

China's Ancient History

- For nearly three-thousand years, China was ruled by a series of dynastic, hereditary monarchies,¹ but by the 19th century, the Chinese government—then under the control of the Qing dynasty—was besieged by internal divisions and weakened by the influence of foreign powers, such as the Japanese and the British. In 1899, a group of pro-Qing Chinese nationalists, vehemently opposed to the continued control exerted by colonial forces over their nation, waged the Boxer Rebellion in a futile attempt to drive out those colonial powers; however, the Boxer Rebellion failed terribly, and resulted in the further weakening of the Qing dynasty. In response, the Qing dynasty, in a last-ditch effort to salvage its power, implemented a series of political, educational, and military reforms.² This, too, failed: hardline Confucian conservatives condemned the reforms as radical, while reform-minded activists predominantly viewed the changes as too little, too late
- In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution saw the overthrow of China's imperial rule, and the subsequent implementation of a provisional government. While the revolution began rather incidentally, with an unintentional detonation of a bomb, large factions within the military soon mutinied³ and joined forces with the rebels. By early 1912, Aisin-Gioro Puyi, the last-ever Chinese emperor, abdicated, and a new government, under the direction of Yuan Shikai, a Chinese military general. However, following Yuan's death in 1916, the non-dynastic government fell apart, and political localism reasserted itself during the so-called "Warlord Era" that saw competing military cliques vie for power in a series of disparate and disjointed civil wars
- Given China's deteriorating and fractious nature—a far cry from China's once-glorious status as a regional power—an unusual political alliance known as the "First United Front" emerged between the KMT and the CCP, which sought to reunify China
 - The KMT, or Kuomintang, best known as the Chinese Nationalist Party, which—as evidenced by its name!—endorsed a narrative of strong Chinese nationalism, even while it disavowed the Marxist ideology of its communist rival
 - The CCP, or Communist Party of China, was founded in 1921 and advocated initially for Soviet/Russian-style Bolshevik communism to be implemented in China to uplift the working-class rural poor
- In 1927, this unified front collapsed when Chinese Nationalists purged CCP officials from the United Front; soon afterward, the KMT (Nationalists) succeeded in uniting China, and proclaimed the Republic of China. This subsequently led to the beginnings of the Chinese Civil War, which saw the KMT and CCP fight throughout mainland China. However, during World War II, the two political movements joined forces once again to

¹ Most of these dynasties were composed of Han Chinese rulers, with a small number of exceptions

² These reforms were an extension of the Self-Strengthening Movement, which rose to prominence after the Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars and pushed for the Westernization of China's military and economic structures. For instance, Western military technologies and strategies were incorporated into the ranks of the Chinese military

³ This happened most directly because many within the military resented the lack of modernization under the Qing dynasty

form the Second United Front to ward off the invading Japanese/Axis Powers. After the Japanese war effort failed and the puppet government in China, under Japanese administration, collapsed, the Civil War between the Nationalists and Communists resumed; this second phase of the conflict, which took place between 1945 and 1949, is generally known as the Chinese Communist Revolution

- The CCP-backed People's Liberation Army ultimately defeated the KMT-backed Republic of China Army. As a consequence, Chinese Nationalists were exiled to the island of Taiwan, while the Communists, under Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Party, proclaimed the formation of the People's Republic of China

China Under Mao

- As the Chinese Civil War brutally raged on, Mao Zedong, influenced by theories of anti-imperialism and Chinese nationalism, rose through the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party, and played a crucial role in leading the Communists to victory in their revolutionary campaign against the KMT. Before the PRC's military success, however, Mao consolidated power and began developing a cult of personality by redistributing land to peasants and by actualizing the Yan'an Rectification Movement, which sought to crack down on enemies of the CCP, to attack the social and political power wielded by intellectuals and academics, and to instill Communist ideas within Chinese culture
- After 1949, Mao became the *de facto* dictator of China; under his rule, China ostensibly promised to protect a wide variety of civil, political, and human rights, including equal rights for women and intellectual freedoms for things like speech, assembly, and correspondence, but in practice, Mao's CCP ruled with an iron fist and cracked down heavily on counter-revolutionary movements and suspected enemies of the state. For instance, the Three-anti and Five-anti Campaigns saw China aggressively persecute thousands of people suspected of corruption or association with material capitalism. Similarly, other political movements and campaigns, like the Socialist Education Movement, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and the Sufan Movement resulted in similar outcomes—mass purges of capitalists, ideological adversaries of communism, corrupt officials, supporters of the political right-wing, and KMT sympathizers. These measures, combined with extensive Chinese propaganda, helped Mao to further solidify his cult of personality within Communist China and further consolidate power by purging any possible enemy of the stateGreat Leap Forward
- Mao's approach to governing relied heavily on the principles of Marxist-Leninism. Under his rule, China pursued a Soviet-style command economy, and within this framework, Mao pursued intense policies of industrialization through Five Year Plans, the first of which came in 1953.⁴ In 1958, Mao launched China's "Great Leap Forward," which tried to radically restructure the Chinese economy away from subsistence agriculture and

