

# Civil Wars, Invasion, and the Rise of Communism (1920–1949)

The betrayal of China in 1919 by the Western democracies marked a major turning point in Sun Yat-sen's political career and in the history of modern China. Before this time, Sun had looked primarily to the West for support of a progressive and democratic China. Now, the Western democracies seemed more concerned with foreign rights and privileges in China, and with the warlords of Beijing, than with Sun Yat-sen and his cause. Moreover, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 in Russia suggested to many that a Marxist movement could seize power in a poor backward country and jump-start the process of rapid modernization, building a wealthy, powerful, and independent nation.

The German thinker and revolutionary Karl Marx had argued that capitalism was a major historical advance over feudalism, releasing new powers of productive capacity that promised to liberate human beings from the precarious struggle for survival. But capitalism, in Marx's view, required such severe exploitation of workers by their capitalist overlords that it would inspire a lethal class struggle and eventually collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. The industrial workers leading this struggle would establish an egalitarian socialism in which all workers would enjoy the full fruits of their labors. Co-owning the factories where they worked, they would develop their full potential as well-rounded and cultured human beings.

Marx thought socialist revolutions could only occur in the most advanced capitalist countries with a large industrial proletariat. In Russia, the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin argued that a highly disciplined socialist party with its own army could seize power in a poor, backward country like Russia and move directly from precapitalist feudalism to a workers' socialism, tolerating enough capitalism on the way to bring prosperity and equality to the country simultaneously. In a very influential pamphlet, *Imperialism as the Last Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin argued that Western imperialism was not just an accident of history but the logical result of the ever-expanding demands of industrial capitalism for raw materials, exploitable workers, and new markets. To educated Chinese readers, Lenin helped explain the Western exploitation of China for the past hundred years with compelling force.

Sun Yat-sen did not fully embrace Marxism-Leninism, but he was impressed by the effectiveness of the Russian Bolsheviks in seizing power and even more by their immediate renunciation of the unequal treaties Czarist Russia had forced on the Qing court in the nineteenth century. In 1920, Sun began meeting with agents of the Soviet-sponsored Communist International, or Comintern, an organization dedicated to spreading workers' revolutions throughout the world. They offered Sun military assistance and political advice if his Nationalist Party would join in a formal alliance with the tiny recently founded Chinese Communist Party. The two parties would remain separate but would work together to promote workers' organizations, to develop a joint army, and to try to seize power from the warlords who were bleeding the country.

In 1923 Sun and his supporters formally reorganized their Nationalist Party along Leninist lines, meaning that members would have to observe party discipline and implement whatever policies the leadership adopted. Communist Party and Nationalist Party members would cooperate wherever possible, and together they formed a military officers' training school, the Whampoa Military Academy, on an island in the Pearl River ten miles downstream from Guangzhou. The first leader of this academy was Chiang Kai-shek, an ambitious young soldier who had undergone military training in China and Japan before 1911 and who went to Russia for a few months in 1923 to study Soviet governmental and party organizational methods.

There were always tensions in this alliance between the more radical Communist Party organizers and more conservative Nationalist Party members. The former wanted to promote workers' and peasants' rights and overturn the traditional Chinese social hierarchies. The latter were more concerned about seizing power from the warlords and unifying China into a strong industrialized state. Sun Yat-sen had enough prestige with both groups to hold the alliance together, but suspicions were growing on both sides in early 1925, when Sun went to Beijing to negotiate a possible truce with the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin, who was then in control of Beijing. Sun fell seriously ill in Beijing, was diagnosed with liver cancer,

and died on March 12. On May 30, Japanese troops fired on Chinese workers demonstrating in Shanghai, and suddenly many Chinese cities erupted with strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts. The May Thirtieth Movement, as it came to be known, swelled the membership of the Chinese Communist Party from 1,000 to 10,000 between May and November 1925 and to 30,000 by July 1926.

Having supervised the first three classes of military officers to graduate from the Whampoa Military Academy, Chiang Kai-shek was appointed commander in chief of the new National Revolutionary Army in June 1926. He enjoyed a strong personal loyalty from the vast majority of 6,000 newly trained officers who commanded an army of 85,000 soldiers recruited from peasant and worker families in south China. One of Chiang's main rivals to become leader of the Nationalist Party after Sun's death was Liao Zhongkai, who had been a close associate of Sun Yat-sen and who, like Sun, maintained cordial relations with the more radical Communists. In August 1925, Liao Zhongkai was assassinated, eliminating one of the obstacles to Chiang Kai-shek's rise to power.

