



A set of red sandalwood furniture reflects a scene from emperors' study. WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY

USED FURNITURE: NOT FOR SALE



A middle Qing Dynasty style throne in red sandalwood. WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY

The Palace Museum in Beijing has opened a new section housing royal artifacts. Wang Kaihao reports

This hall feels like an Ikea store, but in a Chinese royal style.

Thrown open to the public in September, Nandaku Gallery of Furniture, a new exhibition space and warehouse, is another must-see venue at the Palace Museum in Beijing, China's imperial palace from 1420 until the fall of monarchy in 1911. The museum is also known as the Forbidden City.

About 400 items from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties are visible in the new section, and 30 most highlighted pieces have been picked out to be displayed separately under different themes. Some are put together to recreate scenes from the royal court — gardens, studies and rooms for emperors to enjoy the *guqin*, a plucked musical instrument.

Wandering among the old furniture can feel like time travel for some visitors. One can see the patina on handrails or scenes of the emperors' daily lives depicted in ancient paintings.

Zhao Yingying, an exhibition curator at the gallery, said emperors from the pinnacle of the Qing Dynasty — Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong — were chosen as the main themes of the display.

Rosewood, or *huanghuali*, and red sandalwood were used to make the items that showcase royal luxury, and the ornaments are made of materials such as gems, gold, jade, corals, ivory and rhino horns. The technique employed in earlier times to make lacquer ware can also be seen at the new gallery.

"The furniture during Kangxi's time inherited simple styles from the Ming Dynasty," Zhao said. "Yongzheng favored the literati flavor and he personally designed some of the furniture. Qianlong made a great contribution as craftsmanship reached its peak under his rule."

Zhao said furniture pieces were customized during the reign of Qianlong (1735-96), with many styles designed to suit its environment. Among the collections at the Palace Museum, furniture pieces from his reign outnumber items from any other emperor's rule. For example, a red sandalwood throne inlaid with jade is placed



A visitor wanders among royal furniture from the Ming and Qing dynasties at the Nandaku Gallery of Furniture. FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

near the entrance of the new section.

The key exhibit has become a symbol of royal power. A chair, made of deer antlers, was one of Emperor Qianlong's most beloved items because he enjoyed hunting deer. To please the emperors, details were important for the designers of the objects. For example, aquariums for small fish are shaped like palaces or pavilions.

Inside the warehouse of the new gallery, Zhao points to several shelves that pack surprises — a desk inlaid with enamel cloisonne decoration and a tea table in a simple style from the reign of Emperor Xuande (1426-35), are among the oldest

items of furniture in the Forbidden City.

The 170-yard-long Nandaku, or the Grand Southern Storehouse, lay in the largest warehouse in the Forbidden City at one time and can now be partially viewed by visitors. It will be made fully accessible to the public later this year. Nanxundian (Fragrant Hall in the South), which is located near Nandaku, is set to become part of the new section next year.

Nanxundian is among the few surviving original constructions from the Ming Dynasty in the Forbidden City. Most of the palatial complex, covering 860,000 square yards, was burned down in a war in 1644, which led

to the collapse of the dynasty, and the city was rebuilt in the Qing Dynasty.

There are about 6,200 pieces (of which 2,580 are made of red sandalwood) of Ming and Qing furniture at the Palace Museum, scattered across 80 halls.

"Their variety reflects the spirit of ancient Chinese design and traditional craftsmanship," Zhao said.

The museum director, Shan Jixiang, said that while the museum has the world's largest collection of Ming and Qing furniture, a separate display space for such items was not available before.

"In the auction market dozens of pieces of

Ming and Qing furniture have been sold and the prices are rocketing. In contrast, the most precious ones were behind closed doors and covered in dust. It's better to let them shine again."

About 2,000 pieces of furniture will be displayed in the new gallery later, Shan said. Another 2,000 pieces will remain in their original halls inside the museum. The rest will be exhibited in a northern branch museum to be opened on the outskirts of Beijing.

Making full use of rooms in the Forbidden City has been a challenge for Shan since he became director in 2012. At the time, only 52 percent of the museum area was accessible to the public.

Now the area has risen to 80 percent. When Shan decided to renovate Nandaku in 2015, it was a big utility room on the verge of being abandoned.

About 1.9 million cultural relics are housed in the Palace Museum, but only about 2 percent have ever been publicly displayed.

"Many larger sized artifacts had no chance of being exhibited at all," Shan said. "This combination of warehouse and exhibition hall at Nandaku is an experiment. We can save room and have items displayed at the same time."

Unlike paper-based artworks such as paintings, which are sensitive to light and temperature, furniture can be permanently displayed, he said.

"When an artifact is viewed by the public, our preservation of the relics can be better supervised."

More rooms in the Forbidden City will be used as warehouse and gallery space in the coming years.

As many as 240,000 pieces of wood blocks for printing books were recently found in the turrets of the palace.

"We also have 23,000 Buddhist statues, and many horse saddles, weapons, palanquins and large ritual items used in royal ceremonies," Shan said. "We will find more space to display them."

Shan expects that it will be possible to publicly exhibit 8 percent of the museum's collection by 2020, to mark 600 years since the fall of the Forbidden City.

It's always full house at board meeting

BY XU LIN

Wang Jiajun, 30, is a rich merchant in the Middle East. Sometimes he is a general, commanding legions of men.

His adventures differ, depending on the day. These are not roles in a play, but board games, a hobby he took up five years ago.

