





A statue of the early 15th century admiral and diplomat, Zheng He



**Week in China**

# **AN A-Z OF CHINESE HISTORY**

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**Week in China**

# Why an A to Z?

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**It is generally agreed that Chinese history spans 5,000 years but China only became a unitary state in 221 BC**

This book does not pretend to be an all-encompassing history of China. That would be a gargantuan, multi-volume undertaking. Instead it is an effort to focus on some of the key events and personalities in China's extensive history, as a means to help explain how contemporary Chinese look at the world and their place in it.

Every topic and figure will be familiar to Chinese readers but paradoxically almost none of them will be well known by non-Chinese. That is especially true for Europeans and Americans, who are taught history that largely avoids China in favour of Western narratives (from the birth of democracy in Greece and the rise and fall of Rome; through the flowering of the Italian Renaissance and the era of scientific discovery; to the Industrial Revolution, the American War of Independence and the two world wars).

As a continuous civilisation, China's history is longer and richer than anyone else's. But we have arranged it in an A to Z format, allowing for 26 bite-size explainers. That ties us less to chronology and enables us to jump around the historical canvas in a way that we hope to be more thought-provoking, albeit less comprehensive.

It is generally agreed Chinese history spans 5,000 years, although the nation was first forged into a single political entity in 221 BC by Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor. In the

ensuing millennia that empire changed in shape and size (see the four maps on page 8 for how dramatic the expansion was). The country was for large periods ruled by emperors, from the Qin Dynasty (221 BC) to the final dynasty, the Qing (which was replaced by the Republic in 1912). But it also went through turbulent periods of disunity and civil war.

After reading this guide you should understand some of the key themes better, and hopefully feel less daunted should a Chinese counterpart bring up names such as Zhuge Liang or Zheng He, or compare the challenges of Emperor Kangxi versus those of the Tudor monarch Henry VIII (the former had 24 eligible male heirs, causing political chaos; the latter was so desperate for male heirs he went through six wives just to produce one son).

Given the sheer scope of the task at hand, our chronology does not go beyond 1949. However, it does reach into the present day, by highlighting how the views of China's leaders – on issues like the environment, social stability and national sovereignty – are conditioned by events that happened long before the founding of the People's Republic. Of course, Chinese history is complex and if any reader disagrees with any of the perspectives we have taken they can email us at: [editors@weekinchina.com](mailto:editors@weekinchina.com).

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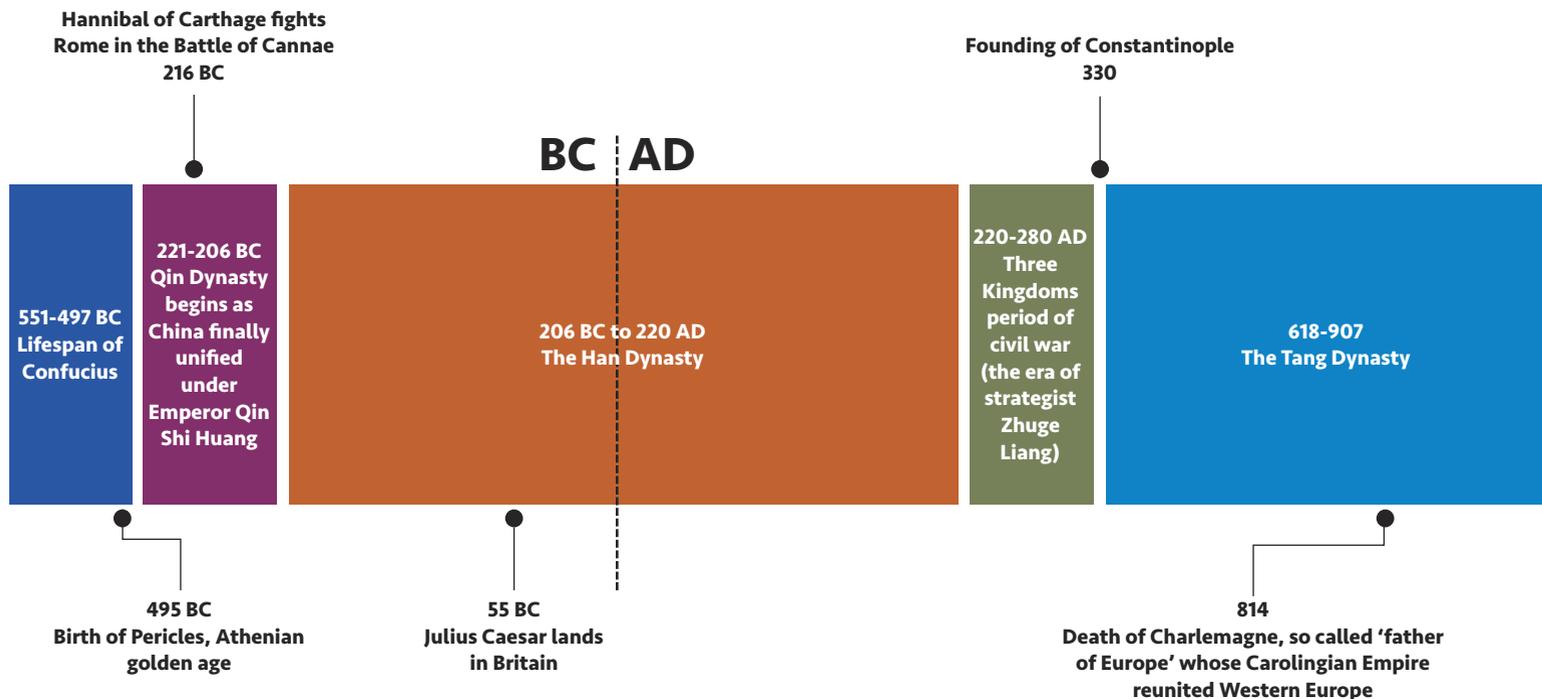
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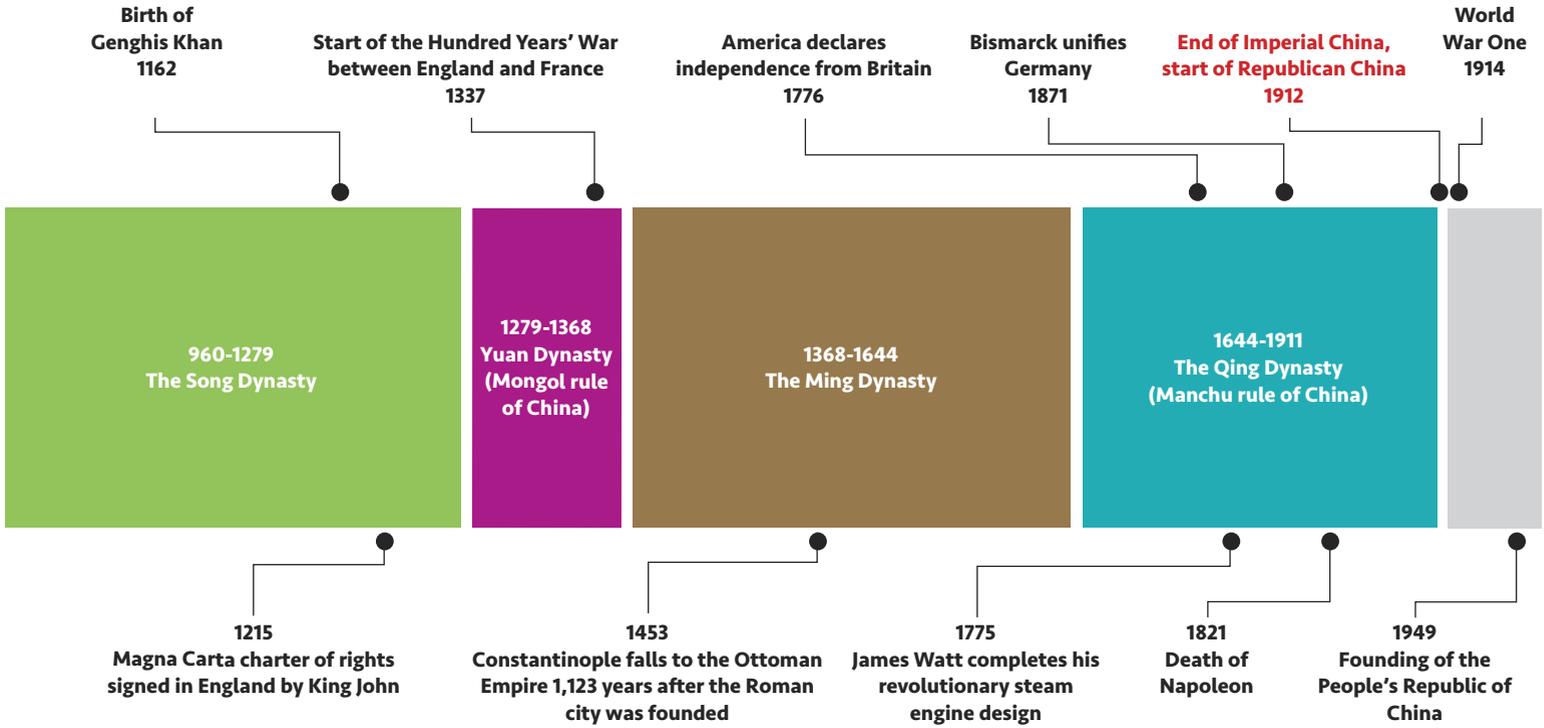
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Emperor Qianlong



# Imperial China: a rough timeline





# Imperial China's growth

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**Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD)**



**Tang Dynasty (618-907)**



**Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)**



**Qing Dynasty around 1765**



# Analects of Confucius

The Han Dynasty has gone down in history as a golden era of Chinese civilisation (that's why China's biggest ethnic group call themselves Han Chinese), and the importance of the *Analects* grew with time

## What is it?

The ancient Chinese book is a collection of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius. With occasional references to people Confucius met, the *Analects* also offers rare insights into the life of the greatest Chinese philosopher.

Believed to have been born in 551 BC during the Warring States period, Confucius is commonly referred to as “the king without a crown”. Confucius was credited with teaching 3,000 students, although only 72 of them are said to have mastered his thoughts. These followers compiled the *Analects* after the philosopher’s death around 479 BC and the book achieved its final form more than a quarter of a century later. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) Confucianism became the ruling ideological doctrine of the Middle Kingdom and the book became required reading for scholars.

## Why is the book important?

The *Analects* shaped traditional values over the last two millennia.

Given the Han Dynasty is viewed as a golden era for Chinese civilisation (which is why China’s biggest ethnic group call themselves Han), its advocacy of the *Analects* was key to the book’s growing influence over time – it was

often the first textbook children studied in school. The basic moral values it advocated, including benevolence, filial piety and loyalty, were the bedrock of Chinese civilisation.

Scholars who excelled in studying Confucian classics were allowed to join the state bureaucracy. This subsequently evolved into a civil service examination, and a process that favoured meritocracy over aristocratic connections – meaning that powerful local governors could start out from humble origins. For nearly 2,000 years, the study of Confucianism and its core values was the sole route for upward social mobility.

## What did Confucius really say?

The *Analects* often begins with the phrase “Confucius says” but the exact origins of Confucian values have been the subject of heated academic debate for thousands of years.

That began with Qin Shi Huang, China’s first emperor, who unified the Middle Kingdom in 221 BC. According to Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* – aka *Shiji*, China’s first book of general history, covering the 2,500-year period leading to the Han empire’s founding – the emperor ordered a mass burning of books, supposedly to unify his new kingdom’s languages (and thus most of its



A statue of Confucius



**Young students at the Temple of Confucius in Beijing**

**Confucianism has made something of a comeback in recent years**

political opinions). The result of this extreme censorship was that many of the Confucian scriptures (carved on bamboo slips) were lost.

That led to the debate between the “New Text School” and “Old Text School”. The “New Text” referred to scriptures written by contemporary scholars from memory. The “Old Text” came from the few older books that had survived Qin Shi Huang’s ban – including some said to be hidden in the walls of Confucius’ former homes. Both camps accused each other of forging the Confucian doctrines.

The debate rumbles on even now...

### **And the relevance today?**

Confucianism has made something of a comeback in recent years. In the 1960s and 1970s – a nadir for Confucian scholars – his ideas were banned by China’s ruling Communist Party as a source of feudal ‘backwardness’. But over the past decade or so the scribe has enjoyed a reputational makeover through the tacit backing of the state. For instance, a network of government-backed institutions that teach Chinese language and culture abroad have been named Confucius Institutes.

China’s renewed embrace of Confucianism coincides with President Xi Jinping’s campaign for a “great rejuvenation” of the nation – an effort that plays on the Middle Kingdom’s strengths during the most iconic Chinese dynasties (such as the Han). If Xi’s message is that of reviving past greatness, who better to yoke to the campaign than Confucius, a figure who embodies the longevity of China’s civilisation.

Xi’s embrace of the sage became plain shortly after he became leader, when he said that Confucianism was the key “to understanding the national characteristics of the Chinese” and was “the cultural soil that nourishes the Chinese people”. At a practical level Confucianism today – as viewed from government circles – is associated with themes like stability and prosperity; respect for elders; and the promotion of officials by meritocratic methods.



# Bloodline

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The 1963 publication *Clan, Caste and Club* by American anthropologist Francis LK Hsu sums up the three most important groupings in the social strata of China, India and the United States respectively.

Defined by bloodline, the concept of clan is so adhesive in Chinese society that the proverb *mendang hudui* advises that people should marry someone with matching social status or from a similar clan. The saying derives from the design of a traditional courtyard house in Beijing: the stone bearings on both sides are called *mendang*, while the wooden pins above the door for hanging lanterns are *hudui*. There were strict codes on how to design and install these features (only the emperor's house at the Forbidden City was allowed to hang four *hudui*, for instance). The phrases' implication for marital choice was the need to wed someone of similar 'design', i.e. status.

## Why bloodline matters

While commoners could strive to raise their own status by studying hard and taking part in the imperial exams (see A for Analects), nobility was a matter of bloodline. During most of the Han Chinese dynasties, an emperor would pass on his throne to his eldest son. This system

of primogeniture sometimes resulted in incapable rulers, but it tried to minimise political struggles within the royal family.

The Manchus did not stick to the same rules when they took control of the Middle Kingdom in 1644. That created a major problem for Kangxi, the fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty and one of the most fertile monarchs in Chinese history.

On the throne for 61 years (he died in 1722), Kangxi had more than 50 children, of which 35 were male and 24 survived long enough to be considered as potential heirs to his throne.

While Kangxi was sizing up which of his boys would be the best candidate to succeed him (and ensure the royal family's longevity), the princes (and their mothers and other political allies) embarked on some of the most vicious leadership purges in Chinese history, plotting to oust or kill each other. A number of them died mysteriously, some were exiled, and Kangxi was forced to imprison several of his sons for life.

The saga has inspired countless novels and dramas. It is also a reason why plots about scheming concubines (consorts of the polygamous emperors) have been such a popular television genre – although they have been

**During most of the Han Chinese dynasties, an emperor would pass his throne to his eldest son**

Emperor Guangxu



discouraged by the current government for promoting undesirable values.

### **How to ensure the purity of the royal bloodline?**

Another bloody power struggle at the royal court meant Kangxi's great-great-great-grandson Guangxu wasn't survived by a single son (Guangxu died in 1908 aged 38). The Qing throne thereupon passed to his 24-month old nephew Puyi (the last emperor of China).

