

China: Political, Social, and Economic Reforms from 1700s to the Present

Connie Shum

Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS, United States

Christine E. Fogliasso

Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS, United States

Gladie Lui

ESCP Business School, London, United Kingdom

Chinese social and economic history is both influenced by and, to a certain extent, married with Chinese political regimes. Various political dynasties from the past have each exercised significant control of Chinese social and economic environments, and continue to exert influence even to the present day. Three of these influential periods include the Kang Qian Flourishing Age (1723-1796), the Qing Dynasty Decline (1800s-1912), and the People's Republic of China Communist Control (1949-present). A review and in-depth examination of each regime helps to both understand where China is today and also how it is likely to evolve in the future.

Keywords: China reforms, political, social, and economic reforms in China, China from 1700s to the present

Introduction

China has long been the focal point of study by economists, historians, anthropologists, and other professionals tasked with understanding human civilizations. It is estimated that humans have inhabited China for 1.7 million years, and it is often considered one of the cradles of civilization--perhaps even one of the places where civilization began. China can trace its historical roots back to the Xia Dynasty that began to rule circa 2070 BC (U.S. State Department, 2007), with the first writing script appearing on oracle bones circa 1500 BC (Keightly, 1996). China is a unique country containing several different geographic features and landscapes. Throughout its long history, however, there is typically a trend to lean towards centralized government. From the heritage of ancient dynasties, where emperors were seen as instruments of God, to Communistic rule of China, which enforced a cult of Mao and incited great feelings of nationalism, Chinese people have rallied towards leaders through the centuries.

To better understand Chinese progress, a review of the social, economic, and political reforms of three different stages of Chinese history is needed, with particular emphasis being placed on political regimes (both domestic and foreign), and their influence on these reforms through the ages.

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Dr. Connie Shum, professor, Kelce College of Business, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS, United States.

Dr. Christine E. Fogliasso, professor, Kelce College of Business, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS, United States.

Dr. Gladie Lui, professor, Department of Financial Reporting and Audit, ESCP Business School, London, United Kingdom.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the social, economic, and political reforms as well as changes in China from 1700s to the present day. Particular emphasis is placed on reviewing how changing political regimes, domestic and foreign, impact such reforms. Discussion is divided into three different stages of Chinese history: the Qing-Led Kang-Qian Flourishing Period, the Qing Dynasty Decline, and the People's Republic of China.

Kang-Qian: The Flourishing Age

The Qing Dynasty was proclaimed in 1636 by Abahai, the son of Nurhachi. Abahai was a Manchu ethnic minority military general who gained power by consolidating various clans and tribes in a Mongol-like fashion. He challenged the then-corrupt Ming Dynasty that was ruled by the major ethnic group, the Han. Abahai set the stage for Qing Dynasty's new beginning by conquering Inner Mongolia (Meyer, 1994, p. 249). However, the next Emperor, Abahai's son Shunzhi, was too young to rule, so instead his uncle Dorgon ruled as regent. When Dorgon died in 1650, Shunzhi then took the throne in his own right. Both Dorgon and Shunzhi tried to fight the corrupt Manchu bannerman and Ming remnant court, but ultimately the efforts resulted in either giving in to corruption or at least to never be able to combat it fully (San, 2014, p. 380).

The Kang-Qian Flourishing Age began with Shunzhi's son, Kangxi, continued with Yongzheng, and ended with Qianlong. Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong both reigned for long periods (61 and 60 years, respectively), but Emperor Yongzheng's reign lasted only for 14 years. However, Yongzhen provided a stable transition from predecessor to successor. Under the able guidance of the three emperors, the Kang-Qian Flourishing Age lasted for 130 prosperous years. It began in 1681 with a military triumph by Emperor Kangxi who succeeded in subduing the *San Fan Zhi Lian* (Revolt of the Three Feudatories), which was a rebellion by the remaining generals from the previous and defeated Ming Dynasty (Zhang, 2015, p. 63). The Kang-Qian Flourishing Age is the peak of the Qing Dynasty rule; interestingly enough, as only three men ruled during that time. The Qing Dynasty's early success was largely due to the shrewdness of the Qing political regime. In autocratic China, where emperors were seen as divinely inspired beings, an effective leader often meant the difference between a good economy and a depression, a society that upheld justice and a society that bred corruption. However, the Kang-Qian Flourishing Age was also one of contradictions. When powerful personalities and personal power intersect, decisions made may be beneficial to society in the end, but the means of carrying out the decision were aimed to be the most quick and efficient. Much like the Industrial Revolution showed, the quickest and most efficient route is often not the most humane.

