

No century in all history has seen such rapid changes as our own twentieth century. In all the world, no country has seen more dramatic events in the twentieth century than China, home to a quarter of the world's population. And in this century of change and revolution in China, perhaps no-one played a more bewildering variety of roles than Pu Yi, who at the age of three was a god but whose happiest days

were spent in his old age as a gardener. It is the story of Pu Yi that is told in the film "The Last Emperor".

China has enjoyed the longest continuous experience of civilised life in the world. Completely remote from the outside world for most of its history, China developed into its own political systems and philosophies, its own methods of farming and manufacturing, its own art and poetry. These are among the most widely admired wherever they are known.

China has suffered, however, from geography and climate. Although an enormous country when viewed on a map, China is made up of several distinct regions, not all of them helpful to human life. In the west and north the country is mountainous and largely barren; over half of China's land is inhospitable in the

extreme. Almost all of China's population is situated in the east and south of the country, and in particular on the Pacific coast and along the great river valleys. As Chinese agriculture is dependent on the crops grown in these valleys, the population is at the mercy of the elements. When the Yangtze River floods, or when there is a serious drought, China's food supply is mercilessly cut down. Only recently have Chinese governments successfully countered these periodic disasters.

In the seventeenth century, China was conquered by a fierce warrior people from the north, the Manchus. In 1644, the last native Chinese emperor surrendered and committed suicide, and a new dynasty, the Qing, took over the running of the largest empire on Earth. Although the early Manchu emperors continued their expansion, so that China grew into its greatest ever size, at the same time the Chinese population began to grow alarmingly. With around three hundred million mouths to feed by the year 1880, China was especially vulnerable to any natural disaster.

In the nineteenth century China became the focus of attention for several western countries, as well as of her powerful neighbours Russia and Japan. The European nations wanted to open China up to their traders and missionaries; with such a huge population, China was potentially the largest market in the world as well as containing the largest single population of 'heathens'. The efforts of China's Qing dynasty rulers to keep the Europeans at bay proved fruitless, and the emperors' grip on the government of the country grew feebler as the century wore on.

In mid-century the empire was seriously weakened by the 'Opium Wars' against the western countries, and by the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-64, which was at least partly based on western ideas. And from 1861 onwards the empire was governed by the Empress Dowager Tzu-Hsi who was determined to ignore all evidence of the growing power of the 'foreign devils'. The historian Harrison Salisbury describes Tzu-Hsi like this:

*"The Empress Dowager possessed no redeeming quality. There was no crime she did not commission or commit. Poison and murder were everyday weapons. Her mind was choked with superstition. Her ignorance had no limit; in cunning she was supreme."*

With Tzu-Hsi as effective ruler, those Chinese who insisted that the empire must reform itself were forced to think of revolution. To the shame of patriotic Chinese, Westerners and Japanese were granted special privileges denied to natives; land was surrendered to Russia, to Japan and to France. There seemed no humiliation to which the 'Celestial Empire' was not a victim.

## **Pu Yi**

In 1908 the Emperor Kuang-Hsu died, quite probably poisoned by the Empress Dowager. In his place Tzu-Hsi chose to raise a three year old boy, Pu Yi, the late emperor's nephew. So began one of the century's strangest stories. For over three years, until the collapse of the empire in 1911, Pu Yi was worshipped as the 'Son of Heaven' and 'The Lord of Ten Thousand Years'. He was described by the man who later became his tutor, Sir Reginald Johnston, as "the loneliest boy on Earth".

For twelve years, as the lonely boy grew into a young man, he was a prisoner inside the Forbidden City. Although no longer emperor, he was still worshipped by the hundreds of courtiers who served him. Outside the sixty-foot thick walls, China was undergoing revolutionary changes that would wash over the whole world, but Pu Yi knew nothing of them. Even when he was finally forced to leave the Forbidden City, and to flee Beijing in 1924, he still led an impossibly protected life, devoted entirely to his own pleasures.

