



From left: Emperor Yongzheng; Qianlong's flower painting given to his mother as a gift; Empress Xiaoshengxian, mother of Qianlong.
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Filial piety of Qianlong's trips

Emperor strived to honor his mother, father and grandfather during his journeys to the south

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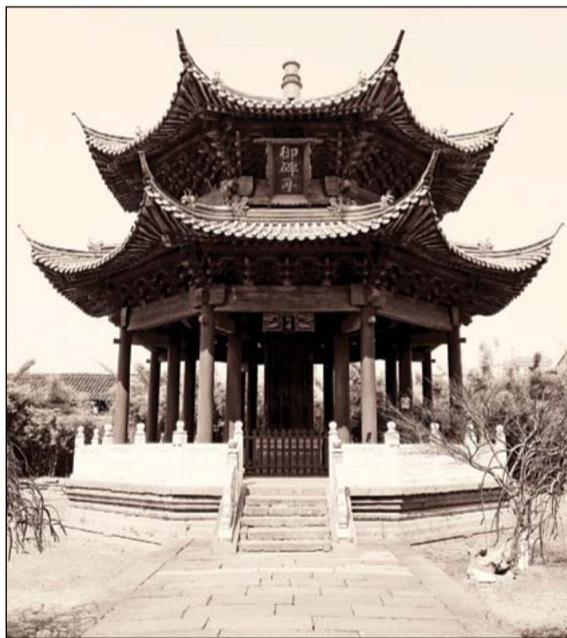
Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) was unlike most emperors in Chinese history, and in particular his father Emperor Yongzheng, who had to wait for 44 years before ascending to the throne, with bitter political struggles that ultimately ended in the demise of more than one of his brothers.

For Qianlong, the road to power could not have been smoother. When he was 12 he met his grandfather, the revered Emperor Kangxi, for the first time. (Little surprise there, given that Kangxi had 24 adult sons and 97 grandsons.) Endearing himself with the old man through a composed disposition rare in a teenage boy, Qianlong, by then known as Hongli (Qianlong was his reign title, and his birth name was Hongli Aisin-gioro, with Aisin-gioro being the royal family's surname), became the de facto crown prince after the coronation of his father, Emperor Yongzheng.

Yongzheng was on the throne for 13 years, dying when he was 57. Qianlong succeeded him, with no opposition. And his mother, who started as one of Yongzheng's low-level concubines, became the king mother, the country's most powerful woman.

The exhibition, which was held recently at the Zhejiang Museum, closely examined Qianlong's six trips to southeastern China and sheds light on the relationships between members of the royal family, relationships often marked by tension rather than tenderness.

In fact, the trips were possible mainly because of the empress dowager, at least according to Emperor Qianlong. "In 1750, the year before Qianlong's first trip to Jiangnan, he talked in public about his costly decision, giving four reasons, one of



From left: The temple dedicated to the water god in Haining county, East China's Zhejiang province; A stone stele in the temple inscribed with articles on levee construction written by Emperor Qianlong and his father Emperor Yongzheng.

them being to fulfill his filial duty.

"Qianlong defined his reign as 'rule with filial piety'. For 41 years, between his ascension to the throne in 1736 and his mother's death in 1777, he acted out his role as a son diligently and wholeheartedly," said Ma Shengnan of the Palace Museum in Beijing.

The Zhejiang exhibition displayed a painting by the emperor himself, depicting magnolia and peach blossoms. The images are simple and the colors muted. A few lines penned by the emperor on the upper right side say the painting was made during his tour of Longjing in Hangzhou, capital of what is now East China's Zhejiang province. "Mother saw it and loved it. So I have had it mounted for her," Qianlong wrote. That was in 1762, during his third trip to the south, a trip the empress dowager also went on.

