

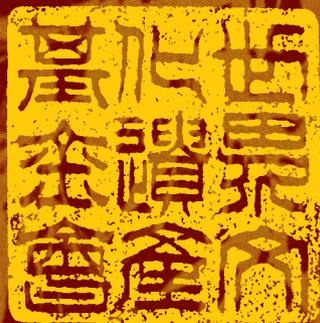
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Perhaps no emperor in all of China's history was more conscious of his own image than Qianlong. Suitably enough, he loved to have his portrait painted, and scores of those renderings have survived: we can see him as a prince, taking over control of the country from his shrewd and hard-nosed father Yongzheng; we can see him as an alert yet decorous young ruler, shortly after succeeding to the throne in 1736; we can see him in the company of his beloved horses, either receiving them as tributary gifts from the nomadic peoples of the steppe or out riding in the full panoply of embroidered robes and gleaming armor. In somewhat less-public images, he appears in a lakeside pavilion escorted by his entourage of beautiful palace women, the erotic possibilities of the moment underlined by the horned stag and the shy doe, at which the emperor is thoughtfully gazing; or shown from different

Portrait of an Emperor

QIANLONG: RULER, CONNOISSEUR, AND SCHOLAR

by JONATHAN SPENCE



vantage points in a trompe l'oeil montage of screens and portraits in his imperial study. And we can see him in the grandest contexts of empire, reviewing the serried masses of his troops while out on maneuvers, traveling with a mighty retinue to inspect the cities in the center of China, or enshrined as a self-reflective Buddhist saint in the midst of a holy mountain.

It is suitable that Qianlong has left us such a plethora of images, since he did in truth play a multiplicity of roles in his long reign between 1736 and 1796. By dint of ten protracted military campaigns, fought at enormous cost in treasure and in casualties, he almost doubled the size of the already vast Chinese empire. To make manifest his power over the recently conquered Muslim peoples of Altishahr, he relocated many of their leaders to spacious dwellings in Beijing, near to the imperial palace, and selected one of their young women to join his cohort of high-ranking consorts. Recent documentary finds show that Qianlong honored her Muslim dietary restrictions, that she bore him a daughter, and that after her death he had her buried in a stone casket, inscribed with passages from the Koran in Arabic. To strengthen alliances between his court and the Lamaist Buddhist Mongols on China's northern frontiers, the emperor gave them special trading privileges,



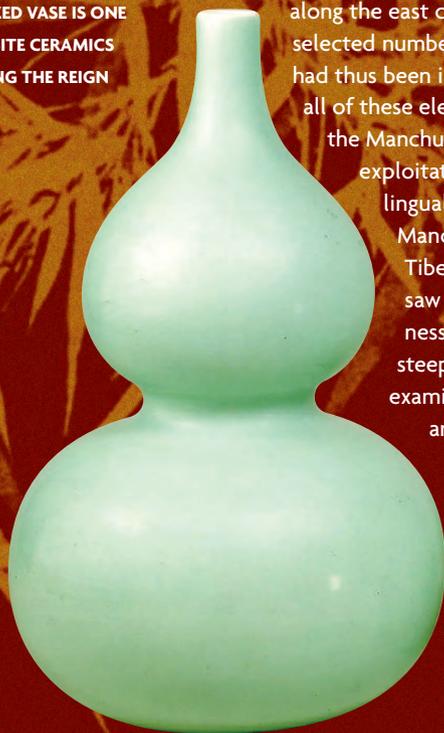


A JESUIT MISSIONARY, THE ITALIAN PAINTER GIUSEPPE CASTIGLIONE (1688–1766) CARRIED OUT NUMEROUS COMMISSIONS FOR THE QING COURT, INCLUDING AN EXTRAORDINARY RENDERING ON SILK, SCENES FROM WHICH APPEAR ON THESE AND FOLLOWING PAGES. ABOVE, TARTAR ENVOYS PRESENT THEIR HORSES TO QIANLONG AND, FACING PAGE, THE EMPEROR DEPARTS FOR HIS SUMMER RESIDENCE.

