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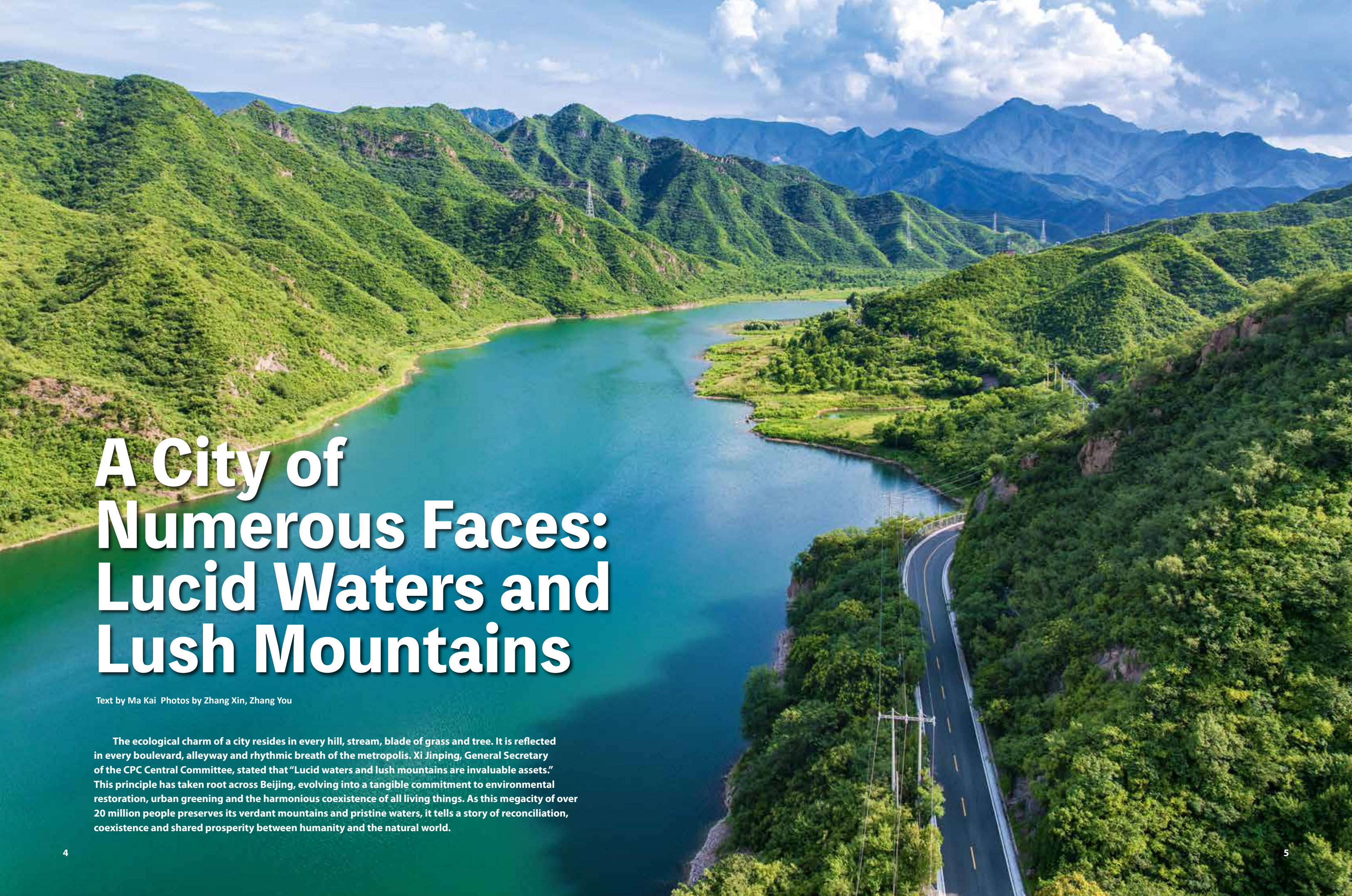
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A City of Numerous Faces: Lucid Waters and Lush Mountains

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Zhang Xin, Zhang You

The ecological charm of a city resides in every hill, stream, blade of grass and tree. It is reflected in every boulevard, alleyway and rhythmic breath of the metropolis. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, stated that “Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.” This principle has taken root across Beijing, evolving into a tangible commitment to environmental restoration, urban greening and the harmonious coexistence of all living things. As this megacity of over 20 million people preserves its verdant mountains and pristine waters, it tells a story of reconciliation, coexistence and shared prosperity between humanity and the natural world.



▲ Forest-covered mountains on the outskirts of Beijing

▲ Liangma River

▲ Beixiaohe River

Weaving a Greener Beijing through Ecological Restoration

The Yongding River winds its way through Mentougou District. Once known as western Beijing's coal storage hub, the area has undergone a remarkable transformation.

Over a decade ago, this area presented a vastly different landscape. Wangping Town was once an industrial mining hub in western Beijing, where prolonged coal extraction caused significant environmental degradation. Following years of dedicated restoration, the once-barren slopes now support thriving pine and cypress forests, while native wildlife has returned. These mountains have regained their vitality through lush vegetation. Today, winding trails cross the green landscape, where gentle breezes and scenic views welcome visitors. Not only have dust pollution and soil erosion been effectively brought under control, but new recreational trails and lookout points have also been created within the restored forests. This has encouraged the growth of rural eco-tourism. Local residents

have left traditional mining behind to embrace environmental stewardship. Many now patrol the hillsides as forest rangers or run guesthouses serving traditional cuisine to holiday visitors. Reflecting on the past, one resident said, "Initially, the closure of the coal mines caused us great anxiety about our livelihoods. However, as the mountains turned green again and our living standards improved, we truly came to appreciate the value of this transformation."

Nestled in the Yanshan Mountains near Mentougou, an ambitious restoration project is taking shape. The sixth phase of Beijing's "Three Norths" project now emphasises quality over quantity. At Badaling Forest Farm, drones have become an important tool for reforestation. In the past, workers spent hours climbing steep slopes carrying saplings, but drones can now deliver soil-filled seedlings to remote sites in just minutes, greatly improving efficiency. A veteran technician remarked, "It took me half a day to climb with saplings, but now it takes less than 10 minutes. It was unimaginable 10 years ago." Covering 36,000 hectares (ha), the programme is restoring vegetation while also creating vital water sources for wildlife

and supporting forest fire prevention.

Extensive woodland across the capital's mountainous outskirts forms a lush protective canopy. Conservation areas in Yanqing, Miyun and Huairou have consistently prioritised reforestation barren slopes, nurturing woodlands, protecting water sources and supporting local communities through environmental relocation. Previously barren terrain is now blanketed by dense forests that change with the seasons. In spring, blossoms cover the hillsides. Summer brings cool shade from the heat. Autumn paints the forests in brilliant colours, while winter reveals evergreens standing resilient against the frost. The Taihang and Yanshan mountains, Beijing's two major ecological corridors, continue to flourish with increasingly rich vegetation. These forests play an essential role in conserving soil and water, purifying the air and regulating the climate. Since 2012, Beijing has added approximately 163,333 ha of afforestation, raising its forest coverage from 38.6 percent to 44.95 percent. The city has become China's first national forest city to achieve full-territory coverage. As General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasised, "Afforestation is an important

task in building a beautiful China." Through the continued efforts of its people, Beijing is steadily enhancing the ecological quality of this historic capital, ensuring it remains surrounded by verdant mountains and flourishing forests.

Improving Water Quality for Ecological Health

If restoring verdant mountains requires enduring patience, the revival of pristine waters stands as a testament to unwavering commitment.

In 2025, Beijing recorded significant improvements in its water ecology. The proportion of rivers achieving Grade I to III water quality reached 95.2 percent, up 31.4 percentage points from 2020. As a result, the length of clear, healthy rivers expanded by approximately 900 kilometres (km).

Three decades ago, the Liangma River truly earned its description as a "black and stinky ditch." Narrow and lined with disorderly banks, its murky waters bred mosquitoes, while dilapidated residential areas created an unsanitary environment. This environmental blight became a longstanding concern for both Chaoyang

District and its residents. From 2019 onwards, comprehensive restoration work began. The project dredged accumulated sediment, restored the natural riverbanks, introduced aquatic plants and revived submerged ecosystems. Simultaneously, waterfront promenades, riverside platforms and landscaped greenery were added to create a complete ecological water circulation system. Today, the river has completely shed its former appearance. Clear blue waters flow beneath gently swaying willows and colourful flower beds, while winding walkways follow the revitalised riverbanks. Now an internationally recognised waterfront and urban living space, the river links landmarks including SOLANA Lifestyle Shopping Park and the Yansha business area. Its banks attract tens of millions of visitors each year for sightseeing, photography and recreation, completing a remarkable transformation from an "ecological pain point" into a celebrated "city highlight."

The Liangma River reflects a broader trend. The Yongding River now flows year-round. Urban parks are linked by green waterfront corridors. The Beixiaohe River features a 400,000-square-metre (sq.m) riverside space, bringing waterside scenery to residents' doorsteps. Meanwhile, the

Chaobai and Liangshui rivers, along with other waterways, are undergoing their own ecological renewal.

The water has cleared and life has returned. Mayflies, among the most sensitive biological indicators of water quality, now appear not only in mountain streams but also in lowland rivers such as the Liangshui and Changhe rivers. During the 14th Five-Year Plan period, Beijing recorded 2,238 aquatic species, with over 80 percent of its rivers achieving excellent ecological status.

This confidence is rooted in the careful protection of Beijing's drinking water sources. In August 2008, General Secretary Xi Jinping replied to villagers around Miyun Reservoir, urging them to "make persistent efforts, achieve success and continue to protect the reservoir well." That trust has since been translated into concrete action. Known as the capital's "priceless asset," the reservoir maintained around 3 billion cubic metres of water storage throughout the 14th Five-Year Plan period, while its water quality consistently met national Class II standards. It was recognised by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment as an outstanding "Beautiful Rivers and Lakes" case and continues to serve as a vital safeguard for the capital's water supply. In September 2024, the peach blossom jellyfish, known as



Qinghezhihou Park



Nanyuan Forest Wetland Park



Guangyang Valley Urban Forest Park



A black swan glides across the waters of the Summer Palace



▲ Purple heron

the “giant panda of water,” was discovered in Miyun Reservoir for the first time. Highly sensitive to water quality, its presence provides compelling evidence of Beijing’s excellent aquatic ecosystem.

Developing Gardens to Enrich Public Life

The vision of “enjoying greenery from the window or stepping into a garden upon leaving home” is steadily becoming a reality in Beijing.

In recent years, Beijing residents have seen more beautiful parks open close to home, including Wenyu River, Central Green Forest, Nanyuan, Aobei and Qinghezhihou. Over 1,100 parks of various sizes now dot the city. Park green space coverage within a 500-metre radius exceeds 93 percent. The total length of greenways has surpassed 3,000 km,

transforming Beijing into one vast garden.

Beijing’s limited urban space cannot accommodate the expansive greening seen in its suburbs. General Secretary Xi Jinping once compared urban management to delicate embroidery. Rather than relying on large-scale planting, Beijing has adopted a “greening wherever possible” approach, transforming overlooked spaces, old residential corners, street verges and former demolition sites into pockets of greenery, stitching together a garden city one space at a time.

Outside the Temple of Earth Park’s south gate, Zhuxiu Garden occupies a triangular plot. Its curved bamboo structures echo mountain silhouettes, harmonising with the park’s ancient elegance. A local elderly man visits daily, saying, “This was once just a dusty corner. Now, sipping tea among the bamboo feels wonderfully peaceful.” Beneath Muxidi Flyover, along the western extension of

Chang’an Avenue, another once-neglected space has been transformed. Hostas unfurl broad leaves, irises bloom in purple and vines climb the concrete piers. Butterflies and bees drift among the flowers, while passers-by pause to admire the colourful scene. These small yet thoughtfully designed green spaces bring a sense of tranquillity into the heart of the city.

In 2025, over 100 micro-gardens emerged across Beijing. Though small, each was shaped through local community feedback. Residents selected the plants, paths and seating. In Haidian’s Shiyuyuan Community, neighbours helped design, plant and maintain their own garden. Sage and begonias bloom within a space of less than 100 sq.m. Opening the window, one resident proudly pointed and said, “That patch is mine.”

Beijing’s micro-gardens are connected by a growing network of urban greenways.

These green corridors, running alongside moats, railways and expressways, link pocket parks, community spaces and riverside landscapes. Once-isolated patches of greenery now form continuous, accessible ecological routes. Residents can stroll beneath shady trees or reach a variety of natural settings without travelling far. This seamless green network brings nature closer to home, encouraging a daily connection with the city’s natural landscape.

Encircling the city are two expansive green belts. Within them, vast parks including Wenyu River Park and Chaonan Forest Wetland each span over approximately 666.67 ha. These landscapes weave together dense forests, sweeping wetlands and broad meadows, forming the city’s natural “green lungs.” They help reduce urban noise and the heat island effect while linking seamlessly with the surrounding mountain forests. Between the bustling city

and the rural countryside, they create an enduring, open green sanctuary.

