

Dates in Chinese History

Until the twentieth century, the dating system used in China was different from that used in Europe and the Americas. There were two principle differences. The first was the method for dividing up the year. The second concerned the method of keeping track of the passing years.

The Months of the Year

As you have already discovered in your reading, Chinese traditionally used a lunar calendar to mark the passing of the months and seasons. Each lunar month begins with the new moon and continues through the lunar cycle which lasts approximately 30 days (29.5 to be a bit more precise). The most usual way of referring to these months was to simply number them from one to twelve. Thus, writers would refer to the fifth month of the year, etc. The months themselves had either 29 or 30 days.

Because each month had about 30 days, the twelve months of the lunar year yield a year of approximately $12 \times 30 = 360$ days. This fact raises a problem. Since the seasons are governed by the Earth's position with respect to the sun, the solar year (i.e., the time it takes the Earth to complete one revolution around the sun) is of vital importance (especially for an agricultural society). That time is actually closer to 365.25 days. Thus, there is constant slippage between the lunar year and the solar year with the result that if it is not corrected, the sequence of months loses touch with the seasons. To get a feel for the problem, imagine if February eventually ended up in the autumn! Chinese corrected the problem by periodically adding extra months (known as "intercalary months"). These were simply inserted in the year and referred to with the same number as the preceding month. For example, "the intercalary sixth month" was an extra month inserted after a regular sixth month.

The Succession of Years

Obviously, for any society interested in keeping a record of its history, it is necessary to devise a system to keep track of the passing years. Chinese historians before the twentieth century generally kept track of the years for each Emperor. The period of an Emperor's rule was given an auspicious title (*nian hao* 年號) and the years simply numbered within that period. For example, the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) was Ming Taizu 明太祖 and his reign was titled "Expansive Martiality" (*hongwu* 洪武). 1370 is thus known as Hongwu 3. Thankfully from 1368 on, each Emperor had only one reign title throughout his time on the throne. Unfortunately, prior to that, Emperors often changed titles in the middle of the reign (sometimes many times!). There are tables of the reign periods available in many dictionaries and reference works (see information below).

There was one other way that Chinese reckoned the passage of time. Both days and years were tracked in cycles of sixty designated by the permutations of the ten “heavenly stems” (*tiangan* 天干) and the twelve “earthly branches” (*dizhi* 地支). The cycle itself had an impact on history. The first day of the cycle (the *jiazi* 甲子 day) was believed to be very auspicious, and therefore many events (e.g., announcing new dynasties, launching a rebellion, etc.) were timed to occur on such days.

Calendrical Conversions

Europe and the Americas have, for many centuries, used the solar calendar (which itself needs to be periodically corrected with the leap year). The solar calendar differs from the lunar in a number of ways besides the different length. First, the lengths of the months are different (including days of 30, 31, and even 28 days). Second, the starting point of the year is different. The solar calendar begins anew every 365 days (except in leap years) on the day designated January 1. The lunar calendar, as noted above, must begin on a new moon. The starting day therefore varies from year to year with respect to the solar calendar because of the length differences and the periodic insertion of intercalary months. This means that there is no clear, one-to-one correspondence between Chinese dates and Western dates. Because a date such as “the thirteenth day of the fifth month in the sixth year of the Heavenly Treasure (*tianbao* 天寶) reign period” is fairly meaningless to most modern students, we need a way to convert dates between the two calendrical systems. Luckily, virtuous scholars have compiled tables to make the process fairly painless. These references works enable us to easily convert the above date to June 25, 747.

Very often when we are checking dates, we only need an approximate equivalent. It is common practice to refer to a year by its closest Western equivalent. For example, most of the sixth year of the Heavenly Treasure reign period occurred during the Western year 747. With regards to the months, keep in mind that the lunar months generally run about one month behind the Western counterpart. In our above example, the fifth lunar month yields a date in June (the sixth solar month). You should also take care with dates around the end of a given year if you are approximating. The period of the lunar cycle and the insertion of intercalary months mean that the lunar New Year can vary from mid-January to mid-February. This means the twelfth lunar month straddles two Western calendar years. If you are referring to such a date, it is important to get the right equivalent.

Reference Works

The University at Albany library does have reference works that you can use to convert dates.

Liang qian nian Zhong Xi li duizhaobiao 兩千年中西曆對照表. *A Sino-Western Calendar for Two Thousand Years, 1-2000 A.D.* Taipei: Yumin chubanshe, 1969.
ULIB call number: CE 15 .L53x

As the English title indicates, this work covers the first two millennia of the Common Era. The tables enable you even to figure out on what day of the week a given Chinese date fell. The “stems and branches” cycles are also indicated. In addition to the tables which provide the date equivalents, there are useful appendices that provide dates for dynasties not traditionally recognized as legitimate. Appendix Table 13 provides a list of emperors by dynasty along with their reign names that includes both characters and Romanization (using the Wade-Giles system), and Table 14 lists all reign names by number of strokes in its first character. This is the easiest and most comprehensive work available in our library.

Chen Yuan 陳垣. *Zhong Xi Hui shi rili* 中西回史日曆. (Calendars for Chinese, Western, and Islamic History). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962. ULIB call number: CE 37 .C49 1962

This work also covers the period between A.D. 1 and 2000. In addition to conversions between the Chinese and Western, its tables also include conversions to the days, months, and years of the Islamic calendar (which differs from both the Western and Chinese calendars). The tables have some interesting quirks. For example, they give the year since the founding of Rome for the period from A.D. 1 to 476 (the date of the fall of Rome). There are also tables for figuring out the days of the week.

Dong Zuobin 董作賓. *Zhongguo nianli jianpu* 中國年曆簡譜. (A Simplified Table of the Chinese Calendar). Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1974. ULIB call number: CE 15 .T86 1974

This work provides simplified tables for each year. Its main advantage is that it covers years from 2674 B.C. to A.D. 2000. For each year, it supplies the dynasty, the Emperor, the reign period, Western year, Julian year, and even the year prior to the founding of the Nationalist Republic of China (e.g., A.D. 1 is 1911 “year before the Republic”). It also lists the Western equivalents for the first day of each lunar month. Days within the month can be calculated by simply by counting off the number of days from the Western start (or vice versa). The “stems and branches” cycles are also indicated.

Other References

Many references include lists of Emperors and their reign periods (usually with approximate Western equivalents). Such lists, however, often assume that you can read characters. The most widely available list is contained in the following work:

Mathews' Chinese English Dictionary. Revised Edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963. ULIB call number: PL 1455 .M34 1963