

Qianlong, Emperor (of Qing)

Qiánlóng 乾隆



1711–1799—Sixth emperor of the Manchu-led Qing dynasty

Alternate names: birth name: Àixīn Juéluó Hónglì 爱新觉罗弘历; temple name: Gāozōng 高宗

Summary

Qianlong, the sixth emperor of the Manchu-led Qing dynasty and the fourth Qing emperor to receive recognition in official history as ruler of China, had one of the longest reigns in China's dynastic history and the longest tenure of political power. Initially, Qianlong increased China's military power, economic prosperity, social stability, and cultural achievements. During the last decade of his reign, however, excessive military costs, overpopulation, political corruption, and deteriorating relations between China and the West led to China's decline and contributed to the eventual demise of the Qing dynasty.

The fourth emperor of the Manchu-led Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911/1912) following the Manchu seizure of

Beijing, Hongli ruled under the title Qiánlóng 乾隆, or “heavenly prosperity.” Qianlong was the fourth son of Emperor *Yōngzhèng 雍正 (r. 1722–1735) and the grandson of the great *Emperor Kāngxī 康熙 (r. 1661–1722). His military campaigns considerably expanded China's territory and strengthened Manchu control over China. Under Qianlong's reign, China enjoyed great prosperity. In the last decades of Qianlong's life, however, China entered a period of serious decline.

Hongli was born in Beijing on 25 September 1711. He died as Qianlong on 7 February 1799, in his main working apartment, the Yǎngxīndiàn 养心殿, in the Forbidden City in Beijing. Until his later years, Qianlong was frugal, hard-working, and conscientious, leading a simple and structured daily life. As he

*People marked with an asterisk have entries in this dictionary.

grew older, his judgment declined, and he made some very unwise decisions. Qianlong was generally intolerant of criticism, and suppressed any behavior that “threatened or questioned the throne or the Manchu house” (Kahn 1971, 71). A lover of literature, the arts, and the outdoors, he was tall and slender throughout his adult life and reputedly very amiable and affable.

Qianlong had seventeen consorts as well as various concubines, with whom he fathered twenty-seven recorded children. (Unlike concubines, consorts were recognized wives, and their children counted as their own.) Of these children, fifteen survived to maturity, but only four sons and one daughter outlived him because of his great longevity (he died when he was eighty-eight). Qianlong’s first empress was Xiàoxián 孝賢 (1712–1748), whom he married in 1727, and to whom he was deeply attached. His second wife, Ulanara (1718–1766), became empress in 1750, but retired to a nunnery in 1765, probably due to a disagreement with the emperor.

Ascension to Power

Hongli was highly favored by his grandfather, Emperor Kangxi, and was declared heir apparent the day before his father, Emperor Yongzheng, died. He began his reign on 18 October 1735, at the age of twenty-four (twenty-five by the Chinese calculation, in which an infant is considered one year old at

birth), by which time he was actually Yongzheng’s eldest surviving son. His imperial title, or temple name (given to a ruler after his death), was Gāozōng 高宗.

Like his grandfather, Qianlong undertook six *nánxún* 南巡, or “southern inspections tours,” in 1751, 1757, 1762, 1765, 1780, and 1784, respectively. The three primary goals of these tours were to show filial piety (in fact, Qianlong’s mother accompanied him on the first four tours); to gain a better understanding of the empire’s southern constituents; and to improve administration, especially with respect to better water control. The tours were, however, extremely expensive and disruptive to everyday citizens. According to Harold Khan, emeritus professor of history at Stanford University, Qianlong himself “is supposed to have confessed to a conscientious official that the southern tours were the only blot on his otherwise perfect reign” because they had “exhausted the people and disrupted the treasury” (1971, 95).

Three Periods of Rule

Politically, there are three main periods of Qianlong’s reign. During the first period, from 1735 until approximately 1750, Qianlong focused on centralizing imperial power. Able courtiers such as Zhāng Tíngyù 张廷玉 (1672–1755), who had served under Qianlong’s father, assisted him in this endeavor.

