



Chinese Communist Revolution

By Eman M. Elshaikh

China was never really colonized, but an anti-colonial vision drove much of its history in the twentieth century. Let's look at their unique route through empire, nationalism, communism and economic success.

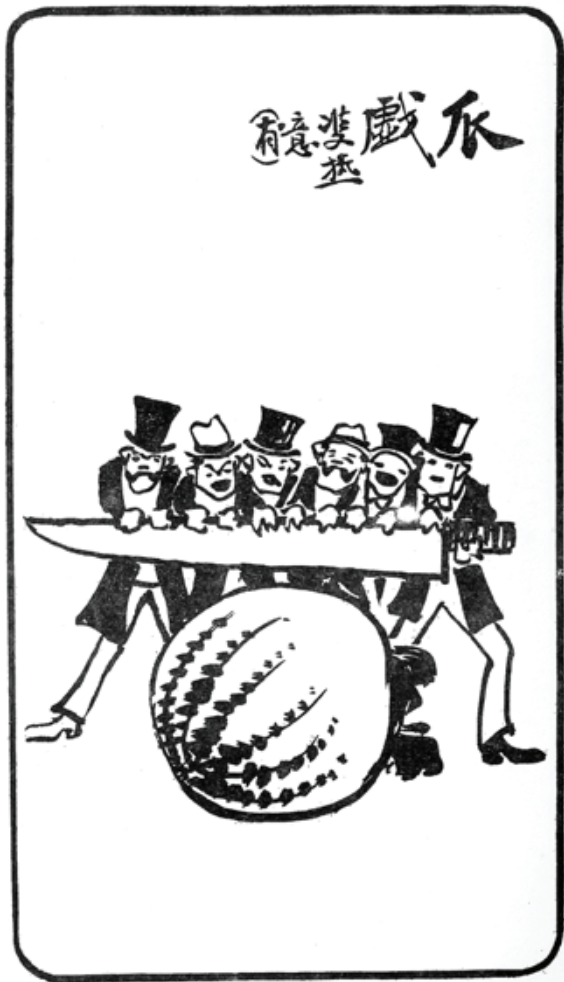


Carving up the melon

In the early 1900s, there was one image that kept popping up in Chinese newspapers and magazines: the melon. No, it wasn't a diet craze. The melon was China. It was a time when foreign influences were exploiting China's weak state more and more. That created an anxiety that China was being "carved up like a melon" by greedy imperialists.

Anxiety about imperialism is understandable. But China has a complicated relationship with imperialism. For much of its history, China *was an empire* that extended its power across Asia, it also struggled against foreign imperialism. So, when we roll around to the post-war period and start talking about decolonization, it's hard to figure out where China fits. Much of China's twentieth century identity stems from fighting imperialism and decolonizing. But can a country decolonize if it was never *really* colonized?

It kind of sort of was, at the same time. Decades of unequal treaties with Western nations and rising Japanese power meant that China lost control of key ports, cities, and spheres of influence. This left China in a semi-colonial situation.



[“Melon Theater” political cartoon in Popular Rights Illustrated in 1912.](#) From the [Journal of Transcultural Studies](#). CC BY-SA NC 4.0.



[1898 political cartoon](#) in *Le Petit Journal* titled “China. A delicacy for kings...and emperors.” Carving up was a widespread image – whether a watermelon, cake, or globe, H. Meyer. Public domain.

In 1911, rebels initiated the Xinhai Revolution, overthrowing China's last imperial dynasty—and imperialism with it. In 1912, the six-year-old Emperor Puyi gave up the throne, and a Chinese republic was established. From that point forward, the idea of the Chinese nation was fundamentally opposed to imperialism.