The declining fertility of the Qing emperors is another interesting topic, with economics weighing heavily as a factor. When Guangxu took over, the Qing empire was already on the wane. He simply could not afford as many concubines as Kangxi, who had at least 55. Guangxu had only three, and two of these he didn't even like because they were used by the Empress Dowager Cixi (the de facto power behind the throne at the time) as spies to watch over him.

The large number of wives that emperors such as Kangxi kept in the royal household could also present problems for the purity of the imperial bloodline. Huge amounts of labour were needed to keep the palace running and serve the emperor's army of concubines. The emperors preferred to keep their women away from temptation, which was why eunuchs were often trusted as monitors of the royal harem. In the early Ming Dynasty, for instance, more than 10,000 eunuchs were said

to work in the Forbidden City (the home of the emperors after 1421).

Kangxi also asked his eunuchs to keep detailed records of when and how long he spent in bed with each of his concubines. The result was arguably the most detailed sex diary in human history.

### **Are bloodlines important these days?**

The imperial era ended more than 100 years ago and the royal bloodline vanished with it. However, the descendants of the revolutionary leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC) have their own lineage, enjoying great influence and prestige.

Many *hongerdai*, or 'second generation red', have taken prominent positions in political and business circles. As an example, Chinese President Xi Jinping is the son of Xi Zhongxun, one of the CPC leaders who survived the Long March to become one of the founders of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Being a *hongerdai* doesn't guarantee a climb to the summit of political and economic power. Nevertheless this 'clan' enjoys its own special status, based on their bloodline (notably they are known too in common parlance as 'princelings').

**Emperor Kangxi had more than 50 children of which 35 were male**



# Capital Cities

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**“If you want to know a thousand years of Chinese history, visit Beijing; if you want to know three thousand years of history, go to Xi’an. Come to Luoyang if you want to know five millennia of history”**

## **The four great ancient capitals**

In Shaanxi province’s Xi’an, natives have immense pride in their city’s rich history. “If Xi’an is the grandmother of all Chinese cities, Beijing is only a youngster and Shanghai is not even born yet,” goes a popular saying to celebrate its ancient origins.

The people of Luoyang in nearby Henan province have a favourite phrase too: “If you want to know 1,000 years of Chinese history, visit Beijing; if you want to know 3,000 years of Chinese history, go to Xi’an. Come to Luoyang if you want to know five millennia of Chinese history.”

Together with Beijing and Nanjing, the quartet are popularly known as “the four great ancient capitals” of China.

## **When Rome meets Chang’an**

Rome wasn’t built in a day and nor was Xi’an – which was known as Chang’an during the Han Dynasty (see W for Wudi of Han). But according to another saying popularised by government officials, Xi’an has been the seat of power over the rise and fall of 13 dynasties.

Legends have it that ancient Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus in 753 BC. Around the same time – 771 BC to be precise – Xi’an was known as Haojing. Having served as the capital of the Western Zhou Dynasty for three

centuries, it was destroyed by barbarians. That marked the beginnings of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, which made Luoyang its capital. Luoyang also lays claims to being the ancient capital of ‘13 dynasties’. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian* the Xia Dynasty (which ruled between 2,100 BC and 1,600 BC), had earlier set up its capital in an area near today’s Luoyang.

Yet for many, Xi’an’s legacy as the most important of the ancient capitals is indisputable. Partly that’s because of the discovery of the Terracotta Warriors there in the 1970s. This was an army to guard Qin Shi Huang – China’s first emperor – in the afterlife. After he had conquered his rivals he had made Xi’an his capital and it was also chosen by some of the strongest emperors in Chinese history, such as those from the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

At the height of its glory in the eighth century, or about 200 years after the fall of Rome, Chang’an (Xi’an) was described as the most affluent city in the world. Occupying some 84 square kilometres, it was three times bigger than the combined sizes of two other great cities of the era: Constantinople and Baghdad. It’s also thought to be the first city anywhere to reach a population of a million people. And it was cosmopolitan too: time-travel back to Chang’an at its peak and you’d find a diverse sprinkling of Persian

# The Four Ancient Capitals Of China

**Beijing** ★

Tianjin

Dalian

**Xi'an** ●  
(Chang'an)

**Luoyang** ●

**Nanjing** ●

Shanghai

Wuhan

Hangzhou



**The glory of Xi'an began to fade after the Tang Dynasty, as China's power centre moved eastwards**



**The Forbidden City in Beijing**

and Jewish traders, Japanese students and Indian monks in this major Silk Road trading hub.

The glory of Xi'an began to fade after the Tang, as China's centre of power moved eastwards. The victory of Khubilai Khan's Mongol army in 1271 saw Beijing emerge as capital of the Yuan Dynasty, which lasted less than 100 years. It was toppled by the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644), which was ethnically Han. The first Ming emperor (known as Hongwu) based his regime in Nanjing – it means southern capital ('nan' means south, 'jing' is capital). The second Ming emperor (Yongle) shifted his capital back to Beijing (the 'northern capital') where he built the Forbidden City in 1421. In the years that followed the capital occasionally shifted between the two cities (Nanjing was the seat of gov-

ernment as recently as the 1920s and 1930s). However, Beijing has served predominantly as China's capital for most of the past 600 years, and exclusively so during the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

### **Will China move its capital again?**

Some historians argue that the mighty Tang Dynasty crumbled because Chang'an was unstable and overcrowded. A comparison might be drawn with the French Revolution of 1789 when Parisians overthrew the ruling regime and revolutionary fervour swept the country.

Chinese leaders are said to be acutely aware of their nation's history lessons – one being the dangers of an overly large or dominant capital.

In recent decades, for instance, there were discussions about moving the nation's capital to Wuhan, which is at the geometric centre of China (other cities also suggested were Chengdu, Chongqing, Nanjing and Xi'an). While the relocation plan never took off, the government has unveiled other plans to make Beijing a less congested place, with many of its existing functions to be diverted to Xiongan, a new city about 100 kilometres to the southwest. The idea was first announced in 2017 and it is closely associated with President Xi Jinping. Xiongan is being developed largely from scratch according to an eco-friendly blueprint that will see this new 'smart city' become three times bigger than Manhattan within a decade.

# D Dragon Throne

## Way of the dragon

Most commonly depicted as a snake-like creature with four legs, the dragon is a powerful symbol in Chinese history and culture. As a metaphor, it is commonly used in proverbs and idioms to describe outstanding people. The dragon is also one of the 12 Chinese zodiac signs.

Most importantly, the dragon is an emblem of imperial authority. Emperors designated themselves “the true dragon and son of heaven”, although they could only sit on the Dragon Throne if they were worthy rulers. Otherwise they risked losing the ‘heavenly mandate’ and being overthrown. Accompanying this ancient social contract was a common belief that natural disasters such as droughts or floods were signs of an emperor losing his heavenly mandate too. Rebellions would often follow, toppling erstwhile stable dynasties.

The Chinese people sometimes call themselves “Descendants of the Dragon” as well. However, this is a more contemporary term and derives from a song of the same name released by Taiwanese singer Hou Dejian in 1978, which became an instant hit. Hou moved to mainland China in 1983 and was warmly received by China’s leaders including Xi Zhongxun, whose son Xi Jinping leads the country today.

## Who was the first ‘descendant of the dragon’?

Over the course of thousands of years, only a handful of laymen won the heavenly mandate to become emperor of the Middle Kingdom.

The first was Liu Bang, or Han Gaozu. Prior to coming to power, Liu was a minor security guard (the equivalent today of a *chengguan*, the unpopular street management officials operating in Chinese cities). His political career only took off when he was 46 and he joined with rebel forces as the unpopular Qin Dynasty crumbled (see Q for Qin Shi Huang). He climbed the ranks and after defeating archrival Xiang Yu – a fearsome warrior from a noble clan – Liu became the first emperor of the Han Dynasty in 202 BC when he was 54.

One problem for Liu and his heirs: as the first layman to rule, he needed to convince others that he was “the true dragon” and that his non-aristocratic family was bestowed with the rightful mandate to govern.

The Liu family decided a history book was the answer. In the *Records of the Grand Historian*, Liu Bang was described as having a “dragon-like face” and it was said he was literally a “descendant of the dragon”.

That book also concocted a story that when Liu Bang’s stepfather was looking for his wife one rainy day, he saw

The dragon is an emblem of imperial power and authority



Han Gaozu



caption

her procreating with a dragon and Liu Bang was born thereafter.

### Any other heirs of the dragon?

*Shiji* is the first of the authoritative *Twenty-Four Histories* of China yet most historians agree that its author Sima Qian deified Liu Bang. This is easy to understand: Sima was ordered to pen *Shiji* by emperor Wudi of Han, the great-grandson of Liu Bang.

History is written by the victors, as the saying goes, and at least half a dozen later emperors borrowed this history lesson from the *Shiji*, and claimed their mythical association with the dragon. Typically, they did so when their own legitimacy as rulers was in question. Take emperor Taizong of Tang, one of the most influential emperors of all time (See L for Li Shimin), who manoeuvred his way onto the dragon throne by killing his two brothers. According to the *Old Book of Tang*, another of the *Twenty-Four Histories*, two dragons hovered outside the room of Tang Taizong's mother on the three days prior to his birth.

### What is the emblem of power today?

Being superstitious is considered 'feudal' and thus much frowned upon by the Communist Party of China (CPC). As such, Chinese leaders in the modern day have tended to shun imperial symbols such as the dragon.

Chinese leaders these days seem to be keen to show that, true to the name of the People's Republic of China, their power come from the mandate of the people.

Before taking office, for instance, ministerial bosses of the State Council now need to swear to uphold the constitution. It became a standard practice for senior officials after Xi Jinping became the first Chinese leader to take a constitutional oath when he was re-elected as the Chinese president in March 2018.

This was a moment of pure political symbolism as Xi took the oath. He held his right fist aloft while leaving his palm firmly on the Chinese constitution. Officials now all adopt the same pose when being sworn into office.

The ceremony was introduced to convey a message: civil servants and CPC members alike have to stay loyal to the constitution and follow the laws. Yet for some more acutely sensitive observers it could still imply "the grip on power".

Why so? In Mandarin the word for the palm of the hand is *zhang*, which can also denote the action of gripping, while 'fist' (or *quan*) sounds the same as the word for 'power'. That's why in official portraits from the Qing Dynasty, the emperor would often hold one hand in a fist while showing the palm of the other, which was a symbol of power.

**Liu Bang was described as having a "dragon-like face" and it was said he was literally a "descendant of the dragon"**



**Records of the Grand Historian** China's first general history book was produced in the Han Dynasty

# E

## Environment

**The Great Wall was the strategic divide between the Middle Kingdom's agrarian economy and its nomadic rivals beyond**



**Chinese farmers plough with cast iron tools**

### **A land of plenty**

According to the China Meteorological Administration, yearly rainfall of 400mm is the minimum needed to sustain basic agriculture in China. If you plot that minimum rainbelt's boundary on a map it will more or less overlap with the layout of the Great Wall.

The Great Wall was also the strategic divide between the Middle Kingdom's agrarian economy and nomadic territory further north. So when China's first emperor (see Q for Qin Shi Huang) started building the wall, he was an unwitting pioneer of environmental 'protection'. His engineers were fencing off the Middle Kingdom's rich arable soil and water resources.

### **Is environmental protection a modern concept?**

Modern-day China put its first Environmental Protection Law into force in 2015. Nevertheless the idea of living in balance with nature has a long history. As recorded by the text on some of the oracle bones (the earliest documentation of the Chinese language, see O for Oracle Bones), people caught littering in public spaces risked having their hands cut off during the Shang Dynasty 3,500 years ago.

A number of bamboo strips that date back 2,000 years were also unearthed in 1975 in Hubei province. One of

these was sculpted with the Qin's "Laws of Farmland". China's earliest environmental protection legislation stipulated that hunting and deforesting would be banned between February and July, for instance. Other rules suggested a river's course should not be blocked and that trees shouldn't be burned and used as fertiliser.

### **Does the 'heavenly mandate' include defending against climate change?**

It's easy to understand why emperors of the past were keen to respect natural conditions, given that the Middle Kingdom's economy was largely agrarian. The political logic today is that a government's popularity can dwindle if the economy performs badly. Likewise, in ancient China during times of natural disaster, such as famines, floods and plagues of locusts, the emperor was often blamed for losing the 'heavenly mandate' (see D for Dragon throne).

Historians have also tried to establish links between climate change and the rise and fall of empires. Take the demise of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. Some academics have argued that changes in weather during the late Ming period brought the onset of one of the coldest periods of the past thousand years. The result was frequent droughts and severe disruption in agricultural production. Colder tem-



The Great Wall of China

**The Ming  
Dynasty's  
collapse  
coincided with  
drought, famines  
and epidemics**



**Genghis Khan**

peratures began in 1627 and droughts started in 1637, leading to famines in 1639, 1640, 1641 – followed by a fatal epidemic. There were more famines in 1642 and 1643, and another epidemic. In this weakened economic state, the last Han Chinese empire was conquered by the Manchurians, who came from northeast of the Great Wall.

Research by the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2018, which traced 5,000 years of temperature changes via different historical accounts, has suggested that the Han-Chinese empires tended to be more vulnerable in extended periods of colder weather. Apart from the mini ‘ice age’ of the late Ming Dynasty, the fall of the Song Dynasty to the Mongols in 1279 came about in a notably colder period too. Scientists have also argued that the rise of Genghis Khan and his all-conquering hordes beyond the Great Wall was partly the result of unusually heavy rainfall over a couple of decades, which allowed the arid grasslands of the Asian Steppe to flourish, creating abundant food resources for his soldiers and warhorses.

**China's environmental concerns today...**

Since China began its economic reforms in 1978, four decades of rapid growth have propelled it into the world's second biggest economy. However, the same breakneck rise has come with heavy environmental costs, many of which have become much more evident in recent years.

Chronic air pollution in cities, for example, has become

a major public health concern, also damaging the nation's international image. Contaminated soil is another flash-point, with a recent survey (briefly classified as a state secret) suggesting that as much as a fifth of farmland could be unsafe for cultivation. Chronic pollution (and depletion) of the country's rivers and aquifers is another major concern.

The central government has finally grasped the severity of the situation and it now makes environmental protection a bigger parameter in appraising the performance of local government officials. The link between greener thinking and social stability is not lost on China's leaders either – especially in the wake of public anger against urban smog, toxic rivers and leaking chemical plants. In fact, the government has now cemented its green credentials as a supporter of the Paris Climate Change Accord. It also offers massive subsidies to support the adoption of green technologies like solar and wind power. New quotas for water usage and greater investment in waste treatment are other facets of the new approach. Perhaps that's because today's leaders know their history – and that dynasties are most vulnerable in periods of environmental upheaval...

# F Female

In ancient China's patriarchal society, women did not enjoy the same status as men. Many of the references to them in the early historical records are about the problems they created for men or society at large. The fall of the first three dynasties (Xia, Shang and Zhou: almost 2,000 years of rule) were all blamed partly on the monarch's misbehaviour with favourite concubines, for instance.

When a woman attained political power, she was often perceived as dangerous and unvirtuous. And two of the most powerful women in Chinese history – both of whom were effective rulers of a united nation – were often portrayed in a very negative way.

## Who was the first empress dowager?

Liu Bang was the first non-noble to become a Chinese emperor (See D for Dragon Throne). He was also the oldest person to be crowned, already 54 when he founded the Han Dynasty in 206 BC. When Liu died, his wife Lu Zhi became empress dowager because her son Liu Ying, aka Emperor Hui, was such a weak successor. She became the effective ruler of the Han for 15 years.