During the second period, from 1750 to the mid- to late-1770s, Qianlong was



Qianlong Re-evaluated

The following paragraph shows a contemporary mainland Chinese historian's view of Qianlong and his reign. There is considerable emphasis on the duration of Qianlong's power (he ruled for nearly a fourth of the entire Qing period), and his importance for the Qing dynasty. The last sentence, however, shows a more cautious evaluation of Qianlong's life and times.

The Qianlong Emperor was on the throne for sixty years, and after he abdicated remained Supreme Emperor (*tàishàng huáng* 太上皇) for three years, holding supreme power for sixty-three years, which is getting on for a quarter of the total period of the Qing dynasty. In the entire period of feudal society in China, he was the emperor who held political power longest. He was hard-working and ambitious and not afraid to break out of stereotypes. Along with his grandfather [Kangxi] and his father [Yongzheng], he created the “prosperous Kangxi–Yongzheng–Qianlong era” 康雍乾盛世, so he was a feudal emperor with a great deal of accomplishment. Due to the times he lived in and class restrictions, he also committed quite a few mistakes and implemented some reactionary policies, which meant that he was also a controversial historical figure.

Translated by Colin Mackerras

Source: Bai Xinliang 白新良. (2003). Neirong tiyao 内容提要 [Content summary]. In *Qianlong huangdi zhuan* 乾隆皇帝传 [Biography of the Qianlong Emperor]. Tianjin, China: Baihua wenyi chubanshe.

at the peak of his authority, and his chief ministers hardly dared to question any of his decisions or actions. While these two periods were prosperous, the second period witnessed excessive court spending, a trend that spread throughout the empire and resulted in a country-wide decrease in wealth.

The third period is associated with Qianlong's corrupt minister, *Héshēn 和珅 (1750–1799), whom the emperor appeared to hold in complete confidence from about 1775 until his death. Heshen was a Manchu officer who was handsome, affable, quick-witted, and exceedingly dishonest, using his influence over

the emperor to feather his own nest. He used his power to get his own henchmen into top positions and to have rivals dismissed and humiliated. He embezzled enormous sums of public money and even had a palace built that was grander than any of the emperor's palaces. When Heshen died, his personal fortune was confiscated and found to be worth more than the national treasury, although far below its peak of a quarter of a century earlier. In 1790, Heshen's son married the emperor's youngest (and favorite) daughter Princess Héxiào 和孝 (1775–1823), further consolidating Heshen's power.

Qianlong abdicated in February 1795 on the grounds that he did not wish his reign to be longer than his grandfather's. Despite his show of filial deference, however, Qianlong continued to retain supreme control over the empire until his death. He allowed his successor Jiāqing 嘉庆 (1796–1820) little power, in particular protecting his favorite Heshen, who immediately after Qianlong's death was allowed to commit suicide in preference to execution.

Although the Kangxi reign remains China's longest ever, Qianlong enjoyed the most extended period in power of any ruler in the country's dynastic history.

Military Expeditions

From 1755 to 1759, Qing troops under Qianlong's second cousin, Zhàohuì 兆惠 (1708–1764), carried out three military expeditions in the Muslim areas to