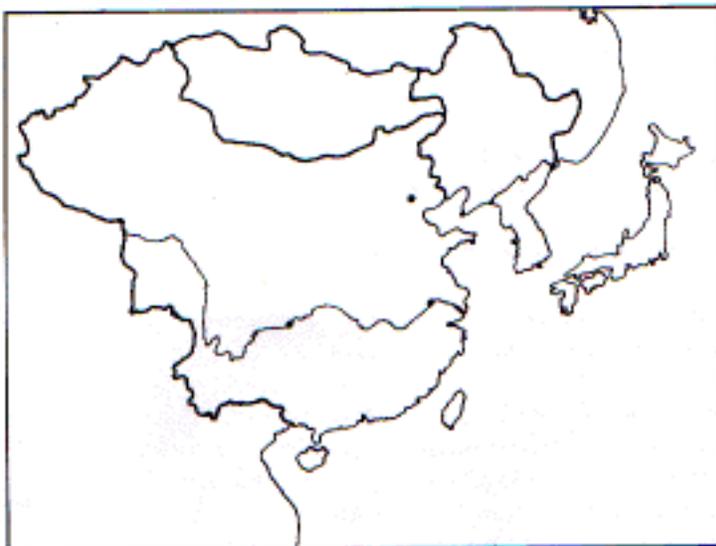
In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, and Pu Yi accepted the Japanese invitation to become emperor - but emperor without power, a puppet-emperor - of the new state of 'Manchukuo'.

When Manchukuo was overrun by the Soviet Union in 1945, Pu Yi was captured and put on trial for war-crimes. However, instead of facing the death penalty that he expected, Pu Yi was returned first to the Soviet Union and then, in 1950, to the newly communist Peoples' Republic of China. He served nine years in prison, where he slowly learned to adjust to his new life; in effect he had to learn to be an independent person, a citizen, for the first time. He was released from prison in 1959, and in 1960 took up work as a gardener in Beijing. He died of cancer in 1967.

## **The Main political events in China during Pu Yi's lifetime, 1906-67**

- 1906 - When Pu Yi was born, the Chinese Empire was in a state of decay. The Dowager Empress was powerless against the greed and determination of the Western countries.
- 1908 Pu Yi was made Emperor, the last of the Qing dynasty. Shortly afterwards, Tzu-Hsi died.
- 1911 - The 'Double Ten'. On October 10th a rebellion began which spread across the empire and brought about the downfall of the Qing dynasty.
- 1912 On January 1st the new Republic of China was born. Although Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's Nationalists hoped to set up a system of government based on their three principles of Nationalism, Socialism and Democracy, it was military power that had destroyed the Empire and it was military power that ruled the republic. The warlord Yuan Shih-kai drove Sun out of China and became effective dictator. China had a new emperor in all but name.
- 1915 Japan took advantage of the war in Europe to try to win influence in China. The Japanese government's Twenty-One demands infuriated the Chinese people, and there were many protests, but Yuan gave way to most of them for fear of the Japanese army.
- 1916 Yuan died in June, and China collapsed into anarchy. There was no central government and the country fell into the hands of warlords and bandits. Many of these local rulers depended on Western support, and so increased the country's subservience to Europe.
- 1923 - Two political groups tried to re-unite China under their own control, the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party. With the support of the new communist government in Russia, the CCP joined with the Guomindang to defeat the warlords, and the two parties worked together from 1922 to 1927.
- 1927 Guomindang leader Jiang Kai-Shek massacred thousands of Communists in Shanghai; the survivors fled inland to Kiangsi-Hunan.
- 1928 - Jiang Kai-Shek was effective ruler of China. Although some warlords still held sway in their regions, none was strong enough to challenge Jiang's authority.