married his daughters to their princely leaders, and built a replica of the Potala palace in the hills north of Beijing, so they would know the sacred center of Lhasa was ever in his thoughts. Since his elderly mother had loved the delicate architecture and winding canals of the prosperous trading cities of the Yangzi delta region when she accompanied him on some of his early royal progresses to the region, Qianlong had some of her favorite sites re-created for her enjoyment in her own palace gardens after age and illness prevented her from traveling anymore. In a different vein, but equally grandiose in conception, was Qianlong's co-opting of several Jesuit missionaries residing in Beijing—especially those skilled in architecture and painting—to design and help in the construction of an exquisite array of Baroque palaces, fountains, and gardens in the northern corner of his Beijing summer palace complex.

In these and many similar actions, Qianlong was emphasizing his role not just as the emperor of China, but as a Central Asian monarch presiding over a multiethnic empire. Some of this complex role-playing came from his own volition, but other facets were imposed on him by birth and by history. Qianlong was always conscious of his family's Manchu ancestry and of the fact that he was the fourth emperor in direct line of descent since the Manchu warriors had swept from their northern base areas into the city of Beijing in the early summer of 1644, destroying the Ming dynasty which had reigned since 1368. Thus we can also trace how diligently Qianlong labored to underline his Manchu traits and heritage, ensuring that Manchu language was maintained by the descendants of the original conquering families, that the original tribal shamanic practices keep their vitality, that Manchu dress and hairstyle be kept as distinguishing markers, and that their military heritage be celebrated in the practices of mounted archery and in hunting. China, especially to the north, around the capital, and along the east coast, was dominated by garrison forces of Manchu troops, their ranks supplemented by selected numbers of Chinese and Mongols who had joined the conquerors in the 1640s or before, and had thus been incorporated into the Manchu military organization known as the Eight Banners. Putting all of these elements together, some historians have recently begun to describe the Qing dynasty that the Manchus founded as a kind of colonial empire: expansionist, self-protective, militaristic, fiscally exploitative, and determined to prevent ethnic self-determination. Certainly it was also multi-lingual. Colophons, steles, inscriptions, and even the coinage issued in Qianlong's and other Manchu reigns have been found in five languages: Manchu, Chinese, Mongol, Arabic, and Tibetan. Yet such undeniable facts should not be allowed to hide the fact that Qianlong also saw himself as very much a Chinese emperor, tied to past Confucian traditions by the richness of received texts on ethics and government that he had learned by heart from his tutors, steeped in the sonorities of Chinese poetry, the defender and maintainer of the competitive examination system that provided the main route for ambitious Chinese into the bureaucracy, and an able exponent of a broad spectrum of Chinese concepts ranging from the norms of filial piety and mourning practices to the techniques of fiscal management by means of grain price controls and state-managed monopolies. It is not surprising that one of Qianlong's grandest projects was to assemble a team of China's finest scholars for the purpose of assembling, editing, and printing the largest collection ever made of Chinese philosophy, history, and literature. Known as *The Four Treasuries* project, this mammoth undertaking spanned the years 1773 to 1784 and required the careful examining of private libraries to assemble a list of around eleven thousand works from the

A CELADON-GLAZED VASE IS ONE OF MANY EXQUISITE CERAMICS PRODUCED DURING THE REIGN OF QIANLONG.





past, of which about a third were chosen for publication. The works not included were either summarized or—in a good many cases—scheduled for destruction on the grounds that they contained scurrilous material, revealed important geographical information that might be of use to China's enemies, or else insulted the Manchus in some way. *The Four Treasuries* was thus a true symbol for Qianlong's reign: carefully planned, historically grounded, culturally sophisticated, but at the same time massive, intrusive, and coercive.

