

# CHINESE POLITICAL HISTORY

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**Introduction** Chinese civilization boasts one of the oldest and most unique cultures in the world. It is known for developing strong central governments at a time when it was extremely difficult to administer large territories. It is unclear precisely where or when the model for an authoritarian state originated. Perhaps the Xia (2100-1600 BCE), the Shang (1600-1050 BCE) or the Zhou (1046-475 BCE) rulers created prototype systems that were later perfected. Regardless, Chinese society has provided historians with examples of nearly a dozen strong, prosperous, stable dynasties that facilitated some of the greatest expressions of human achievement in history. The prototype of Chinese authoritarianism was the first emperor Qin Shihuangdi (259-210 BCE). Many historians believe that he created the notion of China as a unified entity, although he was so hated that his dynasty lasted only a few months after his death. Still, there would likely be no China without him. Successor dynasties built on his legacy—the Han (206 BCE-220 CE), Tang (618-906 CE), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) stand out among all the epochs in human history as among the greatest. All were distinctive and reflected the time and milieu in which they were situated. But they also all embraced the vision of a unified system with a strong central government ruling all Chinese people. This is a vision that remains the ideal today.

## **PREHISTORY—The Neolithic age (10,000 BCE-2000 BCE)**

**Political Organization.** The inhabitants of early and middle neolithic era China were hunter-gatherers and lived in small groups limited by the supply of food and other resources in their general area. Settlements were mostly impermanent and very small because people groups had to be mindful of limited resources. Humans were largely oriented towards the local and village level but were aware of and probably linked to neighboring settlements. Before the transition to agriculture in the late neolithic, settlements were also widely dispersed and, though trade goods and marriage partners could be exchanged so as to not intermarry too closely within kinship groups, were far enough apart to not compete for limited resources. Government, as we think of it today, therefore didn't exist. Until very, very late in the neolithic period, there is no evidence of a ruler, a state, a bureaucracy, a set of written laws, a specialized military or the like. There was, perhaps, someone like a village headman or family/clan leader because limited resources had to be administered. Association was largely based on kinship because clan or family systems provided what little security and stability was available. The future of anyone outside the limited social system could become extremely bleak very quickly. Life could be precarious, particularly in times of drought, flood or famine. Settlements were vulnerable to even small, periodic changes in climate because early neolithic Chinese did not have the capacity to store excess foodstuffs for very long. During periods of hardship, several failed hunting trips or poor foraging outings in a row could lead to hunger, malnutrition, and catastrophe for a small group.

**The Military.** There is no evidence for the existence of specialized military units until very late in the neolithic era. Small groups of hunter gatherers banded together for protection and safety. By definition, however, many members of hunter gatherer groups were proficient in the use of weapons that could take down large game. When threatened, the same skills and weapons used to hunt big game could be employed against enemies. These included spears and clubs, and mechanical devices such as bows and arrows. Small groups occasionally fought, likely over dwindling resources, abductions, and other perceived slights, but there is scant evidence of large scale warfare. Settlements and villages were extremely exposed if significant numbers of inhabitants were away hunting, fishing or fighting. Given the size of the population and the highly dispersed and isolated settlements, fighting was surely sporadic and also probably didn't result in the complete annihilation of an enemy. The taking of slaves and the abduction of women was far more advantageous to the victor than the utter destruction of an enemy.

## **BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)**

**Political Organization.** The Shang government (1600-1050 BCE) was organized hierarchically, with ranks, specialized functions, and the like. There was an aristocracy which was feudal in nature and fiefdoms which passed from father to son. History has provided us with the names of a few Shang rulers. However, we do not know much more about the Shang government, their legal system and the like. The chronicles tell us that the first Zhou rulers (1046-475 BCE) built on the old Shang organization rather than reinventing the system, so it is possible, to a certain extent, to extrapolate backwards. We also know the names of a few Zhou monarchs, but a no comprehensive history

exists. As is the case with most ancient governments, the Zhou government was not highly centralized when compared to governments today. It was divided into administrative areas which, over the course of time, became something like hereditary feudatories. These later became the basis of the “kingdoms” of the Warring Kingdoms period, when regionalism overcame the vestiges of central authority. In total, between the collapse of the Western Zhou in the 770s BCE and the unification of China under the Qin in 221 BCE, there were more than 200 recorded kingdoms complete with walled cities, organized militaries and the like. It should be noted that many of these “kingdoms” were very small or situated on the periphery of Chinese civilization. Most were very short lived.

**The Military.** The Shang military was quite small but generally well organized. It is recorded that they were able to field up to 3000 warriors in battle and keep them there for a season. The government was therefore organized well enough, along with its vassals, to arm itself and defend against significant barbarian threats. In the Zhou period, the monarchs were able to field more than 30,000 warriors and 3000 chariots. This 10-fold increase in military size and strength indicates a commensurate increase in organizational ability and command of resources by the central government.

