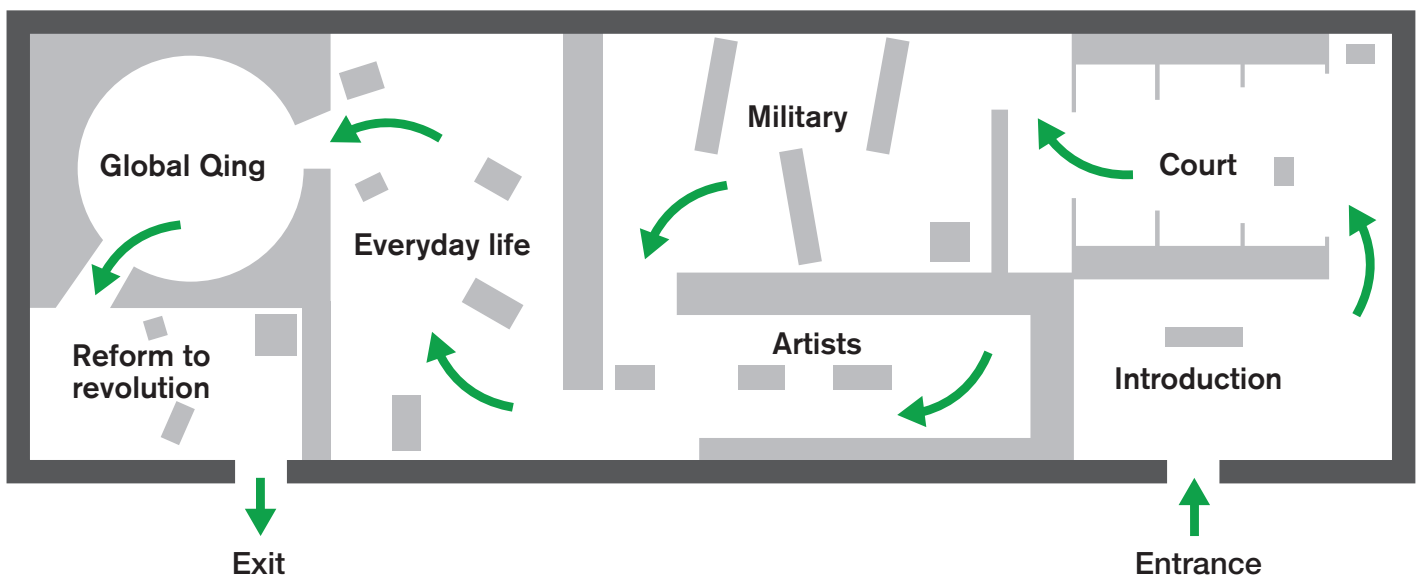


Exhibition map and main texts

China's hidden century

About this guide

This guide gives you an overview of the exhibition's layout and main texts. An online large print guide containing the entire text is also available.



Your visit will take about 60 minutes.

China's hidden century

The Qing was China's last dynasty, ruling from 1644 to 1912.

The final century of Qing rule was one of turmoil, but also extraordinary resilience and creativity. Here, the stories of China's remarkable people emerge from the shadows...

China's hidden century

Manchu armies from the northeast of China overthrew the Ming dynasty, founding the Qing dynasty and ruling China from 1644 to 1912.

By 1796, the Qing ruled over one-third of all humanity and established one of the most prosperous empires in world history. In 1912 imperial rule collapsed. The dynasty's final years were challenged by natural disasters, internal uprisings and foreign invasions.

Despite this, the nineteenth century was an era of extraordinary cultural creativity, and of political, social and technological innovation, as people across China lived resourceful and resilient lives.

Court

Qing emperors claimed universal power over all things spiritual and temporal. Six emperors ruled in succession between 1796 and 1912 from imperial palaces in Beijing (the Forbidden City and Summer Palaces), and from Rehe in Chengde, northeast of the capital. Three adults were followed by three children whose reigns were dominated by Empress Dowager Cixi as regent.

Representations of people at court changed dramatically with the advent of photography. While still ethnically distinct, the Manchu imperial family increasingly adopted Han-Chinese culture. As well as state religion, courtiers held their own varied beliefs. Palace fashion saw creative innovations in dress and furnishings. New forms of entertainment engaged the court, including Peking opera and contemporary dance.

Military

Foreign and domestic wars raged across Qing China throughout the 1800s. Civil conflicts including the White Lotus Insurrection (1796–about 1806), Xinjiang wars (1820s and 1860s) and Taiping Civil War (1851–64) caused the death of millions. International imperialism provoked the Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), Sino-French War (1884–5), Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) and Boxer War (1899–1901).

Fierce competition for work and resources drove unrest among the educated and the poor. As a result of warfare in their own home regions, people migrated to safer cities and to the borderlands in search of food and work. A combination of army mutinies and civil uprisings eventually ended the imperial era in 1912.

Artists

Even as the Qing empire found itself under exceptional pressure from violence in the 1800s, landscape paintings, fans and albums demonstrate that artistic traditions were not in decline, but coexisted with new 'modern' art. Western techniques such as lithography were embraced by artists trained also in traditional woodblock printing design, and by new magazines and newspapers in the coastal cities.

For centuries, the educated gentry class hoped to qualify for government service through the imperial examination system, which was abolished in 1905. This three-tier system existed at local, regional and imperial level. Passing these exams was once the only path to a career in the state bureaucracy. However, as the likelihood of winning an official job dwindled, men sought alternative livelihoods and established new artistic and literary groups.

Everyday life

By the 1850s, China's population reached a staggering 450 million. Some ninety per cent of people lived a basic life, negotiating the devastation caused by conflicts and natural disasters. Average life expectancy was just forty years old. Despite these struggles, cities rapidly developed as displaced yet resilient people migrated for safety, work and food.

A growing body of entrepreneurs developed businesses using new technologies and materials, some even taking over state roles. Handicrafts were industrialised and further commercialised. Wealthy people's homes and fashion reflected these political, cultural, technological and environmental changes, which included interactions with foreign communities.

Global Qing

Until the 1840s, Guangzhou (Canton) was the only place in China where trade with Europe and the USA was legal, and where such foreigners could live and work. The signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, following the end of the First Opium War in 1842, led to more ports being forcibly opened to foreign trade, called 'treaty ports'.

During the last sixty years of Qing rule, modern technology and transport revolutionised industry and changed people's lives. Inventions such as electricity and the new postal system transformed the way people worked and communicated.

Printed media and translations of foreign books provided a two-way window onto the world through travel, industry and education.

Reform to revolution

Qing China was shocked by its defeat to Japan in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5). In the aftermath, Western imperialist forces increasingly vied for Qing land. In response, Chinese patriots sought to rapidly build a modern, cohesive nation that could stand up to external threats. Qing armies were modernised. Empress Dowager Cixi eventually permitted officials to create new ministries for foreign affairs, commerce, the police and education. Beyond China, Qing diplomatic delegations searched for alternative methods of governance. However, after a short, violent revolutionary insurrection in 1911, the last emperor Puyi abdicated in February 1912, ending 2,000 years of imperial rule.