GREAT STATE

CHINA AND THE WORLD

TIMOTHY BROOK

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
29 Cloth Fair
London
ECIA 7NN
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 828 6
eISBN 978 1 78283 347 5

There exists a paramount boundary within Heaven and Earth: Chinese on this side, foreigners on the other. The only way to set the world in order is to respect this boundary.

Qiu Jun (1421–95), quoted in Chapter 5

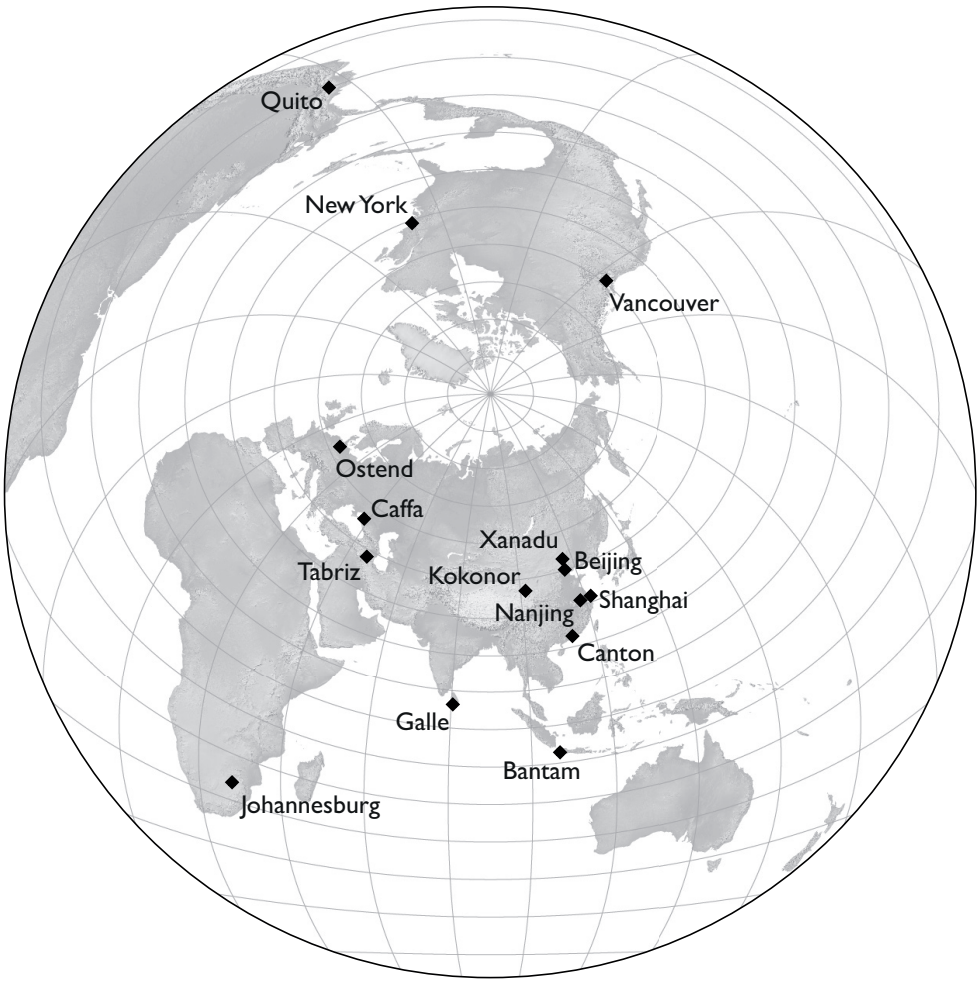
There are principles common to both East and West.

Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), quoted in Chapter 8

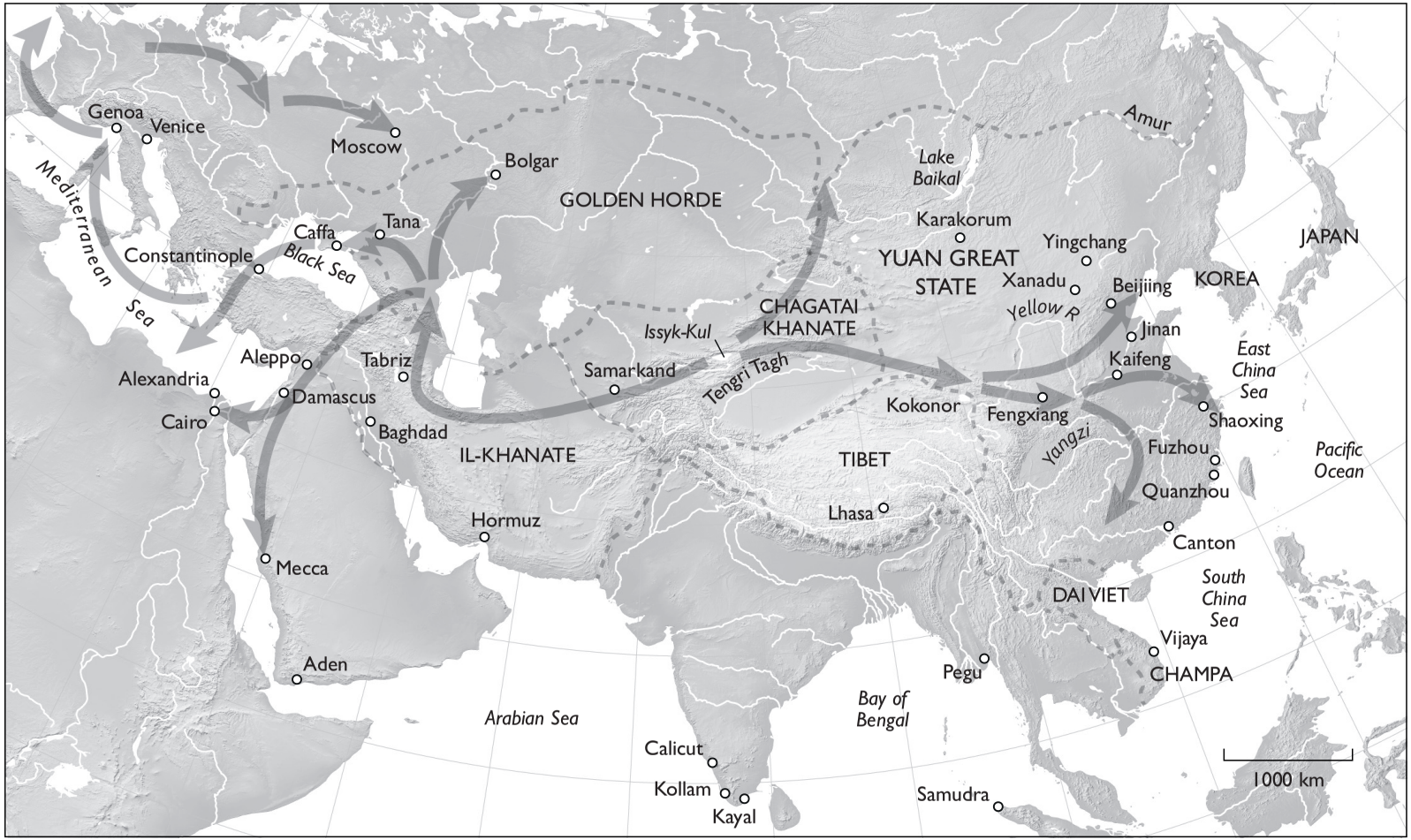
Contents

List of Maps

The maps were drawn by Eric Leinberger.



1. Azimuthal equidistant projection of the globe from China.



2. The movement of the Black Death across Eurasia between the 1330s and the 1360s.

Introduction: Ten Thousand Countries

Vancouver, 2019

A few years ago, an enterprising graduate student at the University of British Columbia (UBC), where I work, was poking about in the geography section of the Asian Library. There, folded neatly inside a twentieth-century pasteboard slipcase, he found a Chinese wall map from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). When unfolded, the map was impressively large, four feet wide and four and a half from top to bottom (see Plate 1). We can't say that the map was lost. It had a call number on the spine and an incomplete entry in the library catalogue, and it sat there in the open stacks for anyone to pick it up. It's just that no one had. In its day it was an ordinary object. You could have bought it for the price of a wok, or maybe 2 pounds of high-grade Philippine tobacco. Today it would fetch a shocking price, which is why, when the student showed it to the librarian, she removed it from the open stacks and locked it in the rare books room.