### **IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)**

**Political Organization and De-Feudalization.** Upon the cessation of major combat in 221 BCE, the First Emperor (Qin Shihuangdi r. 247-220 BCE) imposed much the same structure on the rest of his empire that he had used in his home kingdom. In particular, he embarked on a system of “de-feudalization” in which all power resided with the central authorities. All aristocrats of the old kingdoms were stripped of their lands, titles and privileges and given to the state to be disposed of as the Qin saw fit. More than 120,000 former nobles were resettled in the new capital city of Chang’an so that the Emperor could carefully monitor their activities. All military fortifications were pulled down or otherwise destroyed if not needed for defense by the Qin and all weapons were confiscated. As you might imagine, this created immense resentment among the landed elites in the other former kingdoms. Nevertheless, a highly organized, hierarchical structure for society was put into place. Upon the ascendancy of the Han in 206 BCE, many of the Qin de-feudalization initiatives were relaxed. Though it is not believed that aristocrats of the old kingdoms returned to their ancestral homelands to rule as they pleased, new aristocrats with lands, titles and privileges emerged over the centuries. Nonetheless, the basic governmental structure the First Emperor put into place lasted until the fall of the Han. Indeed, some historians have argued that the system, as envisioned by Qin Shihuangdi, became the ideal form of government for China and lasted in one form or another, for more than 2000 years!

**Provincial Administration and Standardization.** Administratively, China under the Qin was divided into 36 units (known by historians as commanderies) each with three different but generally equal administrators: a civil governor, a military commander and an inspector (sometimes known as a censor). The civilian governor was named by the Emperor and was accountable to the Emperor personally. Though not strictly the governor’s to command, each governor had immense power over the civilian population. This was initially not a hereditary position but later sometimes moved in that direction. Above all, a governor’s job was to keep the peace and to implement the Emperor’s initiatives. The military commander’s job was to face the military threat posed by any internal or external foe. The inspector’s job was to investigate the situation on the ground and to determine the extent to which the civilian governor and military commander were doing their jobs. He then reported directly back to the Emperor. On the local level, small accountability groups composed of 5 family units were to be the norm. If any member ran afoul of the new, standardized legal system, all 5 family units could be held accountable. The Qin were also known for standardizing weights and measurements, the writing system, road widths (50 paces wide) and even axle widths. As above, most of these movements to standardize systems within China remained in place during the Han period, but were more relaxed than under the Qin.

**Central Control.** The Qin also sought to control all public discourse as a form of public “thought control.” The Confucian elites, who had enjoyed some freedom to comment on society during the Warring Kingdoms period, saw their freedom of speech severely curtailed under the Qin. The First Emperor was very unhappy that individuals had the audacity to publicly criticize his initiatives. He responded by limiting the study of philosophy (mostly Confucianism) to topics which would not lead to the questioning of state policy. In addition, the writing of history was limited to those topics approved by the state. In essence, by praising the past, Qin policies—through omission—were obliquely called into question. Finally, all writings other than the Qin official state histories, and works on state religion and agriculture were collected and burned. One copy of all works of literature were to be kept in the

Imperial library. In a public display of defiance, a number of Confucian scholars refused to abide by Qin Shihuangdi's wishes in 212 BCE. He then terrorized those who opposed him by executing the most prominent 460 scholars in the land. In this way, the First Emperor exercised control over public discourse and society. But he became one of the most hated men in all of Chinese history. As above, when the Han ascended to power, the most severe restrictions on public "thought control" were relaxed.

**The Military.** The capability and effectiveness of the Chinese armies increased dramatically in the iron age. Advances in metallurgy provided soldiers with new and stronger swords, pikes, battle axes, arrow tips and other items such as chariots. Iron was also much, much cheaper to produce than bronze and more effective than wood or stone. These same advances applied to agriculture meant that society could spare additional manpower for fighting and armies grew quite large. An arms race appeared whereby larger, more effective armies took the field of battle during the Warring States period. Some kingdoms eventually fielded hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Those that could not were quickly destroyed. By the third century BCE, only a handful of kingdoms remained. The monarch of the state of Qin is well known for organizing his entire kingdom for war. Indeed, it was mobilized for total war, was capably led and its soldiers battle-hardened. King Zheng, its monarch, was also known to be the embodiment of ruthlessness. On several occasions he massacred hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had surrendered. When the last kingdom succumbed in 221 BCE, King Zheng proclaimed himself Emperor of China: Qin Shihuangdi.

## **POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)**

**Political Organization.** All emperors in China, from the Qin in the 3rd century BCE down through the end of the Qing in 1911, were considered absolute monarchs. In theory, they ruled by decree, controlled all land and exercised the power of life and death over all in their realm. As subjects, any rights enjoyed by the Chinese were given by the monarch and could be withdrawn by the monarch. In practice, all Chinese emperors relied on aristocrats and other government officials, who were often treated differently than commoners, to help them rule. The monarchs of the post-classical age used many of the same elements of administration that the Han had used in antiquity, but modified them as necessary. There was a highly organized, hierarchical structure for government and for society. There was a clear division between aristocrats, commoner, peasant and artisan. The empire was divided into administrative units. Each large unit was, in theory, administered by a governor who was usually named by the emperor himself and accountable personally to the emperor. The military was under the direct control of the emperor and was occasionally even commanded on the battlefield by the emperor, although aristocrats raised, maintained and led most campaigns after each dynasty was well established. The office of the inspector (also known as censor) also remained in place to provide reliable reports (sometimes known as memorials) to the emperor.

