Communists, Nationalists, and China's Revolutions: Crash Course World History #37

Crash Course: World History
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Hi I'm John Green, and this is Crash Course World History and today we're going to return — sadly for the last time on Crash Course — to China.

By the way, Stan brought cupcakes. That's good. I wish I could draw some parallel between this and China, but I got nothing. It's just delicious.

I'll sure miss you, piece of felt Danica cut out in the shape of China using blue because we felt red would be cliché.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, Mr Green!

You don't get to talk until you shave the mustache, Me From The Past.

So the 20th century was pretty big for China because it saw not one but two revolutions. China's 1911 revolution might be a bigger deal from a world historical perspective than the more famous communist revolution of 1949, but you wouldn't know it because:

1. China's communism became a really big deal during the Cold War, and

2. Mao Zedong, the father of Communist China, was really good at self-promotion. Like, you know his famous book of sayings? Pretty much everyone in China just had to own it. And I mean, *had to.*

[intro plays]

So as you no doubt recall from past episodes of Crash Course, China lost the Opium Wars in the 19th century, resulting in European domination, spheres of influence, et cetera, all of which was deeply embarrassing to the Qing dynasty and led to calls for reform. One strand of reform that called for China to adopt European military technology and education systems was called self-strengthening, and it was probably would have been a great idea, considering how well that worked for Japan. But it never happened in China-- well, at least not until recently.

Instead, China experienced the disastrous anti-Western Boxer Rebellion of 1900, which helped spur some young liberals, including one named Sun Yat Sen, to plot the overthrow of the dynasty. Oh, it's already time for the Open Letter…

An open letter to Sun Yat Sen.

Oh, but first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, more champagne poppers? Stan, at this point aren't we sort of belaboring the fact that China invented fireworks? Wow! That is innovation at work right there. We used to not be able to fire off one of these, and now we can fire off six at a time if you count the two secret ones from behind me.

Dear Sun Yat Sen,
You were amazing! I mean the Republic of China calls you the father of the nation. The People's Republic of China calls you the forerunner of the democratic revolution. You're the only thing they can agree on! You lived in China, Japan, the United States, you converted to Christianity, you were a doctor, you were the godfather of an important science fiction writer.

But the infuriating thing is that you never actually got much of a chance to rule China, and you would have been great at it. I mean, your three principles of the people, Nationalism, Democracy, and the People's Livelihood, are three really great principles. I mean the problem, aside from you not living long enough is that you just didn't have a face for Warhol portraits. Huh, it's too bad.
Best wishes, John Green

So the 1911 revolution that led to the end of the Qing dynasty started when a bomb accidentally exploded, at which point the revolutionaries were like, "we're probably going to be outed, so we should just start the uprising now". The uprising probably would've been quelled like many before it, except this time the army joined the rebellion, because they wanted to become more modern.

The Qing emperor abdicated, and the rebels chose a general, Yuan Shikai, as leader, while Sun Yat Sen was declared president of a provisional republic on Jan 1, 1912. A new government was created with a Senate and a Lower House, and it was supposed to write a new constitution. And after the first elections, Sun Yat Sen's party, the Guomindang were the largest, but they weren't the majority. So Sun Yat Sen deferred to Yuan, which turned out to be a huge mistake because he then outlawed the Guomindang party and ruled as dictator.

But when Yuan Shikai died in 1916, China's first non-dynastic government in over 3000 years completely fell apart. Localism reasserted itself with large-scale landlords with small-scale armies ruling all the parts of China that weren't controlled by foreigners. You might remember this phenomenon from earlier in Chinese history, first during the Warring States period and then again for three hundred years between the end of the Han and the rise of the Sui.

So the period in Chinese history between 1912 and 1949 is sometimes called the Chinese Republic, although that gives the government a bit too much credit. The leading group trying to re-form China into a nation state was the Guomindang, but after 1920 the Chinese Communist Party was also in the mix. And for the Guomindang to regain power from those big landlords and reunify China, they needed some help from the CCP.

Now if an alliance between Communists and Nationalists sounds like a match made in hell, well, yes. It was. That said, the two did manage to patch things up for a while in the early 1920s, you know, for the sake of the kids.

But then Sun Yat Sen died in 1925 and the alliance fell apart in 1927 when Guomindang leader Chiang Kai-Shek got mad at the communists for trying to foment socialist revolution, to which the communists were like, "But that's what we do, man. We're communists."

Anyway, this turned out to be a bad break up for a bunch of reasons, but mainly because it started a civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. We're not going to get into exhausting detail on the civil war but, spoiler alert: the Communists won. But there are a few things to point out.

First, even though Mao emerged victorious, he and the communists were almost wiped out in 1934 except that they made a miraculous and harrowing escape, trekking from southern China to the mountains in the north in what has become famously known as the Long March, a great example of historians missing an opportunity since it could easily have been called the Long Ass March, as it featured donkeys.

Second, for much of the time the Kuomintang was trying to crush the CCP, significant portions of China were being occupied and/or invaded by Japan.

Thirdly, the Communists were just better at fighting the Japanese than the Nationalists were. In spite of the fact that Chiang Kai-Shek had extensive support from the U.S. And each time the Nationalists failed against the Japanese, their prestige among their fellow Chinese diminished. It wasn't helped by Nationalist corruption, or their collecting onerous taxes from Chinese peasants, or stories

about Nationalist troops putting on civilian clothes and abandoning the city of Nanking during its awful destruction by the Japanese army in 1937. Meanwhile, the Communists were winning over the peasants in their northwestern enclave by making sure that troops didn't pillage local land and by giving peasants a greater say in local government.

