

Introduction to Chinese History

Exploring the detail

Confucian values

Confucius lived in the 5th century BC but his teachings dominated China until the modern era. He stressed the value of harmony in all things. This should be achieved through respect for legitimate authority, including that of a parent or government, as long as that government ruled wisely and did not abuse power. The philosophy of Confucius is expressed in the saying 'Reform yourself, then arrange your family and so pacify the world.'

Exploring the detail

Western influence in China

In the 1839–42 Opium War, Britain defeated China and forced the Emperor to open some Chinese ports to trade with the outside world. Britain also took control of the island of Hong Kong. Another defeat for China at the hands of Britain and France in 1858 led to the opening up of more Chinese ports. The foreigners who took up residence in China demanded that they should still be subject to the laws of their own countries, not to Chinese law, so 'extra-territorial courts' by foreign powers were set up.

Mao Zedong, usually referred to as Chairman Mao, dominated China from October 1949, when he led the Chinese Communist Party to power, until his death in 1976. During those 37 years, Mao was the subject of a growing personality cult that was promoted not only by the Chairman himself but also by the rest of the Communist Party leadership. Mao was the 'Great Helmsman' who was steering the revolutionary course for the People's Republic of China on its voyage towards a communist utopia. His image was everywhere in China in the form of posters, photographs and statues. His speeches and poems were reproduced in newspapers and his writings became required reading for all. Mao Zedong Thought, which in the 1960s was published in the *Little Red Book*, became the guiding principles for political action and was enshrined in the Chinese constitution. Although Mao did not rule China alone and his power and influence were greater at some times than at others, it is nevertheless true that he had the most profound impact on every area of Chinese society. The China that he passed on to his successors was a very different country from that into which he had been born.

Mao Zedong was born in 1893 in Hunan province. In later years, he would make much of his humble peasant origins although, in fact, his father was a well-to-do grain merchant and farmer. Mao therefore had a somewhat more comfortable upbringing than the majority of Chinese peasants, whose 'reward' for a life of back-breaking labour was extreme poverty. Mao showed himself to be rebellious in his youth, trying to run away from home at the age of 10 in protest against his father's beatings and refusing to enter into an arranged marriage against his father's wishes. In doing so, he was taking his first steps towards rejecting the traditional Confucian values on which Chinese family and social relationships were based. China in the 1890s and early 1900s was experiencing a serious social and political crisis that was causing young people to question old certainties and to embrace new ideas, many of which were reaching China from the West.

Crisis in China

Since the 17th century, China had been ruled by the Qing dynasty. Over many thousands of years the Chinese had demonstrated their superiority over Western nations in many ways. The use of a standardised written language, the development of complex systems of government and education, and the invention of printing and gunpowder all occurred in China long before these things were developed or discovered in western Europe. However, by the 19th century China had fallen behind the West in the development of technology, particularly in weapons. Therefore, when Western powers such as Britain began to use force to persuade a reluctant Chinese government to open up its ports to trade with foreign merchants, Chinese resistance was ineffective and futile. By the 1890s, the Chinese Empire was being carved up between various European powers

and Japan. Foreign companies were building railways, factories, mines and ports to exploit China's natural resources. Foreign soldiers were guarding foreign bases on Chinese soil. Foreign residents in China refused to be bound by Chinese laws and would only submit to justice administered by their own 'extra-territorial courts'. Christian missionaries were seeking to convert Chinese people and building hospitals and schools to extend their influence. These humiliations were deeply resented by most Chinese, while the inability of the Emperor to resist growing foreign influence in China severely undermined his authority. A growing nationalist movement among the educated elite sought not only to restore China's national pride but also to modernise the system of government as a first step towards removing foreign influence.