**The Military.** Technological advances in post-classical China were largely incremental. Blades, for example, were sharper, shields and armor stronger and long-range weapons more effective. But the revolutionary advances seen in the iron age and later in the industrial age were rarely seen. The one notable exception was gunpowder. The Tang Dynasty (618-907) military is known to have used it to fire projectiles and potentially created rudimentary mortars and bombs. It is possible that Tang chemists discovered the formula. It is more likely, however, that the knowledge existed hundreds of years before but its utility on the battlefield was finally realized during this period. In addition to new technology, the Chinese military was able to dominate its neighbors with its massive population, fine leadership, tremendous wealth and unparalleled organization. In the early Tang period the Chinese military was composed mostly of farmer-soldiers (local militia) and led by a professional officer corps. In practice, this meant that tens of thousands of farmer-soldiers spent 8-11 months in the fields and 2-3 months training. In times of crisis, they could be called up. This kept costs low and had a minimal impact on agricultural production. In spite of this, the Tang armies were able to expand control to areas of Central Asia, Mongolia, Korea and other areas. A permanent standing army later emerged and is understood by historians as contributing to the collapse of the dynasty because various generals with loyal troops on the frontier turned on the central authorities.

**Vast Population Provides a Foundation for the Military.** The plight of the peasants remained largely unchanged from previous epochs. In some dynasties, they were tied to the land using one form or coercion or another. In the Sui (589-618) and Tang (618-907) periods, significant numbers of the peasant population enjoyed something close to "free-holder" status. This was particularly the case if they served in the military. And there were enormous numbers of peasants in Tang China, approximately 80 million. Interestingly, the population under the control of the Tang Emperor represented roughly one-quarter of the world's population, which was double the population of the contemporaneous Umayyad Caliphate and more than quadruple the number of the Carolingian Empire. Troops from

the Abbasid Caliphate later encountered Tang troops near Samarkand in Uzbekistan, so these civilizations knew each other quite well. The difficulties inherent in governing this vast and populous empire in a pre-modern age are easy to understand. In order to govern well, the Tang court created the world's first large-scale civil service examination.

**The Civil Service Examination.** Because of the size of the empire, it was impossible for the imperial household to maintain familial and/or close political ties with the number of high-level and mid-level administrators and aristocrats necessary to govern the empire. To meet this challenge, the Chinese created a meritocracy, which was based largely on one's ability to score well on a test over the Confucian classics. One had to be educated, literate and capable to do well. But in theory, anyone could take the test. Since governmental officials were needed at every level, tests were administered at various levels. All test-takers had to take the test on the local level. Those who scored the highest were allowed to proceed to the regional level. Those who passed at the local level but did not pass at the regional level became local bureaucrats. Those that passed at the regional level but did not score high enough to pass at the national level became government officials on the regional level. And so it went until the top scorers took a test administered, in theory, by the imperial household. In most test cycles, there was one top scorer who would move into a position to later become a governor, chancellor or other top advisor to the emperor. In due course, these Confucian elites became known as Mandarins or degree holders. The testing process was widely followed by the aspirational classes in China. Since most government positions could not be handed down to one's son, each person earned their own position. Those who passed at the highest level achieved national renown and were celebrated in their hometowns as heroes of the realm. In this way, the government at all levels was staffed by competent, moral men who understood and valued the Confucian system. Of course, there was graft and corruption which had to be rooted out every few decades. As impressive as this achievement was, it is perhaps more important to note that this system lasted, with a few interruptions, in one form or another from the Tang period to the 20th century—more than 1000 years.

#### **EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)**

**Political Organization.** The Manchu conquest of China beginning in the 1630s and 1640s required the collaboration of the Confucian elites and the people of the Han ethnicity because the population of ethnic Jurchen (Manchu) was too small to complete the job. The problem of how to govern China as a conquest dynasty was just as perplexing and much more complicated. The Qing had won the war, then they had to win the peace. The first monarchs of Qing China (1644-1911), who theoretically exercised absolute power, determined to maintain, but reform, the moribund Ming system. The early Ming monarchs (1368-1644) had found success using the Civil Service examination to staff and maintain the bureaucracy. The system, however, had ceased to work as effectively in the last few decades of the Ming period as it had earlier. Indeed, the late Ming period is known for graft, corruption and neglect in government. Thus, the Qing sought to reestablish and reinvigorate the Civil Service and the Civil Service examination. In the early years of the Qing period, there were several efforts to root out corruption and the system began to function as designed on the lower levels. But there remained the problem of how to staff the upper levels.

**Central Government and Manchu Ministers.** To meet the challenge of staffing at the highest levels, the Qing rulers split the duties of "minister of state" into two theoretically equal positions each with a Han (Confucian) minister and a Manchu minister. In practice, the Manchu ministers sometimes just passed down directives from the Imperial household to the Han ministers. The Manchu ministers were therefore more important but the positions did not require a great deal of attention. Of course, reports back to the imperial household had to be written and the Manchu minister, like his Han counterpart, could be held accountable when things went wrong. There were six ministries of state: civil affairs, finance, rituals, war, justice and public works. Each had two ministers. In this way, the Qing ruled through and maintained the existing Chinese system but rarely had much contact with the dominant Han Chinese ethnicity. The foreign rulers, though not exactly hiding in plain sight, consciously sought to minimize their interaction with the Chinese.

