

d) From the White Terror to the Yanan Soviet, 1927-37

The alliance between the Communists and the Nationalists had by 1927 largely fulfilled its primary objective of crushing the warlords. This achieved, Chiang Kaishek (Jiang Jieshi), Sun's successor as head of the Guomindang, turned on the Communists and in the 'White Terror' of 1927 practically obliterated them. That the CCP survived at all was due to the flight of Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) to the mountains of Jiangxi (Kiangsi) province (see the map on page 7). Here Mao undertook the organisation and training of the CCP in the tactics of peasant guerilla warfare. All the while Chiang maintained his efforts to destroy the Communists with the result that in 1934 in desperation they broke out from encircled base in Jiangxi to embark on the celebrated Long March to Yanan (Yenan). This 6,000 mile journey established Mao Zedong as the military and political leader of the CCP. Mao spent the next ten years creating the Yanan Soviet. During this time he overcame his rivals within the CCP and developed his own specifically Chinese brand of Marxism-Leninism with its heavy emphasis upon peasant revolution.

e) The Sino-Japanese War, 1937-45

The Yanan period coincided with the Sino-Japanese war (1937-45). This conflict began with Japan's attempt to extend its control of Manchuria, which it had first entered in 1931, into a full-scale occupation of the greater part of China. Japan's aggression stimulated a renewal of the CCP-GMD united front against the enemy. However, Chiang Kaishek's struggle against the Japanese always took second place to his prior aim of destroying the CCP. This meant that he offered only a limited resistance to the occupying forces, a fact that stood in marked contrast to the fierce anti-Japanese commitment shown by the Communists in their strongholds in the north of China. Mao's appeal to the spirit of nationalism in the struggle against the Japanese forces did much to endear him to the Chinese people. When the USA, following the Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor in 1941, became an ally of China in the greater Pacific war, it failed to appreciate the political situation in China and gave direct recognition and support to the GMD government. In Mao's sense of outrage at this lay the seeds of his intense anti-Americanism. Mao was hardly better disposed towards Stalin and the USSR. The truth was that Stalin had never shown any great faith in the CCP as a revolutionary force. He did not believe that it was strong enough to survive on its own. Since 1927 Stalin had consistently urged the CCP to maintain the front with the GMD, even at the height of Chiang's murderous vendetta against the Communists. Mao never forgot the dismissive way he and the CCP had been treated by both the Comintern and the USSR.

f) The Civil War and the Victory of the CCP, 1945-9

After Japan's surrender in 1945, China returned to its own GMD-CCP civil war. Events were to show that by that date Chiang and the Nationalists had effectively already lost the struggle. They had been in nominal power for nearly a decade but had little to show for it. Their resistance to Japan had been half-hearted, their government was riddled with corruption and nepotism, and they now appeared helpless in the face of soaring inflation. Despite the military hardware that the USA continued to supply, the GMD had lost the initiative in the field. Under Mao, the Red Army's policy of respect for the peasantry, which stood in vivid contrast to the brutality of the GMD's food requisitioning and enforced military recruitment, had won the CCP a major following in the countryside. Mao's determination 'to win the hearts of the people' had proved to be the successful prelude to the CCP's victory in 1949. At the end of four years of fierce struggle, Chiang Kaishek was defeated. He fled with US assistance to Taiwan (Formosa), leaving a triumphant Mao in Beijing to declare the foundation of the Chinese People's Republic in October 1949.



4 China and the Historians

The great problem for historians studying other times and nations is one of perspective. Differences in language and culture obstruct a common understanding. As the authoritative *Cambridge History of China* put it in 1982: 'Historical research and writing on China have flourished in four major parts of the world - China, Japan, the Atlantic community and the Soviet Union - but communication among them has been less than perfect'.

Analysts in these four regions have produced important works but there has as yet been no real synthesis of their findings. This is largely a technical problem. Few of the scholars who study Chinese history are sufficiently proficient in the four main languages in which the original documents or secondary studies are written (Japanese, Russian, English, Chinese) to be able to handle the material easily. To quote the *Cambridge History of China* again:

- 1 [F]ew Chinese scholars feel at home in the Japanese language and are able to work in Japanese collections of Chinese materials. Westerners who use Chinese are not always as facile in Japanese or in Russian, and so on round the circle. In dealing with Republican
- 5 China we are far from the state of multi-archival scholarly competence achieved by historians working on modern and contemporary Europe.