In July 1926, Chiang Kai-shek and the National Revolutionary Army launched the Northern Expedition, a two-pronged campaign along the east coast and through the center of south China to oust the regional warlords and unify south and central China under Nationalist Party rule. The Communist Party labor and peasant organizers infiltrated areas in advance of the troops and helped undermine local warlord forces through strikes and nationalistic propaganda calling on people to resist foreign imperialism and support the Nationalists against the warlords. Within one month, the National Revolutionary Army was in control of the southwestern city of Changsha. In September and October, Nationalist forces took Nanchang and the major Yangzi River port city of Wuhan. By December, they had taken the coastal city of Fuzhou. In March 1927, they took the city of Nanjing (the early Ming capital), and by April, the great seaport and commercial capital Shanghai was in Nationalist hands.

Chiang Kai-shek had never trusted his Communist collaborators. Since the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 had radicalized many workers and pushed them toward the Communist camp, he feared his movement and his army might be taken over by its most radical elements. In his early days, he had briefly been a stockbroker in Shanghai, where he was organizing his government in Nanjing. Although never able to suppress his political rivals completely, he was a master manipulator of factions within the Nationalist Party and an effective speaker, despite a high, squeaky voice and heavy Zhejiang accent, in rallying his followers against the "evils" of communism.

An additional factor in Chiang's rise to power was his much-publicized marriage in December 1927 to Soong Meiling, the daughter of one of China's wealthiest families and the sister of Sun Yat-sen's widow, Soong Qingling. Soong Meiling had been educated in the United States and would become an extremely effective ambassador for her husband and his government to the United States and the entire international community. The Soong family was Christian, and Chiang (who already had one wife) had to promise to consider becoming a Christian as a condition of the family's consent to the marriage. He was baptized as a Christian in October 1930.

Chiang's connections with the Soong family had a profound effect on his government. His wife's brother, T. V. Soong, became prime minister, and her brother-in-law, H. H. Kung, minister of finance. These men managed to create a modern centralized banking system that brought some much-needed economic stability to the cities. A beginning was made to establish a functioning tax system, though many provincial revenues never made it to the central government. Economic growth occurred mainly in the cities where foreign capitalists still tended to dominate the urban economy, but Chinese merchants and entrepreneurs began to grow in both numbers and prosperity.

To provide a counterweight to the anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and anti-Confucian ideology of his left-wing opponents, Chiang promoted the "New Life Movement" in the 1930s, which called for a revival of traditional Confucian values, including reverence for elders, for the nation, and for its political leaders. In the wake of the May Fourth Movement, which had discredited much of Chinese tradition in the eyes of young people in particular, Chiang Kai-shek's attempts to revive traditional values was often viewed with cynicism by urban Chinese youth and by journalists, writers, and university professors.

One of the most vibrant developments in the 1910s and 1920s was a women's movement to abolish foot-binding, end concubinage, eradicate widow suicide, and promote education for women and the freedom of young people to choose their own marriage partners. Many

older women had suffered a great deal to achieve bound feet that had long been regarded as beautiful, so it was confusing and distressing to be told now that they were backward and ignorant victims of an oppressive custom. It also caused almost as much pain to unbind one's feet as to bind them in the first place. Despite the persistence of some women's pride in their bound feet, Chinese society as a whole quickly abandoned a custom that had become the norm over a period of eight centuries.

In the same years, the leaders of the May Fourth Movement called for the promotion of vernacular written Chinese and the abandonment of the cumbersome classical language, which required years of study just to acquire basic literacy. Within a few years classical Chinese became a dead language, except that a few continued to write poetry in classical forms. Vernacular Chinese became the universal means of written communication in newspapers, books, and periodicals.

