Rise and Rule of Single Party States: China 1900-76

\*A note on spelling: There are two systems of translating Chinese characters into English. Most texts do not use the more modern Pinyin version BUT some still use the old Wade-Giles system. For example the older version of Mao’s name is Mao Tse-Tung while the newer is Mao Zedong; the older version of Nationalist leaders name is Chiang Kai-Shek, the newer version is Jiang Jieshi. Don’t worry which to use because IB accepts both.

In October of 1949 Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Although several other political parties were tolerated initially, 1949 effectively marked the beginning of single party rule by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party.) In order to explain the rise of the CCP, it is necessary to first examine the failure of both the Qing (or Manchu) dynasty and Guomindang government of Chiang Kai-Shek to establish stable government.

For about three thousand years, China was ruled by a series of imperial dynasties from the mid-17th Century, the Qing dynasty, originally from Manchuria (which is why they are often referred to as the Manchu,) reigned in China. The 19th century saw the Qing dynasty in decline, struggling to cope with foreign aggression and internal rebellions. In 1911 the revolution of “The Double Tenth” (10th October), destroyed Qing power and China officially became a republic in 1912, following the abdication of Pu Yi, the last emperor.

China is Forced to Open up to the West

Before the mid-19th century, Chinese emperors showed little interest in contact and trade with the West. Their isolationism was fueled by a belief that the Chinese Empire was the only civilized country in the world. University of Colorado Professor, Timothy Weston argues that the Chinese state therefore expected and demanded deference from foreigners and because it had not yet come into full contact with or absorbed into its view of the world the concept of a system of sovereign nation states the Qing dynasty continued to operate on the assumption that China was superior to all other political entities around the world.

However, starting with the Opium Wars (1839-42) in which the British defeated Chinese forces, the Chinese government was compelled to open up to the West. The Qing were forced by military and industrially advanced powers, notably Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia and Japan to grant commercial bases and rights and to allow Christian missionaries to operate in China. As a result of a whole series of “unequal treaties” foreign merchants gained control of China’s import and export trade. Major ports, like Shanghai had large foreign controlled districts. Foreign powers completely took over peripheral areas of china. Russia claimed Manchuria in 1900, France seized Indo-China in the 1880s-1890s and Japan took Taiwan and Korea in 1895. Resentment at foreign aggression against China and at the Imperial government’s inability to stand up to it reached new heights this loss of Taiwan and Korea which also encouraged other foreign powers to make further demands on China. In addition to this, Japan inflicted humiliating defeats on Russia in 1905, which lead to increased Japanese influence in Manchuria.

Events in the 1890s, in particular China’s loss of a war to Japan in 1895, finally caused a real break within the Chinese intellectual world. It was one thing for China to lose wars to Europeans; but to be defeated in battle by the Japanese, whom the Chinese had long considered to be their inferiors, was a deeply humiliating blow. The loss of the Sino-Japanese War forced Chinese intellectuals to question why Japan had been able to modernize its military along Western lines so much more effectively than the Chinese had in a similar amount of time. Once they began to study Japan more carefully Chinese intellectuals realized that, in response to the Western threat, the Japanese imperial government had transformed far more than its military. In fact, it had totally reorganized Japanese society. Chinese intellectuals began to recognize that over the last two and a half decades the Japanese government had carried out a top down revolution that had remade Japan into a modern nation state. Now that Japan too wanted a piece of China for itself, Chinese Patriots were persuaded that true crisis was at hand and that unless the Qing Dynasty initiated massive and comprehensive change similar to that undertaken by the Japanese government, it and Chinese civilization were headed for extinction.

Historians in China and the West frequently argue that China was forced to begin the process of integrating itself into the international system of nation states as defended by the Western world. That war began the long and painful process by which China has come to view itself as one nation among many. Weston argues that the Opium War set the stage for the Chinese people’s quest to become a leading nation within the international community over the next century and a half. Furthermore, the Opium War helped identify the chief goal of the Chinese Revolution – to create a wealthy and powerful modern Chinese nation state- this new objective created the conditions for protracted and bloody competition within China over the question of how to conceive of that nation.

Internal Rebellion

The 19th century was marked by a series of large-scale rebellions as the Imperial government in Beijing found it increasingly difficult to exercise effective control over the whole of the Empire. The Manchu armies deteriorated in quality during the 19th Century and the Manchu Court increasingly allowed regional armies to develop which were outside the main Imperial army. The most serious rebellions were the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864 and the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1900.) During the latter, the Boxers murdered missionaries and Christian converts. The Boxers were militant peasants who blamed Westerners for the terrible economic conditions they faced. Weston asserts that it would be incorrect to Boxer Rebellion a revolution, for the Boxers did not envision a new kind of society. Furthermore, the Boxers supported the status quo and had no intention of overthrowing the Qing dynasty. The foreign powers eventually crushed the Boxers in 1900 and imposed the Boxer Protocol of 1901 on the Imperial government, a fine of $330 million; this further undermined support for the Qing dynasty among their subjects.