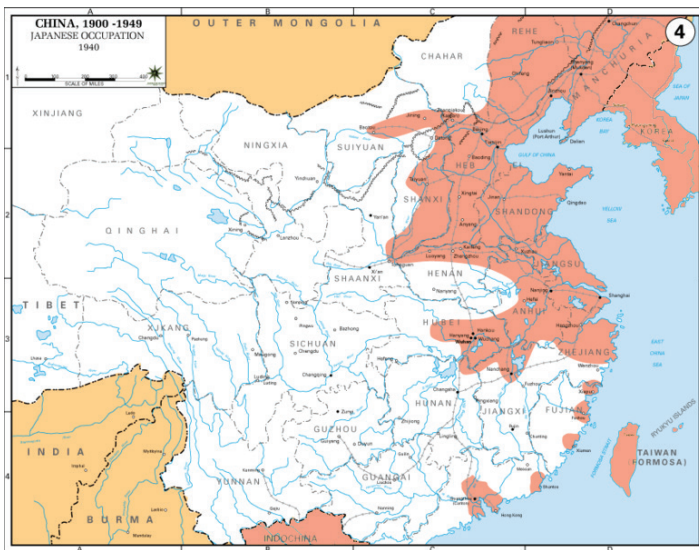


[Lithograph illustrating the 1911 battle at Ta-ping gate, Nanking.](#) From the Wellcome Library, London, CC BY 2.0.

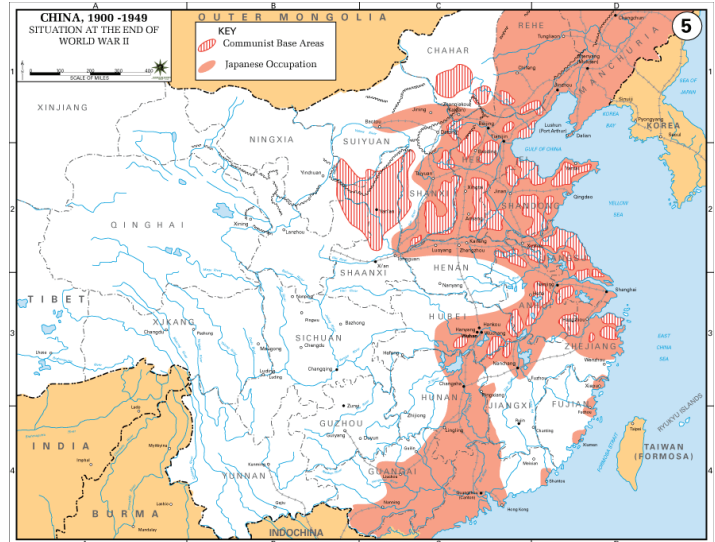
Nationalists vs. communists (except during WWII)

After declaring a republican government, the new nationalist party, called the Kuomintang (KMT), tried to rebuild the country. Under the leadership of the first president, Sun Yat-sen, they set about modernizing and unifying the country. But they struggled to maintain unity, and in reality warlords ran the different regions of China. In 1921, revolutionaries inspired by socialist anti-imperialist ideas formed the Communist Party of China (CPC).

At first, the communists allied with the KMT against the warlords, but it didn't last long. By 1927, shortly after Sun Yat-sen's death, things fell apart. Between 1927 and 1937, communists tried to gain power for themselves, with the nationalists suppressing them. Meanwhile, another danger was looming. While the Chinese had ended their own imperial government, outside empires were still a threat. At the end of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles had recognized some Japanese claims in China as a reward for Japan fighting alongside the victorious powers. By the 1920s, Japanese armies were pushing into Manchuria in northeast China. After 1937, China was officially at war with Japan. Reunited once again against imperialists, the KMP and CPC fought the Japanese invaders.



Map showing the extent of Japanese occupation in 1941. Public domain.



Map showing Japanese occupation (red) of eastern China near the end of the war, and Communist bases (striped). Public domain.

Fast forward to the end of WWII, and the Japanese were forced to surrender in China (as elsewhere), but only to the KMT¹. The anti-imperialist alliance ended, and for three years, 1946-1949, China was divided in a brutal civil war between the nationalists and the communists. The communists were the underdogs for many reasons, but they nevertheless emerged victorious in 1949. The communist leader, Mao Zedong, declared a new socialist nation: The People's Republic of China (PRC). The nationalists and their leaders—about two million people—retreated to the island of Taiwan and established a rival Chinese nation, the Republic of China (ROC).

Rise of the Communist Party of China

So, the communists had their revolution in China, only it took twenty-eight years for them to hold power. But better late than never. They had won a great deal of support among the common people, especially peasants. And they were seen as anti-imperialist heroes for their efforts against the Japanese. The PRC, led by Mao Zedong, embarked on the huge task of building a socialist state.

Chairman Mao (as he was known) had a plan to lower rent, redistribute land, energize industry, and uphold women's



Mao Zedong in 1949/1950. From Washington Area Spark, CC BY-NC 2.0.