■ The end of the Qing dynasty

Resentment at growing foreign influence coincided with a serious economic and political crisis in China. A rising population put pressure on food supplies and caused **inflation**. This was made worse by China's increasing reliance on imports of foreign-made goods, which led to a weakening of the country's financial position. Widespread corruption among local and provincial government officials meant that a large portion of tax revenues did not reach central government, further weakening its financial position. There had been a number of revolts against imperial rule during the 19th century, culminating in the Boxer Rising of 1900 which was primarily a revolt against foreign influence but also threatened to undermine the authority of the Emperor. Pressure for change, although resisted by the Dowager Empress Cixi and her conservative allies, resulted in constitutional reform and the creation of a new professional army in the early 20th century. Such reforms, however, arrived too late to save the dynasty. Growing unrest culminated in an uprising in 1911 which led to the abdication of the Emperor and the setting up of the Chinese Republic.

Yuan Shikai

After the fall of imperial rule, effective power in China was in the hands of the new army and its Commander-in-Chief, Yuan Shikai. Although Yuan at first allowed political parties to be established and elections to be held for a new House of Representatives (parliament), he was not prepared to share power with elected politicians. After the new nationalist National People's Party (Guomindang), led by Sun Yat-sen, won the largest share of the vote, Yuan Shikai outlawed political parties and had himself declared Emperor in 1915. When he died in 1916, he left no clear successor and no stable form of government in China. The result was that for the next 10 years China had no effective system of central government. Instead, provincial **warlords** governed different parts of the country. Wars between rival warlords left areas devastated. Heavy taxes were imposed on the peasants to pay for the warlords' growing armies. Any resistance was put down with brutal force. Internally weakened, China was in no position to resist when, in 1919, the victorious Western Allies in the First World War granted former German-held territory in China to Japan. Student demonstrations against China's treatment at the hands of the Western Allies, held in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on 4 May 1919, failed to have any impact on the actions of the Western powers. Once again, China's impotence had been underlined.

■ Exploring the detail

The Qing dynasty

The last in a long line of dynasties to rule China, the Qing dynasty was established by Manchu conquerors from the north in the 17th century, hence they are sometimes referred to as the Manchu emperors. During the 18th century, China had prospered under their rule.

■ Key terms

Inflation: an increase in prices.

Inflation is usually caused when goods are in short supply.

Warlords: powerful local leaders who had their own armies.

They ruled their territories as independent kingdoms.

■ Exploring the detail

The May 4th Movement

At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, the Allied powers (Britain, France and the USA) had decided that Japan, which had joined the alliance in the First World War, should be rewarded for its support by being allowed to take over former German territory in China. This was regarded in China as another national humiliation and provoked violent protests in Beijing. This led to the spread of a nationwide student protest movement, known as the May 4th Movement, which was dedicated to change and the rebirth of China as a proud, independent nation. The movement could not agree, however, on exactly which changes should be made.

Did you know?

Communism and the Comintern

Communism is the political theory that argues for the abolition of private property and for all property to be owned communally. The Russian Revolution of 1917 had led to the creation of the world's first communist state. The Communist International (Comintern) had been established by the government in Russia (later the Soviet Union) to spread communist ideas and build communist political parties in other countries.

Key term

Nationalism: Nationalists believe in the concept of nationhood, usually defined by a common language and common culture. They argue that the members of a nation should belong to the same State and that the State should be independent of foreign control or influence.

Communists and Nationalists

During the early 1920s, those Chinese who wanted a strong, united China, free of foreign interference, had a choice between two main political parties. The Guomindang (GMD), led by Sun Yat-sen until his death in 1925, was the larger and more established party. Its aims were summarised in its Three Principles: **Nationalism**, democracy and the people's livelihood. With wealthy backers among China's businessmen and landlords, and the creation of a new National Revolutionary Army (NRA), the GMD was fast becoming the dominant party in China in the early 1920s. In 1921, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was also established, led by Chen Duxiu but heavily influenced by Russian advisers sent to China by the Communist International (Comintern). The young Mao Zedong was an early recruit to the new party and began to attract attention for his work in building Communist Party membership in his home area of Hunan. Although CPC membership grew rapidly – by 1926 it had 30,000 members – it was still a small minority party and, following the insistence of its Russian advisers, it worked closely with the GMD. In its early years, the CPC concentrated on recruiting industrial workers in cities such as Shanghai, although Mao also carried out propaganda work among peasants.