Social Reforms

Social reform during the Kang-Qian Age was often centered on maintaining balanced relationships between ethnic classes. Unlike in many conquering nations, the Manchu empire integrated itself with the culture of the previous dynasty, which was of majority group Han. Kangxi especially allowed and in fact encouraged the intermarriage of Han sworn-men and Manchu daughters of politically important men. This policy eventually cascaded down to the civilian population as well, as Beijing, the new seat of the Qing capital, swelled with new immigrant Manchus following their leaders across lands to start a new life. The Manchu was particularly good at mixing ethnic groups and uniting differing cultures. One way that political power was attained was through marriages. The Manchu knew this, and so during Kangxi's reign, a "draft" for eligible girls of all ethnic groups was instituted. The most prized girls who passed palace inspection would be married

to high-ranking officials or could even become a concubine of the emperor himself. This practice insured that power was being distributed evenly within the upper ranks (Walthall, 2008, p. 140). Emperor Yongzheng, the middle emperor, also followed in the policy of uniting different people. His reign saw a focus on mass literacy and education, especially to fringe societies that had just found themselves in the Chinese empire as spoils of war. According to Rowe (2012), Emperor Yongzheng wished to "... reduce social stratification and cultural differentiation within the empire and create a relatively homogeneous population of subjects to an absolutist throne" (p. 69).

Yongzheng's son, Qianlong, however, took a different approach. He resented his father's policies, thinking that imperial harmony could be best achieved by playing many different "king" roles to all the different ethnic people. He also saw mass education as unwise politically unwise and wasteful of financial resources (Rowe, 2012, p. 69). Rowe illustrates the difference between Yongzheng and his son Qianlong best by telling the story of a Han purist schoolteacher named Zeng Jing who thought Manchu rule was displeasing to Heaven and tried to rouse a rebellion by reaching out to a descendent of a legendary Han purist war hero. Emperor Yongzheng pardoned Zeng Jing for these crimes and went on to propagate the case nation-wide by writing intensively on why Zeng Jing's philosophy was wrong. Manchu, Yongzheng argued, was just a "native-place designation" much like northerner or southerner is in the United States. However, when Qianlong came to the throne, he had Zeng Jing arrested once more and made to suffer a long, lingering death (Rowe, 2012, p. 70).

Qing Dynasty also ushered in a new way of thinking. During Ming Dynasty, abstract thought about spirituality and inner renewal was very prevalent. Qing Dynasty changed that, as thoughts shifted to the significance of human society, pragmatism, technology, and nature. This new way of thinking was akin to the Enlightenment of the Europe in the same way that it shifted the focus of thought away from spirituality to the human mind. Society was now less about meditating to cultivate the virtuous ideas and thoughts inside of a person but more about using virtues in practical ways to improve society. Inspired scholars thought that it was a holy obligation for everyone to safeguard the world. Ultimately, the thoughts of these philosophers would inspire the real era of Chinese Enlightenment later in the Qing Dynasty.

Economic Reforms

Although the prospects of Qing Dynasty surviving were initially not well demonstrated, the leadership of Kangxi and his descendants turned their rule into not only the peak of Qing Dynasty, but a great point in Chinese history (Rowe, 2012, p. 63). Economically, Qing was at the height of its power. The Silk Road industries of tea, spices, and silk were in full swing and European countries were spending premium on exotic Chinese products the making of which remained largely unknown (for example, silk was not well understood, and as the silkworm was not native to Europe, Europeans had no way of replicating it). This monopoly provided Qing Dynasty with such quick growth that Emperor Kangxi announced towards the end of his reign that the economy has been stabilized to the same point as the peak of Ming Dynasty and declared that there would be no need to ever raise tax on land again, a policy that would later come back to haunt the filial Qing emperors (Rowe, 2012, p. 66).