The map has the classic look of a Ming-dynasty production. It moulds China into a rectangular shape, on the premise that Heaven may be round but the earth is square, and it sequesters the country within the bounds of the Great Wall along its northern border. But what is it a map of, really? We look at it and see a map of China,

whereas people of the Ming would have regarded it differently, as a map not of China but of the world. Their term for such a map was *hua-yi tu*, 'a map of Chinese (*hua*) and non-Chinese (*yi*)', or barbarians, to give the latter its due resonance. Cartouches in the ocean describe foreign places from Korea and Japan to Brunei and Malacca, and text boxes in the wastes beyond the Great Wall explain who the Khitans, Jurchens, Mongols, Turks and Tibetans are. Four centuries ago this was what passed for a map of the world or, more precisely, a map of China in the world.

The more I examined this map, though, the more mysterious and elusive it became. The publisher's colophon in the bottom left-hand corner declares that it was printed in Nanjing, the secondary capital of the Ming dynasty and a major publishing centre, by Ji Mingtai [Master Ji of the Terrace of Renown] in the year *guiwei*. Chinese years are named according to a sixty-year cycle, and normally the year name is prefixed with the reign title of the emperor on the throne at the time to distinguish one *guiwei* year from the next. The design of the map reminded me of a visually very similar map I had seen published in the same city bearing the date of 1593, so I reasoned that *guiwei* was either the *guiwei* year of the Wanli reign, 1583, or the *guiwei* year of the Chongzhen reign sixty years later, 1643. Eventually I tracked down a copy in the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University on which the date was printed in full: Chongzhen *guiwei*. That confirmed the date: 1643.

The 1593 map I had in mind as a precursor to the one in Vancouver was another large wall map, this one drawn by a schoolteacher named Liang Zhou. It surfaced at a Sotheby's auction in 1988 only to disappear immediately into another private collection, yet it was in the public realm long enough to be photographed and to circulate among scholars. What for me clinched the relationship between these two maps was that they carried the same subtitle: 'with human vestiges and records of events ancient and modern'. This stilted phrasing, which sounds more like advertising copy than truthful description, betrays the fact that they must share an origin, or at least a mutual influence. Their main titles are different, however. The map in Vancouver is called *The Terrestrial Map of the Astral Correspondences of the Nine Provinces*. The references to 'nine provinces' and 'astral correspondences' look back into the past by summoning up ancient

conceptions of Chinese geography. The 1593 map bears a different title, *The Complete Map of the Ten Thousand Countries between Heaven and Earth*. Unlike the 1643 map, the 1593 title declares the map to be a map of the world, which is striking, given the on-again, off-again Ming ban on contact with the world beyond China's borders. These may not look to us like maps of the world, but they have absorbed no small amount of foreign knowledge. The best sign of this on the 1593 map is the debut appearance of the Arctic Ocean complete with North Pole, details that Ji Mingtai regrettably dropped when he drew his version.

In the text printed across the top of his map Liang Zhou reveals his source for the new content to be a six-panel map of the world that had been recently engraved in Nanjing on slabs of stone so that anyone could consult it. 'For the first time', Liang proclaims, there is a map that 'allows you to understand to the most precise degree how Heaven and Earth are contained'. The author of this wonder he calls the Master from Beyond the West. Liang doesn't seem to know his name, but we do. This is Matteo Ricci, the second Jesuit missionary to enter China, in 1583, and one of the characters in Chapter 8 of this book. Here Liang's story stumbles, however, for Ricci did not actually move to Nanjing until 1598, five years after the date Liang has put on his *Complete Map of the Ten Thousand Countries of the Earth*.

Why were these dates out of order? My best guess is that Liang had to fudge his date of publication. Yes, the 1593 map was inspired by the 1598 map, but only because it wasn't printed in 1593. Liang back-dated his map to 1593 in order to obscure a fact that does not otherwise come into view, and that no one else seems to have noticed: that he was infringing someone else's copyright. The sequence of events must have been thus: Ricci's map was posted in a public place in Nanjing in 1598 or 1599, a cartographer possibly named Liang incorporated elements of that map to produce a revised version of the standard Ming map of the world, and then someone using the name of Liang Zhou came along and plagiarised this map as his own, covering his traces by messing around with the date of publication. We are unlikely ever to find the missing link between Ricci and Liang, as so many maps from this era were destroyed when the Ming dynasty fell in 1644. There is one other nice touch of mischief on Liang's map. In the oddly empty

colophon down in the bottom left-hand corner of the map appears the blunt warning: 'reprinting forbidden'!