¹ Under the terms dictated by the United States, they had to surrender specifically to the KMT. A full month after Japan surrendered, the Japanese fought the communists, while the nationalists got ready to travel to the still-occupied territories. The Americans—who were supposedly neutral—provided transportation to the KMT.

rights. But that required him to restructure society completely—an uphill battle, and a violent one. In the early 1950's, the PRC began its land reform process, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of poor peasants to liberate land from wealthy landlords and redistribute their resources. The landlords were subject to humiliation and violence. The struggle led to hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of deaths. The process was, as Mao glibly said, “not a dinner party.”

Mao Zedong is reported to have said that “women hold up half the sky” and should be treated equally. During the early PRC days, he was true to his word. Marriage and land reforms gave women more rights, and women were encouraged to enter the work force—though there was a temporary reversal when women were encouraged to be good socialist housewives.

Following in Soviet footsteps and with Soviet support, the PRC also set out to centralize its industries, using five-year plans to set the pace of development. Focused on heavy industry, this commitment to industrializing continued with the Great Leap Forward. The what? Glad you asked...

The Great Leap Forward

So, you know how on TV, when someone is doing something dangerous—and usually awesome—they say: *don't try this at home!* Well, the Chinese government gave the opposite advice, when it came to making steel. People were encouraged to build furnaces in their own backyards to make steel, in order to help China grow its industries. That's because China had been the biggest manufacturing center in the world before about 1750, but now they were way behind other parts of the world in industrial production. To catch up, they figured, why limit factory work to factories?

Homemade steel wasn't the best idea ever, but it was part of new initiatives launched during the Great Leap Forward campaign. Mao introduced the campaign in the late 1950s to industrialize the countryside, usually with small-scale factories and workshops. The campaign also called for educational reforms and the use of people's communes, where people lived and worked collectively.

Though stay-at-home steel-making didn't pan out, other things did. Infrastructure, like railroads, bridges, canals, reservoirs, mines, power stations, and irrigation systems, were built and modernized. However, agricultural output was pretty bad. There was a period of bad weather, plus a lot of the grain that people managed to grow was exported to the Soviet Union to pay for industrial equipment. As a result, China experienced catastrophic famines that killed tens of millions of people.



DIY (do it yourself) steel-making in 1958. Public domain.

The Cultural Revolution

Now if you're thinking: *another revolution?* Didn't China have two already? – don't worry. This wasn't *that* kind of revolution. It was another one of Mao's campaigns introduced in the mid-1960s: The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The Great Leap Forward hadn't worked, and the economy was slow. Mao thought perhaps capitalism was still the culprit, so he started a social movement to weed it out of Chinese society.

He organized the “Red Guards,” a militarized group of mostly young men. The goal was to destroy the “Four Olds” of pre-communist China: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. Much of China's cultural heritage was destroyed, as it was – said the campaign – associated with capitalist, feudal, or backwards ways of thinking. That included religion, and this was especially tough on religious minorities. Also, those young people in the Red Guard who suddenly had so much power were an unruly bunch, and central authorities did not control them very well.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao and the PRC claimed to have achieved the goal of giving women equal rights, with Mao declaring, “The times have changed; men and women are the same.” Women sported short hairstyles, wore army clothing, and worked alongside men. Despite this declaration, women continued to experience discrimination and abuse, but it was harder for them to speak up when Mao's message was that the battle for equality had already been won.

In the end, the Cultural Revolution caused a lot of problems. Schools suffered as students denounced their teachers as “bourgeois intellectuals”—but don't try that with your teachers. Many industries came to a halt as experts were driven off by the Red Guards. Even the Chinese Communist Party later called the policies “a great catastrophe”, and many leaders believed it was really just Mao's way of eliminating his rivals within the party.

China and the world

After the Cultural Revolution, however, things began to stabilize. Despite some disastrous policies, between 1949 and Mao's death in 1976, China's economy had vastly improved. China as a whole became more independent, and its residents were on average wealthier, more educated, and healthier. China was also becoming a more powerful regional and global actor once again—just in time for decolonization.

