial waterway, a living testament to an extraordinary early mastery of hydraulic engineering. It stands as a major technological achievement predating the Industrial Revolution. By enabling the movement of goods and resources between northern and southern China, the canal helped consolidate imperial authority across the territory and demonstrates the profound ingenuity, determination and perseverance of the Chinese people, as well as the significant contributions of Eastern civilisation to engineering as it pertains to water conservancy and management.

For Beijing, the Grand Canal has long stood as a silent witness to the city's transformation from antiquity to the modern era. From the Tonghui River's pivotal role during the Yuan Dynasty to the sophisticated canal transport administration of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the waterway served

▼ Dragon boat racing on the Grand Canal in Tongzhou during the Dragon Boat Festival





▲ Guangyuan Sluice



▲ Randeng (Dipankara) Pagoda

as Beijing's vital lifeline. Today, the Grand Canal is no longer merely a relic of the past; it has become a living cultural corridor that continues to sustain this historic city. Guided by the twin principles of preservation and sustainable use, Beijing is now reshaping the canal's appearance and function, giving it renewed vitality within the urban landscape.

## An Enduring Cultural Heritage

The heritage section of the Grand Canal of China extends for more than 1,000 km in total, of which the Beijing section accounts for roughly 82 km, less than one-tenth of the entire waterway. Nevertheless, this stretch is exceptionally rich in cultural heritage. High-grade relics are densely concentrated, spanning extensive historical periods and exhibiting remarkable diversity in form. These sites are distributed across Changping, Haidian, Xicheng, Dongcheng, Chaoyang, Shunyi and Tongzhou districts, together forming a rich and varied tapestry of historical heritage.

Today, the waterways and heritage sites listed on the register have been transformed into prominent public landscapes across Beijing. Baifu Spring Ruins Park, recognised as the source of the Grand Canal, has

revived the historic splendour of the famed "Longquan Shuyu." The seven-century-old channel of the Yuhe River has regained its characteristic scene of "water flowing through streets and alleys." Along the Changhe River, Wanshou Temple preserves the former grandeur of an imperial shrine. On the banks of the North Canal, the Randeng (Dipankara) Pagoda recalls the local saying, "the silhouette of a single pagoda symbolises Tongzhou."

In recent years, more than 50 heritage sites along the Beijing section of the Grand Canal, including Guo Shoujing Memorial Hall, Shichahai, Wanning Bridge, Yongtong Bridge, historic sluices and numerous ancient structures, have gradually formed a vibrant cultural corridor. Ongoing restorations of individual canal sites have revived the waterway's lively past for contemporary audiences, embodying the modern concept of "living heritage." Along both banks, natural scenery, historic landmarks and bustling markets each contribute their own distinctive charm.

Historically, the Grand Canal served as the conduit linking the heart of Beijing with the gardens spread across the city's northwestern outskirts. Today, it functions as an urban artery connecting the capital with the Beijing Municipal Administrative Centre.

Following the canal's successful inscription on the *World Heritage List*, the Municipal Administrative Centre has, by extension, become associated with its first World Heritage site. Tongzhou prospered because of the canal, and the administrative hub was deliberately established along its banks. In this way, the canal continues to infuse the city with renewed vitality.

The Grand Canal Cultural Tourism Scenic Area in Beijing (Tongzhou) offers visitors a captivating journey through the river, its 2 banks, 6 parks and 18 scenic views. Stretching 12 km from north to south, the area features numerous popular social media attractions, creating an engaging destination that visitors find difficult to leave.

Central Green Forest Park offers abundant greenery and a distinctive natural charm. Within the park, visitors can explore the three major cultural facilities of the Beijing Municipal Administrative Centre: the Beijing Performing Arts Centre, the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing and the Beijing Library, all thoughtfully distributed throughout the landscape. The harmonious interplay between natural ecology and modern architecture creates an atmosphere of lasting leisure and tranquillity.

Tongzhou's Randeng Pagoda, a thousand-year-old landmark, stands before

the modern skyscrapers of the Canal Business District. This striking contrast embodies Tongzhou's unique character, where ancient heritage blends with contemporary urban development. The Grand Canal, now both a heritage corridor and cultural hub within the Municipal Administrative Centre, continues to display its renewed vitality.

The Grand Canal's legend endures through both its physical waterway and its lasting cultural legacy. Beyond transporting materials and goods, it fostered deep cultural integration along its banks. This waterway pulses with rich cultural heritage: from the relics preserved in the Grand Canal Museum and the energetic Tongzhou boatmen's chants to the centuries-old canal dragon lanterns and the lively Small Cart Show. Even the classic *A Dream of Red Mansions* shares close ties with Zhangjiawan. The chisel marks left by artisans on transported materials remain visible, boatmen's chants still echo across the waterways and the celebrated "Three Treasures of Tongzhou" delicacies continue to be enjoyed today.

To further enrich the Grand Canal's cultural legacy and showcase both its spiritual core and contemporary value,

Beijing has organised a series of influential cultural activities. These include the China Grand Canal Cultural Belt Beijing-Hangzhou Dialogue, the Grand Canal Kaicao Festival and the Beijing (International) Canal Cultural Festival. Through these events, Beijing continues to explore the canal's remarkable heritage in depth while presenting the thousand-year-old waterway's vibrant modern identity.

For millennia, the Grand Canal has flowed ceaselessly, mirroring the unbroken

transmission of Chinese civilisation across the ages. Though its role has evolved over time, its historical and cultural significance remains enduring. Today, the Beijing section has assumed a renewed identity, serving as a vital platform for showcasing Beijing's cultural legacy and its achievements as a national cultural centre. The canal's profound historical and cultural depth has infused its thousand-year course with lasting vitality, allowing this ancient waterway to shine with renewed brilliance in the modern era.



▲ A foreign media exchange event on the cultural legacy of the Grand Canal held in Tongzhou

▼ Canal Culture Square





# Water Nourishing the Capital: The Grand Canal Intertwines Past and Present

Text by Ma Kai, Zhang Jian  
Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Zhang You, He Rong, [Montenegro] Milos Vujovic, Hu Shengli, Yang Jianguo, Sang Yi, Wu Hui, Zhao Shuhua

Travelling north along the Grand Canal, one eventually arrives in Beijing, its northern terminus. This waterway brought Beijing more than grain and goods; it shaped the city itself like a lifeline, tracing a thousand-year legacy of prosperity defined by water, where urban life and rivers have flourished side by side. Springs, sluice gates, temples, bridges, granaries, pagodas, watchtowers and wharves—over time, these relics that emerged alongside the Grand Canal may have been repurposed or lost their original forms. Yet by tracing their remains, one can still sense how profoundly Beijing was shaped by the canal, and how deeply intertwined the city's fate became with this great waterway.

## A Spring Breathes New Life into the Grand Canal

Changping District in Beijing lies at the junction of the Yanshan and Taihang mountain ranges, a region long known for its imposing mountains and abundant waters. On the bank of the Dongsha River in south-eastern Changping District stands a modest, solitary hill. Throughout history, it has been known by various names, including Shenshan Hill, Longquan Hill, Longwang Hill, Baifu Hill and Longshan Hill. At its foot flows a clear spring that has likewise carried several names: Shenshan Spring, Longwang Spring, Longquan Spring and, most famously today, Baifu Spring. Before the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), however, the spring was absent from historical records.

After the Yuan Dynasty established its capital at Dadu (present-day Beijing), it became essential to transport grain and tax revenues from southern China to the capital via the Grand Canal. At the time, however, the canal terminated at Tongzhou, requiring goods to be hauled overland

by carts and horses. In 1292, to solve this logistical challenge, the renowned scientist and hydraulic engineer Guo Shoujing (1231–1316) was commissioned to construct the Tonghui River. His primary water source was Baifu Spring at Longshan Hill. Recognising the spring's limited flow, Guo devised an ingenious diversion system. Rather than directing the water straight south into the city, he diverted it westward along the foothills before turning south, skilfully avoiding the low-lying valleys of the Shahe and Qinghe rivers while collecting additional water from sources including Huyan, Yimu and Jade springs. These waters converged at Wengshan Pond (today's Kunming Lake) before flowing into Jishuitan within Dadu, which served as the terminal wharf for grain barges. From there, a new channel extended southeast through the former Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) sluice riverbed to Tongzhou, "a total length of approximately 82 kilometres," as recorded in Yuan History: Treatise on Rivers and Canals. This engineering achievement remains one of Beijing's greatest hydraulic projects. Remarkably, sections of today's Beijing–Miyun Water

Diversion Canal still follow Guo's original route, reflecting the sophistication of ancient Chinese water management. The system enabled southern grain vessels to sail directly into the capital, greatly reducing costs while improving transport efficiency.

Walking around the Baifu Spring site, one feels as though every step connects the shared history of the canal and the capital.

Following the gentle slope around Longshan Hill, visitors encounter a simple pavilion set among trees and grass. A blue plaque bearing golden characters reads "baifu zhi quan" ("Spring of Baifu"), marking the source of Beijing's thousand-year-old living water. Inside stands a stone stele inscribed "Baifu Spring Site" on the front and, on the reverse, an inscription titled "Record of the Restoration of Baifu Spring Site," composed by the distinguished historical geographer Hou Renzhi (1911–2013) and written by the calligrapher Liu Bingsen (1937–2005). The text briefly recounts the spring's vital role as the headwater of the Tonghui River during the Yuan Dynasty. Beneath the pavilion lies the Nine-Dragon Pool. Embedded in its wall are nine carved dragon heads: the central



“Climbing uphill from the Nine-Dragon Pool leads to the Chief Dragon King Temple at the summit of Longshan Hill. The temple was constructed during the Yuan Dynasty, reflecting its elevated status and its crucial connection to the role of Baifu Spring in supplying the Grand Canal system.”

figure, slightly larger and fashioned from white marble, is set into the stone, while four bluestone bas-relief dragons flank each side. Their mouths remain naturally open, gently releasing clear water into the pool below. This

pool is the site's most iconic feature and was once listed among the "Eight Scenic Views of Yanping" during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

Climbing uphill from the Nine-Dragon Pool leads to the Chief Dragon King Temple at the summit of Longshan Hill. It is Beijing's only temple dedicated to the Chief Dragon King that was constructed under imperial decree during the Yuan Dynasty, reflecting both its elevated status and its close connection to Baifu Spring's role in supplying the canal system. Facing south, the compact temple complex features a spirit screen positioned just three metres (m) from the entrance gate. The bell and drum towers align neatly with the main gate along the slope. Beyond the courtyard, the halls of Caishen (God of Wealth) and Yaowang (King of Medicine) stand on either side of the main hall. Most striking is the central section of the roof, covered with 12 rows of yellow glazed tiles, a privilege reserved exclusively for imperial architecture. Inside the main hall, a human-faced Dragon King presides, flanked by Leigong (Thunder God), Dianmu (Lightning Goddess), Fengbo (Wind God) and Yuntong (Cloud Child). The north wall displays a vivid mural of the Chief Dragon King summoning rain, while the side walls preserve faintly

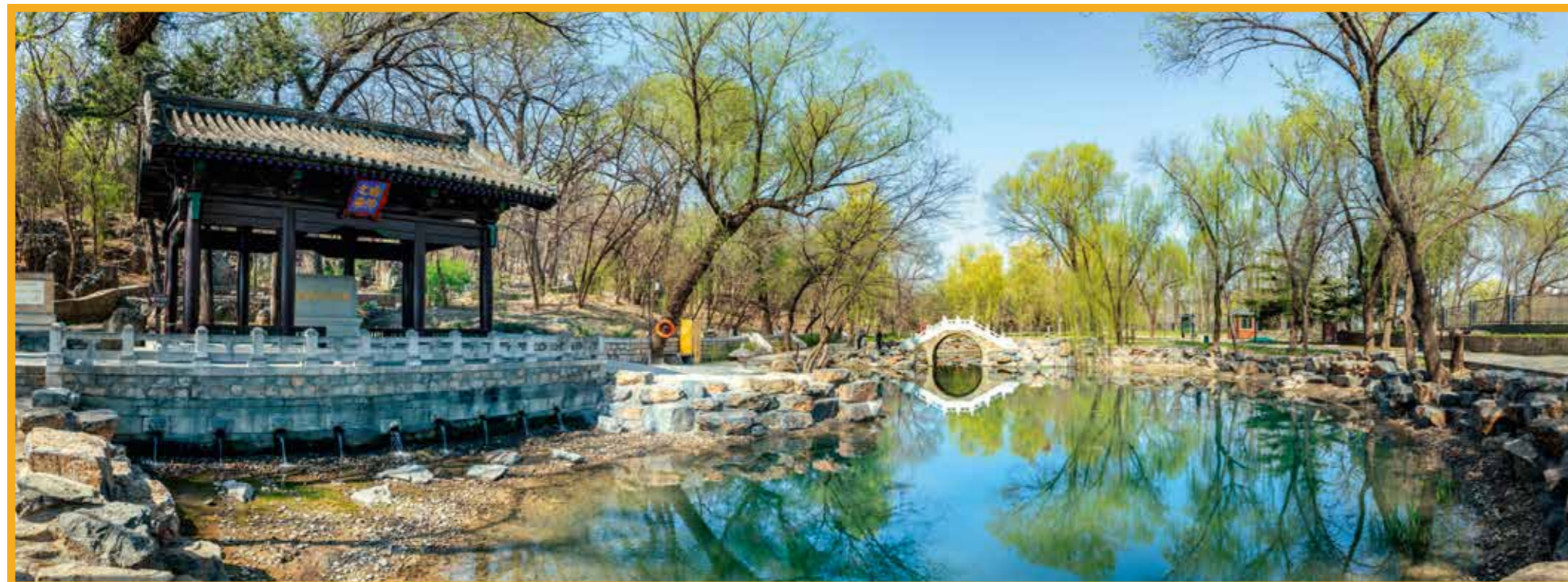
▲ Stone statue of a water-suppressing mythical beast

coloured murals depicting villagers praying for relief during a severe drought and the Dragon King answering their plea. These rare folk-themed murals are among Beijing's few surviving examples of this type of narrative art. Behind the temple stand six stone steles recording multiple restorations during the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, providing valuable evidence of local history and hydraulic culture.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the temple served as a major site for praying for rain in northern Beijing, attracting heavy incense offerings. Over time, a distinctive rain-divination custom developed: during periods of drought, locals would bring small bottles tied with red string to the Nine-Dragon Pool. They lowered the bottles into the spring, and when they floated back up, the water level inside was measured with "so many fingers of rain" to predict the amount of rainfall. Passed down through generations, this practice became part of Beijing's suburban folklore.