So Liang was a pirate, but I soon discovered not the only pirate in this story. Recall that the *guiwei* date on the map in Vancouver was incomplete. A possible reason for this was the times. One of the effects of dynastic turnover was the outlawing of maps of the previous dynasty. Once the Qing army of occupation got down to Nanjing in June 1645, to own or print a map of the Ming in Nanjing was to declare allegiance to that fallen regime, and that was treason. A map publisher had to choose between destroying his woodblocks or tampering with them to remove any sign of the Ming. That blank space in front of *guiwei* could indicate that Ji Mingtai doctored the blocks so that he could keep printing his map after 1645.

As I looked more closely at the map, however, that convenient story dissolved. The reliability of the UBC map began to unravel when I noticed that the first character of the name Mingtai was not the same on the Harvard copy. Ji went from 'Terrace of Illumination' at Harvard to 'Terrace of Renown' in Vancouver. Switching that middle character *ming* ('illumination' and 'renown' are exact homonyms) would be like opening a pop-up coffee shop and hanging out a sign that read Starbukks: the inattentive customer might not notice. Once I was able to compare the two maps in detail, the map in Vancouver revealed itself to be a rather sloppy copy of the map at Harvard. My Ji Mingtai map was not by the real Ji Mingtai. Like Liang Zhou (or whoever was ripping off the real Liang Zhou, if there ever was such a person), my cartographer was committing copyright fraud.

These frauds are fun to detect, but are neither here nor there for our purpose – though they do testify to how hot the market for world maps was at the time. The point is that what became the standard 'Chinese' map of China in the last half-century of the Ming period belongs to a family tree that includes an Italian. And that's not all. In the panel across the top of the '1593' map Liang (or whoever was masquerading as Liang) explains that the Master from Beyond the West derived his map from a copperplate engraving by 'a gentleman from Ouluoba'. ('Europa' is a difficult word to bend into Chinese syllables.) Liang couldn't name this European gentleman, but we can. This is Ortelius, the great sixteenth-century cartographer of Antwerp

whose *Typus orbis terrarum* [Image of the sphere of the earth] of 1570 crowned Europe's first atlas. Having realised the potential that a European map might have for dislodging Chinese views of the world, Ricci had written back to his former teacher, now the head of the Jesuits, Claudio Acquaviva, asking him to send him a world map. The Jesuits had good contacts in Antwerp, so it was not difficult for Acquaviva to obtain a copy and send it to China where Ricci redrew it for Chinese friends.

So now we have a family tree going back four generations, starting in my local university library: from Ji Mingtai's *Terrestrial Map of the Nine Provinces with Astral Correspondences* to Liang Zhou's *Complete Map of the Ten Thousand Countries between Heaven and Earth* to Ricci's map etched on stone in Nanjing and finally to Ortelius's *Image of the Sphere of the Earth*. Two Chinese, two Europeans: some family!

Ten Thousand Countries

Ricci gave his map the title of *Complete Map of the Ten Thousand Countries of the Earth*. The idea that the world consisted of ten thousand countries was not his invention. He took the number from the *Book of Changes*, an ancient divination classic that belongs to the era of small Bronze-Age states three millennia in the past. The goal of the ruler in that era, when no unified polity that could be called China existed, was 'to bring the many things and the ten thousand countries to tranquillity'. That condition of multiplicity changed as some of these states captured enough resources and labour to destroy their neighbours. Entering the third century BCE, it was axiomatic that 'in antiquity there were ten thousand countries, whereas today they number only ten odd'. Exiting that century, all but one of those ten-odd, the Qin, was gone. Only after the ruler of Qin (the origin of our word 'China') eradicated all the other states across the North China Plain and down into the Yangzi Valley in 221 BCE did the paradigm of ten thousand countries disappear. The Founding Emperor of Qin, as he titled himself, declared that he and his descendants would rule All under Heaven as a single realm for all time. The age of ten thousand countries was over. China's era of the single mega-state, still with us, had begun.

The new norm proved to be as much a myth as a reality. Every

dynasty that conquered the country collapsed. The Qin set the worst record, disintegrating in less than fifteen years. Over the next millennium and a half, China was as often splintered among many states as it was unified. Despite the reality of recurring dynastic collapse, or indeed perhaps because of it, the idea of unity took hold and became a political ideal. With every collapse, dynastic contenders dreamed of reassembling the eastern end of Eurasia into a single realm. Some European rulers had the same dream, thinking back to the Roman Empire and wondering whether they might reconstitute it in their time, but it was an eccentric dream that burned out every time it was tried, never a norm. Even though Europe and China sustained roughly similar populations (about 120 million people in 1600) and were spread over roughly the same area (10 million square kilometres), Europe remained a patchwork of small sovereignties whereas China found itself over and over again reunified as a single state.