Lu was credited with abolishing many of the harsher rules imposed by China's first emperor (see Q for Qin Shi Huang) and she laid a solid foundation for the golden era

of Emperor Wu (see W for Wudi of Han). However, her ruthlessness has always overshadowed her historical legacy. Liu's favourite concubine Qi was the most unfortunate of Lu's rivals. Lu was said to have killed Qi's son to prevent Qi from claiming the title of empress dowager in the first place. More infamously, she had Qi tortured after their

**Lu Zhi was said to have tortured her husband's favourite concubine, calling her "human swine"**



A statue of Empress Lu Zhi



A statue of Empress Wu Zetian

husband's death, chopping off her limbs, gouging out her eyes, and throwing her into a latrine. Qi was "human swine", she said.

### **And the first – and only – female emperor?**

Wu Zetian, the first and only empress in Chinese history, turned two of her love rivals and political enemies into "human swine" as well. Wu was said to have taken things a step further by stuffing her victims into large pots of wine to deepen their suffering.

There were endless acts of extreme cruelty through history. Yet when a powerful woman happened to be responsible, such as Wu or the empress dowager Lu, they have earned far greater censure in China.

It was never easy for a woman to survive the power struggles in royal politics, let alone climb to the top. Wu joined the Tang court as a concubine of Emperor Taizong (one of the two most heralded emperors, see L for Li Shimin). Some historians claim that while Tang Taizong was still alive, Wu had an affair with his son who, after taking the throne as Tang Gaozong, made Wu his own concubine. Wu grew her own power base and as Gaozong's health deteriorated she became the effective decisionmaker after the year 660. After a brief stint as the empress dowager, she then took the throne from her own son in 690 and proclaimed herself as emperor of the Zhou, which often goes unrecognised as one of the formal Chinese dynasties.

One of Wu's skills was picking the right talent to advise her and she has also been credited with introducing far-reaching reforms of the civil service selection system. For example, she pioneered the so-called 'palace examination' where she would meet the best students personally and pick the ones best-suited for senior officialdom.

Others have questioned Wu's reputation for political astuteness. Were she more savvy she might have stayed as empress dowager instead of taking the throne herself, for instance. In that way she could have governed more indirectly, avoiding the wrath of conservative palace officials (and later historians) whose default response was to demonise female rulers.

Interestingly, Wu was played in a recent TV series by the popular actress Fan Bingbing. Not long afterwards, Fan also experienced a fall from grace, disappearing from public view for months and then admitting to tax evasion.

### **Where are the female politicians today?**

Since 1949 much has been done to improve gender equality in China – as Mao Zedong famously proclaimed: "Women hold up half the sky". But politics has remained an overwhelmingly male-dominated domain. So far no woman has made it onto the Politburo Standing Committee (currently comprised of seven) that governs China. The Politburo, the next rung down in political power, has 25 members. But only one is female...

**The Politburo has  
25 members but  
only one is  
female**



# Giuseppe Castiglione

**Born in 1688 in Milan, Castiglione was part of the Jesuit order – a Catholic religious body that became active in China as it sought to convert non-Christians**

## The significance of 1793

The year 1793 saw the French king (Louis XVI) executed and revolutionary France declare war on Britain. But far beyond Europe there were diplomatic overtures going on that would soon have far more global ramifications.

That was the year that a British government envoy named Lord Macartney arrived at Emperor Qianlong's court in an encounter that proved to be a curtain-raiser for China's 'Century of Humiliation' (see U for Unequal Treaties). Qianlong was famously dismissive of Macartney's embassy, leading commentators to later point to the costs that China incurred back then for being unreceptive to free trade and some of the West's more liberal ideals. But was the Qing empire really as conservative and isolationist as has often been suggested?

A more outward looking view can be found in Qianlong's iconic portrait – which was painted by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit.

## Who was he?

Born in 1688 in Milan, Castiglione was part of the Jesuit order – a Catholic body that sought to convert non-Christians by sending its members abroad. The Milanese missionary arrived in China in 1715 and would never see his

native land again before his death in 1766. Prevented from preaching his faith, he spent most of his life in the Forbidden City as a portrait painter for three Qing emperors, including Qianlong.

Going by the local name of Lang Shining, Castiglione stood out for combining Chinese painting styles with Western techniques (such as the use of perspective and realism). The latter enabled him to outdo the efforts of Chinese painters and win the patronage of influential members of the royal family (such as Qianlong's concubines). As a result most of the images of the early Qing emperors were painted by the Italian. His work also offers precious insights into life in the Forbidden City.

## Was he the only expatriate hired by the Qing?

In the latter half of the nineteenth century British diplomat Robert Hart was another outsider – this time serving as inspector-general of China's customs, the most lucrative department in the government thanks to booming foreign trade. Hart served the Qing for almost 50 years.

Yet long before his time, it was not uncommon to see expatriates taking on key roles for the Qing court. For the two centuries spanning the late Ming era to the early part of the Qing Dynasty, nearly 500 Jesuit missionaries



Giuseppe Castiglione



An oil painting by  
Castiglione



**Empress  
Xiaoxianchun by  
Castiglione**

**The Qing  
emperors were  
less interested in  
Jesuit preaching,  
than on keeping  
close to Western  
ideas and  
technologies**

worked in China. Their long term – and ultimately unsuccessful – goal was to convert one of the emperors. But the Qing rulers were less interested in theology than keeping them close as ‘foreign teachers’ to educate them about Western ideas and technologies.

After taking control of China in 1644, the Qing rulers even appointed the German Jesuit Adam Schall von Bell as the director of the Imperial Observatory. This was an important posting in terms of calculating the Chinese calendar – a vital task in an agrarian economy (and a dangerous profession too – Schall von Bell was once sentenced to death by “a thousand cuts” for one of his calculations, and only saved when an earthquake struck Beijing, earning him a reprieve).

Foreign experts such as Schall von Bell were retained at the Imperial Observatory till the dynasty fell in 1912.

Probably the most famous of the early Jesuits was Matteo Ricci, who arrived in China in 1583. He produced Chinese versions of the latest maps from Europe – which offered far more accurate depictions than any the Chinese had produced. These gave the local aristocracy better insights about the ‘Ten Thousand Countries’ (the term the Chinese used for ‘the rest of the world’ beyond their own Middle Kingdom), plus a sense of the groundbreaking knowledge being accumulated beyond China.

Ricci also introduced sophisticated Western musical instruments to the court as a means to debunk Chinese

ideas that European civilisation was more backwards than their own.

### **Lots of Jesuits but no deal with the Vatican?**

Despite its long history, the Middle Kingdom has never developed a religion of its own (Buddhism was imported from India). And despite the many centuries of contact with Catholic missionaries, the modern-day relationship between Beijing and the Vatican is fraught with tension too.

The Communist Party broke ties with the Vatican in 1951 and six years later it set up the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which doesn’t recognise the Pope as the head of its church.

The Vatican turned to Taiwan in the same year and became one of the island’s most crucial diplomatic allies.

The Holy See and Beijing signed a provisional agreement in 2018 on the appointment of Roman Catholic bishops. Reportedly it gives the Chinese authorities a bigger role in identifying candidates for the episcopacy, albeit subject to papal approval. This has been seen as a breakthrough towards the eventual establishment of full diplomatic relations. Should this happen, China’s long history of accepting Jesuit guests will likely be referred to in the joint communiqué.

# H Heshen

In imperial China, merchants generally ranked at the bottom of the social hierarchy. No matter how much wealth was amassed, being rich rarely warranted an entry in the history books.

Yet if you Google “the world’s richest men of all time”, a man called Heshen often pops up. Researchers have calculated his net worth to be in the same bracket as the likes of John Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and Mayer Amschel Rothschild.

## Who was Heshen?

Born in 1750, Heshen began his career in the Forbidden City as an imperial bodyguard. His looks and wit impressed Emperor Qianlong. Within a year Heshen had emerged as the monarch’s favourite courtier and he started to assume a number of the Qing empire’s senior ministerial positions.

In fact, when George Macartney led Britain’s first diplomatic mission to China in 1793, he first had to navigate several uneasy encounters with Heshen, who was in charge of arranging his meeting with Qianlong. That included a spat about how Macartney must kowtow before the emperor, a customary ritual to which the Briton objected (in a compromise, he bent a single knee).

## How rich was Heshen?

Heshen is remembered in Chinese history not only as one of the richest men but also as the most corrupt official of all time. With Qianlong’s favour (and probably his knowledge) he enjoyed almost complete freedom of action. Two key posts were the biggest source of his illicit income. As minister of *hubu*, he was effectively the finance minister, overseeing the Qing’s state income. And as minister of *neiwubu*, or “household affairs”, he dealt with the royal family’s personal finances.

Heshen would regularly and openly siphon money from the funds that he managed. Historians are yet to reach a definitive conclusion on how much money he amassed. Yet when he was eventually executed by Qianlong’s son (Emperor Jiaqing) and all his wealth was confiscated – a week after Qianlong’s death – his personal worth was estimated at more than 15 years the Qing empire’s annual income. Other records have suggested that he owned more than 3,000 houses and that mountains of gold, silver and valuables were recovered after he was purged.

## How could Qianlong allow this to happen?

Qianlong is portrayed as one of the most capable emperors in Chinese history. When he first met Heshen, he was al-

**Heshen would regularly and rather openly siphon money from the funds that he oversaw**



Emperor Qianlong



A portrait of Heshen

ready 65 and he had ruled for four decades. By that stage he should have been worldly wise, so it was strange that such an experienced ruler should pluck a 25 year-old from nowhere and give him such an important role. The fact that the emperor then allowed Heshen to get away with such rampant corruption is even more of a puzzle.

That's why the relationship between Heshen and Qianlong has been a topic of some interest. George Macartney, the British ambassador, described Heshen as the only person that Qianlong entirely trusted.

Many historians believe that Qianlong knew of Heshen's corruption, and that Heshen knew Qianlong knew as well. However, by helping himself to such riches in plain view of the emperor, Heshen might have intended to convey a message that he was only interested in wealth and had no political ambitions.

More likely is that Heshen was a 'white glove', dutifully taking on the jobs that his imperial master wanted to avoid. For instance, Qianlong made six famous 'inspection tours' of southern China during his reign. These extravagant trips required huge spending but Heshen organised them, providing Qianlong with everything he needed to ensure these trips were to his liking. And while Heshen became a hated figure for his unscrupulous behaviour, Qianlong was able to keep his own reputation largely intact, sidestepping any taint that he might be the most corrupt emperor or the harshest tax collector.

### In the name of anti-corruption...

One of the major income sources from Heshen's role in *neiwubu* was from confiscating assets owned by convicted officials or individuals. So at the end of the day, Qianlong's decision to allow Heshen's behaviour was not quite as reckless as it sounds. Qianlong's successor, Emperor Jiaqing, waited only a few days before demanding that Heshen kill himself, and in turn secured a handy financial windfall in the properties he then seized from the former top official. Politically too this helped to deliver the new ruler some instant popularity by purging a hated figure from the court.

Of course, graft is still a major problem in contemporary China. In the first seven years after President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, his investigators netted an estimated 1.3 million corrupt officials.

Little wonder that memories of Heshen are fresh in the collective psyche as a symbol of one of the most pernicious issues plaguing the country.

**George Macartney described Heshen as the only person Qianlong entirely trusted**



George Macartney



# Inventions

**Gunpowder's  
creation began  
with an  
accidental bang**

## The Four Great Inventions

All of China's schoolchildren can name "the Four Great Inventions": the compass, gunpowder, papermaking and printing. Each has had a significant impact on the development of human civilisation. And even today they are celebrated as symbols of China's advanced scientific achievements at various points in its history.

The Chinese were using an early form of the compass as early as the second century BC for geomancy and fortune telling. The earliest reference to a magnetic device used in navigation is in a Song Dynasty book dated to around 1000, when the compass was also believed to have been introduced to Europe via the Arab world.

Gunpowder's creation began with an accidental bang in the year 800, when alchemists mixed sulphur with other substances in an attempt to create an elixir of eternal life for the Tang emperor. The explosive findings were deployed extensively thereafter – though more for fireworks than as weapons.

The Chinese are also credited with introducing paper and printing. Various sources state that papermaking was invented in 105 by Cai Lun, a eunuch from the Han Dynasty. He was said to have been inspired by watching wasps making their nests by softening wood fibres. Print-

ing arrived about a century later, although movable-type printing, which allowed characters to be interchanged, was not invented till 1040 during the Song Dynasty.

## But who popularised the concept of China's Four Great Inventions?

The concept is, in fact, an imported idea from Europe, and there used to be only three inventions in the grouping.

The notion of 'three' great inventions – the compass, printing and gunpowder – was an idea first spread by European missionaries in the 15th century. Notably it was mentioned by Karl Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. Chinese textbooks in the early 20th century also referred to the three inventions as great scientific achievements. It was a Cambridge science professor named Joseph Needham that added the fourth. In the 1950s he wrote a groundbreaking multi-volume series entitled *Science and Civilisation in China* and added papermaking as a 'great' Chinese invention. (The professor is also famous for the 'Needham Question' which asked why China hadn't industrialised before Europe.)

Needham's new classification began to find its way into Chinese textbooks, in part driven by government's efforts to rebuild national confidence after what the Chinese have



**A woodblock from  
the China Block  
Printing Museum in  
Yangzhou**



The frontispiece of the *Diamond Sutra* from the Tang Dynasty, the world's earliest dated printed book, published in the year 868

凡欲讀經先念淨口業真言遍

循唎

循唎

摩訶循唎

循循唎

娑婆訶

奉請除災金剛

奉請辟毒金剛

奉請黃隨求金剛

奉請白淨水金剛

奉請赤聲金剛

奉請定除厄金剛

奉請紫賢金剛

奉請大神金剛

佛給孤獨園

長老須菩提



An ancient Chinese compass

Some argue other Chinese inventions such as silk and porcelain are more worthy of a place among the “Four Great Inventions”

termed as “the Century of Humiliations” from their defeat in the Opium War in 1839 until the birth of the People’s Republic in 1949.

### The Four ‘New’ Inventions

Needham’s categorisation has been challenged by critics, who argue that inventions such as silk and porcelain are just as worthy of a place on the list. Others question whether gunpowder really merits a mention, because the Chinese were slow to figure out its more devastating usage: i.e. for warfare.

More recently, the phrase has morphed from four great

inventions to four modern ones, encapsulating innovations where China is a leading exponent, such as high-speed rail, mobile payments, e-commerce and bike-sharing schemes.

None of these were invented in China but the country gets credit for taking the original idea and translating it into practical application on a major scale.

In many cases, the results have been transformative. For instance, the railways were once viewed as a source of shame: a technology forced upon China against the government’s will by more advanced foreign powers. But China now leads the world in high-speed rail with 29,000 kilometres of bullet train track – all completed in the past 10 years.

The government has also been putting a greater emphasis on achieving breakthroughs in other technologies, as part of President Xi Jinping’s championing of the “China Dream”, or the “rejuvenation” of the country to “a fully developed, rich and powerful” nation by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic in 2049.

# J Japan

## Nasty neighbours

Over the centuries, few relationships have matched the geopolitical animosity between China and the island nation of Japan (perhaps the best European parallel would be France and England and their five centuries of on-off warfare).

Contact between what are now the world's second and third largest economies dates back to around the year 200. Cultural interaction reached its height during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), when Chinese influence on Japan was deep, evident in the writing system that the Japanese use today, as well as much of its past architecture and city planning.

