



LIU XIANG / CHINA DAILY

Entry to the mausoleum of the Qianlong Emperor in Hebei province, part of a complex that is considered the best preserved of all tombs in China.

Imperial opulence lives on at Qing tomb complex

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The Egyptian pyramids and tombs of its ancient pharaohs are renowned over the world, but few outside China are familiar with the Eastern Royal Tombs of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the largest, most complete and best-preserved extant mausoleum complex in China.

The site, located in Zunhua county in Hebei province's Tangshan city, is only 125 kilometers northeast of Beijing.

Most of Tangshan was destroyed by a magnitude 7.6 earthquake in 1976 that caused the largest loss of life from a quake in the 20th century, but the tomb complex was largely unscathed.

There are many explanations for the mystery — including ancient architectural techniques and outstanding feng shui — but the undisputed fact is its structures remained standing while others nearby collapsed.

Indeed, the location's feng sui is considered among the very best. The mausoleum complex is embraced by five major mountains, with two rivers flowing to both east and west like belts of jade.

When Emperor Shunzhi (1638-1661), the first emperor of the Qing Dynasty, went hunting in the area, he was deeply impressed at the natural beauty and harmonious surroundings. He decreed that his imperial mausoleum would be built there.

Records show that five emperors (Shunzhi, Kangxi, Qianlong, Xianfeng, and Tongzhi), 15 empresses, a dowager empress, 136 imperial concubines, three princes and two princesses of the Qing Dynasty are buried at the complex.

All imperial mausoleums at the site follow a pattern established by the Xiaoling mausoleum for Emperor Shunzhi. The basic layout has three sections: spirit way, palaces and offering kitchens.

The tomb of the Qianlong Emperor (1711-1799) — the

fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty — may be the most splendid of all royal tombs in Chinese history.

Documents from the era record that the tomb, which is called Yuling, had the finest tomb chamber comprised of a series of nine vaults separated by four solid marble doors located at a depth of 54 meters.

Beginning at the first entryway, all walls, vaulted ceilings and gates are covered with images of Buddhist cosmology — its four heavenly kings, eight bodhisattvas and 24 Buddhas as well as ritual instruments and more than 30,000 words from Tibetan scripture and Sanskrit.

The three-ton doors themselves have fine reliefs of bodhisattvas — beings on the road to enlightenment — and four protective kings usually found at temple entrances.

After hundreds of years, each bead on the strings held by the bodhisattvas can still be clearly counted. Toes and fingers are delicately and vividly sculpted.

The Qianlong Emperor selected the site for his mausoleum in 1742 and construction began in the following year. Although completed in 1752, it was expanded further in the years between 1755 and 1762, when a square, memorial tower, citadel and two side halls were built.

Called Ding Dongling, the tomb of Empress Dowager Cixi stands out for its extremely luxurious decorations. Its Long'en Hall along with eastern and western side halls is made from valuable red timber.

All three halls are decorated with gold-glazed colored painting, gilded dragons and carved stone rails.

Everywhere there are reminders of the Forbidden City, such as the terrace-corner spouts carved as water-loving dragons. The interior has motifs strikingly painted in gold on dark wood, recalling the buildings where Cixi spent her last years.

The Yuling and Ding Dongling mausoleums were looted by troops under the

command of warlord Sun Dianying. Precious burial objects like jewelry and manuscripts were ransacked.

The memoir of a looter said that when the Empress Dowager's coffin was opened and a legendary luminous pearl was taken from her lips it was so bright that it outshined the torches held by troops.

What happened to the fabulous relics remains a mystery.

Today in the underground palaces, the coffins of the Emperor Qianlong and the Empress Dowager are open to public view. Although few burial objects are left, the well-preserved architecture still reminds visitors of the imperial past.

The mausoleum palaces amid the looming mountains and surrounding greenery are peaceful and solemn places, reminding visitors that unlike the Forbidden City built for living emperors, its is a place for the imperial dead, who in some ways remain powerful and extravagant, if only in the imagination of visitors.