In 1931, the best-selling novel in China was *Family*, by Ba Jin, a writer drawn to the political philosophy of anarchism. Based on his own upper-class family's life in the western province of Sichuan, Ba Jin's novel dramatized the oppressive nature of the old family system by showing three brothers in varying degrees of rebellion against the Confucian-style family. The youngest brother in the novel rebels against his family almost completely, while his eldest brother sees its injustices but cannot bring himself to challenge his elders directly. Ba Jin had no concrete proposals for organizing a new social and political system, but he very effectively condemned the old order and helped to infuse a whole generation with the May Fourth spirit.

In China's major cities, Western styles of dress became the norm, and girls began going to school with boys for the first time. Conservatives in the Nationalist Party resisted many of these changes. Nationalist Party zealots formed the Blue Shirts, an organization patterned in part after the Brown Shirts of Nazi Germany. These "morality police" sometimes went so far as to imprison young women for wearing their short bobbed hair with Western-style permanent waves. They also intimidated and even assassinated intellectuals who spoke out publicly against Chiang Kai-shek's policies. Chiang and his closest followers began to promote fascism as the answer to China's problems. All Chinese, in their analysis, should cultivate a greater sense of self-sacrifice to the needs and goals of the nation and an ever greater sense of loyalty to the one leader of the country, Chiang Kai-shek.

One of the major accomplishments of Chiang's government was to regain some aspects of Chinese sovereignty that had been lost in all the humiliating unequal treaties forced on China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From 1928 to 1933, China regained control of its own trade tariffs, something lost after the Opium War, and Chiang's government took complete control of the China Maritime Customs Service and reduced the number of foreign concessions in China from thirty-three to nineteen. Later, during World War II, China's Western allies ended extraterritoriality, that century-long symbol of Chinese subordination, and Chiang met personally with Roosevelt and Churchill as a full partner in the Allies' coalition against the Axis powers.

Despite these advances and some growth of a modern industrial economy in the major cities, the vast majority of Chinese peasants continued under Nationalist rule to live in dire poverty. Without the benefits of modern medicine, peasants suffered especially from parasitic worms and snails that multiplied in the night soil that peasants had used as fertilizer for millennia. If the night soil was not properly heated to kill them, tapeworms and other parasitic organisms survived and easily bore into the skin and infected peasants who waded with bare feet and legs through muddy rice paddies. Millions of Chinese peasants died every year from such parasitic diseases.



*From the fifteenth century on, Beijing (renamed Beiping, or Northern Peace, in 1927) was known for its magnificent walls and gates, including Qianmen, the 138-foot-high “Front Gate” of the inner city, photographed here with a mixture of rickshaw pullers, cars, trucks, and electric trams in 1931. Modernization sometimes caused serious social tensions, as when 25,000 rickshaw pullers (who traditionally hired themselves out to move people about the sprawling city) rioted in October 1929, attacking the newly installed electric trams and their passengers. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-137015*

The traditional sources of peasant misery—floods, droughts, and famines—continued to inflict great damage in the Chinese countryside in the 1920s and 1930s. A major problem in the countryside was a very high rate of tenancy, with many farmers owning no land and paying up to 50 or even 70 percent of their crops in rent. Landlords and loan sharks charged high interest rates, often 30–40 percent annually, so that peasants who fell into debt were unlikely ever to be free of debt payments. The great British economist R. H. Tawney spent a year in China in the early 1930s studying China’s rural economy. After describing the desperate position of Chinese peasants in his classic book *Land and Labor in China*, he made a chilling historical prophecy with typical British understatement. “The revolution of 1911 was a bourgeois affair. The revolution of the peasants is yet to come. If their overlords continue to exploit them as hitherto, it will not be pleasant. It will not, perhaps, be undeserved.”<sup>1</sup>

At the very moment Tawney was writing, Mao Zedong a young, ambitious Communist, and his comrades in a poor rural area were beginning to organize Chinese peasants to turn the traditional rural power structure upside down. A tall, thin young man with sad eyes, Mao was born into a wealthy peasant family in rural Hunan Province, near the provincial capital of Changsha. Rebellious from his youth, Mao often came into conflict with his father. After his high school education, Mao went to Beijing for six months, where he was deeply influenced by Li Dazhao, the Beijing University librarian, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. In sharp contrast to Marxist orthodoxy and the views of Stalin, Li Dazhao argued that Chinese peasants should be the heart and soul of the Chinese revolution.