**Taxation and the Treasury.** The coffers of the imperial treasury in Qing China were generally full after the recovery from the War of the Three Feudatories (1674-1681). The Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661-1722) set up a tax system which was based on goods produced, on land and on population (head tax). The tax was carefully collected and put to good use for much of the early Qing years. The peasants had to pay their taxes to the village headmen, who then forwarded revenue on the authorities on the higher levels. The head tax was also used to determine

conscription and corvée quotas. It is worth noting that though the peasants were not always tied to the land, they were required to provide labor to the state for the purposes of building or rebuilding common infrastructure such as roads, bridges, dikes, irrigation projects and the like. The peasants despised this requirement and did everything they could to shirk this duty. Those who could pay a fee to be freed of this obligation. Others would abscond, making the duty of the remaining peasants that much more difficult. The tax rolls were based initially on Ming surveys and were not regularly updated. By the time the Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-1796) had completed many of his extraordinarily expensive and bloody wars, the treasury was under serious stress.

**The Military.** The Qing military was divided into what is known today as “bannermen” armies. The armies were organized in different ways. Some armies were composed mostly of Manchu soldiers with Manchu generals. Others were composed of mostly Han Chinese soldiers with Han generals who worked with Manchu generals who acted as liaisons. A third type of army was composed of a combination of mostly Mongols, Han and other foreigners as soldiers. The armies were stationed in strategic areas of China where they could be called upon in time of emergency. The armies were known by the color of their banner, which could be solid or solid and framed with a different color. Early in the period of conquest there were six banner armies. Later that number was increased to eight. By the reign of the Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-1796), the Qing could field armies of more than a hundred thousand.

## The 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

**Political Organization and the Decline of Manchu Government.** The system the Qing used to govern China required the collaboration of large segments of the ethnic Chinese. Most Han Chinese had embraced the Qing initially because of their hatred of the Ming. But by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hatred of the Ming had been replaced with growing bitterness toward the Manchu. The events of the early and middle 19<sup>th</sup> century exposed the Qing as being incapable of repelling foreign invasion, of lacking administrative acumen and of being incapable of maintaining the peace domestically. In short, it was only the accumulated inertia of two centuries of rule that allowed the Qing to retain power after the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) because they exercised neither effective military power nor maintained meaningful political authority.

**The Bureaucracy.** One of the hallmarks of late Imperial China was the Confucian bureaucracy. The system of staffing government positions which had worked so well since the Tang Period (618-907CE) was based on the civil service examination. Degree seekers prepared for years for an examination which would reveal the best and brightest in the land who would then provide staffing for every level of government. These examinations constituted the first true large-scale meritocracy in the world. However, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were two major problems with government employees. First, there were not enough of them. The population of China had quadrupled to approximately 400 million by the 1880s (since 1644), but the number of bureaucrats had hardly risen in 200 years. Second, the tax base had not kept pace with the population increase. This led to the treasury being first stressed and then always empty. Sufficient funding for essential government functions could not be secured. When government bureaucrats anywhere are not compensated appropriately but must still fulfill their function, they turn to corruption—both in the selection/hiring process and in the taking of bribes and kickbacks once in office. In short, government corruption became endemic and, in time, government ceased to function at the highest levels. Only the willingness of local officials to continue to do their jobs stood between the people of China and administrative collapse. By the 1890s, even local authority was beginning to become unreliable. Though not in a complete state of chaos, China mostly had a titular government by the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**The Empress Dowager.** A symptom of the fragmentation associated with imperial rule can be found with the Empress Dowager. The Empress Dowager, Ci’xi, is one of the most reviled women in all of Chinese history. She was a concubine of the Emperor Xianfeng (r. 1850-1861) who outmaneuvered all her rivals to have her son, later known as the Emperor Tongzhi (r. 1861-1875) named crown prince. In due course, she became the regent to her son. When her son died while still a young man, she became the regent to her very young nephew, the Emperor Guangxu (r. 1875-1908). She would remain the single most powerful person in China until her own death in 1908. She is remembered for her unparalleled political acumen and for her general unwillingness to initiate or allow for reforms the country so desperately needed. In her defense, there was likely very little that any leader—visionary or not—could have done to save the imperial system from collapse. However, given that she was the captain of a sinking ship, she is blamed, fairly or unfairly, for overseeing the demise of one of the greatest, long-lasting political systems in human history.

**Popular movements and Secret Societies.** Given the absolute power enjoyed by most of China's emperors, it was not possible for men to assemble without government approval, which was rarely forthcoming. And of course, women were not allowed out of the home without an appropriate escort. In this environment, secret societies provided men an outlet for civil discussion. Not all of these societies were triads or criminal enterprises, but many were. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, others emerged with the express intent of overthrowing the government. Among these groups were the Xingzonghui (Revive China Society)—led by Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) and the Furen Literary Society. The former was established in Hawaii and the latter in Hong Kong. Both had among their primary goals the overthrow of the Qing. Though influential in their own right, these two societies would largely have been forgotten except that they merged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to become the Revolutionary Alliance. This group was instrumental in the events which led to the Republican Revolution in China in 1912. Both the current Guomindang Party (now governing in Taiwan) and the Chinese Communist Party (currently ruling the mainland) consider themselves to be the spiritual inheritors of the Revolutionary Alliance.