The three interested foreign parties, Japan, the West (predominantly the

USA) and Russia, have tended to interpret Chinese history very much from their own individual point of view. They have been largely concerned to explain or justify their own record of involvement rather than produce an objective account. The American experience is an especially notable example. The Communist victory in China in 1949 forced the USA, which had invested so much diplomacy and capital in East Asia in the 1930s and 1940s, to reappraise the whole of Chinese history. A large number of universities in the USA established departments of Chinese studies in the 1950s. Their concern was to explain what they regarded as a Cold War calamity, the 'loss' of China to Mao's Communists and the defeat of democracy. Why had China gone the way it had in the twentieth century? Whatever the political motives behind it, the American initiative produced some outstanding scholarship which made a major contribution to the widening of Western perceptions of China.

A remarkable fact is that in the twentieth century the greatest number of studies of modern China have been written in Japanese. The Japanese occupation of China between 1931 and 1945 and Tokyo's growing belief that Japan and China had a joint future as an Asiatic bloc led to the rapid development of a deep interest in Chinese affairs among Japanese officials and academics, particularly in regard to economic and social matters. This interest continued even after the Japanese defeat in 1945; by the early 1970s Japan could legitimately claim to possess a fuller collection of sources on Chinese history in the twentieth century than existed in China itself. As might be expected in the period before 1945, the Japanese interpreted China's history in the light of their own aspirations and expectations; Japan's superiority over its neighbour was the underlying theme. This slanted view was considerably modified in postwar Japanese studies, but as late as the mid-1990s there remained a large body of documents relating to Sino-Japanese relations before 1945 awaiting analysis and assessment.

Although by no means as extensive as the Japanese collection, Russian sources on China are considerable. They remain vital to a complete analysis of Chinese history. Unfortunately, in the strained international atmosphere that prevailed after 1945, the Soviet authorities were unwilling to co-operate with their Cold-War opponents. It was not until after the break-up of the USSR in the early 1990s that Western scholars were granted access to Soviet archives. Moreover, the bitter Sino-Soviet dispute in the 1950s and 1960s had prevented anything approaching a detached or balanced view of Chinese history developing in the USSR. The signs are much more propitious in the late 1990s. Co-operation between Western and Russian historians has begun to throw light on such themes as the USSR's relations with the CCP and the GMD, its involvement in the Pacific war, and its manoeuvres in relation to the Chinese civil war of 1945-9 and the eventual victory of Mao Zedong and the Communists.

Until relatively recently, historians in the West tended to view Chinese history as an appendage to Western developments rather than being of significance in its own right. Indeed, some scholars doubted whether China before the nineteenth century had a history that could be analysed; a closed, inward-looking, and unchanging culture is easier to describe than to interpret. This view was strengthened by particular trends in the writing of Western history, such as the emphasis upon social and economic analysis as the essential first step towards the understanding of political history. Some writers went so far as to say that politics does not have a separate existence; it is rather the formalised and public expression of determinant economic conditions. Applied to China, this particular approach laid stress upon the impact of the West upon Chinese history. It argued that the modern history of China did not really begin until its sudden jolting into modernity by Western economic exploitation in the nineteenth century. China's subsequent development in the twentieth century continued to be shaped by outsiders, such as the Japanese who occupied China for much of the Republican period, the Russians who directed the policies of the Chinese revolutionaries, and the Americans who dictated to the Nationalists.

Other scholars challenged this view as imposing too narrow an interpretation. They asked why any nation's history should be judged only in relation to an arbitrary international measure. History as a record of what happened does not have to conform to a concept of significance. The history of any country has an intrinsic value as an account of its development. Some went even further; they rejected the idea of China as the passive victim of outside powers and instead identified a particular dynamic in Chinese history in the twentieth century. Starting from the Marxist premise that the world's proletariat was on the march to victory, they interpreted the period from the Boxer rising of 1900 to the establishment of the Chinese People's Republic in 1949 as the unfolding story of how the Chinese people first threw off the imperialist yoke and then broke the grip of the Nationalists who had tried to impose bourgeois capitalism upon them. The Chinese thus became the model for all aspirant anti-colonialist peoples.

A complicating factor for Western historians seeking to judge between conflicting interpretations was that when they turned to the way history has been written in China they found a very different tradition from their own. Historical study in China is not a detached academic pursuit. It is indistinguishable from politics. A striking illustration of this is that it is invariably written in the present tense. The past and the present are referred to as if there were no difference between them. For example, a Chinese historian describing the events of 2,000 years ago would write, 'The Emperor calls upon his subjects to crush the rebellion against his authority', not *called* upon. This linguistic style gives an immediacy and relevance to what is being described and

emphasises the continuity of Chinese history.