What gave Mao a chance to rise in the Chinese Communist Party hierarchy was Chiang Kai-shek’s successful suppression of Communist organizational activities in the cities of south and central China in the spring of 1927. While Moscow continued to emphasize the urban labor movement, even after Chiang Kai-shek’s violent purge of Communist and labor organizers, Mao and two military leaders, Zhu De and Peng Dehuai, went in a different direction. In the early 1930s, they began to organize their own soviet—a Communist-

controlled network of villages and market towns—in Jinggang Mountain, a poor, remote mountainous district in the border area between the provinces of Hunan and Jiangxi.

In these isolated mountain villages, Mao worked on political questions of party organization and land reform, while Zhu De and Peng Dehuai organized peasant sons into a disciplined Red Army. The army could protect and secure rural villages, where land seizures and landlord executions could be implemented without fear of reprisals from the provincial or national government. Mao and his comrades adopted the Leninist model of the party controlling the army, but they also went far beyond Lenin in their organizational approach and philosophy. Mao had studied the ancient Chinese military classic *The Art of War*, by Sunzi, and he loved the stories of military battles and inventive strategies in the sixteenth-century novels *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. From these varied sources, Mao developed a unique philosophy of guerrilla warfare that was made to order for the weaker side in any battle.

The basic principles of guerrilla warfare are captured in slogans the Red Army soldiers learned at Jinggang Mountain: “The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue.”<sup>2</sup> The guerrilla army evades its more powerful foe and, through superior intelligence, fights only the battles it can win. This army depended on strong political indoctrination. Knowing who they fought and why, the Red Army troops were well disciplined and taught not to raid, rape, loot, or destroy the property of the people. By winning the support of peasants in the remote countryside, the Red Army also gained superior intelligence that yielded precise information about the movements, strength, and plans of the enemy.

These principles were first developed in local skirmishes around Jinggang Mountain, and it did not take long for Mao’s organizing efforts to attract the attention of Chiang Kai-shek. From 1931 to 1934, Chiang sent his Nationalist troops on five separate “extermination campaigns” against the Communist forces on the Hunan-Jiangxi border. Each of Chiang’s first four campaigns ended in defeat as his armies were outmaneuvered by the smaller Communist forces, divided into subunits, and lured into ambushes. By the fifth such campaign in 1934, Chiang Kai-shek adopted a more deliberate approach: he encircled the Communist forces with his overwhelming superiority in numbers and weaponry and slowly tightened the noose, trapping the Red Army for a final showdown. When these tactics began to succeed, Mao argued for a radical response: to break out of the blockade and flee, with the entire Red Army, to northwest China. This was a move both desperate and brilliant: desperate in that it risked annihilation for an uncertain outcome and brilliant in that it would demonstrate to the world that the Red Army was disciplined and, as Japanese aggression mounted, dedicated to defending China’s peasants against Japan, whose role in China’s internal politics would soon prove crucial.

From October 1934 to October 1935, Mao, Zhu De, and Peng Dehuai led the Red Army—about 86,000 troops (including thirty-five women)—on what has become known as the Long March, one of the most impressive feats of endurance in the history of warfare. Losing 80–90 percent of their troops along the way—to injury, frostbite, desertion, death, disease, or capture—the Long Marchers traversed, mostly on foot, over 6,000 miles in 368 days, enduring frequent harassment or attack. They crossed twenty-four rivers, moved through twelve provinces, and crossed over eighteen mountain ranges. Though pursued by an army that was much better equipped, the Red Army survived through ingeniously daring tactics and sheer force of will. In the middle of the Long March, Mao was recognized for his strategic brilliance and made head of the Chinese Communist Party.

Zigzagging their way through southwestern and western provinces, the Communists arrived in October 1935 in northwest China, one of the poorest regions of the country, where they made their headquarters in peasant-built caves in Yan’an in Shaanxi Province. This area was chosen in part because it was far removed from Chiang Kai-shek’s base in south central China and in part because it was much closer than Jinggang Mountain to Chinese areas now occupied by Japan. Japanese aggression in China accelerated in the early 1930s, in part because Japan feared a truly unified Republic of China. The Japanese had seized control of Manchuria, the original homeland of the Manchus, in 1931–32. This large area north and east of Beijing was rich in forests and coal and oil deposits and, unlike most of China, it was not heavily populated.

