

Why Not the Arabs?



If you can go around Africa from Europe to India, then you can go around Africa from India to Europe. But it didn't happen!

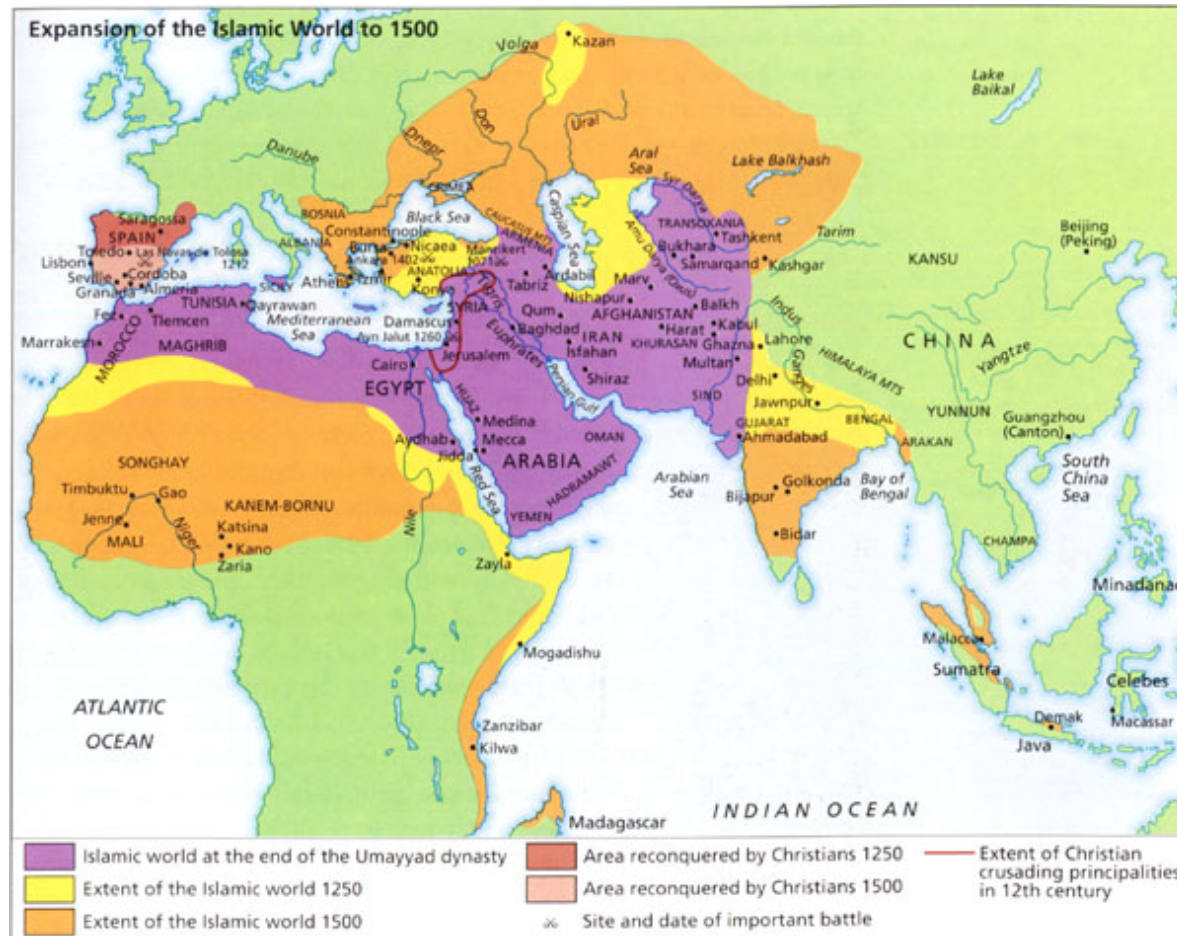
Long before a continuous sea passage was found between West and East, Muslim Arabs of North Africa and the Middle East were firmly rooted in Spain, India (and China).

The Arabs who lived around the western and northwestern borders of the Indian Ocean were at least as far advanced in the seafaring sciences—in astronomy, geography, mathematics, and the arts of navigation—as their European contemporaries.

In India itself, taboos of caste prevented Hindus from freely joining in overseas commerce. Some were forbidden by their religion from passing over salt water.