Wuqiao county flies high on acrobatics

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2,000
year
history of acrobatics

280k
population
in Wuqiao county

37
troupes
from the county perform in acrobatics shows

200
performers
from home and abroad take part in the Wuqiao circus festival

Wuqiao county in North China's Hebei province is considered the birthplace of Chinese acrobatics due to a history of aerial virtuosity that stretches back more than 2,000 years.

Even today its residents, no matter young or old, can often stun tourists with their astonishing acrobatic skills.

Murals in an ancient tomb in the county estimated to be more than 1,400 years old depict scenes of handstands and horsemanship.

In villages, fields or courtyards in the small county of 280,000 people, acrobatic stunts are seemingly everywhere. Daily household or farming tools at hand are often used in performances.

There are more than 2,000 professional acrobats working in 37 State-owned and private troupes in Wuqiao.

In some acrobat families, toddlers only 2 years old have already started receiving acrobatic training.

In recognition of the influence and wide appeal for acrobatics in Wuqiao, the Ministry of Culture officially named the county "home of acrobatics" in November 1996.

The large, high-standard, China Wuqiao International Circus Festival held every two years has earned international fame for the small county.

It is now considered one of the three most influential acrobatic competitions in the world along with the Monte-Carlo International Circus Festival in Monaco and the Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain — the World Festival of the Circus of Tomorrow — in France.

More than 200 top-notch

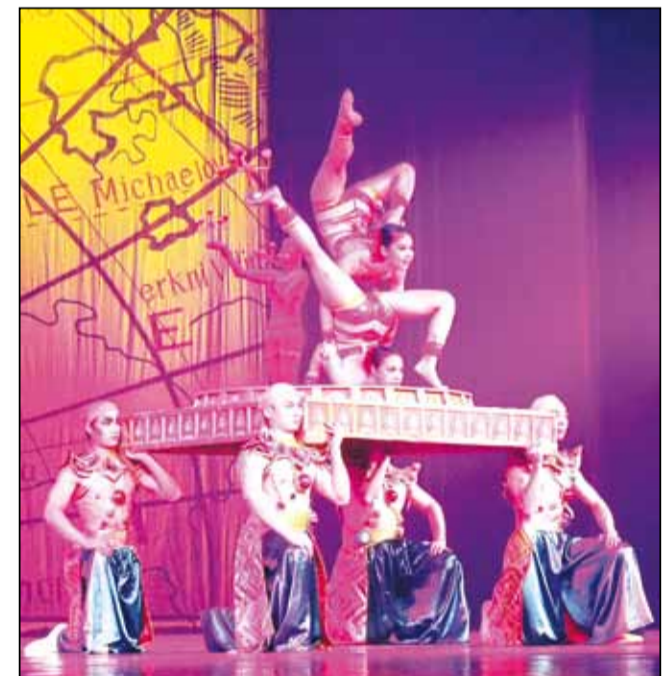
acrobats from 17 countries and regions were selected from 60 renowned circuses in the world to take part in the event in Wuqiao last year.

Acrobatic troupes from Wuqiao now make regular tours of more than 60 countries and regions in the world, especially Europe and the United States.

They have brought wealth and fame to Wuqiao. Last year, the county's acrobats generated \$18 million from performances abroad, forming a core industry that drives the county's economic growth.

They also perform at the 200-hectare Wuqiao Acrobatics World, a theme park unique in the country that showcases their skills.

Now a hotspot that draws increasing numbers of tourists, the park also offers magic and comedy shows.



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Acrobatic virtuosity at the China Wuqiao International Circus Festival, considered one of the top three of its kind in the world.

Beachside Beidaihe: Alluring for more than a century

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Today a favorite vacation destination for Chinese officials and citizens alike, beachside Beidaihe was a small fishing village when English railway engineers provided a getaway in the 1890s from sweltering summertime Tianjin.

Wealthy Chinese and foreign diplomats built villas and the locale in Hebei province eventually became Westernized like only a handful of other places in China at that time.

By November 1948, when Chinese People's Liberation Army arrived at Beidaihe, the resort had 719 villas covering a combined 295,700 square meters.

