

Qing Dynasty's sensitive strongman

Journeys to Jiangnan were almost obligatory for Emperor Qianlong as a man of tireless literary pursuits

By ZHAO XU

On all the evidence, Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) loved to be on the road: He traveled 11 times to East China's Shandong province, the birthplace of Confucius, the teacher and philosopher of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) whose musings became almost holy writ to generations of rulers.

However, it was his trips to Jiangnan, areas south of the Yangtze River, that are better known to modern-day Chinese, partly thanks to period TV dramas loosely based on these journeys.

In these renditions, which invariably romanticize Qianlong (1711-1799), the Qing Dynasty's longest-reigning emperor often comes across as a dashing man whose appeal lay as much in his courtly style as in his courtships. And Jiangnan, known for its strong literary tradition, was a natural place for the emperor to wield his folding fan and show off his prowess with words.

He would no doubt have objected to many aspects of this image, but there is at least one he would have agreed on. Power aside, he was indeed a man of words and a rightful heir to the country's millennia-old literary tradition.

As such, it was almost obligatory for him to pay visits to Jiangnan, the spiritual home for any Chinese of his time who considered himself a member of the literati.

Ma Shengnan of the Palace Museum in Beijing said: "What's special about Qianlong is the fact that as an emperor of ethnic minority descent he used this tireless literary pursuit — throughout his life, the man himself penned an astronomical number of poems, 90,000 of them — as a way of gaining legitimacy for his rule."

"In history there were only two groups of ethnic minority people that had ever ruled over all of China. The Manchus, founders of the Qing Dynasty, who hailed from the frozen plains of the far northeast, was one of them. From the very beginning, generations of Qing rulers tried to embrace the classical majority culture, a policy Qianlong implemented with heart and soul."

Ma is the curator of a recent exhibition at the Zhejiang Museum, the largest on the emperor since 2015, when the Palace Museum mounted a show with works of painting and calligraphy. For the 2015 display, all the selected works were from Shi Qu Bao Ji, an enormous compilation the emperor commissioned based on his royal collection.

The exhibition at the Zhejiang Museum in Hangzhou, featured 202 pieces, with 168 from the Palace



Clockwise from top left: A young Emperor Qianlong (left) wearing Han-style flowing robes; A painting by Italian Jesuit missionary Giuseppe Castiglione featuring Qianlong (left); Qianlong's study; *Eight Views along the West Lake in Hangzhou* by Dong Bangda with accompanying poems written by Qianlong; Two versions of *Emperor Qianlong Giving Appraisal to Antiques* by court painter Yao Wenhan, in a picture-in-picture arrangement. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From left: A Qing Dynasty brush made by Hangzhou-based master craftsmen; A Qing Dynasty green jade brush holder; A Qing Dynasty red lacquered box featuring fallen plum flowers being carried away by water; A porcelain bowl from the reign of Qianlong; A seal commissioned by Qianlong to commemorate his 10 military triumphs.

Museum and most of the rest from the Zhejiang Museum. On view were various articles from the emperor's own study back in his royal palace, the Forbidden City (also known as the Palace Museum). These include a white jade brush rest in the shape of a mountain, an ink bed, a duck-shaped water holder and a jade brush pot with vividly carved people in different scenarios, against a backdrop of rockery and pine trees.

It is worth noting that the scenes were meant to depict the private garden of a noted scholar and court official from the Song Dynasty (960-1279), a period that long ago came to represent a pinnacle in Chinese art and literature. Emperor Qian-

long, a diligent student of history and passionate art collector, long admired and even sought to emulate the artistic heights reached by Song (and its rulers, best represented by Emperor Huizong, possibly the greatest emperor-artist of all time).

Qianlong avidly collected Song Dynasty antiques, one such being a pale-green porcelain brush wash, whose demure color and minimalist design contrasted with the riotous, decorative style more commonly associated with the reign of Qianlong.

Qianlong longed for classical beauty, and the pale-green brush wash was among his most treasured collectibles. The emperor also used

a writing brush made especially for him by master brush-makers in Hangzhou. And this predilection for the life of a literary-minded man influenced other aspects of the emperor's life — and collection — filling it with a sensitivity unusual in a strongman.

The exhibition featured a red-lacquered wooden box with an iron handle. Two ferocious dragons playing with a fire ball adorn the side of the box. Inside it is compartmentalized, with different sections intended for different things — food, tea, and of course papers and brushes. The box, called a mountain-touring tool, was popular in the Song era, when people with similar tastes and views

formed small literary groups, and these groups frequently went on outings, to drink tea, compose poems and be inspired by nature. The box, which invariably appeared on such occasions, was often an object of beauty itself.

Other lacquerware was displayed, including a box in the shape of a musical instrument known as the *guqin*, and another one whose cover is decorated with a repetitive pattern composed of fallen plum flowers being carried away by water. Both were made during Qianlong's reign.

The most concrete proof of the emperor's Song mania comes in the form of his own portrait, painted by the court painter Yao Wenhan at his commission and titled, *Emperor Qianlong Giving Appraisal to Antiques*. In the scroll, painted purely with dark ink, the emperor appeared as a Han scholar in flowing robes, Han being the majority Chinese group.

All around, the emperor is surrounded by cultural objects from the bygone era, including copper, jade and porcelain ware. Right behind him hangs a landscape painting, one that clearly depicts the scenery of a lake-studded Jiangnan and also includes a portrait of the emperor.

The emperor, so relaxed to have taken one foot out of his shoe, is contemplating his roomful of treasures under his own mild gaze. Ma said the painting is the only one depicting an emperor that features this picture-within-a-picture arrangement.

"But it was not as novel as it may seem; the painting is based on a Song Dynasty one that played the same visual trick."

A number of versions of this painting were created at different times during the emperor's lifetime.

To Ma, the exhibition was timely, given how misconstrued the emperor is today. "His taste is questioned," she said, referring to the emperor's love of intensely crafted and often heavily embellished pieces, a love that contrasted with the pared-down aesthetic of his father Emperor Yongzheng.

"However, it appears to me that what the emperor really was after was not any particular aesthetic, but a cultural legitimacy and a sense of undisrupted continuity," she said, referring to Qianlong's reinterpretation of Shang Dynasty (c16th century-11th century BC) bronze ware, in dark green jade.

"It's true that he rated art works from history and left countless stamps on them, sometimes obscuring the original work. And it's true that such practices say a lot about his personal pride. But this pride drove him to collect and preserve with even more fervor. And we all thank him for that."