

Details on the Great Leap Forward

The Great Leap Forward

- In 1956 Mao called on Chinese intellectuals to comment honestly on the first years of the communist nation, but their severe criticism disturbed him so much he punished those who spoke out against his leadership. From this time on, Mao worried whether the revolutionary spirit of the Chinese—particularly of the intellectuals and the young—was strong enough for China to achieve communism and true equality.
- In 1958 Mao shifted government policy and began a uniquely Chinese socialist experiment. The masses were mobilized to work on large-scale industrial projects, such as the construction of dams, reservoirs, and railroads, to help further China's modernization. Mao called this new policy the Great Leap Forward because he believed China could leap ahead of Russia in becoming a truly communist nation and industrialize quickly enough to "catch up with Great Britain in 15 years."
- To initiate the Great Leap Forward, the Communist Party organized most of China into People's Communes, regimented along semimilitary lines, in which peasants ate and worked together. For their lost land and animals, peasants were compensated with free health care, some free clothing, and free meals at commune dining halls. Since Mao believed that human willpower alone could make socialism succeed, the Communist Party called upon all people to work shift after shift with little rest. Mao also directed citizens to devote time every day to upgrading their study of communist values and discussing how to rid themselves of improper—anti-communist—thoughts.

Results of the Great Leap Forward

- Despite some remarkable efforts by masses of people to complete large projects for their communes, the policies of the Great Leap Forward failed. Poor management of the People's Communes caused many problems. Commune officials usually kept imprecise records of which workers did what, and some peasants learned how to work very little and receive free benefits. Other commune officials boasted about how many crops their commune produced so as not to be outdone by surrounding communes. As a result, there were enormous food shortages in communes that had exported food only weeks before. These management problems, compounded with drought and floods, resulted in major economic problems. Hundreds of thousands of people died from 1958 to 1961 during one of the largest famines in history.
- Without acknowledging any failure, the communist government began slowly retreating from the policies of the Great Leap Forward. By 1961 the Communist Party virtually abandoned the People's Communes. Today, many peasants still refer to this period as the "three hard years."

Details on the Protest for Democracy at Tiananmen Square

The Call for Political Reform

- During the first 10 years of Deng Xiaoping's rule, people expressed a desire to have political reforms coincide with the successful economic reforms. In 1978 people created posters criticizing the government and attached them to a wall in Beijing, known as Democracy Wall. In 1986 thousands of students protested for democracy in the cities of Hefei, Wuhan, and Shanghai. The communist government usually stopped these protests by simply arresting a few key leaders.

Student Protest for Democracy at Tiananmen Square

- In April 1989 students held a protest at Tiananmen Square, the main public square in the capital city of Beijing. They demanded that the government consider some political reforms, such as freedom of the press. When the government refused to discuss these initial demands, students began protesting for more radical reforms, such as democracy.
- In the first few weeks, the government did little to stop the demonstrations, even as some students went on hunger strikes as acts of protest. Finally, after a month of protest and an enormous amount of international attention, the communist government ordered troops into Beijing to impose martial law (military rule over civilians). Troops were unable to enter the city because local citizens—estimated at as many as two million—showed their support of the students by blocking the advance of the troops.
- Finally, on June 3, 1989, Deng called in the army the second time to use force to clear the square of the protesters, which it did, killing between 700 and 3,000 citizens. Although the protest is often called the Tiananmen Square Massacre, most of the dead were actually not students and were killed while soldiers were fighting their way to the square.

Aftermath of the Protest

- The government made a systematic effort to find and arrest the student leaders of the democracy movement. Some top leaders in the Communist Party were also cast aside as sympathizers of the protest. The international community voiced outrage at the result of the Tiananmen Square protest, but Deng remained in power, and no political reforms occurred.

Details on the Fall of Dynastic China

Dynastic China

- Powerful emperors ruled China for two thousands years in a recurring cycle of rising and falling dynasties (successions of emperors from the same family). New dynastic governments usually proved energetic and competent, but as they grew older, they often became increasingly corrupt and unresponsive to the majority of the population. In this way, emperors lost their “Mandate from Heaven” (the belief that emperors were chosen by heaven to rule). According to Confucian tradition, dynasties could be overthrown if they governed poorly. After dynasties fell, China usually went through a short period of chaos and conflict, at the end of which a new dynasty arose.
- The absolute power of the emperor fit well with Confucian tradition. Confucius taught that the key to nurturing a stable, prosperous society was for individuals to obey people superior to them. Chinese society was organized into a pyramid of relationships. The emperor sat at the top of the pyramid and answered only to heaven. Government officials and landlords obeyed the emperor. The large majority of the population—the peasants—remained at the bottom.