Many of China's emperors showed little interest in Japan as long as it sent regular tribute and thus acknowledged its vassal status to the Dragon Throne. But Japan's commitment to the tributary system was intermittent – in some periods its rulers opted out of sending gifts. These lulls coincided with greater Japanese piracy on the Chinese coast, a situation that irked China's ruling dynasties.

## How did the rivalry begin?

Things came to a head when a conquering Mongol – Kubilai Khan – seized power in China and decided Japan



**Khubilai Khan: to blame for starting the bad blood with Japan?**

should be next to bend the knee. After the Japanese declined his more diplomatic demands for submission, he sent an invasion fleet of 900 ships and 15,000 soldiers in 1274. Famously this did not succeed, as a divine wind ('kamikaze') blew the fleet off course. Kubilai made two

**Khubilai Khan, China's first Mongol emperor, sent an invasion fleet of 900 ships to conquer Japan in 1274**

Treaty of  
Shimonoseki

下ニ於テ批准セラルヘク而シテ右批准ハ  
並ニ於テ明治二十八年五月八日即  
光緒二十一年四月十四日ニ交換セラル  
ヘシ

右證據トシテ西帝國全權大臣ハ茲ニ記名  
調印スルモノナリ

明治二十八年四月十七日即光緒二十一年  
三月二十三日下ノ關ニ於テ二通ノ作ル

大日本帝國全權辦理大臣

山岡啓之助  
從二位勳一等伯

伊藤博文



大日本帝國全權辦理大臣

外務大臣  
從二位勳一等子爵

陸奥宗光



later attempts to land in Japan before calling a halt on the invasion plan in 1286. However, the period became a key part of Japan's national story, fostering deep mistrust of its far bigger neighbour.

The next major confrontation between the pair was far bloodier. This time it was the Japanese military despot Hideyoshi Toyotomi who did the invading, targeting Ming China's ally Korea in 1592. Known in English as the Imjin War, the conflict lasted seven years and saw Hideyoshi send a massive invasion force of 158,800 soldiers (compare that with the Spanish Armada in 1588 which numbered 30,500 troops).

Hideyoshi was initially successful in conquering Korea and capturing Seoul, and soon he was proclaiming that he would take Beijing too. However, six months after the invasion began, the Wanli Emperor sent 100,000 Chinese troops to bolster Korea's defences. By 1598 Hideyoshi was dead and Japanese troops were withdrawing – China having restored Korea's borders. The war confirmed the Chinese in their view that the Japanese were unruly bandits – not only to be distrusted but brutally barbaric too (in one early rout Hideyoshi's army cut the noses off 8,000 Korean soldiers and sent them home packed in salt).

### **A humiliating period**

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan started to encroach on China's sovereignty again. In 1894, flushed

with pride in the wake of its successful modernisation programme, Tokyo ignited the First Sino-Japanese War in a contest (again) for regional supremacy over China's tributary state, Korea. The conflict resulted in a decisive Japanese victory and the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed by a fading and demoralised Qing Dynasty.

The humiliation was total: China relinquished any hold it had on Korea and gave up Taiwan and islands nearby, plus the eastern portion of Liaodong Peninsula (near the Korean Peninsula) to the Japanese. China also had to pay reparations to Japan.

Japan's startling victory marked a dramatic shift in East Asia's established order and also set the stage for some of the major political faultlines that still bedevil the region today: most notably Taiwan (a former Japanese colony) and the heated dispute between Beijing and Tokyo over what Japanese call the Senkaku Islands and the Chinese refer to as the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

### **A Japanese invasion**

In 1931, Japan seized Manchuria in northeastern China and established the client state of Manzhouguo. A full-scale invasion of China began in 1937, marking the start of China's "eight years of resistance" until the end of the Second World War.

By the time Japan surrendered in 1945, more than 35 million Chinese had been killed or wounded. The Nanjing

**The emperor Wanli sent 100,000 Chinese soldiers to defend Korea from invasion in 1592, rebuffing Japan's Hideyoshi Toyotomi**



**Military despot Hideyoshi Toyotomi**

**In 1978, Japan and China signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship**

Massacre, a six-week atrocity committed by Japanese soldiers in December 1937, came to symbolise the worst excesses of the conflict and the brutality unleashed on the local population.

Memories of the suffering still reverberate in the Chinese psyche, not least because the education system teaches younger Chinese about the historical stain of the period. Among patriots, a revenge narrative is never far from the surface – with a host of TV shows and movies portraying Japanese infamy during the war.

**It's a complicated relationship...**

In 1978, Japan and China signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, sparking a new phase in the relationship in which Japan provided technical aid and investment that helped China grow economically. Over the past decade, as China's gross domestic product surpassed that of Japan, relations have changed again. With the Chinese military growing more assertive in the region, there has been growing debate in Japan about changing its constitution to permit remilitarisation. For historical reasons Beijing vehemently opposes this.

The two Asian giants have enjoyed slightly closer ties since Donald Trump took office in 2017 and the Sino-US trade row kicked off. Chinese policy seems to dictate that it shouldn't make enemies of Japan and the US simultaneously. Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Abe

Shinzo have also talked about a return to a “normal track” in relations after earlier disputes over islands in the East China Sea.

However, the relationship will always be tricky because of the complex history between the two nations, as well as some of the prejudices that each society has about the other. That said, as ordinary Chinese travel to Japan in ever greater numbers as tourists their stereotypes have been challenged and they often comment on the cleanliness and politeness in Japanese society. Many come home with a Japanese rice cooker too, convinced that the quality is much higher than Chinese made-equivalents.

But as Beijing eclipses Tokyo as the premier power in Asia, the view in Japan of China as a potential threat has grown substantially. According to a recent survey by the Pew Research Centre, 85% of Japanese had an unfavourable view of China – by far the most negative response across all 32 countries surveyed.

# K Kangxi

A young Isaac Newton is said to have been inspired by an apple that fell from a tree and hit him on the head. That led him to come up with his laws of gravity later in life, as well as his landmark work *Principia Mathematica* in 1687.

Newton's 'aha moment' came at the same time that a young Kangxi was ascending to the Qing empire's throne in 1661. Kangxi became emperor aged just seven yet he survived the power struggles at court and went on to rule the Middle Kingdom for 61 years, a regal record bettered only by Britain's Queen Elizabeth II in 2015.

Besides becoming the longest-reigning emperor in Chinese history, some argue that Kangxi was one of the greatest as well. Such a verdict would class the Manchu monarch in the same league as two other greats: Emperor Wudi of Han (see W for Wudi of Han) and Emperor Taizong of Tang (see L for Li Shiming).

## Why is Kangxi considered great?

One of his contributions is indisputable: under Kangxi's rule the Qing empire grew to more than 13 million square kilometres in land area, effectively becoming the world's largest country.

Kangxi's military campaigns extended the empire's control to Outer Mongolia, Tibet and to the northwest. In

the northeast Kangxi added areas north of the Heilongjiang River (alternately called the Amur River) after border conflicts with Tsarist Russia. He even absorbed Taiwan, when his navy overran the last stronghold of the previous Ming regime on the island in 1683.

## How did the economy do under Kangxi?

A key parameter in measuring an emperor's greatness is social stability. And apart from fighting wars to put down rebel Han Chinese generals (traitors who had helped the Manchu overthrow the preceding Ming Dynasty), the Qing empire was largely stable under Kangxi's six-decade rule.

This helps to explain the explosion in population in the early stages of the Qing Dynasty. Official records put the number of people at 21 million in 1700, with the total jumping to nearly 80 million by 1713, and surpassing 100 million around 1720.

Other reasons for the incredible boom in headcount have been debated. Some believe the main factor was the spread of higher-yielding foreign crops such as potatoes and corn. Others have credited Kangxi's decision in 1711 to cap the number of adults – perpetually – paying head-tax, and thus exempt those produced by any future population growth from taxation.



**Kangxi in ceremonial armour, armed with bow and arrows, and surrounded by bodyguards**

Emperor Kangxi



Of course, the official census during the Qing era was never entirely accurate. Families may also have been hiding away their children to avoid paying tax. In this respect, Kangxi's tax relief merely brought China's 'grey market population' back into the official records.

### **What about his cultural achievements?**

It was estimated that there were only about 200,000 or so Manchus in 1644 when they overran the Ming empire – meaning the Han Chinese outnumbered their invaders by 100 times. Kangxi then established a lasting powerbase for the Qing, laying the foundation for an empire that would last more than two and a half centuries.

One of the secrets of his success was treating Han officials much better than the Ming emperors had done. Many of his closest aides were senior Confucian scholars and these “Han traitors” (from the perspective of the Han Chinese who were loyal to the Ming rulers at the time) were key figures in the regime. Kangxi won them over by setting himself up as a good example. He was a hardworking Sinologist in his own right: in 1710 he ordered the compilation of a complete record of all the characters in the Chinese language, a mammoth project that became known as the *Kangxi Dictionary*.

### **Are there bad reviews for Kangxi?**

Kangxi also embraced a large number of foreign officials

including Jesuits (see G for Giuseppe Castiglione). Joachim Bouvet, a French Jesuit, was another of his admirers. In letters to King Louis XIV, Bouvet recounted how Kangxi was fascinated by the scientific and mathematical instruments brought by foreign missionaries to China. The emperor even wrote a preface to a translated version of some of Euclid's mathematical works.

That meant that the Qing emperor was also aware of the scientific revolution taking place in Europe – conditions that later made possible the industrial revolution.

Critics in the modern day have argued that Kangxi should have done more to push the Qing to keep pace with European advances. Instead, he sowed the seeds of the Middle Kingdom's decline during this “golden age”. By the time that Kangxi's great-grandson took over, the empire was starting to suffer incursions from smaller but industrialised Western powers, primarily Britain (where the Industrial Revolution was born).

That's a painful lesson the government bears in mind today. Beijing's 'Made in China 2025' technological push is an avowed effort to take the lead in new technologies rather than play catch-up.



**Joachim Bouvet, a Jesuit at Kangxi's court**



# Li Shimin

**Li Shimin, or Taizong of Tang, the second ruler of the Tang Dynasty, has always been categorised alongside Han Wudi as one of the greatest ever Chinese rulers**

The Han Chinese – the world’s largest ethnicity– get their name from the Han Dynasty whose powerful emperor Wudi (see W for Wudi of Han) helped forge their national identity. However, in many cities around the world, the local Chinatown translates literally as “Tang people’s street”.

That’s because the Tang Dynasty is considered as another high-point of Chinese civilisation. Li Shimin, or Taizong of Tang, the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty, has also been categorised as one of the two greatest Han Chinese rulers.

## **What is Emperor Taizong known for?**

Taizong’s era, from 629 to 649, is often described as “the Reign of Zhenguan” and classed as an exemplary model against which later emperors were measured.

China at the time was so affluent and stable that an idiom claimed that people didn’t need to lock their doors at night. According to a chapter in *Zizhi Tongjian* (“Comprehensive Mirror to Governance”, another of China’s most important history books), only 390 criminals were sentenced to death across the entire Tang empire in the year 635. Famously Taizong set all of these condemned men temporarily free so that they could visit their families for the

Spring Festival – on a promise that they would return to the capital Chang’an to receive the death penalty in the autumn.

Rather surprisingly, they all returned on time. Taizong then set them free in a general amnesty.

## **Why are historians so kind to him?**

Many of China’s emperors are wrapped up in myths that they likely fostered themselves and which their own court historians incorporated into the dynastic record.

Many of the accounts about Taizong have been heavily influenced by an eighth century compendium on the emperor compiled by the respected historian Wu Jing. He described a utopian model of government, portraying the emperor as decisive and hardworking, but also willing to listen to a group of talented (and outspoken) advisors.

But Wu also mentioned that Taizong asked to have a look at what his court historians were saying about him. Presumably this meant that some of the records were written in a more rose-tinted fashion.

Recent historians have argued that the more ruthless aspects of his rule – for instance, how he killed his two brothers and forced his father to abdicate – have been downplayed.

Tang Taizong



**One of Taizong's achievements is undeniable. He managed to lay the foundation for the Middle Kingdom to thrive as a superpower for more than a century**

### **Was the Tang empire a superpower?**

One of Taizong's achievements is that he laid the foundation for China to thrive as a superpower for more than a century. Similar to Han Wudi's achievements, ambitious military campaigns by Taizong extended the Tang empire's control across Central Asia, Mongolia, Manchuria and parts of Siberia. As a result Taizong was also titled as Tian Kehan, (aka 'heavenly khan', or khan of all khans).

Satellite kingdoms that recognised Tang China's authority spanned as far west as Persia and Afghanistan. This stirred vibrant commercial contact between Islamic and Chinese civilisations. But the Chinese today take most pride in the Tang Dynasty's almost unmatched cultural influence. The Tang era saw Chinese poetry reach its pinnacle, something recalled in Chinese literature lessons for schoolchildren. Tang China was also famous for its porcelain, decorated furniture and musical instruments.

Superpowers generally enjoy cultural influence and this was how the Tang empire excelled too. Japan, for example, underwent centuries of "cultural borrowing" during the Tang Dynasty (including the Chinese writing system; see J for Japan). It has even been claimed that the traditional kimono was influenced by the fashion sense of the Tang.

But perhaps most importantly, the Tang Dynasty has been celebrated for its self-confidence, which was primarily reflected in its openness to the wider world. Chang'an

(see C for Capital Cities) was the world's most cosmopolitan city of the time and Tang China welcomed new faiths including Mahayana Buddhism (from India, which inspired the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West*). The dynasty even produced the only female emperor in Chinese history (see F for Female).

### **How does modern China benchmark against the Tang?**

Taizong of Tang and Wudi of Han are always discussed in parallel by the Chinese in debates about the past glories of their civilisation. There is no agreed assessment of which of the two emperors was "greater". Both led superpowers in their respective eras but Taizong could be said to have represented a freer, more cultured and more open Middle Kingdom.

Today, the Chinese government hankers after a similar expression of its soft power overseas. In a meeting of the Communist Party elite in late 2019, there was even talk of a new phrase: 'the Reign of China'. This is thought to be an effort to connect the country's rise as a superpower with the peace, prosperity and open government epitomised by Taizong's reign 14 centuries ago, according to an opinion piece written by Wang Xiangwei, a former editor of the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong.

# M Money

The history of China's monetary system is an under-researched topic but it's safe to conclude that the Chinese were pioneers in financial innovation.

When Qin Shi Huang united the nation in 221 BC, copper currency was used, with strict controls on the production of copper and the minting of coins. A thousand years later new ways of paying for goods and services began spreading from China to other nations.

## The first paper money and banknotes

Paper currency was a byproduct of another of China's great innovations: wood-block printing. Paper payment started to appear in the Tang Dynasty around 800 and was known as *fei qian*, or 'flying cash'. The money originated as certificates issued by the government to pay merchants in distant parts of the empire. This explained its name: it was much easier to courier over longer distances.

It was during the Song Dynasty about two centuries later that *jiaozi*, or 'exchange paper', came into circulation as the world's earliest bank notes. The printed notes were widely used in Sichuan, then an affluent region along the Silk Road, although some scholars believe the innovation could have been introduced by Jewish merchants who had settled in Kaifeng, then the country's capital (several hun-

dred Kaifeng residents can still trace back their Jewish ancestry, albeit they have largely assimilated within Chinese culture).

After overrunning the Middle Kingdom in 1271, the Mongols began printing what was believed to be the world's first fiat currency. During the Yuan Dynasty, international trade had opened up via land and sea. Marco Polo was so fascinated by how the government-backed currency circulated in China that he was believed to have brought the idea back to Europe.