Some 483 of the villas were owned by foreigners whose nationalities ranged from

the United States and Great Britain to France, Japan, Russia, Italy, Belgium, Greece, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Spain, Switzerland, Ireland, Norway, Poland, India and South Korea.

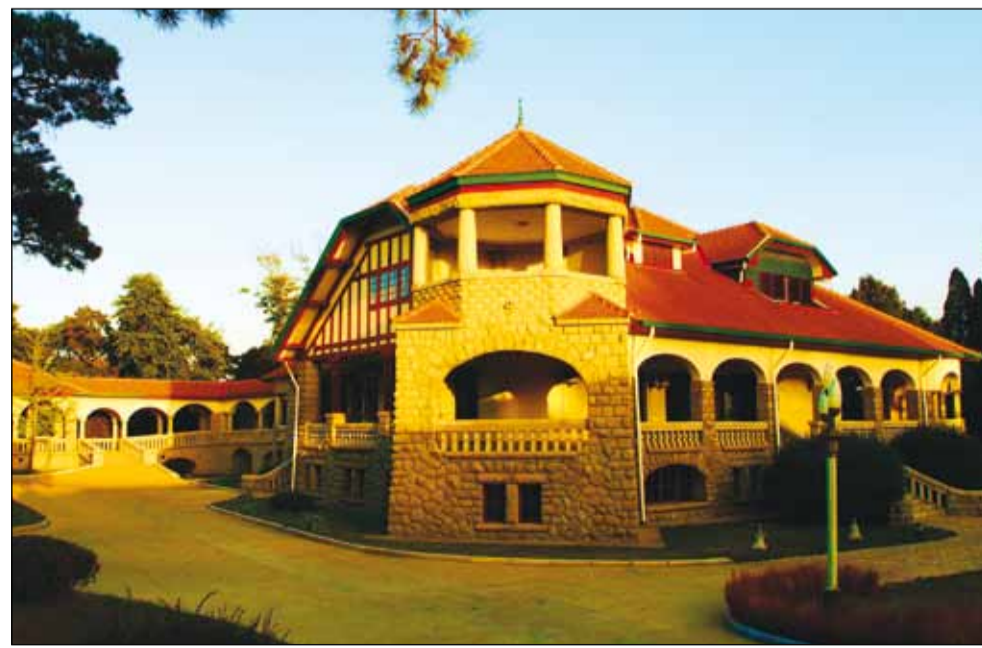
Although the villas were built in various styles due to the different cultures of their owners, they share the same lifestyle of comfort, grace, personality and harmony with the nature.

Few of the villas are open to public, but many visitors still take pleasure in walking by to get a glimpse of the enviable setting.

But even without a villa, tourists still find Beidaihe charming.

Beidaihe's 100-meter-wide beach stretches for 10 kilometers of fine yellow sand. Shallow water is good for swimming, soaking and resting.

According to Lu Guotian, director at the publicity



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European-style villas were built as Westerners began to arrive in the 1890s.

department of Beidaihe district, the authorities have now begun to promote tourism in all four seasons.

In spring, the theme is sports. A national cycling race and triathlon competition are held annually.

The summer topic is "romance." The local government departments invite Russian guests, mainly from

719
villas
in 1948

10
km long
beach

departments invite university students majoring in arts to sketch nature in Beidaihe. With scenic spots open, free of charge to them, the coastal resort has become a creative center for students from several renowned Chinese art universities.

It is also a popular destination for wedding photos as well as a locale for commercial films.

Lu said the district focuses on cultural details. For example, almost every single signpost and rubbish bin is delicately designed by art school students and has languages in Chinese, English and Russian.

In 2009, construction began on transforming the streets into a European style. Beidaihe attracts many visitors from both home and abroad. In peak seasons from July to September, it is even hard to book a single room in the area.

dancing schools, to perform in Beidaihe.

Of course it also includes leisure, comfortable clothes, the warm beach and the sea.

Autumn belongs to fashion, with many stylish events including a modeling competition and a lovers' carnival.

Wintertime is a soothing slow pace when the snowy setting provides the opportunity for writing and other creative work.

Lu told reporters that local