**The Military.** The bannermen armies which had swept the Manchu into power in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century had long since ceased to function as an effective military force by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Taiping (1850-1864) and Nian (1851-1868) rebellions had demonstrated that the Qing had little in the way of a military to force its will on an unwilling population. There were several attempts to reform the bannermen armies in the wake of the two rebellions. New weapons, new tactics, new training, new technology and new forms of transportation were all employed to upgrade the Qing military. The even had a new name, the "New Army." By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it appeared as though they might have been successful. But events such as the Boxer Uprising (1900) made clear that the Chinese military was extremely weak and could neither keep the peace domestically nor repel foreign aggression.

### **The Early 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY (1900-1950)**

**Political Organization and the Nationalists.** The Guomindang Party was known in English as the Nationalist Party. They succeeded in bringing unification to large parts of China in the late 1920s. They then ruled for approximately a decade before the war with Japan began. The Guomindang leadership was an ideologically disparate group. Some were dedicated to the radical forms of socialism, others supported more capitalist ideals. Some believed China was ready for democracy, others such as Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), believed it might take many years of practice before the Chinese people could be trusted with the franchise. For a while, the Guomindang was supported by the COMINTERN (Communist International) and many of their leaders went to Moscow for training and support, including Chiang Kai-Shek. Others were supported by the governments (or individuals) in western Europe or the United States. It was simply unclear exactly where many of the Guomindang leaders stood ideologically in the early 1920s. It was, in fact, their intention to garner as much support from whatever source they could. It didn't matter much where it came from. Vladimir Lenin, and later Joseph Stalin of the USSR, however, didn't believe that the Guomindang was sufficiently Communist and decided to support a more pure political party in China. This would later become known as the Chinese Communist Party. For a while, the Soviets supported both parties.

Given the lack of a clear ideology, it is no surprise that the decade of Nationalist rule in China is not remembered fondly. Other than trying to unify the country, there didn't appear to be a larger goal. In their defense, the Guomindang had inherited a fragmented country, much of which was still not under their control. The economy was largely agrarian and suffered from half a century of neglect. Large sections of China had been brought under the control of one or more of the western nations or Japan. In short, China's future as a unified country was very much in doubt. Nonetheless, the Guomindang are remembered for being corrupt, nepotistic and incompetent. But China under Guomindang rule was better than China under the rule of capricious and arbitrary warlords.

**The Chinese Communist Party.** The CCP was established in 1921 in the aftermath of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement which had swept the nation beginning in 1919. The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement had awakened the masses to politics and had created a sense of nationalism which the CCP would later exploit. The CCP was established when two comintern agents, Yang Mingzhai (1882-1930) and Grigori Voitinsky (1893-1953), made contact with two leaders of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and Li Dazhao (1888-1927). This core group announced the first National Congress in 1921 to be held in the French Concession in Shanghai. The first years of the CCP were very bleak. The party was small and quarrelsome, and its future precarious. As might be expected, it did not grow

quickly. To many interested Chinese, it simply appeared to be the left-wing of the Guomindang Party and was therefore not discernable as a separate political entity. Nonetheless, the right-wing of the Guomindang, exemplified by Chiang Kai-Shek, understood very clearly the risks posed by the extreme left. When the CCP engaged in an unauthorized labor action in Shanghai and other actions in Nanchang in the late 1920s, they became the sworn enemy of the Guomindang. This is a “blood-feud” that has still not exhausted itself. Of course, the CCP eventually won the civil war and still rules mainland China today.

**The Military.** In the dying days of the Qing Dynasty, the imperial household had sought to reform and rebuild its military. Given the limitations of a bankrupt treasury, their only option was to ask wealthy, influential men to raise, train, equip and maintain armies that were to remain under the titular command of the Qing. However, these armies were of questionable loyalty from the very beginning. Indeed, they played a major role in the final collapse of the dynasty. In the brief Republican era (1912-1916), these armies continued to exist as mostly independent actors. With the total collapse of all central authority in 1916, the fragmentation of China was complete and the warlord era began. Each warlord controlled as much territory as possible and conducted themselves as they saw fit. Fighting between warlords, though not incessant, was an ever-present specter. Several great generals had visions of grandeur and believed themselves to be the eventual undisputed leader of China. It should be noted that none of the warlords ever achieved this goal and the Guomindang armies emerged to lead the country in the late 1920s.

### **The Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1950-1999)**

**Political Organization and the Communist System.** Beginning in 1949, the CCP determined to completely reshape the government of China. All vestiges of Guomindang rule were abandoned. At the very highest levels, there were to be three top positions: Chairman of the Central Committee of the CCP (political control), President of the People’s Republic (civilian control) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (military control). From 1945 through 1975 Mao Zedong was known simply as Chairman Mao—the supreme leader, since he was so powerful that he didn’t need the titles of Premier or Commander of the People’s Liberation Army. Since the death of Mao, Chinese leaders who occupy all three offices control all elements of the government and have come to be known as “paramount” leaders. Authority was and is distributed through and by the Party to all other levels of government. For example, the Central Committee names governors of each province, who then often names his/her lieutenants in the party on down to the local level. In time, much of the structure of Party bureaucracy has remained in place as leaders at the top levels were promoted, purged, retired or died.