Parks dot the city like stars, while greenways weave intricate patterns between them. These green spaces do more than beautify the urban landscape. They serve as shared ecological havens where residents can exercise, unwind and reconnect with nature, allowing everyone to enjoy the benefits of ecological progress. When a city makes room for plants and wildlife, it gains a vibrant backdrop of life and colour.

Sustaining Biological Diversity for a Better Future

At Yanqing’s Wild Duck Lake Wetland, birdwatchers train their lenses on a family of three grey cranes wading through the shallows. A seasoned photographer notes that grey crane numbers have increased, with even the rare sandhill crane now making occasional appearances.

The improved ecological environment is clear in the return of wildlife. The white paper *Biodiversity Conservation in Beijing* records 151 natural and semi-natural ecosystems and 7,121 species. In Baihua Mountain Nature Reserve, brown-eared pheasants increased from 200 in 2021 to 500 in 2025. Miyun Reservoir now welcomes red-crowned and white-naped cranes, while Beijing’s bird species count has reached 531 according to the *2026 Terrestrial Wildlife List*.

A liveable city requires more than green mountains, clear waters and beautiful parks. It also depends on the vitality of wildlife thriving alongside people. As Beijing’s ecological spaces continue to expand and improve, species once rarely

seen are returning to the city’s rivers, lakes, mountains and forests. Here they live, breed and flourish, creating a vivid picture of harmony between humanity and nature.

Beijing’s rivers and lakes, now clear and clean, attract over 100 bird species. These waterways provide excellent water quality, lush vegetation and important habitats for migratory and resident birds. Miyun and Huairou reservoirs, vast and blue, host flocks of egrets, herons and wild ducks. White-tailed sea eagles and black-headed pochards are regular visitors. Urban rivers including the Liangma, Chaobai and Yongding also teem with waterfowl. Native fish such as hooksnout carp and pale chub have returned, enriching the city’s river and lake ecosystems today.

Beijing’s mountains, forests and suburban green spaces provide ideal habitats for terrestrial wildlife. In Yanqing, Mentougou and Miyun, roe deer, wild boars and hares are becoming increasingly common, often captured by infrared cameras. Native vegetation continues to recover naturally, creating stable habitats that provide abundant food and shelter for insects, birds and small mammals.

Urban areas are also becoming increasingly vibrant and liveable. In parks and roadside green spaces, native plants flourish, attracting sparrows, magpies and woodpeckers throughout the year. Small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects are also thriving.

Beijing’s verdant landscapes and pristine waters present a vivid picture, harmonising like a gentle melody. From the skies above to the waters below, the grass underfoot to the gardens around every corner, every part of the city reflects the tangible results of ecological governance. Together, they demonstrate Beijing’s steadfast commitment to high-quality development in the new era. However, this progress is an ongoing journey. As General Secretary Xi Jinping noted, “Much remains to be done. The path ahead is long and demanding. We must continue our efforts with dedication.” The achievements of today have been hard won, and preserving them will require the same enduring commitment.

Invigorating Waterfronts Nourish the City

Text by Gao Yuan Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhao Li, He Rong, Gong Yuexian, Mei Xiuhua, Lü Lingwu

Over millions of years, the Yongding River shaped the Beijing Plain, laying the geographical foundation for the birth of the city. Since the Liao (AD 916–1125) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties, water systems have been essential to the city's development. The Liao Dynasty's capital city of Nanjing drew upon the Lotus Pond for its growth, while the Jin Dynasty's capital Zhongdu integrated water into its defensive layout. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the city flourished as the northern terminus of the Grand Canal. Later, during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, the water network was further refined. Drawing on springs from the Western Hills, authorities excavated six lakes and dredged moats to supply the imperial gardens.

In the new era, systematic management has restored its vitality, transforming Beijing from a water-deficient city into a water-rich one.

Rejuvenated Ancient Rivers

Beijing has flourished through its connection to water since ancient times. Situated within the Haihe River Basin, the city is home to five major rivers: the Yongding, Chaobai and Daqing rivers, along with the Northern and Ji canals. These waterways link wetlands, springs and ditches into an extensive network spanning both urban and rural areas. This rich water heritage remains woven into the city's urban fabric and economic vitality. It reflects a distinctive water culture, embodying the long-standing harmony between nature and urban life that defines the essence and resilience of the historic capital.

Spanning 747 kilometres (km), the Yongding River drains an area of 47,000 square kilometres (sq.km). It was known by different names throughout history, including the Sanggan River during the Sui (AD 581–618) and Tang (AD 618–907) dynasties. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, it became known as the Wuding River, or “Unfixed River,” reflecting its tendency towards heavy siltation and destructive flooding.

In 1972, Beijing established a leadership group and launched major pollution control initiatives along the Yongding River to protect the capital's water source.

Today, the Heituwa Wetland along the river is



Dragon boat racing in Shichahai



SOLANA Lifestyle Shopping Park on the waterfront

▼ Five rivers converge in Tongzhou



▲ Beijing Garden Expo Park

characterised by clear waters, swaying reeds and unspoilt natural beauty. “The cheerful birdsong shows just how much the environment has improved. This is where the Yongding River's hope lies,” said Hou Xiuli, who was born in Houzhuangzi in 1965.

Celebrated as Beijing's Mother River, the Yongding River flows for more than 100 km through Mentougou, nourishing the land and sustaining local culture.

A 77.5-km greenway (Fengtai section) along the Western Hills and Yongding River Cultural Belt is currently under construction and scheduled for completion by the end of 2026. The project links a series of green spaces, including the Beijing Garden Expo, Xiaoyue Lake and North Paradise parks. Five distinctive zones have been created to revitalise more than 700 hectares of local ecology.

The Liangshui River, named for its cold spring source, traces its origins to the Yongji Canal built during the Sui Dynasty. During the Jin Dynasty, the river's southern stretch served as part of the capital's moat. The excavated water gate ruins of the Jin Dynasty's capital city of Zhongdu (now Beijing) testify to this historic connection. Under the Ming and Qing dynasties, the

river fulfilled many roles.

As the city grew, the Liangshui River suffered ecological decline. In the 1960s, industrial and domestic waste was discharged directly into the river year-round, causing thick sludge to accumulate on the riverbed.

The ecological restoration of the Liangshui River represents a landmark water-environment programme in southern Beijing. Its design follows four steps: source interception, internal dredging, ecological renewal and landscape enhancement. Between 2013 and 2018, the first two phases were launched, laying a solid foundation for river management. More than 100 sewage outlets in the basin were corrected, 60 direct discharge points were sealed and large reclaimed-water facilities in Huafang and Xiaohongmen were built to return purified water to the river. The main channel soon shed its black, odorous water, improving from below Class V to Class IV.

In 2022, Fengtai District launched the “Beautify the Liangshui River” initiative, focusing on key sections along the South Central Axis, Shiliuzhuang and Dahongmen. The programme reclaimed

vacant land and unused corner plots, transforming construction debris into sponge wetlands that absorb runoff. New amenities now line the riverbanks, including waterfront parks, children's play areas, coffee houses, market stalls and cycling routes.

Today, the Liangshui River has transformed from a former sewage channel into an ecological showcase for the city. Its restored ecosystem supports clear water, returning wildlife and growing populations of fish and birds, with black swans now making the Yizhuang section their home.

During the 2026 Dragon Boat Festival, the 2026 Beijing Grand Canal Dragon Boat Carnival was held in Tongzhou. With the Grand Canal as its central stage, the event combined dragon boat races, intangible cultural heritage demonstrations, folk customs from northern and southern China, light shows, fairs and parent-child activities.

Organisers invited a Lingnan dragon-boat team from Guangdong to enliven the event. Thrilling drifts, lively lion dances and dynamic Wing Chun performances followed one another, bringing southern traditions to Tongzhou's Grand Canal.



▲ An observation deck overlooking Miyun Reservoir

A Vast Expanse of Blue

Functioning as the capital's vital water source, Miyun Reservoir is regarded as Beijing's "priceless treasure." Historically, the valley where the Chaohe and Baihe rivers met was fertile yet prone to instability. Locals relied on farming and fishing for generations but faced constant threats from extreme weather. The rivers often became shallow and silted, causing floods during wet seasons and droughts during dry periods. This cycle endangered downstream areas, including the Tianjin Plain. To ensure

safety, 200,000 workers constructed Miyun Reservoir, permanently reshaping the landscape. For 60 years, Miyun residents have diligently protected this resource by eliminating industrial pollution and safeguarding the capital's water source through their commitment to environmental stewardship. In 2020, marking the reservoir's 60th anniversary, its builders and guardians wrote to Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, reflecting on their long journey and the transformation of regional water protection efforts. On August 30, 2020, the General Secretary

sent a special reply, praising the builders and Miyun residents for safeguarding the capital's water source. He noted that the reservoir had evolved from a simple flood-control project into a vital ecological asset and urged continued commitment to environmental protection and green development. His reply continues to guide reservoir conservation, water management and cooperation between Beijing and Hebei to ensure the capital's long-term environmental stability.

Today, Miyun Reservoir boasts a vast lake, clear waters and green mountains. It is a shining ecological landmark and an important cultural symbol of the capital. In recent years, a number of viewing platforms and hiking trails have opened to the public. "Going to Miyun to see the sea" has become a trendy activity, with many Beijing residents heading there for a relaxing suburban getaway.

During holidays, Chateau Yishi, Yunmeng Mountain, Sun Valley and Yunfeng Mountain attract large numbers of visitors. Situated near the reservoir, each of them offers a unique experience. For example, Yunfeng Mountain offers another breathtaking view across the expansive waters, highlighting the region's diverse tourism appeal.

A two-km trail near Miyun's Jianyan Village offers scenic views of surrounding farmland and the reservoir. Hikers admire the mountain ridges before exploring the banks of the Chaohe, Baihe and Qingshui rivers. Here, tranquil waters reflect the sky, while birds and fish bring the vibrant natural landscape to life.

Reeds Add a Poetic Charm to Wetlands

Rivers bring vitality to a city, while thoughtfully designed waterfronts create picturesque landscapes for residents and visitors alike to enjoy.

Located in southern Beijing, Nanhaizi is the capital's largest urban wetland, with a history spanning centuries. Once an imperial garden, it endured ecological decline before undergoing modern restoration. Today, it is a sanctuary for biodiversity and a thriving green haven for the city's residents.

Nanhaizi, once known as "Nanyuan," served as the exclusive imperial hunting ground during the Liao, Jin, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Spanning 216 sq.km, it featured vast waters and lush forests while providing essential flood control and water storage. Since the Ming Dynasty, the Autumn Breezes of Nanyuan have been celebrated as one of the "Ten Scenic Spots of Yanjing." Swaying reeds, rustling woods and flocks of waterfowl created a remarkable landscape. From the Qing Dynasty onwards, rapid urban expansion and population growth turned Nanhaizi into farmland, leading to the loss of its wetlands.

Since 2010, Nanhaizi has undergone a major environmental revitalisation under the *Action Plan for Faster Development in the Southern Part of Beijing*. The initiative aimed to address southern Beijing's ecological deficit and enhance biodiversity through comprehensive restoration and park development. The strategy prioritised natural processes, minimising artificial intervention while respecting the original

landform. After a decade, Phases I and II have opened, transforming former wasteland into a vibrant urban wetland and a major ecological landmark for the city.

Nanhaizi Wetland Park is now a major ecological oasis in southern Beijing. Covering 11.65 sq.km, it includes 1.27 sq.km of wetlands and more than 90 percent green cover. The park integrates water, forests, grasslands and wetlands into a complete ecological chain. It also serves as China's breeding base for Père David's deer. Today, more than 300 plant species, 149 bird species and thriving populations of wild geese reflect a harmonious natural ecosystem.

In Shunyi District, Hanshiqiao Wetland is the largest reed marsh on the Beijing Plain, known as the "Great Reed Marsh in Eastern Beijing." As early as the Eastern Han

Dynasty (AD 25–220), Yuyang Governor Zhang Kan introduced rice cultivation and water-control works. In 1958, Hanshiqiao Reservoir was built, transforming the natural lakes and marshes into an artificial water storage and regulation system. During the drought of 1972, it supplied irrigation and drinking water, sustaining farmland and local communities in eastern Beijing.

In 2003, Shunyi District launched the restoration of Hanshiqiao by clearing waterways, replanting reeds, blocking pollution and installing water purification systems. Through the use of reclaimed water, the site's hydrology was stabilised. In 2005, it was designated a municipal nature reserve with core and experimental zones. Over the next decade, the local government restored biodiversity, installed monitoring systems and enhanced water purification. The Père

▼ Yuhe River Wetland Park



▼ Wild Duck Lake

David's deer, released into the wild in 2025, has further strengthened biodiversity. Today, Hanshiqiao is home to 394 plant and 254 bird species, including Black Storks.

Hanshiqiao Wetland reflects regional change and Beijing's ecological progress. Today, it represents a new chapter in the capital's modernisation, where people and nature coexist in harmony.

Located beside the future North Courtyard of the Forbidden City, Yuhe River Wetland Park has attracted widespread attention on social media since opening.