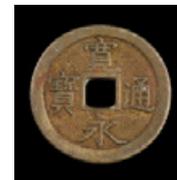
## The rise and fall of the 'silver empire'

Traditionally-minded Chinese believed that an empire's demise could be traced back to the emperor losing the 'mandate of heaven' (see D for Dragon Throne). Economic factors, especially mismanagement of monetary policy, were a decisive factor.

Take the Mongol's Yuan Dynasty, which lasted for just 97 years. It has been well-documented that overprinting of its fiat money led to some of the worst inflation in Chinese history between 1260 and 1309. This eventually led to nationwide uprisings.

An economic crisis also contaminated the Ming Dynasty's later years in the 1600s. The game-changer this

**After overrunning the Middle Kingdom in 1271, the Mongols began printing what was believed to be the world's first fiat currency**



**A close up image of a bronze Chinese cash coin**



Yuan Dynasty  
bank note with its  
printing plate  
from 1287

time, however, was a large amount of silver that found its way from the 'New World' of America. It began to flow into China thanks to demand from Europe for local goods (see P for Porcelain).

That was a fundamental turning point in China's monetary history as the economy morphed from its older copper currency towards a silver standard. The problem was that although China was rich in copper, it was never a major producer of silver. A contraction in silver supply began to grip the Ming empire in the mid-seventeenth century when Spain enforced laws banning trade with the Chinese (mainly via the Philippines), while the new shogunate regime of Japan (a major silver exporter) also banned exports. The resulting spike in silver's value was disastrous for the Ming economy, which was already under stress from a series of natural disasters and famines (see E for Environment).

By the onset of the Opium War in the first half of the 1800s, European countries had switched to the gold standard. Yet silver was still the major currency circulating domestically in China. After the Opium War, China suffered from a worsening trade imbalance as it turned from an exporter into a net importer. Worse, most of the indemnities related to the conflict were settled in gold. That meant that the Qing government was hit by hefty foreign exchange losses as silver declined in price. Between 1901 and 1902, for instance, the Qing court suffered huge losses as silver

prices in London plunged more than a fifth. The situation was exacerbated by rampant counterfeiting of silver within China – which debased the currency. In a bid to shore up its finances, the government set up its first central bank in 1905. The Great Qing Government Bank (today the Bank of China) was a last-ditch effort to defend its monetary sovereignty. However, it was too late: the Qing Dynasty, together with 4,000 years of imperial rule, would come to an end six years later.

### **How has the Chinese government learned from monetary history?**

This is a very popular research topic among financial think tanks in China – especially reviews of how the Middle Kingdom lost its competitive advantages when it switched to the silver standard some 500 years ago.

China has once again become a major global exporter and it has built up large foreign exchange reserves too – reaching close to \$4 trillion at one point. This time round the government wants to use its trade surplus more carefully. It also wants to broaden the reach of its own currency, the renminbi. Rather than hoarding the world's most popular fiat currency (the US dollar) as the Ming and Qing once did with silver, the Chinese have been anxious to diversify their holdings into other commodities and asset classes, and to promote greater acceptance of the renminbi in international markets.

**Between 1901 and 1902 the Qing court suffered huge losses as silver prices in London plunged more than 20%**



# New Culture Movement

**The New Culture Movement began to emerge in China shortly after the 1911 revolution**



Chen Duxiu

May 4th, 1919 is the date most closely associated with the New Culture Movement, but the sentiment behind it began to emerge shortly after the 1911 revolution (see X for Xinhai Revolution). More than two millennia of imperial rule had just come to an end but the republic was riven between regional warlords and powerless to revoke the “Unequal Treaties” forced upon the previous Qing Dynasty by foreign powers. Young intellectuals began searching for solutions that could revitalise their country’s standing in the world.

## Who were the cheerleaders?

One was Chen Duxiu, who founded the influential monthly magazine *New Youth*. Chen and the young writers who contributed to *New Youth* were later to become cultural and political leaders. They included a certain Mao Zedong, although it was Chen, not Mao, who would later become the first leader of the Communist Party of China.

The New Culture Movement grabbed greater prominence on May 4th 1919 after patriotic students demonstrated against decisions taken in respect to Chinese territory at the peace negotiations in Versailles. Most of the anger was provoked when Britain, France and the US gave their approval for Japan to take over the former Ger-

man territorial concessions in Shandong province.

After learning what had been decided in Paris, 3,000 students took to the streets in Beijing and protested in Tiananmen Square, marking the first large-scale student demonstration since China’s education system had switched from Confucian-style teaching to a more Western-influenced curriculum. The protests swept across the rest of the country as workers went on strike as well. The primary target of the protest was Japan, with demonstrators calling for a boycott of Japanese goods. They also demanded an end to the extraterritorial rights of other foreign powers on Chinese soil. Much of the anger, of course, was vented at their own government.

## The unintended consequence?

The New Culture Movement created some of the conditions for the rise to power of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The quest for a new style of government – as a means to rejuvenate the nation – took on a new urgency for intellectuals. Science and democracy were two of the focal points for the new thinking, serving as the Chinese equivalent to the French Revolution’s “liberté, égalité, fraternité”.

Other ideologies were competing to fill the vacuum left

Students in Beijing rallied during the  
May Fourth Movement



by the collapse of Confucian values. And some thinkers, like Chen, were turning to Marxism as the best means to modernise China.

Chen was imprisoned for a few months for his role in provoking the May Fourth uprisings and shortly after his release he became a Marxist in Shanghai. With backing from the Comintern (the international organisation that advocated world Communism), he founded a Communist group and in July 1921 the first National Party Congress of the CPC was held with 13 attending members. They elected Chen as Party Secretary and he would serve as leader for the next seven years, before being expelled in one of the power struggles between its senior figures.

Another of the CPC's founding members was Mao Zedong. The 28 year-old was working as a librarian at Peking University when the New Culture Movement/ May Fourth Movement came to prominence. He witnessed firsthand how student-led uprisings had challenged the status quo and he worked closely with Chen, whom Mao later described as having more influence on shaping his thinking than anyone else.

When Mao became China's leader in 1949, he claimed that the May Fourth Movement was an essential step towards the fulfillment of his Communist revolution.

### **The lesson for today**

One legacy of May 4, 1919 is that where China sees its ter-

ritorial sovereignty under threat, there won't be an inch of compromise from its leaders. The original concession of Chinese territory to Japan led to national unrest as the enfeebled government was decried for being unable to fend off foreign imperialism. No Chinese leader – President Xi Jinping included – wants to risk a repeat of that humiliation by seeming weak in territorial disputes.

In the decade ahead that could have major ramifications for regional stability as it means China won't give any ground on a number of key sovereignty issues, including islands disputed with Japan (known as the Senkakus to Japanese and the Diaoyus to Chinese), a lengthy stretch of border with India, an historical claim to much of the South China Sea (via an ancient map marked with a 'nine-dash' line) and the future of Taiwan (which is regarded by mainland Chinese as a 'renegade province' of China).

All questions of Chinese sovereignty will be deemed non-negotiable. That is the lesson learned from the May Fourth Movement.



**A monument to the May Fourth Movement in Beijing**



# Oracle Bones

When Chinese President Xi Jinping was strolling through the Forbidden City with his American counterpart Donald Trump in 2017, the two men briefly debated whether China was the world's oldest civilisation.

"Egypt is a bit more ancient," Xi admitted. "But the only continuous civilisation to continue onwards is China. We have 3,000 years with a written language."

By "written language" Xi was referring to inscriptions on oracle bones which are recognisable in written form. Dating back to the Shang Dynasty (1600 to 1046 BC), these oxen shoulder blades or turtle shells also mark the beginning of China's so-called "faithful history" – a record seen as more reliable because it is backed up with a written language and archaeological finds.

## How did China's written language evolve?

For centuries, these same historically valuable bones and shells were known as "dragon bones" and used as a form of traditional medicine. That meant hundreds of thousands of pieces of these priceless artifacts vanished into herbal cooking pots. Only later did they arouse the interest of archaeologists and historians, who began to recognise some of the mysterious diagrams as Chinese characters in their primitive forms.

That led to the unearthing of the ancient capital of the Shang Dynasty in Yinxu – today's Anyang in Henan province. The archaeological find happened in 1928, making it all the more miraculous given that the young Chinese republic was falling apart at the time.

The tortoise shells or oxen bones were originally used for divination. Yet most importantly they bear testimony to the development of an ancient writing system. By the end of 2018, archeologists had found 4,300 characters on the oracle bones and the meaning of 1,600 has been identified. From these pictographic origins, the oracle bone scripts evolved into the Chinese characters used today.

## How about the spoken lingua franca?

Chinese is a challenging language for outsiders to master: as opposed to the mere 26 letters in the English alphabet, there are about 50,000 Chinese characters in total, with an educated person knowing about 8,000.

Putonghua, China's official spoken language, translates as "common tongue". But it wasn't commonly spoken in Chinese history. In fact, Mandarin – as it is better known overseas – was viewed as the dialect of the Manchurian nobility. Other languages were also favoured as the lingua franca at different times. During the Ming Dynasty a Han



Chinese Shang Dynasty rust Knife Money



Characters carved on tortoise shells during the Shang period

Chinese dialect from Nanjing was preferred, as that was where the Ming emperors had initially based their capital. After the Manchus broke through the Great Wall and inaugurated the Qing Dynasty in 1644, Han Chinese weren't even allowed to live within the inner city. Beijing was thus separated into two ethnic zones: the Manchurian-speaking rulers resided in the inner circle, and the Han Chinese, speaking the Ming official language, outside it.

But the royal family had a problem. Manchurian had a limited lexicon (the Manchus were a nomadic tribe) and it lacked the vocabulary to match the diversity and sophistication of Han Chinese culture. So the newcomers needed to incorporate Han Chinese terms into their own discourse. This way of speaking eventually evolved into what we know today as Mandarin. Perhaps that's why some scholars still query whether Mandarin is really representative of the Chinese tongue, viewing it more as a language of occupation. There is even a widely circulated (but false) legend that Mandarin won by only a single vote when republican revolutionaries picked it as the official language in 1912 over Cantonese (a dialect of Guangdong province). In fact, no such meeting ever took place.

### **The importance of a 'common language'**

There are about 10 million ethnic Manchus registered in China. Yet only a handful of them can still speak the original (and once royal) Manchurian language, according to

media coverage. Its derivative dialect Mandarin, on the other hand, has been embraced by China's leaders, particularly the Communist Party. The government began to standardise Putonghua in 1955, spending decades trying to make it the common language at the national level. For a country of 56 ethnic groups and thousands of dialects, this is a matter not only of national unity but also a platform for effective governance. But incredibly, a Ministry of Education survey in 2013 revealed that around 400 million people (out of the 1.4 billion population) still couldn't speak Putonghua well. The equivalent would be 20 million Britons not being able to conduct a fluent conversation in English.

While spoken Chinese varies dramatically by dialect, the written character system is uniform across China. Since the 1950s, the government has promoted the use of a system of simplified characters. That has helped to improve literacy levels although some scholars argue that the visual history and pictorial beauty of the original characters have been lost.

For example, in traditional written Chinese the political term "Party" is written as 黨, which pictorially consists of the character 黑 ('black') inside a house (the connotation was more conspiratorial historically). In official simplified form, the same word is written as 党. That representation is now much more positive: the character 兄 (meaning 'brother') has replaced 黑, giving more of a sense of a bond.

**The Chinese government began to standardise Putonghua in 1955**



**Traditional Chinese hieroglyph**



# Porcelain

**Qianlong's  
Meiyintang  
'chicken cup' –  
used for drinking  
tea – sold at  
auction in 2014  
to a Chinese  
buyer for \$36  
million**

## So good they called it China

Mentions of 'Made in China' still prompt the occasional grimace. The situation was the polar opposite for pottery five hundred years ago, when a Chinese origin was a mark of quality, not a cause for alarm.

Like silk before it, porcelain enjoyed stellar standing as one of China's luxury exports, with a tougher texture than its stone and earthenware predecessors and a translucency that allowed for more refined designs.

Such was its association with the country in which it was produced (no one else knew how to make it) that buyers from English-speaking countries were soon simply calling it 'china'. By the 1600s, demand from European polite society was so frenetic, noted Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, that anyone who could afford it was "piling china up on the tops of cabinets, escritaires and every chimney-piece, to the tops of the ceilings..."

## When did the Chinese start making porcelain?

The legend is that someone stumbled on the secret after earthenware left on a fireside hearth was heated to high temperatures. Artisans then spent years working on ways to purify a small group of clays and mix them together in the right proportions, before scorching them in a kiln.

Petuntse, one of the key ingredients, binds the clay together so it's hard and translucent, while kaolin lends the plasticity that allows the clay body to hold its shape.

First deployed regularly as a firing style under the Han, the Tang added artistic touches of their own, although porcelain didn't appear in its more refined white-ware form until the Song, who made it at the 'Five Great Kilns' around China. Later the Ming would introduce the blue-and-white style that became so famous worldwide, mostly from the town of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi, where the porcelain was celebrated as being "as thin as paper, as white as jade, as bright as a mirror, and as sound as a bell".

## At the emperor's behest

Jingdezhen had pine forests that provided fuel for the kilns and nearby mountains that were one of the few areas known to have pure kaolin. Initially most of the focus was on supplying the imperial court: in 1433 alone the town's kilns were tasked with fulfilling an order of 433,500 pieces.

But the emperors realised the profit-making potential and they were soon keeping a close eye on production by protecting Jingdezhen's monopoly rights. "They make it nowhere but in that town, and thence it is exported all over the world," wrote Marco Polo.



Chinese Jingdezhen porcelain  
moonflask with underglaze  
blue and red. Qianlong  
period, 1736 to 1796



Song Dynasty celadon porcelain with a phoenix spout, 10th century

Such was the control of the imperial court that it has drawn comparisons with state capitalism today, with the ‘Jingdezhen model’ used to describe how private sector firms are being squeezed out by state-owned rivals.

However, producing for the emperors also helped to keep standards high, with chipped or imperfect pottery soon piled up high around the city’s kilns. This unforgiving focus on quality means that Jingdezhen’s work is some of the most sought-after by collectors, including pieces like the Meiyintang ‘Chicken Cup’ (a small bowl for drinking wine, so-called because of the hen and cockerel in its design), which sold for \$36 million in 2014.

There are just 17 of these cups surviving, which is why netizens were scandalised when a Chinese multimillionaire who had bought one at auction (paying for it with 24 swipes of his credit card) put it to immediate use to sip a little tea. “Emperor Qianlong has used it, now I’ve used it. I just wanted to see how it felt,” he explained at the time.

### Porcelain pilfered: China’s stolen secrets

Jingdezhen still employs hundreds of thousands of people in its ceramics sector although it lost some of its allure when the Europeans purloined the secrets of porcelain making in the 1700s, helped by a French priest who spent a decade in the city spying on its production.

Back in Europe, efforts to replicate porcelain were led by Augustus the Strong, the Elector of Saxony, who was so

infatuated with Chinese pottery that he diagnosed himself with *porzellankrankheit* (porcelain sickness). Artisans fired the first porcelain in the town of Meissen in about 1710, drawing on a local source of kaolin, and factories soon began to undercut the prices of exports from Jingdezhen and rival it in terms of design and quality. The Chinese monopoly on the trade was lost.