So... why didn't the Muslim Arabs take the sea passage westward and/or eastward? ... and build an empire into Europe and/or China?

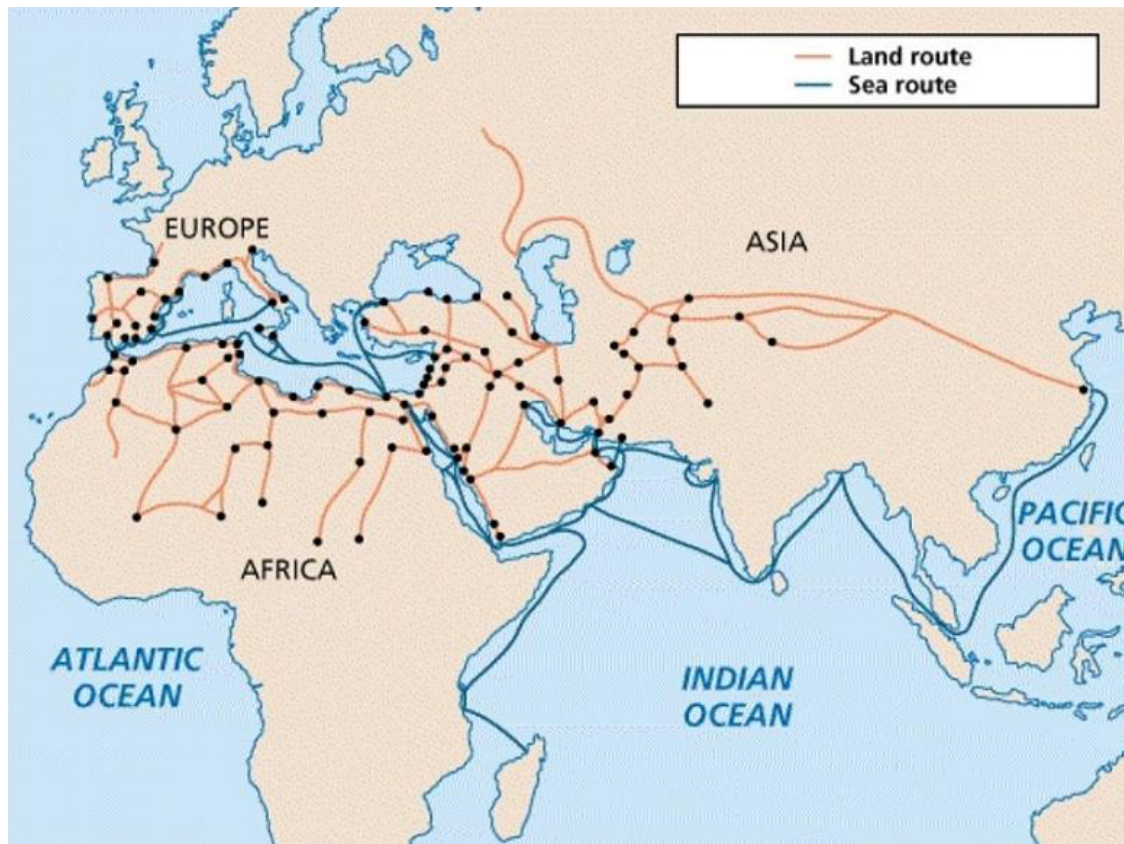
The Arabs were already both East and West



In the Mediterranean, empires were repeatedly won or lost on the water. Ships were the swords of empire builders. If the Arabs of the north, those who settled and expanded around the southern shores of the Mediterranean, had been more like the Romans, more adept and more at home on the sea, less fearful of wide expanses of water, the later history and even the religion and languages of Europe might have been quite different.

The Arabs had extensive land routes and sea routes. They were “already there.”

The sea routes were limited to the coasts and to the Mediterranean, and they used the sea only sparingly when necessary.



After the Portuguese cemented their sea routes around Africa, they destroyed all Arab fleets in the Indian ocean and took complete control of South East Asia



Arabic Dhow (2 mast)

Arabs did not use nails in their ships, they used cords from coconut husks; it was thought nails would be pulled out by magnetic stones at sea. Their ships were not worthy of the high seas.

