

THE by Patrick Wertmann GRAND SECOND SECOND

hat are China's greatest achievements? Surely, one of the first to come to mind is the Great Wall. But did you know that the Chinese also built the longest canal in the world? Its length of 1,104 miles easily compares with a route linking New York and Florida. This canal connects six provinces and five river systems, and its ends are marked by the city of Beijing in the north and the city of Hangzhou in the south. For this reason, the Grand Canal is officially called the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal.

AND SO IT BEGINS

But why would you build such an enormous canal? To find out, we must travel back to the year 486 B.C. It was then that the leader of the State of Wu, which was located near present-day Suzhou, realized he had to find new ways of transporting goods to the northern areas of China. There were roads, but they were often in need of repair. So, he opted for a longer

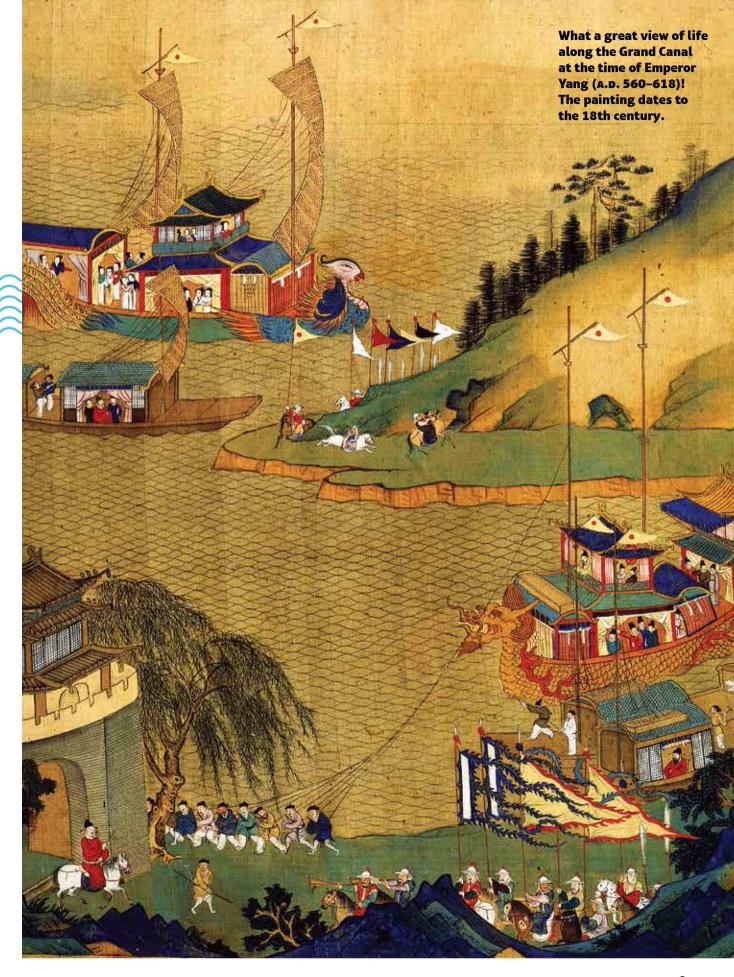
lasting alternative—a canal. It would be a manmade channel, using already existing waterways, to link the Yangzi and Huai rivers. It was this canal that laid the foundation for the future, longer Grand Canal.

More than 1,000 years later, Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty (A.D. 586–618), had the old canals rebuilt and, in addition, had them connected to one another to form what we know today as the Grand Canal. In the centuries that followed, there were times when the Grand Canal fell into disrepair as a result of wars. There were also times when rulers ordered it refurbished and its course adjusted to allow traffic to flow more effectively. For example,

during the 13th century, when the Mongols ruled China, the length of the Grand Canal was shortened by more than 400 miles. The goal was to create a faster route between Hangzhou and Beijing.

A MAJOR CHANGE

Then, in 1403, Yongle, the third emperor of the Ming dynasty, decided to transfer his capital from Nanjing





in the south to Beijing in the north. This definitely was not a simple move. In order to make Beijing a capital, Yongle had to deploy many troops to secure the area and repopulate it as well. Aware that the lands in northern China are less fertile than those in southern China, Yongle knew he had to devise a plan to feed all those moving north. The only way to do so, he reasoned, was to transport grain from the south to the north, and the most effective way to do this would be along the Grand Canal.

To direct the restoration of the Canal, the emperor appointed Chen Xuan, an expert on hydraulic engineering and a professional soldier. Chen Xuan oversaw the construction of 3,000 flat-bottomed barges for shallow water transport and 47 locks that made it possible for the ships to pass from one level to another as they made their way along the waterway. More than 47,000 men were employed to maintain the Grand Canal, which soon became the economic lifeline of the empire.

HEAVILY TRAVELED TO BE SURE

Grain was not the only trade good transported north on the waterways heading to Beijing. Salt was another, as it had become one of the most reliable sources of income during the Ming dynasty. Among the luxury items commissioned by wealthy people were porcelain, wine, and tea. As for the goods traded from the north, these included cotton, wool, coal, flour, precious stones, and dried meat.

At times, more than 120,000 soldiers and officers were needed to operate the almost 12,000 government barges that annually traveled the Grand Canal. This figure is found in official documents of the imperial court. Many port cities along the Grand Canal—chief among them was Suzhou—became thriving trade centers. Ferryboats, hotels, restaurants, pawnshops, and many other businesses were opened to serve travelers. The Grand Canal proved a powerful tool in promoting political stability within the empire and cultural exchange between the north and the south.

STILL USEFUL

With the coming of trains and the subsequent expansion of the railway system in the mid-1800s, the Grand Canal became less and less important to traders. Today, few goods are transported along its waterways. Still, the current South-North Water Transfer Project proves that the Chinese government still sees the Grand Canal as important to the welfare of China. The aim of this costly project is to divert huge amounts of water every year from the Yangzi River in the south to the more arid regions in the north.

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