The Fall of the Manchu Dynasty

- The Qing Dynasty, also known as the Manchu Dynasty, began in 1644, but by the 1800s showed many signs of decay. The emperor collected fewer taxes from local officials and wealthy individuals, placing the tax burden on the poorer peasants. In order to defeat bandits and rebellions, the Manchus also allowed local armies to gain enormous power.
- The Manchus intended to keep China isolated from other countries, yet foreign influence quickened the pace of the decay of the dynasty. Starting in the late 1700s, the British traded opium (a highly addictive drug) illegally. When Chinese authorities objected, the British defeated China in a series of wars and forced it to open up trade and exempt British citizens from Chinese laws. After other military defeats, the Manchu government gave in to similar humiliating demands from other European nations and the United States, making China a virtual colony.
- In 1911 soldiers rebelled against the Manchu Dynasty in the name of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, a longtime critic of the Manchus who was influenced by western (European- and American-influenced) ideas. Sun wanted to establish a modern democratic government. The fall of the Manchu Dynasty marked the end of two thousand years of dynastic rule in China.

The Warlord Period

- With little military support, Dr. Sun Yat-sen failed to create a western-style democracy in China. Instead, the fall of dynastic China resulted in a period of disorder in which warlords (military generals) fought to control various provinces in China. The warlord period lasted until 1927 and resulted in a flood of violence in the countryside. Bandits and lesser warlords exploited (took advantage of) peasants throughout China.

Details on the Communist Revolution

The Rise of Mao Zedong and the Communist Party

- Amidst the chaos in China in the 1920s, the Communist Party was formed. The Communist Party was a revolutionary group that planned to end social and economic inequality, especially for peasants, who represented 90 percent of the Chinese population. Mao Zedong, a founder of the Communist Party, believed “whoever wins the peasants will win China.” Millions of peasants starved in the 1920s and 1930s because of unequal land distribution and government policies that favored landlords. As communist rebels began to conquer territory, they won the support of peasants by collecting land from rich landlords and redistributing it to poor peasants.

Civil War in China

- By 1927 General Chiang Kai-shek had defeated most of the other warlords. He emerged as the leader of the Guomindang (the Nationalist Party) and established himself as the President and virtual dictator of China. But for more than two decades, Chiang Kai-shek fought a civil war for control of China against increasingly influential communist armies.
- In 1934 Chiang Kai-shek surrounded the small communist armies and attempted to defeat them. To escape the Guomindang armies, Mao Zedong, now in command of the Communist Party, led about 90,000 supporters over thousands of miles of mountains in what became known as the Long March. When they finally rested in northern China, only about 6,000 of the marchers had survived.

The Victory of the Communist Revolution in 1949

- Between 1937 and 1945 Chiang Kai-shek and Mao united their armies in an uneasy alliance to defeat a common enemy—the Japanese—who occupied China during that time. After the Japanese were defeated in World War II, however, the Guomindang and communist armies—known by then as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—continued the civil war.
- Though heavily outnumbered, the PLA used peasant support and guerrilla tactics to defeat the Guomindang troops and take military material. As the communists took over new areas of the countryside, they continued to confiscate (take) land from landlords and redistribute it among the peasants. Meanwhile, in the major cities, inflation and widespread corruption weakened the prestige of the Guomindang government.
- By early 1949 the People’s Liberation Army controlled much of the countryside, and thousands of Chiang’s troops began to defect (turn to the communist side). Within a few months, the PLA swept through China with little resistance, and Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan. On October 1, 1949, amidst cheering crowds in the old imperial capital of Beijing, Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. From this day on, most Chinese referred to the Communist Revolution as the “Liberation.”

Details on the Influence of Soviet Socialism

Challenges of the New Socialist Government

- After the Communist Revolution of 1949, Mao Zedong and other communist leaders faced many challenges. First, they needed to restore order to a nation devastated by decades of war. In 1950, they felt compelled to send troops and material to their socialist neighbors in North Korea to help them fight against American troops fighting on the side of South Korea in the Korean War. Perhaps most importantly, communist leaders wanted to modernize China's underdeveloped economy while creating a new socialist nation, in which all citizens would share equally in the wealth. Only the Soviet Union had faced similar challenges—in 1917 after their successful socialist revolution. The Chinese turned to the Soviets for guidance and support.

Soviet-influenced Five-Year Plan and Collectivization (1952–1957)

- The Soviet Union provided support to the Chinese by loaning money and heavy equipment, and providing expert technical advice. In 1952 Mao and other communist leaders set a goal for the nation to modernize key aspects of the economy in five years. This Soviet-influenced Five-Year Plan mirrored the Soviet pattern of using technology and science to develop heavy industry, like steel and railroads. Concerned that western industrialized nations were hostile to communist China, Mao urged citizens to make sacrifices for the economic growth and survival of the state (country).
- In 1953 the Chinese government reversed the original land reform of the revolution that provided each villager with small, equal shares of private property. Again following the Soviet example, the Communist Party organized peasants into government-owned collectives, which often merged many villages. By 1955 China, with the help of Soviet aid, had achieved considerable success in developing heavy industry and increasing agricultural production. Communist leaders even spoke of China as a model for less-industrialized countries in Africa and Asia to copy.