But for the time being, life was good. Even for the lowliest class, the poor peasant farmers, their prospects of wealth were budding. With aggressive social reform policies, new trades and skills were taught to otherwise fringe societies. The growth of mulberry leaves, tobacco, and sugar cane all spread to different regions that

welcomed the diversification of craft and produce. This prosperity was made possible largely due to expanding military operations under Kangxi and Yongzheng that acquired land, and new citizens of that land could provide for themselves and for the country (in the form of taxes) (Smith, 2015, p. 140).

A market economy developed. Zelin (2005) has this to say about the importance of the Qing Dynasty on markets:

The Qing dynasty saw not only an increase in the number of markets and market towns, but also an evolution in market structures. If marketing is viewed as a hierarchical process, wherein there are some markets that are central and collect the goods from many lower markets in the hierarchy, then China was “filling out” its hierarchy during this period. There were markets that served entire regions, markets under these that served sections of regions, and an increasing number of markets that served the producers. Simultaneously, the markets that were serving the producers were moving from being periodic markets (markets that only met a few days a week, to which farmers could come and bring their produce) to becoming stationary markets that operated every day and had stores that existed all the time, wherein people were working full time as merchants. (2005, p. 2)

Political Reforms

Political regimes in China enjoyed a lot of power. Although there were often conflicting interests within the palace, it is very apparent that throughout Chinese history, there were one or two figures, sometimes the emperor, sometimes not, who yielded extraordinary power over the kingdom. During the Kang-Qian Flourishing Age, this power was concentrated with the Emperors. Kangxi and Yongzheng in particular asserted their power and reformed the political structure, an action that would shake China’s social and economic institutions as well.

Kangxi stressed political reform especially in terms of improving Han-Manchu relations. Under his able hands, he brought in Han intellectuals, who thought the Manchu barbaric, and gave them important seats in the government. With the loyalty of Han intellectuals, many other Han people came to accept their new Manchu rulers and even exerted influence over other social policies that affected both Chinese gentry and peasant alike. By replacing Manchu royalty with Han intellectuals, Emperor Kangxi also brought about a new political atmosphere, one less entombed in ancestral power battles, but more relying on Confucianism logic and learning (Zhang, 2015, p. 64).

By contrast, his son Yongzheng’s rule was far more volatile. Dealing with a relaxed and corrupt bureaucracy, Yongzheng fought (especially in his early administration) to punish corrupt officials to restore discipline (Zhang, 2015, p. 65). Yongzheng also reduced the time governors could serve and invented a new way to communicate secret memorials, streamlining the succession process and tempering the chaos and even murder plots that sometimes followed successions when siblings battled for the royal crown. Finally, Yongzheng instituted better surveillance of governor’s accomplishments and records, one of his most important accomplishments. These reforms to the political system would profoundly impact the future of the Qing political discourse by using the power of the monarchy to rationalize territorial administration (Guy, 2010, p. 126).

The next emperor, Qianlong, focused on reversing the iron grip his father had built. Although Yongzheng’s political accomplishments are looked back on as revolutionary, during the 18th century, many people thought him overly-strict and a tyrant. Qianlong’s initial policies righted certain wrongs from Yongzheng’s reign. He reinstated or released officials who were unjustly imprisoned or accused, and elevated certain advisors to diffuse clan conflict. Qianlong wanted to instate a policy that balanced generosity and

strictness. Because of these policies, he gained political capital and his power grew (Zhang, 2015, p. 68). However, his relaxed view of government would come back to haunt him in his later reign. Assandri and Martins (2009) write, “Qianlong emperor used his power and enforced policies in a way that compromised, rather than promoted, a sustainable, constructive, relationship between the throne and his bureaucracy” (p. 48). If Yongzheng’s rule was viewed as tyrannical, then Qianlong’s reign was a lesson of too many fingers in the pie. Conflicting policies, ambitions, and campaigns made Qianlong stretch the empire too thin. Assandri and Martins (2009) have this to say about the late reign of Qianlong:

Instead of creating an increasingly capable state in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, overly ambitious political practices seemed to undermine the administrative capabilities and resource bases of the state, which in turn necessitated even more unpopular policies. This had initiated a vicious cycle of predatory state making and mounting social protests which shaped the character of the late Qianlong’s reign: a chain reaction of increasingly unbalanced tension between state and society. (2009, p. 48)

Unfortunately, Qianlong’s policies would set the stage for political ineptitude that eventually led to the total collapse of Qing Dynasty.

