The Fall and Rise of China

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“The Fall and Rise of China”
Lecture Topics

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Lecture 1: The Splendor that was China (600-1700 AD)

Legend has it that the Emperor Napoleon once said of China, “There lies a sleeping giant. Let it sleep, for when it wakes it will shake the world.” Apocryphal? Perhaps. But in recent decades this long-slumbering Chinese colossus has begun to stir. Though not yet fully aroused, its immense size and weight have begun to command the attention of its neighbors, both near and far.

For some, this awakening giant is a symbol of rebirth and regeneration, inspiring hope and confidence. For others, it is an object of trepidation, its rising strength and growing self-confidence a threat to the very foundations of Western civilization.

What are we to make of this awakening Leviathan, this Gulliver among Lilliputians? How should we understand--and deal with—a “rising China”? Will it be a friend or a foe? A partner or a competitor? On the answers to these questions will hinge, in no small measure, the final epitaph of our present century— which many observers have already begun to call “the Chinese Century.”

This course will not provide definitive answers to these questions. Napoleon’s grim warning of a restless, destructive China may prove prescient, or it may be grossly exaggerated. In either case, we cannot simply take his--or anyone’s-- word for it. We need to look at the evidence ourselves, and then draw our own conclusions.

For me personally, modern China has been a never-ending source of fascination — always changing, always producing the unexpected. Sometimes the country has evoked in me feelings of profound admiration, while at other times it has left me feeling bitterly frustrated and outraged. But one thing that China has never, ever been, is boring.

Though I will try to maintain a general attitude of scholarly detachment and objectivity throughout these lectures, I will not shy away from revealing my own reactions to major Chinese events and developments; and I will share with you a number of personal anecdotes and observations from my various travels to China.

To place the story of China’s awakening in proper perspective, the first half of the course will trace the 19th Century decline of Chinese imperial power, followed by the early 20th century disintegration of the country, and the subsequent struggles among competing revolutionary ideologies and armies that marked modern Chinese history from 1912 until the advent of the PRC in 1949. The first half ends with an assessment of Mao Zedong’s efforts to radically transform Chinese society after 1949—including both his early triumphs and, more spectacularly, his later tragedies, most notably the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

In the second half of the course we examine Deng Xiaoping’s effort to reverse two decades of Maoist radicalism. In the late 1970s and 1980s Deng introduced a series of audacious economic reforms. These reforms, including the introduction of market
principles in agriculture, industry and commerce, set the stage for China’s remarkable economic revival; but there was a downside as well, insofar as the unintended social stresses and strains produced by these early, incomplete reforms led to the eruption-- and bloody suppression--of massive student protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

In the 1990s, under Deng’s successor, Jiang Zemin, China recovered from the traumas of Tiananmen and began to open its economy to massive infusions of foreign investment, trade and technology. These latter reforms spurred the dramatic double-digit economic growth that has generally dazzled the world at large. But politically, China’s post-Mao leaders were reluctant to relinquish the Communist Party’s traditional monopoly of power, and consequently a substantial gap has emerged between China’s dynamic, open economy and its rigid, authoritarian political system. In the latter part of the course we will consider the implications of this bifurcation between politics and economics; and we will conclude with an assessment of China’s rapidly changing role in international affairs.

The full historical sweep of the course thus spans more than 200 years, from the initial decline in Chinese imperial power to the contemporary rebirth of a self-confident global Chinese powerhouse. The journey from there to here is a fascinating one, filled with a good deal of high drama, and punctuated by a great many unexpected twists and turns. So please fasten your seatbelts, for we are about to embark upon a breathtaking ride.

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It is hard for the Western imagination to wrap itself around the idea that as recently as two hundred years ago, the Emperor of China firmly believed that his worldly domain extended to the four corners of the Earth. China was then—as it had been for well over a thousand years -- “the Middle Kingdom,” the notional center of the universe ("Zhongguo"). The emperor was the “Son of Heaven” (“Tianzi”). His earthly domain was coterminous with “All under heaven” (“Tianxia”). (Show visual of these three terms—Zhongguo, Tianzi, and Tianxia—in characters and in Pinyin spelling)

Grandiose? Yes, of course. But such imperial hubris was hardly unwarranted. From the founding of the Tang Dynasty in the 7th Century of the Common Era until the middle years of the Qing (or Manchu) Dynasty in the 18th Century, Chinese civilization and culture thrived, with only occasional disruptions—the most conspicuous being two foreign dynastic conquests—by the Mongols under Genghis Khan in the 13th Century, and by the Manchus in the mid-17th Century. But not even the imposition of two foreign dynasties could substantially alter Chinese society and culture. So strong and deeply engrained were the institutions and values of Chinese civilization that the conquerors were gradually absorbed and assimilated by the conquered. Dynasties came and went, but the Middle Kingdom lived on, its grandeur largely undiminished. By the time the Manchu Dynasty fell in the early 20th century, the only visible symbol of Manchu supremacy was the mandatory male pigtail, or queue. In virtually every other respect, the Manchus had become thoroughly Sinicized.
In stark contrast to the longevity and majesty of the Chinese empire, throughout most of this same 1100-year period, from roughly 600 – 1700 of the Common Era, Western civilization lay dormant. From the onset of the “Dark Ages” following the collapse of the Roman Empire to the first blossomings of the European enlightenment in the 16th and 17th centuries, the West slumbered while China flourished.

A constellation of factors—institutional, technological, ecological and cultural—help to explain China’s early rise, as well as its extraordinary imperial longevity. Some of these factors—such as the philosophical traditions of Confucianism—were unique to China, while others, including mastery of the techniques of wet-rice cultivation and irrigation—were shared with other ancient civilizations. But it was a unique combination of these characteristics that enabled the Middle Kingdom to survive and prosper while other early empires rose, peaked, decayed and disappeared, one after another.

To endure for a millennium or even longer, a major civilization requires, first of all, a sustainable natural ecosystem. In China, two great East-West waterways, The Yellow River and the Yangzi River, provided the water needed to nourish and sustain a large-scale agrarian economy. But China’s continental monsoon climate—with periods of intense seasonal rainfall interspersed with prolonged dry spells—meant that farmlands in China were subject to frequent, oscillating cycles of flood and draught. It was not for nothing that the Yellow River, birthplace of Chinese civilization, has for centuries been known as “China’s Sorrow.”

Under such circumstances, only a sophisticated, well-coordinated system of hydraulic engineering could create the controlled flow of water necessary to support stable, densely populated agricultural settlements. All successful ancient civilizations—including those in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica and the Indus Valley—had this trait in common: that is, they all had relatively advanced water management systems that included large-scale, centrally-administered networks of irrigation canals, dams, dikes, reservoirs and sluiceways. China was no exception. (show Grand Canal, or other early imperial Chinese waterwork project)

But it was not sufficient merely to grow enough food to support a large population. To build and sustain an empire, ruling elites had to be able to syphon off a substantial agricultural surplus from rural producers, both in taxes, which were generally paid in kind, and in mandatory corvee labor service. These extracted resources were used, in turn, to support the ruler and his retinue of court officials, as well as to maintain a standing army (including periodic military campaigns) and to finance the construction of great urban centers and monumental structures—such as the Great Pyramids of Giza, the Incan temples at Machu Pichu, and the Great Wall of China. (show Great Pyramids)

And let us not forget that empire-builders in all great civilizations have indulged in the “conspicuous consumption” of a dazzling array of luxury goods—decorative bronze vessels, ornamental porcelains, gold jewelry, and the like. Such luxury items were produced by urban artisans whose livelihood depended, in the first instance, on the existence of long-distance trade networks, through whose commercialized arteries flowed
the resources and raw materials that were the building blocks of imperial grandeur. (show early Chinese objets d’art)

But effective irrigation techniques, a taxable farm surplus, a vast network of trade routes, and a specialized class of urban artisans were still not sufficient to create an enduring high civilization. A well-functioning empire also required substantial numbers of competent, honest and loyal court officials, magistrates, and tax collectors. And this is where China’s uniqueness first came into play. For beginning in the 7th Century CE, Tang Dynasty officials introduced the world’s first civil service system. Designed to recruit the “best and brightest” young men through a system of standardized, merit-based examinations, China’s imperial civil service was, for its time, remarkably progressive, egalitarian and democratic. Twice-yearly examinations were open to all males, regardless of birth or wealth. And to reduce the tendency toward nepotism and corruption that arose when local economic elites cultivated close personal ties with local officials, an “avoidance system” mandated the periodic rotation of imperial magistrates and prohibited civil servants from being posted to their home counties. For its time, this was a most impressive mechanism (show painting or photo of civil service examination)

Although the civil service system was nominally open and democratic, there were a few hidden catches. For one thing, only males could sit for the examinations. For another, one had to be thoroughly literate in order to pass the exam. And that, in turn, was no trivial matter, since Chinese was an ancient, idiographic language that lacked a written phonetic alphabet (show a few typical, modern Chinese characters along with their ancient pictorial forms and English translations). Indeed, a would-be exam taker would have to spend long years memorizing thousands of individual written characters and their myriad combinations.

As for the exam itself, it was a highly stylized exercise in the rote memorization and manipulation of certain classical philosophical texts, and had to be composed in a famously rigid and constrained style of writing known as the “eight-legged essay.”

The eight-legged essay was constructed in the following manner: First came a two-sentence opening statement, followed by a five-sentence elaboration, followed by a preliminary exposition and an initial argument (which had to be constructed in a discrete number of precisely-paired sentences using exactly parallel language). Then came the central argument, followed by the latter argument, the final argument and the conclusion. And this all had to be done within a prescribed number of words. (And my UCLA students think they have it tough when I ask them to compose expository essays!)

Because of the difficulty of mastering both the Confucian classics and the rigid format of the eight-legged essay, an aspiring imperial Chinese civil servant would have to be privately tutored for many years to have a shot at passing the exam—something that only well-to-do families could normally afford for their privileged sons. Peasant boys, by contrast, had to work in the fields; there was simply no leisure time for indulging in daily private tutorials. Thus, it is not surprising that the vast majority of successful examination candidates came from the affluent landlord-gentry class.
The subject matter of the civil service examinations consisted largely of ancient philosophical texts, written in the 5th and 6th centuries BC by the scholar-sage Confucius and a small group of his loyal disciples. Known as the “four books and five classics of antiquity,” these Confucian teachings were aimed at perfecting the moral self-cultivation of the idealized “gentleman scholar”. Rooted in traditional ethical principles such as benevolence, propriety, natural harmony, reverence for one’s ancestors, and faithful observance of ceremonial rites and rituals, Confucianism prescribed a highly disciplined training regimen for would-be imperial officials. A successful examination candidate would, of necessity, be an accomplished Confucian scholar. (show photo of Confucian gentlemen-scholars, e.g., from Burton Beers, China in Old Photographs, p. 60)

In the Confucian scheme of things, good governance was rooted in the “right conduct” of imperial officials, including the emperor himself. The moral code of Confucianism required conscientious observance of certain well-defined hierarchies of reciprocal, status-based rights and responsibilities. Thus, for example, Confucian morality mandated that sons should unconditionally obey their fathers; wives should obey their husbands; subjects should obey the emperor; and the living should revere the spirits of their deceased ancestors. It was all very precise and orderly; and everyone knew their place—at least in theory.

Given this well-defined system of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities, a smooth-running Confucian society ultimately depended upon each member of an extended family, and of the broader community that encompassed many such extended families, or clans, knowing their proper “place” in relation to all other members of the community. There was no concept of universal social equality, and no notion that individual freedom could take precedence over the obligation to enhance the collective welfare of the family.

For such a family-centered, morally-integrated community to function smoothly, its members had to share a common awareness of their mutual obligations and responsibilities. Now, this was all well and good within small, tight-knit village communities, where people were generally connected to one another by kinship or by habitual interaction. But what of non-Confucian “others”—those unassimilated “aliens” who inhabited imperial China’s outer regions, including Mongolians, Tibetans, Muslims, Manchus, and more than 50 other ethnic groups that did not share the moral traditions and principles of Confucianism? (show map of China’s ethnic heterogeneity, e.g., in Ming dynasty) For these alien “others”, the emperor’s moral authority, and the ethical canons of Confucianism, were insufficient guarantees of interpersonal harmony and social order. Something more was needed.

That something was bureaucratic coercion. To ensure that people from different parts of the sprawling Chinese empire—that is, strangers unrelated by blood or ancestry-- would act in conformity with Chinese norms and practices, punishment for aberrant behavior had to be swift and sure. Criminal conduct had to be well-defined and effectively deterred. (show photo of criminals being punished, in J. Spence and A. Chin, The Chinese Century, pp. 24-25)
It was the particular genius of China’s early emperors and court officials that they recognized the need for both a morally-integrated community of values governing ordinary interactions, and a well-defined set of criminal laws and administrative sanctions to deter and punish aberrant behavior. Indeed the very longevity and durability of China’s dynastic system owes much to the long-term co-existence of these two very different, but ultimately complementary governing traditions, known as Lizhi and Fazhi, respectively –Confucian moralism and coercive legalism— which have sometimes been referred to as the Yin and the Yang of effective imperial rule.

Of course, China’s dynastic longevity and prosperity also benefited from the fact that for most of its 2000-year imperial history, China was bounded by a collection of smaller, weaker states along its southern, western and northeastern periphery. Toward these lesser states, China’s imperial court generally observed a policy of hegemonic tolerance, granting their rulers substantial local autonomy in exchange for ritualized military deference and political obeisance. This “Pax Sinica” was cemented by the regular gift of valuable national treasures –known as “tribute”—from “barbarian” kings to the Chinese “Son of Heaven.” (show map of “tributary” states)

In addition to such ritualized tributary relations, routine commodity trade between China and its neighbors, both near and far, waxed and waned periodically over the life span of the Chinese empire. Early in the Common Era, a number of overland trade routes were opened linking Western China with the people and cultures of Central Asia and beyond. Collectively known as the Silk Road, these trade routes reached their zenith during the Tang and Song Dynasties, from the 7th to the 12th centuries CE. (show map of Silk Road). It was via the Silk Road that Buddhism (from India) and Islam (from Karakorum) first found their way to China. And it was also via the Silk Road that the Venetian explorer Marco Polo first sampled the exotic silks, spices and porcelains of imperial China. With the disintegration of the Mongol Empire in the last half of the 14th Century, however, control over Silk Road trade routes became fragmented among contending regional states. As violence grew at the periphery of empire, commerce diminished, and the importance of the Silk Road as a major trade network sharply declined.

This brings us to the question of imperial China’s military power. Although Chinese armies were not normally used for territorial conquest, by the time of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127CE), China’s military superiority over its smaller, weaker neighbors was firmly established. An army of over one million soldiers was supplied by a state-controlled armaments industry that could annually produce up to 100,000 tons of pig iron, from which were forged tens of thousands of sets of body armor and 3 million field weapons per year—mainly consisting of bows, crossbows, and lances. (show imperial Chinese warriors/military artifacts) By clearly underlining the futility of armed resistance to the Son of Heaven, periodic displays of Chinese military might effectively underpinned the empire’s “tributary” system of foreign relations. (statistics drawn from Mark Elvin, The Pattern of the Chinese Past, pp. 84-85)
The story of China’s remarkable imperial longevity, recounted all too briefly here, is an endlessly fascinating one. But equally fascinating is the improbable tale of spiraling imperial decline that beset China beginning in the late 1700s and culminating in the collapse of the last great Chinese dynasty—the Manchus—in 1911. In just a little over 125 years, China descended from unsurpassed power to unimaginable impotence, from the “Celestial Empire” to the “sick man of Asia.” In the next lecture we shall explore the roots of this extraordinary imperial decline.
Lecture 2: Malthus, Manchu Hubris, and the Madness of King George (1730-1800)

Last time we identified a number of key factors that helped to explain the extraordinary longevity and splendor of the Chinese empire: first was the early mastery of wet-rice cultivation; second, the perfection of large-scale water management techniques; third, the creation of an efficient civil service, recruited by competitive examination; fourth, was the adoption of a patriarchal value system that emphasized obedience of wives to their husbands, sons to their fathers, and subjects to their emperor; and which stressed the wellbeing of the family over the liberty of its individual members; fifth, was a well-developed legal code that deterred deviant behavior by prescribing swift and severe punishment for a wide range of crimes and misdemeanors; sixth was the development of advanced metallurgical techniques that sustained large-scale arms manufacture; and seventh was the fortuitous circumstance of being ringed on three sides by smaller, weaker states willing to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor in exchange for being left alone to enjoy peace and tranquility. With all these advantages going for it, the question is not so much “How did China become so powerful and remain so dominant for so long,” but rather, “Why did the Middle Kingdom collapse so suddenly, so completely?”