Now, that isn't to say everything was rosy under Mao's communist leadership, even at its earliest stages. By the way, that is an actual chalk illustration. Very impressed. In a preview of things to come, in 1942 Mao initiated a "rectification" program, which basically meant students and intellectuals were sent down into the countryside to give them a taste of what "real China" was like in an effort to re-educate them. We try to be politically neutral here on Crash Course, but we are always opposed to intellectuals doing hard labor.

But anyway, within four years of the end of World War II the Communists routed Chiang Kai-Shek's armies and sent them off to Taiwan, and these military victories paved the way for Mao to declare the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

So once in power, Mao and the PRC were faced with the task of creating a new, socialist state. And Mao declared early on that the working class in China would be the leaders of a "people's democratic dictatorship." Oh democratic dictatorships. You're the BEST. It's all the best parts of democracy, and all the best parts of dictatorship. You get to vote, but there's only one choice. It takes all the pesky thinking out it.

The PRC promised equal rights for women, rent reduction, land redistribution, new heavy industry and lots of freedoms, including freedoms of "thought, speech, publication, assembly, association, correspondence, person, domicile, moving from one place to another, religious belief, and the freedom to hold processions and demonstrations." Yeah, NO. Even putting aside the PRC's failure to protect any of those rights, Mao's China wasn't much fun if you were a landlord or even if you were a peasant who'd done well. Land redistribution and reform meant destroying the power of landlords, often violently.

But centralizing power and checking individual ambition proved difficult for the government, and it was made harder by China's involvement in the Korean War, which helped spur the first mass campaign of Mao's democratic dictatorship. Designed to encourage support for the War, the campaign was called the "Resist America and Aid Korea campaign," and it resulted in almost all foreigners leaving China.

A second campaign, against "counterrevolutionaries" was much worse. People suspected of sympathizing with the Guomindang, or anyone insufficiently communist, was subject to humiliation and violence. Between October 1950 and August 1951, 28,332 people accused of being spies or counterrevolutionaries were executed in Guandong city alone.

A third mass campaign, the "Three Anti Campaign" was aimed at reforming the Communist party itself. And the final mass campaign, the Five Anti Campaign was an assault on all bourgeois capitalism, which effectively killed private industry in China. Very few of the victims of this last campaign actually died, but capitalism was weakened and state control bolstered. OK, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Mao and the CCP set out to turn China into an industrial powerhouse by following the Soviet model. We haven't really talked about this, but under the Soviet system, Russia was able to accomplish massive industrialization-- not to mention tens of millions of deaths from starvation-- through centralized planning and collectivization of agriculture, following what were known as Five Year Plans.

The Chinese adopted the model of Five Year Plans beginning in 1953 and the first one worked, at least as far as industrialization was concerned. In fact, the plan worked even better than expected, with industry increasing 121% more than projected. In order for this to work though, the peasants had to grow lots of grain and sell it at extremely low prices. This kept inflation in check, and saving was encouraged by the fact that the Five Year Plan didn't have many consumer goods, so there was nothing to buy. For urban workers, living standards improved and China's population grew to 646 million.

So far, Mao's plan seemed to be working, but there was no way that China could keep up that growth, especially without some backsliding into capitalism. So Mao came up with a terrible idea called the Great Leap Forward. Mao essentially decided that the nation could be psyched up into more industrial productivity.

Among many other bad ideas, he famously ordered that individuals build small steel furnaces in their backyard to increase steel production. This was not a good idea. First off, it didn't actually increase steel production much. Secondly, it turns out that people making steel in their backyard who know nothing about making steel… make bad steel.

But the worst idea was to pay for heavy machinery from the USSR with exported grain. This meant there was less for peasants to eat — and as a result, between 1959 and 1962, 20 million people died, probably half of whom were under the age of 10. Jeez, Thought Bubble, that was sad.

And then in happier news came the Cultural Revolution! Just kidding, it sucked. By the middle of the sixties, Mao was afraid that China's revolution was running out of steam, and he didn't want China to end up just a bureaucratized police state like, you know, most of the Soviet bloc. And the Cultural Revolution was an attempt to capture the glory days of the revolution and fire up the masses, and what better way to do that than to empower the kids.

Frustrated students who were unable find decent, fulfilling jobs jumped at the chance to denounce their teachers, employers, and sometimes even their parents and to tear down tradition, which often meant demolishing buildings and art. The ranks of these "Red Guards" swelled and anyone representing the so-called "four olds" — old culture, old habits, old ideas, and old customs — was subject to humiliation and violence. Intellectuals were again sent to the countryside as they were in 1942; millions were persecuted; and countless historical and religious artifacts were destroyed.

But the real aim of the Cultural Revolution was to consolidate Mao's revolution, and while his image still looms large, it's hard to say that China these days is a socialist state. Many would argue that Mao's revolution was extremely short-lived, and that the real change in China happened in 1911. That's when the Chinese Republic ended 3,000 years of dynastic history and forever broke the cyclical pattern the Chinese had used to understand their past. I mean at least in some senses, those Nationalist revolutionaries literally put an end to history.

That sense of living in a truly New World has made many great and terrible things possible for China, but the legacy of China's two revolutions is mixed at best. China, for instance, made most of the camera we use to film this video. And China made most of the computers we use to edit. But no one in the People's Republic of China will legally be able to watch this video, because the government blocks YouTube. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "Disco Golf Ball." If you want to guess at this week's phrase of the week or suggest future ones, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's videos that will be answered by our team of historians. If you like Crash Course, make sure you've subscribed.

Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.