

announces a world first  
exhibition on 19<sup>th</sup> century  
China

The Citi exhibition

***China's hidden century***

18 May – 8 October 2023

Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery

Supported by Citi

Images available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdcz75j4>

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In a global first, a major new exhibition at the British Museum showcases the resilience and creativity of 19<sup>th</sup>-century China. **The Citi exhibition *China's hidden century*** will illuminate a pivotal period in China's history – one that forms a crucial bridge to the modern nation the country is today.

This is the first exhibition to focus on individual groups of people in 19<sup>th</sup>-century China. Visitors will experience the visual richness of this era through the material culture of multiple sections of society – the court, the military, artists and writers, farmers and city-dwellers, globalised communities of merchants, scientists and diplomats, reformers and revolutionaries. The show consists of 300 objects, half from the British Museum, half borrowed from 30 different British and international lenders, with most being publicly displayed for the first time.

China's 'long 19<sup>th</sup> century' stretches from the accession in 1796 of the fifth emperor of the Qing dynasty, Jiaqing, to the abdication in 1912 of the tenth, Puyi, making way for a revolutionary republic. Between 1796 and 1912 Qing China endured cataclysmic civil and foreign wars (including Britain's notorious Opium Wars), culminating with the revolution that ended 2,000 years of dynastic rule. Tens of millions perished in the conflicts and the chaos they generated.

Despite this tragic backdrop, the events and people of 19<sup>th</sup>-century China launched the country on a far-reaching, multi-faceted quest for modernity. Survivors of this century's dislocations, from many social classes and economic groups, demonstrated extraordinary resourcefulness, both driving and embracing cultural and technological change in painting and politics, war and craft, literature and fashion.

The show is underpinned by conservation and refurbishment of remarkable items never before placed on public display. Surviving objects from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – such as a water-proof straw cape made for a street worker, farmer or fisherman – offer fresh, direct insights into the textures of everyday life. Conservators have painstakingly brushed individual strands of straw and humidified each stalk to bring the garment back to its original shape; the piece and its

restoration highlight the exceptional craftsmanship that flourished across all levels of late imperial Chinese society.

Visitors will also see a stunning robe – loaned from the Metropolitan Museum of Art – that belonged to the Empress Dowager Cixi, the de-facto ruler of China from 1861 to 1908 and a direct contemporary of Queen Victoria. The gown – featuring a swooping phoenix amid lush chrysanthemums and wide sleeve bands – is a gorgeous combination of Manchu, Chinese and Japanese motifs, in purple, gold and turquoise. The Empress Dowager’s wardrobe contained hundreds of such dazzling items, which she would accessorise with grandiose, jewelled headpieces.

The exhibition is the result of a four-year research project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, led by the British Museum and London University. The show was made possible thanks to the collaboration of over 100 scholars from 14 countries.

**Jessica Harrison-Hall, Head of the China Section, Curator of the Sir Percival David Collection, Chinese Ceramics and Decorative Arts at the British Museum**, comments: “In this show we have sought to highlight the creativity and resilience demonstrated by so many citizens of Qing China amid exceptionally hard times. Our aim was to celebrate the contributions of remarkable individuals. Putting the show together has been a huge collaborative effort and it has been wonderful and inspiring to work with so many scholars, collectors, designers and students.”

**Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum**, said: “**The Citi exhibition China’s hidden century** is a world first and showcases the resilience of the many people who lived in Qing China. I would like to express my gratitude to Citi for making this exhibition possible and helping us to illuminate the lives and culture of 19<sup>th</sup>-century China. I’d also like to thank the Huo Family Foundation for their support.”

**James Bardrick, Citi Country Officer, United Kingdom**, said: “We are immensely proud to continue our partnership with the British Museum, which started in 2012, through the Citi Exhibition Series. As the world’s most global bank, we value diverse perspectives and believe that sharing and celebrating culture drives progress. With the Citi exhibition, China’s hidden century, we are proud to help the museum explore the phenomenal cultural creativity of 19<sup>th</sup>-century China in a global first.”

**Wenyuan Xin, Project Curator China’s Hidden Century at the British Museum**, adds: “I have relished the opportunity to explore and tell the story of an often-underestimated period of Chinese art and culture. Over the course of just over 100 years China transformed from a dynastic empire to a modern republican nation. Through this exhibition, we hope to communicate the drama, complexity and conflict of this process.”

**Julia Lovell, Professor of Modern China at Birkbeck, University of London**, adds: “This exhibition aspires to convey both the external and internal cataclysms suffered by China between 1796 and 1912, and the diverse innovations that these crises generated. It will highlight the enormities committed by foreign imperialism, and resourceful responses to turmoil from across Chinese society. Government and governed engaged in new debates about the balance of power between monarch and people. High politics, elite culture and everyday life opened to global influences and exchanges. Artistic and literary traditions were challenged, dismantled, added to and remade – the amalgam of and dislocation between old and new generated a cosmopolitan cultural modernity.”

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**Notes to Editors:**

*The Citi exhibition China's hidden century* runs from 18 May 2023 to 8 October 2023 in the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery at the British Museum.

Open Saturday – Thursday 10.00–17.00, Friday 10.00–20.30. Last entry 90 mins before closing.

Tickets from £16, under 16s free, 2-for-1 tickets for students on Fridays, and concessions and group rates available.

The British Museum Audio app will launch a new audio tour for the exhibition in early May. This will provide audio and text commentary on multiple objects displayed in the exhibition and will be made available in both English and Chinese (Mandarin) for on-site visitors attending the exhibition as well as online users.

[britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/chinas-hidden-century](https://britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/chinas-hidden-century)

To coincide with the exhibition, a beautifully illustrated catalogue, *The Citi exhibition China's hidden century: 1796–1912*, edited by Jessica Harrison-Hall and Julia Lovell, will be published by the British Museum Press in May 2023. British Museum exclusive paperback, £30, ISBN 9780714124940. Hardback, £45, ISBN 9780714124933.

A fascinating book on the most influential – yet often little-known – women and men of 19<sup>th</sup>-century China, *Creators of Modern China: 100 Lives from Empire to Republic, 1796– 1912*, edited by Jessica Harrison-Hall and Julia Lovell, will be published by Thames and Hudson in collaboration with the British Museum in April 2023. Hardback, £35, ISBN 9780500480809.

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**Citi**

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The Citi Exhibition Series is a five-year programme of support for major exhibitions at the British Museum. The series extends a relationship that started in 2012 with the support of the Citi Money Gallery and is a further commitment to supporting the important work that the museum undertakes. The series is a fantastic opportunity to use the Museum's truly global collection to explore a diverse range of subjects that bring historical context to contemporary themes. We are incredibly proud to partner with the British Museum and to support its role as a museum of the world, for the world. We value the fact that our support enables the museum to continue with its ground-breaking exhibitions and renowned education programmes.

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*The Citi exhibition China's hidden century* would not have been possible without the generosity of our long-term supporter Citi, as well as the exhibition's additional supporters: the Huo Family Foundation, Min Zhu, Whang Shang Ying, Ida Chow and Zheng He Management Group. With additional thanks to The Sir Percival David Academic and Research Fund for their continued support of research into Chinese history and art.



Follow updates on the exhibition via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram  
Use #ChinasHiddenCentury and @britishmuseum

For more content about *The Citi exhibition China's hidden century*, follow the British Museum blog at [blog.britishmuseum.org](http://blog.britishmuseum.org)

**Further information**

Contact the Press Office:

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdcz73jt>