Summary of the Kang-Qian Flourishing Age

The Kang-Qian Flourishing Age was characterized by the decisions of mainly three emperors: Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong. Although each emperor emphasized different policies, each left a mark on Chinese political, social, and economic system. Since the cultural constructs of Chinese society dictated a high degree of filial piety, to overturn a law or proclamation of a previous emperor would be a direct disgrace and insult to that emperor. Often, policies were either stuck in a backwards time or had to be refuted or secretly reversed. It is this hold of past political regimes that mark a definite difference between Chinese and foreign political regimes. Oftentimes the next reigning leader is expected to correct the mistakes of the past leader, but in Chinese politics, this would be seen as a grave act of insolence. It is partly because of this filial piety that Qing Dynasty began its decline. Bound by the promises of Emperor Kangxi to never raise taxes on land, the overambitious Qing state ran itself close to financial and political ruin by enacting policies it could not enforce nor support, causing great suffering for not only its own regime but the commoners of China as well.

Qing Decline: Opium Wars & Civilian Revolts

One could argue that the Qing Decline was in part the fault of foreign political regimes and civilian political, militant organizations. Each time the Qing regime was ready and willing to sign into effect edicts that would help modernize or rescue China from the clutches of famine or economic downfall, foreign countries would wage wars for trade dominance, or civilians would revolt that change was not coming fast enough. In general, Qing Dynasty found itself stuck in a changing world that clamored and demanded more than the Qing elite could give. Thus, this period was characterized not by the reforms made, but lack thereof.

Although civil unrest and decline had already become apparent because of the Qing Dynasty’s lack of resources, the decline of the Manchu empire was most clear in the results of the First Opium War. China, which was primarily self-sufficient, would trade its precious commodities only for silver. Western countries, however, were growing tired of it as their silver coffers were all about decimated. To rebuff this condition, Great Britain began to trade with a much more addictive substance: opium. Qing government saw opium addiction as an affront of Confucian ideals and morals, which demanded that the body was a gift, given to a person by his or

her ancestors, to be a link from the past to the present. Desecration of the body, therefore, was an insult to filial piety and the generations that came before. Opium also rid people of social responsibilities, turning them into addicted gutter-rats (Grasso, Corrin, & Kort, 2015, p. 34). However, the Qing government was slow to react. Finally, the Daoguang emperor ordered a government official, Lin Zexu, to abolish the trade. Lin Zexu sequestered 2.66 million pounds of opium, but did not offer reimbursement to merchants. He also cornered foreign traders into their living quarters and blocked trade. As a result, Great Britain went to war with China (Farooqui, 2005). China was defeated by the Western power, whose superior naval skills and technology revealed just how far behind China really was in comparison to Industrial Age Great Britain (Weizheng, 2015, p. 351). Subsequently, the Treaty of Nanking gave Great Britain and other countries more power over Chinese trade and economy by opening up ports, and the door, to China.

As foreign trouble was brewing, so was domestic trouble. Chinese citizens, enraged by Qing's inability and slow progress to reform economic and social situations, were ready for change and wished to overthrow their Qing overlords. Although there were several revolts during the Qing Decline, perhaps the most disastrous of all was the Taiping Rebellion, commonly known as the Chinese civil war. The rebellion lasted for 14 years, at the end of which the death toll was 30 times higher than the death toll experienced by the United States during the civil war (Platt, 2012, p. 1).

Foreign and domestic uprisings contributed heavily to the decline of not only Qing Dynasty, but China as a nation. For thousands of years, China had always been on the upper ladder of countries. Its progressive ways and precious commodities made it a rich and prosperous country. However, as population crowding, land shortage, famines, lack of industrial revolution and scientific processes, and an inept government all mixed together, China began to descend the slippery slope to political, social, and economic ruin.