Arabia possesses almost none of the naval reservoirs—neither wood nor resin nor iron nor textiles—required for shipbuilding.

There were no navigable rivers, few good harbors, nor any populous or hospitable hinterland (just good ol' inland desert).

Coral reefs surrounding the coasts produced wrecks to encourage pirates, from whom there was no convenient refuge.

There was no easy source of fresh water. And the menacing northerly winds came down without respite the year round.

Why would they want to organize a continuous venture into the unknown? The modern organized exploring enterprise initiated by Prince Henry the Navigator was without known precedent. For Arabs, seafaring was destination driven, not pointless unimaginable exploration.

Arabs have never been enthusiastic seafarers

Caliph Omar I (581-644), who organized Muslim power and carried on the great landward expansion of the Muslim Empire into Persia and into Egypt, **was wary of the sea**. His Governor of Syria asked permission to raid Cyprus (an island off of Turkey in the Mediterranean).

Omar sought the advice of his wisest general. "The sea is a boundless expanse," General 'Amribn-al-As warned, "whereon great ships look tiny specks; nought but the heavens above and the waters beneath; when calm, the sailor's heart is broken; when tempestuous, his senses reel. Trust it little, fear it much. Man at sea is an insect on a splinter, now engulfed, now scared to death."

When **Omar** forbade the excursion, he expressed the traditional Arab distrust of the sea. In Arabic, you "rode a ship" as you rode a camel, and when Muslims reached the shore around the Arabian peninsula, they saw the sea as a desert to be crossed en route to raid or to trade. The seafaring adventures of the ancient Arabs in the Mediterranean were limited to excursions of commerce or of piracy.

With the minor exceptions of the islands of Cyprus, Crete, and Sicily, it was not necessary for the Arabs to cross a sea to pass from one part of their empire to another.

The Arabs did not build a seafaring empire.

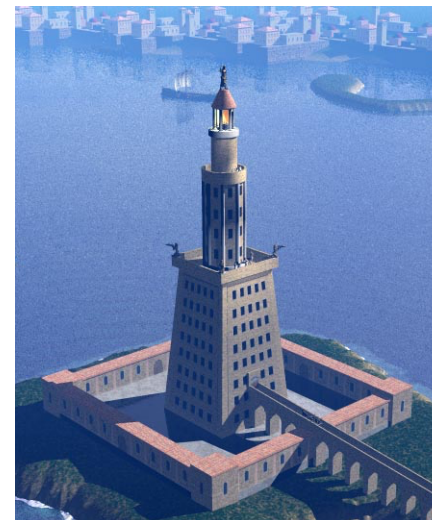
Arabs were in both the East and in the West. Why would they have wanted to go by sea to Portugal or northern Europe? Muslims were already just across the Straits of Gibraltar from the Christian world. **Their domain already included the rich tropical variety of plants and animals and minerals and incense-laden ways.** **What the Arab world had to gain from the Europeans had already been tested and tried in the Iberian peninsula.** **Their encounters with the crusaders in the Middle East seemed to promise only a vast reservoir of infidels in need of conversion.**

Consequences of Stagnation of an Empire

Alexandria might have become a Muslim Venice. But instead, that once great metropolis, which in its earlier heyday contained a population of 600,000, had only 100,000 in the late ninth century. The caliphs of the ninth and tenth centuries allowed the city to decay.

The famous **Pharos Lighthouse, marking Alexandria's harbor**, which had been one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, became a ruin. Then even its ruins were appropriately destroyed by an earthquake in the fourteenth century.

Arabic thought and Arabic literature looked landward.



From 1500 onward, the Muslim empire was surrounded, confined and bullied by the West. The Ottoman Empire finally collapsed in 1918. The remnants are the separate countries, many defined by the Western powers (victors of World War I)



The Chinese Reach Out

伸出

WHEN Prince Henry the Navigator was sending his ships inching down the west coast of Africa, on the other side of the planet **Chinese navigators possessed a navy unparalleled in numbers, in skills, and in technology.** Their grand fleet had already sailed beyond the China Sea and around the Indian Ocean, reaching down the east coast of Africa to the very tip of the Dark Continent.