From above, the park resembles a mushroom divided by Yuhe South Road. The northern section centres on Yuhu Lake, with more than 20 attractions lining its 6.6-km shoreline. Highlights include Sunny Beach, a covered corridor bridge and an observation platform, creating a scenic landscape of one lake and 12 islets.

The south section of the park, across Yuhe South Road, serves

as a neighbourhood leisure space. It features family-friendly play areas, a waterfront park and a science garden. Walkways, fitness trails and woodland areas connect visitors with nature, while interactive displays introduce children to wetland ecology.

The park exemplifies Beijing's innovative approach to river management. Its transformation balances urban safety, ecology and culture while improving rainwater management. It demonstrates that restoring nature delivers tangible benefits people can see, experience and enjoy every day.

As the lifeblood of the capital, water now links communities and landscapes across Beijing. The vision of "clear water and green banks" has become a defining feature of the city, where ecology, economy, culture, tourism and everyday life come together to form a new and dynamic urban tapestry.

Transforming Waterfronts into the City's Living Rooms

Rivers and lakes are among Beijing's treasured natural assets and form the vibrant heart of its ecological landscape.

The Liangma River International Waterfront has become a poetic urban oasis, where sleek high-rise towers are reflected in the blue waters and the city's daily bustle blends effortlessly with moments of relaxation. In Wenyu River Park, waterfowl glide across the surface while water lilies sway gently, bringing nature within easy reach. Along the North Canal, pleasure boats drift beneath Qianhe Xielu Bridge as modern buildings line both banks,

▼ Night view of the Liangma River during the Beijing Chaoyang International Light Festival



Bahe River at night



showcasing the ancient waterway's contemporary charm. The clear waters and verdant banks of the Liangshui River create a welcoming environment that attracts visitors seeking a brief escape. Between INDIGO and the Langyuan section of the Bahe River, graceful bridges are mirrored in the emerald ripples, displaying a dazzling palette of colours.

Beijing's waterfronts are being transformed from neglected low-lying areas and former industrial sites into vibrant cultural and commercial hubs. This evolution reflects the city's strong commitment to environmental protection and innovative approaches to urban renewal.

River governance and urban renewal ultimately share the same goal: improving people's quality of life. Today, Beijing's rivers serve far more than their traditional functions of flood control, drainage, greening and landscaping. They have evolved into vibrant public spaces that offer endless possibilities while becoming defining features of the city, reflecting the steady improvement of its ecological environment.

Wenyu River Park is recognised as Beijing's largest "green lung" and a symbol of the capital's environmental conservation efforts. Its defining characteristic is an ecological philosophy that respects nature and allows wild landscapes to flourish. Management here follows a "wild-like" approach: there are no paved garden paths, street lamps, manicured flower beds or recreational facilities. Instead, ecological recovery relies largely on natural succession, with invasive alien species removed by hand when necessary and native vegetation carefully protected. Under this approach, the area has developed into an important wetland habitat that regularly attracts rare birds, including the great bustard and yellow-breasted bunting.

Since the renovation of the Liangma River, lounge chairs, fishing platforms and rain shelters have been added along its banks, attracting visitors to linger and relax. Today, this award-winning waterway has become a social media favourite, where fashion, art and nature blend seamlessly.



A tunnel-like walkway at Wenyu River Park



Lotus flowers at Wenyu River Park

By 2026, Beijing will have 20 waterfront space projects under development. Together, these projects will connect the city's previously scattered waterfront parks through an integrated network of rivers. Focusing on the central urban area and the Beijing Municipal Administrative Centre, the plan is built around two major east-west rivers and four key waterways. This will create two north-south and four east-west high-quality waterfront demonstration belts, each featuring a variety of attractions.

Water and city intertwine, creating living landscapes. This is the embodiment of ecological civilisation. A healthy environment benefits all. Paddle along the

Liangma River, explore canal-side shops or enjoy a jog through a greenway at dawn.

Beijing has long prioritised environmental protection, launching a comprehensive transformation of its water system. The city has adopted a five-pronged approach focused on resources, environment, ecology, security and culture. This restoration project has revived 168 rivers and lakes spanning 3,512 km, replacing polluted waterways with clear waters and green banks. A connected network of rivers, lakes, wetlands and springs now thrives. Once seen as a weakness, these waterways have become a shared ecological asset, enriching the city and demonstrating the benefits of sustainable water management.

Beijing's Mountain Backbone

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Hao Liangyuan, Wu Hui, Bu Xiangdong, Zhao Shuhua, [Indonesia] Shikhei Goh

Beijing is a city cradled by mountains. Seen from above, the Western Hills and Jundu Mountain extend like two powerful arms, encircling the metropolis in a protective embrace. Rivers such as the Yongding and Chaobai descend from these highlands, spreading across the plains to nourish the fertile landscape where civilisation has flourished for thousands of years. For centuries, visitors have marvelled at the golden roofs of the Forbidden City and the watchtowers of the Great Wall, yet often overlooked the silent peaks standing sentinel along the city's edge. In truth, these mountains have watched over this land for hundreds of millions of years, long before humankind ever arrived.

Venturing into Beijing's surrounding mountains reveals more than spectacular scenery—it uncovers the ancient natural history of the land itself.

The Natural Botanical Garden of North China

Deep in the mountains of western Beijing lies a peak whose very name carries poetic resonance—Baihua Mountain (literally, “Hundred Flowers Mountain”). The name is no mere embellishment; it perfectly captures the mountain’s ecological character. Each year, as spring gives way to summer, Baihua Mountain enters its most enchanting season. Meltwater from thawing snow trickles down rocky slopes, reawakening dormant streams, while forests stir back to life with renewed vigour. As temperatures gradually rise, wildflowers bloom across the mountainside in a carefully choreographed sequence. First, wild peach and apricot blossoms grace the valleys with soft pink hues. Not long after, rhododendrons, globeflowers, gentians and windflowers take their turn, each adding its own brushstroke to the landscape. The entire mountain is transformed into what seems a vast natural garden—an uncured masterpiece of

colour, fragrance and seasonal rhythm.

Situated on the border of Mentougou and Fangshan districts, Baihua Mountain’s main peak rises to 1,991 metres (m), while its highest point, Baicaopan, reaches 2,035 m, making it Beijing’s third-highest summit. One of the region’s most biodiverse mountain areas, Baihua Mountain is home to more than 700 species of vascular plants—nearly half of all those recorded in Beijing. To botanists, it is nothing short of a natural genetic reservoir. To ordinary visitors, it is an ever-changing natural museum, offering fresh discoveries with every visit.

What truly sets Baihua Mountain apart, however, is its alpine meadow above 1,800 m in elevation. This high-altitude grassland is among the largest and best-preserved in North China. From June to August, the meadow reaches its most spectacular season. Flowers blanket the rolling slopes, forming a vibrant sea of colour that shifts with the sunlight and breeze. The scene is a living work of art painted by nature itself.

Beyond its dazzling floral displays, Baihua Mountain also serves as a sanctuary

for rare and endangered species. The area is home to numerous nationally protected plants, the most famous of which is the Baihuashan grapevine (*Vitis baihuashanensis*). This rare wild grape was first discovered in the Baihua Mountain region and once teetered on the brink of extinction, with only a handful of plants remaining in the wild. Thanks to years of dedicated conservation and propagation by scientists, the species has begun to recover and is gradually being reintroduced into its natural habitat.

At the same time, other rare plants, including Amur lilac (*Syringa reticulata* subsp. *amurensis*), also thrive here. The varied microclimates created by differences in elevation and slope aspect provide ideal growing conditions for a rich diversity of plant life, making Baihua Mountain an important repository of botanical resources in North China.

From dense forests to open meadows, from spring blossoms to autumn foliage, the countless forms of life on Baihua Mountain come together to create a complex and exquisitely balanced natural world.

▼ Baihua Mountain



A Sea of Clouds in the Depths of the Yanshan Mountains

Among Beijing’s northern mountains, Yunmeng Mountain stands out as a place steeped in legend. Those who have visited are invariably captivated by its ever-shifting mists, towering peaks and deep, verdant gorges.

Located in western Miyun District, about 80 kilometres (km) from central Beijing, Yunmeng Mountain’s main peak rises to 1,414 m. Named “Yunmeng” (meaning “cloud-draped”) for the perpetual mist that shrouds its slopes, making the summits appear veiled in gauze from afar, the mountain has long inspired myth and legend. Some say it is the earthly embodiment of Yunmeng, the daughter of Fuxi, a culture hero in Chinese mythology, and Nüwa, the goddess credited with creating humanity and repairing the pillar of heaven. Others



▲ Yunmeng Mountain

believe it was once a retreat for immortals devoted to spiritual cultivation. Whether these legends are true or not, Yunmeng Mountain has been shrouded in an aura of mystery since ancient times.

The most mesmerising feature of Yunmeng Mountain is its clouds. At dawn or after rainfall, the cloud formations are at their most spectacular. Peaks drift in and out of a vast sea of clouds, their summits piercing the swirling mist. Sunlight filters through the vapour, casting radiant beams into the valleys—scenes so ethereal they seem to belong to a celestial realm.

Since ancient times, Yunmeng Mountain has been celebrated as the “Little Mount Huangshan of the North.” Though its peaks are not as lofty as those of Mount Huangshan in Anhui, it possesses all the classic features: strangely shaped rock formations, a sea of clouds, deep canyons and jagged ridges. Over hundreds of millions of years, weathering and erosion have sculpted its granite massif into a landscape of remarkable variety. From a distance, the peaks rise abruptly from the earth, each with its own distinctive form. The most iconic is Guiguzi Peak, named after the legendary strategist of the Warring States period (475–221 BC). This towering spire bears an uncanny resemblance to an elderly man seated in meditation, eyes closed in deep contemplation. Locals believe it is the earthly manifestation of Guiguzi himself. Legend has it that he once lived in seclusion on Yunmeng Mountain, observing celestial phenomena,

▼ A waterscape on Yunmeng Mountain





▲ A sea of clouds over Yunmeng Mountain

contemplating the Tao and teaching military strategy. Though impossible to verify, the story has endowed Yunmeng Mountain with profound cultural depth.

In fact, Yunmeng Mountain has long been an important centre of Taoist culture in Beijing and the surrounding region. To this day, cultural relics such as Guigu Cave and the ruins of Sun Bin Temple remain hidden among its forests. Wandering through these woods, one can almost imagine the lives of ancient hermits who sought harmony with heaven and earth. From the mountain's heights, the landscape unfolds in dramatic fashion: ranges roll like ocean waves, the Baihe River winds like a silken ribbon and, in the distance, the Great Wall snakes along the ridgelines. Ruins such as Lupi Pass and the Five Watchtowers emerge faintly among the peaks, silently recalling the beacon-lit days of frontier defence.

Beyond its majestic scenery and ancient legends, Yunmeng Mountain is also a vital centre for biodiversity conservation in Beijing. Its well-preserved mountain forest ecosystem provides habitat for a rich variety of wild plants and animals. Particularly noteworthy are its alpine rhododendrons. Yunmeng Mountain is home to Beijing's largest and most extensive alpine rhododendron

community. Every May and June, the hillsides burst into bloom, their crimson flowers blending with the rolling sea of clouds to create a breathtaking landscape.

Another defining feature of Yunmeng Mountain is its abundance of gorges and waterfalls. The Baihe River cuts through the mountains, carving spectacular canyon landscapes. Scenic spots such as Heilongtan (Black Dragon Pool), Taoyuan Xianggu (Peach Blossom Fairy Valley) and Jingdu Diyi Pu (Beijing's Number One Waterfall) are scattered throughout the area. Heilongtan is famed for its chain of deep emerald-green pools linked by cascading waterfalls and framed by sheer cliffs. Taoyuan Xianggu features crisscrossing streams and plunging waterfalls, while Jingdu Diyi Pu drops more than 60 m, its thunderous roar carrying for miles during the rainy season.

For geologists, Yunmeng Mountain holds particular significance. It preserves one of China's finest examples of a metamorphic core complex—a rare tectonic structure. In the 1980s, scientists identified this remarkable geological formation here, providing crucial evidence for understanding the crustal evolution of North China. In 2009, Yunmeng Mountain was officially designated a national geopark.



The Primeval Forest on Beijing's Rooftop

Deep in the Yanshan Mountains of north-eastern Beijing, Labagoumen Manchu Township is defined by its unbroken mountain ranges. Hidden among them lies the capital's most intact and pristine forest landscape. At the highest point of this vast green expanse stands Nanhou Ridge, rising 1,705 m above sea level. It is not only the highest peak in Huairou District but also one of the key summits in the north-eastern Yanshan Mountains of Beijing.

Compared with well-known peaks in western Beijing, such as Lingshan Mountain and Baihua Mountain, Nanhou Ridge is less famous yet retains a more pristine and untouched natural character. Owing to its remote location on the outskirts of the capital, its ecosystem has remained largely undisturbed. Vast expanses of natural secondary forest and well-preserved primary forest communities have survived to the present day, making the area a vital ecological barrier for Beijing. Forests are Nanhou Ridge's defining feature. With forest cover exceeding 90 percent, the mountains extend in an unbroken sea of green as far as the eye can see.