Given such a tradition, Chinese political leaders cannot adopt a disinterested approach towards history, whether distant or contemporary. It impinges too closely upon their present position. History has to be pressed into service. As with so many intellectual concerns, the value of history for the Chinese is judged in terms of its usefulness as a guide to current circumstance. A traditional way of undermining a political adversary was not by direct condemnation but by likening his actions to those of a well-known failure in the past. This was always a far more potent weapon than its equivalent behaviour would have been in Western politics, where direct criticism and open challenge became the staple of democratic political debate. It is notable that Mao Zedong regularly turned to thousand-year-old historical accounts for guidance on the policies he should follow in twentieth-century China. Little wonder, then, that traditional Western scholarship, with its emphasis on objective reporting and balanced analysis, rarely accorded with the Chinese concept of historical enquiry, which so often seemed to be a matter of propaganda.

After the creation of the Chinese People's Republic in 1949, the Communist hierarchy controlled all official publications. Nothing was allowed to appear that in any way criticised the CCP or its record. There simply was no history as the term would be understood in the West. All that appeared was hagiography, praising Mao Zedong and the CCP and condemning Chiang's Nationalists and their foreign allies. With the death of Mao in 1976 and the subsequent decline in his reputation, a number of adjustments to the official record did begin to appear. But these have been very limited in their extent. There has, as yet, been no equivalent to the de-Stalinisation that occurred in the USSR in the wake of Stalin's death. The adaptations in the post-Mao period were difficult and politically dangerous. The Chinese Communist Party continued to hold power in China. The political in-fighting between the conservative Maoists, such as the 'Gang of 4', and the more progressive Communists who believed that change was necessary for Party and national survival, resulted in the defeat of the die-hards. But this did not leave the victors entirely free to reject Maoism. For members of the CCP to acknowledge too many mistakes on Mao's part would be to undermine their own standing. The official line became a form of compromise. Mao's mistakes in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s were acknowledged, but, as if in compensation for this major shift, extra emphasis was placed on Mao's successful leadership of the Chinese revolution before 1949. The result was that the official histories dealing with post-1949 China have become more reliable than those which deal with the pre-1949 period.

5 Issues in Chinese History

From the foregoing section it is evident that since Chinese history began to be seriously studied outside China, a number of questions have arisen to divide historians. Did China shape its own destiny between 1900 and 1949 or were outside influences the real determinants of what happened? Did China achieve its release from imperialist control by its own efforts or did it merely substitute one alien system for another? Having thrown off one form of oppression - Western colonialism - did it not simply replace it with another - Soviet imperialism? Had China merely made itself the plaything of a foreign ideology or had it, in keeping with its traditions, taken Marxism-Leninism and Sinified it, drawing from it those concepts that fitted the Chinese situation and rejecting the rest?

Another profound question is whether China could have used its plentiful resources, human and material, to turn itself without turmoil into a modern industrial state. Behind the question lies the thought that the availability of Western technology provided China with the opportunity to make the transition without divorcing itself from its cultural roots. In short, why could not China do as Japan had done? Some commentators lay the blame for China's failure to achieve such modernisation squarely on the Nationalists. It was they, runs the argument, who for short-term political and economic gains allowed corruption to become endemic in Chinese public life and so prevented China from moving towards genuine modernisation.

Not all observers are convinced by this reasoning. There is a counter argument to the effect that between 1900 and 1949 Chinese economic and cultural conservatism proved so strongly entrenched that the prospects of an ordered transition from feudalism to modernity were always more apparent than real. Another argument casts Japan and the West as the culprits responsible for China's troubled half century. The aggression of imperialist Japan and the compound of exploitation and disdain that characterised the major Western powers in their dealings with China deprived the Chinese of a genuine chance to modernise.

One subtle line of analysis, however, suggests that it was not Western or Japanese aggrandisement that frustrated China but China's own blindness as to where its true interests lay. The Chinese allowed the bitterness of Sino-Japanese relations to obscure the fact that the best hope for China lay in an economic alliance with Japan, such as had been envisaged in the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. It would have made sense for China to accept a limited period of tutelage to the more advanced Japan in order for the two nations eventually to become partners in what would have become a major commercial and industrial power bloc. Instead the Chinese allowed themselves to be dragged into a destructive war with the very neighbour with whom they should have been in partnership.