Preoccupied with the growing worldwide economic depression, the United States and European countries paid little attention to Japan’s take-over of Manchuria. The League of Nations sent an investigating team that pronounced Japan the aggressor, but beyond

verbally condemning Japan, the League did nothing to contest Japan's fait accompli, and Japan protested the League's censure by withdrawing from the League.

Throughout the early 1930s, Chiang Kai-shek repeatedly complied with Japanese demands and shied away from any military confrontation. Japan set up a puppet state, Manchukuo, in Manchuria, under the nominal leadership of the last Manchu emperor, Henry Puyi. Japan also seized territory in Inner Mongolia and made ever more demands on the Nationalist government for rights and privileges. Comparing Japanese aggression to a disease of the skin and Chinese communism to a disease of the heart, Chiang argued that he must first wipe out the Communists before he could confront Japan. This policy made Chiang begin to look to his own people like an appeaser, ready to sell out part of his country to maintain his own power.

Chiang's policy almost cost him his life in December 1936 when he flew into the northwest provincial capital of Xi'an to meet with the young Marshal Zhang Xueliang, son of Zhang Zuolin, the Manchurian warlord whom the Japanese had murdered in 1928. Zhang's troops had fled their homeland when Japan took over Manchuria in 1931, and now Chiang Kai-shek was urging them to attack the Communist camps around Yan'an. Increasingly resistant to fighting fellow Chinese while Japan colonized their homeland, Zhang Xueliang and his troops rebelled against Chiang's authority and literally kidnapped him at gunpoint. They invited Mao's confidant Zhou Enlai to sit down with Chiang and negotiate an anti-Japanese truce between the Communists and Nationalists. Chiang reluctantly agreed and flew back to Nanjing, after a two-week captivity, to announce an end to the Chinese civil war.<sup>3</sup>

Japan was quick to see the significance of the growing anti-Japanese hostility in China, and in July 1937, Japanese troops south of Beijing opened fire at Marco Polo Bridge in what was to become the opening round of World War II. As Japan had modernized and Westernized in the late nineteenth century, it had quickly adopted the Western version of imperialism, which viewed the world as locked in a struggle for survival between the weak and the strong, the backward and the progressive. As the most advanced eastern nation, Japan saw itself as the most logical power to colonize and modernize China. In Japan's view, it was only following the example of Britain in India, Holland in the East Indies, the United

States in the Philippines, France in Indochina, and the French, British, and Belgians in Africa.

Assuming that Chiang Kai-shek would soon seek a truce, leaving Japan in a strong position in north and northeast China, Japan expected the fighting in China to be brief and decisive. But instead of seeking a peaceful compromise, Chiang and his entire Nationalist government evacuated the eastern half of China and set up a wartime capital in the far western provincial city of Chongqing on the Yangzi River. To slow the Japanese advance westward, Chiang's air force bombed the dikes of the Yellow River in June 1938, thereby flooding millions of acres of farmland, drowning perhaps 300,000 people, and leaving two million people homeless.

The Japanese forces often operated with considerable autonomy from Tokyo, and they reacted with fury when Chinese refused to surrender quickly. When local forces resisted the Japanese occupation of Shanghai and its advance on Nanjing in late 1937, the Japanese military adopted a deliberate policy of raping, looting, and murdering the civilian population with impunity. In six weeks' time, they raped at least 20,000 Chinese women and killed 100,000 to 300,000 Chinese civilians (historians still debate the numbers) in what has become known to the world as the Rape of Nanjing, one of the more infamous atrocities of the twentieth century.



*Ill equipped and no match for Japan's powerful modern army, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces enter the Shandong city of Tai'an in 1937 as they retreat from the invading Japanese. Too weak to offer much resistance, Chiang's forces beat a hasty retreat westward, and his fledgling air force bombed the dikes of the Yellow River in June 1938 to slow the Japanese advance. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-137679*

The Western world, preoccupied with the Nazi movement and its growing threat in Europe, looked on this Japanese butchery in China with some indifference. A stalemate was reached in China by 1939, when Japan controlled the eastern third of the country, the Chinese Communists controlled its small base area in the northwest, and the Nationalists controlled the southwest. Chinese Communists and Nationalists cooperated only nominally, and Chiang Kai-shek often positioned his best troops not so as to engage the Japanese but so as to contain his Communist "allies" in the northwest.