It was not until 1778, when he was already 67 years-old, that Emperor Qianlong let the Chinese people know what his retirement plans were. Even then, he had to be goaded into the announcement by a provincial level examination student, who accosted the emperor on one of his imperial progresses in the north and petitioned him to name an heir apparent from among his sons. In a written response to the student's question, issued at the court, Qianlong stated that he had not publicly named an heir, because such advance statements only encouraged factionalism and jostling for power, but he reassured the Chinese people that he had secretly chosen his heir, and that the choice was safely written down. In a more extended passage, Qianlong announced that if fate would allow him to live so long, he would abdicate the throne at the age of 85 by Chinese reckoning, which would be in 1796. This decision to "withdraw into leisure" in that particular year had been made for a specific





**QIANLONG AND HIS ENTOURAGE
PREPARE FOR A HUNT IN THIS
SCENE PAINTED BY GIUSEPPE
CASTIGLIONE, WHO TOOK THE
CHINESE NAME LANG SHIH-NING.**

**LOTUSES RENDERED IN CLOISSONÉ
ENAMEL ON COPPER GRACE A
QIANLONG-PERIOD VASE BY
TE-HSING-CHENG.**



purpose, for by 1796 Qianlong would have been on the throne for 60 years. By abdicating then, he would leave his famous grandfather Kang'xi, who had reigned for 61 years, from 1661 to 1722, secure in his record as the longest-reigning monarch in all China's history. We know from various records that as a child Qianlong had been affectionately treated by Kang'xi, and there is no reason to doubt Qianlong's assertion that he had in fact come to this decision at the very beginning of his reign and had only withheld the announcement for fear of causing confusion among the people. Now that the news was out, it was time to start planning for his future retirement home: the selected site would be in the northeast corner of the Forbidden City, a comparatively quiet and uncluttered area that had often been used to house the empress dowager or elderly consorts of previously deceased emperors. Now it would, for the first time, house a retired but living emperor, in his palace of peaceful old age, his "Ningshou gong."

Qianlong, of course, had plenty of other places to live: there was the expansive palace complex a few days' ride north of Beijing in the rolling hills of Rehe, offering easy access to the finest hunting grounds and convenient for the visits of Mongol and other bearers of so-called tributary gifts. It was to be here, in 1793, just three years before his retirement that Qianlong would receive King George III's ambassador Lord Macartney, and courteously but firmly turn down all the British envoy's requests for expanded trade between their two countries.) There was also the summer palace in the northwest suburbs of Beijing, with its engaging mixture of Chinese and Western architecture, its spacious gardens, and its fine views of the mountains to the west. But the Forbidden City remained the center of the center, should the emperor in his retirement still seek to keep abreast of political developments in China. Built in its current form mainly in the early fifteenth century and extensively restored after the damage from fire, looting, and neglect in the years after the Manchu conquest, the Forbidden City with its massive walls was also the safest place to be, surrounded as it was by the garrison forces of close to fifty thousand of the imperial Eight Banner troops. The Forbidden City contained not just the residences of the emperor and his family, but also the shamanic temple with its priests and priestesses, the key offices at the apex of the state bureaucracy, the historiographical bureau that kept the records of each incumbent ruler on a daily basis for the edification of his successors, and 42 palace workshops. In these workshops around 3,000 highly skilled Chinese craftsmen—along with a sprinkling of Manchus and Jesuit missionaries—were busy painting, mounting scrolls, printing, and boxing rare books and manuscripts, making clocks and cloisonné, and overseeing the immense stores of silk fabrics, porcelain, and other luxuries, without which the imperial world was unthinkable.



Here too were actors and musicians, experts in both ritual and recreational music and dance, which formed such a major part of court life.

The great walls of the Forbidden City provided one more central service for a man contemplating retirement: they protected the vast and ever-growing collection of imperial artistic treasures on which Qianlong had lavished so much energy and attention since he came to the throne. The imperial collection had its origins in the first century B.C., and had gone through many vicissitudes of fire, civil wars and foreign invasions in the centuries that followed. But it was Qianlong who lavished the greatest attention on it, certainly of any of the Manchu rulers.