But while the exploits of Prince Henry's ships were a prologue to seafaring voyages that would discover a whole New World and circumnavigate the globe, the grander Chinese expeditions of the same era were a **dead end.** They prefaced the catastrophic withdrawal of the Chinese into their own borders, **with consequences we still see today.**

What made the Great Withdrawal of 1433 so dramatic was that the Chinese seafaring outreach had been so spectacular.

Admiral Cheng Ho



The hero, the designer and commander of the most remarkable of these wide-ranging ventures, was **Admiral Cheng Ho**.

The fact that Cheng Ho was a eunuch, as we shall see, helps explain how he managed to develop these grand adventures, and also why they were so abruptly concluded.



Ming Dynasty and The Forbidden City

Wherever eunuchs have been able to exercise political influence, it has been a symptom both of the secluded position of women and of despotic government. Where the monarch maintained a harem of wives and concubines, only members of his immediate family were permitted to reside within the palace precincts. The eunuchs detailed to attend on the women of the harem, being no menace to the purity of the imperial line or to the chastity of the royal consorts, were an exception. They became a privileged class. Knowledge of the daily habits and personal tastes of the emperors gave eunuchs a peculiar opportunity to anticipate the monarch's whims. In the arbitrary governments of the East this meant an opportunity to seize power.



The megalomaniac emperor Yung Lo (1359-1424) decided to send out naval expeditions with messages of his grandeur into all the surrounding seas. For the command he chose Cheng Ho. These expeditions (1405-33), the vastest until then seen on our planet, enlisted some thirty-seven thousand in their crews, in flotillas of as many as three hundred and seventeen ships. Vessels ranged in size from the largest, the

Treasure Ship carrying nine masts, 444 feet long with a beam of 180 feet...

down through the ranks of

Horse Ship

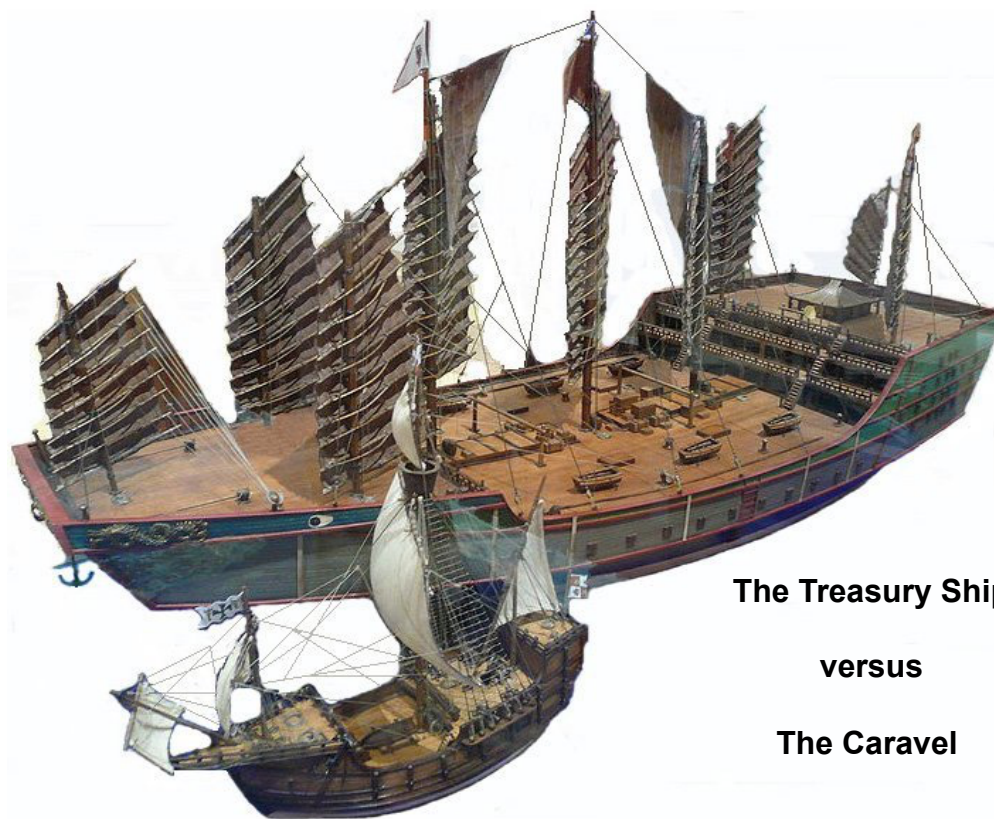
Supply Ship

Billet Ship

to the smallest, the

Combat Ship,

which carried five masts and measured 180 feet by 68 feet



The Treasure Ship

versus

The Caravel

The Portuguese ships were armed for battle and they were uninhibited from using terror. The extracted slaves by the thousands and pillaged (then governed with force) port after port.