It is a tragic irony of modern Chinese history that the extraordinary success of Imperial China’s agrarian civilization, extending over such a long period of time and such a broad expanse of territory, bred habits of complacency, insularity, and arrogance. Believing China to be self-contained and superior in all things, both material and moral, a succession of Chinese emperors shunned all but the most transient and superficial contacts with the outside world. Basking in the glow of their own moral and institutional supremacy, they remained blissfully ignorant of the coming of the Renaissance in post-medieval Europe, and the subsequent dawning of the “Age of Enlightenment,” with its signature revolutions in science and technology.

Historians searching for the root causes of China’s precipitous decline generally start here, by taking note of China’s extreme ethnocentrism, and its myopic disdain for all things foreign. But it was not always thus. Indeed, for almost half a millennium, from the 10th century founding of the Song dynasty down to the middle years of the Ming dynasty in the 15th Century, long-distance trade and maritime exploration flourished in China.

Under the Ming emperor Yongle, seven major oceanic expeditions were mounted by the great Chinese navigator Zheng He. (show map of Zheng He’s explorations and representation of his treasure ships). Seventy-five years before Columbus set sail for the West Indies, Zheng He sailed his massive maritime fleet, which consisted of over 200 six-masted Chinese ships, manned by 28,000 crewmen, to ports in Southeast Asia, India, Ceylon, the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and the Horn of Africa. Although Zheng He’s army was formidable, and though he did not shrink from engaging in displays of force when confronted by hostile local rulers, his fleet of “treasure ships” went abroad not as conquerors but as cultural ambassadors. Wherever he went, Zheng He liberally dispensed gifts of Chinese silk and porcelain, accepting in return valuable native products from his
hosts-- including a variety of exotic African animals destined for the imperial zoo in Beijing, where their latter-day descendents still reside. He also brought with him back to China, as guests of the imperial court, emissaries from at least 30 princely states.

Although Zheng He was undoubtedly the most successful maritime explorer and goodwill ambassador in Chinese history, his pioneering journeys ended not in glory but in disgrace. Following the death of his patron, the Yongle emperor, in 1424, Yongle’s successors, fearing Zheng He’s growing political and military influence, decreed an end to Chinese maritime exploration. They burned Zheng He’s nautical charts and shipbuilding blueprints, and allowed his decommissioned treasure ships to rot in their harbor. Zheng himself died on his final voyage in 1433, and was buried at sea.

With maritime navigation forbidden, and with the Silk Road no longer serving as a vital overland trade route to Central and Western Asia, for the next 400 years China’s emperors were indifferent to foreign commerce and contact of almost any kind. Looking inward, they consigned themselves to an insular, complacent existence—an existence that would eventually cost them—and China-- dearly.

While its growing insularity clearly contributed to China’s eventual decline, there were other important causal factors at work, including, most notably, an unprecedented domestic demographic crisis and the advent of European commercial and military expansion.

Early in the 18th Century, around 1710, China’s population—which had been relatively stable at between 50 million and 100 million for almost a thousand years-- suddenly started surging. Within 75 years the population doubled, from 116 million to 242 million. In the century that followed, it doubled yet again. (show chart of China’s population growth after 1500.)

The origins of this extraordinary population surge can be traced to three interconnected factors: first was the extended period of international peace that followed the Manchu (or Qing) conquest of China in 1644. With the country basically at peace, there was a clear decline in domestic mortality rates. Second, the new Manchu regime, early in its reign, carried out a major campaign to repair long-neglected dykes and irrigation works along the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. The improvement in water management resulted in fewer fatalities from flood, draught, water-borne disease and malnutrition. Finally, and closely related to the first two factors, there was a significant rise in female fertility, resulting in a substantial and prolonged “baby boom.”

While population thus grew dramatically in the 18th and 19th centuries, there was no corresponding increase in total crop acreage under cultivation. Because of a severe shortage of virgin, arable farmland outside of China’s major river valleys, the 18th Century demographic explosion resulted in a sharp increase in rural population density, and a corresponding reduction, over time, in the amount of land cultivated by the average Chinese farm family. From the beginning of the 18th Century to its end, the average farm shrank in size from approximately ten acres to less than six acres.
The problem of rising population density was further compounded by the absence of significant innovation in agricultural technology. Because traditional Chinese agricultural and water management techniques, perfected a thousand years earlier, were extremely well suited to China’s riverine ecosystem and monsoon climate, a relatively large and stable core population was sustained from the Tang Dynasty through the early years of Manchu rule. But as so often happens in human history, success breeds self-satisfaction while blocking innovation. Consequently, throughout this extended period of relatively stable ecological and demographic equilibrium there were few major technological advances either in production and marketing techniques or in water conservation and management; consequently few notable gains were achieved in the productivity of farms or in the efficiency of farmers.

With a rural population that was rapidly expanding, with no new agrarian technologies available to raise farm productivity, and with few virgin frontier lands available to lure struggling families to move to “greener pastures,” Chinese farmers in the late 18th century faced a classic Malthusian dilemma, as a rapidly growing population first caught up with, and then gradually outstripped, the carrying capacity of the land. The historian Mark Elvin has called this situation a “high-level equilibrium trap,” a condition of agricultural impaction characterized by too many people eking out a living on too little land, using traditional means of production and having no place else to go. As farms grew smaller and more and more rural families drifted to the edge of subsistence, grain surpluses vanished and agricultural taxes –the main source of imperial financial liquidity--went unpaid.

Almost unnoticed outside of the hard-pressed Chinese countryside itself, the once mighty Manchu Dynasty began to slip into fiscal decline. By the time Western merchants began their commercial penetration of China at the end of the 18th Century, the process of fiscal erosion was already well underway.

With the coming of Western merchants in the late 1700s, rising commercial profits and tariff revenues helped to mask this fiscal decline by refilling imperial tax coffers with large quantities of European silver, brought into the country in trade for Chinese teas, silks, spices and porcelains--which were in high demand in Europe at the time. In this manner, the decline in agricultural tax revenues was initially offset by a highly favorable Chinese balance of commodity trade.

By the end of the 18th Century, however, a few enterprising British merchants had come up with an ingenious way to obtain the precious Chinese products they needed to satisfy the European market, without having to expend valuable silver in the process. The key to this “magical” amplification of British profit was the appearance of a new and highly popular commodity on the Chinese scene called *Papaver somniferum*, or “sleeping poppy”—more commonly known as Opium.

To be sure, opium was not entirely unknown in China before 1800. In the declining decades of the Ming Dynasty, for example, in the early 1600s, Portuguese traders had
brought small quantities of opium paste from Thailand as “tribute” to the Chinese emperor. And a certain amount had also been brought in overland from Turkey, via the Silk Road.

But when British merchants began smuggling opium in industrial quantities from India to China in the late 1700s, the effects were dramatic. From a mere 200 chests of opium in 1729 (that is, roughly 15 tons of processed opium), imports rose to 75 tons in 1767. By the 1810s annual imports averaged 340 tons (4,500 chests), rising to around 750 tons (10,000 chests) in the 1820s. In 1839 a total of 3,000 tons of opium (or 6 million pounds), were imported into China. (Show graphic of rising opium imports)

Demand for the drug was high, and British smugglers and their Chinese middlemen profited handsomely from the growing opium trade. But China’s fast-rising addiction to opium had a strongly negative impact on the Manchu Dynasty’s precarious fiscal stability. With the bulk of the profits from illicit opium trade going to line the pockets of foreign traffickers, China’s favorable trade balance began to shrink.

A cascade of adverse knock-on effects followed. As the net flow of silver into the country slowed down, its value on the domestic market increased proportionately. In the 1740s, for example, well before the onset of the opium boom, one tael (1.3 oz.) of silver had a market value of roughly 800 copper coins; by the 1820s, at the height of the opium trade, the value of silver had more than trebled, with one tael now trading for 2,500 copper coins.

For China’s beleaguered farmers, already heavily burdened by an emerging Malthusian crisis, this rise in the market exchange value of silver presented a new and potentially crushing hardship. While farmers sold their produce in the market for devalued copper coins, they paid their taxes in silver, which was appreciating in value. Caught in a classic, inflationary Catch-22, more and more peasants found themselves unable to meet their tax obligations. Increasing numbers of them were either pushed below the poverty line or forced off the land altogether.

Under the twin forces of a Malthusian-induced farm crisis and an opium-induced reduction of China’s favorable trade balance, by the end of the 18th Century the Manchu Dynasty exhibited the first signs of an emerging fiscal crisis. One early symptom of this was the outbreak, in 1796, of a massive tax rebellion among impoverished settlers in the mountainous regions bordering on the three central Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Hubei and Shaanxi. Known as the “White Lotus Rebellion,” it took Manchu armies three years to suppress the rebellious tax protesters. (show map of White Lotus Rebellion)

On the eve of this rebellion, with the Manchu Court in Beijing still basking in traditional self-satisfaction, the reigning emperor Qianlong received a high-level trade mission sent by King George III of England,. The year was 1793, and the occasion for the mission was the Qianlong emperor’s 83rd birthday. Led by Lord George McCartney of Ireland, the British mission was tasked with negotiating a treaty with the Manchu government, one that would permit British merchants to establish a permanent commercial presence in
Beijing and grant them freedom to engage in trade in a number of Chinese coastal cities. To secure Qianlong’s blessing, the British envoy lavished a number of valuable “tributary” gifts upon him, including ornate mechanical clocks, telescopes, cannon and assorted engineering instruments that were among the most prized fruits of the newly-blossoming English Industrial Revolution.

The record shows that despite Lord McCartney’s lavish gifts, he got off on the wrong foot with the Qianlong emperor. For one thing, McCartney insisted on being received with the august title of “imperial envoy,” while his Chinese hosts would acknowledge him only as a common “bearer of tribute.” For another thing, as a product of the European Enlightenment and an emissary of the British Imperial sovereign, Lord McCartney refused to perform the customary, self-deprecating ceremonial “kowtow”—consisting of three kneelings and nine prostrations—when he approached the emperor. Adding insult to injury, McCartney reportedly dismissed the Manchu emperor’s reciprocal gift of a large piece of Chinese jade as a “worthless rock”. (show painting of McCartney’s meeting with Qianlong)

Though admittedly amused by the English gifts, Qianlong was nonetheless skeptical of their importance. In a written response to King George’s request for “normalized” trade relations, the Son of Heaven noted, matter-of-factly, that “The Celestial Court has pacified the four seas… .[T]he virtue and prestige of the Celestial Dynasty having spread far and wide, the kings of the myriad nations come by land and sea with all sorts of precious things. Consequently there is nothing we lack.”

Pointing out that no foreigners had ever been permitted to establish a permanent commercial presence in the Imperial capital, let alone to enjoy equal standing at the Manchu court, Qianlong dismissed out of hand the British request for a trade mission. His rebuttal was cocky and condescending, to say the least:

“Being so rich in products of all kinds, China has no need of foreign trade. Traditionally people of European nations who wished to render some service under the Celestial Court have been permitted to come to the capital. But after their arrival they are obliged to wear Chinese court costumes, are placed in a certain residence, and are never allowed to return to their own countries. This is the established rule. (all quotes above from Teng and Fairbank, China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1939-1923, p. 19.)

Referring to Britain dismissively as a small island “far away in a remote corner of the earth,” the Chinese emperor scolded the British sovereign for his apparent ignorance of Chinese law, and for presuming to take advantage of the hospitality accorded by the Celestial Empire.

“Your envoy’s extraordinary requests indicate clearly that many of you Westerners have failed to appreciate our kindness and generosity…. Your envoy’s requests, if granted, would not only constitute a violation of Chinese law but
[would] serve no useful purpose for England as well. Knowing how I feel about this, you must abide by my wishes without fail, so both of our peoples may continue to enjoy the blessing of peace.” (Dun J. Li, ed., Modern China: From Mandarin to Commissar, pp. 41-44.)

This remarkable imperial edict, written shortly before the close of the 18th century, at a time when Chinese imperial potency was already beginning to fray around the edges, was in many ways emblematic of China’s famous “Middle Kingdom Complex”—a constellation of attitudes marked by extreme cultural self-satisfaction, economic insularity, military complacency and, above all, a xenophobic contempt for all things “barbarian”—i.e., foreign. (The two terms were used virtually interchangeably in imperial China.) The product of a millennium of economic, cultural, military and institutional superiority, the Middle Kingdom Complex persisted, even as growing evidence of imperial decay became harder and harder to conceal.

Though history records that Lord McCartney returned to Britain empty-handed, with precious little to show for having endured Qianlong’s humiliating imperial scolding, this was not the end of the story. For with signs of peasant tax protest growing stronger, and with the illicit opium trade increasing unabated, the Manchu Dynasty faced a dual crisis of fiscal liquidity and social stability.

The dawning of the 19th Century was thus fraught with danger and uncertainty for the Son of Heaven. Notwithstanding Qianlong’s haughty and highly-mannered hubris, the Chinese empire found itself sliding dangerously into debt, into denial, and, ultimately, into sharp decline. Next time, we will look at the Chinese emperor’s urgent efforts to curtail the rising opium trade, and thus halt the Manchu dynasty’s accelerating fiscal woes. But as we shall see, Chinese claims of Celestial pre-eminence were no longer sufficient to intimidate British opium traders. And when imperial officials in 1839 seized—and destroyed—more than 20,000 chests of British opium, weighing 1,300 tons, the British Crown responded with a show of military force. Thus began the first Opium War; and thus ended more than a millennium of Chinese supremacy.
Lecture 3: Barbarians at the Gate (1800-1860)

As China’s fiscal situation continued to deteriorate throughout the early decades of the 19th Century, foreign commercial pressures continued to mount. European traders were growing increasingly dissatisfied with the many commercial restrictions imposed by the Manchu court.

Rebuffed in their efforts to negotiate a trade agreement with China, the British increasingly flouted Chinese law, smuggling larger and larger quantities of opium into the country. By 1820, opium had surpassed all other items of trade as China’s chief import.

As opium flowed in, silver flowed out. By the mid 1820s, China’s overall trade balance—heavily favorable throughout the 18th Century—began to turn sharply negative. Between 1831 and 1833, nearly 10 million taels of silver flowed out of China—worth almost $14 million.

In 1838, an official Manchu estimate placed the number of opium addicts in China at between two and ten million, a figure that reportedly included up to one-fourth of the country’s civil servants. A one-day supply of opium in the 1830s cost roughly half the daily wage of a Chinese laborer; and by the mid-30s, British merchants were netting roughly $18 million a year from the opium trade. Small wonder the British parliament showed little enthusiasm for curtailing the opium traffic. (photo of opium users, from Beers, China in Old Photo, or Spence and Chin, Chinese Century, p.p 100-101)

But for the Manchu Dynasty, it was a different story altogether. Alarmed by the growing prevalence of opium addiction and by the growing hemorrhage of silver from the imperial treasury, the Manchu court redoubled its efforts to stamp out the drug trade. In 1836, the emperor ordered the provincial governor-general in Canton to crack down hard on the sale and use of opium. Over the next two years, the governor imprisoned more than 2,000 Chinese opium dealers, smugglers and users; in addition, there were daily reports of addicts being publicly executed.

In 1839 the Manchu emperor appointed a new commissioner to oversee the suppression of the Canton drug trade. His name was Lin Zexu. Lin’s policy was to deal aggressively with all domestic participants in the “opium cycle”, while treating the foreign suppliers of the poisonous drug with leniency and circumspection. Aware of Britain’s growing global power and prestige, he hoped to avoid a clash with her, if possible.

Writing to Queen Victoria in 1839, Lin Zexu cleverly cited Christianity’s own “golden rule” in an effort to shame the British sovereign into stemming the cultivation, manufacture and sale of opium:

I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country... Why do you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries? Suppose there were people from another country who carried opium for
sale to England and seduced your people into buying and smoking it; certainly your honorable ruler would deeply hate it and be bitterly aroused. . . Naturally you would not wish to give unto others what you yourself do not want. (Quoted in Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, p. 180).

There is no record of the British sovereign responding to Commissioner Lin’s letter.

In pursuit of his goal of ridding Canton of all opium, Lin Zexu in the spring of 1839 ordered all foreigners in the city to surrender their stores of opium within three days, and in addition, to sign a pledge that they would never again traffic in the drug. Violation of this pledge was to be punishable by death. In a gesture intended to sweeten his ultimatum, he offered a token reward of 5.5 lbs of Chinese tea for every opium chest turned over by the foreign merchants.

When the foreigners ignored the commissioner’s deadline, Lin threatened to execute two opium merchants. In response, the British reluctantly surrendered more than 1,000 chests (approximately 75 tons) of opium—equal to only around two percent of the opium that was then stockpiled in Canton’s warehouses.

Dissatisfied with the British response, Lin ratcheted up the pressure. He blockaded a key British trading firm, confining its 350 foreign occupants to the factory compound. The siege lasted for six weeks, ending only when British merchants agreed to turn over 20,000 additional chests of opium, weighing approximately 1,300 tons—more than 2 ½ million pounds.

