



Introduction to China's Modern History

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Introduction

This section focuses on four key topics in China's modern history. The first is that of China's conflict with an aggressively expanding West in the 1800s, beginning with the demands made by England at the end of the eighteenth century; England, as was true with the other imperial powers, was intent on "opening up" trade with China. Chinese denials for trade on England's terms eventually led to several wars which concluded by imposing "unequal" treaties that by the end of the century threaten to carve up China "like a melon."

A second key topic is that of the internal crises that were occurring in China at this time: the rebellions, famines, and explosive population growth of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of these issues were not new to the empire, but the extent and the timing of their challenge was crucial, coming at the same time as foreign encroachments.

A third major topic is that of the dialogue within China about how best to respond to these combined challenges and the extent and nature of the changes that were required. Dialogue about reform was many-faceted, and it vacillated between the progressive combination of elements from the West with the best of Chinese traditions, to the outright rejection of the Chinese past. Finally, by the 1920s, some reformers turned revolutionary, discussing the relevance of Marxism for China.

The fourth major topic is that of the Chinese communist revolution that unfolded in China in the 1930s and 1940s and the particular role played by Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) in adapting Marxism to the Chinese situation.

China in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

China in the 1800's

In the 16th century, the Chinese economy was still the most sophisticated and productive in the world, and the Chinese probably enjoyed a higher standard of living than any other people on earth. The Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty (1644-1912), founded by the invading Manchus, continued this splendor. Contemporary Chinese called the 18th century "unparalleled in history," when all aspects of culture flourished. China was a prosperous state with abundant natural resources, a huge but basically contented population, and a royal house of great prestige at home and abroad.

By the late 18th century, however, the strong Chinese state contained seeds of its own destruction, particularly its expanding population. Having remained at 100 million through much of history, under the peaceful Qing (Ch'ing), the population doubled from 150 million in 1650 to 300 million by 1800, and reached 450 million by the late nineteenth century (cf. population of the U.S. was 200 million in the 1980s). By then, there was no longer any land in China's southern and central provinces available for migration: the introduction of New World (American) crops through trade -

especially sweet potatoes, peanuts, and tobacco, which required different growing conditions than rice and wheat - had already claimed previously unusable land. With only 1/10 of the land arable, farmers had an average of only three (3) acres, with many having only one acre. The right of equal inheritance among sons (versus primogeniture as practiced in Japan) only hastened the fragmentation of land holdings. To compound these problems, the state's political control was diminishing. The size of the bureaucracy remained the same while the population grew. By the 19th century, district magistrates at the lowest level of the Chinese bureaucracy were responsible for the welfare, control, and taxation of an average of 250,000 people. This left control and responsibility for government increasingly in the hands of local leaders whose allegiances were to their localities and families, rather than to the state.

The West in China

When the industrializing European states attempted to entice China into the newly forming world economy in the late 1700s and early 1800s, their overtures were rebuffed by the Chinese, who quite rightly felt that they had little to gain from trade with these states. Western military power was far superior to that of the Chinese, however, and China was defeated in a series of military confrontations and forced to sign "**unequal treaties**" that opened Chinese ports (known as "**treaty ports**"), first to European, and then to American and Japanese traders. The Chinese were further humiliated by having to relinquish legal jurisdiction over sections of these port cities and over foreigners residing in China. Chinese were even excluded from facilities and areas controlled by foreigners. The Chinese were also forced under the treaties to allow Western Christian missionaries to proselytize in the interior of the country. Between the first major confrontation, the Opium War of 1839-42, and the early 1900s, the British, French, Germans, Americans, and Japanese competed for "spheres of influence" within China until it was at risk of being "carved up like a melon."

A series of natural catastrophes (drought and famine) and man-made disasters (especially floods from deteriorating water-control works, made worse by over-reclamation of the wetlands, lowlands, and mountain slopes that were necessary to control water runoff) hit China in the late 19th century. The weakness of the state and the disruption of the economy due to the Western presence left China unable to provide for its huge population. A series of rebellions occurred across the country. The Taiping (1851-1864), Nian (Nien) (1853-1868), Moslem (1855-1873), and Boxer (1898-1901) rebellions all took place in the latter part of the 19th century. During the Taiping Rebellion, rebel forces controlled a large portion of China, and established their capital in the city of Nanking. The power of the central government was further weakened as military power was delegated to the provinces to control these rebellions.

China's Response to Imperialism

The ability of the Western nations and then Japan to impose their economic demands on China by force of arms was **jarring to the Chinese view of themselves as a highly developed civilization**. Moreover, the Western notion of a system of international relations conducted among sovereign nation-states challenged Chinese identity as an advanced, universalistic civilization. It was also difficult for the Chinese, whose emperor had been recognized as the supreme authority by countries bearing tribute to the Chinese court, to adapt to the system that had evolved in Europe by the 1800s whereby sovereign nation-states interacted as equals.

