**Chinese Communist Revolution**

**Chinese Communist Revolution:** 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 itself.

In the nineteenth century, however, it struggled against foreign imperialism. Decades of unequal treaties with Western nations and rising Japanese power meant that China had lost control of key ports, cities, and spheres of influence. The government was also forced to borrow money from foreign banks. Although in most cases, not technically colonies, large regions of China were in reality under foreign control.

This situation was a large part of the reason why, in 1911, rebels started the Xinhai Revolution, overthrowing China's last imperial dynasty. The actual trigger came when the government gave control of China's railways to foreign companies. The revolt overthrew the six-year-old Emperor Puyi, and in 1912 opposition leaders established a Chinese republic.

**Nationalists vs. communists (except during WWII)**

After declaring a republican government, the new nationalist party, called the Guomindang (GMD)^11start superscript, 1, end superscript , tried to rebuild the country. Under the leadership of the first president, Sun Zhongshan, 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 (CCP).

At first, the Communists allied with the GMD against the warlords, but it didn't last long. By 1927, shortly after Sun Zhongshan's death, things fell apart. The GMD became willing to ally with any warlords or landlords, no matter how they treated the peasants, as long as they agreed to fight the Communists. In the meantime, the Communists encouraged peasants to overthrow their landlords.

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 GMD and CCP fought the Japanese invaders.

Fast forward to the end of WWII, and the Japanese were forced to surrender in China (as elsewhere), but only to the GMD.^22squared Their alliance of convenience 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, including US support for the GMT Nevertheless, 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, who were glad to escape from the control of wealthy landlords and corrupt warlords. 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 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, as Mao admitted, was "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 urban 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 communities 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.

**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 initiatives 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 teenagers. 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 really have control of them.

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 vastly improved. Its residents during this time became 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.

Equipped with nuclear power after 1967, 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. Some might question, therefore, whether late twentieth-century China was becoming an empire once again.