When Japan moved into French Indochina and occupied a naval base there in the summer of 1941, the United States declared an embargo on further trade with Japan. Since the United States had been its main supplier of oil and scrap metal up to this point, Japan saw the trade embargo as a virtual declaration of war. Japan offered to pull out of French Indochina in exchange for the lifting of the embargo. The United States refused, and Japan attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor without warning on December 7, 1941. Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong both rejoiced to have the United States, finally, as a full partner in the war with Japan.

China's war against the invading Japanese was made to order for the Maoist style of guerrilla warfare. Japanese troops were easily identifiable anywhere in China, and Chinese Communist forces now subordinated their class warfare to the task of uniting all Chinese in the struggle against Japan. In August 1940, Communist forces launched a major offensive against the Japanese in north China, cutting railway lines and roads, blowing up bridges, and sabotaging strategic assets like coal mines. Japanese commanders responded with a scorched-earth policy of "kill all, burn all, loot all," designed to terrorize the Chinese population into submission. What it did instead was to send ever-increasing numbers of Chinese into the Communist Party. Throughout the war, the Communists modified their land policies—they reduced rents while guaranteeing their payment, thus winning the support of all classes. Peasants were so grateful to the Chinese Communist Party for organizing resistance to Japan that they happily sent their sons to join the Red Army. In 1935, the Communists commanded some 30,000 troops and controlled perhaps two million people. By the end of World War II, the Communist Party had a well-trained, highly motivated army of nearly one million troops and controlled a total population of about one hundred million people.

During World War II, the Chinese Communist Party developed many of the techniques it would later use to rule all of China. In the heat of a war that everyone saw as a struggle for survival, the Party developed an iron-clad discipline and a strong spirit of self-sacrifice for the sake of the Party and the nation. Mao delivered a stirring eulogy of Norman Bethune, an idealistic Canadian surgeon who went to Yan'an to help the Chinese Communists resist

Japan, worked tirelessly to teach Chinese doctors and nurses the techniques of battlefield surgical operations, blood transfusions, and so on, and died of blood poisoning after failing to treat a cut he had suffered during surgery: “Comrade Bethune’s spirit, his utter devotion to others without any thought of self, was shown in his boundless sense of responsibility in his work and his boundless warm-heartedness towards all comrades and the people. Every Communist must learn from him . . . . We must all learn the spirit of absolute selflessness from him.”<sup>4</sup>

Mao seemed such a brilliant military and political strategist that he gained ever-increasing authority. Once he and his small group of Party leaders (including Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Peng Dehuai) determined and announced the military strategies and political policies for the day, every Party member was obligated to implement these strategies and policies with enthusiasm. Every Party member was obliged to read and study the speeches and essays of Party Chairman Mao.

When many writers and intellectuals fled to the wartime base of Yan’an, they were quickly indoctrinated against writing the kinds of critical essays or short stories that showed the seamy side of society. Instead, they were told to write clear propaganda in support of the Chinese people and their war effort. In 1942 Mao delivered a series of lectures on literature and art in which he declared that writers and intellectuals must identify themselves with the peasant class and write for the sake of the nation (and the Communist Party). What the country needed from its writers, he concluded, was not “more flowers on the brocade” but “fuel in snowy weather.”<sup>5</sup>

China’s greatest woman writer in Yan’an, Ding Ling, fled to Yan’an after having been imprisoned by the Nationalists. She was disappointed to discover the low status of women in the Communist Party and wrote a story showing the contrast between Party rhetoric about women’s equality with men and the realities of life under Party control. In keeping with Mao’s policies on art and literature, she was harshly criticized for her efforts, forced to confess her “bourgeois outlook,” and pressured to write only propaganda favorable to Mao and the Party.

went into villages to perform plays, puppet theater, songs, and folk dances, all carrying the message that the Chinese Communist Party would lead China to victory against the Japanese aggressors. Peasant associations worked to reduce rents and interest rates while being careful not to attack landlords, who were also enlisted in the anti-Japanese war. Women’s associations mobilized women to work collectively in support of the war effort, confronted men who beat their wives, and worked to promote women’s freedom of marriage and divorce. Youth associations rallied young people in the war effort as well, stirred their idealistic impulses, and recruited thousands to become members of the Communist Party.