The story of Baifu Spring forms part of the broader history of Beijing's canal

### ▼ Baifu Spring





▲ Wanshou Temple

transport and urban water systems. In 1989, to commemorate the 700th anniversary of Guo Shoujing's diversion project, cultural authorities restored the Chief Dragon King Temple and rehabilitated the Nine-Dragon Pool, reviving the "dragon-mouth spouting water" spectacle. In 2023, Baifu Spring Site Park officially opened to the public, exactly 730 years after the completion of the Tonghui River. Today, the park combines heritage and natural scenery around the theme of the Grand Canal's northernmost source. Leisure paths connect key sites including Longquan Chan Monastery, Duquan Garden, Chief Dragon King Temple, Luying Terrace, Lingquan Spot and the Nine-Dragon Pool, making the park a popular destination for visitors seeking both history and quiet walks.

"A single stream pulses through the nation's veins." With quiet grace, Baifu Spring preserves the memory of the Grand Canal's northern source.

## A Sluice Gate along the Nanchang River

The waters flowing from Baifu Spring meander westward, carrying the clear freshness of Kunming Lake, before converging into the Nanchang River. Passing Zizhu Bridge on Beijing's West Third Ring

emperor's longevity and the prosperity of the nation. Upon its completion, Emperor Wanli bestowed the name "Huguo Wanshou Temple" (Temple for Protecting the Nation and Extending Longevity), while Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582) composed an inscription recording its founding. At the time, the temple was remarkable in both scale and layout, with a central axis of successive halls flanked by auxiliary buildings, scripture pavilions and landscaped courtyards containing rockeries and ponds, making it the foremost imperial temple in western Beijing.

During the Qing Dynasty, Wanshou Temple underwent several renovations and expansions, further enhancing its status. When emperors and empresses travelled from the Forbidden City to the famed "Three Hills and Five Gardens" in the western suburbs, they would first disembark at the nearby Guangyuan Sluice, enter Wanshou Temple to worship and rest, and only continue westward by imperial barge after the sluice gates had been closed to raise the upstream water level.

Ascending the steps to the temple, visitors see above the main gate a stone plaque inscribed with seven characters: *chi jian hu guo wan shou si* ("Temple for Protecting the Nation and Extending Longevity Built under the Imperial Decree"), personally

Road, the river reveals on its northern bank a royal Buddhist structure distinguished by upturned eaves and soaring roof corners: this is Wanshou Temple.

Wanshou Temple was a prominent imperial monastery in western Beijing during the Ming and Qing dynasties. According to *Rixia jiuwen kao* (*Records of Old Anecdotes from the Capital*), in 1577, the fifth year of the Wanli era (1573–1620), Empress Dowager Cisheng (1545–1614) financed its construction to pray for the

▼ Stone statue of a water-suppressing mythical beast on the Guangyuan Sluice



written by Emperor Shunzhi (reign: 1643–1661). Passing through the gate and looking upward, one encounters an exquisite ceiling mural titled "Azure Sky with Flowing Clouds and Hundred Bats." Against a clear blue sky, swirling clouds surround nearly 100 red bats outlined in gold, fluttering gracefully across the composition. In Chinese, "red bat" (*hong fu*) is a homophone for "great fortune" (*hong fu*), making the mural a visual expression of boundless blessings and supreme auspiciousness.

Today, Wanshou Temple retains its tripartite layout of central, eastern and western courtyards. The central axis runs from the main entrance gate through the Hall of Heavenly Kings, Main Hall, Wanshou Pavilion, Great Meditation Hall, Hall of Amitayus and the Ten Thousand Buddha Tower, forming a grand sequence of interconnected halls. Flanking the Hall of Amitayus are two Baroque-style Western gates constructed during the Qianlong era (1736–1796), a rare feature among imperial temples. The eastern section, once the abbot's garden, now partly serves as exhibition space for the Beijing Art Museum. The western courtyard functioned as a Qing imperial palace lodge, with its orderly layout and well-preserved ancient cypresses, imperial steles and intricate brick-and-wood carvings reflecting the refined craftsmanship of Ming and Qing architecture. Historical records also confirm that the Yongle Bell, the enormous Ming-era bell now housed at Dazhong Temple, was originally suspended in Wanshou Temple's bell tower, marking an important chapter in the temple's history.

Now functioning as the Beijing Art Museum, the former monastic garden has lost some of its imperial solemnity while gaining a more approachable everyday charm. Visitors passing by are often drawn to the finely carved walls and diagonal spirit screens flanking the entrance, stepping inside out of curiosity. The museum contains a rich collection of cultural treasures, earning it the nickname "Little Forbidden City of Western Beijing." Outside, the Nanchang River continues to flow, and visitors can board replica antique boats at Wanshou Temple Wharf for a leisurely journey to the Summer Palace, experiencing the area's centuries-old cultural atmosphere along the way.

Exiting Wanshou Temple and walking east along the riverbank past Yanqing Temple, visitors arrive at Guangyuan Sluice. Serving as both a bridge and a water gate, it remains the best-preserved sluice-bridge on the Nanchang River. Standing on the bridge and looking over the railing, one can see the massive stone sluice gates below. Embedded on either side are two ancient flood-controlling beasts believed to date to the Yuan Dynasty. Though worn by centuries of weathering, their stern expressions still appear to watch over the water, as if guarding the once-busy canal route. The sluice opening measures 13 m wide and 6 m long, while wing-shaped retaining walls extend outward to the riverbanks, seamlessly integrating with the river.

Built under the supervision of Guo Shoujing, Guangyuan Sluice served as the first lock on the upper reaches of the Tonghui River, earning it the title "No. 1 Sluice of the Grand Canal."



▲ Dragon leisure rafts under Shui Dui Bridge

Because Beijing's terrain rises in the northwest and descends toward the southeast, Guangyuan occupied a strategic position, regulating water flow and maintaining sufficient depth for grain barges. It became a vital link connecting the spring-fed waters of the Western Hills to the capital's canal network. During the Yuan Dynasty, the Tonghui River was filled with activity. Whenever low water levels hindered navigation, officials would conduct rituals at the nearby Dragon King Temple before opening the sluice to release water, a practice that remained deeply woven into canal culture for generations.

Originally constructed with wooden gates, Guangyuan Sluice was later rebuilt in stone because of wood's vulnerability to erosion. In 1999, the adjacent river channel was widened twice, and the sluice itself was expanded with an additional arch. After the southern abutment was removed, the structure was connected to a new bridge, preserving the historic sluice while accommodating modern navigation needs. With the revival of water transport on the Nanchang River, pleasure boats now pass through the newer southern arch, while the ancient sluice remains quietly beside it as a cultural relic, its original function complete.

Today, the Nanchang River flows ceaselessly beneath a skyline of modern high-rises, lined with lush trees and seasonal flowers. From

Wanshou Temple Wharf, visitors can cruise upstream to Xiuyi Bridge at the Summer Palace or downstream through Zizhuyuan Park and Beijing Zoo, enjoying scenic views along the route. Here, the ancient temple and sluice exist in quiet harmony with the vitality of the modern city, continuing to anchor centuries of history within the ever-changing landscape of western Beijing.

## A Waterscape Beautifies Urban Streets and Lanes

In the north-western corner of Beijing's old city lies a broad, shimmering body of water that blends urban life with historic neighbourhoods. This is Shichahai. Comprising three interconnected lakes—Xihai (West Lake), Houhai (Rear Lake) and Qianhai (Front Lake)—Shichahai was historically known as “Jishuitan” or “Haizi.” Its origins can be traced to a natural lake and marsh formed by the ancient Gaoliang River. During the Jin Dynasty, it was called Bailiantan (White Lotus Pond) and extended far beyond its present boundaries, serving as a suburban wetland for Zhongdu, the Jin capital (modern-day Beijing). When Kublai Khan (1215–1294) established Dadu as the

Yuan capital, he abandoned the old Jin capital site and constructed a new city that enclosed the entire Jishuitan within its walls. The eastern shore of the lake became the reference point for the city's central axis, while the surrounding terrain helped determine the alignment of the city walls. This later gave rise to the popular saying: “Jishuitan came first; Dadu was built afterward.”

At that time, Jishuitan was immense, extending east to today's Di'anmen Outer Street, west to Xijiekou, south to Ping'an Street and north to the North Second Ring Road. Its shores were crowded with docks, masts filled the skyline, and merchant and passenger vessels lined up bow to stern in constant motion. More than simply a centre for goods distribution, Jishuitan stimulated commerce, handicrafts and services throughout the surrounding area, becoming one of Dadu's busiest districts. Inns, restaurants, teahouses, taverns and market stalls stood side by side amid the constant bustle, creating a living Yuan Dynasty counterpart to the famous painting “Along the River during the Qingming Festival.”

During the Ming Dynasty, the expansion of the Imperial City divided Jishuitan into northern and southern sections. The southern waters were

incorporated into the Imperial City and gradually evolved into Beihai (North Lake), Zhonghai (Central Lake) and Nanhai (South Lake). The northern section later formed Xihai, Houhai and Qianhai. Because 10 Buddhist temples, known as “Shicha” in Chinese, once stood along the shores of these lakes, the area came to be known as “Shichahai” (“Ten Temple Lakes”). Although the word “*hai*” means “sea,” the bodies of water are in fact lakes. During the Qing Dynasty, this layout remained intact, while princely residences, official mansions, temples and homes gathered along the waterfront, turning Shichahai into a popular retreat for scholars, officials and ordinary residents alike.

Spanning the narrow channel between Xihai and Houhai are two Desheng bridges, one old and one new. The original Desheng Bridge is a single-arch stone sluice-bridge constructed during the Ming Dynasty. Several original bluestone slabs still remain on its surface, moss grows between the joints and the arched opening retains its ancient form. According to *Rixia jiuwen kao*, the bridge's low clearance once allowed only empty boats to pass beneath it. On the western side of the arch, a stone carving of a river-taming divine ox once projected outward, with its mounting marks still visible on the wall. Legend states that the ox extended nearly 60 centimetres from the surface and featured a large head, bulging eyes, sharp horns, a wide mouth and a prominent snout, all rendered with striking realism. Together with the stone hornless dragon at Huitong Ancestral Temple and the iron turtle at Zhenhai Temple near Chongwenmen, this ox was regarded as one of Beijing's “Three Treasures for Subduing the Waters.”

In addition to the ox carving beneath the bridge, a pavilion once stood above it. On nights of the full moon in the lunar calendar, the moon would appear directly over the pavilion, its reflection shimmering across the water below. Pedestrians crossing the bridge felt as though they were walking through moonlight, a scene locals referred to as “Moon Viewing at Desheng Bridge,” later ranked among the Ten Popular Scenic



▲ Desheng Bridge

Views of Shichahai. Here, the poetic phrase “moonlight like water” seemed almost real.

A small temple stands on the east side of the northern end of Desheng Bridge. Above its main gate, a stone plaque bears the inscription “Yongquan Nunnery.” A nearby sign explains its history: the temple was originally constructed during the Chenghua reign (1465–1487) of the Ming Dynasty and rebuilt in 1705, the 44th year of the Kangxi

era (1662–1722). Facing south, it features a compact two-courtyard layout. Earlier this year, following restoration work, it reopened as a golden *nanmu* art museum. Within the courtyard are finely crafted pieces of golden *nanmu* furniture and wood carvings, each characterised by simple yet expressive lines. Inside the main hall, *nanmu* furnishings and scholarly antiques are carefully arranged, showcasing refined craftsmanship. One

especially remarkable artefact is a millennium-old *nanmu* wood knot shaped uncannily like the river-taming ox beneath Desheng Bridge. A century-old tree rises above the courtyard, its broad branches lending the ancient site a quiet vitality.

Across the bridge stands Zhenwu Temple, an even older structure whose origins can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907). At that time, the waters of Shichahai were broad and calm. To honour Zhenwu Dadi (“Truly Valiant Great Emperor”), the Taoist deity associated with the north and with water control, local residents built this temple. Believed to calm floods and protect nearby communities, Zhenwu Temple became a place where people prayed for peace and safety. Arranged along a north-south axis, the temple contains a main hall flanked by eastern and western side halls, creating an orderly and solemn layout. The roof beams inside are original and centuries old; although their painted decorations have faded, traces of their former splendour remain visible. Outside stands a Qing Dynasty stele whose “Record of Reconstruction” inscription is still clearly legible, each carved stroke bearing witness to layers of history.