In a classic display of imperial potency, Lin Zexu’s ceremonial destruction of the British opium was carried out in the presence of several high Chinese officials and foreign observers. The opium was first dumped into three massive open trenches, each lined with large quantities of salt and lime, where it was then covered with two feet of water. The mixture was then stirred thoroughly, and the resulting slurry was flushed into a nearby creek, where the currents eventually carried it out to sea. Repeating the process several times, it took 500 workers 22 days to complete the destruction of the opium. (show painting of opium destruction)

While Commissioner Lin was celebrating his triumph over the opium lords, British merchants were planning countermeasures of their own. They sent a petition to Queen Victoria’s Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, urging the British government to demand full compensation for the seized opium. In London and Manchester, a groundswell of pro-mercantilist opinion arose, demanding firm governmental action to uphold the trading rights of British merchants abroad— and to sternly repay the deep Chinese insult to British pride. Amid a rising tide of patriotic self-righteousness, few British thought to question the propriety—or to note the stunning hypocrisy—of demanding the right to trade freely abroad a substance whose cultivation, sale and use were punishable by death at home.
Responding to mounting public pressure, in October 1839 Lord Palmerston sent an expeditionary force to blockade Canton’s harbor. The force consisted of sixteen warships, four armed steamers, twenty-seven transport ships, and 4,000 soldiers. The First Opium War was underway. Imperial China would never be the same.

The British fleet commander, Admiral George Elliot, arrived in Canton bearing a list of Her Majesty’s demands. These included: first, full replacement of the destroyed opium (or fair market compensation for it); second, full satisfaction for the “indignities” suffered by British subjects during the Opium seizure incident; third, assurances of the future personal safety of British subjects in China; fourth, a permanent grant of one or more Chinese coastal islands to Great Britain; fifth, abolition of the Chinese imperial trade monopoly in Canton; and finally, repayment of all debts incurred by British merchants as a result of Commissioner Lin’s actions. Pending satisfaction of these demands, Admiral Elliot was instructed to extend his Canton blockade to all the principal ports of coastal China, so as to fully impress the Chinese with British might.

Seeing for themselves the potency of the British warships, with their superior design, steel-armored hulls, fast cruising speeds, and powerful artillery—the Manchus blinked first. Having been at peace for a hundred years, China’s coastal defenses had been badly neglected. Many of the largest cannon were rusted out, having last been used at the end of the Ming Dynasty, 200 years earlier; by the same token, the ships of the imperial navy were hopelessly inferior, consisting mostly of wooden warjunks. Recognizing the futility of combat, the Manchus temporized.

In September 1840, as the British fleet extended its blockade of China’s coast, Lin Zexu was removed as Imperial Commissioner. Blamed for failing to deter the British advance, Lin became a convenient scapegoat for the declining fortunes of the Manchu Dynasty. For his patriotic bravura in seizing and destroying 2 ½ million pounds of British opium, he was rewarded with exile in the a remote northwestern region of Xinjiang province.

Lin Zexu’s replacement, a Manchu imperial envoy named Qishan, now adopted softer tactics. Seeking to ingratiate himself with Admiral Elliot and his staff officers, he agreed to meet the British fleet commander near the mouth of the Yangzi River. Bearing the official title “manager of barbarians,” Qishan was highly courteous-- even deferential-- to the British commander. Employing flattery and cajolery, he convinced the British commander that the emperor had dispatched an emissary to Canton with instructions to conscientiously investigate British grievances; and he promised that serious negotiations would begin once a determination of the facts had been made. Taking Qishan at his word, Admiral Elliot halted his fleet’s advance and reversed course, returning to Canton.

But Qishan had been bluffing, stalling for time. No good-faith imperial envoy was en route. In consequence, the credulous Admiral George Elliot was removed from his command. In an ironic turn of events, the admiral was replaced by his younger, more impetuous cousin, Captain Charles Elliot.
As expected, Charles proved more hard-nosed than his cousin George. And shortly after assuming command, he ratcheted up Britain’s demands to include, among other things, permanent British possession of a small Chinese island at the mouth of the Pearl River, called Xianggang, or “fragrant harbor.” Today, this small island is more familiarly known by its Cantonese name, Hong Kong.

When the “barbarian manager” Qishan balked at Captain Elliot’s terms, Elliot ordered his ships, in a show of force, to destroy a Chinese fortress at Quanbi, southwest of Canton. (show photo of destruction by British fleet) Qishan’s confidence was badly shaken, and he was forced to draft a concessionary document in which he agreed to most of Captain Elliot’s demands. Known as the Quanbi Convention, the document provided for (1) the outright cession of Hong Kong Island to Great Britain; (2) a cash indemnity of $6 million in silver to be paid to the British; (3) equal standing to be given to British and Chinese officials in all business dealings; and (4) the reopening of Canton to foreign trade. Having drafted this document under duress, the distraught Qishan did not sign it. Playing for time, he proposed to submit it to the emperor for approval.

But the Manchu emperor was enraged by the terms of the proposed treaty, which he viewed as a wholesale capitulation to the British; and he refused to sign it. Indeed, he was so angry with Qishan for agreeing to draft such a document that he recalled his chief “barbarian manager” to Beijing in chains, to stand trial for treason. Qishan was sentenced to death, though his sentence was later commuted to permanent exile. (Clearly, being appointed as the principal Chinese barbarian handler in mid-19th Century China was not a prime career move.)

The emperor’s repudiation of the Quanbi Convention in January 1841 ushered in a new stage in the Opium War. The impulsive Captain Elliot was ordered to relinquish his command to a more senior British officer, the hawkish Sir Henry Pottinger. But before Pottinger could reach China to relieve Elliot of his command, the captain, seeking a measure of redemption, boldly undertook a new military offensive on his own initiative. In February of 1841 his soldiers captured a series of strategic Chinese forts at the mouth of the Pearl River. He then laid siege to the City of Canton itself, in the process trapping thousands of Chinese fighters. Elliott eventually agreed to release the trapped soldiers in exchange for $6 million in ransom.

With the arrival of Pottinger in the summer of 1841, the third and final phase of the Opium War began. The British fleet now sailed north, occupying the port city of Amoy, in Fujian Province, as well as a series of strategic islands and fortresses near the mouth of the Yangzi River. In June of 1842 Shanghai fell to the British fleet. Britain now commanded all maritime access to the Southeast Coast of China. (show map of Britain’s military victories)

Thoroughly defeated, the Manchu emperor decided to cut his losses. He instructed Qishan’s successor to negotiate a settlement. When the resulting “Treaty of Nanking” was signed aboard Pottinger’s flagship on August 29, 1842, it represented a stunning defeat for China. Under its harsh terms, China not only consented to pay an indemnity of
$21 million in silver to Britain (far more than the British had demanded just a year earlier), but also agreed to open five coastal cities to British commerce and residency: Canton, Amoy (later known as Xiamen), Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai. (show old photos of Canton, Fuzhou, Shanghai and Hong Kong). In addition, the longstanding imperial Chinese trade monopoly was abolished; and Hong Kong Island – a traditional waystation for British merchants en route to Canton-- was permanently ceded to Great Britain.

Under a supplemental treaty signed a year later, in 1843, a fixed, uniform system of low tariffs, averaging just 5 percent _ad valorem_, replaced the punitively high import duties traditionally imposed on British goods by Chinese customs officials. Adding insult to injury, British citizens were now granted extraterritorial privileges while residing in Chinese ports. This meant that Brits were exempt from prosecution under Chinese laws. And finally, Great Britain was granted “Most-Favored Nation” status, which meant that henceforth China would be legally obligated to extend to Britain any and all privileges or concessions that might subsequently be granted to other foreign countries.

Having been forced to concede huge chunks of Chinese state sovereignty to the bellicose British, the new chief Chinese “barbarian handler,” Viceroy Qiying, adopted a policy of appeasement to deal with the British military commander. Defending his approach against hard-line criticism, Qiying argued that he was flattering the barbarians precisely in order to coax them into lowering their guard, and, ultimately, submitting to Chinese authority.

In the event, Qiying’s soft tactics failed to produce any noticeable change in the foreigners’ behavior, as Western political and military encroachments continued to increase. Having failed to manage the barbarians effectively, Qiying was ousted within a year by a group of xenophobic imperial war-hawks, who began to encourage all patriotic Chinese in the treaty ports to stand up to the perfidious “foreign devils.” Stirred to action by patriotic rhetoric, crowds of angry Chinese launched a series of vitriolic attacks against foreigners in Canton and other coastal cities.

In the decade that followed, Western pressures on China increased ceaselessly. Emboldened by the ease with which they were able to extract favorable trade and territorial concessions, foreigners now sought to revise the Treaty of Nanking, to allow them even wider commercial and diplomatic privileges within China. The new demands – which were a product of joint British, French and American collaboration—included: the opening of additional ports to foreign commerce; the establishment of permanent Western ministries in Beijing; and additional, across-the-board reductions in import tariffs.

As the frequency and intensity of hostile encounters between Chinese and Westerners increased, the situation became more volatile. All that was required was a single spark. That spark came in October 1856, when a detachment of Chinese soldiers seized a private British sailing vessel, the _Arrow_, which lay at anchor in Canton harbor. The _Arrow’s_
captain—ironically, a Chinese national-- was charged with engaging in coastal piracy. British officials rejected the accusation and demanded a formal apology, along with full financial compensation. When their demands were rejected, the British commenced a naval bombardment of Canton’s coastal defenses. The residents of Canton retaliated, burning down several foreign factories. The second Opium War had begun.

Unlike the war of 1839-1842, which was exclusively a British affair, the second Opium War involved joint Franco-British military action. In addition, both America and Russia, while not involved in the actual fighting, declared their solidarity with the Europeans, justifying it on the grounds of the need to defend Western civilization. As the American envoy William Reed put it in 1857,

“The powers of Western civilization must insist on what they know to be their rights, and give up the dream of dealing with China as a power to which any ordinary rules apply.” (John A. Harrison, China Since 1800, p. 27).

In December 1857 a joint Anglo-French force seized Canton. They also captured the local imperial Viceroy, carting him off to India in chains. Once they had secured control of Canton, the Europeans sent a note to Beijing, demanding revision of the existing treaties. When their note was returned with a dilatory request for a cooling off period, a joint Franco-British naval force sailed north. In a near-replay of Sir Henry Pottinger’s northern expedition of 1841, in May of 1858 the Europeans laid deadly siege to the key Chinese forts at Dagu, guarding the entrance to the strategic northeast Chinese city of Tianjin. Belatedly, Beijing now agreed to negotiate. (photo of Chinese casualties at Dagu forts, in Burton Beer)

In the late spring of 1858 the victorious French and British, with the Americans and Russians as their “silent partners,” drafted a new treaty calling for the opening of ten additional Chinese ports to Western commerce (including the island of Taiwan as well as the major Yangzi River port cities of Nanjing and Hankow. Additional provisions included permission for nationals of the four countries to reside permanently in Beijing, and the right of foreign warships to enter any port where Western nationals were conducting business. Indemnities totaling $8.3 million were to be paid to the British and French; Western missionaries were to be permitted to travel—and proselytize freely—anywhere in China. And in a final display of Western arrogance, the sale of opium was henceforth to be legalized in China.

But Manchu court officials once again balked at accepting such a humiliating document; and they categorically rejected Britain’s insistence on signing the treaty in Beijing’s Forbidden City— an act which would have set a precedent for foreigners to freely enter the Chinese imperial capital.
A stalemate ensued, which was finally broken in the summer of 1860, when a joint British-French expeditionary force, consisting of 41 warships, 143 transport ships, and 18,000 troops, sailed northward from Canton. Their first objective was to neutralize the Chinese forts at Dagu, which they accomplished with dispatch. Once Dagu’s guns were spiked, the expeditionary force sailed upriver to Tianjin, where the troops disembarked and proceeded to fight their way to the imperial capital of Beijing, 90 miles to the northwest. In a major show of force, the Franco-British army entered the capital city and proceeded to sack the Imperial Summer Palace at Yuanming Yuan, burning to the ground its magnificent constellation of 200 ornate palaces, pavilions, courtyards and gardens. (show photos of devastation at Summer Palace).

The massively destructive act of laying waste to the Summer Palace remains today as a major symbol of the viciousness of Western aggression against China. Although Yuanming Yuan remained undisturbed and in ruins for the next 120 years, over the past decade or more it has been meticulously restored to its original specifications as a major tourist attraction. But one section of the Old Summer Palace remains unreconstructed. According to a placard erected on the site by the state committee in charge of restoration, a group of European-style palaces in Yuanming Yuan will remain in a state of ruin, as “irrefutable evidence of imperialist powers destroying human civilizations.” The government’s stated intent in preserving the dilapidated remains stated was to “encourage the Chinese people to work hard to make the nation strong.” (show my photo of placard)

As a matter of historical interest, the sacking of the Summer Palace in 1860 was carried out on the orders of the chief British minister at the time, the Eighth Earl of Elgin—son of the notorious Seventh Earl, who is best known for having looted the ancient Elgin Marbles from Greece early in the 19th Century. (Quite a family, those Elgins!)

Soon after the sacking of the Summer Palace, the Manchus signed the treaty they had rejected as too humiliating two years earlier. Enacted in Beijing, in October of 1860, its terms were essentially the same as before, with two significant additions: the British and French now increased their demand for monetary compensation from 6 million taels of silver to 16 million (worth $22 million); and Britain now wrested the Kowloon Peninsula away from China, incorporating it into the newly prospering Crown Colony of Hong Kong.

With the conclusion of the Treaty of Beijing, some 1200 years of Chinese imperial supremacy effectively came to an end. China was now a humbled and bleeding giant. Although its rulers struggled in vain to maintain a semblance of their former pride and majesty, a weakened Chinese state provided a tempting target--for foreign predators and domestic rebels alike. In the next lecture, we shall see how rising peasant unrest in China’s rural hinterland further contributed to the fatal weakening of the Manchu dynasty.
Lecture 4: Rural Emiseration and Peasant Rebellion (1842-1860)

In imperial China, the rural population lived in clustered villages, each of which had its own distinctive local customs, festivals, deities and temples. Clans—made up of multi-generational, extended family units based on common ancestral lineage—were the social cement that bound rural inhabitants into a cohesive communities. In ancient times there were approximately 100 to 150 distinctive Chinese lineages, each with its own family surname—with names like Wang, Li, Chen, and Zhang being the most common Chinese equivalents of our own Smith, Johnson, Jones and Williams. And right down to the present day, whenever Chinese refer to “ordinary people,” the term they use—“laobaixing”-- literally means “old hundred-names.”

(By this time in the course, most of you will be struggling with the pronunciation of Chinese words and names. This is indeed tricky business, and your frustration in no way reflects any personal inadequacies. Chinese is a notoriously difficult language-- both to pronounce and to render into romanized spelling. To assist in this task, we have included with your course materials a written guide to basic pronunciation, along with a glossary of Chinese names and terms.)

Despite the pervasive Confucian norms of patriarchal authority and reciprocal rights and obligations, social relations were not always peaceful and harmonious within traditional village communities. For one thing, within a single village there might be two, three or even more lineages living in close proximity; and it was not uncommon for disputes to break out among them-- over such things as property lines, water rights, tax obligations, and the like. Moreover, there were also social class distinctions—both between and within lineage groups. The primary measure of socio-economic status in imperial China was land ownership, which was highly uneven in distribution. In some parts of China it was not uncommon for as much as 70 or 80% of all land in a village to be owned by a handful of landlord families, who in turn might either hire laborers to work the land or rent out small parcels to tenant farmers—who were often their own kinsmen. Notwithstanding the existence of blood ties between landlords and tenants, land rents commonly exceeded half the family’s annual harvest, and were often supplemented by a series of customary fees and corvee obligations.

Peasants were thus economically dependent upon members of the landlord-gentry class, who were called (not for nothing) “dizhu”—or “masters of the land.” Even those peasants who were otherwise self-sufficient, and who normally earned a sustainable livelihood from farming their own land, were often dependent upon the landlords—as dispute mediators, as money-lenders, and as tax intermediaries and “middlemen” in their relations with district administrators.

For over 1,000 years, rural administrative authority was delegated by the imperial court to appointed district magistrates, who were recruited from the ranks of degree-holding bureaucrats-in-waiting. Insofar as district magistrates were the sole formal agents of imperial authority within within their jurisdictions, they were “little emperors” in their
own right. Within each district, which generally encompassed several hundred villages, the power of the magistrate was absolute and uncheck. As a well-known proverb put it, “the ruling elite is like the wind, the little people like the grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends” (Lun Yu, XII:19)

To help administer the functions of local government – tax collection, law enforcement, the observance of ancestral rituals, record-keeping, water management, labor and military conscription, and so forth— each magistrate was entitled to bring with him from his home district, at the state’s expense, up to eight or ten lesser degree-holding scholars to serve as secretaries and financial advisors. Ten or more additional district functionaries—mainly clerks, scribes and notaries—were paid out of the magistrate’s own funds.

