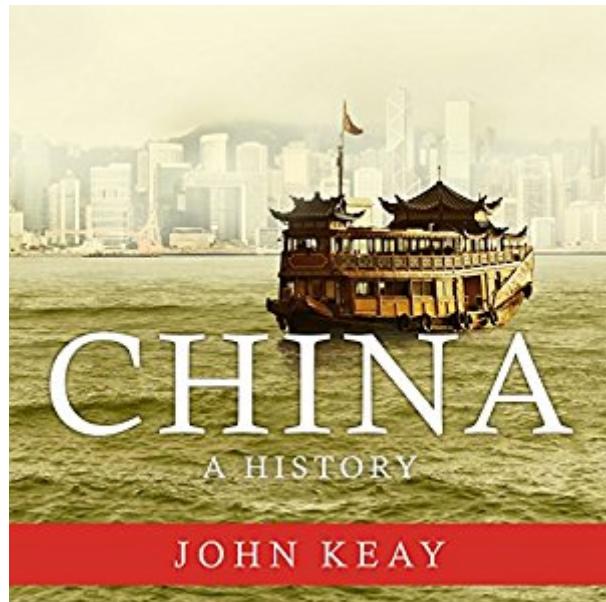


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# China: A History



## Synopsis

Many nations define themselves in terms of territory or people; China defines itself in terms of history. Taking into account the country's unrivaled, voluminous tradition of history writing, John Keay has composed a vital and illuminating overview of the nation's complex and vivid past. Keay's authoritative history examines 5,000 years in China, from the time of the Three Dynasties through Chairman Mao and the current economic transformation of the country. Crisp, judicious, and engaging, China is the classic single-volume history for anyone seeking to understand the present and future of this immensely powerful nation.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 25 hours and 29 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: May 31, 2016

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B01G9E8K3E

Best Sellers Rank: #28 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Asia #55 in Books > History > Asia > China

## Customer Reviews

Wow, I love this book, but I definitely recommend getting it in paperback or Hardcover. Though this is an overwhelming subject, Keay has shaped the narrative in such a way that a new student to China has a foothold and the stories are amazing. The maps are important to see to connect this complex country, and I didn't realize that there were photographs to underscore the detail until I ordered a used copy to support my Kindle copy. There just are books that should not be read on the Kindle.

This is the finest history of China I have read. Much better than Spence or Fairbank. It manages to capture the flavor and nuance of each dynasty as well as the economic and social changes. The writing is clear and often gripping. Of course, even at 500 pages, it is only an overview of the 5,000 years of Chinese History. The only comparison I can think of is "China Marches West" by Peter

Perdue, but then he covers only the Qing Dynasty's and its conquest of Manchuria (part), Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet.

Perhaps nowhere is the saying, “The more things change, the more they stay the same” more appropriate than in China. China has the honor of being the civilization with the longest continuous history on Earth. China was not the first or the oldest civilization, but while ancient Egypt and Sumer have long since vanished from history, China remains. In that long 3000-4000 years of history, China has undergone many changes. Dynasties of rulers have risen and fallen. The country has been united into an empire, only to break apart and then be united once again. The Chinese Empire has expanded its frontiers into Central Asia, and has been restricted to northern or southern China, while foreigners have ruled other sections. China has been conquered and has regained its independence. Through all the revolutions and changes, China remains China. The Communists under Mao Zedong were determined to remake China into a modern, socialist country, yet they went about their goals in a characteristically Chinese fashion. Mao condemned Confucius and sought to end that sage’s influence on China. So did Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China (previous rulers were referred to as “kings”). The Communists enforced a rigid Marxist conformity on China intellectuals. The Song Emperors enforced a rigid Neo-Confucian ideology. China, under Mao limited its contacts with foreigners. So did the Qing Emperors. The present rulers of China have converted China into a major trading nation. So did the Tang Emperors. The Communist Party does not tolerate any rival parties. No imperial dynasty was ever comfortable with parties or partisanship. Like the Emperors of old, the Chinese government thinks more in terms of taking a paternal interest in the lives of its subjects rather than in protecting human rights. Yet, one must not think China as being unchanging or Chinese history as being boring. China has seen drastic changes throughout its history. One might think of this history of change and continuity in terms of the Chinese philosophical ideas of Yin and Yang, opposites that work together. Passive, feminine Yin might represent the periods of imperial unity and strength while active, masculine Yang might represent the chaotic periods of war and disunity that were, nevertheless, the most intellectually productive periods of Chinese history. I think there are few resources which explore the grand sweep of the Yin and Yang of Chinese history in one volume better than John Keay’s *China, A History*. In his book, John Keay tells the story of the Chinese nation from its Neolithic beginning right up to the modern age. Keay does not, as many writers of history books do, spend too much time on recent events while neglecting past centuries. Every dynasty gets the proper amount of attention, as

do the periods of disunion. If I have any complaint at all about China, A History, it is that at 611 pages it is simply too short. Six hundred pages are hardly enough to give an outline of Chinese history. I am not complaining, however. If you want a general outline of Chinese history, China A History serves the purpose admirably and if you want to know more about any topic, there is the bibliography John Keay provides.

I thoroughly enjoyed this tour of Chinese history. You just have to let the names and dates roll by until you get to a period in history that you're familiar with so you can start making connections to people/events you already know. But even for the earlier ages, you get to read about some fascinating people and events and come away with a broad grasp of the Chinese experience, even if the details don't stick in your head. The writing is lively, and, yes, opinionated in places -- but no history is objective even when it pretends to be.

I always knew in the back of my mind that the people involved don't make history -- historians make it, and this is the first time I've read a history of anything where the author points out how the history of China was this or that in one era, and in a later era was completely revised in order to present that latter's desired paradigm. So, the book may not describe what really happened although it is filled with facts; it does, however, tell you what those who documented what happened said, and then how what happened was later revised. For those who are interested in world history, and Chinese history in particular, it is a great, eye-opening, myth busting read.

This was a great overview of what is known about Chinese history, from the earliest known Xia dynasty through to the Mongols and finally to the chaos of the 19th-20th centuries. Easy to read and the author doesn't shy away from controversy when there are possible multiple interpretations of events or where Western interpretation differs from interpretations of the Chinese themselves. I came to this being primarily interested in the revolutions and communist take over of the modern era and found that early Chinese history was just as fascinating. However, each period is only briefly covered, so if you want to look at one period in depth I'd try to find something a bit more specific. Great starting point!

This is a tough one. The book's entire premise is probably a losing proposition. It's thousands of years of history in one go, meaning that it's going to be pretty cursory and shallow by design. There's just no way to get deeper when you have so much material to cover. But if you need a basic

outline of everything that's happened in China from the first emperor to a couple years ago, this is the book.

What a spectacular find! Keay's thoughtful, helpful explanations of how the Chinese themselves regarded their history are totally necessary just to fathom the sweep of their multiethnic past. Considering the complexity of the subject, he makes it accessible and a pleasure to read. Highly recommended!

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