A palace full of wells — and every cup of water carted in from outside | Shenzhou 05

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There are wells inside the Forbidden City.
In the records of the Ming and
the Qing, the palace wells were written
down one by one: some are noted
as "sweet and fit to drink";
others are written off as "ruined wells. "
The city is not short of water
either — just outside the wall runs a
moat. Yet the water used every day
by the imperial kitchens was carted in
from outside the city.
Why?
Start with the wells.
In the Ming, Liu Ruoyu wrote a
book called Zhuo Zhong Zhi, a record
of how the palace was run.
It mentions several wells: one east of
the Small Stone Bridge, "sweet and fit
to drink"; one opened late in the
Wanli reign, "extremely sweet. "
Wells also had different jobs.
Zhou Qian, a research curator at the
Palace Museum, has described wells as the

palace's "main source of domestic water, "
serving both drinking and firefighting.
On firefighting, though, Liu Ruoyu adds a
line in the same book: the Inner
Golden Water River was kept for fire,
because "if we relied only on water
drawn from the wells, how much could
be saved? " Sweeping, watering and washing in
the palace drew on those wells as
well.
One well stood apart from the others:
the Great Kitchen Well in the Hall
of Heart Cultivation. In the eighth year
of Shunzhi — 1651 — a rule was laid
down: every year, in the tenth month,
the Well God was sacrificed to in
front of the Great Kitchen Well.
The Palace Museum's own website describes the
water of this well as "clear,
sweet and cold. " Was anyone looking after
the wells? What can be verified is
repair, not annual dredging.
The octagonal well west of the right
gate of the Jiade Hall was cleaned
out once, in 1626. Afterwards the taste had
not changed, and Zhuo Zhong Zhi simply
writes: "a truly ruined well. "

There was one yearly routine: on the
fourth day of the third month the
palace channels were cleared, the brass vats
scoured and refilled with freshly drawn water.
That every well was dredged every year
for that we could not find a
clear rule in the Ming records.
So the palace wells were not all
unusable. Some could be drunk from;
some were finished. On this point the
records do not agree with one another.
Why go outside the city for water?
Because the people of the time wrote
down what the city's water was like.
Xu Chong, in the Ming, in Nuan
Shu You Bi: " The wells of the
capital are mostly brackish and bitter,
undrinkable. " Li Shizhen, in the Compendium of
Materia Medica, gave the cause: where the
city's wells stand close to ditches and
sewage, the waste seeps in and the
water turns alkaline. In the Qing,
an anonymous writer in Yanjing Zaji:
" The water of the capital is the
least agreeable to the mouth. "
Wang Yun, writing earlier, in the Yuan:
" In densely settled places the water is

mostly brackish; of wells that yield a
fine spring, not one or two in
a hundred. " These accounts describe the whole
city of Beijing, not the wells inside
the Forbidden City. The modern explanation for
the brackish taste comes from groundwater chemistry
that is present-day research, not a record
of the time.
The water line outside the wall was
not a Qing invention.
In the twenty-eighth year of Zhiyuan,
in the Yuan, Guo Shoujing proposed diverting
the Baifu Spring in Changping: the water
was to swing west around the north
of the capital, then turn south and
enter the city at the West Water
Gate. The Yuan History, in its chapter
on canals, records this route.
The Yuan also cut a Golden Water
River, bringing water from Jade Spring Mountain
into the capital and on to the
palace. There was a rule at the
time: no washing hands in the Golden
Water River. An edict of 1322 notes
that "in the time of the founding
emperor, washing hands in the Golden Water
River was forbidden" — by then, people had

been watering horses in it.
The Baifu line later broke.
After the Ming built the imperial tombs
at Changping, the court discussed dredging it
again and concluded that "the water flows
west against the current, past the ancestral
tombs, and this is likely unsuitable, "
so it was not repaired.
In 1471 a party was sent to look
once more, with the same conclusion.
Once Baifu stopped, the water of Jade
Spring Mountain became the capital's main source.
The Qing court drew its drinking water from there
too.
How did Jade Spring Mountain's water come
to be famous? In the sixteenth year
of Qianlong — 1751 — the emperor wrote an
essay: Record of the Finest Spring Under
Heaven at Jade Spring Mountain.
An edict of the same year carries
the line, "having tasted the famous springs,
I judge this one the finest under
heaven. " What he judged was not the
taste. It was the weight.
The method is in the essay:
"compared by means of a silver measure"
the same measure filled with different waters,

weighed, the lighter ranked first.
Water from Jade Spring Mountain: one dou
weighed one liang. Pearl Spring in Jinan:
one liang and two li.
The Golden Mountain Spring on the Yangzi:
one liang and three li.
Hui Spring and Tiger Run Spring:
one liang and four li each.
Waters from Qingliang Mountain, Baisha, Tiger Hill
and the Green Cloud Temple in the
Western Hills: one liang and one fen
each. The essay adds one further line:
snow water is three li lighter than
Jade Spring's, but "cannot be had year-round. "
This was the list Qianlong drew up
himself. To judge water today, we use
chemical analysis, not weight.
How did the water get into the
palace? By land. The carts loaded water
at Jade Spring Mountain, came in through
Xizhimen Gate, then entered the palace by
the Gate of Divine Might.
One record says that after Puyi abdicated,
the carts bringing Jade Spring water still
came through the Gate of Divine Might
every evening. Xizhimen has a nickname:
the Water Gate. The name does not

come from a sluice for diversion
it comes from the water carts all
using that gate. In the old barbican,
the archway carried a white marble carving
of water ripples, called "the Xizhimen water
pattern. " It is gone today.
Diversion took a different route: the Inner
Golden Water River entered the palace by
the sluice west of the Gate of
Divine Might and left by the sluice
south of the East Glorious Gate.
That comes from a public statement in 2016
by Shan Jixiang, then director of the
Palace Museum. One cart, one sluice.
Two entirely different routes.
Who ran it? In the Qing,
the Imperial Household Department.
The office in charge was the Neiguangling
Office, also called the Zhangguanfang Office.
In the twenty-second year of Kangxi a
cart depot was set up under it,
managed by four officials.
How many people? Here there are two
accounts. One says the Zhangguanfang Office had
four thousand nine hundred and fifty subordinate
attendants — but that is the whole office,
not water carriers only.

