

## Imperial tombs of the Ming and Qing dynasties (China)

No 1004

### Identification

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| <i>Nomination</i>  | Imperial tombs of the Ming and Qing Dynasties:<br>1. Ming Dynasty tombs at Xianling,<br>2. Western Qing tombs<br>3. Eastern Qing tombs |
| <i>Location</i>    | 1. Zhongxiang, Hubei Province<br>2. Baoding, Hebei Province<br>3. Zunhua, Yixian County, Hebei Province                                |
| <i>State Party</i> | People's Republic of China   |
| <i>Date</i>        | 26 July 1999   |

### Justification by State Party

[**Note:** the following text is an abbreviated version of the justification given in the nomination for inscription.]

The dynasties of feudal China prescribed the building of very elaborate mausolea as an expression of "filial piety." Considerable resources and labour were devoted to the construction of gigantic tombs for dead emperors and their relatives. These mausoleums illustrate the religious convictions, beliefs, political ideas, and aesthetics of the time. They also reflect the economic situation, the level of science and technology achieved, and the architectural skills of the period.

The imperial tombs of the Ming and Qing Dynasties are made up of ten building complexes constructed over a period of more than five centuries. At their most distant, they are over 1000km apart, although most are situated in the Beijing region.

The State Party considers these edifices to be a testimony to a civilization, architecture, and approach to landscaping that belong to a single tradition and therefore to justify inscription as a group. Only three tomb groups are nominated, however, two of which form the entirety of the Qing Dynasty tombs. The State Party considers that other sites, despite their identical historical and cultural significance, do not meet the criteria for inscription on the World Heritage List.

**Criteria i, ii, iii, iv, v, and vi**

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings* and their *sites*. These also constitute *cultural landscapes* as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*

### History and Description

From time immemorial, the rulers of China have attached great importance to the building of imposing mausolea reflecting not only the general belief in an afterlife but also as an affirmation of authority.

When the Ming Dynasty came to power (1368), an overall design was adopted which, with minor variations, was to be faithfully followed by successive emperors, including those of the Qing Dynasty (from 1644).

This overall design was characterized by the attempt to achieve great harmony between a natural site meeting certain precise selection criteria and a complex of buildings fulfilling codified functions.

The natural site, a plain or broad valley, must offer the perspective of a mountain range to the north, against which the tombs would be built, with a lower elevation to the south. It must be framed on the east and west by chains of hills, and feature at least one waterway. Geomancy (*fengshui*) categorizes such a site as "the land of the four divinities" and considers it to be an ideal place of residence for both the living and the dead.

In order to harmonize with the natural setting, a number of buildings are constructed along a main access road several kilometres in length, known as the Way of the Spirits, which may branch off into secondary Ways leading to other mausolea. An entrance portico with up to five doors marks the beginning of the Way of the Spirits, which subsequently passes through or alongside a number of buildings, in particular a reception pavilion, a pavilion housing the stele of Divine Merits, stone columns and sculptures representing animals, generals, and ministers, in pairs. After one or more stone bridges and a Portico of the Dragon and the Phoenix, the sacred way arrives at a complex of buildings that includes a hall of meditation flanked by side pavilions and a Memorial Tower leading to the walled tumulus under which lie the burial chambers.

The profound significance of the imperial tombs stems from this extraordinary harmony between a natural site with highly specific characteristics and the various religious buildings. This cultural landscape is imbued with a form of cosmogony that invests it with sacred status.

#### 1. The Xianling tombs of the Ming Dynasty.

Situated near the town of Zhongxiang, in Hubei Province, over 1000km from Beijing, the site covers 87ha within a buffer zone of 226ha.

The first work on the mausoleum was carried out by Xing, who planned to be buried there. On genealogical grounds, he was declared emperor posthumously in 1519. Further work was then undertaken to bring the tomb into

harmony with the standards of the Ming Dynasty and to create a second tumulus to house the burial chambers of his family, including the empress. The work lasted from 1519 to 1566 and was to lead to the construction of an unusual feature in the form of the Crescent Castle, which links the tumuli of the two mortuary citadels.

The site is over four centuries old and has suffered damage over that period, remedied by recent restoration that has revived all its former harmony. The Way of the Spirits is intact, as is most of the perimeter wall. The foundations of certain buildings have been uncovered. The Portico of the Dragon and the Phoenix has been restored, as has the Memorial Tower.