**The Party.** The Chinese Communist Party itself convenes as a large group every five years at meetings known as the National Party Congress. In theory, all major decisions are made at these meetings. In reality, however, all decisions are made in advance and the National Party Congress votes to affirm them. The PRC has been and is still governed by a small group of people, an oligarchy working behind mostly behind the scenes. Since 1949, there have only been a few great leaders of China: Mao Zedong (r. 1949-1976)— the supreme leader, paramount leaders Deng Xiaoping (r. 1978-1989), Jiang Zemin (r. 1993-2003), Hu Jintao (r. 2003-2013) and Xi Jinping (r. 2013-present). Recently, political succession at the top levels has become more stable and predictable. But the process remains opaque. Political purges and infighting rarely spill over into the public domain, although power struggles continue unabated behind the scenes.

In a communist system, the Party controls all elements of government, society, economy and culture. This includes the military as well. In theory, nothing happens in the country that the Party is not aware of and controls. Everything from central economic planning, to what crops are planted in what area, to what books are allowed to be printed, to what drama will be allowed to be performed on stage is decided by the authorities. For the ambitious, the only route to success had been through the Party, although that has been changing. For example, until quite recently, only Party members were allowed to attend university. Today there are approximately 88 million members of the CCP. The members of the Party enjoy all the rights of citizenship, including the limited franchise. Chinese who are not members of the Party do not.

**The Military.** The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of the Chinese Communist Party shifted tactics in the aftermath of the war with Japan. Whereas it had been a guerilla force before 1948, Mao and the CCP believed that the PLA was capable of fighting Guomindang armies on an equal footing and soon began the route of Guomindang forces. The Korean War, which began two years after the civil war ended, demonstrated the effectiveness of the PLA when Mao ordered the invasion of the Korean peninsula to push back US and UN forces. Fierce fighting

ensued lasting for two years. Casualty rates were high and resulted in at least 600,000 Chinese deaths, the highest number of all combatants. In recent years, the Chinese military has been modernized. It now possesses very fine weapons, including a first-rate air force and an ability to project power through its navy. China also has several dozen ICBM (Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles) with nuclear capability.

**The Cultural Revolution.** In the years following the catastrophe of the second 5-year economic plan (Great Leap Forward, 1958-1962), the Central Committee decided to investigate what went wrong with agriculture and industry in China. It was determined that Mao's policies could not have led to the mass starvation of 20 million Chinese. Furthermore, it was determined that the peasantry also could not have been responsible. Therefore, blame fell on the Party itself which was responsible for implementing Mao's policies. What followed was a political and social purge the likes of which has never been seen anywhere in the world in the modern era. In the early days of the investigation, anyone associated with the Great Leap failures was sent down to the rural areas to be purified by manual labor with the peasantry. Some of these re-education sentences were very harsh and were to last ten or even twenty years. They were effective death sentences for many. Over the course of several years, groups emerged among university students who were dedicated to proving their ideological purity. They would seek out those in society who were not, members of the party or not. They would then be publically humiliated. These groups, who over time expanded from the ranks of students to include all segments of society, became known as Red Guard Units. Conditions nationwide began to degenerate in the late 1960s and it became impossible to tell who was ideologically pure and who was not. Eventually, society ceased to function effectively. Workers were so busy demonstrating their love for Mao and communist purity that they didn't go to work. Doctors, teachers, engineers, even peasants—all were swept up in the fervor. This amounted to a sort of mass hysteria which lasted for the better part of a decade. Tens (if not hundreds) of millions took part. Many Chinese were brutalized and killed in the violence and chaos. Finally, in the early 1970s, Mao called a halt to the worst of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. But the damage was done to society, to the economy and to the culture. It is still rarely spoken of because the blame for it can be laid directly at the feet of Chairman Mao.

#### Readings

- 1) Harold Tanner, *China: A History, Volume 1. From Neolithic Cultures through the Great Qing Empire*, (Hackett Publishing, 2010).
- 2) Rowan K. Flad and Pochan Chen, *Ancient Central China: Centers and Peripheries along the Yangzi River*, (Cambridge, 2013) pp. 1-42, 287.
- 3) R. W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-T'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in Tang China*, (Western Washington University Press, 1978).
- 4) Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, (Harvard, 2014).
- 5) Thomas H. Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*, (University of Washington Press, 2014).
- 6) June Chang, *The Empress Dowager Cixi*, (Anchor Books, 2014).
- 7) Jonathan Spence, *Mao Zedong: A Life*, (Penguin Books, 2006).
- 8) Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, (Belknap Press, 2011).

