

NANJING

A Witness to the Centuries of Changes

Text and photos by Dr Jimmy Teo, Editorial Board Member

During my recent trip, I learnt that Jinling (金陵) is the ancient name of Nanjing, the Southern “capital”, finally enlightening me on the poem by Li Bai (李白), who wrote “Farewell in a Jinling Tavern” (金陵酒肆留别). Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Nanjing has been the capital city of Jiangsu province. It has many important historical sites, including the Presidential Palace and the Sun Yat Sen Mausoleum.

The southern capital

Nanjing was the capital of several ancient Chinese dynasties, as well as the early Republican period. The first emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, made it the dynastic capital in 1368 when,

for the first time, all of China was ruled from the city (1368–1421). During his reign, he constructed a new palace and a 48-km-long city wall. The brickwork joints were poured with mixed lime, water (in which glutinous rice had been cooked) and tung oil. The city wall remains in good condition and has been well preserved, making it one of the longest surviving city walls in China. It is amazing that a wall made with such primitive technology survived 500 years!

Prior to its flight to Taiwan by Chiang Kai-Shek during the Chinese Civil War, the Kuomintang occupied the Presidential Palace during the period of 1927–1937 and 1946–1949. The city was also the seat of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1853–1964).

Since the first Emperor failed to completely burn all books, the Chinese have been subjected to

examinations. The Imperial Examination Museum of China (Jiangnan Examination Hall, originally built in 1168) traces the history of how the examinations were conducted. Imperial examinations were conducted in cells, which were also the rooms for the candidates. Each door-less cell was formed by two brick walls and a roof, containing two wooden planks. The upper one was used as a desk during the examinations while the lower one was a seat. In the evening, the candidates put these planks together to make a bed. Because the cell width was just about 1.33 m, they would have to curl up. Often the tests were conducted over several days and the candidates were not allowed to leave to prevent cheating. Imagine taking your GCE “O” and “A” levels in such conditions.

The Chinese love revolutions and their history is replete with uprisings, rebellions and the rise and fall of dynasties. The first president of the Republican period, Dr Sun Yat Sen, was buried in Nanjing. His mausoleum is situated on a hill and has a magnificent view of the surroundings. The trip to the mausoleum is enjoyable in early December as the trees exhibit the colours of fall. The daytime temperature of 15 degrees Celsius makes climbing up the 392 steps (representing the then 392 million population of China)



reasonably relaxing. The remarkable story of Dr Sun Yat Sen and the revolution to overthrow the Qing dynasty is also a part of the history of Singapore. Before our current aversion to history-making, Singapore was the staging ground for the Chinese revolution. In fact, in 1994, the Singapore government gazetted the Sun Yat Sen villa (Wan Qing Yuan) as a National Monument (later renamed the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall). Dr Sun stayed at this two-story colonial style villa in Balestier, which was also the headquarters of the Tongmenhui where he recruited revolutionaries and raised funds.

No trip is complete without a description of the area's cuisine. Singaporeans no longer have easy access to congealed blood, but one of Nanjing's delicacy is congealed duck's blood with vermicelli soup (鸭血粉丝汤). In fact the people of Nanjing love eating ducks and have many dishes cooked from it, including brined duck



Sun Yat Sen's mausoleum

(盐水鸭) and roast duck. There are some restaurant chains specialising in Nanjing and Jiangsu cuisine, and they are easy to locate on the internet.

All too soon the trip has come to an end, and as I am met by friends sending me off, I recall Li Bai's poem between cups of Jinling beer. "Vacillating between leaving and staying, we emptied our goblets. My friends, consider this, in the east the river flows, when compared to our intent to part, which of them is longer?"

风吹柳花满店香，
吴姬压酒劝客尝。
金陵子弟来相送，
欲行不行各尽觞。
请君试问东流水，
别意与之谁短长？

Tips and notes

If you use Wi-Fi connections, you will not be able to access Google or WhatsApp reliably. But you can access them when using a foreign mobile phone and data plan. It would be best to download Baidu maps and Di Di (a ride hailing service) for ease of getting around. Visa and Mastercard are not widely accepted and you may need to carry a lot of cash or have a Union Pay card. Automated teller machines are common enough for cash withdrawals. Bring your passport when travelling, booking tickets or visiting museums. Some museums and places of interest require prior online bookings due to crowd management during peak seasons. ◆

Legend

1. Sculpture of exam candidate

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Simulated throne room



Duck blood congeal with vermicelli