

SPOTLIGHT

THE CITY THE EMPEROR LOVED



Emperor Qianlong's *Journey to the South*, a long scroll painted by court painter Xu Yang depicting the emperor's first trip to Jiangnan in 1751. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Exhibition seeks to reestablish Hangzhou's link with Qianlong, through beautiful objects recalling his 'journeys to the south'

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When Emperor Qianlong arrived in Hangzhou for the first time in 1751, at the end of a journey lasting as long as four months, he was already 40, and it heralded the start of a relationship with the city that would play an important role in the rest of his life.

In fact, over the next 33 years, he would undertake the 1,500-kilometer journey from Beijing six times. These days, it is easy to underestimate Qianlong's undertaking. However, given the logistics and physical rigors of such a journey, it is clear that Hangzhou held a special place for Qianlong, the longest-living — and reigning — emperor of Qing (1644-1911), China's last feudal dynasty.

The trips he made in those 36 years are known today as the "journeys to Jiangnan". The term Jiangnan means south of the Yangtze River and refers to large tracts of land covering what are now East China's Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces. Jiangnan was long China's hothouse, culturally and commercially, with its talented people filling the cabinet and its taxes the royal coffers.

Hangzhou (also known as Lin'an when it served as the capital of the

southern song dynasty between 1129 and 1279), with its superb natural scenery and strong literary tradition, was the best place that Jiangnan had to offer. On every "journey to the south", Emperor Qianlong stopped in Hangzhou.

Royal favorite

"Nowhere else beckoned him in the same way that Hangzhou did," said Ma Shengnan of the Palace Museum in Beijing. Ma is the curator of a recent exhibition at the Zhejiang Museum in Hangzhou. The exhibition, *Ruler of a Golden Age*, sought to reestablish the link between the emperor and the city through more than 200 objects. These range from beautifully crafted jade, porcelain and lacquerware to works of painting and calligraphy he commissioned or executed himself.

"We intend to do justice to him," Ma said. "While trying to find time to play his other roles including the country's No 1 cultural patron and art collector, Qianlong was first and foremost a ruler with a strong sense of his own royal duties."

And when it came to Hangzhou, a city by the Qiantang River, fulfilling royal duty included the building of levees.

"The Qiantang River, running for more than 500 kilometers before pumping its torrential water into the



East China Sea, was Hangzhou's biggest natural threat until very late in the country's contemporary history," Ma said. "Bearing in mind that Hangzhou and its surrounding regions were the empire's crucial source of tax income, keeping the destructive waters at bay was the emperor's top priority."

According to Le Qiaoqiao of the Zhejiang Museum, who also worked on the exhibition, the emperor encouraged debate in his court as to the type of levees to be built.

"The choice was between wooden ones and stone ones. The first were cheaper and relatively easy to build, and the second were stronger so could be expected to last longer. Most court officials opted for the wooden ones, arguing that Hangzhou, so far from

Beijing, the imperial capital, would pose no serious threat to social stability even in case of a flood. The matter also became tangled up — as such matters invariably did — in court politics.

"However, the emperor stood firmly behind the second option, and the decision was made to build extended stone levees during his fifth visit. That decision proved to be the correct one, no serious flood occurred after the levees were completed, and only small-scale mending was required in ensuing years."

Prolific poet

The levees were made of stone blocks piled up neatly one layer upon another, dubbed the fish-scale levee. Vestiges remain, reminding us of the

practical impact of the emperor's visits.

Of course there was an element of fun in these journeys. A prolific poet, Qianlong wasted no chance to record his thoughts and delights on his travels. The Palace Museum now houses 53,000 pages of the emperor's draft poems, with more than 20,000 pages discovered in 2014.

On view at the exhibition two pages of writing titled *Five Poems on Eight Sights along the West Lake*, which Qianlong wrote in 1784, during his sixth and final visit to Hangzhou.

The value of the two pages, Ma said, resides in the fact that they were drafts, and reflect the author's thought processes.

"Another thing is that rather than



From left: Emperor Qianlong; His ceremonial garments; His saddle.

leaving his works open to interpretation, the emperor insisted on getting his true thoughts through. What he did was to fill the space between lines with explanatory notes. It's like saying: "This is what I intend to say. Don't get me wrong." The emperor was certainly not one to appreciate abstruse beauty."

The eight sights mentioned were all viewed from the emperor's palace in Hangzhou, built in 1750, one year before his first visit.

Once he had returned to Beijing, he ordered the constructions of temples, mini-palaces and bridges in Yuquan Mountain in the capital's western suburb, to conjure up a view similar to the one that he had encountered in Hangzhou's Shengyin Temple.

Garden retreat

But nothing was more telling than the retirement garden Qianlong built for himself inside his grand royal palace in Beijing — the Forbidden City (now the Palace Museum). The garden, in the northeastern corner of the Forbidden City, was completed in 1776 and

features buildings with sophisticated interior design, clearly influenced by the Jiangnan style.

Yet Qianlong never spent a single day in his garden of retreat. Officially handing over the crown to his son, Emperor Jiaqing, in 1795, he stayed in the center of power for four more years, until his death in 1799.

During Qianlong's last visit to Hangzhou in 1784, he turned 73. And the emperor, who prided himself on his many military achievements, inspected his Manchu troops stationed in Hangzhou. (The Qing rulers were of Manchu origin, a horseback minority group from northeastern China.)

"Zhejiang was one of the few places where the Qing court trained its navy," Le of the Zhejiang Museum said. "But the Manchu soldiers, having been pampered for so long thanks to their special status, had long been disconnected from their horseback tradition."

According to the record, during that inspection, some of the soldiers failed disastrously in mounted archery — the skill of shooting from horseback for which Manchu warriors were renowned.

"This deeply disappointed the emperor, who watched the show with his son, the future emperor. He even left poems expressing his sadness," Le said.

At that time it may have been too early for the powerful emperor to sense any real crisis. After his death, the empire was shaken by internal revolts. Pressure from the outside was also mounting: The door of the empire, after being kept closed since the 14th century, was about to be

pounded open by Western powers.

Today, the emperor is often blamed for his vanity and extravagant lifestyle as partly evidenced by the royal journeys he made.

"People talked about these journeys, imagining up all the romances that could have happened, without ever mentioning the royal duties he performed," Le said.

"Over history, especially over the past 30 years as popular period dramas on television have become a major channel for young people to become acquainted with historic figures, Qianlong has emerged, from time to time, as a hedonist and a lady-killer."

Candid reflections

This does not mean, however, that the six journeys, on top of others Qianlong made to other parts of his empire, should be immune from criticism. Despite a certain self-satisfaction — for instance, in his twilight years, Qianlong ordered a carving of jade seal to commemorate his 10 major military triumphs, a seal put on view at the exhibition — the emperor looked back at his "life's journeys" in a candid and reflective tone. The words are kept in Qing official documents.

"I have been emperor for a whole 60 years, with few blemishes except for the six journeys to the south," he said, talking to Wu Xionguang, a confidant.

"They depleted the royal coffers, leaving a burden upon my people. If any future emperor would like to go on similar trips, you must try to stop him. If you don't, you had better not face me in the afterlife."