Matteo Ricci came from that patchwork world – never ten thousand countries, certainly, but at the time several hundred. His task as a missionary was to persuade people of a very different world to abandon their most basic beliefs and embrace an entirely different set of European Christian norms and practices. It was an amazing ask, if you think about the tenacity most people have for what they believe defines them. Ricci hoped that reason might be enough, but he needed proof. In his first year in China he started drawing maps of the world for his visitors. He wanted to show them where he came from, but he also wanted to show them that there were other ways of organising the world and other possibilities of imagining life, death and salvation – and that his way of knowing these things was better grounded in reality than theirs. He needed to dethrone the traditional cosmology positioning China at the centre of a world and relegating all other cultures to the periphery, where they sloped away from civilisation into a condition of ever more profound barbarism from where nothing good could come. What better device to disorient people and lure them away from their bearings than a picture of the world as it 'actually' was? And so Ricci invoked the ten thousand countries in the title of his map in the hope to persuade Chinese that there were more countries, quite as civilised as China, than were dreamed of in their philosophy. Ji Mingtai was not prepared to embrace the new

vision wholly and left 'ten thousand countries' off his map, but Liang Zhou was persuaded, and so were others. The idea prevailed, and the phrase 'ten thousand countries' came to be the standard term in both Chinese and Japanese for the world up to the turn of the twentieth century. Even so, the tension between one country and ten thousand remained – and is woven right through the story I tell in this book.

The Great State

In the conventional account of Chinese history, China became that one country in 221 BCE. In this book I have elected to tell this story differently. Going back two-plus millennia in the past takes us such a distance from the present that real effects become submerged by formal elements that, to me at least, are at best merely symbolic. While that transition from many countries to one was an important bar to cross, I find it more useful to focus attention on a more recent transition: the moment in the thirteenth century when the dynastic oscillation between unified realms and dispersed kingdoms ended more or less for good, and China fell under the occupation of the Mongol descendants of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan. In the wake of this second great unification China became essentially a different country. The glories of the Tang and Song dynasties preceding the Mongol invasion are indisputable, and the legacies of dynasties in the even more distant past continue to mould Chinese culture. But to this historian, looking at the long term, China today is far more the successor of the Mongol age than it is of the Qin. Some readers will not agree with me, but you don't have to agree in order to appreciate the stories I tell in this book or follow the arc of change that these stories plot.

The concept I needed to tell this new story – the Great State – is not standard fare in histories of China. Great State is an Inner Asian concept. It is not a term that Chinese today will recognise, let alone accept, but it has hugely shaped Chinese political thinking since the time of Khubilai Khan. Before the 1270s China was a dynastic state in which one family monopolised power at the centre because, so the theory went, Heaven had given that family an exclusive mandate to rule. What changed with the coming of the Mongols was the deeper conviction that this mandate entailed the right to extend the authority of that one family out across the entire world, incorporating all

existing polities and rulers into a system in which military power is paramount. This was the Great State, and this is what China became.

The concept of the Great State is a late one, emerging only in the years immediately after Chinggis became Great Khan of the Mongols in 1206. The term in Mongolian is *yeke ulus* (pronounced 'eek ooloose'), *yeke* meaning 'great' and *ulus* meaning 'state'. Once Chinggis was confirmed as ruler of the *Mongqol ulus*, the Mongol State, he began building a new, larger polity to absorb the territories that fell to his armies. By one report the term was suggested to the Mongols by former officials of the Jin Great State, a Jurchen polity that ruled north China in the twelfth century and that the Mongols destroyed in their rise to power. This new polity came to be called the *Yeke Mongqol ulus*, the Mongol Great State. The concept declares that there is nothing natural about the boundaries of a political territory, and that the goal of rulership is to enlarge the realm through conquest. This new polity is often called the Mongol Empire in English, but I prefer to stick to the Mongol term so as not to conflate this historical transformation with Europe's experiences of empire. They may be the same thing, but that remains to be proven.