Porcelain is just one of many Chinese inventions lost to subterfuge. More than a thousand years before, two Byzantine monks were said to have smuggled out the first silk-worm eggs, hastening the demise of the silk monopoly. Shortly afterwards the secrets of papermaking would be surrendered by Chinese prisoners in the Middle East. Much later it was the techniques of tea-making that were pilfered by a Scottish botanist sent on a spying mission by the East India Company in the 1850s.

Of course, in recent decades it is the Chinese who have been accused – mostly by governments and companies from Europe, the US and Japan – of rampant intellectual property (IP) theft involving prized commercial secrets. History teaches us that over the centuries IP theft has gone in both geographical directions, though the techniques have clearly advanced, with sophisticated hacking of computer networks now preferred to sending botanists like Robert Fortune to China to spy (for a history of his exploits, read *For All the Tea in China*).



# Qin Shi Huang

## Who is he?

Born in 259 BC, he was the king of Qin (pronounced 'chin'), one of the seven 'Warring States' that clashed with each other for hundreds of years. The chaos ended with Qin's conquest of the other six states in 221 BC. Its ruler called himself Qin Shi Huang, with *shi* denoting "the first" in Chinese, and *huang* a self-invented title for emperor.

Qin Shi Huang is one of the better known of China's rulers outside the country, thanks to the discovery of his tomb in 1974. It housed his Terracotta Army – a collection of life-size sculptures of more than 8,000 soldiers, 130 chariots and 520 horses. Arguably one of the top archaeological finds ever, the Terracotta Army has also cemented his legacy as one of the most powerful tyrants in Chinese history.

## Why is he considered a tyrant?

Qin Shi Huang's hankering for construction projects extended far beyond his final resting place. For starters he initiated construction of the Great Wall (although it would be built over many centuries), which more than 2,200 years later remains China's most iconic structure.

For Qin Shi Huang the wall served a military purpose (see W for Wudi of Han). So too his laying out of the skele-

ton of a nationwide network of roads (for horse-drawn carriages). That transport system also helped in his mobilisation of a massive army, a practice that was unpopular among the wider population (large standing armies requisitioned lots of food and also conscripted rural folk from their farms).

His lack of popularity was also related to his reforms. Before unification by the Qin, the seven 'Warring States' had differed in key areas like their language, their calendars and their cultural practices. But Qin Shi Huang launched ruthless campaigns to standardise the situation across his new empire, including changes to taxation, the legal system and the currency.

To subdue resistance to his reforms, Qin Shi Huang ordered the burning of much of China's existing literature (his answer to limiting the memories of the past and older ways of doing things). He is also alleged to have ordered hundreds of 'traditional' Confucian scholars to be buried alive. Events like this mean that his rule is often viewed as a tyrannical period. He sat on the throne for just 11 years, dying in 210 BC aged 49 (possibly poisoned by potions he consumed in the hope of eternal life – these contained the likes of mercury, sulphur and lead, according to popular legend).

**Qin Shi Huang was China's first emperor – he is famed for starting the Great Wall and also for the Terracotta Army of 8,000 soldiers made for his tomb**



Qin Shi Huang



The Terracotta Army is the collection of sculptures depicting the armies of Qin Shi Huang found in his burial tomb

The Qin Dynasty crumbled with him, lasting only another three years.

### How about his more positive contribution?

Aside from key pieces of infrastructure, Qin Shi Huang was responsible for laying the basis for the bureaucratic system that governed the vast Middle Kingdom. These were said to have provided the foundations for China as a superpower, in this case through the later reign of the Han (see W for Wudi of Han).

Without Qin's ruthless standardisations, China might have ended up today looking more like Europe as a collection of smaller countries and different languages. The fact that China's writing system is a common standard today also dates back to his 'tyrannical' behaviour.

Some of his other nastier acts, such as burying people alive, have been disputed by more modern historians. His rift with Confucian scholars seems to have been a real one, but many believe he stopped short of the famed atrocity. Accounts of it were perpetuated for 2,000 years, however, because the official history of his reign was written by scholars in the Han Dynasty – when Confucianism was the dominant ideology.

He was probably a workaholic – which some view as another reason for his early death. Frances Wood, in her history of the emperor, states: "According to one story that has been ignored ever since, he would not sleep until he

had read a daily quota of 30 kilos of official documents."

### Are there many modern parallels?

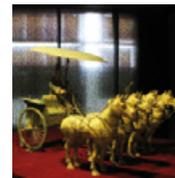
Like him or loathe him, Qin Shi Huang plays a central role in China's historical narrative as the man who united the country.

For this fact alone, he's largely above criticism from the country's contemporary leaders, who put national unity above other priorities.

Historians from the Communist Party of China (CPC) have also been admirers of Qin Shi Huang's governing style, especially in taking unpopular decisions for the good of the nation. In fact, some of them have spent years reassessing earlier verdicts on Qin Shi Huang.

Some of that thinking was reflected in *Hero*, a 2002 blockbuster movie by famed Chinese director Zhang Yimou. In the film, Qin Shi Huang is portrayed as charismatic, intelligent and perceptive, and not just ruthless. So much so that after spending an hour chatting with his royal target, an assassin aborts an attempt to kill him.

Modern China's founder Mao Zedong was an avowed fan of China's first emperor and his methods too. "We have surpassed Qin Shi Huang a hundredfold," he once remarked as a signal of his admiration for the first emperor's rule.



Terracotta chariot found outside the tomb of Qin Shi Huang



# Reform

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**Reformers rarely enjoyed a happy ending in the nation's history**

Reform is one of the principal topics that has kept Chinese think tanks busy since the late 1970s (when the 'Reform and Opening' period began). One reason for the fascination is that reformers rarely enjoyed a happy ending in the nation's history.

## **The grim end of the first great reformer**

During the Warring States Period (476-221 BC), the Qin started out as militarily the weakest of the seven major kingdoms. Yet around 356 BC the Qin began to attain 'superpower' status eventually uniting China under its rule in 221 BC (see Q for Qin Shi Huang).

How? Behind the rise of Qin was Shang Yang, a statesman and thinker with a reputation as one of the greatest political reformers.

Shang's proposals included compulsory military service and drastic tax reforms. At the heart of his programme was applying common standards to more of China's administrative and social practices, as well as the principle of 'equality of all'. His adherence to the rule of law even saw him clash with the Qin's heir-apparent (it didn't end well: after taking the throne, the vengeful new king killed Shang by tying him to five separate chariots and tearing him into pieces).

## **The first 'socialist reformer' didn't die in one piece either**

In the timeline of Chinese history, the four-century reign of the Han Dynasty (206BC – 220AD) was divided into 'Western Han' and 'Eastern Han'. The split came when Wang Mang, a member of the family of a Han empress, usurped the throne and set up his own Xin empire in 9 AD.

Wang is often depicted as a villain, although some Western scholars talk about him as China's first socialist. His economic reforms included seizing private land (mostly owned by Han nobles) and a redistribution of property. He also banned slavery, which was a common practice among richer families at the time.

But Wang didn't enjoy the 'mandate of heaven' that generations of rulers relied on (see D for Dragon Throne). The Yellow River changed course during his reign and a series of disastrous floods provoked uprisings. After being killed by a rebel leader, Wang's head was cut off and hung outside a market. His Xin Dynasty lasted only 15 years and the Han were restored as absolute rulers.

## **The first student strike calling for reform**

Other famous reformers, such as Wang Anshi (1021-1086) in the Song Dynasty and Zhang Juzheng (1525-1582) in the



**The late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping might be considered the most successful reformer in Chinese history**

Ming, were lucky enough to die in their beds. Both were the most powerful officials of their time (second only to the emperor) but lost their positions as their reforms went sour. Wang was imprisoned then demoted, while Zhang's wealth was confiscated after his death.

One of the most fateful eras of reform in imperial China happened during the Qing as the aging empire struggled to modernise after the Opium War (see U for Unequal Treaties). The initial changes in governing style progressed in a conservative manner but this cautious approach ended up in a disastrous defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894 (see J for Japan). That led to calls for more aggressive reforms, including an overhaul of many of the country's traditional values. Events culminated in a massive 'student protest' in the same year.

At the time thousands of students were waiting to take the civil service examinations in Beijing. They were enraged by the news that the Qing court had signed the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded Taiwan to Japan. Kang Youwei, from Guangdong, penned a 10,000-word petition which was co-signed by more than 1,000 students, calling for deep-seated reforms.

The students were then caught up in the interlocking power struggle between the powerful Empress Dowager Cixi and the Emperor Guangxu. The puppet Guangxu was trying to wrestle back authority from Cixi (his aunt). Backed by Guangxu, Kang and his allies promoted the so-

called "Hundred Days' Reform", a series of measures including the setting up of a central bank and the modernisation of the military. But the 1898 campaign was short-lived as Cixi swiftly quashed the movement. Guangxu was put under house arrest until his death. With the help of foreign diplomats, Kang eventually fled to Sweden, but six of his closest allies were beheaded.

The setback stoked the rise of a more aggressive school of reformers who, led by Sun Yat-sen, would overthrow their imperial rulers in a military revolution in 1911.

### **Who was the most successful reformer?**

That title should probably go to Deng Xiaoping, whose policies after 1978 introduced changes that have allowed China to enjoy decades of rapid economic growth and lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.

By the time Deng died in 1997, aged 93, China was on its way to joining the World Trade Organisation and growing into the world's second largest economy.

Stories of other reformers have shown how they often ran into resistance from vested interests. But in 1978, following the decade-long Cultural Revolution, there was less opposition to Deng's proposals from existing businesses, because so much commercial activity had been extinguished. Perhaps that was an important factor behind Deng's success, although economic reformers of the future are less likely to have the same experience.

# S Silk Road

## Who came up with the Silk Road as a concept?

German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen is said to have first popularised the term in 1877. In fact, there were a number of ancient trading routes rather than a single road. But by titling them after one of China's most sought-after exports, von Richthofen cemented the idea of China as a pivotal player in centuries of cultural and commercial exchange.

## When did the Silk Road start?

Many historians believe trade along the Silk Road began under Han Wudi (he ruled from 141-87 BC; see W for Wudi of Han) who dispatched Zhang Qian, the commander of his guards, to the western border in search of allies to fight against the nomadic Xiongnu tribe.

Zhang's 13-year adventure – during which he was enslaved before escaping back to China – conveyed valuable information about the peoples and lands beyond the Great Wall. His journey also opened the way for exchanges of envoys between the Han and the outposts of Hellenistic culture that had developed as a consequence of Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia and invasion of northern India.

Through these influences, connections to the Roman Empire eventually led to intensifying trade with China

(Roman glassware and silverware has been found in China; while the women of Rome had an insatiable desire for silk, according to Pliny the Elder).

In fact, silk was even used as a settlement currency for trade in other goods such as porcelain (see P for Porcelain). New ideas and new religions were also transported through the network of trade routes linking China with Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe, reaching their apex in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), whose rulers possessed a sophisticated understanding of the outside world and a confidence in assimilating foreign ideas and practices. Great adventurers have left their footprints on the Silk Road too.

The monk Xuanzang, for example, departed Chang'an in the year 629 and walked to India. He returned 16 years later with a caravan carrying Buddhist sutras. He chronicled his journey in *Records of the Western Regions* and his feat later inspired one of China's four great works of literature, *Journey to the West*.

During the Yuan Dynasty, a merchant from Venice also travelled along the Silk Road, arriving in the thirteenth century (China was then ruled by the Mongolian Khubilai Khan). Later, the Italian told of his experiences in *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

**Silk was often used as a “settlement currency” for trade in goods such as porcelain**



Xuanzang



Trade along the Silk Road began to fade in the fifteenth century

## How did the Silk Road come to an end?

Commerce along the Silk Road began to fade in the fifteenth century when the Ottoman Empire blocked many of the overland routes. Another school of thought highlights the rise of maritime trade – driven by improved knowledge of the seas and the monsoon, the Chinese invention of the compass and the development of its ship-building industry.

Imperial China's political and economic centre had also shifted from deeper in its interior (Xi'an, see C for Capital Cities) to more coastal cities. However, much of the seafaring trading also ground to a halt when later emperors imposed strict restrictions on trading with outsiders (until the Opium War, see U for Unequal Treaties).

## A new Silk Road today

Today, the legacy of the Silk Road has been revived in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious drive to boost trade and investment with China's partners in Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. First proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the plan encompasses a "belt" of overland corridors and a "road" of shipping lanes. Phase one focused on upgrading the ports, roads and railways of many of the countries along the route. After that, the hope is that it will be much easier to trade across borders.

Beijing's offer is to loan billions of dollars for infra-

structure projects in 68 countries covering as much as 65% of the world's population and a third of its GDP.

That said, the plan has also fostered criticism about China's true intentions, notably in the US. Indeed, five years after the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first unveiled, US Vice President Mike Pence highlighted how it might end up as a 'debt trap'. Speaking to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November 2018, he warned: "We don't drown our partners in a sea of debt, we don't coerce, compromise your independence. We do not offer a constricting belt or one-way road."

But for some developing nations, the funding from China is often the only financing on offer. There is also the offer of expertise in large-scale infrastructure projects (honed by the Chinese over four decades of major construction within the nation's own borders).

Back at home, the BRI has also given Xi Jinping the opportunity to position China as a champion of global trade and investment, especially at a time when the US has been scaling back its involvement in international trade agreements. In 2018, the BRI's auspices were even extended into South America, the Caribbean and the Arctic – all some distance from the trade routes of Marco Polo's time. And in 2019 Italy broke ranks among the Group of Seven nations, becoming the first of its kind to sign up for closer cooperation with the Chinese in BRI projects, brushing off warnings from its American and European allies.



Marco Polo

# T Taiping Rebellion

**The Taiping Rebellion goes down in history as China's most deadly civil war**



Hong Xiuquan

Religious wars have been rare in Chinese history. In the isolated cases where rebel leaders tried to rally support under a religious banner, they generally failed.

The Taiping Rebellion was different. Led by Hong Xiuquan – who designated himself as the younger brother of Christ – the revolt goes down in history as China's deadliest civil war.

## Who was Hong?

Many of the insurgent leaders who wreaked havoc during the late Qing Dynasty came from Guangdong, a province with a long history of interaction with foreign merchants.

Hong was born in Guangdong to a poor rural family in 1814. The Qing empire was already on the wane, but he hoped he could climb the social ladder by studying Confucian doctrine and acing the imperial exams.

He fluffed the test the first time he took it when he was 16. He failed again three years later, and had one final try in 1843, when he was almost 30. Two decades of study with nothing to show for it was a heavy blow, and Hong became extremely ill. He found comfort in Christianity (foreign missionaries were active in southern China after the Opium Wars). After spending more than 40 days in bed, Hong recovered and he began to tell others that he had as-

cended to heaven and met both God and Jesus. Next he started to preach his personal form of Christian faith in Guangxi, starting a cult that grew quickly to more than 3,000 members.

## Why did Hong attract so many followers?

Hong was said to possess some form of supernatural power, including an ability to heal the illnesses of those who had faith in him. This claim was an extraordinary draw for poorer people in rural Guangxi, many of whom scratched out an existence transporting goods from Guangdong to northern China.

Many had lost their jobs as the local economy declined – a function of Guangzhou losing its status as the only port allowed to trade with foreign merchants (the Opium Wars opened up rival 'treaty port' locations). Many of these labourers, together with impoverished peasants from the famine-stricken region, were attracted by Hong's teachings.

Initially Hong seemed satisfied enough with leading his little earthly kingdom. Yet as his following grew, his followers began to arm themselves and clash with local government forces.