In addition to these formal agents of district administration, up to several hundred other underlings were informally retained by the magistrate in each district, without official pay or title; these latter underlings—including gatekeepers, attendants, runners, jailers and watchmen—were expected to earn their keep through side payments from their unofficial clients. Such payments, called “cumshaw” (or “thank-you money,” from the original Chinese term ganxie, meaning “many thanks”), were collected for a variety of services performed for village residents—the most important of which, in many instances, was to intervene with district officials on behalf of local residents (or, alternatively, to shield local residents from scrutiny by district officials). Because more than 90% of peasants were illiterate, the magistrate’s underlings were often paid to read out official notices and documents, and to write petitions, appeals, and tax protests on behalf of village residents. Because they earned a good deal of their income from such quasi-legal representations on behalf of illiterate peasants, they were often known as “litigation tricksters.”

Their place of business—the district headquarters, or Yamen—was often a beehive of activity, much of it only marginally legal or legitimate in nature. For most district residents, most of the time, the less they had to do with local officials, the better they liked it.

Because there was no administrative transparency or political accountability whatever at or below the district level, villagers were readily vulnerable to financial predation and physical intimidation by a magistrate’s unscrupulous underlings. In such situations, their only recourse, if petitioning the magistrate failed, was rebellion.

Because a magistrate would be most likely to receive a promotion if his district was peaceful and its residents voluntarily complied with their tax and corvee obligations, it was in the magistrate’s self-interest to see that the district’s infrastructure, including its water works, roads and public granaries, were maintained in good condition; that public safety was ensured; that exploitation of the peasantry was kept at tolerable levels; and that peasant rebelliousness was consequently minimized. Indeed, fear of peasant rebellion was a prime motivation for good governance at the district level as well as a prime deterrent to egregious predation by the magistrate’s underlings.
It was a precarious political equilibrium, to be sure; but in “normal” times—defined by relatively favorable weather, relatively stable crop yields, relatively effective tax collection and relatively minimal social outlawry—it was an equilibrium that could be sustained by an enlightened, self-interested district magistrate.

Indeed, it was precisely to bolster this “normal,” if precarious local equilibrium that the imperial ideology of the neo-Confucian “social compact” was vigorously employed by imperial scholar-officials to define the relationship between district magistrates and ordinary villagers. In the original Confucian social compact, the emperor was obligated to provide benevolent governance to “all under heaven” (tianxia) in exchange for the unconditional fealty of his subjects. By the time of the Song dynasty, this same set of reciprocal obligations had been extended downward, to district magistrates and their constituent peasant populations.

Unhappily for the peace and tranquility of district magistrates, however, the “normal” equilibrium in rural areas was subject to a variety of imbalances and disturbances, both natural and man-made. These included, among other things, catastrophic natural disasters, demographic instability, a rise in predatory behavior by landlords, money-lenders or the magistrate’s local agents, and the district government’s neglect of waterworks and public granaries. The resulting shocks to rural social and political stability could be quite sudden, sharp and occasionally devastating.

A combination of these destabilizing conditions, compounded by the effects of Western commercial penetration in the first half of the 19th Century, rendered China increasingly vulnerable to rural unrest. As Western powers inflicted humiliation after humiliation upon the once-proud bearers of China’s imperial tradition, there were rumblings of disturbance deep in the rural interior. After years of grumbling discontent, farmers in many provinces, driven deeper into debt by the progressive devaluation of copper coins relative to silver specie, and unable to pay their taxes, stood at the brink of revolt. Beset by worsening fiscal woes, and discredited by their failure effectively to put an end to Western bullying, the Manchus began to lose their grip on the countryside.

Rebellion was sparked by a series of natural disasters that began in the early 1850s. Among the worst of these was massive flooding of the Yellow River, which caused the collapse of dykes along hundreds of miles of the river’s densely populated middle reaches. The Manchu government was slow to react, and when it did react, its flood relief efforts were meager and inadequate. Consequently, the government was widely blamed for the ensuing lost off life—and for the deepening emiseration of the countryside.

A peasant rebellion followed. Lasting 15 years, the Nian Rebellion at its height engulfed parts of sixteen Chinese provinces. The rebels, whose actions were neither centrally directed nor effectively coordinated, launched frequent raids on well-to-do merchants; they sacked the houses of rich landlords, executed local gentry and district officers, and opened-up the prison gates. In the tradition of peasant brigands everywhere, they distributed confiscated goods to the poor, inscribing on their banners the words, “Kill the
officials, kill the rich, spare the poor” (Jean Chesneaux, Peasant Revolts in China, 1840-1949, p.33). (show painting of Nian Rebellion)

Although the Nian rebels employed guerilla tactics and a code of virtuous conduct that in some ways foreshadowed Mao Zedong’s strategy of “people’s war” and the PLA’s famous “three-eight work style” of the 1930s and 40s (about which more will be said later), in the end their poorly-organized, rag-tag peasant armies were unable to overcome the superior forces and firepower of the imperial armed forces. Still, the very magnitude and duration of the Nian Rebellion, and the enormous cost of suppressing it, took a major toll upon an already teetering Manchu Empire.

But the most serious internal threat to Manchu rule in the mid-19th Century came not from the Nian rebels, but from the Taipings. The Taiping Rebellion had its origins in the progressive impoverishment of common people –the “laobaixing”--in Southeast China, principally Guangdong and Guangxi. In these provinces, which constituted Canton’s rural hinterland, the effects of the worsening general fiscal and agrarian crises began to converge, in the late 1840s, with a mounting unemployment crisis. Most severely affected by this latter crisis were members of Canton’s new lumpenproletariat, consisting of hundreds of thousands of coolies, boatmen and porters--whose jobs were threatened when Canton lost its traditional status as China’s exclusive port of entry for foreign commerce.

The leader of the Taipings was a Guangdong native named Hong Xiuquan. Son of a Hakka farming family near Canton, Hong was an educated young man who four times failed the imperial civil service examinations. After his fourth failure, in 1837, he experienced a nervous breakdown, in the course of which he had a series of visions in which, among other things, an old woman appeared, telling him that he was descended directly from God. He emerged from his delirium obsessed with the belief that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ. (show photo/picture of Hong Xiuquan)

Hong had first encountered Protestant missionaries in Canton during his youth; and he was familiar with Christian teachings. Now driven by his new obsession, he set out to create his own church, with an eclectic blend of Judeo-Christian doctrine that combined elements of old and new testament gospel, seasoned with a generous helping of native Chinese mysticism. In the mid-1840s he began to preach his new faith in the remote mountains of Guangxi province.

Where other disillusioned scholars dreamed of restoring the glory of the Ming dynasty, the charismatic Hong Xiuquan aspired to found a dynasty of his own-- which he did, in 1851, naming it “Taiping Tianguo”: the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. His followers were drawn from the downtrodden masses of the Southeast. With rural emiseration growing steadily, he welcomed into his “flock” increasing numbers of discontented, landless peasants, coolies, miners, demobilized soldiers, and other members of China’s burgeoning underclass.

From the outset the Taiping rebellion was targeted at the rich and powerful-- landlords, gentry and imperial officials. When the rebels left their Guangxi mountain base area and
advanced northward toward the Yangzi valley, proselytizing as they went, they attracted
a large following among poor, disaffected peasants. Wearing their hair long and
unbraided in defiance of the mandatory Manchu style of a single, long pigtail, they
vented their wrath against the wealthy and influential. Rich merchants and landlords were
put to death; tax registers, land deeds and loan records were burned, and government
offices were sacked.

Marching northward through the south-central provinces of Hunan and Hupei, and thence
down the Yangzi River, Hong Xiuquan established his “Heavenly Capital” in Nanjing in
1853. (show map of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom) En route to Nanjing, Hong’s armies
looted the key Yangzi River port of Wuhan, where they seized 10,000 vessels, a million
taels of silver, and a huge supply of grain and provisions. By this time, his armed forces
numbered half a million men, and he effectively controlled a vast land area in Central
China that included most of Jiangxi, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Anhui provinces, as well as
parts of Hunan, Hubei and Jiangsu.

Perhaps anticipating the revolutionary reforms that would take place under Mao
Zedong’s aegis some 100 years later, one of Hong Xiuquan’s first official decrees as self-
declared Emperor was the abolition of private land ownership; and he mandated the
destruction of traditional Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist idols. Ancestor worship was
outlawed, and men and women were decreed to be equal. Reportedly, up to 100,000
women served in the Taiping’s military forces.

After setting up his headquarters in Nanjing, Hong sent an army northward toward
Beijing. By 1854 Hong’s armies had advanced as far as the outskirts of Tianjin, less than
a hundred miles from imperial capital. With the Manchu government increasingly in
disarray due to the rising pressure of Western forces and the declining morale of the
imperial court, for a time it appeared that the Taipings might actually take control of all
of China.

But Tianjin was as far as the Taiping forces ever got. Overconfident, logistically
overextended, and plagued by severe winter weather, they began to falter. In 1855 the
expedition’s two top military commanders were captured and publicly executed by
Manchu troops.

By 1856, internal dissention had broken out among Hong’s allied military commanders in
Nanjing. One such chieftain harbored ambitions to replace Hong as emperor. In an effort
to undermine Hong’s claim to be the brother of Jesus Christ, he mimicked Hong’s tactic
of falling into trances to “prove” that he enjoyed God’s favor. The rebellious chieftain
succeeded in recruiting thousands of followers, who honored him as the “Lord of Ten
Thousand Years.”

In the internecine struggles that ensued, the spirit and vigor of the Taiping movement
were gradually sapped. Hong himself, though victorious over his ambitious rival, began
indulging in dissolute behavior to distract him from his growing troubles. As morale
deteriorated, the government began to drift, rudderless. By 1860, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom had run its course.

In the end, the Taiping’s defeat was sealed by a particularly impressive imperial military officer by the name of Zeng Guofan. Zeng, who commanded the emperor’s Hunan army, was put in charge of operations against the Taipings in the spring of 1860—at almost the same time the British and French were preparing to sack the Summer Palace in Beijing. With a loyal, well-trained fighting force of 120,000 troops, Zeng and his chief lieutenant, Li Hongzhang, attacked the Taipings at Shanghai and Suzhou, down river from Nanjing. Scoring impressive victories, they now controlling most of Jiangsu province. Next they imposed an ever-tightening blockade around Nanjing itself, cutting off Hong Xiuquan’s sources of supply. With food and provisions running precariously low, Hong contemplated, and rejected out of hand, the prospect of surrendering to imperial forces. (show photos of Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang)

Toward the end of their campaign against the Taipings, Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang received military assistance from an unexpected quarter—the Western powers. Initially sympathetic toward Hong Xiuquan because of his Christianity and his promise of expanded foreign trade, the British, French and Americans soon found the Taipings, with their pretensions to universal authority and their puritanical opposition to the the importation and use of opium, not to their liking.

Once the Western powers had tamed Manchu resistance by forcing upon them the particularly egregious treaties of 1860, there was little reason for the foreigners to further seek the overthrow of the dynasty. On the contrary, they now began to realize that their ability to extract further concessions from the wounded Manchus depended largely on the continued survival of the dynasty.

To assist the imperial forces of Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang defeat the Taipings, an American “soldier of fortune” named Frederick Townsend Ward was hired by a wealthy Chinese banker to recruit foreign mercenaries into a new military unit. (show photo of Frederick T. Ward). With 100 demobilized European officers and 200 Filipino seamen comprising the mainstay of his new unit, Ward supervised the training of 4,000 Chinese recruits, drilling them in European military procedure and supplying them with Western rifles. In 1861 the emperor bestowed on Ward’s troops the title of “Ever-Victorious Army.” With that, the foreign mercenary-led forces joined the battle against the Taipings. Ward’s army won a number of battles in the lower Yangzi River region, until he was fatally wounded at the battle of Cixi in September 1862. Shortly thereafter, a British officer, the notorious Charles G. Gorden, assumed command of the “Ever-Victorious Army.” Leading his troops into battle with a walking stick, Gordon refused to allow his soldiers to loot captured cities, as was the Manchu custom. When a group of mercenaries mutinied, Gordon shot dead one of the ringleaders and threatened shoot one additional mutineer every hour until the mutiny ended. It was over inside of an hour. For his service to the Manchu empire in helping to secure the final defeat of the Taipings, Gordon was promoted by the Emperor to one of the highest ranks in the Chinese imperial army, and
was decorated with the Yellow Jacket of the Mandarinate. He also earned the sobriquet, “Chinese” Gordon. (show picture of Gorden in Chinese jacket.)

For their part, generals Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang were also rewarded for their role in defeating the Taipings with the grant of high imperial titles. Later, the two men would distinguish themselves as among the most able and respected Chinese scholar-statesmen of the late 19th Century. Together, they would play a vital role in fashioning the Manchu Dynasty’s strategic response to the challenge of Western domination, which became known as the “Self Strengthening” Movement.

As for Hong Xiuquan, after ruling out the possibility of surrender to his enemies, he committed suicide in his Nanjing capital on June 1, 1864, at the age of 52. His empire collapsed shortly thereafter, bringing to an end the remarkable, if ultimately short-lived “Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.”

With the Manchu regime having absorbed a series of devastating internal and external shocks, it is perhaps surprising that the Dynasty didn’t collapse altogether after 1860. But collapse it did not. With the Taipings now decisively defeated, and Western troops no longer breathing down the necks of the Manchu oligarchs in Beijing, the dynasty enjoyed something of a respite. Indeed, the decade and a half between 1862 and 1875 witnessed a substantial restoration of imperial functioning, under the reform-oriented rule of the boy-emperor Tongzhi.
Lecture 5: The “Self-Strengthening” Movement (1860-1890)

With the Manchus having narrowly averted dynastic collapse, an effort to revive and revitalize the tottering empire was launched in the early 1860s. Called the “Tongzhi Restoration,” after the young emperor Tongzhi who ascended the throne in 1862, the reform drive, also known as the “Self-Strengthening” movement, was spearheaded by Prince Gong, an arrogant and highly ambitious senior member of the royal family. Prince Gong had played a key role in negotiating the withdrawal of French and British forces from Beijing in 1860; and though he was widely disliked within the imperial court, he enjoying the trust of the boy-emperor Tongzhi. With the emperor’s backing, he initiated a series of significant reforms in domestic and foreign affairs. (show photo of Prince Gong, e.g., from J. Spence, The Search for Modern China, p. 228, overleaf).

In an effort to treat the underlying causes of rural unrest, which were hardly alleviated by the defeat of the Taipings, substantial sums of money were now appropriated to repair damaged water works; devastated farmlands were reclaimed and rehabilitated; and agricultural taxes were reduced or even, in some cases, forgiven altogether. To deal with growing popular resentment against corrupt imperial officials, a new code of conduct was introduced for civil servants, stressing honesty, personal austerity and humble demeanor. And to aid in the recruitment of men of practical talent into the imperial bureaucracy, civil service examinations were revamped to lay greater stress on problem-solving abilities rather than classical Confucian moral training.

In foreign affairs, Prince Gong recognized the importance of modernizing his country’s dealings with the outside world. No longer assuming the traditional airs of Middle Kingdom supremacy and invincibility, Gong was well aware of the superiority of Western military technology. To deal with this “weapons gap” he adopted a policy of sending the “best and brightest” of China’s young scholar-officials abroad, to learn the secrets of Western military technology. (show photo of Western officer instructing Chinese gun crew, in Beers, China in Old Photographs, p. 146)

Along with Prince Gong, two other imperial officials who were prominent in the movement to learn Western technologies of warfare were (our old friends) Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang, military heroes of the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion.

Zeng Guofan, was the more senior and more philosophical of the two leaders of the “self-strengthening” movement. He believed that Western military technology could be comfortably and compatibly grafted onto China’s traditional Confucian values and institutions to create a powerful, invincible state. Zeng’s disciples called his strategy “using the barbarians to control the barbarians”—or “beating them at their own game.” The strategy was outlined in a series of letters Zeng wrote to his former student, Li Hongzhang:

If we wish to find a method of self-strengthening, we should … regard learning to make explosive shells and steamships and other instruments as the work of first importance. If only we could possess all [the
Westerners’ superior techniques, then we would have the means to return their favors when they are obedient, and we would also have the means to avenge our grievances when they are disloyal.