It was Qianlong who ordered the compilation and printing of the meticulous multi-volume catalogues of the collection, in which were described every painting, scroll of calligraphy, rare book, bronze, jade, porcelain, and religious and other images that made up the extraordinary collection. One of the many roles played by Qianlong, with his customary diligence, was that of the emperor as collector and curator. Evidence from those same catalogues and from other documents such as scholarly memoirs, provenance lists, and court diaries, shows how carefully Qianlong followed the art market in rare paintings and antiquities, using a team of cultural advisers, from elderly Chinese literati to newly fledged Manchu connoisseurs. These men would help the emperor spot which great private collections might be coming up for sale, either because the fortunes of some previously rich merchant family were unraveling or because the precious objects acquired by Manchu or Chinese grandes during the chaos of the conquest period were no longer valued by those families' surviving heirs. Sometimes, too, Qianlong would pressure or even force wealthy courtiers into yielding up choice art objects: he did this by pointing out failings in their work, which might be excused if they made a certain "gift," or, in a couple of celebrated cases, by persuading the current owners that only the secure walls of the Forbidden City and its guardians could save



AN ICE CHEST EXECUTED
IN CLOISONNÉ ENAMEL
AND GILT ON COPPER

some precious painting from theft or from fire.

As part of his image-building, Qianlong loved to make a show of his Chinese connoisseurship. It is known that while he was still a prince, in the early 1730s, Qianlong took painting lessons from a talented Manchu landscape painter named Tangdai. And on some of those princely paintings, leading Chinese scholars wrote colophons, perhaps as instructional models for the future emperor. By the mid 1740s Qianlong was confident enough of his own eye to stage an elaborate scenario in his palace, at which he displayed two versions of the same painting, a long landscape scroll by the revered Yuan fourteenth-century painter Huang Gongwang. Laying the two scrolls side by side on long tables, Qianlong challenged his advisers to tell him which was the genuine painting and which was a later copy. To his own satisfaction, at least, he felt that he alone had made the correct identification of the genuine article and wrote a triumphant colophon to that effect. One of his court scholars was instructed to write a colophon on the other painting, stating that it was clearly not the original. (Current art experts believe Qianlong got it wrong.)

A different and spectacular exercise in power and connoisseurship was put into play by Qianlong later in his reign. It was in 1777 that the emperor was informed by courier that the largest undamaged block of jade ever seen had just been located in Khotan, far to the west but



now a part of Manchu China's expanded empire. The flawless white and green jade stood two meters tall, and weighed more than 5,000 kilos. Normally such an enormous stone would have been cut into sections to facilitate transport and carving, but Qianlong ordered that it be brought to Beijing in one piece for him to see. The process of moving the jade, which had to be slid on a wooden framework for more than 4,000 kilometers, took three years and hundreds of laborers and draft animals.

Once Qianlong had examined the jade, he worked with his craftsmen to shape a succession of wax replicas until they had the best possible design. The emperor decided that the best design was one which created on the jade the image of China's great early culture hero Yu the Great, as he supervised hundreds of workers in drilling through the mountains and replanting the forests so as to make the rivers flow more peaceably and the fields yield more fertile crops. Thereupon the jade block was shipped by water to Yangzhou, where the greatest concentration of skilled jade cutters was to be found. The work was completed in 1787, having absorbed an estimated 150,000 working days from scores of Yangzhou's finest craftsmen.

When the carved jade came back to Beijing, it was placed in the location that the emperor had chosen, in front of the Hall of Joyful Old Age, which stood at the center of the emperor's retirement site in the Ningshou gong. What better way to spend part of one's retirement leisure than in inspired contemplation of yourself as supreme artificer, benevolently supervising the toil of your obedient subjects! Qianlong did stay alive, as he had hoped, and he did abdicate in 1796 as he had promised. He had three years to keep his stone company, until death claimed him in 1799, when he was 88 years old. His reign is listed as the second-longest in China's history. ■

ABOVE, A PORCELAIN VASE OF THE QIANLONG PERIOD. BELOW, QIANLONG PARTICIPATES IN A STAG HUNT IN THIS SCENE BY CASTIGLIONE.