Social Reforms

The social situation of the declining Qing Dynasty was dire. According to Grasso, Corrin, and Kort (2015):

Along with Western incursions, by the end of the eighteenth century the Qing dynasty was also being seriously threatened by a multitude of internal problems. First, there was the state's inability to sustain an enormous increase in population. Because of a century of peace and relative prosperity, China's population apparently doubled under the Manchus, reaching the level of about 300 million by the end of the eighteenth century. The expansion of agricultural production was unable to keep up with such rapid demographic growth. By 1800, arable land had increased by less than 5 percent, woefully inadequate to support a population that had expanded by more than 100 percent. Rather than accept unemployment or starvation, many Chinese peasants turned to banditry or joined rebel movements to ease their misery. (2015, p. 32)

Socially, things were not progressing very well in China. Even though starvation was largely a peasant problem, Qing elites could not live in peace and prosper because rebellion movements rose up and engulfed the country. All cultural improvements ceased as the nation was divided between the Chinese lower class and Manchu elite. Opium addiction, perpetuated by Great Britain, also incapacitated many, as peasants and elites alike became addicted and ineffectual, including one of the emperors of the Qing Dynasty, Xianfeng, who died of opium overdose. Taiping Rebellion as well as the Second Opium War emerged (Ringmar, 2013, p. 168).

Qing Dynasty did attempt to reform itself and cure some of the social ills, especially after the Sino-Japanese War, where China was embarrassingly defeated at the hands of Japan, who was seen as a weaker and smaller country. Thus it began the Hundred Day's Reform, which lasted 103 days in 1898. Emperor

Guangxu issued edicts, mainly led by the thoughts of intellectual Kang Youwei. The edicts called for reformation of education; abolishment of imperial examinations; advocacy of private industries, establishment of national bank and financial reforms; creation of public newspapers; and devising a way for the Throne to hear suggestions and concerns of the peasant people directly. Although this reform seemed promising, many Qing elites thought it was radical and a blatant disregard for Confucian morals. Under the direction of Empress Dowager Cixi, who loomed as a veiled, powerful figure in Qing politics, a coup against the Emperor was staged. Emperor Guangxu was placed on house arrest. His reform advisors were killed. The only reform the Qing elite kept from the Hundred Day's Reform was the new schools. The rest were abolished immediately (Fang, 2015, pp. 20-21).

Economic Reforms

The economy of the Qing Dynasty was ever faltering after the Opium Wars. China was once a self-sustaining, efficient economy. Now the country was left penniless and broken as it was torn at by hungry Western imperial powers. Altbach and Salvaratnam (2012) write,

Internal decline under the Qing dynasty was compounded by incontrovertible evidence of external empires which could not be subjugated by the authority of Confucian canons of knowledge and whose scientific and industrial achievements, evidenced in the gunboats sent to enforce foreign demands, could not be matched by outdated Chinese technology. The Opium Wars of 1840 and 1858 gained for Britain rights of entry first to certain coastal ports, later to numerous inland cities, rights quickly seized upon by other imperial powers. (2012, p. 32)

The cause of economic stifling was largely due to China's inability to change. Its large population, which once was a great strength for the nation, turned into a weakness as land began to shrink, overburdened by the growing population. Per capita production began to fall, transforming China from rich to poor. China's large population also stifled industrial and technological development. With such a large labor force, labor was extremely cheap. Cheap labor meant labor-saving technologies could not be properly introduced as in Western countries (Grasso, Corrin, & Kort, 2015, p. 30).

Confucian ideals also halted economic expansion. The ravaging pursuit of profit, such that capitalism displayed, was distasteful to Confucian scholars and minds. For ages, the political elite controlled, protected, and mandated industries and the economy. Uncontrolled industry expansion was seen as disruptive and potentially dangerous (Richardson, 1999, p. 55).

Finally, after half a century of revolts and Western imperialist ravaging, the Qing elite attempted to mobilize industrial technology. The process was called The Self-Strengthening Movement, which occurred during late Qing Dynasty from 1861-1895, after the Second Opium War. The idea of this reform was to duplicate Western learning in a practical way (the use of guns, ships, cotton looms, etc.), but use Eastern Confucianism learning as the fundamental foundation. The two ideals quickly proved to be contradictory towards each other, and progress moved at an incredibly slow pace because of the direct conflict from the Chinese *literari*, the group of Confucian intellectual scholars and governors who ruled over China (Fairbank, 2009, p. 197).