- 1931 Japan invaded Manchuria, China's northernmost province and the ancestral home of the Manchu dynasty. Manchuria was a fertile region and was also rich in iron and coal.
- 1934 The Japanese government made Pu Yi emperor of the puppet state of Manchukuo. The Guomindang did not believe that they were strong enough to defeat the Japanese, and they concentrated their efforts on trying to crush the CCP.
- 1934-5 - Mao Zedong led his Communists on an amazing six thousand mile 'Long March' to escape the Guomindang armies.
- 1937 - Japan invaded China. The CCP showed itself to be more prepared than the Guomindang to offer resistance. By 1942, Japan controlled most of China's coastline.
- 1945 - In August, the USA dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, ending World War II and also the Japanese war against China. The CCP and the Guomindang now fought each other for the control of the newly-liberated country.
- 1949 - The CCP were better organised and more determined, and they grew more popular by the week. Jiang Kai-Shek fled to the island of Formosa and on October 1st Mao Zedong announced the creation of The Peoples' Republic of China.
- 1954 - China exploded its first atomic bomb.



On the map mark in:  
China, Japan,  
Manchukuo;  
Beijing/Peking, Nanking,  
Chungking; the  
Yangtse-Kiang. Shade  
in the areas controlled  
by Japan in 1942.

## Pu Yi in history

History is what people in the present think and believe about the past. As such it can never be complete or 'true'. The past is gone and cannot be recaptured perfectly - how much can you remember of what you were doing a year ago today ? To re-create the past as accurately as possible, we must ask as many different questions as possible, and examine whatever evidence we can find.

Film-makers working on a historical drama such as "The Last Emperor" go to great pains to learn as much as they can about the period they are trying to re-create. They will then use all their expertise to try to present accurate images of the past on film, It is likely of course that the more evidence the film-makers can discover about a particular time and place, the more accurately they will be able to portray it.

- 1) Compare two scenes, from the beginning and from the end of Pu Yi's life. The first scene shows the child-Emperor in one of the great courtyards of the Forbidden City; hundreds of courtiers are kowtowing to the 'Son of Heaven'. The second shows the aged Pu Yi as a citizen of the Peoples' Republic of China, in his garden.



Say which scene is more likely to be an accurate record of what really happened and explain why you think so.

- 2) Imagine that it is your job to advise the director of “The Last Emperor” on costume in the last days of the Qing dynasty, when Pu Yi was a child. Explain how you would go about making sure that you had accurate information about the way people dressed in China eighty years ago. What particular problems do you think you would face? If you could have just SIX items from the period to help you, what six items would you choose and why ?
- 3) At different times in his life, Pu Yi made two very important statements. He spent ten days in the witness box at the Tokyo war-crimes trials at the end of World War II. He had to explain why he had agreed to act as puppet-emperor of Manchukuo for eleven years, between 1934-1945, and why he had supported Japan in the wars against China from 1937, and against the USA and Britain from 1941.

When he returned to China and underwent reform in prison, he wrote an autobiography.

Taking each of these statements in turn, say whether you think that Pu Yi would be likely to “tell the whole truth” about himself. Explain your answers in detail.

### **Pu Yi in Manchukuo - puppet-emperor or collaborator ?**

Read sources A-H carefully:

**A** *“I thought: if I got along with the Japanese they might even help me recover my Imperial title.*

*Looking on the bright side, being Chief Executive seemed to be not a humiliation, but a step towards the Imperial Throne.”*

Pu Yi: From Emperor to Citizen (1964)

**B** *“We had strong reason to believe that delegates representing public bodies and associations which left statements with us had previously obtained Japanese approval. In fact, in many cases, people who had done so informed us afterwards that what they had written had been substantially revised by the Japanese and were not to be taken as an expression of their real feelings.”*

From a note by Lord Lytton, who led a League of Nations Commission investigating the Japanese presence in Manchuria. The Commission concluded that Japan should withdraw its troops from Manchuria and that the province should be governed by an international agency.

**C** *Manchukuo “was founded on 1 March 1932 by the thirty million people of Manchukua.. who, by their efforts and the unfailing co-operation of their friendly neighbour. Japan, finally overcame all obstacles, both internal and external and liberated themselves from the militarist regime from which they had suffered for many years.*

From an article written by the Manchukuo Information Department, run by the Japanese, 1932.