We should carefully watch and learn their superior techniques and also observe their shortcomings…. If they abandon good relations and break their covenant, we should then have the weapons to oppose them. (Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, pp.62-63)

Like his mentor, Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang believed in the superiority of China’s traditional civilization and culture. In his view, the only thing China needed in order to regain its past glory was modern weapons. Li believed that the principal reason for this weapons gap lay in the traditional habits of scholarly sloth and self-indulgence that prevailed within the imperial Mandarinate. Noting that Western scholars and officials “use mathematics for reference and exert their energy in deep thinking to make daily increases and alterations” in their weapons, he contrasted this Western ethos of constant innovation with the stagnant self-satisfaction of China’s traditional scholars, who sit around (as he put it) “indulging in the inveterate habit of remembering [poetic] stanzas and sentences and practicing fine model calligraphy” (Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, pp. 70-71.)

Entrusted by the emperor to supervise the manufacture of European-style weapons, Li Hongzhang established China’s first modern arsenals at Ningbo, Foochow, and Jiangnan. By the mid-1870s these arsenals were producing thousands of small arms generally comparable in quality to the breach-loading Remington rifles favored by the Europeans.

An ambitious naval shipbuilding program was also launched under Li Hongzhang’s direction. But this program was beset by a series of major obstacles --including a lack of indigenous raw materials and technical talent, as well as rampant corruption in the awarding of construction contracts and the hiring of overpaid and incompetent foreign advisors. Consequently, naval construction during the Tongzhi Restoration proved to be slow, costly, and inefficient.

Prior to the Tongzhi Restoration, China’s Manchu rulers had never recognized other countries as diplomatic equals, but only as tributary or vassal states. Consequently, they never felt the need to have a government department or office specifically devoted to foreign affairs. The folly of this approach in dealing with the Western powers had been clearly shown in the diplomatic humiliations suffered by the Manchus after the Opium Wars.

To remedy this weakness, Prince Gong established a new imperial office, the Zongli Yamen (or Office for General Management) to deal with foreign affairs. To prepare Chinese scholars and officials to interact more effectively with foreigners, Kong promoted the establishment of a new foreign language institute, with instruction offered, for the first time, in major European languages. Also for the first time, a few modern schools were introduced, with classes offered in mathematics, astronomy, physics,
chemistry, and international law. Technologies of communication and transportation were also upgraded with the introduction of the first railroads and modern telegraphy facilities.

In these and other respects, the Tongzhi Restoration planted the seeds of a genuine Chinese renaissance. Unhappily for China, however, not everyone in the court of the young Tongzhi emperor was impressed with Prince Gong’s policies or with the emulation of Western techniques favored by Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang. Consequently, an influential group of arch-conservative Manchu court officials mounted a campaign of resistance and sabotage against the “Self-Strengthening” movement.

One key member of this group, the Imperial Grand Secretary Wo-ren, was an ardent defender of “orthodox” Confucian moral training, and he lashed out sharply against the new thinking. In a famous 1867 broadside directed against the reformers’ efforts to emulate foreign science and technology. Wo-ren argued:

“According to the viewpoint of your slave, astronomy and mathematics are of very little use. If these subjects are going to be taught by Westerners as regular studies, the damage will be great…. Your slave has learned that the way to establish a nation is to lay emphasis on propriety and righteousness, not on power and plotting. The fundamental effort lies in the minds of people, not in techniques…. From ancient down to modern times, your slave has never heard of anyone who could use mathematics to raise the nation from a state of decline or to strengthen it in time of weakness…. “(Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, p. 76.)

Prince Gong’s response to Wo-ren’s blind opposition to everything new was both blunt and direct. Addressing the question of defending China against the onslaught of the West, the prince wrote,

“[Wo-ren] considers our actions a hindrance. But if he really has a marvelous plan to control foreign countries…. [we] should certainly follow [his] footsteps…. [But] if he has no plan other than to use loyalty and sincerity as armor, and propriety and righteousness as a shield,… and if he says that [lofty] phrases are [sufficient] to accomplish diplomatic negotiations and thereby control …our enemies, then [we] are indeed skeptical and cannot presume to believe it.”

(Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, pp.76-79.)

Although Wo-ren was quite outspoken in his opposition to reform, the chief architect of internal court resistance to Prince Gong’s proposals was not Wo-ren, but rather the more devious and insidious figure of the Tongzhi emperor’s own mother, the supremely ambitious and highly formidable Dowager Empress, Cixi. As regent to the child emperor, Cixi enjoyed enormous power, much of it wielded from behind a famous screen positioned to one side of the imperial throne, from which she would instruct the young emperor on his responses. (show photo of Cixi, ca. 1880)
Cixi had not always been a hard-line reactionary; indeed it was she who, in her role as imperial regent, defied a longstanding Manchu tradition by placing a Han Chinese official—Zeng Guofan—in command of the army that ultimately defeated the Taipings. But Cixi was nothing if not supremely self-aggrandizing; and she eventually came to realize that if the reformers were successful in imitating Western ideas and innovations, her own power and influence would be sharply curtailed.

Cixi was a true force of nature; and her behavior was decidedly erratic. At one point she approved the purchase of seven British warships—but when the ships arrived, staffed with a full compliment of several hundred uniformed sailors under British command, she protested vigorously. When negotiations failed to settle the question of the legal status and jurisdiction of the British sailors, she ordered the ships returned to England.

On another occasion, after Li Hongzhang had recommended the building of a railway line to connect Beijing with other Chinese cities, Cixi resisted its construction under the pretext that trains were excessively loud, and would “disturb the tombs of the emperors.” When construction went ahead anyway, Cixi reportedly demanded that the railroad cars be pulled by horse-drawn carts rather than steam engines, to ensure the undisturbed slumber of her departed ancestors. (Prof. Sui Lizhuang, CCTV Lecture Series on Cixi, Episode 9).

Perhaps Cixi’s most infamous foible, however, was her alleged act of embezzling thirty million silver taels that had been set aside by the government to finance naval construction. With the aid of a retinue of loyal court eunuchs, in the late 1880s she reportedly diverted these construction funds, using them instead to rebuild the Imperial Summer Palace, which had been destroyed during the Second Opium War. As part of this restoration project, she commissioned the construction of an elaborately hand-carved, double-decked marble pleasure boat. Far too heavy to ever set sail, Cixi’s marble boat stands today, as it has for the past 115 years, permanently moored in the muddy shallows of Kunming Lake, northwest of Beijing, where it remains a painful reminder-- both of Cixi’s corrupt vanity, and of the costly failure of the self-strengtheners’ efforts to modernize the country’s defenses. (show photo of Cixi’s marble boat, e.g., in Burton Beers, China in Old Photographs, p.144). Because of Cixi’s misuse of imperial funds, no new naval warships were put into service after the late 1880s. Consequently, the Chinese navy was soundly defeated by a superior Japanese fleet in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. Was Cixi personally and singly responsible for this humiliating defeat? Probably not. But her extreme vanity and self-interestedness certainly contributed.

For all the self-strengtheners’ valiant and well-intended efforts to raise China’s military profile and modernize its antiquated infrastructure, they ultimately failed to make the country “rich and strong.” There were three key reasons for this failure: The first was their own limited understanding of the requisites of modernity. Interested primarily in acquiring Western military technology in order to repulse Western penetration, they failed to appreciate either the complex upstream and downstream linkages, or the broader institutional and cultural implications of modernization. Even Li Hongzhang-- in many ways the most forward-looking of the self-strengtheners-- had underestimated the
systemic requirements of effective reform. In Li’s view (which was shared by many leading “self-strengtheners” of the day) the ultimate goal of reform was to adopt Western learning merely for its “practical applications”, while carefully preserving Chinese learning as the “foundation” of empire: “Zhongxue weiti, Yangxue weiyong”

The second reason for the Tongzhi restoration’s failure was the machinations of Cixi and her ultra-conservative court minions. When the Tongzhi emperor fell mysteriously ill and died in 1875, at the age of only 18 years, Cixi’s power increased and the reformers found themselves being progressively marginalized. Indeed, many historians believe that Cixi herself played an active role in “assisting” her son’s passing. In any event, with Tongzhi’s death, Prince Gong began to lose influence. Having been officially chastised three times at the initiative of the Dowager Empress, he went into semi-retirement in 1884.

As for Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang, though they were granted elaborate honors and high official positions throughout the 1870s and ’80s, their real power was progressively curtailed by Cixi, who secretly encouraged conservative forces to oppose them.

The third reason for the failure of the “Self-Strengthening” movement was the continued high cost of resisting barbarian incursions. Though the Opium Wars ended in 1860, foreign powers continued to chip away at Manchu sovereignty and Manchu wealth. In 1884, China lost a war with France over territorial rights to Indochina; a decade later the Japanese navy – confronting a weak Chinese defense force totally lacking in modern naval vessels—stripped the Korean peninsula and the island of Taiwan from Manchu dominance. By the end of the century, more than a dozen “unequal treaties” had been forced upon China by foreign powers.

Further weakening the imperial government was the fact that with import tariffs extremely low (and their collection supervised by foreigners), Western countries were free to flood China with cheap machine-made goods, thereby bringing hard times to China’s traditional, labor-intensive textile and clothing industries. In this connection, the idle fantasy of a mid-19th Century British textile mill owner was to prove prophetic. If he could just add one inch to the coattail of every Chinese, he dreamed, “400 million customers could keep the mills of Manchester running forever.” (Robert Marks, The Origin of the Modern World)

Although increasing numbers of Chinese had come to admire Western science, technology, and economic innovation, they also deeply resented Western bullying, and the imperious attitude of Western entitlement and “noblesse oblige” that all too often accompanied it. Such ambivalence lay at the very heart of the alternating emotions of respect and resentment, admiration and anger, love and hate, that characterized China’s 19th-Century response to the West. It was an ambivalence that was to endure for well over a century, flaring up periodically, right down to the present day—a theme we shall have occasion to return to later in this course.
Writing in 1949, Mao Zedong captured the essence of China’s century-long ambivalence toward the West:

“From the time of China’s defeat in the Opium War,” wrote Mao, “progressive Chinese went through untold hardships in their quest for truth from the Western countries. [Many prominent Chinese intellectuals] looked to the West for truth…. Chinese who …sought progress would read any book containing new knowledge from the West. The number of students sent [abroad] was amazing….Every effort was made to learn from the West. In my youth, I too engaged in such studies. Representing the culture of Western… democracy…this was called the “new learning”…..

“But Imperialist aggression shattered the fond dreams of the Chinese about learning from the West. It was very odd—why were the teachers always committing aggression against their pupil? The Chinese learned a good deal from the West, but they could not make it work…. Day by day, conditions in the country worsened, and life was made impossible. Doubts arose, increased and deepened…..” (Mao, “On People’s Democratic Dictatorship”)

What the foreigners didn’t take by force in the 19th Century, they often secured through negotiated leases, concessions and settlements. Between 1860 and 1898, foreigners established territorial enclaves in dozens of Chinese cities, from Harbin, Dalian, and Qingdao in the northeast, to Hainan, Shantou and Beihai in the south. (show map of foreign concessions, ca. 1898)

Capping off this extensive foreign real-estate grab, on July 1, 1898, Britain signed a 99-year lease for several hundred square miles of Chinese territory immediately adjacent to the thriving British Colony of Hong Kong. Known as the New Territories, this valuable piece of South China real estate remained in British hands until a little more than a decade ago. (As a matter of historical interest, it was the approaching expiration date of the 99-year British lease on the New Territories that forced British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in the early 1980s, to enter into negotiations with Deng Xiaoping over the future of Hong Kong. The rest, as they say, is history. With Deng unwilling to renew the British lease—which had long been a painful symbol of China’s 19th Century humiliation—Mrs. Thatcher had little choice but to agree to return the entire Hong Kong Crown Colony to China. Amid great Chinese jubilation, the handover of Hong Kong took place at the stroke of midnight on July 1, 1997—99 years to the minute after the lease first took effect. (show photo of HK handover ceremony) We shall have more to say about Hong Kong’s controversial retrocession later in this course.)

Yet for all the ongoing 19th Century predations of foreigners, for all the failings of the Tongzhi self-strengtheners. and for all the sinister machinations of Cixi and her retinue of reactionary palace eunuchs, the Manchu Dynasty did not collapse—at least not yet. On the contrary, in the waning years of the century, just when it looked like the end might be very close, the teetering empire seemed to get a second wind, momentarily righting itself,
as a new and radical program of socio-economic modernization and political reform was urgently enacted by imperial decree. China’s “last best hope” for salvation from within was now at hand.
Lecture 6: The “Hundred Days of Reform” and the Boxer Rebellion (1890-1900)

The ultimate failure of the Tongzhi Restoration and self-strengthening movement had proved particularly frustrating to one group of aspiring reformers. Initially trained in the neo-Confucian tradition of moral philosophy and tributary statecraft, these talented young scholars had become progressively more disillusioned by China’s failure to raise itself out of the mire of imperial ineptitude and European domination. Some had traveled to the West under Prince Gong’s program of sending students abroad. Others had remained in China, where they gained a growing appreciation for the internal sources of Chinese weakness. By the early 1890s, these two groups of reformers had converged to initiate a lobbying campaign in support of more fundamental change.

Leading figures in this coalition of liberal intellectuals included Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong and Wang Kangnian. Though each emphasized different aspects of China’s imperial stagnation, all agreed that mere institutional tinkering and fine-tuning would not do: a fundamental overhaul was needed. Here is Liang Qichao’s assessment, written in 1896:

….Those who insist that there is no need for reform say, “let us follow the ancients, follow the ancients.” They coldly sit and watch everything being laid waste by following tradition, and there is no concern in their hearts….

Now, here is a big mansion which has lasted a thousand years. The tiles and bricks are decayed and the beams and rafters are broken. It is still a magnificently big thing, but when wind and rain suddenly come up, its fall is foredoomed. Yet the people in the house are still happily playing or soundly sleeping and as indifferent as if they have seen or heard nothing. Even [the few] who have noted the danger know only how to weep bitterly, folding their arms and waiting for death without thinking of any remedy. Sometimes there are [even] people who try to repair the cracks, seal the leaks, and patch up the ant holes in order to be able to go on living there in peace…in the hope that something better may turn up. These three types of people use their minds differently, but when a hurricane comes they will die together….

For his part, Tan Sitong boldly advocated importing Western institutions, values and culture as China’s only hope for reviving the decaying empire. His admiration for the West was enormous, and was equalled only by his contempt for the superficiality of traditional Chinese scholarship.

In China [he wrote in 1898], during the last several decades, where have we had genuine understanding of foreign culture? When have we had scholars or officials who could discuss them? What [they] mean by foreign matters are things such as steamships, telegraph lines, trains, guns, torpedoes, and machines for weaving and
for metallurgy; that’s all. [They] have never dreamed of or seen the beauty and perfection of Western legal systems and political institutions….All [they] speak of are the branches and foliage of foreign matters, not the roots….

[The] idea of despising our enemies arises because [our officials] think [all foreigners] are still barbarians. This is a common mistake of scholar-officials…and they must get rid of it. …We must first make ourselves respectable before we despise others. Now, there is not a single one of the Chinese people’s sentiments, customs, or political and legal institutions which can be favorably compared with those of the barbarians….

Other leading reform advocates went further still, advocating a complete makeover of China’s governmental system, replacing it with a mixed, Western-style parliamentary system where the people participate in the selection of their leaders. Along these lines, the reform scholar Wang Kangnian wrote:

Chinese who discuss governmental systems speak only in terms of governing the people by a ruler. In the West, however, there are democratic countries… governed jointly by the ruler and the people. Chinese scholars…consider [this] strange. [But] what is so strange about it it?...

In general, when the power of the empire comes from one person, it is weak. When it comes from millions of people, it is strong…. (all quotations above from Teng and Fairbank, China’s Response to the West, pp. 154-163.)

Sitting on Beijing’s Dragon Throne as the 19th century drew to a close was the 27 year-old emperor Guangxu. Increasingly fearful at the prospect of China being dismembered by rapacious foreigners, and intrigued by tales of Western-style economic and administrative revitalization in Meiji Japan and in Russia under Peter the Great, the Guangxu emperor, who was an avid reader, began devouring books about Western institutions.

Noting the emperor’s rising interest in reform, a renowned scholarly advocate of radical Chinese modernization named Kang Youwei, sought to persuade Guangxu to underwrite massive reforms by barraging him with a series of policy recommendations, in the form of written “memorials.” (Today, we would call these memorials “Policy White Papers”).

In his heart of hearts, Kang Youwei was a “utopian socialist.” His ideal world was one in which there would be no separate nations, but a single world government divided into various regions. The central government would be popularly elected. Families and clans would no longer perpetuate themselves over successive generations, and cohabitation between men and women would be limited to one year’s duration. All children would be raised in public nurseries, and would
receive public education from kindergarten through middle school. There would be public hospitals for the sick and retirement homes for the aged. Public dormitories and dining halls would be made available to all classes and strata according to their working incomes.