"The fun part is that you can experience new worlds alongside different values and rules in varying styles of board games," Wang said. "There are various occupations and lives to choose from."

"Each game is a new world, and you can broaden your horizons by getting to know local customs and traditions."

Wang, who works for a State-owned company in Beijing, plays board games twice a week, and like him more and more Chinese are playing a diverse range of board games that have come from Europe and U.S.

About a decade ago, *Legends of the Three Kingdoms*, a Chinese card game, became popular among young Chinese. The rules of the game, based on the historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, are almost identical to those of the Italian card game *Bang!*, which came out in 2002.

Then, dedicated board-game bars sprang up, but it turned out to be a fad, and they gradually disappeared. It is only in recent years that the public appreciation of board games has revived thanks to the sudden popularity of role-playing game *Werewolf*. In that game werewolves secretly kill a villager at night, and the villagers have to discover and eliminate the werewolves during the day with the help of a seer.

"These are the two games most Chinese play," Wang said. "What they don't realize is that there are many other great games."

Wang said he has spent about 30,000 yuan (\$4,300) on board games, and owns more than 100 sets. Sometimes, after playing them for a period, he sells the games to other enthusiasts, and it is not uncommon for people to exchange games.

"There is such a great variety of board games that you will eventually find the one that suits your character," Wang said. "Whether you like making calculations or have a vivid imagination, there's a suitable game out there for you."

Some board games have complicated rules, and may deter the uninitiated.



A participant in a board game meeting. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"It's about peer education. You need to ease gamers into simple games first and build up to the more complex ones with the guidance of a veteran gamer. You have to play different games seven or eight times until you become a real gamer."

Those who have the patience to listen to the rules for half an hour have the potential to become good gamers, he said.

"The biggest challenge is to find time," Wang jokes that due to the fast pace of life in big cities, those who squeeze in time to dine with each other are called "true friends".

Imagine trying to assemble five or six people who are willing to play board games for half a day, he said.

"Finding a good gamer is also important, because — even by playing the same game



People need to put down their mobile phones and socialize with one another. It's a way of relaxation."

WANG HAN
OWNER OF A BOARD-GAME BAR IN BEIJING

over and over again — the experience differs when you play with different people."

Making friends with others through a hobby popular only among a small group of people is akin to looking for a soul mate, he said.

He also has board-game apps on his mobile phone, so he can play at any time, but one big disadvantage is the lack of face-to-face communication and the tactility of touching the game pieces.

Wang Han, owner of a board-game bar in Beijing, said: "People need to put down their mobile phones and socialize with one another. It's a way of relaxation; relieving themselves from the hustle and bustle of the city."

Wang said some board-game bar owners also buy new games from global crowdfunding platform Kickstarter and translate them into Chinese.

Meanwhile, Chinese game publishers are striving to import more games, as well as create their own.

According to a survey last year conducted by dicehobby.com, a Chinese website for board game enthusiasts, among the 669 respondents, half said they had spent between 1,000 and 5,000 yuan on board games, and 83 percent said they had donated to a crowdfunding program for a board game.

Race: A challenge to limits

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"A caring and responsible heart is what is needed to be a capable and reliable guide runner."

Volunteers in their group are required to cover their eyes in training to experience sightless running.

"Running blindfolded and allowing others to guide you enables you to feel what it's like running with little or no vision, and you realize how much the runners trust you and makes you aware of your responsibilities," Li said.

"It's difficult for the visually impaired to get here in the morning; they have to catch the first train or bus."

It takes a lot of courage just to train, he said.

Runners in their group are disciplined and organized and are never late for training, he said.

After Li joined the group, he required the runners and volunteers to train scientifically and in a healthy way.

"We are a running group, we have to stimulate our talent and challenge our limits. What impressed me most is that although they are physically vulnerable, they are mentally strong."

"The first visually impaired runner I guided impressed me a lot with his perseverance."

They ran together in heavy rain, and with his professional guidance and encouragement the runner completed an event of a little more than six miles, Li said.

Volunteers and runners get along well in their group. They are not just running partners, but also friends.

Li said the runners are kind and are always grateful for volunteers' help.

"They are considerate and often worry about the volunteers becoming too exhausted. ... They bring positive energy to our lives, and their optimistic attitude toward life is inspirational."

The spirit of partnership does not end when they cross the finish line. Li and other volunteers also take runners for medical checkups and buy them new gear.

"I am proud of what I've done for them," Li said.

To better align work with his volunteering activity he persuaded his company to



Li Yubao (right) helps a visually impaired runner to warm up prior to a training session at the Olympic Green. CHEN ZEBING / CHINA DAILY

organize a marathon in the Olympic Green on Sept. 22.

When talking about his public service work, he said volunteers serve as a bridge between society at large and vulnerable groups.

He Yajun, founder of the running group, said that without volunteer guides the runners could not even take the first step.

He lost his eyesight when he was 10 years old after a fever. He was depressed for several years and attempted a suicide, he said, but finally got through the dark times and started a business in Beijing as a blind masseur.

He started running in 2014 and completed his first overseas marathon in Barcelona in March 2016.

Running helped improve his physical condition and he became more optimistic, he said.

"We are counting on the volunteers to guide us, they are our eyes and we rely on them."

Having a partner to exercise with pushed him to improve his fitness and made him more aware of the surroundings, he said.

Li has guided by him many times.

"Li is very professional and he runs fast." "Li is very professional and he runs fast." When they run together, Li gives him professional insights like a coach, and in daily life Li is a caring friend, He said.

He is serious during training and pushes the runners if he thinks they are slacking off.