

China in the 20th Century and Beyond

In the early 1900s, China was ripe for revolution. China had faced years of humiliation at the hands of outsiders. Foreign countries controlled its trade and economic resources. Many Chinese believed that modernization and nationalism held the country's keys for survival. They wanted to build up the army and navy, to construct modern factories, and to reform education. Yet others feared change. They believed that China's greatness lay in its traditional ways.

Nationalists Overthrow Qing Dynasty

Among the groups pushing for modernization and nationalization was the Kuomintang (KWOH•mih•TANG), or the Nationalist Party. Its first great leader was Sun Yixian. In 1911, the Revolutionary Alliance, a forerunner of the Kuomintang, succeeded in overthrowing the last emperor of the Qing dynasty. The Qing had ruled China since 1644.

In 1912, Sun became president of the new Republic of China. Sun hoped to establish a modern government based on the "Three Principles of the People": (1) nationalism—an end to foreign control, (2) people's rights—democracy, and (3) people's livelihood—economic security for all Chinese. Sun Yixian considered nationalism vital. He said, "The Chinese people . . . do not have national spirit. Therefore even though we have four hundred million people gathered together in one China, in reality, they are just a heap of loose sand." Despite his lasting influence as a revolutionary leader, Sun lacked the authority and military support to secure unity. Sun turned over the presidency to a powerful general, Yuan Shikai, who quickly betrayed the democratic ideals of the revolution. His actions sparked local revolts. After the general died in 1916, civil war broke out. Real authority fell into the hands of provincial warlords or powerful military leaders. They ruled territories as large as their armies could conquer.

The Legacy of Mao

After the Communists came to power in China in 1949, Mao Zedong set out to transform China. Mao believed that peasant equality, revolutionary spirit, and hard work were all that was needed to improve the Chinese economy. However, lack of modern technology damaged Chinese efforts to increase agricultural and industrial output. In addition, Mao's policies stifled economic growth. He eliminated incentives for higher production. He tried to replace family life with life in the communes. These policies took away the peasants' motive to work for the good of themselves and their families.

Facing economic disaster, some Chinese Communists talked of modernizing the economy. Accusing them of "taking the capitalist road," Mao began the Cultural Revolution in 1966 to cleanse China of antirevolutionary influences. Instead of saving radical communism, however, the Cultural Revolution turned many people against it. In the early 1970s, China entered another moderate period under Zhou Enlai. Zhou had been premier since 1949. During the Cultural Revolution, he had tried to restrain the radicals.

China and the West

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, China played almost no role in world affairs. In the early 1960s, China had split with the Soviet Union over the leadership of world communism. In addition, China displayed hostility toward the United States because of U.S. support for the government on Taiwan. China Opened Its Doors China's isolation worried Zhou. He began to send out signals that he was willing to form ties to the West. In 1971, Zhou startled the world by inviting an American table-tennis team to tour China. It was the first visit by an American group to China since 1949.

The visit began a new era in Chinese-American relations. In 1971, the United States reversed its policy and endorsed UN membership for the People's Republic of China. The next year, President Nixon made a state visit to China. He met with Mao and Zhou. The three leaders agreed to begin cultural exchanges and a limited amount of trade. In 1979, the United States and China established diplomatic relations.

Both Mao and Zhou died in 1976. Shortly afterward, moderates took control of the Communist Party. They jailed several of the radicals who had led the Cultural Revolution. By 1980, Deng Xiaoping had emerged as the most powerful leader in China. He was the last of the "old revolutionaries" who had ruled China since 1949.

Although a lifelong Communist, Deng boldly supported moderate economic policies. Unlike Mao, he was willing to use capitalist ideas to help China's economy. He embraced a set of goals known as the Four Modernizations. These called for progress in agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. Deng launched an ambitious program of economic reforms. First, Deng eliminated Mao's communes and leased land to individual farmers. The farmers paid rent by delivering a fixed quota of food to the government. They could then grow crops and sell for a profit. Under this system, food production increased 50% from 1978-1984. Deng extended his program to industry. The government permitted private businesses to operate. It gave the managers of state-owned industries more freedom to set production goals. Deng also welcomed foreign technology and investment. Deng's economic policies produced striking changes. As incomes increased, people began to buy appliances and televisions. Chinese youths wore stylish clothes and listened to Western music. Gleaming hotels filled with foreign tourists showed China's new policy of openness.

Massacre in Tiananmen Square

Mao's Attempts to Change China	
Mao's Programs	Program Results
First Five-Year Plan 1953–1957	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Industry grew 15 percent a year.• Agricultural output grew very slowly.
Great Leap Forward 1958–1961	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• China suffered economic disaster—industrial declines and food shortages.• Mao lost influence.
Cultural Revolution 1966–1976	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mao regained influence by backing radicals.• Purges and conflicts among leaders created economic, social, and political chaos.