What truly sets Nanhou Ridge apart is its magnificent birch forest. Labagoumen is home to Beijing's largest and best-preserved natural birch woodland. From late September to mid-October each year, as autumn deepens, the birch leaves turn from emerald green to brilliant gold. Sunlight filters through the canopy, bathing the entire valley in a golden glow, as though the hillsides were ablaze. From a high vantage point, the colourful forest stretches for dozens of km, resembling a vast and rich oil painting. Many photographers travel great distances to capture this spectacular autumn scene.

Beyond its striking scenery, Nanhou Ridge showcases biodiversity at its richest. As a key ecological core zone in north-eastern Beijing, it supports a remarkable diversity of plant and animal communities. Its varied terrain, rich vegetation and well-preserved environment also make it one of Beijing's most important migratory bird corridors. Black storks, golden eagles and goshawks are frequently seen soaring overhead. During the migration season, flocks of birds sweep across the ridgelines, bringing the quiet forest to life. For birdwatchers, Nanhou Ridge is an exceptional natural classroom. Even for ordinary visitors, simply strolling through the woods and listening to birdsong echo through the valleys is a rare and rewarding experience.

The climb up Nanhou Ridge is itself a journey into the heart of nature. As the trail follows the ridgeline, the views become increasingly expansive. Upon reaching the summit, the full sweep of the Yanshan Mountains unfolds beneath your feet. Looking south, the outline of Beijing's urban area is faintly visible; looking north, the contours of Hebei's Bashang grasslands gradually emerge on the horizon.

Standing here, one gains a true sense of Beijing's grand geographical setting. The city is but one part nestled within a ring of mountains, while these vast forests and ridgelines form the ecological foundation that sustains it. In fact, the Labagoumen area, where Nanhou Ridge is located, is also a vital water conservation zone for the capital. Its forests function like a giant natural sponge, storing water, preventing soil erosion and regulating the climate. Countless streams originate in these mountains before flowing into the Chaobai River basin, providing a steady supply of life-giving water to the ecosystems of north-eastern Beijing. In this sense, Nanhou Ridge is not only a mountain of remarkable beauty but also a green fortress safeguarding the city's ecological balance.



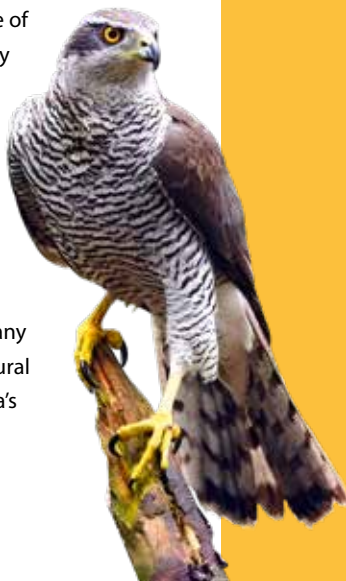
Natural Wonders within Global Geoparks

To hikers and tourists exploring these mountains, the landscape is one

of forests, canyons, rivers and seas of flowers. Geologists, however, see something entirely different: ancient oceans preserved within rock strata, the passage of geological time revealed in deep canyons and the earth's memories etched into the landscape over countless millennia. The two UNESCO Global Geoparks in Fangshan and Yanqing districts hold the keys to unlocking this "great book of the Earth."

The Fangshan UNESCO Global Geopark, located in south-western Beijing, is one of the sites recognised by UNESCO. Covering a total area of 1,045 square kilometres, it spans the junction of the Taihang and Yanshan mountains and is regarded by many geologists as the "natural archive of North China's geological evolution."

Here, visitors can



▼ A birch forest in Labagoumen





▲ Shidu Scenic Area

▼ Shihua Cave



observe rock strata formed 3.5 billion years ago, alongside limestone deposited in ancient oceans hundreds of millions of years ago. Fault lines left by tectonic movements, as well as canyons and karst peaks carved by flowing water, are also clearly visible. Indeed, nearly every stage of Beijing's long and complex geological evolution can be traced in Fangshan.

More than 500 million years ago, most of North China lay beneath a warm, shallow sea. Countless marine organisms died and settled on the seafloor, gradually forming thick layers of limestone. Later, as the Earth's crust continued to rise, the sea gradually retreated, transforming the seabed into dry land. These sedimentary rocks were preserved and now form the geological framework of today's mountains.

The Shidu Scenic Area stands as the most spectacular testament to this transformation. The Juma River flows ceaselessly through fissures in the rock, acting like a chisel that has slowly chipped away the hard stone to create deep, winding canyons. The sections left untouched by the river have become towering peaks and sheer cliffs, together forming Shidu's breathtaking landscape of karst mountains and gorges. Beneath the surface, Shihua Cave reveals another kind of geological wonder. Stepping deep into the cavern feels like entering a world frozen in time. Stalactites, stalagmites, flowstones and columns glisten under soft lighting in an astonishing variety of forms. These formations did not appear overnight. Each drop of water carries trace minerals, depositing an ultra-thin layer of calcium carbonate with every drip. It often takes more than a century for just one centimetre of growth. Those stalactites stretching several m—or even more than 10 m—represent hundreds of thousands, even millions, of years of patient accumulation.

Fangshan's most significant treasures are not only the traces



▲ Baili Landscape Gallery Scenic Area

of tectonic activity but also the evidence of early human history. Zhoukoudian's Dragon Bone Hill stands quietly among the mountains. The discovery of Peking Man fossils here astonished the world and established China as a key centre for global palaeoanthropological research. Around 700,000 years ago, our ancestors lived here, sheltering in caves from the wind and rain, hunting and gathering in the forests, and preserving fire to illuminate the long nights.

From geological relics to human civilisation, Fangshan seamlessly intertwines natural and human history. It is more than a UNESCO Global Geopark—it is a living encyclopaedia chronicling both the Earth's evolution and the dawn of civilisation.

If Fangshan is a weighty historical tome, then the Yanqing UNESCO Global Geopark is a slowly unfolding landscape scroll. The Baili Landscape Gallery is the park's most representative area. From its high points, mountain ranges roll like ocean waves, while rivers wind through the landscape like silken ribbons. The Baihe and Heihe rivers cut through the mountains, steadily eroding the rock and shaping valleys over immense spans of time. At times tranquil, at others roaring, these rivers

have created a rich mosaic of canyons, terraces and wetlands. Wulong Canyon is among Yanqing's most spectacular geological features. Stretching for several km, it is flanked by towering cliffs and jagged rock formations. Torrents surge along the valley floor, carving deep pools and waterfalls into the stone. Though they may appear gentle, rivers have, through millions of years of persistence, cut through solid bedrock to create the magnificent landscape before us.

Another geological treasure of Yanqing is its petrified forest. Tens of millions of years ago, this area was covered by vast woodlands. Sudden geological changes rapidly buried the trees beneath volcanic ash and sediment. Over countless ages, underground minerals gradually replaced the organic wood tissue, transforming the trees into stone to create today's silicified wood. Astonishingly, despite the process of petrification, many logs still retain their bark texture, wood fibre structure and distinct growth rings, as though time itself had stood still. Each piece of silicified wood is a message from an ancient forest to the present. Through these fossils, one can almost picture the lush woodlands of millions of years ago and imagine

prehistoric creatures moving among them.

Yanqing has also yielded Beijing's first dinosaur footprint fossil site. These deeply impressed tracks, preserved in rock for millions of years, remind us that long before humans appeared, this land belonged to a very different world.

Beijing is an ancient capital. With more than 3,000 years of urban history and over 800 years as the nation's capital, the city possesses remarkable cultural depth. Yet when one shifts attention from its city walls, palaces and hutongs to the surrounding mountains, it becomes clear that long before humans arrived, this land had already witnessed cycles of oceanic submersion, volcanic eruptions, crustal uplift and river erosion.

The flower seas of Baihua Mountain, the seas of clouds at Yunmeng Mountain and the forests of Nanhou Ridge celebrate the richness of life, while the rock strata, canyons, fossils and rivers of Fangshan and Yanqing preserve the passage of time. Together, they form the deepest and most enduring backdrop to Beijing's mountain landscapes. Walking among these rivers and peaks, people encounter not only magnificent scenery but also the traces of billions of years.



Enjoying Urban Forests in Summer

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin

During the height of summer, Beijing flourishes with its richest and most vibrant greenery. As heat waves sweep through its streets and lanes, the city, sheltered by millions of *mu* of forests (*mu* being equivalent to approximately 0.067 hectares), has become a naturally cool urban oasis. This verdant expanse is not confined to the distant mountainous outskirts but extends from the city centre in every direction. A network of forest parks, large and small, links the flatland forests, foothills and pockets of woodland scattered throughout the streets and alleys. Wandering through these interconnected green spaces, visitors become devoted readers, savouring this lush and living verse that is “summer in Beijing.”

Two Forest Parks in the North

Stepping out of Forest Park South Gate Station on Beijing Subway Line 8, visitors are greeted by a refreshing breeze carrying the cool, earthy scent of trees from Olympic Forest Park. This vast green sanctuary, larger than New York's Central Park, serves as a vital green lung, helping to purify the city's air.

Spanning 680 hectares (ha), the park consists of North and South sections connected by an ecological corridor over 60 metres (m) wide. This innovative ecological bridge, created for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, is densely planted with abundant flora, allowing wildlife to move safely between the two areas. Beyond iconic venues such as the "Bird's Nest" and "Water Cube," the Games left Beijing this remarkable forest park—a testament to ecological foresight.

Two decades ago, the northern terminus of the Central Axis consisted of derelict farmland and scattered villages. This ecologically fragile area was frequently affected by dust. In 2005, construction of

the Olympic Forest Park began. Designers adopted the traditional Chinese technique of "digging lakes and piling up mountains," repurposing more than one million cubic metres of waste from venue construction to create Yangshan Hill and Aohai Lake. This method eliminated resource waste, successfully replicating a classic landscape of high mountains and long rivers within the urban environment.

Entering through the park's south gate, visitors are greeted by Aohai, a dragon-head-shaped lake. In the summer heat, its surface shimmers as the emerald water reflects the sky, drifting clouds and surrounding greenery. Reeds and calamus flourish along the shoreline, creating a soft green border. Throughout the South Section, ash and ginkgo trees line the fitness paths, their branches forming a dense leafy canopy.

The North Section's wild charm lies in its untouched woodland. Park designers preserved the original terrain with minimal intervention, allowing the trees to grow freely into natural arcades. Layers of ground cover at varying heights provide cooling shade, where squirrels are often seen darting

through the undergrowth.

Persistent ecological protection has transformed the Olympic Forest Park into a stable wildlife habitat. Squirrels, grey magpies and woodpeckers now thrive here. Visitors maintain a respectful distance, allowing people and wildlife to coexist in harmony. These quiet encounters have become a distinctive feature of the park's summer landscape.

Within the North Section, several themed flower gardens provide seasonal displays. The Sunflower Garden is especially spectacular in summer, when thousands of blooms reach their peak. An early morning visit is highly recommended. As the first rays of sunlight sweep across the fields, countless sunflowers turn eastward in unison, creating a truly magnificent spectacle.

Summer at the Olympic Forest Park blends urban vitality with rural charm.

North of Olympic Forest Park, beyond the Qinghe River, lies Aobei Forest Park. Connected by tree-lined paths, it links a series of surrounding parks to form a continuous green necklace. The park comprises 10 distinct "gardens within

gardens," each with its own character, from Dongxiaokou's green trail to Huoying's garden. A 42-kilometre (km) greenway connects these spaces, creating a lush corridor across the northern part of the city.

This forest serves the Huilongguan and Tiantongyuan residential areas. Previously, vacant, derelict land left residents without accessible parkland. Through ecological restoration, authorities removed illegal structures and consolidated fragmented plots into a continuous green space. Today, this landmark urban green wedge has significantly improved the living environment in northern Beijing.

Today, this expansive green space stands as a major ecological landmark along the northern section of the Beijing Central Axis. The park offers facilities for all ages, including exercise areas, dedicated cycling paths and family-friendly spaces. It seamlessly combines its woodland setting with practical amenities, providing nearby residents with an accessible destination for recreation and sport.

Huitian Viewing Platform offers the finest views in Aobei Forest Park. Climbing the stone steps, visitors pass leafy green walls scented by a gentle breeze. From the summit, a winding waterway glistens like silver through the trees, complementing



▲ Huitian Viewing Platform at Aobei Forest Park

the Olympic Forest Park to the south. Below, layers of daisies and verbena bloom in vibrant colour beside understated structures. Summer concerts, creative markets and hot-air balloon rides bring the woodland to life, turning weekends into lively urban retreats.

The Green Heart of Eastern Beijing

Extending northwards to Tongzhou, the Central Green Forest Park offers a

unique summer experience. Spanning approximately 11 square kilometres, the site was once home to industrial facilities such as the Dongfang Chemical Plant. Today, it has been transformed into the largest and most important urban woodland within the Beijing Municipal Administrative Centre.

For many decades, industrial activity contaminated the site with polluted water, degraded soil and compacted ground, leaving it as an industrial heritage site within the Beijing Municipal Administrative Centre.