Key profile

Chen Duxiu

Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) was a radical intellectual who was involved in the May 4th Movement in 1919. He was one of the founders of the CPC in 1921 and its General Secretary from 1921 to 1927. He later broke with the CPC and joined an opposition group.

The White Terror

In 1926 the GMD, by now led by Chiang Kai-shek, decided to launch a military campaign to break the power of the warlords in northern China. In a short but bitterly fought campaign, the NRA took control of the Yangzi River basin and the city of Nanjing in central China. The campaign continued in 1927–8 until, by the end of 1928, Chiang and the GMD were in control over the whole of China from Guangzhou in the south to Manchuria in the north. In the early stages of the campaign, cooperation with the CPC was helpful to the GMD. Communist propaganda among the peasants led to many revolts, which undermined the warlords' power from within. However, cooperation with the Communists also caused problems for the GMD because its wealthy backers (businessmen and landlords) were vigorously opposed to working with a party that was agitating workers to strike and peasants to revolt. In 1927, therefore, Chiang decided to end cooperation with the Communists and destroy the CPC. In April 1927, NRA forces in Shanghai, working closely with criminal gangs, massacred the Communists and their supporters in the city's trades union movement. It has been estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 people were killed. Similar anti-communist massacres, often referred to as the White Terror, were carried out by GMD forces in other cities, including Guangzhou. Attempts by Communists to start their own uprisings, for example in Nanchang, were easily and ruthlessly crushed.

Key profile

Chiang Kai-shek

Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), the son of a salt merchant, came from a well-to-do middle-class family. Educated in China and Japan, he rose to prominence in the 1920s as a military leader in the Guomindang. He was sent to Moscow in 1923 for military training before returning to China to take charge of the Whampoa Military Academy, at which officers in the NRA were trained. At Whampoa, therefore, Chiang was able to create a core of young army officers who were loyal to him. On the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925, Chiang's power base in the army helped him to secure the succession. He married Soong Mei Ling, the sister-in-law of Sun Yat-sen and the daughter of a wealthy Shanghai businessman. These connections, and his links to the Shanghai criminal underworld, helped him in his rise to power and his subsequent career. After the Communists took power in China in 1949, Chiang set up a nationalist government in Taiwan, where he was president until his death in 1975.

Nationalist rule

Over the course of the next 10 years, Chiang Kai-shek consolidated his control over China. Under the GMD, the country once again became ruled by a single central government, although in reality China remained a loose federation of semi-independent provinces. The building of new roads, railways and airports improved internal communications and cities such as Shanghai became thriving industrial and commercial centres. Foreign influence, especially over trade and industry, remained strong but the Chinese government did regain control over the collection of customs duties. Politically, China was essentially a one-party State under Chiang's dictatorship. Chiang was both President and Commander-in-Chief of the army; he had close links to powerful banking and commercial interests, and he used an extensive secret police network to spy on and repress any opposition.

Communist survival

As Chiang's power grew, the CPC's own survival was severely threatened. Forced to abandon its city strongholds after the events of 1927, and with its membership plummeting, the Communists retreated to remote rural areas. Mao Zedong was forced to leave Hunan and establish a base in a mountainous area in Jiangxi province. Mao, who had always differed from the CPC leadership in advocating working with the peasants in rural areas rather than the official line of building up a membership among industrial workers in the cities, was well placed to take the lead in the new base area. By 1931, he had become Party Secretary and head of the government in the Jiangxi base area, now known as the **Chinese Soviet Republic**. By confiscating land from the landlords for redistribution to the poorer peasants and instituting reforms which improved the rights of women, Mao was able to win support and consolidate communist control over this region. Nevertheless, the position of the Communists in Jiangxi became increasingly precarious as Chiang's army made several attempts to crush this independent communist outpost. By 1934, the military situation had become so dangerous that a decision was made to abandon the Jiangxi base area and break out to find a more secure base elsewhere.