▼ A reconstructed scene of historical Jishuitan at the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing



▼ Yinding (Silver Ingot) Bridge



▲ Wanning Bridge

Together, these two modest temples and the ancient bridge form one of Shichahai's most compact and captivating historic ensembles: "One Bridge, Two Temples."

Continuing along the northern shore of Houhai leads to Guanghua Temple, one of the most renowned monasteries in urban Beijing. Originally built during the Yuan Dynasty, it flourished throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties and became widely known across the capital. Today, it serves as the headquarters of the Beijing Buddhist Association. Usually closed to the public, the temple opens only on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, as well as during major Buddhist festivals, earning it a reputation as one of Beijing's most secluded temples. The complex is highly symmetrical, divided into central, western and eastern courtyards containing more than 300 rooms. Linked by covered corridors, it exemplifies the distinctive architectural style of "a courtyard within a courtyard."

The central courtyard forms the heart of the temple, while the main axis links the entrance gate, the Hall of Heavenly Kings, the Five Buddha Hall (Main Hall) and the Scripture Tower. Bell and drum towers stand

on either side, alongside halls dedicated to guardian deities and patriarchs, creating a solemn and dignified atmosphere. Above the arched gateway hangs a golden plaque inscribed "Imperially Bestowed Guanghua Temple," flanked by sturdy stone lions. The roofs are finished with grey half-round ridge tiles and hip-and-gable ends, while *dougong* (interlocking wooden brackets) and window frames display careful carving. Inside, the Buddha statues project a sense of quiet solemnity. Ancient cypresses and scholar trees cast shade across the courtyards, and bronze bells and wooden fish hang within the side corridors. Murals depicting landscapes, flowers and Buddhist stories line the walls, their colours faded yet their details still precise. Although surrounded by lively hutongs, the temple's morning bells and evening drumbeats continue to separate sacred calm from the bustle of the outside world.

Linking Houhai and Qianhai is Yinding Bridge, the most celebrated bridge in Shichahai. Named for its resemblance to an inverted silver ingot, it marks the famous viewpoint known as "Viewing the Western Hills from Yinding Bridge," one of the legendary "Eight Scenic Spots of Old Beijing."

This small single-arch stone bridge is paved with smooth white-blue stone slabs, creating a level and comfortable crossing. Its railings are simple and unadorned, their clean lines revealing the natural texture of the stone, worn by time yet still conveying a quiet elegance.

On clear days, standing at the bridge's centre and gazing west reveals the silhouette of the Western Hills, with distant peaks dark as ink and nearby waters veiled in mist. This elegant vista defines "Viewing the Western Hills from Yinding Bridge." Even today, the bridge remains Shichahai's most popular viewing spot, crowded with visitors leaning on the railings or posing for photos while enjoying Beijing's distinctive waterside charm.

South along the eastern shore of Qianhai, just west of Wanning Bridge, stands Huode Zhenjun Temple, Beijing's oldest and highest-ranking imperial temple dedicated to the Fire God. Founded in AD 632 during the Tang Dynasty's Zhenguan era (AD 627–649), it holds important ritual and folk significance. Although the temple faces south, its main gate opens eastward to accommodate pilgrims. At the entrance

stands a colourful *pailou* (memorial archway) with layered brackets and upturned eaves framing the front courtyard.

Turning left past the gate leads visitors to the temple's central axis. The front hall, Lingguan Hall, guards the sanctuary, while deeper inside stands Yinghuo Hall, dedicated to the Fire God (Huode Yinghuo Xingjun), portrayed with a red face, three eyes and an imposing presence. The hall's most remarkable feature is its gilded octagonal caisson ceiling, where a coiled dragon clasps the Xuanyuan Mirror in its jaws, a rare example of refined craftsmanship in Beijing's ancient architecture. Beyond stand Doumu Tower and Wansui Jingming Tower, both once bearing imperial plaques from Emperor Qianlong (reign: 1735–1796). Side corridors formerly led to a waterside pavilion overlooking Shichahai.

Numerous ancient steles record centuries of repairs and rituals associated with the temple. For more than a millennium, incense has continued burning there, and pilgrims still arrive to offer prayers.

At the eastern tip of Qianhai, water flows gently beneath Jinding Bridge and Wanning Bridge into the old Yuhe River. The Yuhe River formed the urban section of the Yuan-era Tonghui River. During the Ming Dynasty, it became known as the "Imperial River," before officially receiving the name "Yuhe River" during the Qing Dynasty. It served as the final stretch of the Grand Canal into Jishuitan, the "last kilometre" of the canal route. From Wanning Bridge on Shichahai's eastern shore, it wound through alleys, passed Dongbuya Bridge and followed present-day Beiheyuan and Nanheyuan Streets southward to join the Tonghui River near Zhengyangmen.

Built in 1285, the 22nd year of the Zhiyuan era (1264–1294) of the Yuan Dynasty, Wanning Bridge was originally wooden before later being rebuilt in stone. Its name, meaning "10,000 years of peace and stability," reflects hopes for lasting prosperity. Most importantly, the bridge marks the intersection of the Grand Canal and the Beijing Central Axis, giving it exceptional historical significance.

Wanning Bridge's most striking features

are the river-taming beasts positioned along its banks. Tradition holds that six such creatures flank the bridge: two on each shore and two submerged west of the bridge, facing their counterparts on land. Between each pair rests a dragon pearl, forming the classic composition of "two dragons playing with a pearl."

These beasts share a consistent design: flat mouths, upturned snouts, round eyes, flowing manes, clawed limbs, scaled bodies and sturdy tails that project authority. The four onshore figures differ in posture. Those east of the bridge crouch at the edge, gazing westward toward the current, while those on the western side cling vertically to the embankment as if silently guarding the waterway.

The beast on the north-eastern bank is especially significant. Beneath its jaw is an inscription dating it to "the ninth month of the fourth year of the Zhiyuan era" (1267), making it a rare surviving relic from the Yuan Dynasty, though weathered beyond detail. The remaining beasts were reconstructed during Ming Dynasty restorations, creating a visual dialogue between stonework from different dynasties.

Along the northern and southern embankments lie ruins of ancient hydraulic works. During the Yuan Dynasty, 11 sluices were built along the Tonghui River, including

Chengqing Sluice, which had upper, middle and lower gates. The upper gate once stood beside Wanning Bridge. Today, foundation remains and carved grooves survive on both banks, alongside broken stone blocks believed to be parts of the sluice mechanism. Nearby are fragments of winch stones once used to raise and lower the gates. The middle and lower gates formerly stood at Dongbuya and Wangyun bridges, where only archaeological traces remain today.

East of Wanning Bridge, the river winds toward Dongbuya Bridge, once the site of Chengqing Middle Sluice, which played a vital role in regulating water levels for barge traffic. At its height, closing the gate raised the water level, and once enough had accumulated, reopening it released a surge of water and movement, with boats, voices and rushing currents combining in a lively rhythm.

During the Yuan Dynasty, the Yuhe River served as an official waterway dedicated to canal transport. Its banks were lined with stone, while the river itself featured broad waters, clear currents and a steady flow. Rice, silk, porcelain and tea flowed continuously from southern China through the Grand Canal into Jishuitan before being distributed across the city, making the Yuhe River an economic lifeline of Dadu.

During the Ming Dynasty, parts of the Yuhe River were enclosed within

▼ Huode Zhenjun (Fire God) Temple





▲ A section of the old waterway of the Yuhe River

the expanded Imperial City, reducing its transport role as it became a scenic and drainage channel for the imperial family. During the Qing Dynasty, the channel narrowed and was lined with homes and offices, serving daily needs such as washing and drawing water. By the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period (1912–1949), neglect caused siltation and pollution, ending navigation. In 1956, the river was filled in and converted into an underground culvert beneath new roads and buildings, disappearing after seven centuries.

In 2007, archaeological excavations began along the former Yuhe River. Over the following year, workers uncovered important relics from the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, including riverbanks, Dongbuya Bridge, Chengqing Middle Sluice, Yuhe Nunnery and old wharves, helping reconstruct the river's historical evolution.

A decade later, the former course of the Yuhe River was revitalised. Restored as the Tonghui River–Yuhe River Site Park,

it recreates the historic scene of “water threading through alleyways.” Divided by Ping’an Street into northern and southern sections, the northern stretch borders Nanluoguxiang and is surrounded by historic residences and lively hutongs. Buildings along the banks were restored in the Ming and Qing style, with grey tiles and brick walls that evoke an older Beijing. Wooden footbridges, curved walkways, waterside pavilions, reeds and rockeries enrich the scenery. West of Fuxiang Hutong, a white marble bridge reveals an excavated section of the original riverbed discovered in 2007 and preserved in situ. Nearby stand the restored Yuhe Nunnery, unearthed steles and traditional courtyards of Dongbuyaqiao Hutong.

South of Ping’an Street, the scenery changes, with shallower water, gentler currents and viewing platforms extending over the surface. Quiet lanes and traditional courtyards create a tranquil atmosphere. Along the southern bank, five copper relief walls depict the Grand

Canal’s journey from Baifu Spring and the Tonghui River to Tongzhou, Tianjin, Yangzhou and Zhenjiang. Crafted in high-relief purple copper, they condense canal culture into a visual epic. Walking beside the Yuhe River offers visitors a glimpse into the Grand Canal’s broader hydrological and cultural systems.

In 2014, China’s Grand Canal was inscribed on UNESCO’s *World Heritage List*, with Shichahai and the Yuhe River recognised as core components. In recent years, Beijing has strengthened water restoration and heritage conservation efforts, further highlighting the city’s enduring identity as one shaped by water.

### Granaries Sustaining Livelihoods

Following the ancient course of the Yuhe River eastward, the waterway grows calmer and the clamour of canal

vessels gradually fades. Yet in earlier times, the canal’s role extended far beyond transportation alone. Goods arriving in the city still required safekeeping and storage, both essential to sustaining the capital’s daily operation. A comprehensive and highly organised storage system gradually developed alongside the waterway, ensuring a steady supply of daily necessities and supporting the city’s long-term functionality.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Beijing developed a “Thirteen Granaries in the Capital and Tongzhou” layout, with granaries located both inside and outside the city walls. These facilities stored grain transported north from the south via the Grand Canal. Among them, Nanxin Granary, situated at present-day Dongsi Shitiao in Dongcheng District, remains the largest surviving example from that period.

Nanxin Granary originated during the Ming Dynasty and was constructed upon the existing foundations of the Yuan Dynasty’s Taicang Granary. Its primary purpose was to store staple grains, particularly rice and beans. The complex used the *ao* as its basic unit. Early layouts featured three bays per *ao*, though this was later expanded to five bays per unit. The adjustment improved administrative efficiency while enhancing ventilation and reducing dampness. At its peak, the complex contained more than 70 individual granaries, stretching in an unbroken expanse that created an imposing sight across the surrounding landscape.

Granary construction emphasised pure utility over ornamentation. Their walls, constructed from bricks roughly 1.5 m thick, tapered from a narrower top to a broader base, keeping the interior warm in winter and cool in summer, much like an ancient “constant-temperature space.” Each unit space incorporated three specialised features near its roof. Bamboo-woven partition openings functioned as ventilators while also preventing birds from entering. Beneath the wooden flooring, an underfloor ventilation layer helped keep the grain dry. The Granary God Temple, the Alarm Bell Tower and *Jitongku* (a fire-prevention security system, further reinforced by an on-

site garrison patrol station.

In the latter half of the Qing Dynasty, the decline of canal transport reduced the need for extensive granary storage, leading to the partial abandonment of some facilities. Nanxin Granary, however, remained in continuous use, with its function later expanding to include periods as an armoury. Today, its surviving unit spaces reveal layers of historical materials, including Ming bricks, Qing stone foundations, Republic of China period slogans and modern fixtures.

Today, nine unit spaces survive within Nanxin Granary, making it one of the capital’s relatively intact ancient storage complexes. In 2013, the site was designated a key cultural relic protection unit at the national level. Its significance

lies not only in the surviving architecture itself, but also in the canal-transport legacy it represents and the former operational model of the city it reflects.

Nanxin Granary has since been transformed into a multifunctional cultural and leisure zone, incorporating exhibition halls, restaurants and cultural spaces within its original fabric.

The true significance of the canal system, extending from its headwaters through the city’s waterways to the granaries, is only now being fully appreciated. Waterways functioned as arteries of transport, while granaries acted as repositories for the grain they carried, together forming the core logistical framework of historic Beijing.

▼ Nanxin Granary Culture Museum



▼ A bronze *ding* vessel from Nanxin Granary



## An Ancient Pagoda: the Symbol of Tongzhou

Historically, the canal's waters broadened as they flowed east towards Nanxin Granary. Within the granaries lining the route, grain was carefully stored. Beyond Beijing's walls, the waterways extended to Tongzhou, the northernmost point of the Grand Canal. This location marked the end of canal transport and the final major gateway before reaching the capital.