In 1851, following unexpected victories over Qing



Taiping rebels in 1853

**The Taiping Rebellion lasted for some 14 years, ravaged 17 provinces and took between 20 and 30 million lives**



**Flag of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom**

armies, Hong's followers took control of the city of Jiantian (present day Guiping in Guangxi). He proclaimed his kingdom to be the *Taiping Tianguo* (*taiping* translates loosely as 'peace' and *tianguo* means 'heavenly kingdom').

Hong's devotees expanded quickly in number. But they were hardly peaceful. With nearly a million in their ranks, his zealous soldiers swept north through the affluent areas around the Yangtze River. And they marched onwards until they had seized control of Nanjing, one of China's wealthiest cities, in 1853.

### **Why did the Heavenly Kingdom fall?**

Throughout history the bulk of military campaigns that set out to unify China from the south failed. That was because of the logistical difficulties of maintaining supplies and morale as an army headed northwards (where it was colder and where there were fewer resources).

The Taiping rebels would fail as well, but not before they had terrified the Qing government. Ultimately the Taiping Rebellion lasted for some 14 years, ravaged 17 provinces and claimed between 20 to 30 million lives. It also weakened the Qing court to the point at which it could no longer maintain effective control over the entire country.

Hong's undoing? One key factor: his kingdom soon became corrupted by 'ungodlike' behaviour. The 'Heavenly King' turned into another tyrant, with accounts suggest-

ing he stocked up his palace with about 1,000 concubines, for instance. The Taiping rebels lost their fearless fighting edge as well and the Qing army finally overran Nanjing in 1864. Hong died a few days before the city fell – some say he committed suicide.

### **Why does the rebellion still resonate?**

Hong's rapid rise came at a time when Confucian values were collapsing. His twisted form of Christianity seemed to fill the spiritual void that opened up in the clash with Western culture.

Spiritual matters have always been a matter of some sensitivity for the Chinese Communist Party, and its attitude to Christianity remains suspicious.

However, the broader lesson of the Taiping Rebellion is the danger of disunity. In periods of centralised stability there have been notable advances in technology, culture and economic well-being. By contrast when the country splits up in civil war it becomes poorer and weaker. Colossal numbers of lives can also be lost, with the Taiping Rebellion a brutal example. The rebellion is remembered for the chaos it created. One message: would you rather have a strong central government or another period of anarchy and social instability?

# U Unequal Treaties

## A humiliating period

For the Chinese the term “Unequal Treaties” characterises the terms of surrender imposed by the gunboat diplomacy of the European powers and Japan between 1840 and 1949.

Under these treaties, China was forced to change its laws, pay huge indemnities and grant concessions (i.e. control of some of its cities, ports and waterways to foreign governments).

The concessions, which began with the trading and residential privileges granted by the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, have more recently become associated with the ‘Century of Humiliation’ – an era when China’s standing in the world was at one of its lowest ebbs.

In this analysis, it was only when Mao Zedong stood atop Beijing’s Gate of Heavenly Peace on October 1, 1949 and proclaimed the founding of the People’s Republic of China that this “century” – which actually lasted 109 years – came to an end.

Even today, China’s leaders are inclined to invoke the memory of these “Unequal Treaties”, especially in international disputes. The current leader, Xi Jinping, also alludes to them when he calls for a “China Dream” of national rejuvenation.

## The world’s first drug war

In 1839, a trade war between the British Empire and China’s Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) had seismic geopolitical consequences. The British had been buying large quantities of Chinese tea, but the Chinese were buying little from Britain in return, creating an uncomfortably large trade deficit (and a drain on British silver). The British response was to sell the Chinese more Indian opium, a product that was proving hard to resist. However, as the number of addicts grew the Qing sought to ban opium imports, stoking tensions with British merchants. The merchants persuaded their government that the new restrictions ran counter to the principles of free trade and in June 1840, following the breakdown in negotiations with the Qing court, the British government sent a large military force to capture the city of Canton (now Guangzhou). Later, British troops travelled north, entering the Yangtze River Delta.

The First Opium War ended with the defeat of the Qing, not only unmasking how far behind the country had fallen technologically but also consigning the tributary system to history: for the first time the Middle Kingdom felt unable able to respond to a foreign nation from a position of superior status.



Opium smokers in China from a contemporary engraving

A painting by E Duncan depicting the First Opium War



At the subsequent Treaty of Nanking, the first of the “Unequal Treaties” imposed on China, the British extracted significant concessions from the Qing, including the ceding of Hong Kong island, the expansion of trading rights to additional ports beyond Canton (today’s Guangzhou) and extraterritorial rights for British subjects in China (in effect, that they would be under British law, even on Chinese soil).

By the 1850s, Russia and France had concluded a series of similar treaties with China, taking control of treaty ports that they would run in a quasi-colonial way. Japan would sign its own treaty in the 1890s after a crushing military victory over the Qing empire, taking control of the island of Taiwan, as well as a dominant position in much of China’s Northeast (see J for Japan). The humiliation weakened and ultimately toppled the Qing in favour of a new republic, which was declared in 1912.

### **Abolition of the treaty system**

After the Second World War the foreign powers largely left China. However, the British retained Hong Kong until 1997, when the city was handed back to China (two years later Macau was also returned, marking in Chinese eyes the end of the “Unequal Treaties” era).

Yet the term still resonates in China’s relationship with the wider world, dating back to warnings from Mao that “every day and every minute the imperialists will

try to stage a comeback. This is inevitable and beyond all doubt”. Memories of the period loom large in more contemporary debate too, including negotiations in early 2019 on a deal with Washington over trade tariffs, when Xi Jinping compared some of the American demands to those made by foreign powers over 150 years ago.

A request in those negotiations that China change some of its laws clearly impinged on national sovereignty and resembled the nineteenth century push for extraterritorial legal rights, the government argued. An editorial in Xinhua, the state media outlet, made the point more robustly: “Obviously, these arrogant demands are beyond the scope of trade negotiations and touch on China’s fundamental economic system. This shows that behind the United States’ trade war against China, the US is trying to invade China’s economic sovereignty and force China to damage its core interests.”

Another lesson not lost on the Chinese from their defeat in the Opium Wars was the importance of maritime power. The Qing were vulnerable because of the shortcomings of their navy and today the Chinese military is pouring resources into expanding its fleets. Some of that effort is the legacy of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ and subsequent analysis by Beijing’s strategists of how ruling the waves had earlier helped the British secure trade routes and protect their dominant position.

**During the subsequent Treaty of Nanking, the first of the “Unequal Treaties” imposed on China, Great Britain extracted significant trade concessions from the Qing Dynasty**



# Voyages

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**What makes Zheng He's voyages even more noteworthy is that they happened almost 90 years before Christopher Columbus discovered the New World**

## The Ming Dynasty's naval ambitions

Zheng He was China's greatest seafarer, commanding seven expeditions between 1405 and 1433 that sailed deep into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, and reached as far as East Africa and the Middle East.

What makes these voyages even more noteworthy is that they happened almost 90 years before Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. Columbus sailed west with 90 sailors on three ships, the biggest of which was about 85 feet long. But Zheng He was at the head of armadas of 300 boats, carrying as many as 30,000 men. His largest treasure junks, or *baoshan*, were said to be four times the size of the Santa Maria, the flagship in Columbus' fleet.

## Who was Zheng He?

He was born in Yunnan, then an independent state, to a Muslim family from the Hui ethnic group. Captured as a boy during a Ming invasion, he was brought as a slave to the imperial household after being castrated (a common practice: eunuchs were used to avoid doubt on the paternity of children born to the emperor's consorts).

However, eunuchs at the court were often promoted to high rank and Zheng He became a key advisor to the Em-

peror Yongle after serving impressively in military campaigns against the Mongols. In the first three decades of the fifteenth century he would then lead his seven great voyages on behalf of the emperor, trading and collecting tribute thousands of miles from home.

## Why are his treasure fleets so famous?

Zheng He's voyages are widely celebrated as evidence of China's spirit of exploration (championed in the present day by the country's lunar expeditions or its breakthroughs in quantum computing).

Yet although he was an exceptional navigator, Zheng He was not necessarily a true pioneer: his fleets followed routes mapped out by merchants dating back as far as the Han Dynasty. What was more impressive about the voyages was their scale. They were completed with hundreds of ships, many built in proportions that wouldn't be surpassed until the long-distance steamers of the nineteenth century (i.e. 400 years later).

Some naval historians aren't convinced by the chronicles of the time, arguing that ships with nine masts, 12 sails and four decks would have pushed the limits of what was possible in wooden construction. But it's generally agreed that the largest junks would still have been at least 800



Relief at Zheng He Park in  
Yunnan, China

**Another common Chinese theme about the voyages is that Zheng He came in peace, never as an oppressor**

tonnes in weight, featuring innovations like bulkheads that seafarers wouldn't implement in Europe until many years later.

Another common theme about the voyages among the Chinese is that Zheng He came in peace, never as an oppressor. The observation is supposed to contrast with the behaviour of the European powers during the so-called 'Century of Humiliation'. But it's not completely accurate: there were confrontations in places like Java and Ceylon, and cases in which prisoners were brought back to Nanjing.

Of course, the very purpose of these voyages was as a fifteenth century version of 'shock and awe', projecting Chinese power into faraway lands. The fleet brought gifts of gold, silver, porcelain and silk for their hosts, but the quid pro quo was that these peoples paid homage to Yongle, the second Ming emperor. Ultimately, Zheng He's priority was to promote the glory of the new Ming Dynasty.

### **Why else is Zheng He's story interesting today?**

The eunuch admiral died on his way home from an expedition to the Red Sea in 1433 and in the years that followed the Ming court turned against maritime adventure. The reasons are disputed: one theory is that the political elite was alarmed at the rise of a merchant class; another is that there was a need to refocus on the Mongol threat in the north; a third was the huge financial drain of building and

manning the treasure fleets.

When another voyage was suggested to the court in 1477, the Ministry of War removed all mentions of Zheng He from the archives, damning them as "deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people's eyes and ears". "Although he returned with wonderful precious things, what benefit was it to the state?" the ministry also asked.

The Ming turned further inwards, making it punishable by death to build a boat with more than two masts and later ordering the destruction of all ocean going vessels.

But Zheng He stands out in a period when the Middle Kingdom was actively engaged with other parts of the world. As such, he started to get more mention again in the wake of China's 'opening up' under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and 1990s. Even then Deng was cautious, urging his compatriots to "hide brightness and cherish obscurity", but under Xi Jinping, the current president, China is steering a more confident course overseas.

Perhaps that's why Zheng He's feats are back in focus, as ancient forerunners of policies like the Belt and Road Initiative and the push to internationalise the Chinese currency, the yuan. With China's companies trading and investing in international markets like never before, and millions of its students and tourists venturing overseas, the case is being made for a more expansive nation, drawing on the inspiration of Zhang and his treasure fleets.



# Wudi of Han

## The first golden age

The Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) was a pivotal era, so integral to the shaping of China's national identity that the majority of Chinese still refer to themselves as the Han people today.

It was the Han's accomplishments that brought imperial China to new heights – politically, socially and militarily – with Emperor Wu, the seventh monarch of the Han, usually classed as one of the most influential emperors. Reigning for 54 years, Emperor Wu (also known as Han Wudi) governed China for longer than anyone else, until that record was broken some 1,800 years later by Emperor Kangxi (see K for Kangxi).

## Han innovations

Science and technology during the Han period saw significant breakthroughs, including paper making (see I for Inventions), steering ships by rudder, and the introduction of negative numbers in mathematics. Han scientists came up with metallic spheres for stargazing and navigation, and early forms of a seismometer that were used to discern distant earthquakes.

Yet historians generally regard its political innovations as the peak of the Han's greatness. Qin Shi Huang estab-



Emperor Wudi reigned for 54 years

**The Han court set up one of the most sophisticated bureaucracies in the ancient world**

lished China's first unified state, but his dynasty was short-lived, lasting only 14 years (see Q for Qin Shi Huang). The Han court built on these foundations to set up one of the most sophisticated bureaucracies in the ancient world, dividing the Middle Kingdom into a series of administrative areas ruled by centrally appointed officials, for whom promotion was based primarily on merit.

More importantly, the Han started to sponsor Confucianism as a social contract, with Emperor Wu enshrining it as a coherent and commanding ideology of government. Training in Confucian studies became a requirement for

Peony pavilion and giant  
pagoda in Xi'an



civil service candidates (see A for Analects). The result was a relatively stable society and an economy that expanded significantly.

### **The emergence of a superpower**

The Han government was interventionist. It nationalised the silk industry after machines were developed for winding silk fibres onto large reels, making production faster and more efficient. It also helped to commercialise new understandings of how to mine large quantities of salt – a valuable commodity – instead of sourcing it from the sea. Salt became an imperial monopoly, one of the oldest state-owned enterprises in China.

Another notable Han state-owned enterprise was the Shandan Horse Ranch in Gansu province (founded in 121 BC). The breeding facility, now part of the China Animal Husbandry Group – was created by Emperor Wu to provide the best horses for his cavalry.

This marks another important Han legacy: helped by a strong economy and the spirit of invention, Wu excelled at warfare, and almost doubled the size of his empire by pushing into parts of Central Asia, Korea and Vietnam. This made the Han a superpower of the East.

Most notably, Emperor Wu was credited with successful military campaigns against the Xiongnu, nomadic tribes from the Central Asian steppe that posed a constant threat (and were a key reason why the Great Wall was built;

see Q for Qin Shi Huang). The Han army's victory over the Xiongnu was a crucial moment for Chinese civilisation, providing safer conditions for an agrarian economy to thrive. Besides expanding the empire's territorial reach, it also created safer passage abroad, stretching through modern day Xinjiang to the Mediterranean Sea. These trading routes would later be known as the Silk Road (see S for Silk Road).

### **The Han model is something to follow?**

One lesson that might be inferred from the Han era is that the longevity of its rule rested on both an effective military and a stable economy. Combinations of concentrated state power and bursts of creativity and innovation also brought about the advent of major new technologies, most of which have been to the benefit of the wider world.

Now at the helm of the world's second biggest economy, Chinese President Xi Jinping has said that his ambition is to maintain his country's "peaceful rise" while also creating "a community with a shared future for mankind".

Yet if Xi wants to go down in history as one of China's most influential leaders, territorial issues can't be ignored either. Waging wars like the expansionist Emperor Wu isn't on the agenda, but China is determined to defend its claims. That includes reunification with Taiwan: a goal that all of its modern-day leaders see as national destiny.



**A Chinese coin from the Han Dynasty: the coin was manufactured around 200 BC**



# Xinhai Revolution

**The Year of Xinhai was the 48th year in the 60-year cycle of the Chinese calendar**

Who knew that China has its own Statue of Liberty? A mini replica of the much grander lady of New York, it stands atop a mausoleum in a Guangzhou park, commemorating the martyrs of a failed uprising against the Manchu government in April 1911.

It was one of many revolts during the late Qing Dynasty, but probably the most emotive. The sacrifice of the 72 rebels stoked up the nationalist mood to new peaks and revolutionary sentiment swept across the country, triggering another uprising in Wuchang on October 10, 1911.

This one succeeded, signalling the sudden demise of more than two thousand years of imperial rule.

## Why is it called the Xinhai Revolution?

The critical moment in overthrowing the Qing happened in 1911, which was the Year of Xinhai, or the 48th year in the 60-year cycle of the Chinese calendar.