The movement did have some positive effects before it ended. The establishment of a railroad, telegraph, and mining was all important steps. Naval and military power grew greatly, with new military technologies being introduced and manufactured in China. Textile and cotton-weaving industries also prospered. For a while, it seemed as if China was finally on its way to modernization (Leung, 2012, p. 27).

However, the modernization was limited and shallow, lacking true depth and integration to actually become a deep mainstay of Qing Dynasty. These weaknesses were shown clearly during the Sino-Japanese War of 1884-1885, which revealed that despite naval and military advancements, China was still incapacitated and futile. The reasons for this failure include “lack of coordination, limited vision, shortage of capital, foreign imperialism, and technical backwardness and moral degradation” (Leung, 2012, pp. 28-29). With the failing of this push for reform, people of China would witness the collapse of Qing Dynasty and not be able to regain economical capital until Communist Mao Zedong took control (Grasso, Corrin, & Kort, 2015, p. 31).

Political Reforms

The Qing political machine had crawled to an ineffective pace. While the Kang-Qian Flourishing Age was characterized by the lives of three incredible, politically capable men, Qing Dynasty lacked centralized authority, which the political regime had for so long relied on. Instead, political factions, inertia, and a closed-off elite class made Qing Dynasty incapable and weak. Population growth also made it harder for the Qing government to govern its citizens. There was simply too many for the administration to effectively oversee each community (Grasso, Corrin, & Kort, 2015, p. 33). One could argue that foreign political regimes had more influence on China during this period than the actual political regime of China did.

Amongst this political stagnation was corruption at a local level. Tax collectors in communities often stole money, forcing peasants to pay more and the government to receive less. This corruption enraged peasants and also made Qing Dynasty lose capital, unable to provide services it used to do. A very concrete sign of this corruption was the flooding of the Yellow River 17 times during a 25 year period. Money that was supposed to be used for the maintenance of dykes and dams was instead diverted to greedy tax collectors’ pockets. These floods caused mass devastation and death, which further fueled anti-Qing sentiment amongst peasants (Grasso, Corrin, & Kort, 2015, p. 33).

Particularly devastating and embarrassing for the Qing elites was the Treaty of Nanking, which outlined concessions for increased trading ports and demanded repayments for the cost of the war to Great Britain. Although opening more trading ports seemed like a good thing to most sensible economic minds, the Qing elite had adverse ideas about opening more ports to foreigners. Qing’s isolationism bred a sense of superiority; “lesser” countries should not have the option to trade with any ports they wished, but rather should have to adhere to Confucian standards and rules. This ethnocentrism was proven to be held on false foundation after Great Britain crushed the technologically backwards China during the Opium Wars, and forced a policy of open trade (Grasso, Corrin, & Kort, 2015, p. 34).

Summary of Qing Dynasty

The decline of Qing Dynasty was mainly due to Qing elite’s inability to adapt and govern a nation that was populating quickly, and foreign regimes clamoring for equal trade. Although brave efforts were made by several emperors to push China into centerfield of civilization, it quickly became apparent that with its own government and citizens against it, the road to modernization would be difficult and long. Dynastic China concluded when Emperor Puyi abdicated in 1912 to give ruling power to an unstable Republic (Mooney, 2008, p. 72).

People’s Republic of China: Upward Climb

Although China did not initially become a Communist state, it could be said that it did not begin to regain

its world hegemony until the brutal and overly-ambitious political regime of Mao Zedong began. During the unstable period from 1912 to 1949, forces of nationalism and forces of communism battled back and forth, making any reform impossible. There was also the looming force of Japanese subjugation during World War II, from 1937 to 1945. Japan invaded China at its most weakened state, and went on to commit war atrocities as well as claim the lives of 20 million civilians.

