Professor Elliot demystifies the Qianlong Emperor

“Let go of your preconceptions of the Qianlong Emperor, if you hope to understand him”, coaxed Professor Mark C. Elliot in flawless Mandarin to the 450-strong audience gathered in the SPH News Centre Auditorium on 17th August.

Speaking as part of the Tan Lark Sye Professorship in Chinese Language and Culture Public Lecture Series, Prof Elliot’s public lecture – “The Qianlong Emperor in Triumph and Tragedy” – was organised by the Centre for Chinese Language and Culture of HSS, The Association of Nanyang University Graduates, and Lianhe Zaobao. And the public lecture was chaired by Professor Liu Hong, Chair of HSS.

Urging his audience to discard the numerous stereotypes of the Emperor, not least an elderly man subject to his corrupt officials’ manipulation, Prof Elliot, who chairs Harvard University’s PhD Committee in History and East Asian Languages and is the Director of the Fairbank Center for East Asian Studies, also cautioned against “romanticizing the Emperor for his achievements”.

According to Prof Elliott, Qianlong was just twenty-four years old when he became emperor. During his reign, he expanded China’s empire by one-third, brought economic growth through the free-flow of goods between provinces and foreign nations, even compiling an anthology of two millennia of Chinese writing totalling 36,000 volumes.

“The writings would have fit 128 CDs,” Prof Elliott said, to widespread gasps.

Prof Elliot believes, though, that there is no definite answer as to whether the Emperor had more triumphs or tragedies.

“It really depends on the yardsticks you’re using,” he said.

Still, the Qianlong Emperor had numerous achievements. For one, his reign lasted 63 years – the longest of all China’s emperors.

Though already nicknamed “Precious Prince” by his grandfather, Emperor Kangxi, the Qianlong Emperor further increased in favour after Emperor Kangxi witnessed his calmness even when confronted with a charging bear.
However, the Emperor faced tragedies too. Eighteen of his twenty-seven children died, including his seventh son, at age 1 from smallpox, whom he had hoped would succeed him.

Qianlong was still writing love poems to his wife, half a decade after she died. Prof Elliot displayed one written in 1798, with a concluding line of “What joy is there in solitary longevity?” – supporting his earlier description of Qianlong as someone who treasured relationships.

Although we might never know the real Qianlong, due to his care in recording his exploits for posterity and the myths surrounding him, perhaps, the best way to view him in triumph or tragedy would be as Prof Elliot said, “a man, just like us”.