As vessels approached, the imposing Randeng (Dipankara) Pagoda, rather than the city walls or wharf, dominated the first view. Its silhouette rose prominently above

the vast plain. This striking scene, known as "An Ancient Pagoda Soars into the Clouds," is recognised as the foremost of the "Eight Scenic Views of Tongzhou."

For canal boatmen journeying north, the pagoda served not only as a spiritual site but also as an important navigational landmark. After long voyages, the sight of its distant silhouette signalled the approach of Tongzhou, bringing a reassuring sense of safety and relief.

Originally built during the Northern Zhou Dynasty (AD 557–581), Randeng Pagoda underwent major changes over the centuries. It was renovated during the Tang Dynasty's Zhenguan era and later reconstructed during the Liao Dynasty's

Chongxi era (1032–1055). Additional repairs took place throughout the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, despite the pagoda suffering earthquake damage during this period. In modern times, its main structure was carefully restored, preserving its iconic appearance. The present octagonal pagoda stands about 56 m tall, with a 13-storey main body featuring multiple eaves and a brick-and-wood structure. It remains one of Beijing's largest surviving ancient pagodas, rising prominently along the canal.

A closer look at the pagoda reveals copper bells hanging from the eaves of each storey, their clear chimes echoing in the breeze. Intricately carved brick *dougong* brackets are layered with careful precision

beneath the eaves, where more than 100 Vajrapani figures appear in distinct poses. One especially remarkable feature is the elm tree growing from the tiles near the top of the main structure. Having endured centuries of wind and rain, its twisted branches create a unique natural spectacle upon the pagoda.

Randeng Pagoda is far from an isolated monument along the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal. It is recognised as one of the "Four Famous Pagodas of the Grand Canal," alongside the Buddhist Relic Pagoda in Linqing, Wenfeng Pagoda in Yangzhou and Liuhe Pagoda in Hangzhou, serving as an important landmark along the north–south waterway. Nearby stand the Confucian



▲ Daguang Tower

▼ The illuminated night view of Tongzhou's "Three Temples and One Pagoda" landmarks



Temple, Youshengjiao Temple and Ziqing Palace. Representing Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, respectively, the three sites are distinct yet closely situated. Spatially, they are arranged in the form of the Chinese character "品." The Confucian Temple occupies one position, while Youshengjiao Temple and Ziqing Palace stand at either side, forming a visual balance with the pagoda. Historically, Tongzhou, as a major centre of canal transport, attracted a constant flow of people and a blending of different beliefs. This unique arrangement gradually developed from that historical environment.

A short distance from Randeng Pagoda, at the confluence of the North Canal and the Tonghui River, a striking tower stands prominently beside the water. This imposing structure is known as Daguang Tower.

Unlike the taller Randeng Pagoda, Daguang Tower derived its importance from its strategic location. It was built in 1528, the seventh year of the Jiajing era (1521–1567) of the Ming Dynasty, by Wu Zhong, Imperial Censor of the Granaries responsible for grain inspection. As a result, it became known as the "Building for Grain Inspection." All vessels arriving from the south along the Grand Canal were required to stop here, unload their grain cargoes and undergo careful inspection, weighing and registration before continuing northward.

Historically, the tower provided an ideal vantage point for monitoring and directing boat traffic. Upon arrival, vessels slowed for unloading, inspection and rechecking.

With the decline of canal transport in the late Qing Dynasty and the arrival of railways around 1901, Shiba Wharf became obsolete, rendering Daguang Tower's original function unnecessary. Throughout the 20th century, Tongzhou's water conservancy infrastructure continued to evolve. After the construction of the old Beiguan Flood Diversion Centre, the area took on new water-management functions, though urban expansion increasingly placed pressure on these ageing systems. A major modernisation project took place in 2007 with the construction of the new Beiguan Flood Diversion Centre downstream. Historical elements were carefully incorporated into the redesign, leading to the reconstruction of Daguang Tower and its return as a prominent canal landmark.

Today, the tower, enlarged in scale yet traditional in form, prominently features its plaque and layered *dougong* brackets. It now serves as an important management building for local water conservancy projects while also enriching the canal's cultural landscape and preserving its historical character for public appreciation.



▲ Stone carving and statue of a water-suppressing mythical beast on Tongyun Bridge

## Zhangjiawan: a Historic Town by the Canal

Beyond Daguang Tower, the course of the waterway became less direct. The river curved gently, and its current noticeably slowed. The former mooring site of Zhangjiawan now lies hidden within the fabric of modern villages and towns.

South of Tongzhou's urban area, this ancient town, located more than 10 km away, still retains much of its historical character. Although the course of the North Canal has shifted and its waters no longer flow through the town, its historic name and landscape remain. Traces of the old layout are still visible, while the enduring relationship between bridges, settlements, waterways and villages offers visitors a glimpse into the canal's former operations.

The name Zhangjiawan has long been closely associated with water. After the Yuan Dynasty established its capital at Dadu, canal transport became essential to sustaining the city. In 1283, the 20th year of the Zhiyuan era, the imperial court initiated extensive sea transport. Grain from Jiangnan was shipped via Tianjin to the Baihe River before moving upstream towards the capital. However, the shallow waters and numerous shoals south of Tongzhou impeded further progress. Vessels frequently paused at Zhangjiawan to unload their cargo for transfer to land transport. This important junction gradually developed into a major meeting point between water and land routes.

Over time, Zhangjiawan grew into an important hub within the canal network, eventually earning the historical reputation of being "the largest wharf in eastern Beijing."

Today, although Zhangjiawan has long since lost the bustle of its heyday, traces of its historic role still remain across the landscape. Its most striking landmark is Tongyun Bridge, which arches gracefully over the former canal bed.

Historical records indicate that Tongyun Bridge was originally a wooden structure before being rebuilt in stone in 1605, the 21st year of the Wanli era of the Ming Dynasty. Its roadway is paved with stone slabs of varying sizes and colours, each preserving subtle traces of repairs carried out over the centuries. The balustrades still display clearly visible relief carvings, including lotus leaves, ornate vases and other decorative motifs rendered in a simple style. These designs not only add visual appeal but also carry auspicious symbolism.

On either side of the bridge, rows of balusters are punctuated by stone lions in a variety of poses. Some are shown kicking a ball, while others cradle cubs, each carved with lively expressions that bring the stone figures to life. At the bridgehead, a short section of the parapet curves gently inward, a subtle mark left by generations of farmers who once sharpened their knives against the stone. Over time, the repeated strokes wore the surface into a visible arc, leaving behind a tangible trace of everyday labour. Beneath the bridge, four massive water-suppressing mythical beasts occupy the corners. Their imposing scale was intended to protect the waterway. Although the sculptures have suffered damage over the centuries, their outlines remain clearly recognisable.

When visitors look north from the bridge, the remains of an ancient city wall come into view. The Ancient City of Zhangjiawan was originally built to protect the granaries and secure the transport routes passing through the area. During the Zhengtong era (1436–1449) of the Ming Dynasty, the imperial court established Tongji Granary there to relieve the surplus of grain

stored in Tongzhou. By the Jiajing era, border unrest had become increasingly frequent, and a fortified city was constructed on the site to defend against incursions by northern cavalry. Because reclaimed materials were readily available and the location was strategically important, construction progressed rapidly and was completed within only a few months. Although modest in scale, the city was closely integrated with the surrounding waterways and warehouses, forming a coordinated system of defence and transport.

Over time, Zhangjiawan's role expanded far beyond that of a simple trans-shipment wharf, gradually developing into a thriving market town and settled community. The movement of boatmen and merchants also encouraged the growth of eateries, workshops and guild halls, which together developed into a sizeable town community.

The movement of people also fostered a convergence of cultures. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, envoys from Ryukyu

and other foreign states travelling to the capital often disembarked at Zhangjiawan. Those who fell ill and died while awaiting passage were buried there, leaving behind burial sites that can still be seen today. In addition, many temples were established throughout the town to serve different communities. As a result, Zhangjiawan functioned not only as a centre for the exchange and distribution of goods but also as a lively hub of cultural interaction.

The continuity of everyday life has endured alongside this history. Traditional customs, including temple fairs and distinctive stilt-walking performances, have been passed down through generations in Zhangjiawan. Although the once-expansive "Ten-Li Street" market has dwindled in size, surviving folk rituals and intangible cultural heritage performances still preserve echoes of the town's former vitality.

Zhangjiawan stood at the junction of water and land routes, where vessels unloaded, transferred and redirected

cargoes in coordination with Tongzhou's warehouses and the grain inspections at Daguang Tower.

Today, Zhangjiawan is quieter. The river has shifted course, and the old wharf has disappeared. Yet fragments of the city wall remain, and a stone bridge still spans the water beside recognisable historic structures.

When canal traffic ceased, the waterway fell quiet but did not disappear. Its traces remain throughout the city in old riverbeds, ancient bridges, granaries, Randeng Pagoda and fragments of city walls, all still reflecting the former order and rhythm of the canal's enduring legacy.

Tracing these legacies, visitors witness not only the course of a south-north waterway but also the gradual formation of the city's layout, shaped not overnight, but through the steady flow of water across centuries.

The sound of flowing water may fade, but its cultural legacy endures.

▼ Tongyun Bridge in Zhangjiawan





# Artefacts Reveal the Grand Canal's Timeless Tales

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Tong Tianyi

The meandering Grand Canal, a flowing cultural artery, stands as a vivid testament to the prosperity and flourishing of the Chinese nation. The northern terminus of the canal, located in Beijing's Tongzhou District, is not only a thriving symbol of the Grand Canal's enduring legacy but also home to numerous precious cultural relics that bear witness to its changing fortunes. Like brilliant pearls, these relics reflect the deep connection between the Grand Canal and Beijing, narrating both the past and present of the canal's Beijing section and the enduring stories carried along its waters.



▲ The Canal Transport Wharf in Tongzhou

## Secret Symbols and the Tracking of Canal Grain

More than a decade ago, the television drama series *Canal Transport Wharf*, which chronicled the history of canal transportation, offered many fascinating historical details. In one scene, for example, a quality inspector for canal-transported grain (*Junliang Jingji*) loses a folding fan marked with secret symbols during a rendezvous with the daughter of Tielin, the Canal Warehouse Governor. Stricken with alarm, the governor laments, “Do you comprehend the trouble this fan will cause across the Grand Canal, and the number of lives it will tragically claim?”

This legendary fan, a relic from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), is displayed at the Tongzhou Museum. Although its frame has long since disappeared, the yellowed, mould-stained paper survives as a rare testament to canal transport and is regarded as one of the museum’s “treasures.”

At the height of canal transport during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing

dynasties, Tongzhou bustled with over 30,000 vessels arriving annually from the south. These vessels carried southern goods to the capital. The constant stream of heavily laden arrivals and empty departing vessels created a spectacular scene, truly embodying a “gathering of ten thousand vessels.”

Upon arrival at Tongzhou wharf, canal-transported grain underwent inspection and storage under the supervision of the *Junliang Jingji* (not government officials, but officially recognised civilian quality inspectors). Their folding fans, marked with secret symbols, served as work permits, authorising them to board vessels for inspection and collection duties.

Beyond its original purpose, the folding fan carried significant responsibilities. Its primary functions were accountability and fraud prevention. After quality inspections, grain was packed into bags, which inspectors marked with charcoal to signify approval and personal responsibility for the grain’s condition.

The system resembled a modern “one-code traceability” method, in which a unique QR code reveals a product’s history. If problems later emerged with inspected grain, the responsible inspector could be identified through the secret symbol marked on the bag. Because these symbols were highly confidential, they also served as an effective anti-counterfeiting measure, making forgery exceptionally difficult.

During the Qing Dynasty, 100 inspectors oversaw canal-transported grain, each assigned a unique secret symbol. The fan preserved at the museum displays all 100 symbols carefully arranged across both sides of *xuan* paper, forming an artwork resembling both drawing and calligraphy. Each symbol contains two elements: an upper “body” for marking and a lower “name,” serving as the inspector’s code rather than a personal name. Examples include Fenghuang, Zhaoli, Heizi and Luoguo. Many symbols drew inspiration from local Tongzhou culture. The “Tongzhou” symbol appears as two parallel crosses,

while “Xiaolou” resembles catfish whiskers, referencing the local delicacy Xiaolou Braised Catfish. “Wangma” consists of crossed diagonal lines inspired by the famous Wangmazi Scissors. Other symbols incorporate motifs such as lotus seed pods, pomegranates and grapes, reflecting the close relationship between these coded markings and everyday life in Tongzhou.

This unique folding fan, donated by Chen Naiwen, bears 100 symbols and offers valuable insight into Grand Canal culture and the former prosperity of the Canal Transport Wharf.

## A Three-Century-Old Notice for Rectifying Canal Transport

Another artefact associated with these inspectors is preserved at Tongzhou Museum: a notice dating from 1726, during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng (1722–1735). Although the paper is aged and slightly damaged, the hundreds of Chinese characters written in still-legible script provide a valuable historical record.

The 1726 notice exposed bribery, extortion and abuses of power among canal grain inspectors during the Yongzheng era, highlighting the severe overcharging of provisions. During the

Qing Dynasty, most grain carriers were military personnel earning scant wages; after arduous journeys to Tongzhou, they still endured relentless exploitation at the hands of such inspectors.

Upon reaching Tongzhou, the inspectors served as the first gatekeepers of the grain consignments. Clearance depended entirely on their judgement. If the requisite palm-greasing proved insufficient, the cargo would fail both quality and quantity inspections.

