

## **A Quick Introduction to Chinese History in the 20th Century**

China's two thousand years of imperial rule by various dynasties, the last of which was the Qing dynasty, ended in 1912 when the army overthrew the dynasty and established a short-lived republic. This change in power was followed by a ten-year period of fragmentation in which various warlords, provincial military leaders, competed with one another for power. This period lasted from 1916 to 1927. During the 1920s, the great struggle between the nationalist movement and the communists to gain control of China began. In the 1930s, the nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), gained the upper hand and expelled the communists from southern and eastern China. In what became known as the Long March, the communists trekked across China and established a base in the northwest. It was during this period that Mao Zedong (1893-1976) emerged as the communist leader.

In the 1930s, the impoverished and divided nation also had to deal with the Japanese invasion, which was not finally repelled until the end of World War II in 1945. After World War II, the civil war between nationalists and communists, which had been put on hold during the previous decade because of the need to unite against the foreign invader, resumed. By 1949, the Communist Party emerged victorious and inaugurated the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Chiang Kai-shek and the remaining nationalists fled to the island of Taiwan.

The communists soon formed a strong central government with a planned economy based on the five-year plans typical of the Soviet Union. In rural areas, the old feudal system was broken up, and land was taken from landowners and given to the peasants. This was a violent upheaval, and from 1950 to 1952, some 700,000 landlords and others designated as counterrevolutionaries were killed.

Despite the violence, during the 1950s, China made enormous strides in modernizing the backward economy, particularly by investing in heavy industry (iron, steel, machinery). During the first five-year plan, the annual industrial growth rate was 11 percent. But Mao was dissatisfied with the results, and from 1958 to 1960, he oversaw what was called the Great Leap Forward, a drastic reorganization of the economy aimed at raising production. The results were disastrous and contributed to the famine that afflicted China especially in 1960 and 1961, during which twenty million people died of starvation.

## **The Cultural Revolution**

In 1966, the ten-year period known as the Cultural Revolution began, during which the country descended into chaos and near anarchy. The Cultural Revolution was put into motion by Mao as a way of outmaneuvering other communist leaders whom he had come to distrust. Mao also wanted to shake up the bureaucracy, which he thought was too slow in implementing reform. For this he enlisted the aid of millions of young people, mostly students, reasoning that they

were not attached to the ways of the past and would generate the necessary revolutionary fervor. Mao invited these students, who were known as Red Guards, to tear down all the old structures of society. Mobs of Red Guards dressed in paramilitary uniforms traveled the countryside by train creating turmoil wherever they went. Educational and religious institutions were targeted. Teachers were beaten up by their students; factories and high schools were closed. People who were arbitrarily accused of being counterrevolutionaries were either imprisoned or executed. Millions died during the Cultural Revolution; some estimates put the deaths at between twenty-three and thirty-five million.

The Cultural Revolution was also the time when the personality cult surrounding Mao, which had been present since the 1940s, reached its most extreme form. Jonathan Spence explains in his book *Mao Zedong* the form the personality cult took during this time:

Every street was to have a quotation from Chairman Mao prominently displayed, and loudspeakers at every intersection and in all parks were to broadcast his thought. Every household as well as all trains and buses, bicycles and pedicabs, had to have a picture of Mao on its walls. Ticket takers on trains and buses should all declaim Mao's thought.

Mao Zedong was regarded as the embodiment of the Chinese nation, the great leader whose wisdom unerringly steered the ship of state.

## **Economic Liberalization**

Mao died in 1976. In the 1980s, his successor, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), pursued what were known as open-door economic policies, which encouraged the introduction of Western capitalistic practices to the Chinese economy. These policies were continued by Deng's successor, Zhao Ziyang (1919-2005), who became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 1987. As a result, the Chinese economy began to prosper as never before. Annual growth rate during the 1980s was about 9.5 percent (compared to an average 3 percent annual growth in the United States), and Chinese consumers found that luxury items such as American clothes, stereos, automobiles, and washing machines were now within their reach.

Economic liberalization also produced demands for political liberalization. There were some pro-democracy demonstrations at the end of the 1980s. Leaders used the army to suppress demonstrations, and many students and others were imprisoned following mass public disorder.