The voyages of Cheng Ho became an institution in themselves, designed to display the splendor and power of the Ming dynasty.

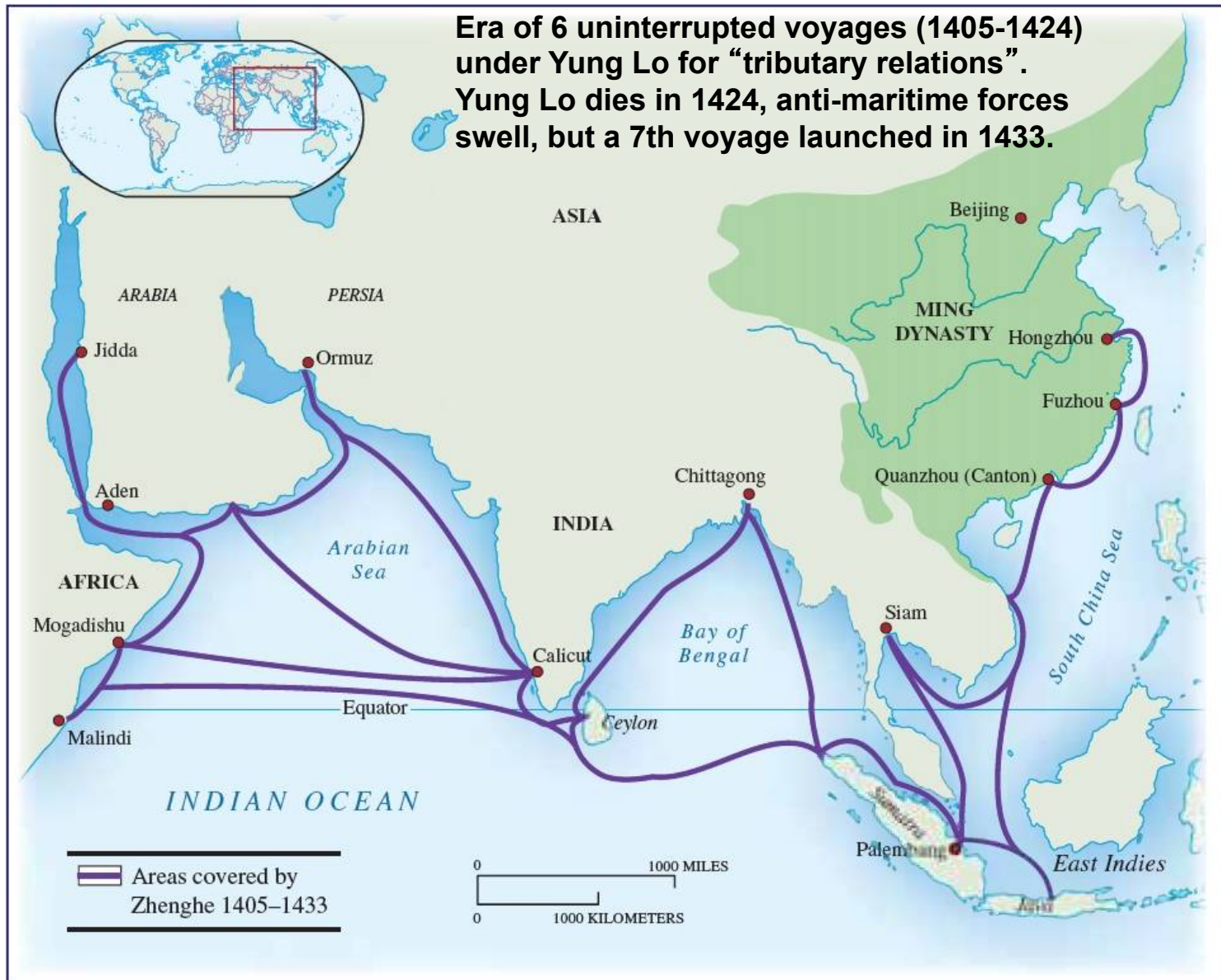
The voyages proved that ritualized and nonviolent techniques of persuasion could extract tribute from remote states.