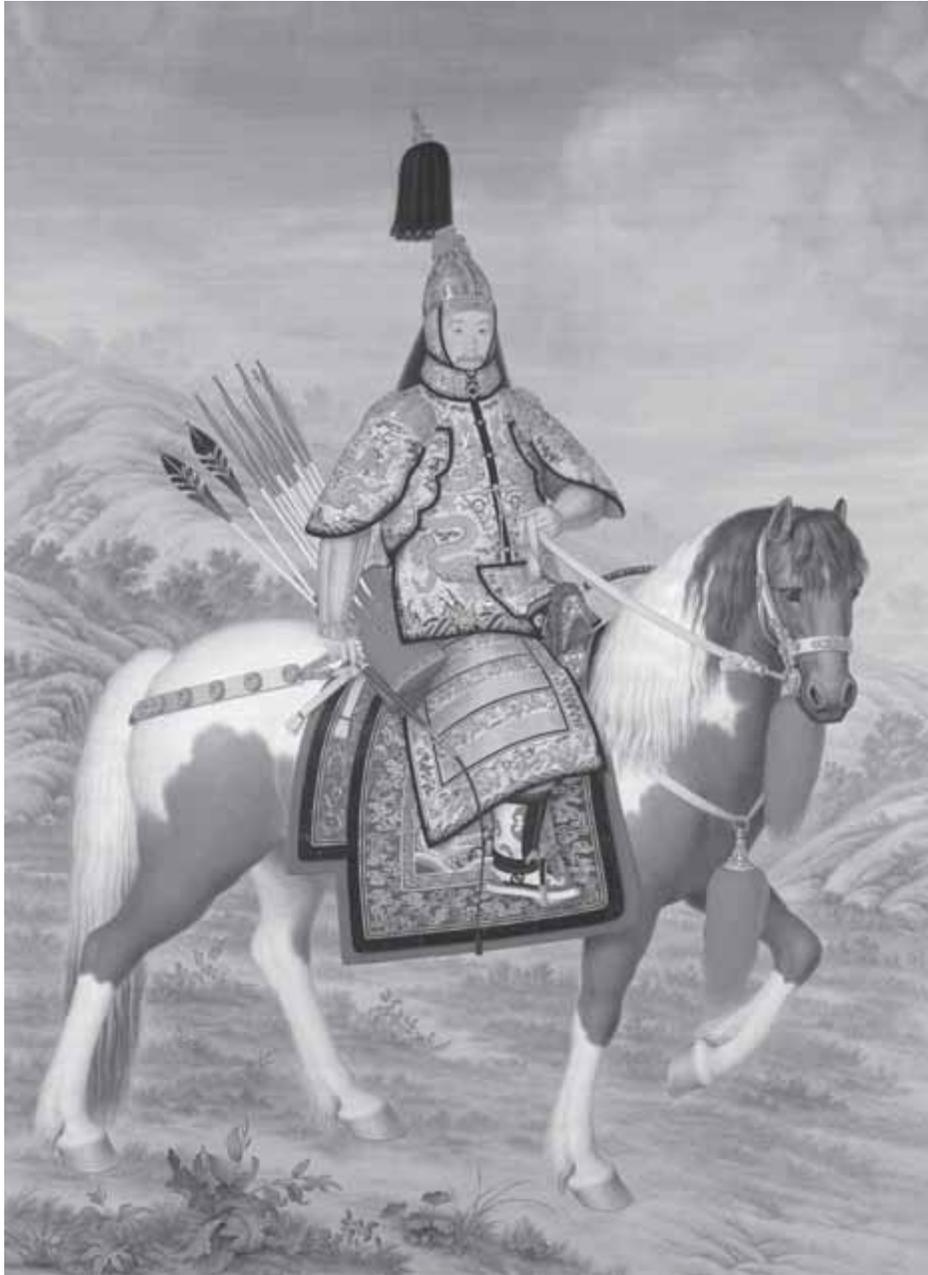
China's west, culminating in the capture of the cities of Kashgar and Yarkand. From the Manchu point of view, these actions protected China against further threats from the west. They also completed the conquest and incorporation of territories so large that Qianlong could claim that, by comparison with the Ming, the Manchus had more or less doubled the size of Chinese territory. In his abdication proclamation, Qianlong thus commented that "we have added vast tracts to the empire" (quoted in Kahn 1971, 198).

On the other hand, these conquests were very costly in terms of money, casualties, and human suffering. Some of Zhaohui's forces were even reduced to cannibalism by extreme deprivation during a siege of Yarkand from late 1758 to early 1759. The conquests moreover involved the slaughter and near total annihilation of the coalition of western Mongolian tribes known as the Zunghars, who had posed a threat to Manchu power since the 1680s. Several historians, in particular Peter Perdue (2005, 283–285), regard the slaughter of the Zunghars as nothing short of genocide.