⁴ As an interesting note—since China's transition to a mixed-market economy within the past two decades, China has renamed these "plans" to "guidelines," to better reflect the shifting nature of the Chinese economy!

towards industrialized manufacturing. Under this system, economic planning was further centralized within the hands of the Communist Party, but more importantly, private agriculture was banned, forcing all farms in China to operate under a system of collectivization. This ultimately led to economic disaster, and the worst famine in human history, in which an estimated *forty-five million people* starved to death—and even though China’s industrial output and population surged in totality, China’s embrace of Maoist ideology led to a staggering loss of life and a profound quantity of sheer human suffering. Several factors contributed to the failure of the Great Leap Forward:

- First, much of the motivation behind Mao’s pursuit of aggressive and unsustainable collectivization/industrialization was irrationally driven by egotistical desire, rather than logical rationale: in 1956, China and the Soviet Union had split from each other over irresolvable ideological fractures. Mao, desperate to demonstrate the superiority of China’s “pure communism” over Nikita Khrushchev’s post-Stalinist reorientation of the Soviet Union’s economy, demanded that production quotas be raised ever-higher within China, forcing Chinese communities to metaphorically tighten their own belts ever-further
- Second, between 1953 and 1958, local officials began lying about local levels of production so they could avoid public humiliation or even execution from dissatisfied CCP top-brass bureaucrats in Beijing; this made Central Party planners overconfident in the health of the Chinese economy, thereby incentivizing them to raise quotas/projected targets *even higher*, which amplified pressures on Chinese farming and industrial communities to unsustainable levels
- Third, China compensated workers with little regard to each worker’s level of output, which created a relative disincentive to work; in the long run, this eventually contributed to a massive food shortage, as collectivized farms became increasingly inefficient and production slowed
- Fourth, the centrally-planned nature of China’s industrialization resulted in materials shortages and mismanaged coordination efforts; for instance, China constructed thousands of backyard furnaces and expected local communities to use those furnaces to increase Chinese steel production. This failed, however, because most of the furnaces could only produce low-quality crude “pig” iron
- Fifth, ineffective farming practices were implemented across China, particularly because many of the officials ordered by Mao to oversee agricultural collectives weren’t suited for the complexities of agricultural engineering. For instance, China attempted to exterminate nearly all sparrows from the country,⁵ since Mao believed their consumption of grain stymied agricultural output; however, this backfired, as locusts—which are normally kept in check by sparrows, which are their natural predators—swarmed farms and destroyed huge amounts of

⁵ The primary way China tried to do this was by making millions of peasants clang pots and pans outside their doors and windows to make sparrows and other grain-eating birds so tired yet incapable of resting (due to the din) that they would drop dead

otherwise-arable farmland. This was also worsened by China's dual approach to economic development—not only did Mao's Great Leap Forward attempt to revitalize China's agricultural sector, it *also* attempted to transform China into a leading global producer of *steel*, which necessitated the relocation of millions of able-bodied men into urban steel-producing facilities. This left much of the backbreaking and grueling agricultural work to the women, children, and elderly left behind in rural areas

