

A stylized red graphic on a dark grey background. It features a traditional Chinese junk boat with multiple sails on the left and the Oriental Pearl Tower on the right. The word "China" is written in a large, bold, yellow sans-serif font, with the red graphic elements layered behind and through the letters.

China

KERRY BROWN

POLITY HISTORIES

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Abbreviations

BRI

Belt and Road Initiative

CCDI

Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection

CPC

Communist Party of China

CR

Cultural Revolution

GATT

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

PLA

People's Liberation Army

PRC

People's Republic of China

SEZ

Special Economic Zone

TVEs

Town and Village Enterprises

WTO

World Trade Organization

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of Christopher Henson, and to his wife, Sally.

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About the Author

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China's Arduous March to Modernity

Chinese history is long and complex. It is a story that splits into many different themes and plots. Trying to understand China without having at least some knowledge of this historical background is, nevertheless, impossible. This is particularly true today, when current Chinese leaders daily appeal to the glorious, unique past of their country as a source of their authority and power in the present. The complexity of this history, however, means that there are many different interpretations and meanings that can be harvested from it. This book aims to present at least some of these, and show why they are important.

Despite China's global prominence in the twenty-first century, these Chinese histories are not well known by people in Europe or the United States (broadly what we can call 'the West'). This lack of knowledge is compounded by the politicized way that China's history is told within the current People's Republic of China (PRC). This book aims at helping to rectify this situation, giving those with no specialist engagement with China a workable outline by which to make sense of this vast story.

One aim of this book is to demonstrate that, however marginal China may have seemed in much of the period since the mid-nineteenth century, for a country and a culture accounting for a fifth of humanity, its story is a global one. It was an aberration that so little of this story was known outside of China. What we are witnessing now is a long-overdue correction to this imbalance - something that should have been done earlier.

What is China?

Before grappling with Chinese history, we have to ask a more fundamental question: what is China? Shanghai-based contemporary academic Ge Zhaoguang acknowledges that the answer to this question is intimately linked to historical issues. Speaking to the debate about whether the current PRC has grown from what has been called a 'civilizational state' based on cultural influence not tied to particular geographical boundaries, or is a real empire exercising hard territorial power, he proposes a number of orientating ideas. The first of these is that 'even though China's borders have often changed, the central region has been relatively stable, becoming very early on a place with a commonly recognized territory and unified politics, nationality, and culture: this region also comprised a historical world.'¹ He also argues that Han (dominant ethnic group) culture, for all its diversity, 'extended across time in this region, forming a clear and distinct cultural identity and cultural mainstreams'. Supplementing this was 'a traditional Chinese world of ideas', and the sense of 'cultural continuity'. This mixture of geography, culture, ethnicity, and belief systems created an organic whole, something that can link the earliest dynasties for the Qin two centuries before the time of Christ, to the Tang from the seventh century, and the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing imperial eras that covered the millennium from 960 up to 1911.

The distinctive result of this is that "China" has had both the characteristics of a traditional imperial state and aspects that resemble early modern nation-states; it has resembled *both* a modern nation-state and a traditional civilizational community.'² Despite the efforts of the post-modern deconstructors, for Ge 'China' is a definite thing, and it has cohesiveness, continuity with past entities

occupying broadly the same geographical space and ethnic, cultural, and ideological components. It is far more than a geographical idea. Chinese leaders today echo this when they claim that their country, despite being founded in its current guise in 1949, has a continuous civilizational integrity stretching back further than anywhere else. Speaking soon after becoming General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, shortly before becoming President a few months later, Xi Jinping declared that 'the Chinese nation has an unbroken history of more than 5,000 years of civilization. It has created a rich and profound culture and has made an unforgettable contribution to the progress of human civilization.'³

Every part of Ge's ideas, and those contained in Xi's statement, could be contested - and they frequently are. The '5,000-year history' claim makes as much sense as saying Europe, with all its experience of fragmentation and complexity, has a common root going back to ancient Greece 2,500 years ago. For sure, there are unifying threads; but they are just that: threads. For long stretches, the geographical space we call China today was divided. There were multiple states and empires. As for Han ethnic continuity supplying this area of commonality, in the last 1,000 years, previous Chinese states have been under non-Han rule for over a third of this time. The last imperial dynasty, that of the Qing (1644-1912), was, as historians in recent decades have argued, one ruled by the Manchu group, extending far beyond the historical limits of previous Chinas, and connected to Inner Asia and other geographies through geographical annexation. As historian Timothy Brook argues, the modern centralized Chinese state was as much the creation of the Mongolian conquests of the thirteenth century, and their imposition of rigid rule, as something that links back to the Golden Age of the Tang and is derived from the state ideology adopted then of

