Historical Narratives of the Kangxi Emperor’s Inaugural Visit to Suzhou, 1684

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Introduction

Almost every student of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and of Chinese history more generally is familiar with the ‘southern tours’ of the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors.1 These were political spectacles of the first order which facilitated the consolidation of Qing rule in China proper and spawned a number of narrative accounts.2 The purpose of this essay is to recapture the dynamic negotiations between various historical actors that were inherent to the consolidation of Qing rule. In particular, it focuses on knowledge production and the writing of historical narratives as both a mode and a means of political participation and negotiation.

The Kangxi emperor’s inaugural southern tour was a relatively short affair, lasting only sixty days from early November through December of 1684.3 During this time, the emperor engaged in a wide range of endeavours. In Shandong province, he performed sacrifices at the sacred peak of Mount Tai and paid homage to the Confucian Temple in Qufu. In northern Jiangsu province, he inspected critical hydraulic infrastructure and ‘inquired about the people's hardships.’ Once south of the Yangtze River, the Kangxi emperor ‘observed local customs’ particularly in the prosperous city of Suzhou, the southernmost point on the imperial itinerary in 1684 (fig. 1).

1 The Kangxi emperor (Aisin Gioro Xuanye; 1654–1722, r. 1661–1722) embarked on six southern tours in 1684, 1689, 1699, 1703, 1705, and 1707. His grandson, the Qianlong emperor (Aisin Gioro Hungli; 1711–1799, r. 1736–1795) also embarked on six southern tours in 1751, 1757, 1762, 1765, 1780, and 1784. For more on the former see Jonathan D. Spence, Ts'ao Yin and the Kang-hsi Emperor: Bondservant and Master (New Haven, 1966), 124–57; for more on the latter see Michael G. Chang, A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680–1785 (Cambridge, MA, 2007).
2 The southern tours were highly publicised undertakings, celebrated at the time in vast official compendia, outpourings of courtly verse, monumental court paintings, and more recently, in serialised television dramas.
3 On average, each of the Kangxi emperor’s six southern tours lasted about three months (86.7 days). Chang, A Court on Horseback, 116.
These activities form a central part of the historical record, and the Kangxi emperor and his officials repeatedly cited them as justifications for his first (and subsequent) southern tour(s). As documented in official sources, the southern tours fit squarely within a venerable tradition of Confucian rule and statecraft which emphasised, and indeed demanded, the emperor’s ‘reverence for Heaven’ (jing tian), his ‘administrative diligence’ (qin zheng), and his ‘cherishing of the people’ (ai min).

In ideological terms, such phrasing alluded to the rule of ancient sage-kings, as recorded in the classical texts of Chinese political philosophy. Modern scholars have cited this rhetorical accommodation of Confucian values, ideals, and expectations as evidence of the Qing court’s ‘sinicisation’, ‘acculturation’, and more recently, its ‘continuation of ruling orthodoxy and political identity’. However, as suggested elsewhere and reiterated below, the Kangxi emperor’s southern tours were not simply one-way exercises in cultural or political accommodation, nor should they be treated as such.

A close and careful reading of available sources reveals that the meaning and significance of the Kangxi emperor’s first southern tour of 1684 were neither self-evident nor agreed upon. The Kangxi emperor’s first visit to Suzhou in late 1684 was a momentous ‘event’, the precise meaning of which was always open to interpretation by a range of historical actors, both at court and beyond. These historical actors produced narrative accounts which sometimes overlapped, but not always and never completely. Equally important, these narratives functioned not as reflections of an a priori reality, but rather as discursive

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6 The analysis here builds upon the ideas of Marshall Sahlins who argues that ‘an event is not simply a phenomenal happening… apart from any given symbolic scheme. An event becomes such as it is interpreted. Only as it is appropriated in and through the cultural scheme does it acquire an historical significance’ (xiv). In more succinct terms, ‘The event is a happening interpreted—and interpretations vary.’ Marshall Sahlins, Islands of History (Chicago, 1985), 153.