

China's Path to Modernity

By Dagmar Lorenz, © MoneyMuseum

Smoking factory chimneys, the rapid growth of industry, trade and consumption – these have been the features of Western modernity from the middle of the 19th century. Quite the opposite in China: here the dawn of a new age was linked not to signs of an upswing, but of economic decline. And it was not the development of industry that marked the beginnings of modernity, but the trade in drugs. The English merchants acted as dealers and flooded the Chinese market with, for the most part, Indian opium.

Opium trade as a “door opener”

Despite an imperial ban, the import of opium in the 30s of the 19th century increased in leaps and bounds. As the Chinese paid in silver for their opium this resulted in a steady rise in the export of this metal which was important for the Chinese economy – and created new economic problems. To put an end to this trade the Chinese government blockaded the English settlement outside the gates of Canton and forced the English to surrender their supplies of opium warehoused there – an incident which the British government used in 1839 as an excuse to push through the "opening" of Chinese ports to Western imports by using canon boats. This first of the so-called "Opium Wars" ended in 1842 with the Treaty of Nanking, the first in a series of "unequal treaties" which from then on imposed on the militarily inferior Chinese Empire so-called "indemnity payments," the ceding of sovereignty and territorial rights. In the decades that followed, the militarily and technologically superior major powers of France, Britain, Russia, Germany and Japan secured for themselves areas of influence, trading bases and minerals in the regions of China.

The decline of a world

It was, above all, the cultural self-confidence of China's educated elite that was shaken by this degradation of the former major Asian power to a semi-colonial domain.

Since time immemorial China, the "Middle Kingdom," had not regarded itself as one civilisation among others, but as the only civilisation there was, with a regent at its head who had received his mandate from heaven according to an ancient Chinese belief and governed his country with the help of a hierarchy of officials. Since 221 BC this empire had existed over more than 25 imperial dynasties and "exported" its civilisation into all the neighbouring east Asian cultures. Now, seeing itself confronted by a technologically superior opponent, this system revealed its weakness in a humiliating way.

The end of the Manchu Dynasty and the would-be republic

Radical reforms were necessary to overcome this weakness. But the government of the Manchu Dynasty under the rule of the emperor's widow, Cixi, who had taken over the regency for the still minor boy Emperor Pu Yi, turned out to be incapable of meeting the challenges of modernity. Nor did the peasant uprisings, such as the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, change anything. A military revolt in autumn 1911 resulted in the foundation of a Republic of China. It was headed by the former exile politician Dr. Sun Yat-sen. After the official abdication of the Imperial Dynasty (1912) it turned out, however, that real political power lay not with the intellectuals influenced by Western democratic ideas in the Guomindang Party founded by Sun Yat-sen, but in the hands of local warlords. Henceforth their rivalry for political power was responsible for a permanent situation resembling civil war, which even the commanders of the

conservative Guomindang Party were unable to pacify on their so-called "Northern Expedition." All this contributed to growing impoverishment, especially among the rural peasantry.

China's "roaring twenties"

In some of China's major towns, however, tendencies towards modernisation were discernible. Not only trade, but also industrial production, mostly controlled by foreign capital, as well as a class of industrial wage earners did arise here and their political and trade union organisation took over the Chinese Communist Party, founded in Shanghai in 1921. Shanghai, a city with an international ambience, which was divided into several foreign sections, turned into the cultural centre of these years. It was in this city that the social contrasts became brutally obvious. But China's prominent writers also lived here, popularising Western ideas and contributing to the development of the modern Chinese written language. And here, too, the beginnings of the Chinese film industry emerged.

The Communist Party: its success out of defeat

In the Shanghai of the twenties the Chinese Communist Party suffered one of its greatest defeats. In 1927 its military alliance, originally formed against the warlords with the Guomindang Party led by Sun Yat-sen's son-in-law, Chiang Kai-Shek, broke up. Having formed his government in Nanking, he almost completely smashed the Communists' base in the Chinese towns with the help of the "white terror." There were massacres of trade unionists, rebellious workers, women and children: a shocking event for Europe's left-wing intellectuals as well, and this found expression in a best-selling novel of those times, "La Condition Humaine" (Man's Fate) by André Malraux.

The defeat of the Chinese Communist Party, which was supported by Moscow, seemed to be devastating – and led to a far-reaching change in political strategy: not the towns with their industrial workers were from now on to be at the centre of Communist agitation, but the population in the countryside.

The Long March: an escape route

That this, too, almost resulted in failure is evidenced by the legendary Long March, which in later years was made out to have been a success story. Only in the almost inaccessible rural mountain regions did some Communist Party commanders, among them the peasant's son and middle-school teacher Mao Zedong, manage to survive with their troops. When the ring of the besieging forces of the Guomindang army closed in around their base in Jiangxi the Communists broke through the blockade in a desperate military operation in 1934. A gigantic flight began: of the 80,000 Communist partisans – after covering 12,000 kilometres on foot, the Long March – only some 8000 reached the town of Yanan in the north-west province of Shaanxi in autumn 1935, where they founded a new soviet republic. For the group of leaders around Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, Yanan thus became the prototype of Communist administration.

