

Early history and the Imperial period

Chinese civilisation began in the Yellow River basin of northern China, an area of fertile soils where Neolithic agricultural communities developed in the 5th and 6th centuries BC. In 221 BC, the Emperor Qin completed the conquest of neighbouring states, and for the first time an extensive area of China was united under a single ruler. By this time, cities and commerce had emerged with an administration capable of undertaking drainage and irrigation projects. Agricultural and basic industrial techniques were well developed, and the basis of Chinese thought such as Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism), had been established.

During the Qin Dynasty and the succeeding Han Dynasty, the administrative system was further developed, and Chinese rule extended westwards and southwards. The Han Dynasty fell in AD 220, and China remained divided until reunited by the Sui in 589. They were followed by the Tang Dynasty (618-907), during which an effective Confucian bureaucracy was set up, Chinese culture flourished, and Chinese rule spread along the Silk Road. There then followed a period of division in which the Chinese Song Dynasty ruled in southern China, and the Mongols, under Genghis Khan, in the north. In 1279 Kublai Khan defeated the Song and reunited China under Mongol rule, with his capital at what is now Peking (Beijing), then known as Dadu. In 1368 the Chinese cast off Mongol rule.

Under the newly-installed Ming Dynasty, the traditional Chinese economic and administrative system was refined. In 1644 the Manchu people from the northeast conquered China and founded the Qing Dynasty. The Manchus had long been in contact with Chinese civilisation and absorbed the Ming system almost intact (although the commanding heights of authority were reserved for Manchus). The Qing extended their rule over the western periphery of China, including Tibet, so that by the mid-eighteenth century the Chinese Empire was at the height of its strength and prosperity. During the nineteenth century the Qing faced repeated challenges from peasant revolts and the depredations of the western powers. Following the Chinese defeat in the first Opium War (1839-42), the Qing ceded Hong Kong Island to Britain, and were forced to open certain ports to foreign trade.

Further concessions were obtained by Britain and other powers, including the establishment of extra-territorial rights (including the right for non-Chinese to be subject to the laws of their own countries). During this period, a massive popular revolt, the Taiping rebellion (1855-65), devastated much of central China. The Qing made various half-hearted attempts at reform. But central power was progressively eroded. The Qing Dynasty fell in 1911, and the Republic of China was founded in its place.

The Republic of China (1911 – 1949)

However, the new Government failed to concentrate political control and China steadily dissolved into a series of regional quasi-fiefdoms, often dominated by local warlords. The Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang - KMT) led by Dr Sun Yat-sen (who died in 1925) was founded in 1912.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established in 1921. One of its founders was Mao Zedong. For a brief period the two parties cooperated. But all collaboration ended abruptly in 1927, when the KMT led by Chiang Kaishek turned against the Communists. Communist guerrillas established bases in the countryside, mainly in the southern province of Jiangxi between 1928-34. To flee the attacks of the KMT, the Communists were forced into a prolonged evasive manoeuvre known as the Long March (1934-35), which finally led them to a redoubt near Yan'an in northwest China's Shaanxi Province. When the Japanese invaded China in 1937, the two parties patched together a "united front", which collapsed into all-out civil war following Japan's defeat. The KMT eventually took refuge on the island of Taiwan off the southeast coast. The KMT on Taiwan still claim that they constitute the lawful Government of China, although most nations, including the UK and USA, recognise the Government in Peking as China's sole legitimate Government.

The People's Republic under Mao

The People's Republic of China was established on 1 October 1949. The new government faced enormous problems of establishing administrative control and restoring an economy ravaged by warfare. Land was redistributed to the peasants and by 1953 the economy had been restored to its pre-1937 level. In a campaign which reached its peak in 1955 the peasants were organised into collectives and the remaining private industries passed into collective ownership. By 1956 the leadership felt confident enough to encourage greater intellectual freedom and launched the 'Hundred Flowers' movement. However the criticisms proved unacceptable and the foremost critics were imprisoned during the subsequent 'anti-Rightist' campaign.

The first Five Year Plan (1953-58) had been based on the Soviet model of development, with priority given to heavy industry. In 1958, searching for a Chinese model, Mao Zedong launched an ambitious economic programme known as the 'Great Leap Forward' which involved the intensive organisation of agriculture through the commune system and the widespread development of small-scale local industries. The programme foundered, with problems aggravated by poor harvests from 1959 to 1961, and by the withdrawal of Soviet aid in 1960.