**D** *“Mirror-like is the ocean as the traveller embarks  
On the long voyage to the Land of the Rising Sun I  
Enduring is the handclasp between Japan and Manchukuo /  
May the eternal peace in the far east be assured.”*

Poem written by Pu Yi on the occasion of his state visit to Japan in 1935.

**E** *“I had put my head in the tiger’s mouth.”*

Pu Yi at the Tokyo War Crimes Trial

**F** *“I did not have my hand, I did not have my mouth... If I had told Lord Lytton the truth, I would have been murdered right after the commission had left Manchuria.”*

Pu Yi at the War Crimes Trial.

**G** *“Pu Yi’s performance in the box was bravura. Until his first public appearance, he had been derided by observers as slow-witted, if not mentally retarded, a cardboard figure. On the stand, however, Pu Yi proved himself wily, the master of cunning, guile and downright deceit.”*

From Arnold Brackman: *The Other Nuremberg, The Untold Story of The War Crimes Trials*, (1987)

**H** *“Pu Yi (showed himself) to be a consistent, self-assured liar, prepared to go to any lengths to save his skin.”*

From Edward Behr: *The Last Emperor* (1987)

1) How valuable are sources A and D to historians trying to understand Pu Yi’s role as emperor of Manchukuo ?

2) Read sources E-H. How much value should we attach to Pu Yi’s statements to the War Crimes Trial ?

- 3) How might you argue that sources A and D are more valuable to the historian than sources E and F ?
- 4) Read sources B and C. What do these sources tell you about the relationship between Japan and Manchukuo ?
- 5) What differences would a historian recognise between sources A-F on the one hand, and sources G and H on the other?
- 6) a) What impression of Pu Yi is given in these sources ?  
b) Does the film confirm this impression, or contradict it ?

### **Biography and History**

“The Last Emperor” is the story of one man playing several parts in an extraordinary and exciting drama. But how valuable is biography, the story of one person’s life, as a means of explaining the past ? In particular, how valuable, is this film biography to us as we try to understand what the Manchu Empire was like in 1908: what Manchuria was like in 1934, and what Communist China was like in 1967.

Draw up a list of the advantages and disadvantages of “The Last Emperor” as a resource for historians.

#### **ADVANTAGES**

The colour photography gives a vivid impression of how China must have looked.

#### **DISADVANTAGES**

Film cannot easily tell us what people are thinking.

1) "The Last Emperor" shows us several of the ideas of history being worked out on the screen. For each of the following terms, give a brief definition, and describe a scene in the film which illustrates it in action:

- |                    |               |
|--------------------|---------------|
| a) Emperor-worship |               |
| b) Protest         | e) Remoulding |
| c) Puppet emperor  | f) Revolution |
| d) Justice         | g) Citizen    |
|                    | h) Propaganda |

2) How does the film show Pu Yi change between 1924 and 1964 ?

- a) in the way he related to other people ?
- b) in the freedom of action he enjoyed

3) Bernardo Bertolucci, the director and co-writer of "The Last Emperor" has said: "All my previous films were journeys from light towards darkness. "The Last Emperor" goes the opposite way, from darkness to light."

The darkness of Pu Yi's early life was the artificiality of the Forbidden City, where he was a prisoner for sixteen years. The light of his last years was the happiness he enjoyed as an ordinary citizen of the Peoples' Republic of China.

At what stage of his life would you say that Pu Yi began to enter into the light ? How does the film show this

4) The makers of "The Last Emperor" were the first western film-makers to be allowed to make a film about modern China in China, and the first to be allowed to film in the Forbidden City. While "The Last Emperor" was being filmed, all other work at the Beijing Film Studios stopped. Pu Chieh, Pu Yi's brother, and Li Wenda, who helped him to write his autobiography, both acted as advisers to the film-makers. Over two thousand members of the Peoples' Liberation Army were made available to act in crowd scenes.

Having seen the film, why do you think the Chinese authorities went to such lengths to help the film-makers?

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Produced for Columbia Pictures by Ian Wall and Peter Scott