In fact, rebellion had been in the air for years, fomented by a rising tide of frustration from Han nationalists, who argued that the Manchu Qing were the main reason why China was weak and impoverished.

Anger grew after the disastrous defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, when the Middle Kingdom was on the verge of being partitioned by foreign powers. More

progressive politicians were still hoping for peaceful change, such as a switch to a constitutional monarchy. But after a period of experimentation ended with the leading reformers beheaded or exiled (see R for Reform), most opponents of the Qing came to the conclusion that the only way to save China was to overthrow the fragile government.

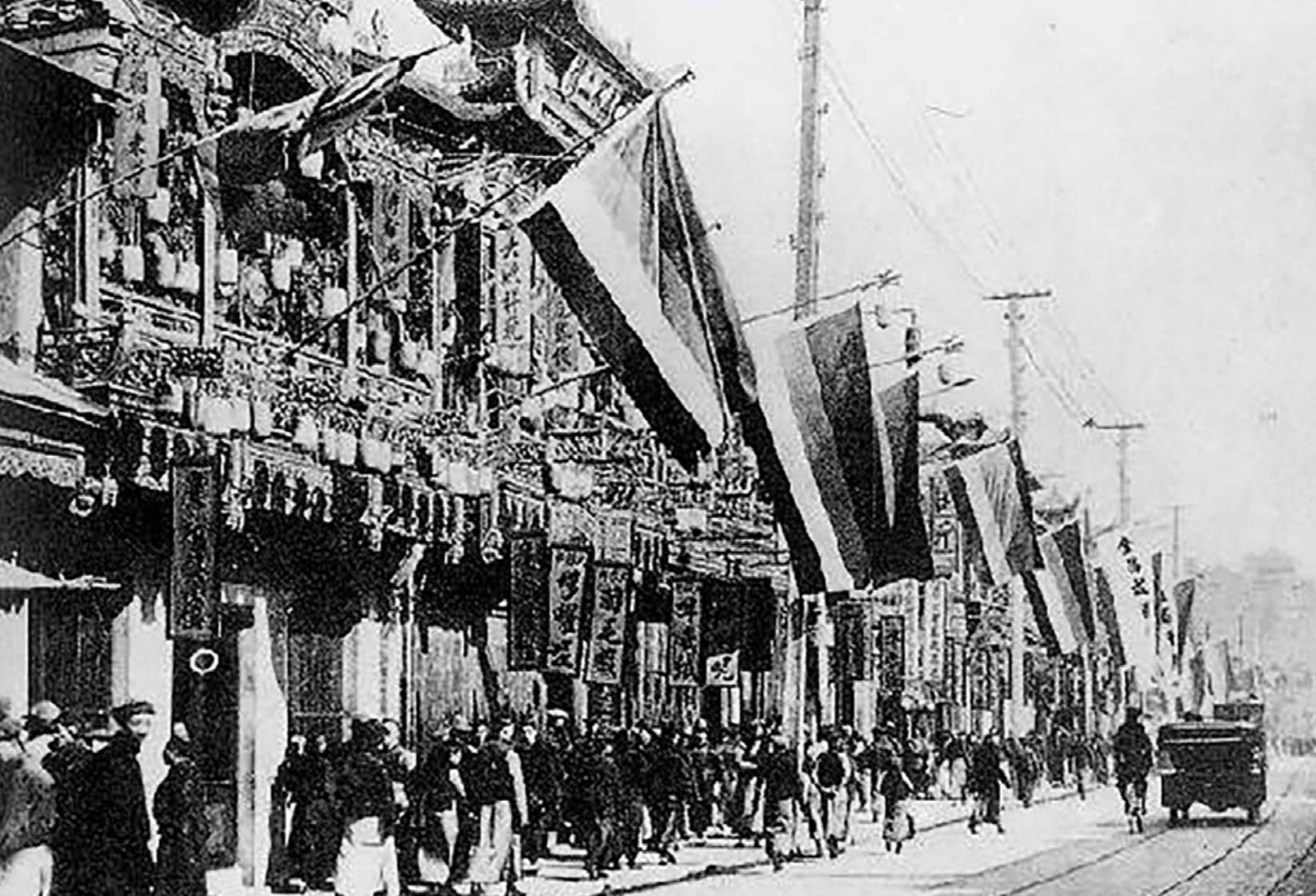
Many of the leading revolutionaries had been educated in foreign countries (including Japan). Often combining forces with local gangsters or politicians capable of raising funds from overseas Chinese, such as Sun Yat-sen, various groups staged uprisings across the country between 1895 and 1911.

Their rationale: once they took a major city by force, commanders of troops elsewhere would join them, thus bringing down the Qing.

Hence the commemoration of the uprising in Guangzhou in 1911. Although it had ended in defeat, it was a glorious one. It was now a matter of when and where the first dominoes would fall against the Qing.

## Why in Wuchang?

Heads of cities and provinces still in control of Qing forces found themselves with a crucial decision to make. Should





**The imperial cabinet in 1911**

they stay loyal to the imperial rulers and suppress the revolts (knowing they risked retribution if the Qing court collapsed) or join the rebels and face execution if their uprising failed?

A strange sequence of events resulted in another rebellion in Wuchang, part of current-day Wuhan. The crisis started with a stock market collapse in Shanghai prompted by a crash in the price of rubber. Major banks backed by the Qing rulers went under. To raise funds to pay war debts, the Qing court decided to nationalise a railway in Sichuan and sell it to foreign investors. This stoked widespread protests and the central government was forced to redeploy troops from Wuchang to Sichuan.

This upset the military balance in the city. On the night of October 9, 1911, there was a huge explosion (caused, some say, by a careless bomb-maker who was smoking). When the house was searched, the police found a helpful list of all the plotters in the city. With their cover blown,

the rebels felt that they had no choice but to rise up.

The head of Hubei, the local province, ordered a crack-down but his key subordinates mutinied and joined the revolt. This was crucial because it meant that the uprising was backed by regular troops, and not the more typical mix of chancers, gangsters and intellectuals. The mutineers established a military government for Hubei province the next day, which seceded from Qing rule. This created a template for others to follow. Emperor Puyi, only six years old, would abdicate just months later.

### **How is the Xinhai Revolution regarded in national history?**

Many of the leading rebels in Wuchang went on to make up the core of the Kuomintang (KMT). After defeat in the civil war to the Communist Party of China (CPC), the KMT fled to Taiwan, where it still celebrates October 10 as “national day”.

Of course, the CPC has chosen another date for the same celebration: October 1, marking the creation of the People’s Republic in 1949. However, Party historians still credit the rising in Wuchang as a seminal moment, not least in bringing many centuries of feudal monarchy to an end. The Xinhai Revolution also created the conditions for a period of political experimentation and debate, laying some of the foundations for the more radical revolution that would follow in 1949.



# Yuan Shikai

## China's first elected leader or its last emperor?

Yuan Shikai took centre stage at a critical moment in history as China stumbled out of the imperial era to become a young republic.

In control of the country's strongest military force, Yuan became president of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912 after winning the majority of votes in the first presidential election.

Yet the general-turned-politician was soon to become more notorious after an ill-fated attempt to restore the monarchy, with himself as emperor.

## Military man

Born in 1859, Yuan wasn't a good student. After failing the exams for the civil service twice, he chose a military career. In 1882 his brigade was sent to Korea, then a subject nation of China, to prevent Japanese encroachment on the peninsula (which shielded northeastern China, the Qing Dynasty's home turf).

Even as a young man, Yuan was regarded as a military genius. With limited financial support from the Qing court he was able to train a modern army to counter Japan's military threat, becoming a de facto governor of Korea for nine years until China's disastrous defeat in the First Sino-

Japanese War that began in 1894.

After that humiliation, the task of training a modernised army corps to Western standards fell on Yuan. First deployed in Tianjin – a strategic point in any invasion of Beijing – the new troops would evolve into the Beiyang Army, the largest and best-trained force in northern China.

## When guns spoke louder than words

Yuan's political stature grew and he was personally involved in key events at the turn of the 20th century which shaped China's fate.

In 1898 after the failed "Hundred Days of Reform" led by Emperor Guangxu (a puppet ruler, for all excepting these 100 days), Yuan is said to have played a crucial role in preventing the overthrow of the Empress Dowager Cixi, the real power behind the throne. Guangxu was put under house arrest for the remainder of his life.

Yuan also played a decisive role in the Xinhai Revolution (see X for Xinhai Revolution) that aimed at replacing the Qing rulers after Cixi died in November 1908 (suspiciously; her nephew Guangxu had died only a few hours earlier). Puyi, a toddler, was then picked to succeed to the throne.

Fearing Yuan's growing clout, the Qing court dismissed

**In control of the country's strongest army, Yuan became the first official president of the Republic of China in 1912**



Close up shot of a silver coin with Yuan Shikai's portrait, issued in 1914

him briefly but his loyal subordinates remained in control of the Beiyang Army. On October 10, 1911 rebel forces captured the city of Wuchang, forcing the Qing court to bring Yuan back to quell the revolution. Had he stayed loyal to the Qing, a civil war would have ensued. Yet he could see the empire was doomed, so he struck a deal with the revolutionaries, forcing Puyi to abdicate but guaranteeing his personal safety. On February 12, 1912, the day the Qing Dynasty (and imperial China) ended, Yuan was elected as the first formal president of the ROC (Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the new republic, had spent a few months as temporary president).

### **Did Yuan want to become emperor?**

The young ROC was fragile. The nation was on the verge of being split up between provincial warlords and encroaching foreign powers, especially Japan. In control of China's largest and best-equipped army, Yuan seemed the only choice to hold the country together.

It was also a turbulent period where traditional and newer (mostly imported) ideas clashed, often violently. The revolutionaries, best represented by Sun's KMT party, saw parliamentary democracy as the best option but conservatives argued they were naïve and that it would only plunge the nation deeper into chaos.

Swinging between the revolutionary and conservative camps, Yuan finally concluded that a stronger, authoritar-

ian leader was needed. He then contrived to make himself president for life, before proclaiming a new imperial dynasty with himself as emperor in 1915.

The self-anointment proved a colossal misjudgement. Emperor Hongxian, as Yuan styled himself, irked the KMT as well as the left-wingers who would later found the Communist Party of China (CPC). Foreign governments also disapproved of what was criticised as a backward step in China's political development. With an array of critics attacking him in the fledgling media, Yuan lost control of his own "gun barrels" as his old lieutenants from the Beiyang Army refused to fight for him. He abolished his ill-fated monarchy in March 1916 and died three months later, going into the history books as one of modern China's most-despised figures.

### **What lessons were learned from Yuan?**

In order to stay in power China's ruling Communist Party learned that it needed to retain control over the "two barrels" – i.e. the gun (the military) and the pen (media and propaganda). One of Mao's best-known sayings was that "political power grows out of the barrel of the gun". But more recently China's leaders have refocused on media loyalty to the Party. The country's Great Firewall prevents criticism from overseas being read online. And at home there's a heavy layer of regulation and censorship across the media, the internet and the entertainment industry.

**Yuan styled himself as Emperor Hongxian in 1915, his reign lasted for 83 days**

# Zhuge Liang

**Zhuge embodies the idea of genius to Chinese, much like Leonardo da Vinci does in the West**



**Guan Yu, a famous general from the Three Kingdoms Period**

Ask a few Chinese for their view on the smartest guy in history and the chances are that the responses would be unanimous: Zhuge Liang. The military strategist and statesman is so well-known that even students with a lesser knowledge of history have heard of him. Zhuge has become synonymous with intelligence in Chinese culture and he is also seen as the embodiment of many core Confucian virtues.

## Who was he?

Zhuge was born in the year 181 when the Han empire (206 BC-220 AD) was crumbling. From the wreckage emerged three kingdoms and a gaggle of competing warlords. As a result, the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280 AD) became one of the bloodiest chapters in Chinese history. Life expectancy fell to as low as 26 and three-quarters of the Middle Kingdom's population would perish.

Yet centuries later the struggle between the warring kingdoms was turned into a tale that became a national favourite. The era's more heroic figures were deified and their legends passed on from generation to generation.

For example, Guan Yu, a general under the warlord Liu Bei and the kingdom of Shu Han, is still worshipped by many Chinese today as the god of righteousness and loyalty.

Zhuge Liang, Liu's chief of staff, is another of the legendary figures from the period. Many temples in Sichuan, where Liu's Shu Han kingdom was founded, still worship him too.

## Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Much of the folklore about Zhuge stems back to the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of China's four great works of classical literature. It was penned by Luo Guanzhong some 1,300 years after Zhuge had died.

According to the novel, every warlord at the time wanted his help. But he decided to back Liu, one of the weakest figures, because he believed him to be the legitimate heir to the Han throne.

During Zhuge's first encounter with Liu, he predicted that the nation would split into three and advised Liu to take control of Shu Han so that he could become a contender for power. Zhuge then helped him do precisely that and thanks to his strategic counsel, Liu won all of his major battles, despite starting out with little money and territory, and no proper army of his own.

Zhuge was head and shoulders above all others when it came to predicting future events, as well as how rivals and allies would react in critical moments. *Romance of the*

Zhuge Liang statue



**Shu Han was the weakest among the three kingdoms**



**An illustration showing the Romance of the Three Kingdoms**

*Three Kingdoms* also depicts him as a technological genius who invented lethal weapons. He could even predict the weather conditions (and sometimes alter them) to put his troops in a more favourable position. In other words, he was almost superhuman in his know-how and influence.

### **How does Zhuge Liang fare in official history?**

*The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Chen Shou in the third century (about a thousand years before the novel the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was published), is a more recognised official history of the period. Yet Zhuge Liang was highly rated by Chen as a politician as well. Why? Shu Han was the weakest of the three kingdoms. Yet as chancellor Zhuge was able to turn the mountainous region into a thriving economy, which provided the resources for the kingdom to confront its stronger rivals of Wei (in the north) and Wu (in the east), and to stay competitive for nearly half a century.

In fact, Chen's imperial masters (ergo employers) were rivals of Zhuge who had fought against him for decades. That being the case, Chen could only give Zhuge restrained praise in his official history. As such, many of the legends about Zhuge started among the more appreciative people of Shu Han and were spread through word-of-mouth. These tales became folklore across China more widely, and were increasingly exaggerated as they passed from generation to generation. Zhuge and his most important side-

kick Guan Yu became almost godlike figures.

Many idioms that are still used today are attributed to Zhuge and his genius. One example: "To borrow arrows with a thatched boat" refers to a ruse in which he sent a boat towards his enemy ahead of the Battle of the Red Cliff. Low on arrows, he knew enemy archers would bombard it as it sailed towards them. Having padded it with thatch, the boat collected their arrows, which he then gave to his own troops. Nowadays the expression is dropped into conversations among business bosses debating how to source capital from others.

### **A lasting legacy**

Fewer people have read *The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms* than the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, or at least its most celebrated chapters. That means that the novel has been much more influential. Nurhaci, the key Manchurian chieftain who laid the groundwork for the foundation of the Qing empire (he reigned between 1616 and 1626), was said to have learned his military strategies by reading about Zhuge Liang, for instance. And stories of the warring kingdoms also live on today, including as analogies for the rivalry between the 'BAT' giants of Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, who have battled it out for dominance from their respective kingdoms of online search, e-commerce, and social media and gaming.

An aerial night view of a traditional Chinese village, likely a historical site. The image shows a dense cluster of buildings with dark, tiled roofs. The interior lights of the buildings are on, creating a warm, yellow glow that contrasts with the cool blue tones of the night sky and the dark roofs. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the village. The text is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

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