During the era when grain was transported to the capital via the canal, its weight was measured using an official *hu*, a standard measuring vessel. The chief weighman would announce the total aloud, a practice known as “*changhu*” or “calling out the weight.” When the vessel appeared full, some inspectors struck it, causing the grain on top to collapse, an act called “*tihu*” or “giving a kick to the measuring vessel.” The number and force of these kicks were often deliberate. If a carrier failed to provide sufficient palm greasing, part of the consignment could be rejected, forcing the transporter to make up the deficit with additional grain.

The “*linjian*” technique involved deliberately maintaining an uneven surface on the grain pile. This practice allowed the grain to rise above the horizontal plane of the measuring vessel,

## How Did the Ancients Inspect and Weigh the Grain Transported by the Canal?



### Grain Inspection Tray

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, when canal vessels docked at Tongzhou’s earth-and-stone grain terminals, cargo was transferred into cedar wood trays shaped like buckets for inspection. If the grain appeared dry, white and clean, it was deemed acceptable, then weighed, bagged, marked with the inspector’s secret symbol in charcoal and placed into storage.



### Stone Weights

A *shiquan*, a stone weight used in bulk trade, exemplifies historic measuring practices. Recent discoveries in Tongzhou have uncovered numerous large stone weights dating from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Many bear the inscription “Guanfa” (“official weight”), confirming official manufacture and highlighting the region’s canal-transport heritage.

▼ A folding fan bearing the secret symbols of *Junliang Jingji* (a grain quality inspector)



increasing the measured quantity each time. Once the vessel was filled, a scraper was drawn across the surface. Under normal circumstances, a straight blade would be used, but some inspectors instead employed a crescent-shaped tool to maximise yield. When the convex side faced upward, the grain formed a concave surface; when the concave side faced upward, the surface became convex. This deliberate reversal created a significant discrepancy in measured volume, which inspectors could exploit for personal profit.

To curb corruption within the canal transport system, Emperor Yongzheng issued a strict edict forbidding arbitrary levies. The emperor reminded officials of their duties: to manage affairs rigorously, protect the interests of transporters and prevent the covert sale of canal-transported grain caused by excessive charges. The decree also warned that any breach or negligence would incur severe punishment. This very notice, now displayed at the Tongzhou Museum, contains those directives. Originally, such proclamations were posted at numerous docks; the survival of one example to the present day is truly extraordinary.

## Bricks and Stones: How the Canal Built Old Beijing

An old Beijing saying goes, "The city of Beijing drifted here," meaning that its building materials arrived via the Grand Canal. Whether expanding Zhongdu during the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), constructing Dadu in the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) or developing Beijing throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, enormous quantities of bricks, stone and timber were required, most of them transported from distant regions.

The permanent exhibition "Historical and Cultural Exhibition of Beijing and the Grand Canal" at the Grand Canal Museum displays numerous bricks and stones transported to the capital via the man-made waterway. Among the exhibits are a city brick inscribed "Made in Linqing in the 15th year of Emperor Jiajing's reign" and a Great Wall brick marked "Made in Dezhou." The highlight is a "gold brick" bearing the inscription "Made in the 14th year of Emperor Guangxu, a fine two-*chi*-square specimen."

In fact, the "gold brick" was not made of the precious metal, but was a floor tile

once used in Beijing's imperial palaces and altars during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its name derived from its jade-like sheen, dense and uniform texture and the clear metallic ring it produced when struck. During these dynasties, such floor tiles were essential building materials in the construction of Beijing. Because the firing process was so intricate, people at the time said that "one brick was worth one tael of gold."

For the Forbidden City, the floor tiles known as "gold bricks" were produced in Suzhou, Jiangsu, using carefully selected Taihu Lake clay. Their manufacture involved dozens of meticulously controlled stages carried out over nearly two years to achieve the exacting quality required. Dimensions varied according to the rank of the structure, with common sizes including one *chi* seven *cun* (54 cm), two *chi* (64 cm) and two *chi* two *cun* (71 cm). The most prestigious halls, such as the Hall of Supreme Harmony, were paved exclusively with the two-*chi* and two-*cun* tiles.

The kilns that fired the "gold bricks" were located more than 500 kilometres (km) from their final destination in Beijing, with production centred in

Suzhou, Jiangsu. Once completed, the tiles were shipped north along the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal to Tongzhou, then transported onward to the capital. Each brick bore a detailed production stamp recording the year of manufacture, the names of supervisors and kiln owners and the tile's specifications. The example displayed at the Grand Canal Museum carries the inscription "14th year of the Guangxu Era (1888)" and "two-*chi*-square," along with side markings naming the overseeing officials and recording the precise firing date; workshop trade names also remain visible. These cultural relics vividly illustrate the enduring connection between the Grand Canal and Beijing's architectural splendour.

## Delivered Precious Porcelain Wares by the Grand Canal

Alongside the "gold bricks," the Grand Canal also carried porcelain treasures. At the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing, a recreated scene of a Yuan Dynasty wharf at Jishuitan features a porcelain shop. Nearby, a full-scale barge replica appears to drift among shimmering reflections, surrounded on all sides by exquisite wares. These finely crafted pieces highlight the canal's vital role in linking northern and southern China through trade and cultural exchange.

Among the highlights of the collection is a hexagonal vase from Jingdezhen dating to the Qianlong era (1736–1796), featuring a famille rose exterior and a blue-and-white interior, with hollowed flower-and-fruit reliefs. Standing about 40 cm tall, it represents the pinnacle of Qing porcelain artistry and remains a cherished national treasure.

This porcelain vessel is exceptionally rare, with only two known examples surviving worldwide. One is housed at the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing, while the other belongs to a private museum in Taiwan, China. Its double-walled form combines famille rose enamels, vibrant colours and intricate hollowed flower-and-fruit motifs. Firing such a nested vase presented immense technical challenges. Through the six openings, the inner blue-and-white decoration remains clearly visible, revealing remarkable craftsmanship. The motifs and glazes also blend Chinese and Western artistic styles, standing as a testament to an ingenious cross-cultural design.

Legends surround this masterpiece. Conceived in 1743 during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, the vases were created by Tang Ying (1682–1756), supervisor of porcelain in Jingdezhen, to court imperial favour through experimental wares later regarded as the pinnacle of Chinese porcelain artistry. Only two survived the perilous firing process. Admired by the emperor, they adorned Yuanmingyuan's Xiyanglou. Tragically, both were looted by Anglo-French forces in 1860.

In 1988, one vase appeared at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong and was acquired by the Chang Foundation



“ The hexagonal vase from Jingdezhen dating to the Qianlong era, featuring a famille rose exterior and a blue-and-white interior, with hollowed flower-and-fruit reliefs. Standing about 40 cm tall, it represents the pinnacle of Qing porcelain artistry and remains a cherished national treasure. ”



“ For the Forbidden City, the floor tiles known as "gold bricks" were produced in Suzhou, Jiangsu, using carefully selected Taihu clay. Their manufacture involved dozens of meticulously controlled stages carried out over nearly two years to achieve the exacting quality required. Once completed, the tiles were shipped north along the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal to Tongzhou, then transported onward to the capital. ”

the capital via the Grand Canal. Producing its vivid red glaze required kiln temperatures near 1,300 degrees Celsius, where even slight fluctuations could cause blackening. Because of this difficulty, such wares were rare. This example's bright red glaze makes it an especially prized artefact.

At the height of canal transport, both imperial and folk porcelain travelled along the Grand Canal. Many fine folk pieces, including the large, intricately decorated Blue and White Vat and Jar from the Qing Dynasty, were later unearthed in Tongzhou. These rare masterpieces are now displayed at Tongzhou Museum.

## The Prosperous Grand Canal in Scrolls

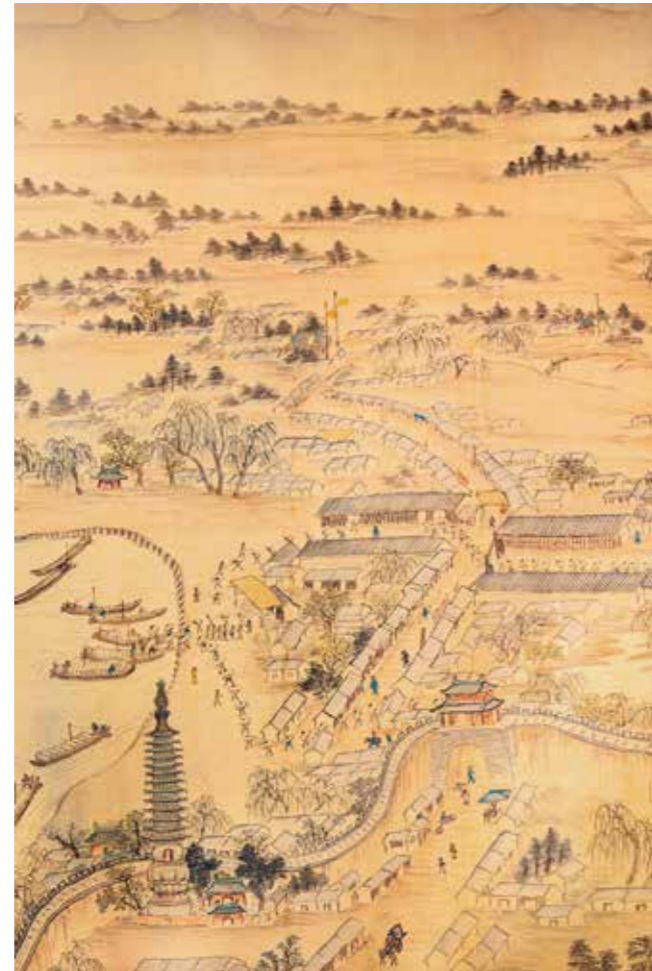
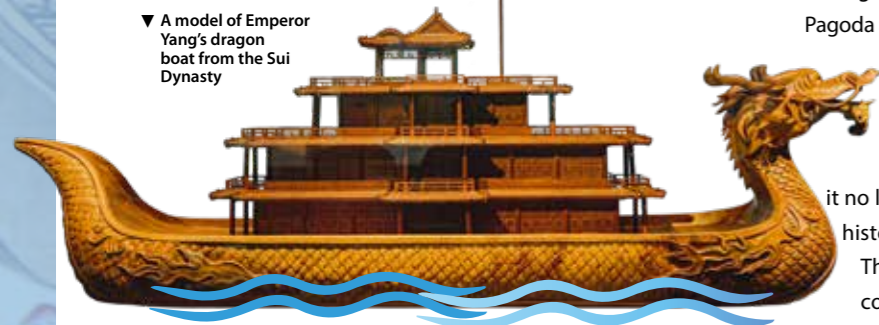
Traditional Chinese scrolls document the Grand Canal's history, particularly along the Qing Dynasty's Beijing-Hangzhou route. These paintings vividly portray landmarks and scenery, preserving a detailed visual record of the waterway's prosperous past.

Jiang Xuan's celebrated "Supervision and Transportation Scroll of the Luhe River," created during the Qianlong era, remains one of the most important depictions of historical canal life. The painting vividly portrays the bustling economy, trade and customs along the Luhe River, part of the Grand Canal. Although long believed to depict Tongzhou, recent studies suggest the scene may actually represent Tianjin's Sancha River Estuary.

Shen Yu's Qing Dynasty masterpiece, the "Scroll of the Canal Transport along the Tonghui River," depicts the Beijing section of the Grand Canal. Although the original is housed at the National Museum of China, visitors to the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing can explore the artwork through an interactive touchscreen display.

Measuring nearly 3.5 metres, this extensive painting vividly depicts Qing Dynasty grain transport from Shiba Wharf in Tongzhou, the North Canal's terminus, to the capital along the Tonghui River. The scroll features barges, canal boats, fishing craft and pleasure vessels, while also portraying locks, docks, city walls, government buildings, temples and shops. Porters, boatmen, officials and ordinary people further bring the bustling canal scene to life.

▼ A model of Emperor Yang's dragon boat from the Sui Dynasty



▲ Part of the "Scroll of Canal Transport along the Tonghui River"

Upon closely examining this remarkable scroll, visitors gain a vivid glimpse of Tongzhou's architectural landmarks, including the Daguang Tower and Randeng (Dipankara) Pagoda, alongside many fascinating smaller details. The painting features several sluice gates and dams, as well as porters carrying grain in orderly lines up flights of steps. Barges travelling upstream are hauled forward through the combined labour of trackers and livestock along the shore. In shallow, silted stretches, workers dredge the riverbed. As the waterway reaches a fork, the scene opens into a broad expanse of gently rippling water bordered by verdant willow-lined embankments. Nearby, the grand central arch of Yongtong Bridge, also known as Bali Bridge, spans the canal gracefully. Rising above the riverbank, the towering Randeng Pagoda appears as a silent witness to the history of the Tonghui River, watching over both its past and present and the enduring prosperity along its banks.

For millennia, the Grand Canal has flowed unceasingly as a vital artery of connection. Although it no longer serves its former role linking north and south, its historical and cultural significance remains enduringly vibrant. The many relics associated with this ancient waterway continue to recount the legendary story of canal transport.