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) The Qin set up a system which lasted (with some minor changes) until the fall of the Han Dynasty in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Yet, the Qin (and in particular the first emperor) have been vilified by the Chinese since 210 BCE. Analyze the Chinese approach to official histories, how each succeeding dynasty has authored the work on the loss of the Mandate of Heaven by the preceding dynasty. In other words, how is history understood by the Chinese? What is its purpose and what are the aims of the authors.
- 2) The Chinese Civil Service examination system lasted for more than 1000 years. It served the interests of the monarchs of the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. What about it contributed to its longevity? What was so important about it that both indigenous and foreign rulers alike used it to staff their bureaucracies? To what extent could it be or has it been used as a model for staffing civil services in other parts of the world?
- 3) Continuity and change has long been a theme of the transition period between the Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty. To what extent is this description true? What does it mean? Did Ming institutions, ideas and philosophies continue to dominate Qing China, or was there a meaningful cultural and social break at the time of change in leadership? Did the concept of “China” change as China entered the early modern period?
- 4) What were the elements that brought about the final collapse of the Qing Dynasty? Was the collapse inevitable? Could there have been a constitutional monarchy in China? What would have to have happened in order for there to have been a constitutional monarchy? Do you think a constitutional monarchy would have made a difference for the Chinese people in the chaotic years and decades that followed 1912?

## Texts

1) From the *Book of Documents*, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, Number 33, compiled by Sima Qian. Attributed to the Duke of Zhou

From the reign of the Shang founder Tang to that of Di Yi, none did not perform the proper sacrifices and make their virtue bright; none was not a suitable match for Heaven. But then his son, the king Zhou, was greatly dissolute and lax, he attended neither to Heaven, nor to the needs of the people. His people were all as under sentence of death. In the meantime, King Wen did not take the time even to eat a meal while the sun was in the sky, and so he enjoyed the throne of the Zhou people for fifty years.

2) The Emperor Qin Shihuangdi, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, on the issue of the control of knowledge. Recorded by the ancient historian Sima Qi'an

The emperor ordered his ministers to debate this question:

The Prime Minister Li Si said, "The Five Emperors did not emulate each other nor did the Three Dynasties" adopt each other's ways, yet all had good government. This is no paradox, because times had changed. Now Your Majesty has built up this great empire to endure for generations without end. Naturally this passes the comprehension of a foolish pedant. Chunyu Yueh spoke about the Three Dynasties, but they are hardly worth taking as examples. In times gone by different barons fought among themselves and gathered wandering scholars. Today, however, the empire is at peace, all laws and order come from one single source, the common people support themselves by farming and handicrafts, while students study the laws and prohibitions.

"Now these scholars learn only from the old, not from the new, and use their learning to oppose our rule and confuse the black-headed people." As Prime Minister I must speak out on pain of death. In former times when the world, torn by chaos and disorder, could not be united, different states arose and argued from the past to condemn the present, using empty rhetoric to cover up and confuse the real issues, and employing their learning to oppose what was established by authority. Now Your Majesty has conquered the whole world, distinguished between black and white, see unified standards. Yet these opinionated scholars get together to slander the laws and judge each new decree according to their own school of thought, opposing it secretly in their hearts while discussing it openly in the streets. They brag to the sovereign to win fame, put forward strange arguments to gain distinction, and incite the mob to spread rumors. If this is not prohibited, the sovereign's prestige will suffer and factions will be formed among his subjects. Far better put a stop to it!

"I humbly propose that all historical records but those of Qin be burned. If anyone who is not a court scholar dares to keep the ancient songs, historical records or writings of the hundred schools, these should be confiscated and burned by the provincial governor and army commander. Those who in conversation dare to quote the old songs and records should be publicly executed; those who use old precedents to oppose the new order should have their families wiped out; and officers who know of such cases but fail to report them should be punished in the same way.

"If thirty days after the issuing of this order the owners of these books have still not had them destroyed, they should have their face tattooed and be condemned to hard labor at the Great Wall. The only books which need not be destroyed are those dealing with medicine, divination, and agriculture. Those who want to study the law can learn it from the officers. The emperor sanctioned this proposal.

3) Short story about two men taking the Civil Service Examination in Tang China, translated by Clara Yu, found in Patricia Buckley Ebrej, ed., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*. (Free Press, 1993), pg. 130.

Xu Tang was from Jing county of Xuanshou and had been taking the examinations since he was young. In the same village there was a man named Wang Zun, who had served as a minor government clerk when young. After Xu Tang had taken the examination more than twenty times, Wang Zun was still but a low functionary in the government. Yet, Wang Zun wrote good poetry, although no one knew about it because he kept it secret.

One day, Wang Zun resigned from his post and set out for the capital to take the imperial examination. As he was approaching the capital, he met Xu Tang, who was seeing some friends off at the outskirts of the city. "Eh," Xu Tang asked him, "what are you doing here in the capital?"

"I have come to take the imperial examination," answered the former functionary.

Upon hearing this, Xu Tang angrily declared "How insolent you are, you lowly clerk!" Although they were not fellow candidates for the imperial examination, Xu Tang treated him with contempt. But in the end, Wang Zun passed the examination and became very famous. Xu Tang did not pass until five years later.

4) The Emperor Qianlong's response to George III of Great Britain asking for the trade and the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1793, found in the public domain.

You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas, nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilization, you have dispatched a mission respectfully bearing your memorial. Your Envoy has crossed the seas and paid his respects at my Court on the anniversary of my birthday. To show your devotion, you have also sent offerings of your country's produce.