Much of the intellectual history of the late Qing (Ch'ing) and Republican periods (1912-1949) centers around the conflicting views within China of how it should respond to foreign pressures. These fall roughly into three categories: 1) anti-traditionalism, which rejected the traditional claims of cultural superiority, dismissed Chinese culture as sick, corrupt, and useless, and advocated complete Westernization; 2) pro-traditionalism, which sought to completely reject any import of Western culture and to strengthen the country through reform-within-tradition and cultural revival; and 3) the idea of adopting Western technology in order to preserve the essence of Chinese civilization, "**Western learning for application, Chinese learning for essence**." The Chinese emphasis on the moral role of government, the perfectibility of man, and the belief that moral qualities and not technical expertise merited reward and ultimately benefited society, led to an unwillingness to cultivate a class of technical experts-- in industry or in government. As China's predicament worsened, some intellectuals began to argue that these Confucian values were at the root of China's inability to repulse the military and political incursions of the West and Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Revolution and War

The combination of internal upheaval and foreign aggression led to the **collapse of the Qing (Ch'ing) or Manchu dynasty in 1911** and calls for the establishment of a republic. Sun Yat-sen led the forces calling for a republican government and established the Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist Party in 1912. The collapse of the dynastic system ushered in the turbulent "warlord period," however, with regional power centers competing for control. The country was partially reunited under the army of Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party in 1928, but it was invaded by Japan in 1937 and subsequently engulfed by **World War II**.

In the 1920s some Chinese found an explanation for China's subjugation by the imperialist powers and hopes for China's eventual liberation in Marxism. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was formed in 1921 to promote revolution based on Marxist principles. Under Mao's leadership, the Chinese Communist Party established rural (as opposed to urban) bases and began mobilizing farmers. Driven out of southern China by Chiang Kai-shek and Nationalist troops, the CCP made its headquarters in the remote mountainous area of Yanan in north China subsequent to the Long March of 1935-36. The CCP gained strength by calling for united resistance against the Japanese and by experimenting with land reform and other policies to ease the plight of the peasants.

After the end of WW II with the defeat of Japan in 1945, a **civil war** continued between the Nationalists and the Communists over the right to lead China's political and economic development and reestablish China's position in the world. On October 1, 1949, the Chinese Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Nationalist government evacuated to the island of Taiwan, where it established the Republic of China (ROC).

Timeline

THE QING DYNASTY (1644-1911)

1792

Novel, "The Dream of the Red Chamber" published.

1793

Macartney Mission from Great Britain.

1839-1842

Opium War between Great Britain and China.

1842-1843

Treaty of Nanking and Bogue Supplement fix tariff at 5 percent and establish extraterritoriality and most-favored-nation principle in China. Great Britain acquires Hong Kong.

1850-1864

Taiping Rebellion.

1860

Treaty of Peking; Great Britain acquires Kowloon; Russia gets all lands north of Amur and east of Ussuri Rivers.

1884-1885

China defeated in war with France; establishment of French Indo-China.

1894-1895

China defeated by Japan; treaty of Shimonoseki.

1895-1900

Scramble for concessions.

1898

Hundred Day's Reform attempted by the Guangxu Emperor on advice of Kang Youwei (1823-1901); halted by Empress Dowager Zuxi.

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

1900-1901

Boxer Rebellion; allied occupation of Peking; indemnity of 450 million taels (Chinese silver coins).

1905

Abolition of the civil service examination system. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) founds Revolutionary Alliance in Tokyo.

1912

China declared a republic; Sun Yat-sen first President, but resigns in favor of Yuan Shihkai (1859-1916); formation of Nationalist Party.

1915-1920

New Culture Movement: Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Hu Shi (1891-1962), Lu Xun (1881-1936).

1916-1926

Warlord period.

1917

Sun Yat-sen sets up rival government in Canton.

1919

May Fourth Incident.

1921

Founding of Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai.

1926-1927

Northern Expedition led by General Chiang Kai-shek (1884-1975) reunifies China under Nationalist government.

1931

Mukden Incident; Japanese expansion in Manchuria.

1934

Chiang Kai-shek's New Life Movement.

1934-1935

Long March; Communist headquarters established in Yen-an under leadership of Mao Zedong (1893-1976).

1938

Chiang Kai-shek moves capital to Chungking.

1941

New Fourth Army Incident causes rupture in Communist and Nationalist united front. United States enters war with Japan.

1945

Soviet Union enters war against Japan, invading Manchuria. United States attempts to mediate an accord between Communists and Nationalists.

1946-1949

Civil War between Communists and Nationalists results in Communist victory.

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