One cause of the growing unrest in China was the poverty of its peasant masses. Arable land constituted only 10% of China and much of it periodically suffered from natural disasters such as flooding. Huge population growth in the 18th century (a rise from an estimated 120 million in 1712 to 440 million by 1900) made for growing land hunger, exacerbated by the custom of dividing land among all the sons of a family. Devastating local famines became increasingly frequent. By 1900 landlords and prosperous peasants, who made up 10% of the rural population, owned 70% of the land, most of which they rented out. Many peasants were constantly in debt ant they gave 50-80% of their crop as rent. The urban population was small and there were few modern industrial centers, except on the eastern seaboard and most were foreign owned.

Many Chinese were angered by China’s inability to stand up to foreign encroachment and believed the solution lay in reform and modernization by the Imperial government. Kang Youwei, in the *Hundred Days of Reform*, persuaded the Emperor Guang Xu to introduce reforms in order to modernize the bureaucracy, the armed forces and the transport system as well as develop industry. The reforms were consciously modeled on those carried out in Japan. However, a rise of more conservative Chinese members began to be concerned that too much compromise would lead to the extinction of Chinese civilization. Westernization might save China as a political entity, but in doing so it would lead China shorn of its core identity. Not surprisingly the 1898 reform movement led to a sharp reaction from conservatives. Almost as soon as the young emperor enacted his battery of reforms conservative forces within the government carried out a coup d’état, resulting in the house arrest of the emperor and the ascendance of his far more conservative aunt, Empress Dowager Cixi who hated reform and western ideas. Her conservatism was a powerful barrier to reform from 1861 until her death in 1908.

The Revolution of the Double Tenth: October 10, 1911

Because of the rise of conservatism under Empress Dowager Cixi many Chinese nationalists believed that only the overthrow of the Qing and the establishment of a republic could save China. The most prominent Republican leader was Sun Yatsen. Sun had been trained as a doctor in Hawaii and Hong Kong. In Hawaii (1894) he created the *Revive China Society* and in 1905 in Japan Sun brought about a coalition of several Chinese revolutionary groups known as the *Revolutionary Alliance (Tongmenghui.)* Sun’s ideas were influenced by Western ideas, but he was also very impressed by the modernization of Japan since 1868. In his writings, Sun outlined the *Three People’s Principles: People’s Nationalism, People’s Democracy and People’s Livelihood*. Sun sought to end foreign domination of China and to create a strong unified China under Republican government. His idea of People’s livelihood fell far short of full-blown socialism but rather represented a desire to see greater social justice and a fairer distribution of wealth.

The causes of the 1911 Revolution revolved around many factors however; the main reasons surrounded the fact that there was a growing Nationalist resentment at the continuing feebleness of government. In addition to this there was disappointment of many educated Chinese that the reform programs had not gone far enough. Anger grew at the government’s nationalization of several privately owned railway networks and the poor financial compensation offered. This was compounded by the fact that the government turned to foreign banks for a loan to finance its railway program. Among the lower classes, severe flooding and harvest failure impacted the South.

Sun Yatsen was abroad at the time of the Double Tenth but he returned to China in December and was proclaimed President of the new Chinese Republic by the Revolutionary Alliance in Nanjing. However, the Revolutionary Alliance was too weak on its own to topple the Imperial government; what sealed the fate of the Qing dynasty was the decision of the most powerful of the Imperial Generals, Yuan Shikai, to broker a deal with the rebels. Yuan promised to support the revolution on condition that he, rather than sun, took over as President. Lacking substantial military force of his own, Sun agreed and the Republic formally came into being in February 1912, following the abdication of Emperor Pu Yi.

Yuan Shikai called Parliamentary elections in 1913. The Revolutionary Alliance, which had reconstituted itself as the Guomindang (National People’s Party) in 1912, won the elections. However, Yan had no intention of sharing power and in 1913, having the Guomindang (GMD) leader Song Jiaoren assassinated, he banned the GMD. In 1914 he closed down parliament and proceeded to rule China very much as if he were an emperor (Which he clearly aimed to make himself.) Yuan proved no more able to stand up to foreign aggression than the Quing. In 1915 he tamely submitted to most of the *Twenty-One Demands* that Japan made; these included the transfer of German privileges in Shandong to Japan and the granting of rights to exploit mineral resources in southern Manchuria. Within a few short years those who hoped that the country would be transformed overnight into a Western-style republic realized that this was but a fantasy. By 1913 the new representative government had already been mortally wounded and militarism had set in. The country soon broke into warlord domains that engaged one another in constant warfare and in the process brutalized huge numbers of Chinese Civilians. The rapid collapse of the Republic of China into warlordism also destroyed the possibility of a strong modern Chinese nation state finally freeing itself from the grip of Western and Japanese imperialism.