Breaking From the Influence of Soviet Socialism

- Despite several years of economic success and the establishment of a stable government, Chinese Communist leaders eventually rejected the guidance of the Soviet Union. By 1956 it became clear that Mao disagreed with the Soviet leaders on the fundamental path a socialist nation should take to achieve communist goals. Mao felt that the Soviet Union moved too slowly toward communism. He believed they relied too much on machines and on a class of technological experts and not enough on human spirit and the socialist value of equality. As communist China asserted its independence from the influence of Soviet socialism, the Soviets decreased financial aid and withdrew technical advisors. In 1958 Mao shifted government policy and began a uniquely Chinese socialist experiment. He wanted China to move toward equality through great effort and sacrifice from the masses.

Details on the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1969)

- After the failure of the Great Leap Forward, communist leaders focused on rebuilding the ruined economy. Mao feared, however, that the new successes of economic recovery in the early 1960s created a society concerned most with making money. Mao believed this threatened the socialist spirit of the revolution. In 1966 Mao concluded that modern China needed a cultural revolution to rid itself of what he referred to as the Four Olds—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits—that were rooted in pre-revolutionary culture.
- Many leaders in the Communist Party opposed Mao's plan to reverse the successful economic recovery. So, Mao turned to young people across China, later called Red Guards, to guard the culture of the revolution. Red Guards did this by humiliating and imprisoning “enemies” of the people, primarily educated Chinese, city dwellers, and corrupt Communist Party officials. Mao published a book of his quotations, known in western nations as the *Little Red Book*, which all Red Guards carried with them. Millions of high school and university students marched in the streets shouting slogans in unison and punishing anyone not following the “politically correct” ideas of Mao. They traveled all over the country wreaking havoc. They raided homes and destroyed anything remotely associated with the Four Olds, including western-style clothes, books, and paintings. They also destroyed precious art objects in museums and Buddhists shrines. Meanwhile, Mao quickly regained control of the Communist Party from leaders who favored a more moderate approach.
- Communist leaders lost control of the Cultural Revolution. Within two years, it brought China to the brink of anarchy (absence of government authority and order). At first, even after Red Guards beat people to death, the police and the military were under orders from Mao not to interfere. By 1967 organized marches had become angry mobs that attacked teachers, civic leaders, and foreign diplomats. Thousands died, and hundreds of thousands of citizens were imprisoned. Many temples, historical monuments, and valuable books were destroyed. In 1969 Mao recognized the excesses of the Red Guards. He called on them to disband and allowed the military to impose law and order.

Aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1969–1976)

- As Mao became old and ill in the early 1970s, his wife, Jiang Qing, gained powerful influence in the Communist Party and continued many radical policies of the Cultural Revolution. But when Mao died in 1976, his wife and three radical colleagues, known as the Gang of Four, were arrested for trying to overthrow the government and causing the deaths of 34,000 people during the Cultural Revolution. By 1979 Deng Xiaoping, a leader twice disgraced by Mao, secured control of the Communist Party and again shifted government policy toward encouraging economic development. He condemned the Cultural Revolution and called for “less empty talk and more hard work.”

Details on the Economic Reforms of Deng Xiaoping

Shifting Leadership from Mao to Deng

- After three years of power struggle among leaders of the Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping, who had early been dismissed from his post by Mao, became the most powerful leader of China in 1979. Deng rejected the extreme socialist values of the Cultural Revolution and shifted the focus of the government back to making China strong economically. Deng called his reforms the Four Modernizations—science, industry, technology, and defense—and argued that they were needed to modernize China.
- Deng's policies differed from Mao's in many ways. Unlike Mao, who distrusted intellectuals and respected peasant values, Deng praised scientists and engineers and wanted China to rise above its peasant culture. Mao believed that the central government in Beijing should plan a socialist economy for all China, while Deng shifted power and responsibility from the capital to local governments and families. Mao constantly focused on his dream of an ideal society with all people motivated by socialist spirit and service to the nation. Deng, however, wanted to see immediate results for China's progress toward modernization, and he believed individual rewards were needed to motivate people to work hard.

Economic Reforms in Agriculture and Industry

- In agriculture, Deng Xiaoping initiated the Responsibility System, which permitted peasants to sell crops from their own private plots at local markets—if they first produced a quota (amount determined by the government) of crops to be given to the government. Motivated by the incentive to make a profit, peasants gradually left state-owned collectives and tended to their own private plots of land. These reforms yielded increased agricultural production.
- In industry, capitalist enterprise came to be accepted. Deng allowed citizens to start their own private businesses, to hire people to work, and to earn a profit from the labor of others. Deng also created many Special Economic Zones, in which foreign investors were permitted to build factories, using cheap Chinese labor to reproduce goods mostly intended for export. Still, many Chinese workers preferred employment in state-run enterprises because of the promises of lifetime employment, housing, retirement, and other benefits.

Results of the Economic Reforms of Deng Xiaoping

- Agricultural and industrial production increased enormously after Deng Xiaoping started his economic reforms. Despite this success, however, China still lacked efficient energy and transportation systems.