The conquered territories were called the "New Territories" (Xīnjiāng 新疆). The historian Jonathan Spence (1990, 97) describes the conquest and incorporation of Xinjiang as "Qianlong's most important achievement." It added several major Muslim and other minorities, including the Uygurs, Kazakhs, and Kirghiz, to China's population. Xinjiang,



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The Qianlong Emperor in Ceremonial Armour on Horseback (1758) by the Italian artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), who took the name Láng Shìníng and mastered Chinese painting. Palace Museum, Beijing.

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while the source of frequent unrest over the years, remains part of China in the twenty-first century. Qianlong's incorporation of the region has thus permanently changed the Chinese landscape.

Qianlong undertook several other military actions in frontier areas. In the late 1740s, a crisis erupted in Lhasa, Tibet, where the Qing already had significant authority through court-appointed resident governors called *amban* (or *dàchén* 大臣 in Chinese). Tensions culminated in an anti-Qing uprising in 1750, resulting in attacks on the office of the *amban* and the massacre of Chinese citizens in Lhasa. In response, Qianlong decided that the *amban* would become the sole governors of the region and sent in troops to enforce Qing rule. The Dalai Lama remained in place, but without any real temporal power.

In the late 1740s, Qianlong sent troops to quell an aboriginal minority uprising in Jīnchuān 金川, Sichuan Province, and the rebels, while ultimately defeated, showed remarkable resilience. From 1771 to 1776, rebellion flared again in the same region, and its suppression proved to be remarkably time-consuming and costly. In 1787, Qianlong sent an expedition against rebels in Taiwan, and from 1788 to 1793, he took military action against some Gurkhas from Nepal who had entered Tibet and plundered lamaseries there.

In 1794, the largest-scale rebellion in over a century, led by the White Lotus (*Báilián jiào* 白蓮教) society, a millennial Buddhist sect, erupted in the

impoverished Hubei-Sichuan-Shaanxi border area. This rebellion was not suppressed until 1804, putting a major blot on Qianlong's last years. In 1795, a rebellion of mountain peoples called Miáo 苗 (not necessarily the same Miao as later people of the same name) broke out in the border areas of Guizhou and Hunan, and the military response against them dragged on until 1806.

The Manchu Fúkāng'ān 福康安 (1754–1796) was a commander who took part in several military campaigns against unrest, including most of those from the 1770s to the 1790s. In addition to his military exploits, Fukang'an achieved several extremely high provincial civil posts and was Heshen's ally. Despite his ability and bravery as a commander, Fukang'an's enormous personal wealth gave him a reputation for corruption that was second only to Heshen's. Fukang'an's career is an example of the links between late Qianlong military and political decline.

Qianlong also became militarily involved in neighboring countries. Between 1765 and 1769, Chinese troops launched four unsuccessful invasions against Burma. The first invasion was technically over petty trade disputes between Chinese and Burmese merchants, but in reality had more to do with Qianlong's pride, and alarm that such a small country refused to submit to the Chinese state. The result of the four-year war was a treaty signed in December 1769, under which China and



Burma agreed to resume friendly relations. This treaty laid the basis for the border between the two countries that remains intact centuries later. Chinese casualties were much higher than Burmese casualties in absolute terms, but relative to the population of the two countries, both sides suffered badly.

In Vietnam, a major rebellion called the Tay Son, named after the place its leaders came from, overthrew the last emperor of the Le dynasty (1428–1788), who then appealed to China for help. In late 1788, Qing troops intervened and even occupied the Vietnamese capital Thanglong (now called Hanoi), but were soon forced into a humiliating retreat. The Tay Son government nevertheless immediately requested, and received, Qing recognition of its rule and sent a tributary mission to China. Even after the Tay Son was itself defeated and the Nguyen dynasty established in 1802, Vietnam acknowledged itself as a tributary of the Qing.