In 1959 Mao retired as Head of State and was replaced by Liu Shaoqi. Under his direction and that of Premier Zhou Enlai, the economy gradually recovered. However, Mao became increasingly concerned by the policies and style of their leadership which he regarded as revisionist. In 1966 he launched the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' with the aid of his wife, Jiang Qing, and the then Defence Minister, Lin Biao, and encouraged the Red Guards, consisting mainly of students, to criticise the Party and Government. Officials at all levels, including President Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, then the General Secretary of the Party, were disgraced and the Party machine was all but destroyed. In 1967-68 violence and anarchy forced Mao increasingly to rely on the armed forces to maintain order and exercise control. In 1971, Lin Biao, who had been designated Mao's successor, was killed in an air crash while attempting to flee to the Soviet Union after the failure of a coup d'etat. Following his fall the army's influence was reduced and many Party and Government official were rehabilitated.

The last years of Mao's life were marked by an increasingly intense struggle for succession between those leaders who had come to power during the Cultural Revolution

(such as Jiang Qing), and the old guard of the Party (personified by Zhou Enlai), many of whom had been rehabilitated after being disgraced in the Cultural Revolution. In 1973 Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated, and was clearly intended by Zhou Enlai to succeed him. Zhou died in January 1976. He was succeeded as Premier (and as second to Mao in the Party) not by Deng but by the relatively unknown Hua Guofeng. Deng was dismissed for a second time in April 1976. Mao himself died in September and within a month Jiang Qing and her associates (the 'Gang of Four') were arrested, and Hua Guofeng was appointed Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party.

Reforms under Deng Xiaoping

Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated for a second time in 1977 and gradually increased his power at the expense of Hua Guofeng who was eventually replaced by Deng's protégés Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. An important turning point came in December 1979 when the Party turned its back on the legacy of Mao's later years and took the first steps in what was to become a thorough-going programme of economic and social reform aimed at modernising the economy, developing China's external relations (the 'open door') especially with the West, and implementing a gradual and limited liberalisation of Chinese society. The economic results, especially in agriculture, started off spectacularly but the increasing complexity of the problems facing China forced periods of retrenchment and it became more and more difficult to satisfy the rising expectations of the population. At the same time, increasing demands for political reform met resistance from the more conservative minded elderly members of the Chinese leadership. Hu Yaobang was forced to resign in 1987 as Party General Secretary for attempting to speed up the pace of reform. His successor, Zhao Ziyang, another committed reformer, was himself forced from office following the massive pro-democracy demonstrations and their brutal suppression in Beijing in May and June 1989.

The Chinese government labelled the demonstrations 'a counter-revolution' and clamped down on dissent. Prominent dissidents fled the country or went into hiding and many people involved in the events of June were arrested and executed. Political control swung firmly into the hands of the hard-line conservative elements who made government more centralised and emphasised the teaching of ideology. At the same time, however, the government pledged continuing commitment to reform and the 'open door policy' and cultivated its relations with the Third World in the face of western coolness.

Recent political developments

In November 1989 Deng Xiaoping retired from his last official post of Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and was succeeded by party General Secretary Jiang Zemin. Jiang was appointed to the additional post of State President in March 1993. Deng's tour of Southern China in January 1992 initiated a swing back into the hands of the reformers in the leadership, and a renewed emphasis on accelerated reform. In the military too, Deng replaced political ideology with professionalism and modernisation. A 'collective leadership' was formally entrenched at the 14th National Party Congress and the National People's Congress in October 1992 and March 1993 respectively. Deng's death in February 1997 left a vacuum which could not be filled by any one individual. But following the appointment of a new national leadership at the National People's Congress

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of March 2003, power has become consolidated under the current President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. Wu Bangguo became head of the NPC, or parliament.

China is in practice a one-party state, with the Chinese Communist Party holding all effective power, and exercising effective control over appointments to the main offices of state, including ministerial and civil service posts. The closest equivalent to a parliament is the National People's Congress, which is indirectly elected, and meets annually in March. It has a legislative function, and has in recent years gradually been extending its role in the scrutiny of the government's work, though this remains small. Each province has a governor, who is responsible for government of the province, and is invariably a Party member (though some deputy governors are not necessarily Party members), and also a Provincial People's Congress. There have in recent years been elections at the lowest level of government – village level – though there are at present no plans to extend democratic reforms.

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