Anti-imperialism had been a huge part of Chinese nationalism for most of the century, and China committed to fighting imperialist powers abroad. But the face of imperialism had changed since WWII, with the United States and the Soviet Union vying for control. And though the PRC was on good terms with the Soviets initially, the relationship had soured, and China was more or less on its own by the 1960s. It joined the Non-Aligned Nations – who were committed to not taking sides in the US - Soviet Union rivalry – and practiced a policy of overall opposition to imperialism and colonialism.



Red Guards, many of whom were high school and university students, holding copies of Chairman Mao Zedong's “Little Red Book,” gathering in Tian'anmen Square in Beijing in September 1966, the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Public domain.



[Chinese Cultural Revolution image](#) which says “The proletarian cultural revolution in our country is shaking the whole world.” From the University of Michigan Library, public domain.

Equipped with nuclear power after the 1960s, China emerged as the most powerful of these non-aligned nations. With a growing economy and a strong military, it became a powerful world actor. In fact, it was the PRC and not the Soviet Union that was the main socialist backer of communists in the Korean and Vietnam Wars for a while. As its economy and power grew, China effectively became the third-strongest global power. And for a long time, it sponsored decolonization in many places. Ultimately, this powerful nation enacted policies that others claimed were Chinese imperialism – like taking over Tibet and trying to culturally change Muslim citizens in the south-west of China. But its overall legacy in the twentieth century was as an anti-imperial power.

Sources

- "1750-1919: China and the West: Imperialism, Opium, and Self-Strengthening (1800-1921) | Central Themes and Key Points | Asia for Educators | Columbia University." Accessed July 18, 2019. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_imperialism.htm.
- Duara –, Prasenjit, Sun Yat-Sen –, Ho Chi Minh –, Jawaharlal Nehru –, Frantz Fanon –, Jalal Al-I. Ahmad –, Kwame Nkrumah –, et al., eds. *Decolonization : Perspectives from Now and Then*. Re-Writing Histories. London ; New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Duara, Prasenjit. *Culture, Power, and the State : Rural North China, 1900-1942*. Edited by Prasenjit Duara. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=e000xna&AN=11946>.
- . "Modern Imperialism." *The Oxford Handbook of World History*, March 31, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199235810.013.0022>.
- . *Rescuing History from the Nation : Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Edited by Prasenjit Duara. Pbk. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uchicago/detail.action?docID=471849>.
- . *Sovereignty and Authenticity : Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*. State and Society in East Asia. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.
- Duara, Prasenjit, and Sugata Bose, eds. *Asia Redux : Conceptualising a Region for Our Times*. Research Series (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre) ; New Delhi, India: Manohar, 2013.
- Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, and Anne. Walthall. *Modern East Asia : From 1600 : A Cultural, Social, and Political History*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2014.
- Eisenman, Joshua. *Red China's Green Revolution : Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development under the Commune*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- "Everyday Life in Maoist China." Accessed July 18, 2019. <https://everydaylifeinmaoistchina.org/>.
- FitzGerald, C. P. "Religion and China's Cultural Revolution." *Pacific Affairs* 40, no. 1/2 (1967): 124–29.
- Fraser, Cary. "Decolonization and the Cold War." *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, January 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199236961.013.0027>.
- Goodman, David S. G. "Revolutionary Women and Women in the Revolution: The Chinese Communist Party and Women in the War of Resistance to Japan, 1937–1945*." *The China Quarterly* 164 (December 2000): 915–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000019238>.
- Goscha, Christopher. "Global Wars and Decolonization in East and South-East Asia (1937–1954)." *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, December 6, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.16>.
- Hershatter, Gail. *Women and China's Revolutions*. Edited by author Hershatter Gail. Critical Issues in World and International History. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.
- . *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century*. Edited by University of California Berkeley. Global, Area and International Archive. Berkeley: Global, Area, and International Archive : University of California Press, 2007.
- "Introduction to China's Modern History | Asia for Educators | Columbia University." Accessed July 18, 2019. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china_modern_timeline.htm.
- Ip, Hung-Yok. "Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture." *Modern China* 29, no. 3 (2003): 329–61.
- Kerr, Gordon. "A Short History of China : From Ancient Dynasties to Economic Powerhouse,." 2013. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=535379>.
- Lee, Christopher J. "Anti-Colonialism." *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, December 6, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.24>.
- Li, Yuhui. "Women's Movement and Change of Women's Status in China." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 18, 2013): 30–40.

