
BACKGROUND BOOKS

MAO'S CHINA

Mao and his colleagues were not the first to feel the weight of the 4,000 years of recorded Chinese history. Every leader since Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) has sought to restore China to its 11th-century imperial eminence, when it was, according to historian Charles Hucker, "the most populous, prosperous, and cultured nation on earth."

In **China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture** (Stanford, 1975), Hucker sees the 11th century as marking the end of China's adolescence. It was followed, he notes, by nine centuries of "chastened, sober, often grim and drab maturity."

The causes of that languid decline are set forth by Mark Elvin, an Oxford economic historian, in **The Pattern of the Chinese Past** (Stanford, 1973). Like the United States at the end of the 19th century, China began to "fill up" with people. But rather than look to foreign outlets for its expanded economy as the Americans did, the xenophobic Chinese turned inward, reducing their overseas trade and contacts.

Ironically, China's economy was revived by European and Japanese imperialism. Opening the country to the world market in the middle of the 19th century, according to Elvin, led to rapid commercial and industrial growth.

Seeing little of value in European civilization and dismayed by Western encroachments on Chinese sovereignty, the Chinese government tried to contain the movement and influence of Westerners. Their efforts, observes Berkeley historian

Frederic Wakeman, Jr. in **The Fall of Imperial China** (Free Press, 1975, cloth; 1977, paper), culminated in 1900 with the "Boxer Rebellion," the doomed attempt of a dying empire to expel all foreigners. Hostilities ended when the troops of Britain, the United States, France, Austria, Russia, and Japan occupied Beijing (Peking). The weakened Ching dynasty was then battered by a string of revolts and fell in 1911.

The infant Republic of China, founded in 1912, was as shaky as the dynasty it replaced. For two decades, hundreds of "warlords" — commanders of small personal armies controlling at most a province or two — divided up a beleaguered China. The dozen years after 1916 saw the formation and dissolution of 25 governments, notes Northwestern historian James E. Sheridan in **China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912-1949** (Free Press, 1977, cloth & paper).

The "warlord era" ended in 1928 when Chiang Kai-shek unified China and established his capital in Nanjing (Nanking). Yet Chiang, says Sheridan, was never more than the nominal ruler of a fragmented nation.

Though hit by natural disasters (in 1931, flooding of the Chang, or Yangtze, River displaced 25 million people) and plagued by the warlords, the Communists, and the Japanese, the Nationalist government was hurt most by its own corruption. In 1931-32, barely half of the taxes assessed by the government actually arrived at the national treasury, according to Lloyd Eastman, a Univer-

sity of Illinois historian.

Yet, Eastman argues in **The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927-1937** (Harvard, 1974), under Chiang, China became a modern nation: Law codes were promulgated; the old exploitative treaties with foreign powers were abrogated; school enrollment nearly doubled.

The 1937 Japanese invasion changed all that. Chiang retreated to Chongqing (Chungking) in southwestern China, leaving most cities to the invaders and much of the northern countryside to the Communists.

The invasion also brought American war correspondents. Fresh out of Harvard, Theodore White was counted among the best of them. Written with Annalee Jacoby, White's **Thunder Out of China** (William Sloane, 1946; Da Capo reprint, 1975) provides a vivid account of a famine in Henan province. After watching the starving citizens of Zhengzhou literally eat dirt, White was served "one of the finest and most sickening banquets I ever ate" by the city fathers.

While White covered the Nationalists, his fellow journalist Edgar Snow followed the Communists into the countryside. In 1936, Snow caught up with them in Yanan (Yenan). His glowing observations are preserved in **Red Star Over China** (Random, 1938; Grove, rev. ed., 1968, cloth & paper; Bantam, 1978, paper). Snow found the then 43-year-old Mao Zedong "rather Lincoln-esque," a "plain-speaking and plain-living" man who had a potential for greatness. Mao reciprocated by telling Snow the story of his life.

