

Mark C. Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Longman, 2009, xv + 192pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-321-08444-6 (pbk).

Mark Elliott is a well known scholar of Qing (1644-1911) China who specialises in the history of its Manchu founders. In *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World*, Elliott has turned his considerable linguistic and historical skills to a biography of the long-lived Hongli (1711-1799), who from 1735 until 1795 reigned as Emperor Qianlong. Presiding over a period of extremely rapid social, intellectual, demographic and environmental change, Qianlong's complex personality and reign are examined anew in Elliott's study.

Elliott's work is one in the growing 'Library of World Biography' series, put out by Longman Pearson under the careful editorship of world historian Peter Stearns. Elliott's most recent edition succeeds admirably in meeting the series' brief: to provide an interpretive biography of someone whose life either reflected important themes in world history or who significantly impacted on world history. Elliott provides a lively and engaging narrative that touches upon different aspects of the Qianlong reign. The first three chapters follow a roughly chronological approach, detailing in turn Qianlong's early life, his first years in power, and familial duties and their impact on his rule. As Elliott notes, 'A preoccupation with continuity dominated not just Qianlong's family life, but almost all aspects of his waking existence' (p. 50). The next five chapters focus on different, but inter-related, aspects of his reign. Chapter Four examines Qianlong's delicate political balancing act. As a 'foreign' (i.e. non-Han) ruling dynasty, the founders of the Qing had to carefully establish and then maintain their legitimacy to rule by demonstrating Heaven's favour at the same time as maintaining their own separate identity, demonstrated through martial prowess. Cleaving to both assumed and inherited traditions, Qianlong visited almost every corner of China (excepting the far south), spending on average three months a year outside the capital of Beijing. Chapter Five provides an overview of Qianlong's incredible grand imperial touring that became a hallmark of his reign. Indeed, Elliott estimates that Qianlong spent roughly a quarter of his reign outside Beijing. Whether reviewing flood control works or donating monumental *stelae*, Qianlong's travels were calculated to follow earlier dynastic precedent and to serve distinct ends: the military-like precision required to plan touring on such a grand scale provided excellent preparation for actual military conflict, while also meeting strategic and political goals, and effectively flying the imperial flag to the populace.

Chapter Six demonstrates the logical outcome of Manchu martial identity and touring: the display of military prowess on the battlefield. Here, Elliott provides succinct accounts and evaluations of some of the important campaigns undertaken under Qianlong, and which ultimately significantly expanded the boundaries of his empire. Discussion focuses on the Dzungar campaigns (1755 and 1756-57) and that against the White Mountain Khojas (1758-59) waged in China's 'Far West'.

Next to his military prowess, as Elliott demonstrates, Qianlong carefully cultivated his image as a scholar, as a man whose words and actions 'perfectly balanced *wen* and *wu*; literary accomplishment and martial virtue' (p. 107). A serious scholar all his life, Qianlong earned something of a reputation as a pedant for correcting officials' writings, but also as a patron of learning. A flood of scholarly works deluged the Chinese literary world – all initiated and often directly overseen by Qianlong. The famous *Complete Libraries of the Four Treasuries* amounted to over 10,000 titles. Qianlong also commissioned portrait after portrait, penned over 40,000 poems, not to mention initiating a number of dictionaries, histories and guides.

Chapter Eight moves from the scholarly to the wider world, providing an extremely useful overview of Qing China's foreign relations. Elliott deftly discusses the nature of China's tribute system (a translation of *gong*, the name for any gift presented to the emperor), correcting the commonly mistaken conceptualisation of the tribute system as a rigid set of proscriptions weighted down by ceremony. Instead, Elliott demonstrates its flexible nature, which meant it could meet the demands of visiting missions from places as far afield as Russia, Vietnam, Korea or even England. In formulating a flexible foreign policy, Qing authorities differentiated the civilised from the uncivilised, those who accepted or rejected Qing power and those who thus merited dignified treatment or humiliation. Rounding out this section, Elliott examines Lord Macartney's Mission of 1793, re-evaluating the likely reasons for Qianlong's famous diplomatic rebuff.

The final chapter of the book focuses on the declining decades of Qianlong's reign, symbolised on an individual scale by the rapid rise of Qianlong's favourite, the corrupt Hešen (1750-99), and on the imperial arena by spiralling problems of corruption, population increase, environmental degradation, social discontent and open rebellion. As Elliott demonstrates, part of the problem lay with Qianlong's own policies. Qianlong under-funded and under-staffed the bureaucracy, failing to increase its numbers despite China's population doubling from the 1700s to the 1800s (from 150 million in 1700 to over 300 million by 1800 [p. 146]). Chronic under-resourcing meant imperial bureaucracies were unable to meet basic administrative costs. Increasing corruption and collusion with local elites resulted. Meanwhile, rapid population growth placed pressure on scant environmental resources. While farmland acreage increased over Qianlong's reign, the ratio of land per person actually declined, from 3.5 *mu* per person in 1766 to 3.33 *mu* per person by 1790.

Throughout the book, Elliott firmly places Qianlong and his reign within the ambit of world history, providing evidence for example of Qianlong's fascination with European art and the impact of Qing expansion into Xinjiang in increasing Qing dealings

with the Islamic world. In *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World*, Elliott presents a succinct, extremely useful and lively re-evaluation of this signally important figure of world history.

*Reviewed by JAMES BEATTIE,
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