I have perused your memorial: the earnest terms in which it is couched reveal a respectful humility on your part, which is highly praiseworthy. In consideration of the fact that your Ambassador and his deputy have come a long way with your memorial and tribute, I have shown them high favor and have allowed them to be introduced into my presence. To manifest my indulgence, I have entertained them at a banquet and made them numerous gifts. I have also caused presents to be forwarded to the Naval Commander and six hundred of his officers and men, although they did not come to Peking, so that they too may share in my all-embracing kindness.

As to your entreaty to send one of your nationals to be accredited to my Celestial Court and to be in control of your country's trade with China, this request is contrary to all usage of my dynasty and cannot possibly be entertained. It is true that Europeans, in the service of the dynasty, have been permitted to live at Peking, but they are compelled to adopt Chinese dress, they are strictly confined to their own precincts and are never permitted to return home. You are presumably familiar with our dynastic regulations. Your proposed Envoy to my Court could not be placed in a position similar to that of European officials in Peking who are forbidden to leave China, nor could he, on the other hand, be allowed liberty of movement and the privilege of corresponding with his own country; so that you would gain nothing by his residence in our midst.

Moreover, our Celestial dynasty possesses vast territories and tribute missions from the dependencies are provided for by the Department for Tributary States, which ministers to their wants and exercises strict control over their movements. It would be quite impossible to leave them to their own devices. Supposing that your Envoy should come to our Court, his language and national dress differ from that of our people, and there would be no place in which to bestow him. It may be suggested that he might imitate the Europeans permanently resident in Peking and adopt the dress and customs of China, but, it has never been our dynasty's wish to force people to do things unseemly and inconvenient. Besides, supposing I sent an Ambassador to reside in your country, how could you possibly make for him the requisite arrangements? Europe consists of many other nations besides your own: if each and all demanded to be represented at our Court, how could we possibly consent? The thing is utterly impracticable. How can our dynasty alter its whole procedure and system of etiquette, established for more than a century, in order to meet your individual views? If it be said that your object is to exercise control over your country's trade, your nationals have had full liberty to trade at Canton for many a year, and have received the greatest consideration at our hands. Missions have been sent by Portugal and Italy, preferring similar requests. The Throne appreciated their sincerity and loaded them with favors, besides authorizing measures to facilitate their trade with China. You are no doubt aware that, when my Canton merchant, Wu Chao-ping, who was in debt to foreign ships. I made the Viceroy advance the monies due, out of the provincial treasury, and ordered him to punish the culprit severely. Why then should foreign nations advance this utterly unreasonable request to be represented at my Court? Peking is nearly two thousand miles from Canton, and at such a distance what possible control could any British representative exercise?

If you assert that your reverence for Our Celestial dynasty fills you with a desire to acquire our civilization, our ceremonies and code of laws differ so completely from your own that,

even if your Envoy were able to acquire the rudiments of our civilization, you could not possibly transplant our manners and customs to your alien soil. Therefore, however adept the Envoy might become, nothing would be gained thereby.

Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect governance and to fulfil the duties of the State: strange and costly objects do not interest me. If I have commanded that the tribute offerings sent by you, O King, are to be accepted, this was solely in consideration for the spirit which prompted you to dispatch them from afar. Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures. This then is my answer to your request to appoint a representative at my Court, a request contrary to our dynastic usage, which would only result in inconvenience to yourself. I have expounded my wishes in detail and have commanded your tribute Envoys to leave in peace on their homeward journey. It behooves you, O King, to respect my sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country hereafter. Besides making gifts (of which I enclose an inventory) to each member of your Mission, I confer upon you, O King, valuable presents in excess of the number usually bestowed on such occasions, including silks and curios—a list of which is likewise enclosed. Do you reverently receive them and take note of my tender goodwill towards you! A special mandate.

5) From the *Selected Readings of Mao Zedong*, Foreign Press Club, 1971. Report on the Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, March 1927. Found in *Education About Asia*, [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/mao\\_peasant.pdf](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/mao_peasant.pdf)

During my recent visit to Hunan I made a first-hand investigation of conditions in the five counties of Hsiantan, Hsianghsiang, Henshan, Liling and Changsha. In the thirty-two days from January 4 to February 5, I called together fact-finding conferences in villages and county towns, which were attended by experienced peasants and by comrades working in the peasant movement, and I listened attentively to their reports and collected a great deal of material. Many of the hows and whys of the peasant movement were the exact opposite of what the gentry in Hankow and Changsha are saying. I saw and heard of many strange things of which I had hitherto been unaware. I believe the same is true of any other places, too. All talk directed against the peasant movement must be speedily set right. All the wrong measures taken by the revolutionary authorities concerning the peasant movement must be speedily changed. Only thus can the future of the revolution be benefited. For the present upsurge of the peasant movement is a colossal event. In a very short time, in China's central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent than no power, however, great will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation. They will sweep all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants and evil gentry into their graves. Every revolutionary party and every revolutionary comrade will be put to the test, to the accepted or rejected as they decide. There are three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them. To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticizing. Or to stand in their way and oppose them. Every Chinese is free to choose, but events will force you to make the choice quickly.