## Further Reading

### An Overview of Canal Scrolls throughout the Ages



#### "Timbers Shipment on the Lugou River"

Period of Creation: Yuan Dynasty  
Painted by: Anonymous  
Housed at: The National Museum of China  
Brief Introduction: This painting vividly portrays everyday life around Lugou Bridge during the Yuan Dynasty, with particular emphasis on timber transport by water.



#### "General Sketch Map of River Management"

Period of Creation: Ming Dynasty  
Drawn by: Pan Jixun (1521-1595) and others  
Housed at: The National Museum of China  
Brief Introduction: This work was compiled under the direction of Pan Jixun, a Ming Dynasty water conservancy expert, and provided essential guidance for later generations in managing river disasters.



#### "Sketch Map of the Sources of the Grand Canal"

Period of Creation: Qing Dynasty  
Drawn by: Anonymous  
Housed at: Tongzhou Museum  
Brief Introduction: This sketch map illustrates the rivers, lakes, cities, villages, bridges, sluices and other features extending for hundreds of kilometres along the Grand Canal from Beijing to Tai'erzhuang in Shandong Province.

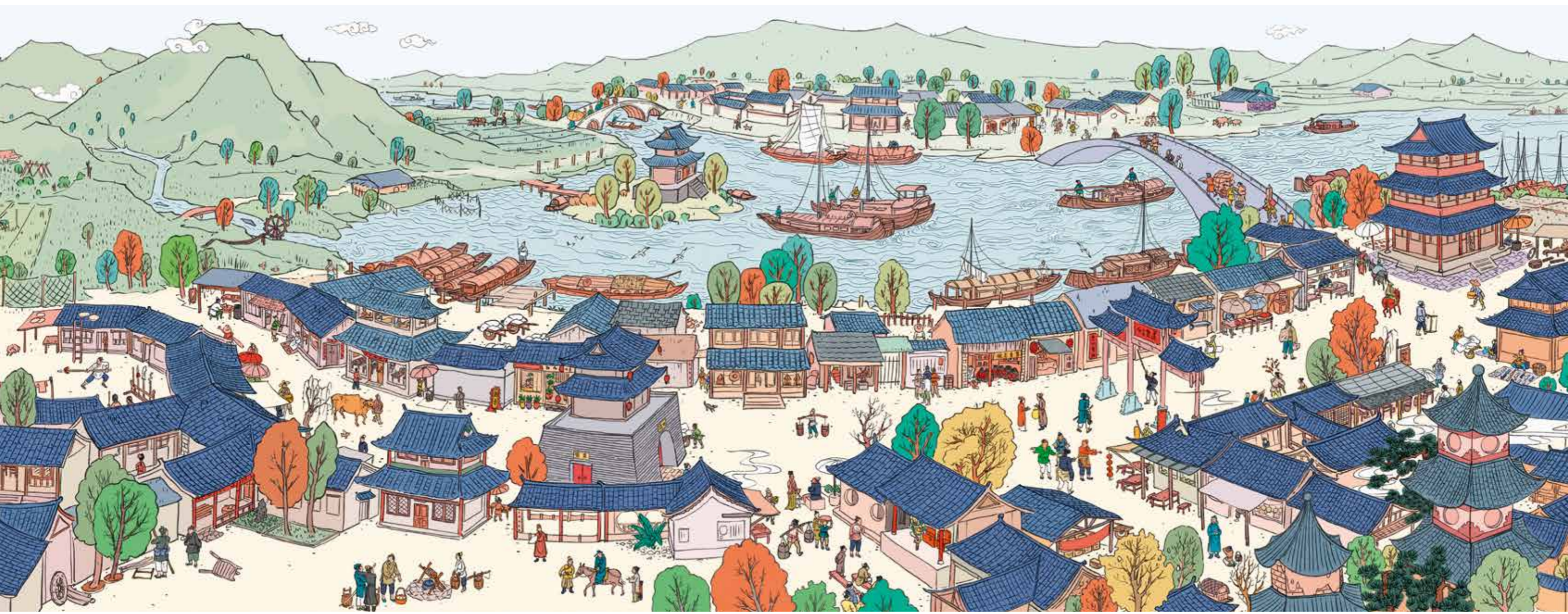
#### "Praying to a Deity for the Thawing of the Frozen Canal"

Period of Creation: Qing Dynasty  
Painted by: Huang Yue (1750-1841)  
Housed at: The National Museum of China  
Brief Introduction: The painting depicts a true story involving a Qing Dynasty court official during the Jiaqing era (1796-1821). Concerned that a frozen river would hinder his inspection of canal transport, he prayed to a deity for a safe and smooth journey.



#### "Sketch Map of the Water Conservancy of the Spring Sources for the Grand Canal in Nine Provinces"

Period of Creation: Qing Dynasty  
Drawn by: Anonymous  
Housed at: The National Library of China  
Brief Introduction: This sketch map provides a comprehensive portrayal of water conservancy along the Grand Canal, recording the waterway's condition during the prosperous era of the Qing Dynasty.



# Luminaries Connected to the Grand Canal

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi, He Rong, Wu Hui, Gong Yuexian, Zhao Shuhua

The Grand Canal's legacy is a rich tapestry woven by those who guided its course, and by foreign visitors who documented its waterways. Their varied contributions, ranging from scientific observation and public benefit to cross-cultural study, forged lasting connections with this vital artery. As a result, the canal transcends its physical form, becoming a dynamic nexus linking people and eras across time.

The canal's waters, like echoes of human voices, flow on eternally.

Historic figures who navigated its waters were like luminous stars, illuminating how this man-made waterway shaped the city and connected it to the wider world.

## Laying the Foundation for Future Development

Atop a western hill near Shichahai stands the Memorial Hall of Guo Shoujing (1231–1316). Inside, a bronze statue of the ancient engineer, map in hand, greets visitors. His keen gaze still seems to survey the city's vital water network.

This museum's four halls present the remarkable life of Guo Shoujing, a scientist from the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

Known as "Grand Historian Guo," he hailed from a scholarly lineage. His grandfather excelled in classics, history and arithmetic, with notable expertise in water engineering. Young Guo Shoujing absorbed this knowledge, combining sharp intellect with practical application. Mentored by figures such as Liu Bingzhong (1216–1274), he developed strong mathematical skills and a rigorous investigative approach, which, together with extensive fieldwork, shaped him into a distinguished water conservancy expert with both theoretical and practical know-how.

Around 1264, Guo Shoujing presented his "Six Matters Concerning Water Conservancy" to Kublai Khan (reign: 1260–1294) in Shangdu, outlining his extensive experience and water management strategies. Deeply impressed, Kublai Khan promptly appointed him "Inspector of Rivers and Canals," tasking him with overseeing water conservancy initiatives across diverse regions. Guo later became a key figure in the Zhongdu (present-day Beijing) area, holding roles such

as supervisor of canal transport along the Tonghui River.

In 1272, Kublai Khan re-designated Zhongdu as Dadu, establishing it as the Yuan Dynasty's capital. This elevation to the nation's political and economic centre increased Tongzhou's importance as the northern terminus of the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal. Southern canal boats, laden with grain and essential goods, arrived there continuously. However, transporting these supplies from Tongzhou into Dadu still relied on land, proving slow, arduous and insufficient for the city's growing needs.

After a thorough survey of Dadu's surrounding terrain and hydraulic network, Guo Shoujing proposed excavating a canal linking Tongzhou with the city's urban areas. Kublai Khan accepted the plan, issuing an edict requiring all civil and military officers below the rank of prime minister to take part in the canal's construction and the building of dams. However, digging the channel alone would not suffice; the decisive factor was securing a reliable water source to sustain a steady, unobstructed flow. The Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) had failed due to silting and insufficient inflow, and Tongzhou's low-lying position made such issues critical. Consequently, Guo conducted field investigations and identified Baifu Spring in Changping as the most suitable source.

Baifu Spring supplied exceptionally clear water with minimal sediment, making it an ideal source for diversion. However, the elevation difference between the spring and Dadu was slight, and a direct channel would have had to cross valleys and ditches,



▲ Baifu Spring

▼ Tongzhou Section of the Tonghui River



▼ A statue of Guo Shoujing



preventing the water from reaching the city. A longer route around these obstacles would have required the canal to follow the foot of the Western Hills. In an age without precise surveying tools, it was widely assumed that the hill base stood higher than the spring, meaning the water could not flow upward. As a result, this diversion route was considered impractical.

Through meticulous surveys and calculations, Guo Shoujing devised a method of measuring ground elevation by reference to sea level, demonstrating that Baifu Spring stood above the foot of the Western Hills. He routed the canal along the hillsides, bypassing low-lying sections and tapping additional springs, increasing both flow and reliability. Once completed, the water entered Wengshan Lake, present-day Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace, and then flowed south to Tongzhou, creating a vital lifeline for the capital.

In 1292, the canal linking Dadu with Tongzhou was completed, with a total length of 82 kilometres (km). Kublai Khan named it "Tonghui," meaning "benefit from canal traffic." To overcome differences in elevation, Guo Shoujing constructed 24

sluice gates and dams that followed the terrain, enabling water levels to be regulated so vessels could travel upstream and move in and out of the capital. The opening of the Tonghui River completed the final stretch of the Grand Canal, establishing it as a major north-south waterway. Vessels could then sail to Jishuitan in Dadu, and grain shipments rose sharply, from thousands of *shi* (also known as *dan*) annually to over one million *shi* (one *shi* is roughly 62.5 kilograms).

Over the long term, the Tonghui River and the Baifu water diversion scheme not only resolved Dadu's immediate water shortage but also established a lasting hydraulic foundation for the later growth of Beijing.

Guo Shoujing's contributions extended far beyond hydraulic engineering. In astronomy, he led the compilation of the *Shoushi Calendar*, whose precision was unmatched worldwide and remained in use for over 360 years. He also refined and devised a range of astronomical instruments, including a compact armilla, enhancing the accuracy and reliability of celestial observation.

Because of his remarkable scientific



▲ Pingjin Sluice

legacy, later generations have honoured Guo Shoujing in various ways. A lunar crater and an asteroid bear his name, and major Chinese astronomical observatories have been dedicated to him.

## Reviving the Grand Canal

When the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) moved its capital from Nanjing to Beijing, Zhu Di, Emperor Chengzu (reign: 1402–1424), selected Changping for the imperial mausoleum. Fearing that water diversion might disturb the site's feng shui, he issued an edict to abandon the Baifu Weir. The loss of this vital supply to the Tonghui River led to silting, and the channel gradually became choked.

It was against this backdrop that Wu Zhong (1482–1568) emerged into the historical spotlight. He faced not the arduous task of excavating a new waterway, but the pressing challenge of reviving one already lost.

In 1527, the Imperial Censor Wu

Zhong submitted a memorial to the throne, forcefully detailing the deficiencies of the Tonghui River and stressing the urgent need for its restoration. Beyond urging the reopening of the waterway, Wu carefully outlined the risks involved in the transport and storage of military grain. He warned that keeping provisions far away in Tongzhou left them vulnerable; should border unrest erupt, the enemy could strike with ease. In mountainous regions such as Miyun, where roads twist through narrow passes, a sudden Mongolian cavalry raid could see granaries seized or destroyed, placing the capital in dire straits. Deeply moved by Wu's analysis of these potential crises, Emperor Jiajing (reign: 1521–1567) instructed the Ministries of Revenue and Works to consider a response. By October of that year, the court formally authorised the dredging of the Tonghui River.

Launched in February and completed in May 1528, the project saw Wu Zhong coordinate the overall effort, completing a range of works in just a few months. He oversaw dredging the channel, erecting stone

dams, restoring sluices, constructing barges and clarifying officials' duties, giving the entire canal system a renewed appearance. Such high efficiency was hailed as a remarkable feat of the era.

During this renovation, Wu Zhong introduced substantial modifications to the existing hydraulic network. He abandoned the original downstream stretch of the

▼ *Tonghui River Annals*



Tonghui River, which had previously run from Gaoli Village into the Baihe River, and instead advanced the wharf to Tongzhou city. Between the Tonghui and Baihe rivers, he constructed a series of stone dams to facilitate the transfer of grain onto barges, allowing cargo to be transported along the river as far as Datong Bridge. As a result, the Tonghui River came to be known as the "Datong River." In terms of water conservancy infrastructure, Wu carefully adapted facilities to local conditions, refining and reconfiguring the existing system of sluices and dams. His plan retained only the lower gate of Qingfeng Sluice, both the upper and lower gates of Pingjin Sluice, the lower gate of Puji Sluice and the entirety of Liutong Sluice. In total, this arrangement comprised five gates and two dams. These measures improved water-level regulation and ensured smoother, more reliable navigation along the canal.

Thereafter, navigation flourished. Transshipment barges lined the river in dense formation, moving in shoals. Grain vessels departing from Tongzhou at dawn reached the capital by dusk, fully restoring the Tonghui River's navigability.