Not every ruler of China since the thirteenth century has been successful in conquest, but every ruler since then has declared his regime to be a Great State. Khubilai Khan did so in 1271, announcing to his Chinese subjects that he was founding the Da Yuan, the Yuan Great State. Zhu Yuanzhang did the same when he announced the creation of the Da Ming, the Ming Great State, in 1368. And so did Hong Taiji in 1635, when as Great Khan of the Manchus he promulgated the founding of the Da Qing, the Qing Great State, which would go on to absorb the Ming in 1644. Only in 1912, with the founding of a People's State, or Republic as it is usually translated, did the Great State nomenclature come to an end in China – though it still survives, for complex historical reasons having to do with the legacy of Japanese imperialism, in Korea. The official name of South Korea, Daehan Minguk, translated literally, means the Republic of the Korean Great State.

This book is not a political history of China, but I found that I needed the concept of the Great State to frame the stories I tell of the relationships that formed between Chinese and non-Chinese over the past eight centuries. The sovereign of the Great State was endowed

with an authority that was potentially universal: those within must submit to his authority, those without must defer to it. The concept matters because it was a basic fact for those who owed the Great State allegiance as well as for those entering from zones beyond its reach. It supplied the symbolic architecture of the spaces in which Chinese and non-Chinese interacted. It coloured the terms within which they imagined who they were. It perfumed the moral air they breathed. Part of knowing you were Chinese was knowing that you stood under the canopy of the Great State. Even the pirates who stripped the shipwrecked Koreans of their last possessions in Chapter 5 boasted that they were subjects of the Great State – they anachronistically declared that they were subjects of the Tang Great State even though it was the Ming that then ruled – so that foreigners sailing in China's coastal waters would know that fact and be awed.

Telling This Story

Everything that happens in this book took place against national backdrops, in international contexts and on global scales. In telling these tales, however, I have chosen as much as possible to focus on what happened to real people in particular local settings: on board boats moored off the Zhejiang coast in February 1488, for example. I encourage the reader to think broadly about China's relationships with the world and about how that history may shape the present, but that scaling-up is for you to do. My task is to furnish you with thirteen stories that you can use to construct that larger story (see Map 1). Rather than parade readers across seven and a half centuries down the grand avenue of Chinese history, I offer a series of intimate portraits of people, Chinese and non-Chinese alike, to exemplify how the world has mattered to China, how China has mattered to the world and how China has always been in the world – and how that may have shaped the ways in which people caught between China and the world have managed that tension and made sense of their lives.

As a result, not all the characters in this book are Chinese. In fact, in the first three chapters, which fall within the period that Chinese chronology calls the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), Chinese are outnumbered by non-Chinese. The subject of Chapter 1 is a Mongol, Khubilai Khan, the ruler who brought China within the Mongol Great State.

Watching Khubilai in action gives us a chance to imagine the nature of the political regime that the Mongols installed in China, from which so much of China's subsequent history flows. In Chapter 2 we shift our gaze from the land to the sea and examine Mongol attempts to dominate the maritime world beyond China. We will do this by tracing Marco Polo's voyage as a member of the entourage of a Mongol princess travelling to Persia, at the end of which he returns home to Venice. In Chapter 3 we look more broadly at the Eurasian continent to revisit the old question of whether the Black Death that raged through the Middle East and Europe in the 1340s also struck China, and if so, what this reveals about China's presence in the world. Europeans and Mongols dominate this chapter, mostly because the core research on the history of the plague in China has yet to be written.

The next section of the book takes us into the period of the Ming Great State (1368–1644). Chapter 4 reconsiders some of the issues raised in Chapter 2 by examining how the third Ming emperor, imitating his Yuan predecessors, sent armadas into the Indian Ocean along the very same maritime route that Marco Polo travelled, although a century later. The main character in this story is Zheng He, the imperial eunuch whom some have elevated to the status of China's Christopher Columbus, a comparison that misses what is distinctive about his voyages. Chapter 5 opens similarly on the ocean, though in China's coastal waters rather than the Indian Ocean, where Koreans blown off course find themselves having to negotiate with a wide range of Chinese from pirates to governors in sometimes threatening face-to-face settings. This chapter is set in 1488, at a time after which imperial policy had shifted from the grand designs of the early Ming emperors to an anxious policy of reinforcing the boundaries between Chinese and non-Chinese, whether at the level of individuals or at the level of the state. The chapter also examines the trade in horses that linked the Korean and Chinese economies in this period.

Sharing a border meant that Koreans had centuries of experience managing their relations with Big Brother and knew how to tread carefully when dealing with Chinese in an official or a private capacity. Europeans had no such experience. Chapter 6 catches them at the beginning of that relationship, when Portuguese arrived on China's south coast and attempted unsuccessfully to negotiate a working