With no stable government, no reform could take place. However, when the Communist party of China drove the ROC nationalist forces into hiding in 1949, a new era for China began. Communist China rule is in many ways reminiscent of Dynastic rule. There is a single party, or regime, controlling millions of people, with the idea that the government is “a chosen people, entrusted with authority to rule over a chosen state ...” (Callick, 2013). This sounds suspiciously like the idea of the Chinese Emperor, who was often thought to be a chosen instrument of the Gods.

Today, China is one of the most economically powerful countries in the world. However, the road to prosperity has been long, brutal, and often in severe violation of human rights. Even in present time, as China’s economy grows and more and more people are gaining capital and becoming middle class citizens, human rights are still not catching up to the economic reforms. These extreme opposites of free market and controlling government characterize China as the country it is today.

Social Reforms

Much like the toppling of Czarist Russia and the veneration of peasant Russian “folk” ideals, Communist China under Chairman Mao Zedong tried to right the perceived wrongs of the bourgeoisie against the common people. This social upheaval is called The Cultural Revolution and lasted from mid-1950s to 1976, until the death of Mao. According to Lu (2004),

Starting from the mid-1950s Mao had become increasingly concerned about the new bourgeoisie arising within the governmental body and among party officials. For Mao, this bourgeoisie ideology, along with traditional Chinese cultural practices, had permeated every aspect of Chinese life, posing a threat to the socialist economic system and communist ideology... Thus the Cultural Revolution was an attempt to completely destroy the existing bourgeoisie cultural as well as the “four olds” (old ideology, old culture, old habits, and old customs) of traditional Chinese culture. (2004, p. 4)

The Cultural Revolution could rightly be called the Cult of Mao. Ultimately, what started as a plan to replace Confucian thinking with socialist ideology turned into propaganda on the highest level. Youth militant organizations, oddly reminiscent of WWII Hitler Youth, were formed. Ritual practices that revolved around Mao were instated. Wall posters, speeches, songs, poems, and slogans were all part of the propaganda machine that polarized Chinese citizens and turned many into violent, revolutionary extremists. Chinese masses were brainwashed, programmed to think that socialism was the apogee of human civilization that would ensure material wealth for all (Lu, 2004, p. 5).

But the reality of the situation was dire. This social reform went on to inspire fervent revolution ardor, incite hatred amongst classes, and propagate monstrous human right violations (Lu, 2004, p. 6). One and a half million rural Chinese citizens were killed as a result of class hatred. These collective killing generally targeted people of a certain family background or economic level, usually landlords or richer peasants, who were seen as part of the bourgeoisie “bad elements” (Su, 2011, p. 40). The genocide of these citizens was unpunished, and was in fact encouraged during Mao’s Cultural Revolution.

Relief from the monstrosities of the Cultural Revolution came only with the death of Mao in 1976 and imprisonment of The Gang of Four, Mao's master propagandists. Chinese citizens now enjoy greater freedom than ever before, even if that freedom is still not comparable to Western ideals. However, the effects of the Cultural Revolution can still be felt today. As tourists pass through Tiananmen Square, the portrait of Mao is not simply a relic or nod to the past but is a sign of the corruption still alive in the Chinese government (Callick, 2013). Social problems like censorship, child policies, Tibetan Buddhist suppression, and support of radicalized North Korea are all issues that China still must deal with in the future if it wishes to join the rank of national superpowers.

Economic Reforms

Mao's earliest economic reforms were meant to mobilize the country and launch China into rapid expansion and modernization. In some ways, the earlier economic reforms did work but were not sustainable. The economy was a traditional command economy, typical of Communist ideology. Control of wages, quotas, resources, products, land, foreign trade, and money was in the hands of the Chinese government, more specifically the Politburo, a type of board of directors who oversaw the expansion of China's economy during the Cult of Mao era (Shirk, 1993, p. 25).

Heavy industries like steel and machine building multiplied by 90.6 times. However, although this expansion did incite short-term economic progress, it was too short-sighted to sustain China's economy and would in fact cripple it in decades to come. Agriculture and light industries, such as energy and transportation, only rose 2.4 and 19.8 times, respectively. Without the infrastructures in place provided by light industries, heavy industries collapsed or were severely constrained. Plants and factories would be idle two to three days a week, just because of energy shortages. Economic progress of the heavy industries came at a high cost to consumers and taxpayers. The level of living remained stagnant (Shirk, 1993, pp. 26-28).