- In totality, the Great Leap Forward was called off by 1962, having killed tens of millions of Chinese individuals and having largely failed to invigorate the Chinese economy in the utopic manner predicted by Mao
- Four years later, in 1966, Mao launched a wide-reaching socio-political movement known as the Cultural Revolution, which saw the re-emergence of radical Maoist leadership after several years of moderate policymaking following the Great Chinese Famine. While the Cultural Revolution had many components, the central goal was to reassert Mao's control over the CCP and inspire China's youth to rid the country of "impure" elements of its political, social, and cultural structures that were, in Mao's view, sapping strength from the revolutionary movement—and most importantly, the goal was to eliminate the "Four Olds," or *old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas*. Mao widely distributed his *Little Red Book*⁶ to re-instill Maoist sentiment within the Chinese masses. He encouraged students and China's upcoming generation to carry on the revolution; this resulted in the formation of dozens of paramilitary groups, like the Red Guards, which violently attacked Chinese intellectuals. High-ranking Communist leaders, such as China's President Liu Shaoqi, were purged from power and summarily executed. Cultural artifacts were destroyed, thousands were killed in public spectacles of murder and massacre, cities were plunged into near-anarchical states as factionalism within paramilitary organizations manifested in street violence, and, during the "Down to the Countryside Movement," millions of privileged youth intellectuals were forcibly relocated to poor, rural provinces to be rid of their pro-bourgeois mindsets

Reform under Deng

- Although Mao Zedong's rule came to a close by the late 1970s, it would take several years for China to establish a new hierarchy of well-defined power; eventually, a reform-minded centrist official named Deng Xiaoping, who had been a target of Mao's former purges, outmaneuvered other prospective CCP leaders and became the paramount leader of the Chinese government. Xiaoping was highly disenchanted with Maoist ideology, but was highly impressed by Singapore's expert-driven and technocratic approach to governance. This, combined with the ruinously fragmented state of the

⁶ The *Little Red Book* contained a variety of speeches and essays from Chairman Mao Zedong. Millions of copies were printed and distributed throughout the nation to the peasantry

Chinese political and social landscape that Deng Xiaoping inherited from his predecessor, created an impetus for reform!

- Xiaoping privately disavowed Mao's obsession with ideological purity, and instead opted to pursue a realpolitik agenda of economic pragmatism
 - Economically, China pursued a variety of reforms that accelerated the growth of China's economy, and replaced the Maoist/Soviet-style command economy with a system widely known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Beginning in the late 1970s, China de-collectivized its agricultural industry and liberalized its economy, such as by allowing greater inflows of foreign capital, permitting entrepreneurs to open private enterprises, and implementing the Chengbao system.⁷ By the mid-1980s, China under Deng Xiaoping coziered up even more to the principles of market capitalism: for instance, price controls on many consumers goods were lifted, protectionist barriers to trade were revoked, regional trade agreements were forged, and China further deregulated its communist-style economy in pursuit of WTO⁸ membership and influence within the global economic order, such as by creating special economic zones in cities like Shenzhen. In totality, these reforms contributed to staggeringly high growth rates, often exceeding 9% annually!
 - Socially and culturally, Xiaoping reversed the anti-establishment momentum generated by Mao's Cultural Revolution, and instead sought to return Chinese society to a state of normalcy through the "Boluan Fanzheng" movement. Under this, China's constitution was significantly revised, the structure of the CCP reformed, the gaokao university entrance exam restored,⁹ and the image of intellectualism and academic thought rehabilitated. In short, Xiaoping worked to restore the stability and continuity that had been thrown into upheaval during Mao's tenure as China's paramount leading figure. Demographically, Deng's China implemented a strict one-child policy to curb explosive population growth; while population controls had officially been implemented under Mao, they were tightened and more robustly enforced under Xiaoping's rule
 - Politically, China moved to normalize diplomatic relations with the US, proposed the "One Country, Two Systems" principle that would later guide China's approach to dealing with Macau and Hong Kong, and pursued domestic political reform through Constitutional revisions and term limits
- However, Deng's power was, inevitably, marred by controversy. His relative opposition to Maoist ideology prompted backlash from those supportive of Mao and his cult of

⁷ The Chengbao system partially privatized many state-owned firms by contractually leasing the provision of services, like bus lines and hospitals, to private enterprises, in exchange for those enterprises agreeing to pay a handsome royalty to the state. To be clear, though, the largest state-owned enterprises in China—particularly in sectors like petroleum extraction and financial services—were not affected by the Chengbao system

⁸ The WTO is the World Trade Organization, which was officially established in 1995; China joined the WTO by 2001

⁹ Deng Xiaoping also mandated a nine-year education for all children in China!

personality. Additionally, his embrace of economic liberalization—which had previously been castigated by Mao—exacerbated economic inequality, raising questions about China’s continued status as a communist power. Internationally, Deng’s oversight of the brutal military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests led to outcry and condemnation