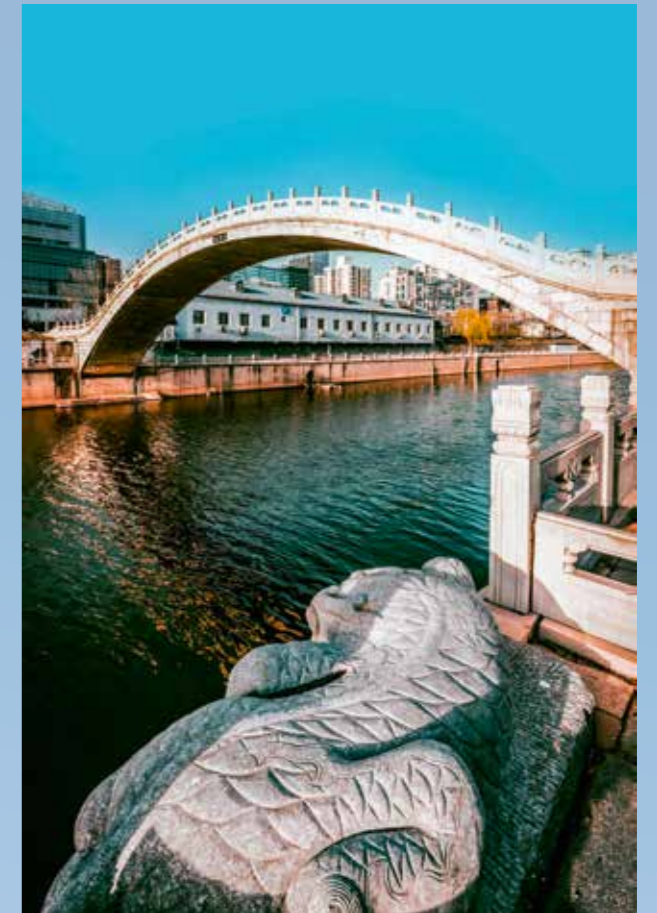
For his distinguished service, Wu Zhong received commendation and promotion, later assuming the governorship of Chuzhou in Zhejiang. En route to his post, he travelled along the Tonghui River towards Zhangjiawan in Tongzhou, where the familiar sights stirred deep emotion. Seizing the stillness of the canal journey, he consulted ancient texts and local annals, combining them with his own experience and revising where necessary. From this effort emerged the two-volume *Tonghui River Annals*, comprising over 20,000 characters, drafted upon the waters themselves and regarded as a notable episode in the long tradition of historical record-keeping.

*The Tonghui River Annals* is rigorously organised. Volume one presents maps of the waterway's source and course, then examines in detail the construction of sluices and dams, the establishment of administrative offices, the cost of refurbishing the channel and the duties of its maintenance staff, thereby providing a comprehensive record of the project and its upkeep. Volume two gathers memorials to the throne from the Jiajing era, distilling the key issues and decision-making rationale in governance.

Crucially, faced with persistently low water levels, Wu Zhong devised and implemented the "reverse-stowage scheme." Grain arriving along the canal was offloaded at an upstream gate and carried by porters to waiting vessels. This practice endured throughout the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. The "Scroll of Canal Transport along the Tonghui River" by Shen Yu of the Kangxi era (1662–1722), now preserved in the National Museum of China, depicts each stage of the process, serving as a testament to the system's lasting vitality.

To commemorate Wu Zhong's achievements, traders and local residents in Tongzhou raised funds and, in 1566, erected a shrine in his name, establishing the annual Canal Transport Festival. This tradition continued until canal traffic on the North Canal ceased at the end of the Qing Dynasty.

In April 2023 at the launch event of the consumption season



▲ Qingfeng Sluice



▲ A lion dance performance at the Grand Canal Kaicao Festival



▲ A historical scene reenactment performance at the Grand Canal Kaicao Festival

at Beijing's Municipal Administrative Centre in Tongzhou, the public witnessed the Grand Canal Transport Festival. Clad in Ming Dynasty attire, a robed "official" strides onto a stone dam with attendants, surveying the scene and issuing commands. Known today as "Wu Zhong Inspects the Dam," the performance allows contemporary audiences to honour his legacy.

## Travelling along the Grand Canal to Explore China

Beyond its role as a transport route, the Grand Canal became a hub for people and ideas, carrying grain, merchants, envoys, missionaries and travellers, who, upon arriving at Tongzhou, encountered its culture, turning the canal into a gateway showcasing Chinese civilisation.

Of all the foreign visitors, the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) formed the closest connection with the Grand Canal, meticulously documenting his observations.

Ricci's engagement with the Grand Canal began in 1598, during the reign of Emperor Wanli (1572–1620) of the Ming Dynasty, when he made his second visit to the capital. Bearing gifts such as self-chiming clocks, Western musical instruments and a glass prism, he sought to gain the emperor's favour and secure permission to spread his religion in Beijing.

In July of that year, Ricci embarked on a northbound journey from Nanjing via the Grand Canal. By early September, he reached

Zhangjiawan in Tongzhou, then a crucial transport hub for the capital. The waterway teemed with sails, and the docks bustled as goods from across the nation were exchanged. Witnessing this vibrant trade, Ricci felt a surge of anticipation for his missionary work in the capital.

This journey allowed Ricci to examine the water management and canal transport systems. He recorded his experiences in *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, producing valuable accounts of Ming canal transport and early China-Western cultural exchange.

Ricci's writings praised the canal as a "wonder of the world," expressing evident awe. He described the emperor's construction of a canal from the Yellow River to enable water transport between Nanjing and Beijing. He was struck by the sheer number and variety of vessels navigating its waters, from imperial grain ships to merchant vessels and military fleets.

Ricci carefully examined the Ming Dynasty's canal transport regulations. He noted strict controls on navigation, observing that "private merchants from the Yangtze River were barred from these canals, save for vessels belonging to those residing in the northern sections." This policy aimed to prevent overcrowding and ensure the timely delivery of essential goods to the capital, reducing the risk of spoilage.

Ricci marvelled at the canal's ingenious water control: hinged timber gates regulated the level. When a lock filled to the brim, it swung open, allowing a vessel to glide downstream with the current.

Ricci was not alone in marvelling at the canal's splendour. As a key water-land interchange, Tongzhou once served as the gateway

to Beijing. Renowned Korean scholar Pak Chiwon (1737–1805) and other travellers often halted there on journeys to and from the capital. They were struck by Tongzhou's prosperity and the lively bustle along the Grand Canal. In their writings, the Tongzhou stretch featured prominently, providing later scholars with valuable material for studying the region's canal culture.

In 1780, Pak Chiwon served as a member of a Korean delegation for the celebrations marking the seventieth birthday of Emperor Qianlong (reign: 1736–1796). Pak later wrote *Diary of Rehe*. In it, he described a broad, crystal-clear canal teeming with vessels whose numbers rivalled the grandeur of the Great Wall; large ships painted with dragons moved beneath bright banners. A total of three million *shi* of millet from Hubei was shipped by sea from Nantong to Tianjin and then to Zhangjiawan in Tongzhou. All this vast river freight converged at Tongzhou, and only by witnessing this immense hub could one grasp the capital's former splendour.

Travelling from Tongzhou towards the capital, Pak Chiwon was struck by the splendour of Yongtong Bridge, also called Bali Bridge. Pak noted its impressive scale, and the balustrades were adorned with stone lions whose heads resembled the knobs of traditional Chinese seals. Beneath the bridge, boats glided towards Chaoyang Gate, where grain was transferred to smaller vessels and then conveyed through sluices to the imperial storehouses. The 20 km stretch to the capital was lined with stone-paved roads, their surface echoing with the clang of iron-wheeled carts, a sound that stirred the heart.

In 1793, the British envoy George Macartney (1737–1806) led

a delegation to China, marking the first official diplomatic contact between the two nations. Ostensibly there to congratulate Emperor Qianlong on his birthday, the mission's true aim was to gain access to the Chinese market and establish formal relations. On their return, they boarded a vessel at Tongzhou and travelled south along the Grand Canal. The 33-day journey made them the first foreign delegation to traverse the entire canal.

George Leonard Staunton (1737–1801), a senior member of the diplomatic corps, presented a vivid account of the Grand Canal in his *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*. He described it as the greatest and most ancient waterway of its kind, traversing heights, valleys, rivers and lakes.

The Grand Canal served as a conduit for culture. While Chinese civilisation spread along its waters, Western ideas also entered China via this route. In 1615, Matteo Ricci's *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* was printed in Germany, sparking a fascination with China that drew missionaries such as Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592–1666), who introduced the Western calendar, artillery and mining techniques. Arab astronomy, mathematics and medicine, along with Korean music, also travelled the canal, reshaping life along its banks.

The Grand Canal is more than a waterway; it is a conduit of civilisation, linking China's north and south and connecting the nation with the wider world. It carried both goods and ideas. Travellers' accounts create a timeless, evolving portrait of an open and continually reinterpreted China.

▼ The ruins of the city walls and Tongyun Bridge in Zhangjiawan



► A statue of Matteo Ricci



# The Enduring Chants of Grand Canal Boatmen

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin



▲ Zhao Yiqiang

By the Tongzhou section of the Grand Canal in Beijing, a replica of an imperial leisure vessel, richly adorned with carved beams, awaits. A sudden and resonant "Let's sail!" pierces the air, scattering birds. It is the voice of Zhao Yiqiang, a fourth-generation custodian of the "Canal Boatmen's Chants," a Beijing-level intangible cultural heritage item. As he lifted his hands, his clear, powerful voice carries across the water.

At 69, Zhao Yiqiang continues to uphold the legacy of the Grand Canal and its boatmen's chants. He transforms ancestral voices into lasting memories, keeping the spirit of the waterway alive.

For Zhao Yiqiang, the boatmen's chants run in his blood. His great-grandfather's generation established the clan's reputation on these songs. Zhao Qing, his grandfather, known as "Boatman Zhao," possessed a beautiful voice. Zhao Qingfu, his father,

mastered over a dozen tunes, having learned them from the acclaimed "King of Boatmen's Chants," Cheng Jinglong. Growing up by the canal, Zhao Yiqiang was constantly immersed in his father's singing, a memory that left a lasting impression on him.

Zhao reminisced: "When I was young, I didn't understand the chants. I thought the tunes my father produced were simply energetic." His father, he explained, wove these chants into every aspect of his life, humming them during both work and leisure. He recalled, "From a young age, my father sailed from Tianjin to Beijing. Against the strong current, boatmen towed their vessels, relying on a lead singer. Familiar with the waterway, this singer set the pace and direction through shifts in melody and rhythm. The voice was not only pleasing but also deeply inspiring, serving as the backbone of the entire operation. As

water levels dropped, making large-scale transport impossible, boatmen sought other livelihoods, yet my father remained devoted to the chants."

Zhao Yiqiang grinned, stating, "The boatmen's chants served as their parents' matchmaker." He explained: "My father, while working on a reservoir and bridge project in Miyun, adapted the chants, incorporating modern slogans. He led fellow workers in these chants during pile-driving. My mother, a construction site broadcaster, often listened to them. Their shared appreciation for the chants brought them together."

In 1987, Chang Fuyao of the Tongzhou Cultural Centre visited villages along the North Canal seeking the chants' origins. He located Zhao Yiqiang's father, the only remaining outstanding singer. Zhao Qingfu's 22 boatmen's chants across 10 categories remain priceless cultural treasures.

Although every major city along the Grand Canal has its own boatmen's chants, Tongzhou, at the northern terminus, is distinct. "The chants from Tongzhou include the 'chants for smooth water', which combine Tongzhou-style lyrics with a northern melody and a southern accent. Leisure chants are also unique, performed during breaks. The lead singer dons a small, upturned braid, paints his face white, carries two beef ribs adorned with bells, and sings and dances on the bow to entertain both crew members and spectators along the shore."

In 2006, the "Canal Boatmen's Chants"

were inscribed on *Beijing's Municipal Intangible Cultural Heritage List*, expanding Zhao Qingfu's responsibilities. He organised his family and fellow villagers into a Yangko dance troupe and funded a grain-carrying boat as a prop. The group performs along the canal, bringing the melodies to a wider audience. Following his father, Zhao plays the *suona* horn and sings the chants, absorbing their deeper meaning: both a boatmen's language and a call for unity.

At one point, Zhao Qingfu was the sole custodian of the canal boatmen's chants. During an inspection of Tongzhou in 2017, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central

Committee, remarked, "Tongzhou possesses abundant historical and cultural heritage; we must let the past serve the present and fully explore these resources along the Grand Canal." That year, Beijing launched the Grand Canal Cultural Belt initiative, ushering in a new chapter for the chants.

After his father's death, Zhao Yiqiang assumed responsibility for the chants. Determined to preserve them while forging his own path, his submarine service gave him a sense of resolve and courage. After leaving the military, he worked as a factory accountant, developing a meticulous and conscientious style of work. In his spare time, he modernised the verses, refining older phrasing while preserving the melodies.

In recent years, Zhao Yiqiang has led a troupe of more than 10 performers along the Grand Canal, taking part in events. In 2024, marking the canal's UNESCO World Heritage 10th anniversary, he and Chang Fuyao recorded all 10 chants at the Sound Art Museum for archiving.

Zhao Yiqiang's days are filled with school lectures, community performances and visits to canal cities. He said, "The government now places great importance on promoting traditional Chinese culture to the public, especially in schools and communities."

Schools across Beijing now organise field trips to explore the Grand Canal. Zhao Yiqiang accompanies children along its banks. He feels joy when hearing children echo "Let's set sail!" While teaching chants, he shares stories of past boatmen. "A boat resisting the current must press on or drift backwards; when one is in peril, helping hands arrive from every shore."

Over the years, Zhao Yiqiang has witnessed the transformation of the Grand Canal. In his spare time, Zhao walks the banks, discovering new sights and reflecting on how pleased his father would be to see today's thriving scene.