The Warlord Era (1916-1927)

Yuan Shikai died in 1916 and thereafter there was no effective central government in China until 1927. There was a government in Beijing, which foreigner powers recognized but its authority did not extend over much of China. Instead a series of powerful regional generals or warlords held sway. Conditions were terrible for ordinary Chinese as warlord armies frequently attacked each other, pillaged and looted the civilian population and extracted heavy taxes from the peasants. The integrity of the former Chinese Emperor was further undermined, as control over Tibet. Xinjiang and Outer Mongolia was lost. During this period, Sun Yatsen tried to set up a GMD government at Guangzhou, planning to mount a northern military expedition with an aim of reunifying China. However the GMD’s position remained precarious and Sun was dependent on the support from local warlords. In 1922 Sun was forced to flee to Shanghai.

The May the Fourth Movement 1919

This proved to be a highly significant development in the history of modern China. Massive student demonstrations joined by workers in the major cities, were organized in protest at the western powers’ decision at the Versailles Peace Conference to award Germany’s former concessions in Shangdon to Japan. The May Fourth demonstrators were protesting at yet another example of foreign powers carving up China in their own interests and also at revelation that the Chinese government had earlier secretly agreed to this concession to Japan. The May Fourth Movement did much to revive the fortunes of the GMD as it provided a powerful stimulus to nationalist feeling.

Because of this, in the 1920s two avowedly revolutionary parties came into being, The Nationalist Party, which grew out of what remained of Sun Yatsen’s 1911 group led by Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Communist Party which was founded shortly after the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The Nationalist Party was by far the larger of the two and, like the Communist Party, drew inspiration and monetary assistance from Russia. In the Mid 1920s, at the urging of the Russian Communist leadership, the two Chinese revolutionary parties formed a “united front” for the purposes of reunifying the warlord-torn country and ridding China once and for all of the Western and Japanese imperial presence. This was the period of the Northern Expedition, a time when the two parties cooperated in a northward moving (from their base in Guangdong Province in the south) military conquest against the warlords. The Northern Expeditionary forces racked up success after success on the battlefield and by the end of the 1926 managed to bring the southern half of China, including some of the country’s wealthiest and most industrialized regions under their control.

While the success of Lenin’s Bolsheviks in seizing power in Russia in 1917 as well as the first Chinese translation of Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto played a significant role in the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, the arrival on Comintern agents (Comintern was the Russian Communist Party’s agency for spreading worldwide revolution) in China sent by the Soviet government in 1920 as well as The May Fourth Movement were the main factors in the emergence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as many of the founding members of the CCP had been involved in the May Fourth demonstrations, particularly at the Beijing National University. Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, both professors, were the leading members of the fledgling CCP. Mao Zedong, a university librarian of peasant background, was also one of the founding members but his influence was limited at this stage. The CCP was tiny at firs, numbering only 432 members by 1923.

The First United Front (1923)

Neither the GMD nor the CCP were strong enough to achieve power in China in the early/mid 1920s but in 1923 the USSR helped to broker and alliance, known as the First United Front, between the two Chinese parties, which would facilitate the establishment of a GMD government in 1927. CCP members were allowed to join the GMD as individual members but there was no merger of the two parties.

The USSR had tried unsuccessfully to establish diplomatic relations with the Beijing government, so decided to work instead with the GMD and CCP. The Soviets aimed to increase their own influence in China by the overthrow of the pro-western government in Beijing. Comintern provided the GMD and CCP with political and military advisers and some financial backing. Acting on Comintern advice the GMD/CCP set up a military training academy at Whampoa.

In 1925 Sun Yatsen died, just as he was planning the Northern Expedition to take on the warlords. Eventually Chiang Kai-Shek the commandant of the Whampoa Academy emerged as the new GMD leader. This proved highly significant as Chiang was politically to the right of Sun Yatsen and was deeply suspicious of the CCP. Chiang’s main rival fro the GMD leadership, Wang Jingwei, was munch more to the left and therefore may have acted to preserve the United Front.

The Northern Expedition (1926-27) and the White Terror (1927)

In 1926-27 Chiang Kai-Shek successfully led joint GMD-CCP forces on the Northern Expedition; the aim was to defeat the various warlords and create an effective national government, whose authority extended over all of china. However, it must be emphasized that Chiang did not defeat all the warlords but rather brokered deals with several, whereby they agreed to join forces with him. The CCP only provided a limited number of troops for the Northern Expedition but they made a major contribution in terms of organizing peasant uprisings and urban strikes, distributing propaganda among peasants and factory workers.

Chiang Kai-Shek became increasingly concerned about the growing strength- 50,000 CCP members by 1927 and influence of the CCP and feared that their fomenting of strikes would frighten off the GMD’s middle class bakers. So at Shanghai, in April 1927, just after the capture of the city, Chiang Kai-shek ordered a massacre of thousands of CCP members and trade unionists. This white Terror was extended to other cities during the rest of the year.

The atrocities in Shanghai led to a schism within the GMD as Wang Jingwei and the left of the party, based at Guangzhou, and condemned Chiang’s actions. However, Chiang proceeded to establish a Nationalist government at Nanjing, which became the new capital of China. Chiang had several key assets, including the support of businessmen and bankers and the support of several powerful warlords, particularly Feng Yuxiang. Foreign governments duly recognized the new GMD government as the official government of China.