▼ Olympic Forest Park



▼ Aobei Forest Park





▲ Central Green Forest Park

In developing the park, planners rejected large-scale demolition and reconstruction, instead adopting an approach of “ecological restoration plus heritage revitalisation.” They remediated the soil, restored the water network and transformed former factory buildings into landscape features, allowing the area’s industrial heritage to coexist with flourishing nature while creating a model for the ecological regeneration of former industrial sites in Beijing.

Entering through the east gate, visitors are welcomed by dense groves of Chinese pines, ash, scholar trees and ginkgoes. Their interlocking canopies form a natural green ceiling. Following the garden paths, visitors soon notice the temperature drop by several degrees Celsius, offering welcome relief from the summer heat.

Deeper within the park lies its centrepiece—the star-shaped garden path. Viewed from above, this 5.5-km circular route forms a giant five-pointed star, creating a distinctive landscape.

The park’s most striking feature is its ecological-conservation core, encircled by garden paths. Here, artificial landscaping has been deliberately avoided, allowing wild grasses, shrubs and trees to grow naturally, free from pruning or shaping. The birds’ chirping within the woodland rises and falls like a concert performed by the forest itself.

This low-intervention conservation zone is a natural ecological laboratory in the city. It relies on natural processes to

recover, preserving the original habitats of local flora and fauna while demonstrating the modern urban ecological principle of living “close to nature.”

Flanking the star-shaped promenade are 24 solar term forest windows. Each features plants and landscape elements associated with its corresponding solar term, giving every season its own distinctive character. At the height of summer, interwoven small-leaf ash and ginkgo trees form a dense green canopy that shades the path from the intense heat. When autumn arrives, the entire walkway is transformed into a magnificent golden corridor.

Several red brick chimneys rise above the trees. These are remnants of the former

Dongfang Chemical Factory, preserved as landscape features during the park’s construction. At the height of summer, lush vines climb the weathered brickwork, while wild grasses emerge from cracks below. The industrial ruins create a distinctive landscape where heritage and ecology coexist.

The park has revitalised and repurposed former factories and red-brick warehouses, transforming them into visitor centres, cultural and creative exhibition halls, and public fitness venues. In doing so, these once-abandoned industrial spaces have become centres for leisure and aesthetic education, while preserving the city’s industrial heritage.

A leisurely circuit of the garden path takes about an hour, with several rest areas offering refreshments along the way. Beyond the trees stand the Grand Canal Museum of Beijing, the Beijing Performing Arts Centre and the Beijing Library, together forming the area’s three cultural landmarks. Together, they have created a cultural living room for the Beijing Municipal Administrative Centre, seamlessly blending nature with culture and history.

Observing Woods in the South

Extending east and south along the former course of the Yongding River lies a

▼ A landscape view of Central Green Forest Park



▲ Nanyuan Forest Wetland Park

vast expanse of greenery. This landscape has a history far older than the Tongzhou Industrial Zone. During the Liao Dynasty (AD 916–1125), it served as an imperial hunting ground, and in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) it became known as Nanyuan, the “South Garden.” The area later fell into decline, becoming a neglected suburban district. Today, Nanyuan Forest Wetland Park, covering many thousands of *mu*, has been created, serving as a vital ecological “green lung” for southern parts of the capital.

Entering from the north and following the forest trail south-east across a small stone bridge, visitors arrive at the Nanyuanshe Forest Library, a wooden structure nestled among the trees. Its thatched roof slopes like an open book resting on the grass. Outside, the woodland glows with a quiet brightness, while inside the scent of books fills the air. Floor-to-ceiling glass panels transform the surrounding forest into a natural picture window framing the landscape. During the height of summer, temperatures rise sharply, yet a gentle breeze circulates through the reading room. Visitors settle in, read quietly and spend unhurried afternoons there. As a result, the library has become one of the park’s most peaceful and relaxing corners.

The pathway encircling the library is filled with charming details. Cherry blossom motifs are printed on the pavement, while graffiti on tree bark adds a playful, childlike touch. Near the end of the trail, vintage railway tracks, steel-framed platforms and old signal lights evoke the atmosphere of a bygone era. This corner has become a favourite spot for visitors to take photographs and for children to explore and play.

The Yanjing Platform at the park’s centre rises 59 m. From its summit, visitors enjoy a sweeping 360-degree panorama of the Nanyuan forest. Layers of green stretch across the landscape, interwoven with a glistening network of waterways. To the north, the silhouettes of the CBD and Lize Business District towers rise on the horizon; to the west, the deep green ridges of the Western Hills stand in the distance. At twilight, the setting sun bathes the woodland in a warm golden glow. As the evening breeze stirs the trees, waves of verdant foliage ripple across the forest. Here, the urban skyline and the natural landscape come together in a harmonious balance of movement and tranquillity that captures the beauty of the capital.

▼ A painting on a tree hollow



Emerald Peaks among the Western Hills

The Western Hills National Forest Park is the closest forest park to Beijing’s urban areas. Adjacent to Fragrant Hills and



▲ Western Hills National Forest Park

Badachu parks, it boasts vast artificial forests. These hills marked the beginning of Beijing's modern afforestation efforts during the early years of the People's Republic of China.

For over 70 years, successive generations of workers have laboured on these rocky, barren slopes, digging pits, adding soil, raising seedlings and tending them with care. Year after year, they have planted trees and shrubs, transforming once-sterile hillsides into extensive woodlands. This sustained effort stands as the clearest testament to Beijing's long-term commitment to ecological improvement.

Upon entering Western Hills National Forest Park, visitors are welcomed by a refreshing breeze. At the entrance, a 25-m-high artificial waterfall cascades down a rockery, its thunderous roar echoing throughout the area. It is Beijing's largest man-made waterfall, constructed from tens of thousands of tonnes of rock. Following the stream upstream, visitors eventually reach Huaxi, or the Valley of Flowers, hidden deep within the forested hills. Here, water tumbles over rocks, while during holidays

an artificial mist system periodically releases a fine spray from either side of the stream, enveloping the valley in a gentle haze. Even on the hottest summer afternoons, the temperature here remains a pleasant 20 degrees Celsius.

The path gradually climbs, becoming steeper as the trees grow ever denser. The Western Hills, an extension of the Taihang Mountains, display a classic rocky mountain landscape, yet their slopes are completely cloaked in trees. A pavilion, situated over 170 m above sea level, provides an ideal place to pause and recuperate. From here, the view opens dramatically, with glimpses of the city appearing through breaks in the canopy. The China Central Television Tower resembles an inverted cup, while the distant China Zun rises like a silver needle. Beyond the pavilion, smoke trees and purpleblow maples become increasingly abundant. In summer, they seem to gather all their vitality, poised to transform their colours without reservation when the autumn winds and frost arrive.

Guixiaoshi, or Ghost Laughing Rock,

stands as the park's highest point and offers distant views of Xianglu Peak in Fragrant Hills Park. Upon reaching the summit, visitors are met by cool breezes sweeping in from every direction, washing away the heat and fatigue of the climb. Ghost Laughing Rock has become a favourite destination on social media. This massive rock, perched at an altitude of 473 m on the ridge between Fragrant Hills and Badachu, commands sweeping views across Beijing. As night falls, countless lights begin to glow, turning the city's streets into a web of luminous ribbons and creating a spectacular panorama. At dawn, its east-facing position makes it one of the best places to watch the sunrise.

Dense forests and sweeping views in the park make it an ideal escape from the summer heat, offering visitors a peaceful retreat for relaxation and recreation.

Leisure Spaces in Urban Areas

The summer charm of Beijing often shows in small parks scattered across the

urban areas. After strolling down Caishikou Street, visitors turn a corner and discover a 4.7-ha woodland called Guangyang Valley Urban Forest Park, only three km from Tian'anmen Square. Occupying a prime urban location, this green oasis features no open lawns, only a dense canopy of trees and shrubs. The pathways consist of crushed stone that rustles under each footfall, while the permeable ground absorbs rainwater like a sponge.

Guangyang Valley takes its name from the Guangyang Prefecture of the Qin (221–206 BC) and Han (206 BC–AD 220) dynasties, preserving a geographical legacy spanning two millennia. After early demolition, the site was left neglected and overgrown with weeds. In 2017, the project abandoned commercial development, transforming this valuable urban plot into a forest. Using native plants, rainwater recycling, on-site composting and chemical-free maintenance, planners created a complete urban micro-ecosystem that has been hailed as a benchmark for micro-renewal in the old urban areas.

After its demolition, the municipal government chose to preserve the site as green space. Seedlings of Chinese scholar, ash and maple trees were planted, watered and tended. Over time, they took root, spreading across the once-barren ground



▲ A cartoon sculpture at Guangyang Valley Urban Forest Park

and transforming it into thriving woodland. In 2024, the park received the International Awards for Liveable Communities, often referred to as the "Green Oscars."

Travelling east from the park, crossing much of Beijing, one eventually reaches the southwest corner of the Guomao Cloverleaf Interchange, where a newly created woodland flourishes among the gaps between towering skyscrapers. The CBD Urban Forest Park occupies 2.25 ha and is the first forested area of its kind within the area. Its gently rising terrain encircles a central basin, creating a scene that resembles a valley surrounded by mountains. This pocket of woodland provides a rare oasis amid the city's concrete landscape. A brick-and-stone

path winds across the undulating terrain, bordered by layered plantings of pines, Chinese scholar trees, bamboo and shrubs that together provide more than 80 percent canopy cover. Stone steps punctuate the route, leading to a modest viewing platform. Looking back, visitors see the towering Jianwai SOHO buildings rising behind the plants, forming a striking contrast between urban architecture and greenery.

This compact forest provides tens of thousands of CBD office workers with a nearby sanctuary.

Forest parks are now emerging throughout the city centre, from Xinzhongjie and Ande to Xijiekou and Changlefang. These green patches tucked into street corners allow residents to enjoy nature without leaving the urban areas. A stroll along nearby pathways has become part of everyday life for many Beijingers.

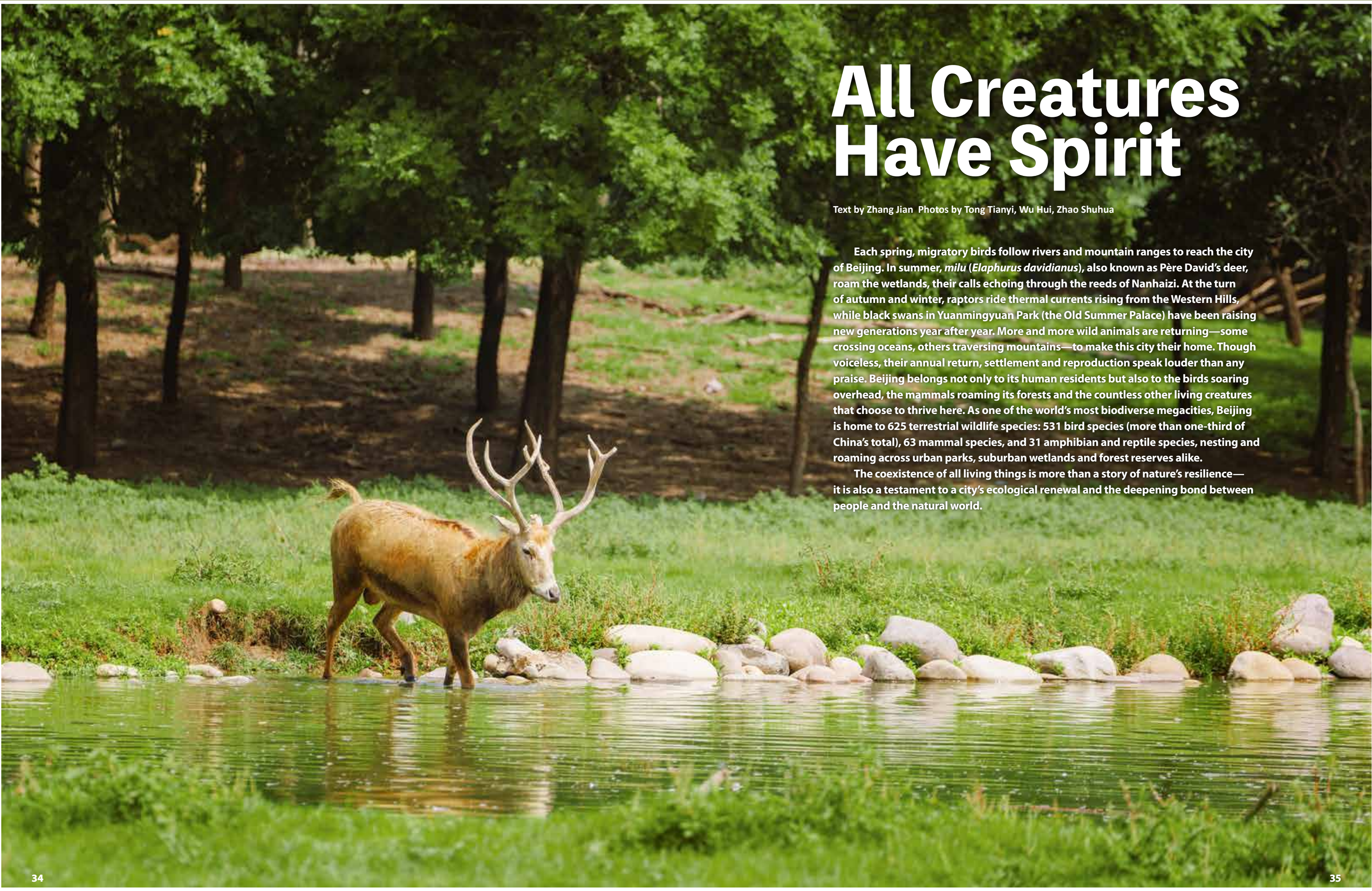
Beijing enchants in every season, yet the lush greenery of midsummer is perhaps its most soothing. Viewed from above, the city has woven itself into a green tapestry through the "one screen, three belts, nine corridors and multiple zones" plan. That greenery has become shared public space, offering comfort and tranquillity to its residents. This transformation vividly reflects the capital's ecological progress and its positive impact on everyday life.