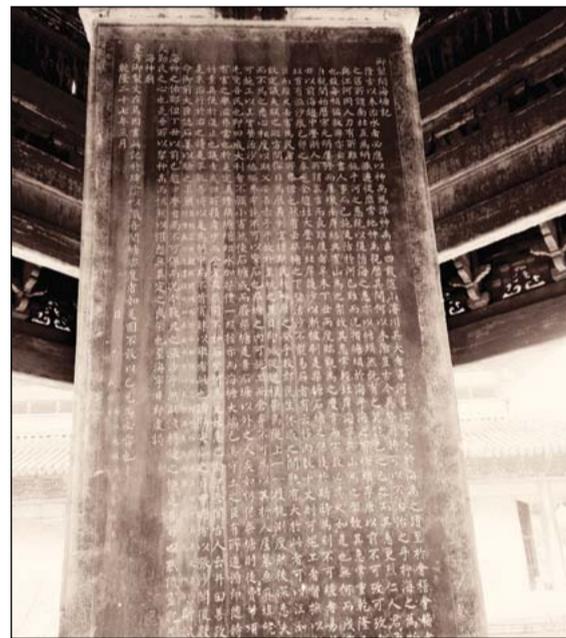
The emperor also tried to memorialize the deeds of his father, Emperor

Yongzheng — or to emulate them in his own way. Yongzheng, today regarded as the hardest-working Qing emperor, slept for no more than five hours a day, according to the official record.

And Yongzheng, like his father Emperor Kangxi, paid great attention to the building of levees along the Qiantang River that runs through Hangzhou. But it was only during the late reign of Qianlong that the nagging issue was put to rest.

Also during his third trip in 1762, Qianlong wrote a long article offering his own thoughts on building levees, based on field trips. Later he ordered the inscription of this article on a stone stele standing in a temple dedicated to the water god in Haining county, about 60 kilometers from Hangzhou.

"By that time, the other side of the stele bore another inscription, of an article penned by Emperor Yong-



zheng, also about building levees," Le said.

Today the stone stele is still there, with the writings on both sides telling a story about continuous effort and lasting memory.

However, no one could take the place of Emperor Kangxi, the grandfather who, after seeing Qianlong for the first time, decided to take the boy away and put him under his tutelage, a tutelage widely interpreted as an initiation into future kingship. Kangxi died in 1722, eight months after seeing Qianlong for the first time.

Kangxi was 67 when he died, after having been emperor for more than 60 years. His grandson Qianlong enjoyed a much longer life, dying when he was 88. However, in a rare gesture, to pay tribute to his grandfather, Qianlong abdicated three years before his death, in 1796, after being on the throne for exactly 60 years.

"What is not so well known is that Qianlong traveled to southeastern China six times and no more, possibly because Emperor Kangxi had been there six times," Le said.

"It seems that Qianlong decided he was not going to surpass his grandfather, in any controllable aspect. He had taken upon himself to make Kangxi the greatest emperor of Chinese history."

Sometimes the journey seemed to have been ruined, at least in part. Qianlong's fourth trip in 1765 saw the emperor getting furious with his empress: The unfortunate woman, who was made an empress three years after the death of Qianlong's first wife, fell out of his favor once and for all. (She was sent back to Beijing that very day, while the emperor and his entourage journeyed on.) The empress died the next year, followed by her son 10 years later.

No official record recounts what happened. Qianlong blamed the empress for "cutting her hair and breaking a national taboo". But for what? No one knew exactly. A widespread rumor was that the empress alienated herself from her husband by trying to stop him from taking on more romance on the road. This was never verified, of course.

The empress dowager died in 1777, after having accompanied her son four times during his southbound journeys. For the last two trips, in 1780 and 1784, the emperor was alone, without the mother whose death he mourned for the rest of his life, and without the wife he never forgave. Of course there were many concubines, but none claimed a place in the emperor's heart in the way his mother and first wife did.

During his sixth and final trip, the 73-year-old Qianlong wrote: "My travel ends here. Everything I am experiencing today will be memories for tomorrow."