Today, Zhao Yiqiang's brothers, children and grandchildren all take part in the chant ensemble, often singing an adapted canal song before meals. He has vowed to remain by the water's edge, sharing these everlasting arts for as long as his voice allows.



▲ Zhao Yiqiang (far left) explains Grand Canal boatmen's chants



▼ Zhao Yiqiang performing an excerpt from the chants of Grand Canal boatmen

# Dancing with the Chinese Dragon

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi



▲ Xie Zhaoliang

When Xie Zhaoliang raised and swung a pole supporting a flexible giant Chinese dragon puppet, its head jingled and its two upright whiskers swayed gently. In an instant, the spectacular dragon lantern seemed to come to life.

In Chinese culture, the dragon is regarded as an auspicious creature. According to legend, dragons command clouds and rain, ward off disasters and bestow blessings. As a result, performing dragon dances to pray for peace and bountiful harvests has become a long-standing tradition across China.

In Xie's memory, his ancestors would

carry handcrafted dragon lanterns on every festive occasion to "start the celebration" in front of Guandi Temple in Zhangzhuang Village, performing dragon dances as a way for the children of the Grand Canal to preserve their cultural heritage. Today, having been passed down for nearly 200 years, the Grand Canal Dragon Lantern tradition is recognised as an intangible cultural heritage project.

Born in 1966, Xie Zhaoliang is a fifth-generation inheritor of the Tongzhou Grand Canal Dragon Lantern tradition. He has lived alongside "dragons" for over half a century. From an early age, he followed his

father in crafting and performing dragon lantern dances, while both his grandfather and great-grandfather were core members of the dragon dance troupe. After his father's passing, Xie resigned from his job to devote himself full-time to preserving and passing on this tradition. In 2005, the Tongzhou Grand Canal Dragon Lantern tradition was designated as a Beijing municipal-level protected intangible cultural heritage project, and Xie was recognised as a representative inheritor in acknowledgement of his contributions to safeguarding this traditional craft.

Having been born in Zhangzhuang

Village in Tongzhou District, located beside the Grand Canal, Xie Zhaoliang's childhood was shaped by the famed waterway. When the village was first established, it frequently endured thunderstorms and flooding, and in winter, the frozen river would often halt grain transport along the waterways. In response, villagers came to honour the dragon—a symbol of good fortune—as their spiritual anchor, praying for favourable weather and abundant harvests through dragon lantern processions. This marks the origin of the Grand Canal Dragon Lantern tradition.

The dragon heads from Zhangzhuang Village are highly distinctive, with square faces and open mouths. Village elders believe that only when the soaring dragon opens its great mouth does it truly resemble the Dragon King summoning wind and rain. "Our dragons are blue, the colour symbolising the Grand Canal, and we use a pair of male and female dragons, which is quite rare across Beijing," Xie explains. What is even more unique is that five large copper bells hang around the dragon's neck. As the head sways, the bells ring out loudly, creating a majestic and awe-inspiring spectacle.

Dragon dancers' hearts are bound to their lanterns, a truth Xie deeply understands. In the past, the dragon head was extremely heavy, so Xie and his father refined its design, reducing its weight from 25 kilograms (kg) to 15 kg. Traditionally, there were more than 30 routines; today, Xie has preserved nearly 20. As a form of intangible cultural heritage, the dragon lantern dance is rooted in tradition yet continues to evolve. Xie and his father also co-created a new routine: they built a wooden bridge taller than a person and performed "dragon crossing the bridge" on top, while below they staged "dragon coiling the pillar" and "dragon frolicking in water." He further enhanced the lighting in the dragon's eyes, body and pearl, making them brighter. Now, the pearl in his hand glows,



▲ Illustrated diagrams of the Grand Canal Dragon Lantern Dance

rotates and produces gentle sounds. At night, the fiery red pearl leads the twin dragons in a playful chase, soaring, diving and spiralling in vibrant, multicoloured light. Whenever he recalls this scene, Xie's face lights up with excitement.

When asked about the most memorable moments of his dragon-dancing career, Xie cites two. One was attending the National Dragon Dance Competition on behalf of Beijing in 2024—the group photo from that event now hangs in the Grand Canal Dragon Lantern Culture Museum in Zhangzhuang Village. In the photo, Xie and his teammates stand before Chenghai Tower at Laolongtou, the eastern terminus of the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan, overlooking the sea, holding their dragon lantern high, spirited and triumphant. The other was during the 2023 Chinese New Year (Year of the Dragon), when he appeared in CCTV's Spring Festival special programme "Festival Flavours." As one of seven selected inheritors, he delivered New Year greetings nationwide, an experience that filled him with immense pride.

Since Beijing launched the "Intangible Heritage into Schools" programme in March 2023, Xie has introduced Grand Canal dragon dancing into local primary schools. To help students better grasp the movements and experience the art firsthand, he has carefully designed four new simplified routines. He has also crafted two lightweight dragons specifically for children, reducing the weight of each component. Looking ahead, Xie plans to film all the routines, add written explanations, and compile them into a systematic educational resource to preserve and pass on this intangible heritage.

A few years ago, the village established the Grand Canal Dragon Lantern Culture Museum. Among its most striking exhibits are two blue dragons and a dragon-head frame, precious testaments to this enduring tradition, crafted by Xie's father more than 40 years ago. The leaping, undulating twin blue dragons evoke the winding flow of the Grand Canal, embodying Zhangzhuang Village's cultural identity, shaped over centuries through its close relationship with the waterway. Today, the Grand Canal Dragon Lantern of Zhangzhuang has become a vivid symbol of the broad, clear waters of the Tongzhou section of the Grand Canal, as well as a tangible expression of its distinctive cultural spirit.

▼ Dragon ornaments from the Grand Canal Dragon Lantern Culture Museum



# Small Cart Show: a Rural Folk Performing Art

Text by Zhang Yan Photos by Zhang Xin

“My grandfather is 78, and my grandmother’s hair has turned grey.” Han Decheng, a custodian of the Li’ersi Village Xiaochehui (Small Cart Show), has a powerful voice and a modest singing

style. To the rhythmic pulse of gongs and drums, he led a troupe of brightly costumed performers around the arena, introducing them to the audience one by one. With this, the village performance

officially began. This traditional folk art, which features small cart models as its central props, blends *yangko* dance with elements of classic Chinese opera.

Han Decheng often reflects on his first encounter with the Small Cart Show. As a boy, he recalls hearing the shout “The show is starting!” and scrambling into his father’s shoes before racing towards the performance. He remembers a scene filled with vibrant red and green costumes, set to the lively rhythm of gongs and drums. Although its deeper meaning eluded him at the time, the vivid spectacle left a lasting impression. Having devoted more than 40 years to this craft, he remains a steadfast witness to the fortunes of this traditional art.

The stage is minimalist, anchored by a makeshift bridge that performers cross as they play games and exchange jokes. They dance in circles, moving on and off the bridge in a rhythm that keeps the audience mesmerised. As the saying goes, “the layman enjoys the spectacle, while the expert observes the craft.” A classic scene features an “Empress” in her carriage, reclining gracefully while attendants pull and push the cart. Accompanied by more than 10 members of her entourage, including a butler and an accountant, they encounter colourful characters such as a witty female matchmaker, a clown and a handsome young gentleman. Each role is performed with distinct flair, ranging from dignified to cunning or carefree.

The rhythm shifts with the drumbeats, moving from gentle interludes to lively moments, such as food-snatching or a master engaged in a fan-fighting performance. By the end,



▲ Four performers showcase graceful dance as “young gentlemen”

the performers are breathless and perspiring, having poured their energy into this physically demanding tradition.

Wang Shuqin, now nearing 80, portrays the butler while also serving as the troupe’s leader. Despite its deep historical roots, the show once fell into a period of decline. In the early 1990s, Wang led efforts to revive the tradition in Li’ersi Village. She tirelessly visited local factories to secure sponsorship, raising the initial funds needed to restart the performance. She then purchased the first props and personally financed the initial set of costumes. Her dedication inspired fellow villagers to follow, eventually investing in their own attire. The revival of the performance stands as a clear testament to her commitment.

The liveliest figure is the “stinky plaster.” True to his name, he darts from scene to scene throughout the performance, constantly playing pranks and occasionally earning a slap or a blow from other characters. This role provides comic relief while also helping to regulate the timing and pace of the show. As the narrative draws to a close, he appears to “spoil” the ending, deftly ushering in the next scene and linking the separate acts together.

The Empress’s role appears simple, yet it is the most demanding. The carriage she occupies weighs roughly 45 kilograms and rests on shoulder straps draped over Wang’s shoulders. To create the illusion of reclining, she leans her upper body backwards while pushing her hips forward. Throughout the performance, Wang must also squat,

kneel and trot, all while maintaining an air of composure. By the end, her costume is soaked with sweat, and her shoulders and hips are often bruised and swollen from constant friction.

Although they are amateurs, their passion for ancestral folk traditions has forged a highly dedicated troupe. Offstage, they return to ordinary jobs or care for grandchildren, yet any rehearsal or performance brings them together. Whether the “youngest” of performers (still over 50) or those in their 70s or 80s—once they apply their makeup and the curtain rises, they leap and dance with the vigour of youth, delighting in every moment on stage.

The Small Cart Show is a form of pantomime, with no spoken lines. Performers convey each character’s traits, emotions and inner life through movement and expression. An actress portraying an elderly lady walks on the backs of her feet, creating a wavering gait. In a flirtatious passage, another shields her face with a fan, then lifts it to reveal a shy, hesitant glance, heightening the tension with her co-actor.

Such refined acting does not stem from formal instruction. Shi Yongping, who plays the role of a female matchmaker, serves as the troupe’s instructor and, like the others, hails from Li’ersi Village. Shi believes that even highly trained external teachers, though versed in performance theory, cannot truly integrate with this local folk art. The essence of the Li’ersi Small Cart Show, he insists, must be passed down by villagers themselves. Shi has studied numerous

intangible heritage forms, stages the performances, leads rehearsals and applies makeup for the cast, enabling newcomers to grasp their roles quickly and blend into the production.

On the wall of the Activity Centre in Li’ersi Village hangs a photograph of the troupe taken at the Temple of Heaven Park. On that day, the troupe won an award in a competition featuring 30 groups. A Tsinghua University professor of intangible cultural heritage, serving as a judge, rose to applaud. In that moment, Han Decheng, president of the Li’ersi Small Cart Show, felt a deep sense of kinship. For decades, the troupe has preserved its local character, safeguarding the art’s simplest and most authentic essence.

To better adapt to the present era, the village’s Small Cart Show has refreshed its classic format by quickening the pace and adding humour to its characters. Shi Yongping, who now plays a female matchmaker inspired by a blend of matchmaker and wet nurse roles, presents a plump, comic figure, often blowing kisses to draw laughter from the audience.

Performing the Small Cart Show is no longer merely a form of folk entertainment; it is a responsibility to preserve tradition. The village troupe feels concerned as the younger generation dismisses it as outdated and dull. Han Decheng insists that, if given the opportunity to introduce this heritage into schools, they will strive to inspire children to appreciate its charm and ensure its continuation.



# The Grand Canal in Picture Books

The Grand Canal of China, flowing for more than 2,500 years, links the nation's north and south, standing as a living cultural heritage inscribed upon the landscape. Picture books provide an ideal way to explore this ancient waterway. Let us turn their pages and begin a paper journey along the Grand Canal.



## 穿越时空的大运河

绘本以全景图画的形式细腻描绘了大运河的千年发展史。全书甄选大运河的经典历史节点，用 8000 多个人物、200 多只动物、500 多艘船只和 3000 多栋建筑共同支撑起大运河的故事，透露运河周边生活的点滴。依据史实创作的 14 幅全景长卷，图文并茂穿越时空，内容涵盖大运河的诞生，大运河发展过程中的辉煌与坎坷，以及大运河充满活力的今日面貌。

### ***China Through Time: A 2,500-Year Journey Along the World's Greatest Canal***

This picture book delicately portrays the thousand-year evolution of the Grand Canal through panoramic illustrations. Drawing upon key historical periods, it brings the canal's stories to life with more than 8,000 figures, over 200 animals, upwards of 500 vessels and more than 3,000 buildings. The scenes are filled with people and activity, capturing the vibrant rhythms of everyday life along the canal. Grounded in careful historical research, the book presents 14 panoramic scrolls that combine imagery and text to transcend time and space. It traces the canal's origins, follows its transformations across centuries and culminates in its lively contemporary presence.



## 大运河送来爷爷的车

绘本讲述了这样一个故事：住北京的老闫头儿要将自行车送给在杭州上学的孙子飞飞。沿着京杭大运河，自行车在船夫们的一棒棒接力下终于来到了杭州。绘本以自行车辗转交接的奇妙旅程为线索，串联起大运河沿线 8 座城镇和地区，将各河段的独特历史文脉、乡土风俗与自然风光徐徐铺展开来。

### ***Transporting Grandpa's Bicycle on the Grand Canal***

This picture book tells a heartfelt story about Grandpa Yan, who lives in Beijing and wishes to send his bicycle to his grandson Feifei, studying in Hangzhou. Along the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, the bicycle is passed from one boatman to another until it finally reaches its destination. The narrative unfolds as a charming journey through eight cities and regions connected by the canal. As the bicycle travels onward, the story gradually introduces the distinctive historical background, local customs and natural scenery found along different sections of the man-made waterway.