Economic reforms of 1978 reversed this trend. By adopting a mixed economy, one that embraces capitalist ideals for economic purposes, China has now been one of the fastest growing economies since the 1980s. A huge portion of its population has been lifted out of poverty because of these reforms, blossoming a new middle class (Naughton, 1996, p. 5).

Political Reforms

The Chinese political system, especially in the beginning, reverted back to what China knew best: controlled power in the hands of one man. Mao Zedong led a cult following that enshrined him as savior and ruler in the minds of the people of China. Such a charismatic personality, mixed with the trappings of Communistic corruption, would not be a good combination. McCormick (1990) argues that

the Cultural Revolution and the overall direction of Mao's politics were not only a catastrophe for society but also a serious threat to the state. Mao created an extremely autonomous state that could arbitrarily intervene in any sphere of social life. (1990. p. 3)

Mao's economic and social policies were ultimately a failure and a menace to society. Much like Hitler and Stalin, Mao Zedong created a political atmosphere of fear and cult-like obedience, which was stopped only at his death in 1976.

After Mao's death, there was much speculation at what to do next; the dictator had controlled so much of the political regime of China. To fill his shoes was another charismatic figurehead, Deng Xiaoping. However, unlike Mao, Deng recognized the need for a different type of economic reform. A command economy was

obviously not working, and the legitimacy of the Communist party waned day by day. Deng gave the Communist party a new lease on life and led it through the Economic Reforms of 1978, which bolstered the economy and sustained actual change. He understood that to normalize the party, he would have to harmonize the “inner party life”—establish party norms that did not thrive on anarchy and rebelled against lawlessness. He also instituted a retirement system, and sought out leaders from engineering backgrounds, knowing they were not touched as heavily by Maoist cult ideology (Fewsmith, 2013, pp. 1-4). Deng set about a new order within the Communist party. Much like the Emperors before him, his policies have shaped China’s political regime even until now, as modern political members are following in his footsteps. China still has a long way to go, but it has progressed tremendously from Maoist China.

Summary of the People’s Republic of China Communist Control

The two political regimes of modern China, Maoist China and Deng China, have had incredible impacts on Chinese society. Although Communist rule did not initially benefit Chinese people and in fact caused death and lawlessness, the introduction of a mixed economy meant that modern Chinese people enjoy a level of freedom once unknown to them. However, the regime remains totalitarian and undisputed, much like Imperial China before it. Political opponents are crushed, silenced, and censored. In this respect, the Chinese political machine still has much growing to do.

Conclusion

China’s rich history has been influenced greatly by political regimes. Laws were enacted by men within political machines that had great impact on China’s economy and social life.

During the Kang-Qian Flourishing Age, three men built a dynasty up to its pinnacle. The zenith of Qing Dynasty was characterized by great social and economic prosperity, as China survived in a self-sustaining, isolationist bubble. Population grew, and land holds grew with it. However, it could be said that the same policies that made the dynasty great in the beginning haunted the later Emperors and actually contributed to the decline of the dynasty.

The Qing Decline was heavily influenced by the political regimes of Great Britain, as after the First Opium War China was forced to give great concessions to imperialist Western countries. The West divided China amongst itself and pried it open, despite the fact that the country was ill-prepared to join the modern world. China’s own political regime quarreled and grew corrupt and isolated, which set back any reforms to modernization it could have made. In the end, its inability to conquer over foreign invaders and heal domestic ills made it give up the crown forever.

Maoist and modern China are characterized by two opposite ideals. The horror of the earlier Mao decade and his Cultural Revolution left millions of Chinese dead by indoctrination that turned Chinese against Chinese. The later Deng ages of present China reversed this policy, making the party more subtle and quiet, though still keeping a tight hold on social and political affairs. Economic prosperity of the country greatly increased.

China has never been a democratic country, and perhaps this is for a reason. The traditional values of China come in direct conflict with Western ideals about individualism. As long as China continues to embrace these traditional values, political regimes will always play a very large part in Chinese history.

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