▼ Children play at Guangyang Valley Urban Forest Park



▼ A corner of Guangyang Valley Urban Forest Park



A photograph of a milu deer (Elaphurus davidianus) with large, multi-tined antlers standing in a shallow pond. The deer is facing right, and its reflection is visible in the water. The background consists of a dense forest of green trees, and the foreground is a grassy bank with some rocks.

All Creatures Have Spirit

Text by Zhang Jian Photos by Tong Tianyi, Wu Hui, Zhao Shuhua

Each spring, migratory birds follow rivers and mountain ranges to reach the city of Beijing. In summer, *milu* (*Elaphurus davidianus*), also known as Père David's deer, roam the wetlands, their calls echoing through the reeds of Nanhaizi. At the turn of autumn and winter, raptors ride thermal currents rising from the Western Hills, while black swans in Yuanmingyuan Park (the Old Summer Palace) have been raising new generations year after year. More and more wild animals are returning—some crossing oceans, others traversing mountains—to make this city their home. Though voiceless, their annual return, settlement and reproduction speak louder than any praise. Beijing belongs not only to its human residents but also to the birds soaring overhead, the mammals roaming its forests and the countless other living creatures that choose to thrive here. As one of the world's most biodiverse megacities, Beijing is home to 625 terrestrial wildlife species: 531 bird species (more than one-third of China's total), 63 mammal species, and 31 amphibian and reptile species, nesting and roaming across urban parks, suburban wetlands and forest reserves alike.

The coexistence of all living things is more than a story of nature's resilience—it is also a testament to a city's ecological renewal and the deepening bond between people and the natural world.



▲ A bird perches on a branch at Milu Park



Returning Home

In the southern reaches of Beijing lies Nanhaizi, a wetland that has endured for thousands of years. This ancient expanse of water and marshland is the original homeland of *milu*, a rare and remarkable species once nicknamed the “Four Unlikes” because of its unusual combination of features: a horse-like head, antlers resembling those of a deer, a donkey-like tail and hooves like a cow’s. Archaeological and historical records show that the species has inhabited the Nanhaizi wetlands since at least the Shang (16th century–11th century BC) and Zhou (11th century–256 BC) dynasties. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, the deer became an exclusive treasure of the Nanhaizi Imperial Hunting Ground, a vast royal estate established for recreation and wildlife conservation. Revered as an “auspicious

animal” (*ruishou*), Père David’s deer were carefully bred and protected by specially appointed keepers, symbolising imperial authority and harmony with nature. They became the signature species of the imperial menagerie. However, as political instability and neglect led to the decline of the Nanhaizi estate in the 19th century, the fate of the deer also took a dramatic turn. In 1865, French missionary and naturalist Armand David, while exploring the imperial park, discovered this species unique to China and sent specimens to Europe, introducing *milu* to Western science for the first time. Tragically, this scientific discovery also triggered a wave of exploitation, as live deer were smuggled out of China and distributed to zoos across Europe. The final catastrophe came in 1900 during the invasion of Beijing by the Eight-Nation Alliance. Foreign troops looted the remaining herd from Nanhaizi and, with that, the species disappeared entirely from its native land. For the next



▲ Black stork

85 years, Père David’s deer survived only in captivity abroad, becoming extinct in the wild in China.

The deer’s long journey home spanned more than half a century and was made possible through remarkable international collaboration. Recognising the species’ precarious future, Herbrand Russell, the 11th Duke of Bedford, began acquiring Père David’s deer from zoos across Europe in the early 20th century. He kept them at his Woburn Abbey estate in England, where the climate and wetland environment closely resembled those at Nanhaizi. There, the deer flourished, forming the world’s only viable breeding population. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, efforts to restore the nation’s ecological heritage gathered momentum, and bringing the deer home became a symbolic national goal. Official discussions between Chinese and British institutions began in 1979. Following more than a decade of diplomatic and logistical coordination, 22 Père David’s deer were flown from Woburn Abbey to Beijing in August 1985. They were released into the newly established Nanhaizi Milu Park, a specially created reserve within their ancestral wetland. This marked the species’ return to Chinese

soil after an absence of 85 years. The following year, a further 39 deer were reintroduced to the Dafeng Milu National Nature Reserve in Jiangsu Province, establishing a strategic north-south dual-site conservation model that significantly reduced the risk of extinction.

To ensure the deer could truly readapt, Nanhaizi Milu Park underwent extensive ecological restoration. Wetlands were rehabilitated, native vegetation replanted and artificial enclosures minimised in favour of a semi-wild management approach. Rather than confining the animals, the park allowed them to roam freely within a protected landscape that closely resembled their natural habitat, with abundant grasses, reeds and shallow waters. Dedicated staff monitored their health, supported breeding and prevented disease outbreaks, gradually enabling the herd to reproduce independently. From the original 22 individuals, the population has now grown to more than 200, with a self-sustaining wild subpopulation successfully established. The Père David’s deer has not merely returned—it has reclaimed its place as the ecological and symbolic heart of Nanhaizi. Once again, its soft, haunting call echoes across the wetland’s green meadows and shimmering lakes, bridging a century of loss and heralding a profound reconciliation between a city and a species once thought lost forever.

Today, Nanhaizi serves as Beijing’s “ecological green lung” and stands as a flagship project of China’s broader ecological civilisation initiative. The area



▲ A peacock displaying its feathers at Milu Park

now supports 149 bird species, including stable populations of the Oriental stork and black stork, both listed as national first-class protected species. The greylag goose population has grown from just over 30 individuals to more than 750, forming the largest such flock in northern China. Even the freshwater jellyfish (*Craspedacusta sowerbii*), often hailed as the “giant panda of the water,” has been recorded here—a strong indicator of excellent water quality. Biodiversity continues to flourish, with the Père David’s deer serving as both a conservation icon and a keystone species. No longer an imperial preserve, Nanhaizi Milu Park now welcomes more than three million visitors each year, providing a vibrant public space where urban residents can reconnect with nature.

Every day, visitors can watch herds

of deer lowering their heads to drink or grazing peacefully along the water’s edge. Fawns stay close to their mothers, occasionally pausing to gaze curiously at onlookers before bounding off to rejoin the group. People observe in quiet reverence—no shouting, no chasing. Few realise that little more than a century ago, the last native Père David’s deer disappeared from this very place. Even fewer know that Beijing waited 85 years for their return.

“*Lu ming you you, shi ye zhi ping.*” (“The deer call out to one another in harmony, feeding on the wild mugwort.”) This evocative line from *Book of Songs*, composed more than 2,000 years ago, has at last found its living echo—not in myth or memory, but in the wetlands of Nanhaizi, where the deer have finally come home.

Inhabitation

If the story of the Père David's deer at Nanhaizi in southern Beijing tells of a species lost and remarkably restored, then the story of the black swan—a visitor from the farthest reaches of the Southern Hemisphere that has chosen to settle in Beijing's parks and wetlands—forms another chapter in the city's evolving relationship with nature. Though their origins and journeys differ greatly, both stories point to the same truth: Beijing is becoming a place where an ever-growing number of living creatures choose to stay.

For black swans (*Cygnus atratus*), native to Australia, to not only survive but also breed successfully in a Northern Hemisphere metropolis like Beijing, the city must offer more than open water. It requires clean, stable aquatic ecosystems: unpolluted lakes, abundant aquatic vegetation, reliable food sources, and healthy wetland habitats that support nesting and the raising of young. This ecological threshold is significant because black swans are highly

sensitive to water quality and disturbance; their successful establishment signals a broader environmental recovery. Today, these conditions exist at multiple sites across Beijing. Black swans glide gracefully through the waters of Yuanmingyuan Park, the Summer Palace, Nanhaizi Suburban Park, Cuihu Wetland and Beijing Zoo. Their occasional appearances at Olympic Forest Park, Lianshi Lake and Miyun Reservoir often spark excitement among residents, quickly becoming viral moments on social media—a testament to how urban wildlife now captures public imagination in ways once reserved for exotic travel documentaries.

Just two decades ago, few Beijingers would have believed that a family of black swans could thrive in Yuanmingyuan Park—nesting among the reeds, hatching eggs, raising cygnets and becoming beloved local celebrities that draw visitors from across the city. After all, black swans are native to Australia and typically inhabit lakes and wetlands in the Southern Hemisphere, not the temperate zone at 40 degrees north latitude. Yet they not only arrived—they stayed, adapted and flourished,

demonstrating remarkable behavioural plasticity uncommon among waterfowl.

Entering Yuanmingyuan Park through its east gate and walking just three to five minutes along a shaded path, visitors come upon a serene lake. On its shore stands a bronze sculpture: two adult black swans with wings slightly spread, surrounded by fluffy cygnets—a tribute not to myth, but to real life. In February 2008, three black swans unexpectedly landed on this very lake. No one knew where they came from—perhaps escaped from a private collection or a zoo—but what began as a brief stopover developed into a decade-long bond between the species and the city. True to their strictly monogamous nature, two quickly formed a pair. Staff and visitors affectionately named them “Da Hei” (“Big Black”) and “Hei Niu” (“Black Girl”); the third quietly departed, possibly seeking its own territory elsewhere.

They chose a quiet reed bed near the Shizi Grove area, a shallow, densely vegetated and undisturbed nesting site ideal for concealing vulnerable eggs and hatchlings from predators. Nest building is a shared effort for black swans, with both partners gathering plant material to construct a sturdy mound above water level. From then on, the pair bred almost every year, producing clutches of four to eight eggs. As their cygnets matured, the parents displayed what seemed like tough love, persistently pecking at and chasing them away until they flew to more distant waters—a natural dispersal behaviour ensuring genetic diversity and reducing competition. Over time, these young swans were spotted at the Summer Palace, Olympic Forest Park and even Peking University's Weiming Lake—evidence of a new generation making Beijing its home. Tragedy struck when “Da Hei” died unexpectedly, likely due to age-related decline or disease. “Hei Niu” spent months alone, drifting silently across the lake in apparent mourning. To help her form a new family, Beijing Zoo introduced a male black swan, soon nicknamed “Er Hei” (“Second Black”). Rather than force the pairing—an approach that often fails with intelligent, socially



▲ Fuhai Lake at Yuanmingyuan



▲ Mandarin ducks at the Summer Palace

complex birds—caretakers allowed the birds to become acquainted gradually through adjacent enclosures. Eventually, “Hei Niu” accepted her new mate, and together they continued the cycle of nesting and raising cygnets, extending the Yuanmingyuan Park swan lineage into a second decade.

This success did not happen by chance. Over the past decade, Yuanmingyuan Park has implemented comprehensive aquatic ecosystem restoration by using purified reclaimed water from municipal treatment plants, improving water circulation through strategic channel design, and reintroducing native aquatic plants like lotus and water chestnut that provide both food and shelter. Water quality has steadily improved from Class V (unsuitable for most aquatic life) to Class III (supporting diverse ecosystems), attracting fish, insects, amphibians and more

than 280 bird species—including globally threatened ones such as the Baer's pochard (*Aythya baeri*) and Eurasian spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*). The black swan has become one of the park's most recognisable residents, symbolising ecological resilience. Each winter, as temperatures fall below freezing and the lakes begin to ice over, park staff activate submersible pumps to keep critical sections of water flowing—an energy-intensive but necessary measure. They lay straw along the banks to insulate potential nest sites, preserve reeds and cattails for shelter against wind and cold, provide supplementary feed rich in protein and fat during food-scarce months, conduct regular patrols to deter predators like feral dogs, and monitor for avian influenza and other diseases through collaboration with veterinary authorities. These seemingly small acts of care, rooted in both traditional stewardship and modern conservation science, help cygnets survive Beijing's harsh winters, allowing a once-foreign species to become a resilient, self-sustaining part of the city's ecology.