The Xianling mausoleum is associated in Chinese memory with the "ritual dispute" that marked the posthumous recognition of the emperor. The decision was contested by certain members of the court, a stand which led to their downfall.

## 2. The western Qing tombs.

The site covers 1842ha within a buffer zone of 4758ha, and contains 14 imperial tombs and two building complexes: the Yongfu Tibetan Buddhist temple and the temporary palace where the imperial family resided when it came to honour its ancestors. The site lies some 120km from Beijing and much building work was carried out there from 1730 to the beginning of the 20th century. The natural setting is extremely beautiful, in large part owing to the forest of elegant centuries-old pines.

## 3. The eastern Qing tombs.

This 224 hectare site some 120km east of Beijing, within a vast buffer zone of 7800ha, is particularly spectacular. It contains 15 mausolea in which 161 bodies were buried – emperors, empresses, concubines, and princesses. Among them are the Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong, remembered as great sovereigns who actively promoted the development of China, and the Dowager Empress Cixi, who ruled the Empire through intermediaries throughout the second half of the 19th century.

The underground burial chambers of the mausoleum of Emperor Qianlong were made accessible when they were broken open and pillaged by a warlord in 1928. They consist of nine vaulted rooms and four stone doors. The walls are covered with Buddhist-inspired bas-reliefs that are masterpieces in themselves.

## Management and protection

### *Legal status*

All the nominated heritage sites are placed under the strictest legal and regulatory protection. Any interventions within the perimeter of absolute protection are subject to authorization by the national authorities responsible for the protection of national heritage.

The Xianling mausoleum of the Ming Dynasty is protected by provincial regulations dating from 1956 and national regulations dating from 1988.

The western and eastern Qing tombs are subject to national regulations updated in 1961.

## - Perimeters and buffer zones

### 1. The Xianling mausoleum of the Ming dynasty

The perimeter of absolute protection follows the outer limit of the perimeter wall. A buffer zone then stretches for 200m from the perimeter of protection all around the site.

### 2. The western Qing tombs

The perimeter of protection covers all the important areas and the historic buildings. The buffer zone (restrictions on construction) covers a vast area of open parkland (4758ha). A review carried out at the time of the ICOMOS expert mission evaluation led to the extension of the buffer zone to the south and south-west along the crests of the neighbouring hills.

### 3. The eastern Qing tombs

A perimeter of absolute protection extends 10m from the outer perimeter of each building. This area forms part of a vast buffer zone (7800ha) covering all the surrounding landscape.

### *Management*

Management responsibilities are divided between the national and provincial levels, which provide overall supervision and restoration funds, and the municipal level, which is responsible for the actual site management. Numerous skilled teams are constantly to be seen at work carrying out the site management plan, which includes regular maintenance.

### 1. The Xianling mausoleum of the Ming dynasty

The site is managed by a team of 45 people, of whom 15 are qualified conservation professionals.

### 2. The western Qing tombs

The site is managed by a team of 150 people, of whom some fifty are assigned to restoration/conservation work.

### 3. The eastern Qing tombs

Management of the site is linked with that of a nearby workers' holiday centre, with all the positive synergies this implies. The site as such is managed by a team of 125 people, including 90 professionals.

### *Training*

For centuries the same plans were followed and the same materials employed using the same techniques. This tradition is still alive today. Permanent maintenance teams are constantly on site. Whenever a major project is launched, such as the overall restoration of the Ming mausoleum or the Yongfu temple adjacent to the western Qing tombs, young people are regularly brought in to assist in the work and to learn the techniques from master craftsmen.

### *Risk prevention*

Over the centuries there have been major earthquakes and many great storms, none of which have caused serious damage. The principal risk is fire, whether human in origin or ignited by lightning. The appropriate measures have been taken, from the installation of lightning rods on all buildings and provision of fire extinguishers and

water cisterns to the presence of a standing fire brigade service at the Qing tombs.

#### *Authenticity*

The nominated properties undoubtedly possess a very high degree of authenticity. Their cultural and political importance has justified constant surveillance over the centuries: thousands of soldiers were once assigned to guarding the tombs. The sites have also enjoyed regular maintenance coupled with scrupulous respect for tradition as regards plans, materials, and techniques, all the more remarkable when it is remembered that, at the same time, building work was going ahead on new mausolea. The recent restoration of the Yongfu temple, adjacent to the Qing tombs, adheres in every respect to the highest standards.