Confucianism and its highly hierarchical notion of order (608-912 CE).⁴

Despite this huge set of issues, one thing is indisputable. 'Chinese history' is seen as an immense source of cultural unity by politicians like Xi. Nor does this just apply to the current Communist leaders. The Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887- 1975), head of the Republican government in power up to 1949 before fleeing to Taiwan, spoke in similar ways in the 1930s: 'Through five thousand years of alternate order and confusion and the rise and fall of dynasties, our nation has acquired the virtue of modesty, a sense of honour and the ability to endure insult and shoulder hardships.'⁵ Every leader in the People's Republic, from its founder Mao Zedong to Xi, has repeated sentiments similar to these. Each, however, has chosen to accept interpretations which accorded with his own priorities, recognizing how complex and varied a resource 'Chinese history' is.

Mao was the most radical, boldly eschewing much of the heritage of China's historical and political imperial past by castigating it as feudal and exploitative. Despite this, he still asserted a strong sense of pride in aspects of Chinese literature and culture. Mao's posture illustrates the ambiguity of this historical legacy - the ways in which it was a source of suffocating restraint as much as of secure identity. 'Although China is a great nation,' he wrote in 1939, 'and although she is a vast country with an immense population, a long history, a rich revolutionary tradition and splendid historical heritage, her economic, political and cultural development was sluggish for a long time after the transition from a slave to a feudal society.'⁶ His successors, Deng Xiaoping (paramount leader from 1978 to the 1990s), Jiang Zemin (President from 1989 to 2003), Hu Jintao (2003 to 2013), and Xi Jinping (President from 2013 to the time of

writing), have appealed to 'traditional' Chinese culture as something more positive and unifying than Mao appeared to suggest.

The rehabilitation of the past after Mao's attack has not been easy. The path of modernity since the nineteenth century has involved fierce arguments about what relationship modern leaders need to take to this history, and what sort of resource it offers. The common point is that all eras of modern Chinese history, despite their very different political convictions and attitudes, have been driven by the desire for renewal. Chinese modern history has involved many things: the mission to industrialize, to create national unity, to struggle against colonial interference and achieve national self-determination. But, above all, it has been a history of trying to renew.

China's Struggle to Catch Up

China's engagement with modernity was an arduous one. It has spawned many myths, some of which are unresolved. In recent decades, there has been a lively debate about the issue of why industrialization and economic modernization took the very different trajectories they did in Europe and China. In *The Great Divergence*, historian Kenneth Pomeranz joins those who contest the popular idea that Europe had something unique in terms of its culture and philosophical outlook which meant it was predisposed to innovate and industrialize. 'There is little to suggest,' he writes, 'that western Europe's economy had decisive advantages before [the 1800s], either in its capital stock or economic institutions, that made industrialization highly probable there and unlikely elsewhere.'⁷ Rather than attributing Europe's ultimate success in pulling ahead so dramatically in the nineteenth century to holistic explanations that range from the cultural - Max Weber's

Protestant work ethic, for instance – to the more overtly economic or political – like the rise of consumption and the prevalence of individualism and its associated governance models – Pomeranz looks at a host of interrelated, but different, more localized causes. Some of these derive from the various forms of resistance to change and transformation within Qing China. Some refer to the strengths of Europe in terms of political and social flexibility. What is indisputable is that in the nineteenth century the Qing was in seemingly irrevocable decline. In gross terms, China ranked as the world's largest single economy up to 1820. But this claim is rendered almost meaningless by the deep structural differences between the Qing's economy and that of, for instance, Great Britain. Nineteenth-century China did not have the same levels of urbanization, infrastructure building, and capital formation that powers like the United States, Great Britain, and Germany did. While its lack of naval assets made it incapable of reaching and impacting on Europe, Europe was more than capable of involving itself directly in China. By 1900, China was weak, exposed, and vulnerable.

These issues are illustrated by one of the key moments of encounter between the Qing court and an industrialized and modernizing Great Britain approaching its century of radical transformation. The Macartney Mission during the era of George III (r. 1760–1820) is a key moment in the histories of both China and the West. The outcome of this mission was a rejection by the ageing Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–96) of the manufactures and goods offered by the visiting dignitaries. Throughout the whole mission there were many moments of cultural miscommunication. Lord George Macartney's refusal to show his status as a visitor from a vassal state by kowtowing to the emperor and the tortuous negotiations to achieve a way around was one of the most striking. But Macartney's journal recording the