Chiang Kai-shek’s forces, by contrast, grew in numbers but not in strength. He appointed commanders on the basis of their personal loyalty to him rather than their competence or honesty. Commanders often inflated their troop rolls, sold off their allotted rations on the black market, and left their troops starving and weaponless in the field. Nationalist forces died more often from disease and starvation than enemy bullets. American diplomats in China often contrasted the high morale and discipline of the Communist forces with the corruption and incompetence of the Nationalist forces. The crusty American general George Stilwell, known as “Vinegar Joe” for his sharp tongue, felt nothing but contempt for Chiang Kai-shek, who seemed to care far more about his own power and Communist rivals than defeating Japan. Eventually the United States recalled Stilwell from China in order to try to improve America’s relationship with Chiang Kai-shek.

When World War II ended, the United States was anxious to avoid a renewed civil war in China between the Communists and the Nationalists. General George Marshall, one of America’s most respected generals, went to China to try to negotiate a peaceful compromise between the two sides, but his efforts were doomed by the deep suspicions on both sides based on their long history of lethal conflict and feigned “cooperation.” Having suffered through an eight-year war that left twenty million Chinese dead and millions more wounded, sick or starving, the Chinese people desperately wanted peace. But Chiang Kai-shek was not about to tolerate an independent Communist army in China, and Mao would never again agree to lay down arms and trust the goodwill of Chiang.

On paper, the Nationalists had about a four-to-one advantage in numbers of armed troops (four million to one million); overwhelming technical superiority in terms of tanks,

aircraft, and weapons; and the clear and strong support of the United States, which provided Chiang's forces with about \$2 billion in military aid from 1946 to 1949. But Chiang was overconfident in thinking the United States could not and would not let him lose a shooting war with his Communist rivals. Against American advice, Chiang used U.S. air transport to fly his best forces into northeast China and Manchuria in 1946–1947 in order to try to prevent the Communists from taking the Japanese surrender and establishing Communist power in those areas. When full-scale civil war broke out in early 1947, the Communists abandoned their wartime capital of Yan'an, scattered into the countryside in classic guerrilla fashion, and renamed their forces the People's Liberation Army.

Chinese Communist forces had moved into Manchuria with some tactical help from the Soviet Union (which had also sent troops into China on the request of the United States when the overwhelming concern was to force Japan's quick surrender). In mid-1947, the Communists seized the initiative in Manchuria, surrounded the Nationalist forces in the cities, and cut railway and communication lines. Chiang refused to recognize the looming defeat of his troops there and sent in reinforcements. In late 1948, the Communist general Lin Biao led a final massive assault in Manchuria, capturing in two months' time 230,000 rifles and 400,000 of Chiang's best soldiers.

Even then, the Nationalists still enjoyed numerical superiority in men and a virtual monopoly on tanks and planes. That changed in the central Yangzi valley battle of Hwaihai (Xuzhou) from November 1948 through January 1949. When the Nationalist general at Hwaihai found himself encircled and cut off by Communist forces, he heard that Chiang Kai-shek was preparing to bomb his troops to keep them and their equipment from falling to the Communists. He quickly surrendered his force of 460,000 troops to the People's Liberation Army. The Nationalist effort was further undermined by rampant inflation that swept through Nationalist-controlled territory with the force of a hurricane. From January 1946 to August 1948, prices multiplied sixty-seven times. In late 1948, all confidence in the Nationalist government collapsed. Prices multiplied 85,000 times in six months, and the Nationalist currency became as meaningless as a Qing dynasty copper coin. Chiang Kai-shek fled first to Sichuan Province in the far west and then to Taiwan, along with nearly two million Nationalist troops and officials and their families. (Taiwan, a Japanese colony from 1895 to 1945, had been returned to the Republic of China upon the surrender of Japan in August 1945.) On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong stood atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace in the center of Beijing and proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China.