The other says water carrying fell to
the Imperial Kitchen, with one hundred and
three men on the duty.
Both accounts are cited.
For the number of men whose sole
duty was carrying water, we found no
primary record. How much water came in
each day, or each year — likewise not
found.
There is one more thing we could
not find. In the Qing there was
a work called the Palace History.
Two of its chapters record daily expenses,
allowances and offerings in the palace.
Milk, tea, vessels, ice chests — each listed
item by item. Water is not there.
Another work, the Collected Regulations of the
Palace, sets out the daily allowances from
empress dowager down to the lowest-ranked consorts.
It has no entry for water either.
On the Palace Museum's own website,
the emperor's daily allowance is said to
include "twelve jars of Jade Spring water. "
That figure carries no archival citation.
Another set of numbers circulating online
fifty jars for the emperor, twenty-five for
the empress dowager, twenty for the empress,

two for a maid — we could not
trace, and it does not match the
twelve. How the water was divided up
after it reached the palace, we found
no primary record for either.
Water had another form in the palace:
ice. Ice was cut in more than
one place. The archives and the Collected
Statutes of the Great Qing record the
waters used: the Tongzi River around the
Forbidden City, the Jingshui or Imperial River,
and the Lotus Pond at Longwangtang.
In the early Qing, ice was cut
as far away as the Tongzhou channel;
after 1754 Tongzhou was dropped and more ice
was cut on the Imperial River each
year. The ice was stored in icehouses
outside the Longzong Gate.
The Collected Statutes record: "within the Forbidden
City, five icehouses, storing twenty-five thousand blocks"
each block a foot and a half
square. Four icehouses still stand in the
palace today. Ice was not only for
the palace. In the ninth year of
Shunzhi a rule was set: every year
from midsummer until the start of autumn,
the princes, the ministers and the censors

all received ice.

Ice was collected on a ticket.

The Board of Works issued ice tickets,

and the holder came to collect.

Not only people inside the palace either.

Outside the ten city gates, and at

the four memorial arches east and west,

fourteen official summer-broth stations were set up

for soldiers and civilians.

The system was interrupted in the middle:

suspended in 1674, restored in the Qianlong reign.

So "the Qing issued ice throughout" is

not accurate. It stopped once.

That spring, the one Qianlong weighed at

one liang — what of it today?

The springs of Jade Spring Mountain stopped

flowing completely in 1975. Beijing's plan for treating

groundwater overdraft, covering 2023 to 2025, still lists "accelerating

ecological restoration of the Jade Spring Mountain

and Baifu Spring areas" as a task

that is, as of that plan,

it has not recovered.

The water Beijing drinks has changed source.

Guanting Reservoir began supplying water in 1954,

and stopped supplying Beijing's domestic water in 1977

as quality declined. Miyun Reservoir was completed

in 1960; from 1982 it stopped supplying Hebei and

Tianjin and went to Beijing alone.

In December 2014, the middle route of the
South-to-North Water Diversion began delivering water to
the city. The " Finest Spring Under Heaven"
stele still stands beside the spring at
the southern foot of Jade Spring Mountain.

Jade Spring Mountain is used today by
a state institution and is not open
to the public.

What became of the stored ice?

Of the four icehouses still standing in
the palace, three have become restaurants and
one a storeroom. The area is a
visitor service zone now.

When did the water carts stop?

The Beijing water company was approved in 1908
and began supplying in 1910; its stated range
ran "inward as far as the Forbidden
City. " Whether it ever actually supplied the
palace has two accounts.

One says it did.

The other, from the recollection of an
old employee of the works, says the
pipe into the palace served firefighting only:
it entered from the East Glorious Gate,
ran about three hundred metres, and ended
at the Wenchang Pavilion — and the palace

still drank water delivered by cart.
The exact year the carts stopped,
we could not find.
The latest marker is 5 November 1924, when Puyi
left the palace. Jade Spring's water was
still there then: a survey in 1928 still
recorded eight springs. What stopped was the
system, not the source.
Back to the question at the start.
There are wells in the palace.
Some of their water could be drunk,
some could not; the wells were sacrificed
to, and repaired. That the city's water
was unpleasant is written down by the
people of the time.
Qianlong used a silver measure to place
Jade Spring's water first on a list
he drew up himself.
So every day water carts came into
the city: from Jade Spring Mountain,
in through Xizhimen, in through the Gate
of Divine Might. Who managed it,
how many men, how much came in
each day — the offices can be traced;
the figures mostly cannot.
Once the water reached the palace,
part of it became ice, stored outside

the Longzong Gate and handed out on
tickets in summer. This way of moving
water ran from the Yuan, when Jade
Spring was diverted into the capital,
all the way to 1924.
And the water of Jade Spring Mountain
where did that come from?
Shenzhou: China's Living Heritage.
The transcript and bibliography are at sylogs.com.

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