

THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA: 1912-1949 Founding

In 1911, after over two thousand years of imperial rule, a republic was established in China and the monarchy overthrown by a group of revolutionaries. The Qing Dynasty, having just experienced a century of instability, suffered from both internal rebellion and foreign imperialism. The Neo-Confucian principles that had, to that time, sustained the dynastic system were now called into question. Its support of the Boxers Rebellion against the world's major powers was its final mistake. The Qing forces were defeated and China was forced to give a huge indemnity to the foreign powers; an equivalent to £ 67 million to be paid over 39 years. Disconnected from the population and unable to face the challenges of modern China, the Qing government was in its final throes. Only the lack of an alternative regime in sight was prolonging its existence until 1912.

The establishment of Republican China developed out of the Wuchang Uprising against the Qing on 10 October 1911. On 29 December 1911, Sun Yat-Sen was elected president by the Nanjing assembly representing the seventeen provinces which had risen in rebellion. On 1 January 1912, he was officially inaugurated and pledged "to overthrow the despotic Manchu government, consolidate the Republic of China and plan for the welfare of the people".

Sun however lacked the military support to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. Realizing this, he handed over the presidency to Yuan Shikai, the imperial general, who then forced the last emperor Puyi to abdicate. Yuan Shikai was officially elected president in 1913. Yuan ruled by military power and ignored the republican institutions established by his predecessor, threatening to execute Senate members that would disagree with his decisions. He soon dissolved the ruling Kuomintang party and banned "secret organizations" (which implicitly included the KMT), and ignored the provisional constitution. An attempt at a democratic election in 1911 ended up with the assassination of the elected candidate by a man recruited by Yuan. Ultimately, Yuan Shikai declared himself Emperor of China in 1915. The new ruler of China tried to increase centralization by abolishing the provincial system; however this move angered the gentry along with the province governors, usually military men. Many provinces declared independence and became warlord states. Increasingly unpopular and deserted by his supporters, Yuan Shikai gave up on becoming Emperor in 1916 and died of natural causes shortly after.

Thus devoid of a strong, unified government, China thrust into another period of warlordism. Sun Yat-sen, forced into exile, returned to Guangdong province in the south with the help of warlords in 1917 and 1922, and set up successive rival governments; he re-established the KMT in October 1919. Sun's dream was to unify China by launching an expedition to the north. He however lacked military support and funding to make it a reality.

The Beiyang government in Beijing struggled to hold on to power. An open and wide-ranging debate evolved regarding how China should confront the West. In 1919, a student protest against the weak response of China to the Treaty of Versailles, considered unfair by Chinese intellectuals, led to the May Fourth movement. These demonstrations were aimed at spreading western influence to replace Chinese culture. It is also in this intellectual climate that the influence of Marxism spread and became more popular. It eventually led to the founding of the Communist Party of China in 1920.

A Decade of War

After Sun's death in March 1925, Chiang Kai-shek became the leader of the KMT. In 1926, Chiang led the Northern Expedition through China with the intention of defeating the last remaining warlords and

unifying China. Chiang received the help of the Soviet Union; however he soon dismissed his Soviet advisors. He was convinced, not without reason that they wanted to get rid of the Nationalists and take over control. Chiang decided to strike first and purged the Communists, killing thousands of them. At the same time, other violent conflicts were taking place in China; in the South, where the Communists were in superior numbers, Nationalist supporters were being massacred. These events eventually led to the Chinese Civil War. Chiang Kai-shek pushed the Communists into the interior as he sought to destroy them, and established a government with Nanking as its capital in 1927. By 1928, Chiang's army overturned the Beiyang government and unified the entire nation, at least nominally.

According to Sun Yat-sen's theory, the KMT was to rebuild China in three phases: a phase of military rule through which the KMT would take over power and reunite China by force; a phase of political tutelage; and finally a constitutional democratic phase. In 1930, the Nationalists, having taken over the power, started the second phase, and promulgated a provisional constitution for the political tutelage period and began the period of so-called "tutelage". They were criticized as instituting totalitarianism but claimed they were attempting to establish a modern democratic society. Among others, they created at that time the Academia Sinica, the Central Bank of China and other agencies. In 1932, China sent a team for the first time to the Olympic Games. Historians, such as Edmund Fung, argue that establishing a democracy in China at that time was not possible. The nation was at war and divided between Communists and Nationalists. Corruption within the government and lack of direction also prevented any significant reform from taking place. Chiang realized the lack of real work being done within his administration and told the State Council: "Our organization becomes worse and worse ... many staff members just sit at their desks and gaze into space, others read newspapers and still others sleep." The Nationalist government wrote a draft of the constitution in 5 May 1936.

The Nationalists faced a great challenge in the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, with hostilities continuing through the Second Sino-Japanese War, part of World War II, from 1937 to 1945. The government of the Republic of China retreated from Nanking to Chongqing. In 1945, after the war of eight years, Japan surrendered and the Republic of China, under the name "China", became one of the founding members of the United Nations. The government returned to Nanking in 1946.

After World War II

After the defeat of Japan during World War II, Taiwan was surrendered to the Allies, with ROC troops accepting the surrender of the Japanese garrison. The government of the ROC proclaimed the "retrocession" of Taiwan to the Republic of China and established the provincial government at Taiwan. The military administration of the ROC extended over Taiwan, which led to widespread unrest and increasing tensions between Taiwanese and mainlanders.

From 1945 to 1947, under United States mediation, especially through the Marshall Mission, the Nationalists and Communists agreed to start a series of peace talks aiming at establishing a coalition government. They however failed to reach an agreement and the civil war resumed. In the context of political and military animosity, the National Assembly was summoned by the Nationalists without the participation of the Communists and promulgated the Constitution of the Republic of China. The constitution was criticized by the Communists, and led to the final break between the two sides. The full scale civil war resumed from early 1947.

In 1948, the ROC administration imposed perpetual martial law. Meanwhile, the civil war was escalating from regional areas to the entire nation. Eventually, the Communist troops, supported by the Soviet Union, defeated the ROC army, supported by the United States. Thus in October 1949, the Communist party led by Mao founded the People's Republic of China while Chiang evacuated the government to Taiwan and made Taipei or 'wartime' the temporary capital of the ROC – a position it still holds today. Between one and two million refugees from mainland China followed him, adding to the earlier population of approximately six million inhabitants, including both a boriginal peoples and Han (mainly Min Nan) Chinese.

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