Many visitors come to Yuanmingyuan

Park in search of relics from its imperial past—the haunting beauty of ruined European-style palaces destroyed during the Second Opium War. Yet when they pause to watch a black swan preening its iridescent feathers or a line of grey cygnets following their parents in single file, history takes on a new dimension. Beyond the ruins and weathered stone, life is flourishing in real time. A bird once native only to the distant Southern Hemisphere now calls Beijing home. What began as the arrival of a wandering visitor has become the story of a self-sustaining resident—building nests, raising young and soaring freely across the skies of northern China, adapting to seasonal rhythms unknown in its ancestral range.

Ultimately, the true measure of a city's ecological civilisation is not simply how many trees it plants or parks it creates; rather, it is how many forms of life—especially those with high habitat demands—choose to remain and reproduce. Year after year, the hatching of new cygnets in Yuanmingyuan Park conveys a quiet yet powerful message: the most beautiful landscape a city can offer is not merely mountains reflected in water,

▼ A black swan with two cygnets at the Summer Palace

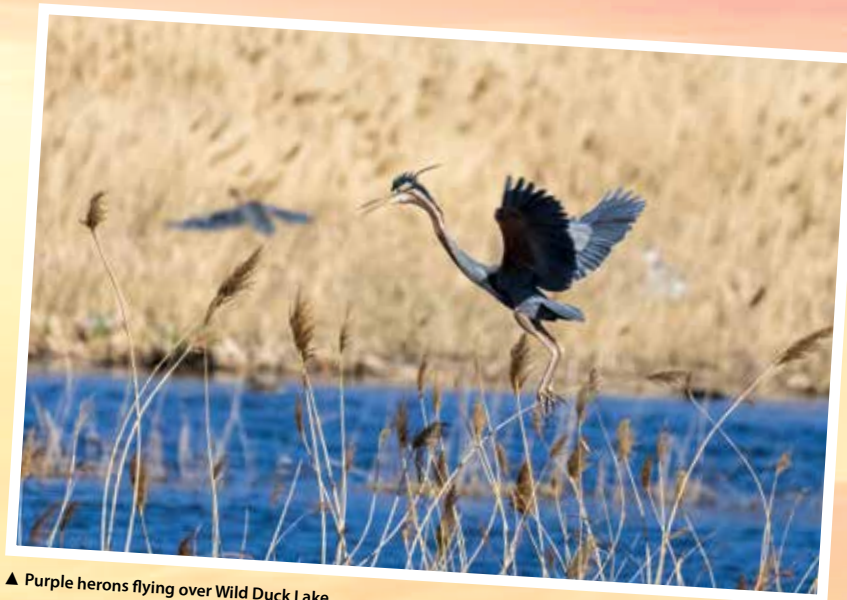


but a dynamic, inclusive habitat where all living beings—whether native or newly arrived—can find nourishment, safety and the chance to pass on their legacy.



From the Père David's deer re-establishing its lineage at Nanhaizi to black swans peacefully raising cygnets in Yuanmingyuan Park; from waterbirds, absent for decades, gathering once again in flocks along the Yongding River to growing numbers of migratory birds returning each year to the Wenyu River, Cuihu Wetland and Yeya (Wild Duck) Lake—these stories reveal a fundamental truth: birds do not remain because a city is prosperous or dazzling. They stay only where clean water flows, forests flourish, food is abundant and habitats are secure. More sensitive than any sensor and more honest than any dataset, birds vote with their wings. A single bird's arrival is a choice; the return of an entire flock is the most genuine “vote of confidence” an ecosystem can receive. Beijing's quiet ecological transformation over recent decades has begun with exactly this trust.

For many birdwatchers, Beijing's greatest allure lies not merely in the presence of rare species, but in the completeness of its ecological landscape. The rolling Western Hills are cloaked in lush forests, while the Yongding and Chaobai rivers wind across the landscape, linking wetlands like threads in a living tapestry. Reservoirs such as Guanting and Miyun, together with countless urban lakes and parks, form a vast,



▲ Purple herons flying over Wild Duck Lake

interconnected network of life. Within this rich ecological web, two landmarks stand out—one beside the water, the other atop a mountain.

Yeya Lake, in Yanqing District, is a vast wetland formed by Guanting Reservoir and Beijing's only nature reserve dedicated to wetland birds. Here, shallow lakes, mudflats, reed beds, meadows and farmland combine to create a rich mosaic of habitats. This remarkable diversity makes Yeya Lake one of the capital's most important stopover sites for migratory birds.

Each spring and autumn, the wetland comes alive. Common cranes (*Grus grus*) arrive from Siberia, gliding down on elegant wings. Ospreys soar high overhead before plunging dramatically into the water, while northern lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*)

dart nimbly across the marshes. Bearded reedlings (*Panurus biarmicus*) cling to swaying reed tops, resembling delicate blossoms dancing in the breeze.

Today, Yeya Lake is celebrated as a birdwatcher's paradise, with nearly 300 recorded bird species. Enthusiasts often say its magic lies not in spotting a particular “star” species, but in the constant surprise of what might appear next. Some spend entire mornings hidden among the reeds hoping to glimpse the Chinese penduline tit (*Remiz consobrinus*), while others rise before dawn for days on end to capture common cranes taking flight. Even casual visitors, unfamiliar with the birds' names, are often captivated by skies

alive with swirling wings.

Yet for these long-distance travellers, Yeya Lake is only a temporary haven. The fact that increasing numbers choose it as a place to rest, feed and shelter speaks volumes. Decades ago, it was little more than a patch of water on a map; today, it has become a vital stop on one of the world's busiest migratory flyways.

In contrast, Baiwang Mountain offers no vast lakes or flocks of waterfowl. First-time visitors often find it unassuming: rising just 200 metres, its gentle slopes can be climbed in little more than half an hour. As the forest park closest to central Beijing, it feels more like a neighbourhood retreat, frequented by joggers, hikers and families. Yet during the migration seasons, this modest hill becomes sacred ground for birdwatchers from across the country.

Baiwang Mountain sits at the easternmost edge of Beijing's Western Hills, where the Taihang Mountains meet the North China Plain. This location places it directly along a major raptor migration corridor. Every spring and autumn, birds of prey—including eagles, hawks and falcons—from Siberia, the Mongolian Plateau and Northeast China ride thermal updrafts rising from the mountain slopes, gliding south with

minimal effort. For decades, Beijing's Raptor Migration Monitoring Project has used Baiwang Mountain as its principal observation site, documenting more than 30 species, including Eurasian goshawks, saker falcons, golden eagles and cinereous vultures (*Aegypius monachus*). As apex predators, raptors are highly sensitive indicators of ecosystem health. Their presence reflects thriving populations of rodents, insects and small vertebrates and, in turn, a healthy, well-balanced forest ecosystem across the Western Hills.

As French writer and thinker Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once wrote, “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” The same holds true for urban ecology. While measures such as forest coverage and restored wetland area are important, what truly resonates with people is the chorus of birdsong outside their windows at dawn, the sight of swans returning to city lakes or the annual passage of eagles over Baiwang Mountain. These living signs convey a simple truth: this is a place worth staying in. Today, Beijing manages 79 protected areas, safeguarding more than 90 percent of its key wildlife species and their habitats. Birds now nest in urban parks, residential

neighbourhoods and schoolyards, reflecting a restored bond between people and nature.

When more and more creatures choose to make their home here, we see not only wildlife, but a city transformed. Year after year, morning mist rises over Yeya Lake; season after season, winds carry soaring wings above Baiwang Mountain. Migratory birds from thousands of miles away continue to inscribe Beijing on their ancient migratory routes. And Beijing, in turn, remains committed, generation after generation, to becoming a home where people and nature flourish together.

A city's liveability has never been measured solely by skyscrapers, wide boulevards or glittering neon lights, but also by how many living beings choose to call it home. The Père David's deer waited 85 years to return. Black swans journeyed from the Southern Hemisphere to raise generations in Yuanmingyuan Park. Each spring and autumn, migratory birds arrive on schedule, while raptors trace familiar paths across the mountain skies.

All creatures have a spirit. Increasingly, they are choosing Beijing—not merely as a stopover, but as a home. In doing so, they add a new and living chapter to the city's story.

▼ Baihua Mountain

The Call of the Deer at Nanyuan

Text by Ma Kai Photos by Zhang Xin, Tong Tianyi



Beyond the Southern Fifth Ring Road in Beijing, the Liangshui River winds through a vast wetland known as Nanhaizi. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, this area served as an imperial hunting ground. Although its original perimeter walls have long since disappeared, they have been replaced by high protective railings and a secure entrance. Beyond the gate lies the Beijing Milu Ecological Research Centre, more commonly known as Milu Park.

Team Leader of the Deer Park

Bai Jiade greeted us outside an office building, striding over with a booming voice and an energetic manner. Having served as director of the Beijing Milu Ecological Research Centre for 18 years, he knows every pond and every creature across the reserve. As we shook hands, he said with a self-deprecating laugh, “I majored in animal husbandry and originally raised pigs and cattle. I never imagined I’d be ‘assigned’ to raise *milu* (Père David’s deer).” He has now spent nearly 20 years protecting these animals, known in Chinese as *sibuxiang* (literally “four not alike”) because they have the head of a horse, the antlers of a deer, the hooves of a cow and the tail of a donkey. He admitted he “never expected it,” yet the role seems to have become his true calling.

Our group followed a path deeper into the park when the distant call of a deer rang out. Bai paused to listen before saying, “That’s a stag taking over the herd.” He explained, “He’s saying, ‘This is my territory.’” Then Bai cleared his throat and answered with a series of deep, guttural calls of his own. Moments later, a faint reply drifted back from the distance. We stood in astonishment, but Bai simply gave a casual wave, like a performer finishing a song, and carried on walking.

Continuing on our walk, we spotted a large stag standing by the water. It pawed at the mud, rubbed its head in the wallow and let out a loud roar. “He’s scent-marking,” Bai explained. “By coating himself in a mixture of mud and urine, the stronger the smell, the more intimidating he becomes.”

From June to August, *milu* enter their mating season, a turbulent period for the wetland. To secure mates, stags engage in fierce, often violent battles that can leave rivals badly injured or even dead. Sensing our unease, Bai spoke matter-of-factly. “We won’t save them, nor should we. If one can’t win, that’s nature.” In his view, the laws of the wild are uncompromising. Excessive human intervention in these contests serves no purpose and ultimately weakens the population’s natural resilience.

The sanctuary is home to far more than *milu*. Blue peacocks wander freely, their chicks trailing close behind as they disappear into the undergrowth. Nearby, the waterfront has become a bustling nursery for countless birds. Cormorants and egrets flourish here. Gesturing towards the treetops, Bai said, “This year, the egrets alone have built 300 or 400 nests. All those black dots you can see are nests.”

As we spoke, a tricycle rumbled past carrying a large water tank. Seated beside it were two bespectacled men. “These are two PhD researchers from our centre,” Bai explained. “They’ve just returned from delivering water to the deer.” The slimmer of the two, Cheng Zhibin, a native of Fujian, has worked here for 16 years after completing his studies at Northeast Forestry University. Although his career path may seem unusual, he has devoted himself to wetland and wildlife conservation. Beside him sat Lu Guanjie, a veterinarian from Shandong Province who recently joined the team. Despite their different backgrounds, both have dedicated themselves to the vital work of protecting wildlife.

As Lu only recently joined the team, he has yet to treat a *milu*. He recalled, “The first time I saw one in person, I couldn’t think about



▲ Bai Jiade

anything else. I was simply struck by how enormous it was. If I end up collecting samples from them in the future, it’s definitely going to be a lot of work.” Their daily routine includes three patrols of the reserve, checking the herd’s health, inspecting water troughs for algae and managing feed supplies. Lu joked that his girlfriend likes to tease him, saying his responsibilities at the centre equate to nothing more than a simple animal keeper’s role.

Guardians of the Wetland Deer

Bai knows species conservation is a long battle, and his young team, with an average age of just over 30, gives him every confidence. “Our team of over 40 includes many with master’s and doctoral degrees. Beyond research, everyone performs multiple roles, most commonly delivering water and feed.” Bai jokingly calls it “making deliveries.” The Nanhaizi reserve covers roughly 60 hectares, leaving ample space for visitors. Over 100 *milu*, divided into eastern and western herds, consume nearly three tonnes of alfalfa and concentrated feed daily. Staff transport forage from Daxing, chop it, load it onto tractors and distribute it at designated feeding points. Fresh grass is fed in summer and silage in winter. “A single deer can consume 20 to 30 kilograms a day,” Zhang Qingxun added. “Once, Director Bai asked us to remove everything from a dead deer’s stomach and weigh it. It

came to several dozen pounds.”

Zhang, an associate researcher at the centre, completed his postdoctoral research at the Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences. During his five years here, he has kept a camp bed in his office for overnight duty. His department oversees every animal's life cycle at every stage, managing breeding, health checks and disease prevention from birth to death.

Cheng returned to the subject of transporting the deer. Over the past 40 years, the park has relocated more than 600 *milu* to over 50 sites across the country, from Hainan in the south to Liaoning in the northeast. Every transfer is a demanding operation. Cheng recalled one journey to Poyang Lake in Jiangxi Province. Setting off in March, the trip lasted more than 30 hours. As they travelled south, temperatures climbed. The deer began panting in the heat and even overturned their water basin. “We

stopped at a service area, cooled them down with a sprinkler and drove to a nearby village to buy large basins to use as water troughs,” he said. “We arrived at 11 p.m. Because we didn’t know the road conditions, the truck got stuck in the mud. It took another two hours to get the deer into the enclosure.”