Japanese occupation and the Second World War

Even before the outbreak of the Second World War Japan had proved to be an especially aggressive occupying power in China. As early as 1932 the new Far Eastern major power set up a satellite state in Manchuria and installed China's last emperor, Pu Yi, as a puppet regent. From 1937 Japanese troops advanced into the south and east of China and conquered Nanking, the capital of the conservative Guomindang government. The Nanking Massacre of the defenceless civilians subsequently committed by Japanese troops is one of the most despicable war crimes in modern times. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the United States' entry into the war, the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party formed a united front against the Japanese for a

time. But upon Japan's surrender in 1945 and its withdrawal from China the conflict between the two parties flared up again.

The founding of the People's Republic of China

The civil war between the hostile parties lasted from 1947 to 1949 and ended in victory for the Communist Party. The support which Mao's partisans received from the rural population had contributed to this. And that was, in turn, due to the discipline of the Communist troops, whose commanders did not tolerate looting and even urged their soldiers to help the peasants, for example, with harvesting. All this was in stark contrast to the impression left by the soldiers of Chiang Kai-Shek's economically ailing government. Chiang and the Guomindang commanders fled with the rest of their troops to the island of Taiwan, where – with military aid – an autocratically run "Republic of China" was created.

Mao Zedong, on the other hand, proclaimed the new People's Republic of China in Beijing on 1st October 1949.

The early years of the People's Republic of China

In foreign policy the 50s were, on the one hand, marked by China's entry into the Korean War (1950-51) and, on the other, by reliance on the Soviet Union. Domestically, the Communist Party pursued the collectivisation of agriculture and an ever more rigid policy of suppression of the intellectuals (Hundred Flowers Campaign). Redistributing the land to so-called "poor peasants" (1951-56) was followed by setting up people's communes (1958). Mass campaigns, such as the Great Leap Forward, which was meant to turn China into an industrial nation within a short period of time, ended in an economic debacle and a famine which is estimated to have claimed 20 million lives between 1959 and 1962. The economic problems increased when in 1960 the political break with the Soviet Union emerged and the Soviet technical experts left the country more or less over night.

Caught between terror and a foreign policy of détente

In 1966 power struggles inside the party leadership, the imminent toppling of Mao Zedong and the propaganda campaigns of his third wife, Jiang Qing, resulted in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. She found her supporters mainly among the young school children and students in the towns and cities, whom she incited to cruelly terrorise their teachers, party cadres but also prominent scholars and authors. A whole generation of young people was taken out of the schools and sent to rural areas to perform physical labour. Through the constant campaigns of radical agitators the country threatened to descend into chaos. Not until after 1969 did the situation quieten down. Cautious contacts to the United States – in 1972 US President Nixon visited China – indicated a hesitant opening in foreign policy by China. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976 Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng, finally had the "Gang of Four" of the Cultural Revolution arrested, including Mao's widow Jiang Qing.

“Enrichissez-vous”: China's second modernity

At the end of 1978, the party cadre Deng Xiao Ping, who had once been toppled from power, distinguished himself as China's new leader and began to liberalise and privatise the economy. Since the 80s China had opened itself up to Western goods and investments to an extent never seen since 1949. Deng Xiao Ping broke with old Communist taboos, openly called for free enterprise and encouraged foreign investors – also from Taiwan – to set up factories in some coastal regions (for example, Shenzhen) declared to be "special economic zones" and promoted the creation of a stock exchange, a course that was to be continued by his successors.

China and human rights

Yet as liberally as the state led by the Chinese Communist Party acts, its citizens who call for political freedom still put their lives at risk, as the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 showed, when Chinese students gathered on the Square of Heavenly Peace in Beijing to demand democracy. While Taiwan – which is regarded by the People's Republic of China as a "breakaway province" – has developed democratic structures with free elections in the course of the last ten years, on the Chinese mainland the arrest of regime opponents, the suppression of free trade unions and action taken against certain religious groups (Falun-Gong sect) are common occurrences. China's Tibet policy, the excessive use of the death penalty and the absence of an independent judiciary constantly come in for criticism.

China: a nation being tried to breaking point?

Such criticism, however, has to be seen against the background of massive political problems on the domestic front.

- The booming economy in the towns of the southern coastal provinces contrasts with the impoverishment – in the north, for example – of the less developed rural regions, while the prosperous regions in China are showing a tendency to break away from the central power.
- Social problems are on the increase. Migrant workers from the poor regions are moving illegally into the towns. In addition to these, there are the other unemployed who – mostly without any social security – have been dismissed from former unprofitable state-run companies. There is no state welfare system with insurance for pensions, unemployment and health.
- That Chinese society is drifting apart can also be observed on a national level: the drive for independence among ethnic minorities, such as the Uighur, are becoming explosive issues because they involve regions with Islamic features on the border with the former Soviet Union.

Conclusion

In the last few years the Communist government has achieved successes mainly in its foreign policy, such as the "return" of the former British colony of Hong Kong (1997) or China's entry into the WTO. But its legitimacy in the eyes of its own population, which has long been fragile anyway, can only save it if it continues to ensure above-average economic growth. However, whether, in view of the critical situation of the world economy, this is a realistic goal remains questionable.