Should fire or storm destroy a structure, it is generally rebuilt to the original plan, working from impeccable documentary sources. In the case of the restoration of the Xianling mausoleum in Zhongxiang, the decision was taken, quite justifiably, to proceed with caution and to go no further than highlighting the essential features of the foundations in order to grasp the significance and aesthetic concept of the historic site, without unnecessary reconstruction.

The importance of the sites has ensured the retention of detailed documentation and archives. Site managers have all the basic documentation needed for their maintenance operations, while the complete archives are kept at the headquarters of the national heritage agency.

#### **Evaluation**

##### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the sites in January 2000.

##### *Comparative analysis*

In relation to the history of China, the Ming and Qing tombs represent remarkable continuity over five centuries. They are distinct, however, from the mausolea of earlier dynasties. The imperial tombs of the Zhou Dynasty consisted of underground burial chambers with no above-ground structures. The imperial tombs of the Qin and Han Dynasties around Xian, typified by the mausoleum of the Emperor Shihuangdi, were characterized by the raising of a gigantic earthen mound in the form of an inverted *dou* (recipient for measuring grain). The mausolea of the Tang Dynasty were built in hilly terrain, with the burial chambers dug into the hillside. The emperors of the Yuan Dynasty were buried in very deep graves and all external signs were expunged. The new model of mausoleum developed by the Ming Dynasty, with its rounded tumulus, is therefore a distinct break with the past.

In relation to other civilizations, the mausolea in question are a singular manifestation of power and the quest for eternity. The insistence on harmony between a special natural setting and the buildings of the mausoleum is exceptional. The scale of the work involved and the mobilization of resources required invite comparison with the Pyramids of Egypt.

#### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

The exchange of views made possible by the visit of the ICOMOS mission led the authorities in charge of the western Qing tombs nomination to extend the perimeter of the buffer zone to the south and south-west, along the crests of the neighbouring hilltops. The authorities have produced a new map of the site accordingly.

Thousands of visitors flock to the tombs each year: in their thousands to the Xianling mausoleum, in their hundreds of thousands to the eastern Qing tombs. The vast majority of the visitors are Chinese. Inscription on the World Heritage List would be expected to lead to a significant increase in the numbers of visitors, particularly foreign visitors. The attention of site managers was drawn to the need to deal adequately with these visits. Visitor reception and access facilities will no doubt need to be modified accordingly. The sites should also be properly presented in order to shed light on their historical dimension and their rich significance, by ensuring that information is also provided in foreign languages.

It is important to avoid any misunderstanding as to the inscription of the Ming imperial tombs. Only one mausoleum is proposed for inscription, as the others do not yet meet the required criteria. The wisdom of this approach is worthy of praise. Among the other sites, however, there is the major site of Changping where thirteen Ming emperors are buried. The Changping site is close to Beijing and attracts large numbers of visitors. Care should be taken to avoid any confusion which might suggest that the Changping site is inscribed on the List. ICOMOS recommends that precise information should be issued to prevent any such misunderstanding. It also proposes to take note of the intention of the State Party to apply in due course for the inscription by extension of other Ming tombs – in the short term the Mingshaoling Mausoleum at Nanjing (Jiangsu Province) and in the longer term the vast Changping complex.

#### **Brief description**

The Ming and Qing imperial tombs are natural sites modified by man, carefully chosen according to the principles of geomancy (*Fengshui*) to house numerous buildings of traditional architectural design and decoration. They illustrate the continuity over five centuries of a world view and concept of power specific to feudal China.

#### **Recommendation**

That these properties be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, iv, and vi*:

**Criterion i** The harmonious integration of remarkable architectural groups in a natural environment chosen to meet the criteria of geomancy (*Fengshui*) makes the Ming and Qing imperial tombs masterpieces of human creative genius.

**Criteria ii, iii, and iv** The imperial mausolea are outstanding testimony to a cultural and architectural tradition that for over five hundred years dominated this part of the world; by reason of their integration

into the natural environment, they make up a unique ensemble of cultural landscapes.

**Criterion vi** The Ming and Qing tombs are dazzling illustrations of the beliefs, world view, and geomantic theories of *fengshui* prevalent in feudal China. They have served as burial edifices for illustrious personages and as the theatre for major events that have marked the history of China.

ICOMOS, September 2000