Deng's economic reforms produced a number of unexpected problems. As living standards improved, the gap between the rich and poor widened. Increasingly, the public believed that party officials profited from their positions. Furthermore, the new policies admitted not only Western investments and tourists but also Western political ideas. Increasing numbers of Chinese students studied abroad and learned about the West. In Deng's view, the benefits of opening the economy exceeded the risks. Nevertheless, as Chinese students learned more about democracy, they began to question China's lack of political freedom.

In 1989, students sparked a popular uprising that stunned China's leaders. Beginning in April of that year, more than 100,000 students occupied Tiananmen Square, a huge public space in the heart of Beijing. The students mounted a protest for democracy. The student protest won widespread popular support. When thousands of students began a hunger strike to highlight their cause, people poured into Tiananmen Square to support them. Many students called for Deng Xiaoping to resign.

Instead of considering political reform, Deng declared martial law. He ordered about 100,000 troops to surround Beijing. Although many students left the square after martial law was declared, about 5,000 chose to remain and continue their protest. The students revived their spirits by defiantly erecting a 33-foot statue that they named the "Goddess of Democracy." On June 4, 1989, the standoff came to an end. Thousands of heavily armed soldiers stormed Tiananmen Square. Tanks smashed through barricades and crushed the Goddess of Democracy. Soldiers sprayed gunfire into crowds of frightened students. They also attacked protesters elsewhere in Beijing. The assault killed hundreds and wounded thousands.

The attack on Tiananmen Square marked the beginning of a massive government campaign to stamp out protest. Police arrested thousands of people. The state used the media to announce that reports of a massacre were untrue. Officials claimed that a small group of criminals had plotted against the government. Television news, however, had already broadcast the truth to the world.

China Enters the New Millennium

The brutal repression of the prodemocracy movement left Deng firmly in control of China. During the final years of his life, Deng continued his program of economic reforms. Although Deng moved out of the limelight in 1995, he remained China's leader.

In February 1997, after a long illness, Deng died. Communist Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin assumed the presidency. Many questions arose after Deng's death. What kind of leader would Jiang be? Would he be able to hold on to power and ensure political stability? Jiang was considered skilled, flexible, and practical. However, he had no military experience. Therefore, Jiang had few allies among the generals. He also faced challenges from rivals, including hard-line officials who favored a shift away from Deng's economic policies. Other questions following Deng's death had to do with China's poor human rights record, its occupation of Tibet, and relations with the United States. During the 1990s, the United States pressured China to release political prisoners and ensure basic rights for political opponents. China remained hostile to such pressure. Its government continued to repress the prodemocracy movement. Nevertheless, the desire for freedom still ran through Chinese society. If China remained economically open but politically closed, tensions seemed bound to surface.

In late 1997, Jiang paid a state visit to the United States. During his visit, U.S. protesters demanded more democracy in China. Jiang admitted that China had made some mistakes but refused to promise that China's policies would change. President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji announced their retirement in late 2002. Jiang's successor was Hu Jintao. However, Jiang was expected to wield influence over his successor behind the scenes. Hu became president of the country and general secretary of the Communist Party. Jiang remained political leader of the military. Both supported China's move to a market economy.

Another major issue for China was the status of Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a thriving business center and British colony on the southeastern coast of China. On July 1, 1997, Great Britain handed Hong Kong over to China, ending 155 years of colonial rule. As part of the transfer, China promised to respect Hong Kong's economic system and political liberties for 50 years. Many of Hong Kong's citizens worried about Chinese rule and feared the loss of their freedoms. Others, however, saw the transfer as a way to reconnect with their Chinese heritage. In the few years after the transfer, the control of mainland China over Hong Kong tightened.

China Beyond 2000

The case of China demonstrates that the creation of democracy can be a slow, fitful, and incomplete process. Liberal reforms in one area, such as the economy, may not lead immediately to political reforms.

In China, there has been a dramatic reduction in poverty. Some experts argue that China managed to reform its economy and reduce poverty because it adopted a gradual approach to selling off state industries and privatizing the economy rather than a more abrupt approach. China's strategy has paid off: by 2007, the country had the world's fourth largest economy, after the United States, Japan, and Germany. Cheap consumer goods from China are filling shops and department stores worldwide.

But China's economic strength has come with a cost. The wealth gap between urban and rural areas has widened, with inequality leading to social unrest. In addition, rapid industrialization has caused pollution and severe environmental problems. As countries are increasingly linked through technology and trade, they will have more opportunity to influence each other politically. When the U.S. Congress voted to normalize trade with China, supporters of such a move argued that the best way to prompt political change in China is through greater engagement rather than isolation. Another sign of China's increasing engagement with the world is its successful campaign to host the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.