The Chinese would not establish their own permanent bases within the tributary states, but instead hoped to make "the whole world" into voluntary admirers of the one and only center of civilization.



Cheng Ho would not seek slaves or gold or silver or spices. Nothing would suggest that the Chinese needed what other nations had.

While peoples of Asia would be struck by the Portuguese power to seize, the Chinese would impress by their power to give.



A state giving tribute to China was not submitting to a conqueror. Rather, it was acknowledging that China, by definition the only truly civilized state, was beyond the need for assistance.

No wonder the Chinese found it hard to imagine a community of sovereign nations! Only China was truly sovereign, for only China was worthy of sovereignty. The corrosive consequences of this frame of mind persisted into the twentieth century.

When the first British diplomatic representative, Lord Macartney, arrived in Peking to open trade with China, the response of the Manchu emperor was hardly encouraging. "There is nothing we lack," the Emperor observed in 1793, "as your principal envoy and others have themselves observed. We have never set much store on strange or indigenous objects, nor do we need any more of your country's manufactures."

The Great Withdrawal: The emperor forbade his subjects to go abroad. Chinese seen outside their country were there illegally, and indiscreet travelers were punished with beheading. Cheng Ho's grand seventh voyage was China's last. His return home in 1433 marked an end to his country's organized seafaring adventures. **An imperial edict in that year (1433), and others that followed (1449, 1452) imposed increasingly savage punishments on Chinese who ventured abroad.**

By 1500 it had been made a capital offense even to build a seagoing junk with more than two masts. In 1525, coastal officials were ordered to destroy all such ships and to arrest mariners who continued to sail in them. In 1551 the crime of espionage was redefined to include all who went to sea in multiple-mast ships, even if they went only for trade.

China turned back on herself.

When Europeans were sailing out with enthusiasm and high hopes, land-bound China was sealing her borders. Within her physical and intellectual Great Wall, she avoided encounter with the unexpected. Fully equipped with the technology, the intelligence, and the national resources to become discoverers, the Chinese doomed themselves to be the discovered.

In the early nineteenth century, when the British Empire's silver was being drained East to pay for silk, tea, and lacquerware, the British East India Company shrewdly introduced opium, which they could import to China from India and elsewhere, as a new medium of exchange. While solving their foreign-exchange problem, they set the stage for the Opium War (1839-42), which brought the decisive foreign occupation of China.

Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

In 1449 Esen Tayisi led an Oirat **Mongol invasion of northern China** which culminated in the capture of the Zhengtong Emperor.

In 1542 the **Mongol leader** Altan Khan began to harass China along the northern border. In 1550, he even **reached the suburbs of Beijing**.

The empire also had to deal with **Japanese pirates attacking the southeastern coastlines**. The deadliest earthquake of all times, the **Shaanxi earthquake** of 1556 killed approximately 830,000 people.

Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)

By the 1860s, the Qing Dynasty had put down the rebellions at enormous cost and loss of life.

This undermined the credibility of the Qing regime. Spearheaded by local initiatives by provincial leaders, contributed to **the rise of war-lordism in China**.

Official corruption, cynicism, and imperial family quarrels made most of the military reforms useless. As a result, **the Qing's "New Armies" were soundly defeated in the Sino-French War (1883-1885) and the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).**

In 1900, the Boxer Rebellion threatened northern China. This was a conservative anti-imperialist movement that sought to return China to old ways. The Empress Dowager, probably seeking to ensure her continued grip on power, sided with the Boxers when they advanced on Beijing. In response, **an Eight-Nation Alliance invaded China to rescue the besieged foreign missions.** Consisting of British, Japanese, Russian, Italian, German, French, US and Austrian troops, the alliance defeated the Boxers and demanded further concessions from the Qing government (carved up the nation for themselves!)



French political cartoon showing China divided among Britain, Germany, Russia, France and Japan (1900)

War and Civil War (1911-1949)

Communist Rule (1949-)



Nantang Massacre 1937