Key term

Chinese Soviet Republic: this term was borrowed from the Russian revolutionaries of 1917, who based their power on the Soviets – councils of workers', soldiers' and peasants' representatives. By using the term 'Soviet Republic', the Chinese Communists were consciously declaring the revolutionary nature of their regime.

The Long March

What followed was the Long March of 1934–5, which has been given legendary status by Communist Party propaganda ever since. Although recent studies have questioned the official CPC version of the events of the Long March, it is nevertheless true that the Communists, under Mao's leadership, broke out of the Jiangxi base area and headed west on foot. After several changes of direction, crossing 18 mountain ranges, fighting through the ranks of four GMD armies, 368 days and a journey of 12,500 km (7,700 miles) the survivors arrived in the area around Yan'an in Shaanxi province. Of the 80,000 who had originally set out, only about 5,000 survived the rigours of the journey and GMD attacks. The area in which they finally set up a new base was desolate and barren. By the mid-1930s, it seemed that the CPC was on the verge of extinction.

War against Japan

What completely transformed the situation in China was an external threat from Japan. Since the 1890s Japan, a growing power in the Far East, had been gaining territory from China. First the island of Taiwan and the Korean peninsula were taken by Japan in 1895. After the First World War, Japan was given control over former German concessions in China by Western powers, without any reference to the Chinese government. In 1931, Japan began a newly aggressive phase of expansion in China when Manchuria was occupied. With no outside help, and with his priority being to crush the Communists in China, Chiang Kai-shek put up little resistance to Japanese aggression. In the summer of 1937, however, the Japanese launched an even more serious threat to China when a Japanese army occupied Beijing, the beginning of a campaign to take control over the whole of northern China. At this point Chiang realised that if he did not resist, his own position would be threatened. He called a national conference to coordinate resistance, to which the Communists were invited. Mao declared that the Communists would support a policy of 'total resistance by the whole nation'. The United Front between Nationalists and Communists was, in theory at least, revived. The pressure on the CPC had been relieved and the Party was able to rebuild and expand.

Nationalist retreat

Over the next four years, the Japanese extended the area under their control southwards to the Yangzi River basin, including the city of Nanjing. They also captured Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong so that, by the end of 1941, they were in control of most of the Chinese coastline. Chiang was forced to retreat and move his capital city to Chongqing in the south. He now controlled only central southern and western China, and even in these areas his control was not total. Meanwhile, the Communists had begun to revive. Outside Yan'an there were still remnants of the CPC in the old base area of Jiangxi. In Yan'an, Mao established himself for the first time as the undisputed leader of the CPC through the Yan'an Rectification campaign of 1942. With a more open recruitment policy, Party membership began to grow; from 40,000 members in 1937, the CPC had grown to 800,000 by 1940. The communist armies showed similar increases in size. By implementing policies of rent control, and campaigns to improve literacy and stamp out corruption among officials, the CPC gradually began win over the support of the peasants. Above all, the Communists were seen to be achieving some military successes against the Japanese,

■ Cross-reference

See page 38 for more on the Yan'an Rectification campaign.

in contrast to Chiang and the GMD whose military campaigns mostly ended in defeat. Mao adopted **guerrilla warfare** tactics which tied down large numbers of Japanese troops and won the Communists respect from other Chinese people.

By the late 1930s, communist forces in China were showing signs of a revival in their fortunes after appearing to be on the verge of extinction in 1935. As long as the war against Japan continued, however, the struggle for control of China would have to be postponed.

■ Key term

Guerrilla warfare: the key features of guerrilla warfare are to divide an army into small, lightly armed, mobile bands which can merge into the civilian population and attack the larger enemy forces at their weakest points. Key targets for guerrilla bands would be the enemy's lines of communication and supply. A key principle of guerrilla warfare according to Mao was to retreat when the enemy concentrates a vastly superior force but to attack when and where the enemy least expects it.