In 1792, Qianlong wrote a “brief self-congratulatory essay on the martial prowess of his reign” (Kahn 1971, 49). He claimed victory for his “ten campaigns,” two each against the Zunghars, Jinchuan rebels, and Gurkhas, and one against each of the Muslims, Taiwanese, Burmese, and Vietnamese, and described himself as “the old man of the ten completed campaigns” (*shíquán lǎorén* 十全老人). While some of the campaigns were indeed victories, especially those in Xinjiang, others were in fact Qing

defeats, particularly the interventions in Burma and Vietnam. Moreover, the high costs of these “ten campaigns,” including the victorious ones, produced a lasting and deleterious effect on the Qing dynasty.

Diplomacy and Relations with the West

During the Qianlong period, China enjoyed a generally positive image in the West. Some European Enlightenment thinkers of the time even held China up as a model. For example François-Marie Arouet Voltaire (1694–1778) regarded China’s secular government as exemplary and Qianlong as the ideal “philosopher-king.” François Quesnay (1694–1774), the founder of the Physiocrats, an early school of economic thought that emphasized following the rule of nature, admired the weight China placed on agriculture. Others, however, were less enthusiastic. Baron George Anson (1697–1762) led an expedition to Guangdong Province in 1743, in the first British warship ever to enter Chinese waters. An account published in 1748 based on Anson’s personal papers found the Chinese people deceitful and lacking in morals, and the government tyrannical and corrupt.

While China and Russia had signed treaties in 1689 and 1728 that determined their mutual borders, China had few diplomatic relations with European countries. Europe was eager to do trade

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with China, a desire that strengthened as the eighteenth century progressed. Beginning in 1757, however, all foreign trade was restricted to the port of Guangzhou (Canton), with representatives allowed to reside only in that city, and only during the trading season.

During the end of Qianlong's reign, two Western embassies visited Qianlong and his court, one British and the other Dutch. Both embassies were established to improve trade prospects with China, and to offer ceremonial greetings to the emperor. Qianlong and his court responded much more positively to the Dutch than to the British.

Earl George Macartney (1737–1806), who represented the British East India Company and traveled to China under King George III (r. 1760–1820), led the earlier of the two embassies. He entered China under the rubric of celebrating Qianlong's eightieth birthday, but his primary goal was to pressure the Chinese to allow the British greater trading privileges and to send an official British representative to reside in Beijing. Macartney and his retinue arrived in Guangzhou (Canton) in mid-1793 and proceeded immediately to Tianjin, from where they were escorted to Beijing with the official status of tribute emissaries.

The British embassy met with Qianlong in his summer residence in Jehol, northeast of Beijing, as well as with Heshen. The Chinese court refused all of Britain's requests concerning trade

and resident representation in Beijing. Qianlong wrote a long letter to George III explaining his rationale, using language that the British perceived as arrogant and patronizing.

In what proved significant to Sino-British relations at the time, the British embassy refused to kowtow (*kētóu* 磕头) to Qianlong. The word kowtow (literally “knock the head”) means “to lie prostrate and strike one's head against the ground,” an act of extreme subordination. Macartney's embassy insisted that they merely kneel before the emperor, as they did with their own king. Their refusal to kowtow greatly displeased the Chinese, and put the Sino-British relationship on a bad footing. The kowtow issue was, however, probably symptomatic of a deeper inability of either side to understand the etiquette and manners of the other.

The Dutch mission was in China from 1794 to 1795. Its primary aim was to attend the celebrations for the sixtieth anniversary of Qianlong's reign, held during Chinese New Year in 1795, and it was allowed to enter Beijing from Guangzhou for the occasion. The leader of the mission was Isaac Titsingh (1745–1812), who represented the interests of both the Netherlands and the Dutch East India Company, and therefore had commercial motives. Unlike his British predecessor, Titsingh kowtowed to the emperor and fulfilled all the expected requirements of Chinese etiquette, making a very favorable impression on





Portrait of Earl George Macartney, who led several embassies to China, but refused to kowtow to Emperor Qianlong.

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Qianlong and the Chinese court. Ironically, however, this turned out to be the last mission from a Western country to the Chinese court carried out within the context of China's traditional foreign relations system.