Although this was Kang Youwei’s ultimate vision for the future of mankind, he did not try to impose his utopian views upon the Guangxu emperor. Instead, his written memorials to the emperor were considerably more modest and down to earth. After sending five such memorials to the emperor, Kang Youwei was finally granted that rarest of imperial privileges—a private audience with Guangxu. Though conservative court officials, led by the ever-vigilant Dowager Cixi, sought to derail the meeting, Guangxu remained steadfast, and Kang Youwei got his audience in late January of 1898. Their conversation went like this: (show picture of Kang’s meeting with Guangxu)

Guangxu: “Today it is really imperative that we reform.”
Kang: “…It’s not because in recent years we haven’t talked about reform…but it was only a slight reform….we change the first thing and do not change the second, and then we confuse everything so as to incur failure…. The prerequisites of reform are that all the laws and the political and social systems be changed and decided anew…."
Guangxu (Casting a sidelong glance at the screen next to him): “What can I do with so much hindrance?”
Kang: “…Today most of the high ministers are very old and conservative, and they do not understand matters concerning foreign countries. If Your Majesty wishes to rely on them for reform it will be like climbing a tree to search for fish….If Your Majesty wishes reform, the only thing to do is to promote and make use of lower officials…and employ them without following tradition…. The trouble today lies in the non-cultivation of the people’s wisdom, and the cause…lies in the civil service examinations based on the eight-legged essay…”
Guangxu: “It is so. Westerners are all pursuing useful studies, while we Chinese pursue useless studies.”
Kang: “Since Your Majesty is already aware of the harm of the eight-legged essay, could we abolish it?”
Guangxu: “We could… [Now] you should withdraw and take a little rest. If you have something more to say you may prepare memorials…in detail and send them here.” (Teng and Fairbank, pp. 177-179)

This remarkable conversation, lasting altogether five hours, was the longest imperial audience in recorded history. After the meeting, Kang Youwei and his associates prepared a detailed list of reform proposals. The emperor received them, and on June 11, 1898, the reforms commenced. Over the next three-and-a-half months, more than forty imperial edicts were issued in rapid succession.
The new decrees encompassed a sweeping set of innovations in such areas as higher education, civil service examinations, medical training, and the management of foreign affairs. Specific mandates included the establishment of China’s first imperial institution of higher learning—Peking University— and the abolition of the eight-legged essay in imperial examinations. Bureaucratic offices and procedures were simplified; non-competitively awarded positions, or sinecures, were abolished; legal codes were improved and rendered comprehensible; and the country’s first official newspaper was commissioned. In economic affairs, agricultural and industrial commercialization were encouraged; technological innovation was promoted; foreign trade was expanded; and a formal process of governmental budgeting was introduced. In all areas of imperial policy, suggestions were thenceforth to be solicited from private citizens with the stipulation that these should be forwarded by government offices on the same day as received.

In breadth and depth, the Guangxu emperor’s “100 days of reform” were breathtaking indeed. But the proposed reforms did not go unopposed. Mobilizing the forces of reaction within the imperial court, the ever-vigilant Cixi pulled out all the stops in her effort to abort Guangxu’s program. (show photo of Cixi from Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, pp.18-19)

Though nominally in semi-retirement since 1889, Cixi, now in her 60s, continued to influence the imperial court from behind the scenes. Alarmed by the radicalism of Guangxu’s reforms, and by Kang Youwei’s growing influence over the emperor, she devised a plan to seize power. On September 21, 1898—exactly 103 days after the first reform decree was promulgated— a loyal retinue of Cixi’s ultra-conservative court officials and eunuchs raided the emperor’s palace, seizing all documents pertaining to the reforms. The dowager then announced that Guangxu had fallen suddenly ill, overcome by a mysterious malady that had incapacitated him, making it imperative that she personally assume control of the government. Meanwhile, the emperor was placed under detention and was whisked away to a small island in the Imperial Garden west of Beijing. Cixi’s palace coup was now complete, and the “100 days of Reform” came to a sudden, jarring end.

In the aftermath of Cixi’s coup, progressive reformers were quickly targeted for arrest. A total of 22 scholars were arrested, dismissed from their posts, banished and stripped of all property. Kang Youwei himself, his writings now officially banned, managed to evade arrest, escaping safely to Japan along with his student, Liang Qichao. Tan Sitong, however, decided to remain in Beijing, where he offered to surrender himself to Cixi as a martyr.

With the ascent, once again, of Manchu reactionaries to the very center of imperial power, the regime took on an ever-stronger flavor of atavism, arrogance and anti-foreignism. Hostility toward the foreign barbarians was officially
encouraged, and Western missionaries were accused of committing all manner of abominations, including the boiling and eating of young children.

Xenophobia and nativist superstition now flourished under the reactionary reign of the dowager empress. A series of natural calamities in 1898 and 1899 was conveniently blamed by Cixi’s court on the foreigners’ well-known contempt both for Confucianism and for the rituals of ancestor-worship.

A number of secret societies were active in this period, united only by their hatred of the all-powerful, ever-insidious barbarians. One such secret society, known as Yihe Quan, or the society of “Righteous and Harmonious Fists,” called “Boxers” for short, had been in existence for almost a century.

The Boxers loathed all foreigners, whom they referred to as “hairy men”. Devoted to the martial arts, they believed that their magical charms and incantations rendered them immune to foreign bullets. Boxers shunned the use of rifles, preferring old-fashioned swords, lances, and fists. In the late 1890s, they decreed that all “hairy men” must be exterminated, along with their traitorous Chinese collaborators. (show photo of Boxers with anti-foreign banner)

Originally anti-Manchu in orientation (the Manchus were, after all, a foreign dynasty), the Boxers soon found themselves being courted by Cixi and her followers, who shared the Boxers’ intense antipathy to the “hairy men.” Seeking to co-opt the society of “Harmonious Fists” and thus blunt their anti-Manchu anger, she secretly summoned their leaders to Beijing, where they were invited to teach the art of boxing to Manchu court officials.

The rising tide of anti-foreignism broke into the open in 1899, in a north Chinese village near the seaside city of Qingdao, in Shandong province. Qingdao had recently been occupied by Germany, and the villagers were incensed when a local ancestral temple was appropriated by Catholic missionaries for use as a church. Spurred into action by the Boxers, villagers attacked the church.

In the spring of 1900 the Boxers, now numbering in the tens of thousands, went on a rampage in Tianjin, southeast of Beijing, burning churches and shops that sold foreign goods, and randomly killing Chinese Christians. (show photos from Boxer uprising, e.g., in Moser and Moser, Foreigners within the Gates, pp. 47, 60; also J. Spence, The Search for Modern China, pp. 228 ff.)

On June 13, 1900, a force of over 10,000 Boxers headed for Beijing. En route they brutally assaulted all visible bearers and symbols of Western influence. When they reached Beijing, they first attacked the German legation, killing the German minister. Sensing that a decisive blow was about to be inflicted on the foreigners, Cixi now declared war on the foreigners and ordered her imperial officers to collaborate with the Boxers. Soon all foreign legations in Beijing were
under seige, with the imperial court offering a reward of 50 silver taels for each foreign male captured.

Trapped within the foreign legations, eleven of which were clustered near the Forbidden City, were some 475 Western civilians (including ten foreign ministers of state), along with 450 armed guards, two hundred or more Chinese servants and 2,300 Chinese Christians who had sought refuge from the fanatical Boxers. Facing near-certain annihilation by the Boxers and their Manchu backers, the inhabitants of the foreign legations held out for 55 days. Ultimately they were saved by the insubordination of a reform-minded Manchu military officer named Ronglu, who ordered his troops to withhold firing their most powerful weapons against the foreigners, instead perfunctorily discharging a large number of noisy but unloaded rifles.

To lift the seige, an international force was mobilized in Tianjin. The force, which took a month to assemble, consisted of 18,000 troops, with the largest contingent being Japanese (8,000), followed by Russians (4,800), British (3,000), Americans (2,100), French (800), and a scattering of Austrians (58) and Italians (53). Setting out for Beijing on August 4, the allied forces reached the beleaguered legations ten days later. With their overwhelming firepower and superior numbers, they quickly overwhelmed the attacking Boxers. By the time the dust settled, 231 foreigners had been killed, along with a substantially larger number of Chinese Christians. But Boxer deaths were far more numerous, numbering well over 10,000.

During the six months of the Boxer Uprising, an estimated 18,000 Chinese Catholics were killed along with 182 Protestant missionaries. With the breaking of the seige in Beijing, Western troops throughout North China went on a rampage of their own. (show photos of anti-Boxer reprisals, e.g., from Spence and Chin, Chinese Century, pp. 30-31, and Moser and Moser, Foreigners within the Gate, p.72) German troops were particularly vindictive. Responding to Kaiser Wilhelm’s order to “Make the name German remembered in China for a thousand years so that no Chinaman will ever again dare to even squint at a German,” the Germans savagely plundered, looted, and slaughtered their defeated foes. Altogether, an estimated 50,000 Chinese were executed by foreign troops as suspected Boxers—after the lifting of the seige in Beijing (Eugene Melvin and Penny Sonnenburg, Colonialism: An International, Social, Cultural, and Political Encyclopedia. ISBN 1576073351).

(For those who savor historical factoids, when American troops participated in lifting the seige of Beijing, it marked the very first time that American troops had fought on Chinese soil. For film buffs, the American role in the 1900 liberation of the foreign legations is dramatically –and rather shamelessly–romanticized in the 1963 Hollywood movie, “55 Days in Peking,” starring Charleton Heston). (juxtapose photo of Charleton Heston from film, if available, with actual photo of Western soldiers, in B.Beer, China in Old Photographs, p. 153)
The peace settlement that followed in 1901—known as the Boxer Protocol—was harsh and vindictive. A dozen high court officials who had carried out Cixi’s policy of assisting the Boxers were either executed or ordered to commit suicide. A few had their sentences commuted, while a number of lesser officials were banished to the outer regions of empire in Xinjiang. Commander Ronglu, the man who had helped save the foreign legations by sparing them heavy artillery and rifle fire, escaped allied punishment. He later played an important role as Superintendent of Political Affairs in the waning days of the Manchu empire.

In addition to the harsh punishment meted out to the Boxers and their Manchu instigators, the foreign powers now increased their political and military presence in Beijing, with the establishment of permanent diplomatic missions, which amounted to a kind of shadow “super-government” that existed alongside the deeply wounded Manchu court.

Finally, war reparations totaling 450 million taels of silver—worth approximately US$330 million—were nominally extracted from the Manchu court by the various foreign powers, to be paid out over a period of 40 years. (I use the word “nominally” because, in the first instance, most of the money first had to be loaned to the near-bankrupt imperial government in the form of bonded debt, and also because a substantial portion of that debt was later reduced or cancelled outright by the foreign powers). (Parenthetically, for its part, the United States, which had suffered 53 dead and 253 wounded in the Boxer rebellion, used a substantial portion of its $24 million share of Boxer funds to underwrite American-oriented educational institutions in China and to endow scholarships for Chinese students. The balance of the debt was unilaterally forgiven by the U.S. Senate in two stages, partly in 1908 and the remainder in 1924.)

Finally, as a condition of receiving shares of Boxer indemnity funds, each foreign government, at the insistence of the United States, signed an “Open Door” pledge renouncing any colonial designs on China and guaranteeing to respect Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity. All in all, then, the Boxer Rebellion was one more inglorious chapter in the century-long humiliation and decline of the Middle Kingdom.

By the end of 1900, with the dynasty broke and in disarray, and with any hopes for imperial reform and revitalization having all but evaporated, the likelihood of meaningful change coming from within the dynastic regime were reduced to virtually zero. Thereafter, the initiative for change fell into the hands not of reformers, but of revolutionaries.
Lecture 7: The End of Empire (1900-1911)

With the Boxer humiliation serving to amplify the deepening sense of imperial crisis and disarray, efforts to reform the tottering Manchu dynasty from within gave way to conspiratorial attempts to overthrow it from without. Of course, rebellion was not new in China: the Nians, the White Lotus Rebels, and the Taipings, among others, had all sought the dynasty’s demise. Even the Boxers had started out as anti-Manchu rebels.

But none of these primitive rebellions were in any sense “modern.” Their leaders were either peasant bandit chieftains or charismatic cultists—people like the delusional Taiping leader, Hong Xiuquan. And none—save for the bizarrely superstitious and poorly-armed Boxers—had managed to fuse anti-Manchu anger with the country’s growing rage at foreigners. What was missing in all of these late-18th and 19th Century insurrections was any effective linkage between rebel demands for rural tax relief and retribution against rapacious landlords, on the one hand, and a coherent program for ridding China of foreign domination and restoring national pride and integrity, on the other.

The first distinctly modern Chinese rebel to propose a coherent political solution to the twin problems of unrestrained foreign predation and deepening domestic chaos was Dr. Sun Yat-sen. A physician by training, Sun was a native of Canton. In the 1880s, at a time when the dowager empress Cixi was tightening her grip on the Manchu court and strangling the reform efforts of the self-strengtheners, Sun, then a teenager, went abroad to study. He first attended an Anglican missionary high school in Hawaii, later pursuing a medical degree in Hongkong, where he converted to Christianity in the mid-1880s. (show early photo of Sun Yat-sen in Hong Kong—from Spence, The Search for Modern China, pp. 228ff)

While living abroad, Sun became deeply impressed with the cleanliness, orderliness and administrative efficiency of his host societies. During his residency in Hawaii (which was then an independent kingdom on the verge of being annexed by the United States), Sun first became acquainted with American political ideas, legal institutions, and educational philosophy.

After graduating from medical school, Sun practiced medicine for two years in Hong Kong and Macao. Returning to his native Canton in 1893, he grew increasingly disillusioned with the corruption and decadence of the Manchu bureaucracy. In this early stage of Sun Yat-sen’s political career, he was torn between conflicting reformist and revolutionary impulses. To help him resolve this ambivalence, he traveled north to Beijing to seek the advice and counsel of Li Hongzhang, the former commander of the anti-Taiping military forces. By the middle 1890s, Li Hongzhang was China’s foremost advocate of military modernization. He had overseen the “self-strengthening” movement’s efforts to introduce modern ships, guns, and accompanying industrial infrastructure. But like his mentor Zeng Guofan, Li believed that the key to regaining China’s “wealth and power” was to copy barbarian technology in order to control the barbarians.
When Sun Yat-sen tried to convince Li that the secret to the wealth and power of Western countries lay not in their battleships and cannon, but in their commitment to the full development of human talent, the free exchange of commercial products, and the full utilization of the earth’s material resources, Li simply ignored him. And when Sun tried to persuade Li Hongzhang that free universal education and the study of Western laws were necessary to “reform the [Chinese] people and perfect their customs,” Li refused even to see him. (Hsu, *Rise of Modern China*, p. 457)

Stung by this rebuff, Sun returned to Canton, where a year later, in 1894, he founded a radical anti-Manchu organization, the “Revive China Society” (*Xingzhong Hui*). Meeting secretly in Canton, the 112 original members of this society took an oath to expel the Manchus, restore Chinese rule, and establish a federal republic. By 1895, overseas branches of the “Revive China Society” had been established in Hong Kong and Honolulu.

At this point, in 1895, Sun finally and irrevocably burned his bridges to the reformers’ camp. Aided by 3,000 sympathizers recruited from among Canton’s returned students and Christian converts, as well as from local secret societies, Sun plotted to seize control of Canton itself. But his plan was compromised by an informant, resulting in the deaths of 48 of his followers. From then on, Sun Yat-sen was a man on the run—hounded by Imperial police and ultimately forced to leave the country. Evading several attempts to arrest him (including an 1896 kidnapping plot by imperial agents in London), Sun traveled widely throughout Europe, refining his revolutionary political ideas and seeking financial support for his cause. Ironically, the unsuccessful kidnap attempt, engineered by Manchu agents in London, made him something of a celebrity, giving him access to the drawing rooms of Europe’s polite society, the *haute bourgeoisie*.

While traveling in Europe, Sun in 1897 formulated an early version of what was to become his signature political credo-- the *Sanmin Zhuyi*, or “Three Principles of the People”. The principles were, respectively, *Minzu* (or “Nationalism”); *Mingquan* (“People’s Rights”) and *Minsheng* (“People’s Livelihood”). Under the first of these principles, “Nationalism”, Sun called for both the overthrow of the alien Manchu dynasty and the final removal of all foreign imperialist footholds in China. Under the second principle, “People’s Rights,” Sun called for the adoption of four basic democratic devices—popular election, referendum, recall and people’s legislative initiative—and the separation of five distinct branches of government: the executive, the legislative, the judicial, the police function (also known as the control branch) and the civil service (or examination branch). Finally, under Sun’s third principle, “People’s Livelihood,” he called for equalizing rural land ownership and regulating the accumulation of capital. Later, this third principle would be given a more revolutionary-populist spin, and would be relabeled, “land to the tiller.”