- Ma, Tehyun. "The Eclipse of Empire in China." *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, December 6, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.14>.
- McNeill, John, and Kenneth Pomeranz, eds. *The Cambridge World History Volume 7 Part 1 Production, Destruction and Connection, 1750–Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139196079>.
- , eds. *The Cambridge World History Volume 7 Part 2 Production, Destruction and Connection 1750–Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316182789>.
- Mitter, Rana. "China and the Cold War." *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, January 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199236961.013.0008>.
- . "Nationalism in East Asia, 1839–1945." *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, March 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199209194.013.0014>.
- Ropp, Paul Stanley. *China in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Rowe, William T. *China's Last Empire : The Great Qing*. History of Imperial China. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Schmalzer, Sigrid. *Red Revolution, Green Revolution : Scientific Farming in Socialist China*. Chicago ; University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Shaffer, Lynda. "Modern Chinese Labor History, 1895-1949." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 20 (1981): 31–37.
- Strayer, Robert W. *Ways of the World: A Brief Global History with Sources; Volume 2: Since the Fifteenth Century*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2019.
- Wagner, Rudolf. "'Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon, Guafen 瓜分': The Fate of a Transcultural Metaphor in the Formation of National Myth." *The Journal of Transcultural Studies*, no. 1 (October 10, 2017): 9–122. <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.ts.2017.1.23700>.
- Yang, Wenqi, and Fei Yan. "The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao's China: Gender Inequality of Sent-down Youth during the Cultural Revolution." *China Information* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 63–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X17691743>.
- Zarrow, Peter Gue. *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949. Asia's Transformations*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2005. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uchicago/docDetail.action?docID=10273050>.
- Zhao, Gang. "Reinventing China: Imperial Qing Ideology and the Rise of Modern Chinese National Identity in the Early Twentieth Century." *Modern China* 32, no. 1 (2006): 3–30.
- Zheng, Wang. "Communism and Gender in China." In *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, 1–8. American Cancer Society, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss761>.

Eman M. Elshaikh

The author of this article is Eman M. Elshaikh. She is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the United States and in the Middle East and written for many different audiences. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master's in social sciences and is currently pursuing her PhD. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP World History.

Image Credits

Cover: During a welcoming party for Mao Zedong, General Chiang Kai-shek toasts with Mao over the banquet table. © Bettmann/Getty Images

"Melon Theater" political cartoon in *Popular Rights Illustrated* in 1912. From the *Journal of Transcultural Studies*. CC BY-SA NC 4.0. <https://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/23700>

1898 political cartoon in Le Petit Journal titled “China. A delicacy for kings...and emperors.” Carving up was a widespread image – whether a watermelon, cake, or globe, H. Meyer. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_imperialism_cartoon.jpg

Lithograph illustrating the 1911 battle at Ta-ping gate, Nanking. From the Wellcome Library, London, CC BY 2.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xinhai_Revolution#/media/File:An_episode_in_the_revolutionary_war_in_China,_1911_-_the_battle_at_the_Ta-ping_gate_at_Nanking._Wellcome_L0040002.jpg

Lithograph illustrating female rebel fighters from the Revolutionary Women’s Army led by Wu Shuqing in a battle in Nanking. From the Wellcome Library, London, CC BY 2.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu_Shuqing#/media/File:An_episode_in_the_revolutionary_war_in_China,_1911_-_the_revolutionary_women’s_army_attacks_Nanking._Wellcome_V0047151.jpg

Map showing the extent of Japanese occupation in 1941. Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Sino-Japanese_War#/media/File:Second_Sino-Japanese_War_WW2.png

Map showing Japanese occupation (red) of eastern China near the end of the war, and Communist bases (striped). Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Sino-Japanese_War#/media/File:Situation_at_the_End_of_World_War_Two.PNG

Mao Zedong in 1949/1950. From Washington Area Spark, CC BY-NC 2.0. https://www.flickr.com/photos/washington_area_spark/20747042244

DIY (do it yourself) steel-making in 1958. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Backyard_furnace4.jpg

Red Guards, many of whom were high school and university students, holding copies of Chairman Mao Zedong’s “Little Red Book,” gathering in Tian’anmen Square in Beijing in September 1966, the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red_Guards_in_Tian%27anmen_Square.jpg

Chinese Cultural Revolution image which says “The proletarian cultural revolution in our country is shaking the whole world.” From the University of Michigan Library, public domain. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/ccs1ic>