Culture

A great lover of literature and the arts, Qianlong nevertheless exercised severe censorship over them. The greatest literary achievement of Qianlong's reign is

arguably the mass collection (some 36,000 volumes) of rare books entitled the *The Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* (*Sìkù quánshū* 四库全书). The process of compilation, undertaken under the general editorship of Jì Yún 纪昀 (1724–1805), began with an authorizing edict by Qianlong in 1773 and lasted until 1782, with final production not being complete until 1792 (Elliot 2009, 119–120). In sponsoring this enormous project, Qianlong intended not only to preserve ancient literature, but also to root out topics that were hostile toward the Manchus.

Qianlong was a major sponsor of architecture, painting, porcelain, and other arts, all of which reached a high point during his reign. He promoted artists and sometimes even protected those in trouble. One painter he kept at court for many years was the Italian Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), who took the name Láng Shìníng 郎世宁 and mastered Chinese painting. Castiglione drew several pictures of the Emperor himself, including one from about the time of Qianlong's accession to the throne, and was known for his paintings of horses.

Qianlong was also a theater lover, and the Nánfǔ 南府, the organization responsible for court dramatic performances, reached its zenith under his reign. In 1742, Qianlong set up a new organization, the Board of Music (*Yuèbù* 乐部), to improve ceremonial musical performances. Although outside the

court, Peking Opera (*Jīngjù* 京剧) took a major step forward when the Sichuanese actor Wèi Chángshēng 魏长生 (1744–1802) entered Beijing in 1779, under Qianlong's reign. Additionally, in the early 1790s, the combination of the two tune-types essential to Peking Opera, *erhuáng* (二簧) and *xipi* (西皮), first debuted in Beijing.

Qianlong was not as successful in promoting the official use of the Manchu language. While he attempted “to glorify Manchu and enhance its prestige” (Elliott 2001, 301), the use of the Manchu language in the imperial archives actually declined during his reign; today it is spoken by only a handful of people.

Causes of Decline

Qianlong's military expeditions involved heavy casualties and costs great enough to deplete the treasury and exhaust once-healthy finances, to the detriment of the dynasty and the country. The six southern inspection tours, excessive spending, and worsening corruption during Qianlong's last decades (particularly exemplified by Heshen's rise to power) created long-term and serious negative effects on China's prosperity and Qianlong's reputation.

Another factor contributing to the Qing dynasty's decline was overpopulation. The first century and a half of the Qing dynasty were a period of both rapid agricultural improvement (including the introduction of sweet potatoes and other new crops from the New



World) and economic and population growth. The balance between economic prosperity and population growth was at its best around the third quarter of the eighteenth century, with serious pressure on resources emerging by the 1790s. China's population was about 180 million in 1750 but somewhat over 300 million by the time Qianlong died (Spence 1990, 93–96). The prosperity of the early Qing, which was a major factor behind China's population expansion, also carried the seeds of its own destruction: by the end of the Qianlong reign, the population exceeded the country's ability to sustain its economic growth.

Legacy

Qianlong's overall image is favorable in some ways, less so in others. His tenure of power was among the longest in Chinese history. For most of his reign, he represents the acme of Qing power, economic prosperity, social stability, and economic achievement. He greatly expanded China's territory, which remains largely unchanged to this day.

There is, however, a more negative side to Qianlong's image. His reign became corrupt in its last decades as he allowed unsavory characters like Heshen to assume undue power. Qianlong's wars against Burma and numerous ethnic minorities were excessive in their violence and, in some cases, much less successful than he claimed them to be. By the time Qianlong died, the standard

of living among the average populace was in steep decline.

China's encounter with the British embassy in 1793 showed China to be, on the surface, very much in control of its tributary relationship with foreign countries. In broader terms, however, this encounter was the prelude to the long-term decline of China and its relationship with the West—especially rapidly industrializing Britain. In a very real sense, the last decades of the Qianlong reign foreshadowed the so-called “century of humiliation” (*bǎiniǎn guóchǐ* 百年国耻) and the demise of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

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