Four years after World War II, Chiang fled to Taiwan and Mao ruled the mainland. In **Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945-1949**

(Univ. of Calif., 1978), Suzanne Pepper argues that Mao's popular appeal resulted from his success in bringing about land reform and from Chiang's failure to stop hyperinflation (prices increased by 2,000 percent between 1937 and 1945).

In **China: Tradition and Transformation** (Houghton, 1978), John King Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer, two of America's most distinguished Asia scholars, describe China's traditional dynastic cycle: "a heroic founding, a period of great power, then a long decline, and finally total collapse."

From the day he proclaimed the People's Republic in 1949, Mao tried to postpone that cyclical decline by constantly re-creating the Communist revolution. Maurice Meisner, a University of Wisconsin historian, observes in **Mao's China: A History of the People's Republic** (Free Press, 1977, cloth & paper) that Mao began his efforts with broad land reform and agricultural collectivization. The late 1950s brought the Hundred Flowers movement and the Great Leap Forward. Finally, in 1966, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution.

The emblem of China in the 1960s remains **Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung** (China Books, 1967), the "little red book." More complete is **The Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung** (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1960-77; Pergamon, 1977, cloth & paper). These five volumes contain the official, sanitized version of Mao's pre-1958 work.

During the Cultural Revolution, China became "a nation of spies," avers the narrator of one of the entries in Chen Jo-hsi's **The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution** (Ind. Univ., 1978). Chen's fiction makes it clear that the revolu-

tion touched every aspect of life: Parents worry about their kindergarten-age child's political record; a political pariah who commits suicide is said to have "terminated his ties with the Party and the people."

The height of the Cultural Revolution also saw the nadir of the PRC's image abroad. So notes newsman turned academic A. Doak Barnett in his lucid **China and the Major Powers in East Asia** (Brookings, 1977, cloth & paper). Since 1949, Beijing has tried to balance its dealings with Moscow, Tokyo, and Washington, observes Barnett. Always at odds with one or another of those powers, the PRC was, during the whirlwind era of the Cultural Revolution, on unusually bad terms with all three. For a time, it had only one foreign ambassador, stationed in Cairo.

China's relations with the United States have been especially volatile. Within a year of the establishment of the People's Republic, Mao sent 200,000 "volunteers" to fight the Americans and their allies in neighboring Korea. In 1971, however, diplomatic reconciliation began even as the United States battled the Communist North Vietnamese on China's southeastern border. The history of Sino-American difficulties is recounted in detail in *Congressional Quarterly's China: U.S. Policy Since 1945* (Congressional Quarterly, 1980, paper only).

Some Americans assume that Bei-

jing's renewal of diplomatic ties with Washington somehow implied the liberalization of China's economy, politics, and art. The thaw that came in the wake of Mao's death in 1976 seemed at first to support that belief. For a time, a few Chinese felt free to speak their minds. It did not last. The fiction, poetry, and essays in **Literature of the People's Republic of China** (Ind. Univ., 1980), edited by Kai-yu Hsu, a scholar at San Francisco State University, offer few surprises. "Steel is refined in the struggle of production," writes a People's Liberation Army poet, "and poetry should also be refined and honed in class struggle."

Such orthodoxy provoked Belgian Sinologist Pierre Ryckmans to write **Chinese Shadows** (Viking, 1977, cloth; Penguin, 1978, paper) under the pseudonym "Simon Leys." Ryckmans details 20 years of Maoist mayhem, scholars' suicides, and cultural destruction.

When the original French edition was published in 1974, the People's Republic was commonly portrayed in the Western press as a nation with few noticeable blemishes. Today, however, Ryckman's criticisms seem an eerie anticipation of the downgrading of Mao and Maoism by China's present rulers. Ryckman's conclusion might give those men pause: The Chinese people, he asserts, "have buried 20 dynasties, they will also bury this one."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Harry Harding and Ingrid Larsen, an administrative assistant of the Wilson Center's East Asia Program, suggested some of the titles mentioned in this essay.*