First formulated in 1897, Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People” were later incorporated as the official political philosophy of the Provisional Republic of China in 1912. Though that government was ultimately short-lived, the “Three Principles” remain
today as the governing credo of the Chinese Nationalist Party—the Guomindang—on Taiwan.

Throughout his period of European exile around the turn of the 20th century, Sun Yat-sen’s reputation as a revolutionary benefited from a series of reformist setbacks in China. The first of these was the collapse of the “100 days of reform,” as engineered by the ultraconservative Dowager Cixi and her reactionary Manchu minions. The failure of the “100 days” served mainly to underline the futility of trying to reform the Manchu dynasty peacefully, from within. And if a further display of Manchu fecklessness were needed, it was provided by the abject humiliation inflicted on China by the foreign powers in the infamous Boxer Protocol of 1901.

As a result of these internal developments, Sun’s prestige grew, both inside China and among the burgeoning communities of anti-Manchu Chinese living abroad. In Paris, Berlin, Brussels and Tokyo, Sun began to gain new and willing recruits to his revolutionary cause, which he renamed, in 1904, from the “Revive China Society” or Xingzhonghui (which suggested a reform agenda) as the Zhongguo Tongmeng hui, or “China Alliance Society.”

Between 1906 and 1911, the Tongmeng Hui, whose members and affiliates now numbered several thousand, organized at least ten separate revolutionary uprisings in South China. All of these ultimately failed, though the final insurrection, which took place in Sun’s native city of Canton in April 1911, generated widespread public sympathy. (Historical note: Sun’s Canton insurrection of April 1911 was later memorialized by a large concrete obelisk erected in one of Canton’s main public parks, Huanghua Gang. Honoring the memory of the 72 revolutionary martyrs who died in Sun’s attempt to seize the city, the monument remains today as a major Cantonese municipal landmark.) (show photo of Canton memorial obelisk)

Meanwhile, beset by rising revolutionary violence, the beleaguered Manchus belatedly introduced a series of domestic reforms to stave off disaster. Between 1905 and 1908, the iron-willed Dowager Cixi, now in her seventies, grudgingly agreed to implement a series of constitutional reforms, which included the final abolition of the much-despised eight-legged essay (about time!), the establishment of provincial political assemblies, the reorganization of the imperial bureaucracy, and the introduction of public participation in local administrative affairs and financial planning.

But the reforms were a classic example of too little, too late. Decades of Manchu self-indulgence, negligence, corruption, and reaction were now exacerbated by a series of natural calamities. Between 1909 and 1911 the Yangzi and Han Rivers underwent severe, repetitive flooding, bringing famine to hundreds of thousands. A morally and fiscally bankrupt regime could offer little in the way of meaningful relief. Thousands perished; tens of thousands more rebelled. In the year 1909 alone, 113 local uprisings were reported throughout the country, most of them spontaneous revolts by hungry peasants; a year later, the total jumped to 285 uprisings. Much of this violence occurred in recently-
flooded areas along the lower and middle reaches of the Yangzi—the same regions where the Taipings had enjoyed their greatest success half a century earlier.

Anti-Manchu resistance also gathered strength in China’s newly-established provincial assemblies, whose locally prominent delegates were increasingly resentful over Beijing’s attempts to impose centralized control over valuable provincial industrial assets. Indeed, it was a rebellion by the Sichuan provincial assembly against a Manchu scheme to nationalize the country’s railroads that triggered the revolution of 1911.

Ironically, when the end came for the Manchus, it was triggered not by a massive popular insurrection, but by a single, unintended urban bomb blast. As central government troops were being mobilized to suppress the Sichuan assembly’s railroad rebellion, revolutionary allies of Sun Yat-sen’s Tongmeng hui, who had infiltrated the ranks of the imperial military forces in the city of Wuhan, hastily pushed forward their plans for an armed uprising.

On October 9, 1911, a revolutionary bomb went off accidentally at the headquarters of Sun’s military allies in the Russian Concession at Wuhan. Apprised of the rebel bomb blast, the Wuhan police mounted a raid on the Russian quarter, where they arrested 32 of Sun’s supporters and seized stores of weapons and explosives. More important, they seized documents that identified a number of underground revolutionaries among the garrison’s officers and men. Their identities revealed, the compromised conspirators decided to strike first.

The rebels, numbering perhaps 2,000 fighters, first attacked the offices of the Manchu governor-general of Wuhan. Caught by surprise, the governor panicked and fled, along with the local garrison commander. Encountering little resistance, the rebels gained effective control of the city by noon on October 10, 1911. (show photos of Wuchang uprising—e.g., from Jonathan Spence, The Search for Modern China, pp. 228 ff, and Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, p. 48)

When the fleeing Manchu governor urged foreign diplomats to send gunboats to bombard the revolutionaries, some foreign consuls flatly refused; others declared their political neutrality; still others simply ignored the request. Thus began the famous Chinese Republican Revolution of 1911-- quite accidentally, without any master plan, and with its principal architect, Sun Yat-sen, thousands of miles away.

In the folklore of China’s Xinhai Revolution (so named for the date of the uprising on the Chinese lunar calendar), the seizure of Wuhan on October 10, 1911, corresponding to “double ten” on the Western calendar, —is celebrated today, in Taiwan, as China’s National Day, the day that Sun Yat-sen’s Republican “David” slew the hated Manchu “Goliath.” In reality, however, the final Manchu collapse took place over a substantially longer period of time; and it was as much the product of decades of accumulated foreign wounds and domestic imperial dry-rot as it was of the revolutionaries’ leadership and political mobilization. (Indeed, it is ironically emblematic of the sudden, unexpected
outbreak of the Xinhai revolution that Sun Yat-sen himself was out of the country at the time, on a fund-raising trip to the United States.)

With foreign governments now sitting on their collective hands, city after city, province after province declared independence from Manchu rule. By late November of 1911, three-fourths of China’s provincial assemblies had seceded from the Manchu Empire.

Meanwhile, in a desperate effort to stave off total collapse, the Manchus tried to persuade their recently retired Northern military commander, Yuan Shikai, to assume overall command of the loyalist armed forces. (show photo of Yuan Shikai with bodyguards, from Spence, The Search for Modern China, pp. 228ff.) Yuan’s Beiyang army, originally organized and trained by Li Hongzhang during the Taiping Rebellion, was the most modern, best-equipped military force in China. But Yuan had been forced into retirement in 1908, a victim of scheming Manchu court officials. Still seething from the insult to his pride, he was in no mood to do the Manchus’ bidding. Instead, he dictated a set of strict conditions for his return to action. His terms included: granting himself full powers of command over the army and navy; substantially enlarging the imperial military budget; convening a national assembly within a year; and granting imperial pardons to all revolutionaries who surrendered.

With few, if any, viable options remaining, the Manchu regent, Prince Jun, acting on behalf of the six-year-old child emperor Puyi, agreed to Yuan’s terms. On October 27, 1911, Yuan Shikai was appointed commissioner in full charge of the imperial army and navy. Still not satisfied, Yuan now upped the ante—demanding that the regime also agree to promulgate a full set of constitutional principles, and that he himself be named as the emperor’s Prime Minister. (show photo of Puyi, from Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, pp 36-37.)

By the end of November, 1911, all that was left of the once-mighty Manchu court was the figurehead boy-emperor, Puyi, who had been placed on the Dragon Throne by Cixi as a three-year-old toddler in 1908; Puyi’s regent, Prince Jun; his mother, Princess Jun, and a retinue of their personal retainers. As for Cixi, the incomparably powerful and sinister Manchu Dragon Lady had died three years earlier, exactly one day after Puyi ascended to the throne following the death of the Guangxu emperor.

With Yuan Shikai now in effective command of what remained of both the imperial army and government, he cautiously sounded out Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionaries about a possible power-sharing arrangement. Communicating through intermediaries, the two rival strongmen circled each other warily.

Sun himself had read about the Wuhan uprising in a Denver newspaper during his sojourn in the United States. Choosing to remain abroad for the time being, he continued his fund-raising drive. In mid-autumn, he left the United States for France, where he redoubled his efforts to secure Western recognition and support.
Returning to China in December 1911, Sun arrived just in time to preside over the birth of the “Provisional Republic of China.” Meeting in Nanjing on December 29, representatives of the new regime elected Sun Yat-sen as “provisional president” by a near-unanimous vote of 16 to 1. Three days later, on the first of January, 1912, Sun was inaugurated. (show photo of Sun as president, from Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, p. 53)

Although Sun had declared his willingness to share power with Yuan Shikai, Sun’s election as provisional president deeply offended Yuan, who had political ambitions of his own. In a fit of pique, Yuan ordered his lieutenants to break off all negotiations with the republicans.

Recognizing that the provisional republic was extremely fragile, and could not long survive without the support of a loyal army, Sun now sought to appease Yuan Shikai. First he tried to minimize the importance of his own election as provisional president, suggesting to Yuan’s intermediaries that he had agreed to accept the provisional post in order to reserve the regular presidency for Yuan himself. But Yuan was not mollified by this rather half-hearted explanation; and he threatened to order his generals to oppose the new republic and opt instead for a constitutional monarchy.

In early January, 1912, Sun proposed an arrangement that would ensure a mutually satisfactory transfer of power: In exchange for Yuan’s public confirmation of the Manchus’ abdication, and for his personal declaration of support for the new republic, Sun Yat-sen would resign as provisional president, thus clearing the way for Yuan’s accession to that coveted post. Satisfied with these terms, Yuan agreed; and on January 30, the imperial regent, Prince Jun, advised Princess Jun, Puyi’s mother, that there were no feasible alternatives to abdication. She thereupon summoned Yuan Shikai to the palace. Her voice heavy with emotion, she announced: “I leave the various matters to your judgment and have no request other than the preservation of the dignity and honor of the emperor.” (Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, p. 473.)

Two weeks later, on February 12, the abdication was publicly decreed. An agreement among the parties to the decree provided that the child emperor Puyi would be given an annual allowance of 4 million taels of silver and allowed to live indefinitely in the imperial Summer Palace, along with his mother and a substantial retinue of personal attendants. With that, the 268-year-old Manchu Dynasty came to an end, exiting the stage with barely a whimper. (Film buffs will recall that the last, traumatic days of the Manchu Dynasty, and Emperor Puyi’s subsequent internal exile within the Summer Palace, are exquisitely depicted in the classic 1987 film by Bernardo Bertolucci, The Last Emperor). (show still photo from Bertolucci film)

As one of their first official acts of governance, the republicans formally moved the seat of China’s national government from Beijing, whose name means “northern capital,” to Nanjing, or “southern capital.”
With the abdication now a fait accompli, Yuan Shikai formally threw his support behind the Nanjing regime. One day later, on February 13, 1912, Sun Yat-sen fulfilled his part of their bargain by resigning as provisional president of the republic. One month later, Yuan was duly sworn in as president. Significantly, however, Yuan took his oath of office not in Nanjing, but in Beijing. There was now a single, nominal Republic of China; but there were two rival groups of government officials vying for supreme authority-- each with a different vision for China’s future. Eyeing each other warily, they set about forming a unified government.
Lecture 8: The Failed Republic (1912-1919)

Soon after the inauguration of the new Republic in February 1912, the victorious revolutionaries of Sun Yat-sen’s Tungmeng hui reconstituted themselves as a western-style political party. Calling themselves the Guomindang (abbreviated as KMT or GMD), meaning “Nationalist Party,” their platform consisted of an elaboration of Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People”—“nationalism, democracy, and people’s livelihood.” Named to head the new party was Sun’s long-time ally (and sometime rival), Song Jiaoren, who was a leading republican expert on parliamentary government.

China’s first parliamentary elections were held in December 1912, under the rules of the provisional constitution. With Song Jiaoren leading the GMD electoral campaign, the party won a clear majority of seats in the new legislature. They capped their victory by naming Song as prime minister. (show photo of Song Jiaoren, e.g., from Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, p. 52)

But Yuan Shikai was clearly displeased with the outcome; and on March 20, 1913, before the new parliament could be convened, Song Jiaoren fell victim to an assassin’s bullet at the Shanghai railway station. Though there was little doubt that Yuan had engineered the assassination, no hard evidence ever came to light, and the GMD ultimately swallowed this bitter pill with only a mild protest.

With Song Jiaoren’s death, the Guomindang became rudderless; and when parliament finally convened in April 1913, Yuan’s supporters shamelessly tried to bribe the GMD’s majority legislators—offering them 1000 British pounds sterling apiece to resign from the party. Some accepted; others refused. Those who refused soon found themselves hounded by the police. With that, the door began to shut on China’s short-lived republican experiment.

Yuan Shikai now set about to maximize his personal power and undermine that of his rivals. With the national police openly harassing Guomindang lawmakers and their supporters, Yuan unilaterally revoked the credentials of the remaining GMD-affiliated members of parliament. When lack of a legal quorum prevented the parliament from convening, Yuan dissolved the parliament.

With Song Jiaoren dead, with parliament dissolved, and with the Guomindang branded as an outlaw party, Sun Yat-sen was forced into political exile yet again. In August 1913 he fled to Japan together with hundreds of his fellow Guomindang activists. While in Japan, Sun, who was already married with grown children, took as his second wife the middle daughter of one of his key financial backers, Charlie Soong. The new wife, Soong Ch’ing-ling, was twenty-six years Sun’s junior. (Show photo of Soong Ch’ing Ling)

(As an aside, Soong Ch’ing-ling’s younger sister, the Wellesley-educated Soong Mei-ling, later married Sun Yat-sen’s successor as head of the Guomindang, Generalissimo Chiang K’ai-shek. Taken together, the Soong sisters’ top-level marital alliances helped to
consolidate the fabled “Soong family dynasty.”) (show cover of Sterling Seagrave’s book, The Soong Dynasty)

In order to legitimize his naked power grab, Yuan Shikai utilized the services of an American political scientist, Dr. Frank Goodnow, who had been hired by the republicans a year earlier to draft a new Chinese constitution. (show photo of Frank Goodnow)

However, like Yuan Shikai himself, Frank Goodnow, distrusted direct democracy, believing that the Chinese people were not yet politically mature enough to govern themselves. Consequently, when the new constitution was finally completed in 1914, it featured a strong American-style president with virtually unchecked executive authority. The president—Yuan himself—was to be elected for a term of ten years, without any limit on the number of terms he could serve. And the president further reserved the right to nominate his own successor, thus in effect guaranteeing that Yuan Shikai would remain president for life—a sovereign monarch in everything but name.

Thus armed with a new constitutional mandate, Yuan Shikai stepped up his drive to restore the dynastic system. First, he revived various Confucian rituals that had been abandoned at the time of the republican revolution, including the imperial rites of ancestral sacrifice performed at Beijing’s Temple of Heaven. (Show photo of Temple of Heaven). He then convened, on his own initiative, a “National Congress of Representatives,” which dutifully voted unanimously to restore the imperial regime.

Yuan Shikai might actually have succeeded in his grand scheme of dynastic restoration had it not been for the unexpected outbreak of World War I in August 1914. With the major Western powers focusing their efforts and attention on the war in Europe, Japan, which had nominally entered the war as a declared ally of France and Britain against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now sought to capitalize on the war’s distraction by enlarging its own strategic footprint in China.

Back in 1900, at the conclusion of the Boxer Rebellion, the major foreign powers had agreed, at the urging of the United States, to refrain from attempting to colonize China, or to seek exclusive territorial privileges and concessions at the expense of others. Known as the “Open Door Policy,” this covenant, initiated by Secretary of State John Hay, effectively bound the various signatories to “share and share alike” in China. Though cloaked in the loftiest of democratic values and Christian moral principles—such as respect for China’s sovereignty and reaffirmation of America’s sacred duty to protect the powerless Chinese against rapacious foreigners—the Open Door Policy was, in reality, a thinly disguised exercise in calculated self-interest. Some have even called it a covenant among thieves, though that is probably an overstatement of its cynical intent.

Fifteen years after the Open Door Policy had been formally endorsed by the nations of Europe, Japan set about quietly seeking to close the Open Door. Acting on the pretext of assisting allied military operations against German-occupied strongholds in Shandong province, the Japanese government in January 1915 presented Chinese president Yuan Shikai with a document that called, among other things, for China to recognize Japan’s
paramount commercial and diplomatic interests not only in Shandong province, but in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia as well. Known as the “21 Demands,” the document called for joint Sino-Japanese control of China’s iron and steel industries, and for Japanese “advisors” to assume key posts in China’s civil administration, army, and police. If fully implemented, the 21 Demands would have reduced China to the status of a virtual Japanese semi-colony. (Is there a visual depiction of Yuan receiving the 21 demands?)

