

## Manchu



The conquest of China by the people of Manchuria was to mark the beginning of the end for the two-millennia-old dynasty system of government.

But during the initial centuries of Manchu rule, times were prosperous, with the Manchus adopting and adapting many of the systems used by the previous Han rulers. It was the second time the unified China had been conquered - Genghis Khan and his marauding troops took over the country four centuries earlier - but the Manchurian invasion of the 17th century was a much less traumatic affair.

In fact the Manchurians followed the Confucian style of rule, whereby the moral uprightness of the rulers was paramount; they had a sophisticated, examination-structured administrative system which utilised both Han and Manchurian civil servants. The ancestor-worship beliefs of the Han were also retained.

The Qing dynasty of the Manchurians produced powerful emperors with huge personalities -- Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong -- who are revered figures in Chinese history. The country's vast borders also became more secure during the Qing period; once the Manchurian rulers had subdued the country as a whole, they conquered Outer Mongolia and, in later years, Central Asia as far as the Pamir Mountains and established a protectorate over Tibet.

With all immediate outside danger to China eliminated, a period of prosperity and artistic development was ushered in. Literacy was high, even in the rural areas of the vast country, and artistic and architectural creativity allowed to flourish.

In early years, the Manchu dynasty based its court in Shenyang, an hour's flight from Beijing. Here, reminders of that era are in abundance: in the oldest section of the city, a mini-Forbidden City houses exhibitions of ivory and jade artifacts, furniture and excellent collection of musical instruments.

Shenyang has other historical relics to fire the imagination, reminders of more turbulent times in China - the warlord Zhang Zuolin had his headquarters here. Museums have relics that go back into the far mists of time, to the Stone Age.

When the capital moved to Beijing, a summer palace was established in Chengde, with extravagant gardens and a glorious central lake surrounded by palaces and temples. Chengde also acted as a secondary stronghold for the Qing rulers, who could keep a watchful eye on any potential invaders from the north.

But it was from an unexpected source that the danger finally came from. Aggressive European traders managed to get a foothold in China, in particular the British, who provoked the Opium War of 1840, a skirmish that ended with the Treaty of Nanking which ceded rights and territory to the victors. British and French troops later burned the Summer Palace in Beijing.

It marked the beginning of the end for Qing - and dynastic -- rule in China. In 1911, a republic was established under the leadership of Dr Sun Yat Sen, marking the abrupt end of two thousand years of rule by emperors. A period of political turmoil, foreign invasion and civil war finally finished in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established.

To this day, Beijing remains the seat of power. At one end of the vast Tiananmen Square is the mighty Forbidden City, a striking symbol of imperial rule; flanking the square is the Great Hall of the People, symbolising the modern government.

It is a city that, fittingly, has elements from all of China's history, from the Great Wall, a short drive from the urban limits, to the buildings created in the spirit of modern, open-looking China.