Specially designed high-guardrail trucks are used to transport the deer. Sunshades are fitted over the top to block their view and reduce stress. Before departure, the antlers are sawn off to prevent injuries during the journey. Bai and his team developed a “non-anaesthetic loading” technique, for which they obtained a patent and later showcased on China Central Television's *I Love Invention*. Cheng explained, “To put it simply, we create an enclosed passage to guide the deer from the pen onto the truck without anaesthesia, minimising stress and the risk of injury.”

Transport also came with its share

of risks. Cheng recalled one journey to Dongting Lake when thick fog reduced visibility to just 10 metres on the expressway, forcing the team to pull into a service area. On another trip, the sound of a creaking bridge prompted everyone to get out of the vehicle. After assessing the risk, they carefully reversed and took a detour to ensure the deer reached their destination safely.

Researchers fear inbreeding even more than the risks of transport. Zhang explained, “All of the world’s more than 10,000 *milu* are related, resulting in low genetic diversity and an increased risk of disease.” He has studied fatal haemorrhagic enteritis caused by *Clostridium perfringens*. “This opportunistic bacterium normally coexists peacefully with *milu*,” he said. “But when an animal’s resistance drops because of poor nutrition or sudden changes in temperature, the bacteria multiply rapidly and attack the

intestines. By the time symptoms appear, the best opportunity for treatment has often passed.” This silent threat remains one of the conservation team’s greatest concerns.

The central laboratory’s ultra-low-temperature freezer stores *milu* samples from across the country. Bai hopes to build an “unsinkable” gene bank. “It will preserve not only conventional genetic material but also vital gut microbiota,” he explained. The idea arose from the discovery that *milu* health depends on microbial balance. Once completed, the bank will help safeguard genetic diversity and the species’ long-term survival. “Even if the environment changes one day,” Bai said, “their genetic material will still be preserved.”

No Longer at Risk

“Nanhaizi is uniquely linked to *milu* as the site of its scientific discovery, native extinction and eventual reintroduction. There is nowhere else like it in the world.” Bai believes this wetland bears the responsibility of restoring the species. However, conservation is not about captivity but returning the animals to the wild. He outlined three stages: restoring the population, establishing new herds and rewilding. Each depends on years of monitoring, adjustment and patience.

Forty years later, the data tells a remarkable story. China is now home to over 16,000 *milu*, with 6,000 living in the wild—the world’s largest wild population. Spread across 104 sites in 27 provinces, they now form a resilient network supported by scientific cooperation. The International Union for Conservation of Nature has ranked the programme among the world’s top 15 reintroduction successes. Bai said simply, “Nowadays, there is no longer any worry of *milu* extinction.”

Bai understood that increasing the *milu* population was only the first step. The true value of conservation extends beyond saving a single species. “Protecting *milu* promotes ecosystem sustainability, stability and diversity.” This simple statement reflects a key ecological principle: no species exists in isolation. As *milu* return to wetlands,

their grazing, trampling and waste reshape vegetation and soil nutrients, influencing insects, birds and the wider food chain. Bai’s team has moved beyond traditional herd management, using *milu* as a flagship species to restore and monitor the wetland ecosystem.

Time passes swiftly for those devoted to their calling. As retirement approaches, Bai often visits the Milu Park Museum, studying antler specimens and sharing stories of *milu* with visitors. He lingers before a painting depicting nine Chinese elders alongside an international friend, identifying each by name. They were his predecessors, the pioneers of *milu* conservation in China, and their legacy fills him with deep respect.

Behind him, three young men watch quietly. Bai has become their mentor, guide and inspiration. Though silent, their eyes seem to hold a shared promise: “One day, we too will stand in a painting.”

As the interview drew to a close, Bai stood apart, watching the *milu* herd that had shared his days and nights. He remained motionless, quietly observing them like a true guardian of the deer. This land and his life had become inseparable, much like the antlers that are shed and regrown each year. The old must give way to the new. Here, he had witnessed 18 cycles of renewal.

He said, “When life feels overwhelming, people can come here. This place will heal them.”

▼ Cheng Zhibin (right) and Lu Guanjie



Tissue sections of *milu*

▼ Zhang Qingxun



▼ *Milu* (Père David's deer) specimens



▼ Blue peacocks



Beautifying the City with Vibrant Flowers

Text by Gao Yuan Photos courtesy of the Beijing Green Space Maintenance and Management Centre and by Tong Tianyi



▲ Liu Jie

As early summer arrives, driving along Beijing's ring roads reveals a vibrant spectacle. The *yueji*, or Chinese roses, adorning the median strips are in full bloom. Climbing up trellises with vigour, they display shades of red, yellow and pink, forming continuous walls of flowers. Social media users are captivated, sharing "casual snapshots" and declaring that these are the "most beautiful roads for commuting," while stating that "The *yueji* along the ring roads have taken over the romance of early summer." Many are equally impressed, remarking, "Traffic jams don't seem so annoying anymore."

Liu Jie, head of the Urban Greenway Management Section at the Beijing Green Space Maintenance and Management Centre, has played a key role in cultivating the *yueji* belt along the Eastern Fourth Ring

Road. Transforming drab, single-toned median strips into vibrant floral walls—and earning the reputation as the city's most beautiful road for commuting—required far more than simply planting flowers. It was made possible through extensive cross-departmental collaboration and innovative technologies, showcasing Beijing's creative approach to building a garden city through refined and intelligent urban renewal.

In 2025, Beijing's Fourth Ring Road was undergoing a major renovation, prompting the Municipal Forestry and Parks Bureau to enhance its green landscape. The Eastern Fourth Ring Road's challenging planting conditions and construction constraints posed significant obstacles. Previously, monotonous cypress hedges lined the median strips, falling short of garden city standards. Liu explained that the first step

was removing the eight-kilometre (km) hedges. They were replaced with climbing *yueji* and large-leaf boxwood to create three-dimensional floral walls. Flower boxes on elevated bridges and ramps were also planted with floribunda roses, forming an aerial ribbon of pink blossoms.

To guarantee the sustained growth of the *yueji*, different planting methods have been adopted to suit local conditions. Liu explained, "Some sections of the Eastern Ring Road already have soil, allowing flowers to be planted directly, whereas other areas are paved with hard bricks. The hard surfaces must first be removed piece by piece, replaced with planting soil and then used for planting." The soil had to be replaced because the original earth along the ring road was unsuitable for growing flowers. Liu revealed that the team had previously collected soil samples from beneath the Sihui Interchange for testing by a professional institution. The results showed that the soil failed to meet the technical standards for planting, with salt content twice the normal level. Furthermore, the levels of organic matter, phosphorus, potassium and other nutrients essential for plant growth were all well below the required standard.

Good soil is essential for growing flowers, making soil improvement the first step in enhancing greenery. While planting flowers may seem simple, every stage—from planting, watering and fertilising to bloom maintenance and winter protection—requires careful attention. If any element, from soil quality and plant selection to watering, fertilisation or pest and disease control, is overlooked, the flowers will not thrive.

Irrigation presented a significant challenge. The Eastern Fourth Ring Road's median strips originally had no water supply, relying solely on sprinkler trucks and manual watering, which was both inefficient and unsafe. Liu noted that taking advantage of the major road renovation, multiple departments worked together to bury water pipes beneath the main lanes and connect them to a water source. This innovation enables the *yueji* belt to be irrigated

automatically. Liu said the approach provided a one-time solution with long-term benefits. It eliminated traffic disruption while effectively solving the challenge of watering the median strips, reflecting refined and intelligent urban management.

Notably, this environmental enhancement project has fully integrated a sophisticated maintenance system. Across the site, 175,000 linear metres of irrigation infrastructure have been installed. The smart irrigation system combines drip irrigation, sprinkler irrigation and conventional watering methods while monitoring soil moisture and rainfall, enabling precise water delivery. Through the use of this advanced technology, the *yueji* can effectively thrive with minimal manual. Beyond irrigation alone, the system also supports integrated fertilisation, allowing nutrient levels to be adjusted according to seasonal requirements. Furthermore, maintenance staff can monitor parameters such as humidity and flow rates in specific zones through a mobile application, enabling precise control of irrigation valves. They can

even programme water-to-fertiliser ratios, ensuring the automated and uniform distribution of nutrients directly to plant roots overnight, improving efficiency while supporting healthy, consistent growth.

Technological advances have enabled the *yueji* to flourish in Beijing, with smart maintenance providing the essential support for its continued growth. This approach has successfully transformed previously inhospitable urban spaces, including elevated roads, interchanges and ring roads, into sustainable floral belts requiring relatively little maintenance. Liu explained that internal assessments have demonstrated significant financial and operational improvements. Since the installation of these smart irrigation systems along the 15.6-km main road and nearly 30-km bridge areas of the Eastern Fourth Ring Road, maintenance costs per km have fallen by nearly 400,000 yuan annually. Furthermore, the project is expected to improve water-use efficiency by more than 50 percent while reducing the frequency of manual watering by 60 percent.

The bond between the *yueji* and

Beijing stretches back several centuries. Because the flower displays remarkable vitality and blooms across three seasons, it is affectionately known as "Changchunhua," or "Everlasting Bloom," a symbol of a prosperous life and continuous energy. It first flourished on the lofty walls of imperial gardens before spreading to the city's streets and lanes, and in 1987 it was officially designated Beijing's city flower. From that point forward, it has become closely intertwined with the city's identity and development. Its lush, vigorous blooms effectively fill gaps in urban roadside greening, while its widespread popularity and accessibility have made it one of the most recognisable and admired features of Beijing's garden city landscape.

Today's abundant blooms along Beijing's streets not only reflect the city's distinctive vitality but also its enduring commitment to beauty. Behind this colourful spectacle are countless people like Liu, who work quietly and diligently to care for the plantings, continually contributing to the city's flourishing green landscape and its vision of sustainable development.

▼ *Yueji* (Chinese roses) belt



Fayuan Temple Historical and Cultural District: One of the UN's Top 10 International Outstanding Practices on Urban Regeneration

Recently, at the 13th World Urban Forum in Azerbaijan, the Fayuan Temple Historical and Cultural District Urban Renewal Project, managed by Xicheng District of Beijing, was recognised as one of the “Top 10 International Outstanding Practices on Urban Regeneration” by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. Organised jointly by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme and Shanghai University, this initiative is regarded as one of the most prestigious and authoritative honours in the field of global urban renewal.

Serving as a vital component of Beijing's Xuannan culture, the Fayuan Temple Historical and Cultural District preserves some of the city's most authentic historic architecture, traditional courtyard residences and cultural character. As a living repository of the ancient capital's history and traditions, however, the neighbourhood faced longstanding challenges. Issues including dilapidated infrastructure, overcrowded communal spaces and the gradual deterioration of heritage sites and historic courtyards made it difficult to balance preservation with modern development.

Guided by the essential principle of “protection first, people's



livelihood as the foundation, followed by organic renewal, revitalisation and inheritance,” the project advanced its renovation strategy through a model of refined governance, incremental improvement and targeted updates. While ensuring the historic character and appearance of the capital remained intact, the programme successfully addressed shortcomings in residents' daily lives while simultaneously restoring the inherent energy of the district.



A New Highlight in Tianqiao: the Cultural Revival of Zhaozhuizi Hutong

Centuries after the area was established, visitors strolling through Tianqiao on the western side of the southern Beijing Central Axis can still immerse themselves in its rich cultural heritage. Today, that historic legacy is evolving into a dynamic force for future development. An innovative initiative centred on the “creative transformation of intangible cultural heritage” is now unfolding in Zhaozhuizi Hutong, north of Tianqiao. The project has transformed an ordinary alley into a vibrant experimental space, composing a modern symphony of cultural renewal that celebrates the revival of the ancient city.

Zhaozhuizi Hutong continues to embody Tianqiao's distinctive “performing arts plus” legacy, attracting a growing number of creative organisations to establish themselves there. These groups transform intangible cultural heritage into contemporary experiences that are accessible, engaging and interactive. Within this setting, Fang Haoran, a national-level master of vocal imitation, brings fresh vitality to his traditional craft by recreating a remarkable range of sounds. The Zhao Chunxiang Subtle Art Museum blends the delicate medium of soft clay with traditional Chinese aesthetics. Meanwhile, the Zhiruan Digital Art Museum uses immersive technology to offer new interpretations of cultural traditions. Guided by a philosophy of “design as curation,” the Hutong Art Gallery weaves architectural renewal and community engagement into its exhibition practices.

A sophisticated model of symbiosis is emerging throughout Tianqiao. Efforts towards historical preservation and practical use are advancing hand in hand. The performing arts sector and a wide range of commercial ventures continue to grow together, while environmental improvements and better living conditions for residents are being pursued in parallel. As Tianqiao's charm becomes ever more luminous, it invites visitors from around the world to discover how an ancient city can preserve its authenticity while embracing continual renewal, ultimately winning the hearts of all who experience it.