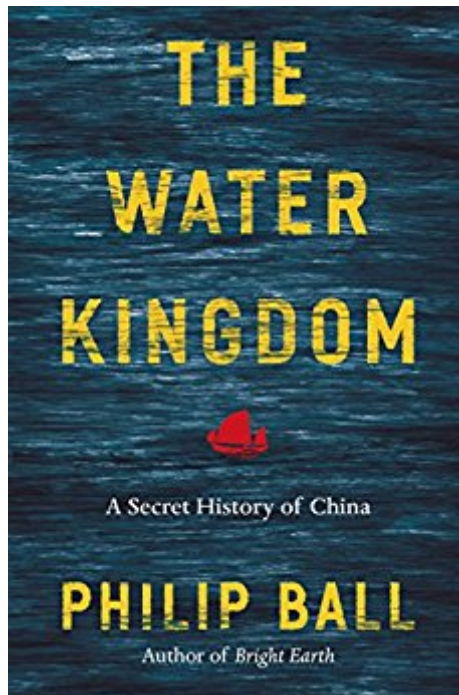


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# The Water Kingdom: A Secret History Of China



## Synopsis

From the Yangtze to the Yellow River, China is traversed by great waterways, which have defined its politics and ways of life for centuries. Water has been so integral to China's culture, economy, and growth and development that it provides a window on the whole sweep of Chinese history. In *The Water Kingdom*, renowned writer Philip Ball opens that window to offer an epic and powerful new way of thinking about Chinese civilization. Water, Ball shows, is a key that unlocks much of Chinese culture. In *The Water Kingdom*, he takes us on a grand journey through China's past and present, showing how the complexity and energy of the country and its history repeatedly come back to the challenges, opportunities, and inspiration provided by the waterways. Drawing on stories from travelers and explorers, poets and painters, bureaucrats and activists, all of whom have been influenced by an environment shaped and permeated by water, Ball explores how the ubiquitous relationship of the Chinese people to water has made it an enduring metaphor for philosophical thought and artistic expression. From the Han emperors to Mao, the ability to manage the waters to provide irrigation and defend against floods was a barometer of political legitimacy, often resulting in engineering works on a gigantic scale. It is a struggle that continues today, as the strain of economic growth on water resources may be the greatest threat to China's future. *The Water Kingdom* offers an unusual and fascinating history, uncovering just how much of China's art, politics, and outlook have been defined by the links between humanity and nature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Excellent book. Full of new information and truly innovative thinking. Should be made compulsory reading in high schools.

Jumped around and seemed to be searching for support for book's premise.

This book was reviewed in The Economist last year, before the American edition was published. Rather than telling you what is inside, I suggest that you click on "Look Inside" and read the Table of Contents. As you will see, it covers all aspect of water in China: geography, history, arts and politics. It is not dry and "scholarly" like a textbook, and while you may find some chapters less interesting than others, you will also find some that are "page turners". One warning though: I bought the Nook e-reader version (a few dollars cheaper) and I should have known better. Wherever there is (I assume) a Chinese character in the text, the Nook reader just shows a small empty square; it is no big deal but I felt I missed something. I have no idea how it would look on a Kindle reader. Also note: (1) although the book contains a few maps, it might be a good idea to read with an atlas or a map of China at hand; (2) if you have other books on China\*, the transliteration of Chinese names may be different -- but easy to figure out. (\*I have RenÃfÂ© Grousset's "The Rise and Splendor of the Chinese Empire" (first published, I think, in the 1930-1940's) that I would highly recommend (I bought mine from an -market supplier, for \$2.95, "used, very good" but with no sign of ever having been read -- a bargain and, yes, a page-turner too.

While this book focuses on the history of water management, it does much more and provides a concise history of China. Chinese history appears to be extremely complicated to most Westerners but it turns out to be quite simple when you approach it correctly. The main difference between Western and Chinese history is that the West suffered two total collapses in the last 3,000 years while China never had a total collapse. The two collapses were the 1200 BC Bronze Age collapse (which most people have never heard of) at the time of ancient Crete and the Fall of Rome in 476 AD. Instead China has had alternating periods of stability and chaos during the same period. While

Western history falls into the sequential eras of Antiquity, Dark Ages, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, Chinese history can be easily understood by looking at its eight successful dynasties (those lasting a few centuries) and ignoring the countless intervening states and conflicts. The Bronze Age Xia Dynasty dates from about 2070 BC and corresponds to the era of ancient Crete in the West. This was followed by the Shang Dynasty from about 1766 BC during which the West suffered its first total collapse. This was when the first primitive Chinese characters on tortoise shells were developed. It was followed by the Zhou Dynasty from about 1046 BC during which China entered the Iron Age. The latter part of the Zhou Dynasty saw China's longest period of instability beginning in 475 BC known as the Warring States period where ultimately seven states including Zhou competed for dominance. Confucius lived during this period. A new period began in 206 BC when the warring state of Han unified China and founded the Han Dynasty. This was actually a watershed moment in Chinese history as the Chinese then began calling themselves the Han people, as they do today, instead of the Xia people. This was the beginning of "modern" Chinese history. What follows then is the dynasties we are more familiar with: Tang (618 AD), Song (960 AD), Ming (1368), and Ching (1644) when the Manchus conquered China. The Ming Dynasty was when great structures such as today's Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the Grand Canal (started in the short-lived Sui Dynasty) were built or completed. A couple of other dynasties requiring mention include the Chin Dynasty which actually unified China in 221 BC but only lasted 14 years before being defeated by the Han Dynasty. The Chin Dynasty is when the Great Wall was begun, even though the current structure was built mainly during the Ming Dynasty. The Chin Dynasty is when the Terracotta Army was sculpted. It is also when the Mandarin (civil service) meritocratic examination system was introduced, but perfected in the Tang Dynasty. The other dynasty is the Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty of 1279 AD. This Mongol dynasty lasted only about a century but was the first foreign dynasty and the time when Marco Polo visited China. This dynasty moved the capital to Beijing, which is near Mongolia. But the book is much more than history and covers various subjects such as philosophy, art, and technology. After spending most of the book on the past, Ball looks at the present and future, especially at China's environmental problems. For example, China has most of the world's polluted cities, the Yellow River (world's sixth longest) ran dry at its end in 1997 and never made it to the sea that year, and the once famous Yangtze Dolphins are now extinct after completion of the Three Gorges Dam in 2003. What may be more relevant for today is that all the modern dynasties (post-Warring States) lasted about three centuries, except for the Han Dynasty which lasted four centuries. This should be kept in mind as the United States approach its 250th Anniversary.

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