Badly wrong-footed by the Japanese, Yuan Shikai tried to negotiate with them. In exchange for accepting the 21 Demands, Yuan asked for Japanese recognition of his new imperial dynasty as well as Japanese financial backing for China’s industrial and military modernization. It was a desperate, and highly cynical quid-pro-quo, to say the least.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Yuan reckoned (correctly) that given Japan’s vastly superior military power, resistance to the 21 Demands would be futile in the absence of firm European support. Since such support was not forthcoming, in May of 1915 Yuan Shikai agreed to accept the Japanese demands.

But before a final deal could be struck, the contents of the 21 Demands were leaked to the public. There was an immediate outcry from Chinese students, intellectuals, and members of the new commercial bourgeoisie. Yuan Shikai was accused of betraying China’s national honor, and a movement to boycott Japanese goods quickly spread to more than a dozen cities along the eastern seaboard.

Undeterred by this strongly patriotic Chinese backlash, the stubborn and single-minded Yuan Shikai moved ahead with his scheme to restore the monarchy. In mid-December 1915 he declared that the following year, 1916, would mark the start of a new imperial reign, to be called (ironically) the “Glorious Constitution” (or Hongxian).

However, in the provinces, opposition to Yuan’s imperial restoration campaign now accelerated. Yunan province rebelled, declaring its independence in late December, followed in short order by Guizhou, Guangxi, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Hunan..

Urged by his advisors to retire and travel abroad, Yuan refused. Abandoned by his closest lieutenants, and uncharacteristically overcome with grief and shame, Yuan died unexpectedly, on June 6, 1916. Though the official cause of his death was reported to be uremia, suspicions of deliberate poisoning have lingered for more than 90 years. (show picture of Yuan’s deathbed scene, if available)

Natural or unnatural, Yuan Shikai’s death brought to a sudden, jolting end China’s brief experiments with both republicanism and dynastic revival.

Thereafter, the country began to slip into chaos and confusion. With no central government in place, with the bulk of Sun Yat-sen’s republican movement in exile
abroad, and with a dozen or more newly-independent provinces each going their own way, anarchy now became a distinct possibility.

At this critical juncture, Yuan Shikai’s vice-president, General Li Yuanhong, a veteran member of Yuan’s Beiyang military clique, attempted to restore some semblance of political order by reviving the 1912 provisional republican constitution, having himself installed as president, and reconvening the elected parliament that Yuan Shikai had unilaterally dissolved. But incessant quarreling among provincial governors and militarists forced Li to abandon his plan.

What happened next is the stuff of Chinese nightmares. Without effective central political leadership able to issue enforceable commands, centrifugal forces spun out of control. Various provinces went their own way, each professing its own sovereign authority. Although President Li Yuanhong and others tried valiantly to maintain the façade of republican governance, the lack of effective central authority fatally undermined these efforts. By default, political power now gravitated into the hands of provincial military commanders, the so-called. Dujun. China’s Warlord era had begun. (show photos of principal warlords, e.g., Zhang Zuolin, Feng Yuxiang and Wu Peifu, from Spence, The Search for Modern China, pp. 388ff)

Though a nominal central government continued to exist in Beijing under Li Yuanhong, it was powerless to enforce its mandates. Rival cliques of politicians and militarists fought among themselves for the right to make diplomatic and budgetary decisions in the name of the enfeebled republic. As their fortunes waxed and waned, coalitions and alliances were forged--and just as quickly broken.

The warlords were a strange and colorful lot. One of the more bizarre militarists, Feng Yuxiang, was nicknamed the “Christian General.” Before going into battle, he would baptize his troops en masse with a firehose. Another colorful warlord, Wu Peifu, was known as the “Philosopher General.” He was partial to precious stones, and was said to own the world’s largest diamond. A third warlord, Zhang Zuolin, was nicknamed the “Tiger of Mukden.” A closeted homosexual whose tastes reportedly ran to very young boys, he nonetheless accumulated five wives and a personal fortune estimated at US$10 million—not a trivial amount in those days. Later in the 1920s, Zhang Zuolin would be assassinated by the Japanese in Manchuria; and a decade after that, in 1936, Zhang’s son, General Zhang Xueliang, would lead a mutiny against Chiang K’ai-shek on the eve of the Sino-Japanese War—a mutiny that arguably sealed Chiang’s—and China’s—fate. (We will have more to say about this remarkable episode in a later lecture)

Within their own bailiwicks, which could be as small as a handful of rural districts or as large as two or three whole provinces, the warlords were a law unto themselves. Commanding personal armies made up largely of peasant conscripts, they were most often men of rather narrow vision and weak ability. Often they behaved as predators, exploiting their own people to get rich. And once they had amassed sufficient wealth, many voluntarily relinquished their warlord positions, retiring to the safety of foreign
concessions in the treaty-port cities, where they could enjoy life with their ill-gotten
lucrative.

The warlords might have gone down in the history books as something of a mere
curiosity, a short-lived feudal anachronism. But the decade during which their armies
fought for control of China, from 1916 to 1927, was one of the most bloody and
destructive in modern Chinese history. Not only were an estimated 2 million Chinese
killed in the senseless, internecine wars of this period, but vast numbers of uprooted
peasants, seeking to escape the continual fighting, were displaced from the land,
becoming a semi-permanent army of impoverished refugees. It was this vast human
migration that inspired Pearl Buck to write her award-winning 1931 book, *The Good
Earth*.

Meanwhile, as World War I raged in Europe, the allied powers -- France, England, Japan
and the United States—were eager to enlist China, at least nominally, in the struggle
against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire. One key reason for wanting China to
enter the war was to facilitate the repatriation of Germany territorial concessions and
property holdings in Northeast and Central China. Responding to allied blandishments,
China declared war on Germany in August 1917. Immediately after the war declaration,
Chinese warlords seized all German and Austrian-controlled properties and territories in
the cities of Qingdao, Tianjin and Wuhan. In exchange for this seizure, the allied powers
declared a five-year moratorium on China’s repayment of indemnities imposed under the
punitive Boxer Protocol of 1901.

Although nominally a participating member of the victorious triple alliance, when the
war ended China nonetheless found itself being treated not as an equal partner, but as
bounty to be exploited by others. At the Versailles Peace Conference of April 1919,
Chinese representatives made the startling discovery that the territories and properties
they had so recently seized from the Germans in Shandong province had been secretly
and cynically pledged not to China, but to Japan, in payment for Japan’s entry into the
war.

Understandably outraged, Chinese representatives at Versailles demanded the return of
Shandong to China, And they further sought from the allied powers a formal commitment
to abolish all foreign privileges in China, as well as Japan’s formal renunciation of the 21
Demands. To justify their claims, they invoked President Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen
Points”—in particular the Wilsonian principles of national self-determination, territorial
integrity, and “open covenants, openly arrived at.” But it was to no avail; preoccupied
with dividing up the larger spoils of war, the allied powers all but ignored China’s
demands.

Reaction within China to the hypocritical actions of the victorious allies was both swift
and intense. On May 4, 1919, over 3,000 students from thirteen schools and universities
in Beijing gathered at Tiananmen, the famous Gate of Heavenly Peace standing at the
southern entrance to the Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City. (show photo of May 4
demonstration at Tiananmen, from Spence and Chin, *The Chinese Century*, p 67). The
demonstrators angrily denounced the perfidious Westerners, as well as the scheming Japanese and, for good measure, the feckless Chinese negotiators in Versailles. Shouting radical nationalist, anti-foreign slogans. They then marched to the house of the pro-Japanese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs and burned it to the ground. Police intervened to disperse the angry crowd. But in the process, many students were arrested and several were beaten. At least one student died of his injuries.

The next day, students throughout Beijing declared a strike. Resonant chords of protest sounded in other Chinese cities as well; and in June, workers in Shanghai went on strike against foreign-owned enterprises. To quell the mounting disorder, the military clique then in control of Beijing promised to release all imprisoned students and to dismiss the disgraced vice-foreign minister. In addition, China’s representatives at the Versailles Conference were instructed not to sign the final Peace Treaty.

The “May 4th Movement,” as this month-long series of protest demonstrations and strikes was later called, signalled the birth of modern nationalism in China. In the course of the movement, large numbers of students, intellectuals, patriotic businessmen and factory workers were mobilized to express their patriotic anger against both the perfidious foreign imperialists and their Chinese “running dogs” and lackeys.

In the excitement of the May 4th movement, China’s deeply-alienated intellectuals began searching for meaningful new solutions to the nagging problems of foreign predation, warlordism, political instability, economic backwardness, and—for many progressive Chinese—Confucian cultural bankruptcy. Modernizing young intellectuals of the May 4th era began to study diverse Western philosophies, from democratic socialism to anarchosyndicalism, from the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey to the hyper-nationalism of Friedrich Nietzsche and the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer. One of the key progressive thinkers of this period, a man named Chen Duxiu, was an unabashed admirer of Western concepts of science and democracy. Only when harnessed together, argued Chen Duxiu, could these dual developmental icons, “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy,” bring salvation to China. Ironically, a few years later Chen would jettison his blind faith in Western institutional solutions when he became a co-founder, in 1921, of the Chinese Communist Party. (show photo of Chen Duxiu, e.g., from Spence, The Search for Modern China, p.388f.)

Out of the ashes of China’s discredited Confucian tradition there also emerged in the May 4th era the sprouts of a new Chinese literary awakening. Known variously as the “New Learning” and the “New Culture Movement,” this Chinese renaissance witnessed the spread of a new vernacular form of writing. First popularized by an American-educated Chinese philosopher and essayist, Dr. Hu Shi, the new vernacular replaced the archaic classical literary style, which required years of tedious study to master, and which bore little or no resemblance to the spoken language. By contrast, the new written vernacular was relatively easy to learn and mirrored normal speech. Not surprisingly, there soon followed a major spurt in popular literacy—including, for the first time, the education of large numbers of Chinese girls.
By the 1920s, a new generation of modern Chinese writers had begun composing in the vernacular style—including such literary giants as Lu Xun, Lao She, Mao Dun, and Hu Shi himself. In terms of literary innovation, the 1920s were golden years in China.

Also active in the May 4th Movement were a handful of study groups made up of radical scholars, students and aspiring politicians. In the aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, some of these young radicals began to study in earnest the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and V.I. Lenin. Indeed, it was while participating in one of these study groups, organized by the head librarian of Peking University, a man named Li Dazhao, that a young middle school graduate of 24 years, speaking in a rather thick rural accent from his native Hunan province, gained his first introduction to the theory of dialectical materialism. (show 1919 photo of Mao Zedong, from Spence, the Search for Modern China, p. 388f). Being something of a country bumpkin who dressed rather shabbily and spoke crudely, this young man was unable to secure admission to Peking University. But Mao Zedong was nonetheless destined to make an indelible mark on modern Chinese history. In the next lecture we shall examine the origins of Chinese Communism.
Lecture 9: The Birth of Chinese Communism (1917-1925)

In the swirling vortex of the May 4th Movement, all the ambivalent elements in China’s long-simmering love/hate relationship with the West were powerfully amplified and recapitulated. While one group of Chinese nationalists gravitated toward Western liberalism, another group was strongly attracted to its Bolshevik antithesis, represented by the triumph of the Russian Revolution. Disillusioned with a century of cruel and callous Western treatment of China, as well as Western hypocrisy at Versailles, a growing number of radical Chinese intellectuals were drawn to the example of the Bolsheviks who, in the name of empowering the “toiling masses,” had successfully thrown off centuries of Czarist oppression and seized the property of the ruling classes. For Chinese struggling to overcome a century of national impotence, this was an extraordinary achievement.

Shortly after the Russian revolution, Chinese scholars began translating the works of Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin into Chinese; and a Marxist study group was formed in 1918 under the guidance of a Peking University history professor, who was also the university’s head librarian, Li Dazhao.

Part anarchist and part socialist, Li Dazhao believed that for China to regain its lost national energy, patriotic intellectuals would need to replace the fatalistic pessimism that had paralyzed the Chinese psyche with a new spirit of intense mental and physical struggle. Patriotism, he believed, would play a vital role in this national mobilization.

In this belief, Li differed from his principal collaborator, Chen Duxiu. Where Li believed that patriotism was the key to preparing the country for its coming liberation struggle, Chen distrusted patriotism as a blind, non-productive emotion, one that could arouse people, without necessarily enlightening them. And he stressed the need for deep self-knowledge and knowledge of society as essential pre-requisites for effective social action. Together, Li and Chen—the emotional patriot and the introspective rationalist—founded China’s first quasi-Marxist journal, Xin Qingnian, or “New Youth,” in 1917.

A year later, in 1918, the 25 year-old Mao Zedong applied for a job as assistant librarian at Peking University. Armed with a letter of introduction from his middle-school teacher in Hunan, Mao got the job. Right from the start, Li Dazhao’s influence on the young Mao was apparent. Like Li, Mao believed that young Chinese intellectuals needed to toughen their minds and bodies for the coming struggle; and like Li, he was more of a populist than an elitist, believing that the main force for China’s national salvation would be the country’s impoverished rural masses.

These were not particularly Marxist ideas. Indeed they went against the grain of orthodox Marxism, which placed all revolutionary hopes on a violent upheaval by the urban proletariat. Still, under Li Dazhao’s guidance, in 1919 and 1920 Mao first began to study the Marxist classics, including Das Kapital and The Communist Manifesto.
While Marx’s predictions of violent class struggle between workers and capitalists certainly appealed to China’s radical intellectuals, it was Lenin’s Theory of Imperialism that made a far bigger impression. The reasons for this were not hard to find. For one thing, Lenin provided a clear, coherent theoretical explanation for China’s recent descent into national humiliation and degradation; for another, his writings contained a powerful revolutionary prescription for how to reverse China’s steep decline into national impotence. (show appropriate photo of Lenin here).

Lenin suggested, first, that the global commercial expansion initiated by the Western powers in the 18th and 19th centuries was not merely random or accidental, but was the inevitable outgrowth of an ever-intensifying competition for profits within maturing European capitalist economies. In other words, imperialist expansion abroad was, in Lenin’s view, the direct result of diminishing returns on capital and labor at home.

With any number of traditional, pre-industrial societies available for commercial exploitation abroad, Western capitalists could cooperate among themselves in the gentlemanly sport of carving out colonies and “spheres of influence” abroad. (show Western/foreign diplomats together in Beijing, ca 1900-1915) As a source of cheap labor, industrial resources and raw materials, and as a potential market for Western exports, such pre-industrial societies as China and India were powerful magnets attracting foreign mercantilists to their shores. As we saw in our earlier discussion of the virtual “carving up” of China after the Opium Wars, the existence of vast, untapped overseas markets, resources and labor made it possible for the Western powers to observe a mutually benign strategy of “share and share alike” in exploiting China’s national wealth. This strategy was clearly exemplified, for example, in the ubiquitous “Most Favored Nation” agreements that were incorporated into successive “unequal treaties” forced upon China by the foreign powers after 1842. Moreover, it was this same, cynical ethos of “honor among thieves” (dressed up in the lofty, self-justifying language of noblesse oblige, that lay at the heart of Europe’s agreement to accept the moralistic American “Open Door” proposals of 1898.

But that was not the end of Lenin’s remarkable story. For as overseas European commercial expansion continued apace, it eventually led to the exhaustion of easily-exploitable profit-making opportunities. That is, as the “low-hanging fruit” of foreign privileges and concessions was effectively harvested, commercial rivalries among the various imperialist powers would inevitably heat up, as they rubbed up against each other in the increasingly frictional competition for markets, resources, and labor abroad. (In China, as we have seen, such zero-sum competition would eventually result in Japan’s attempt to impose the “21 Demands” on Yuan Shikai, representing an attempt to unilaterally close the “Open Door” and thereby obtain exclusive Japanese pre-eminence in China.)

With competition among imperialists growing more and more intense, the inevitable end result, in Lenin’s view, was world war. In a nutshell, this was Lenin’s theory of imperialism: War is the highest stage of imperialism; and imperialism is the highest stage
of capitalism. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to understand why this theory proved so appealing to many radical young Chinese intellectuals of the May 4th era.

But Lenin’s theory offered even more. In addition to providing a cogent diagnosis of the reasons for China’s 19th century humiliation, the outbreak of World War I, and Japan’s increasingly desperate attempts to close the Open Door, Lenin also provided a timely prescription for putting an end to the evils of imperialist expansion, exploitation, competition, and war.

Karl Marx had argued that proletarian revolution was a spontaneous act that could—and would--occur only when the objective economic contradictions of industrial capitalism had fully intensified and played themselves out. At that point, and only at that point, the exploited industrial workers, having “nothing to lose but their chains,” would rise up in revolt against their capitalist masters, seizing the factories and abolishing all private property. Precisely because such a revolution was an example of spontaneous combustion, and was not a product of purposive human agency, it could not, in Marx’s view, be hastened or accelerated. It would happen when it was ready to happen—“no revolution before its time”.

Lenin, however, was not content with such a simple, mechanistic view. He was unwilling to wait 20, 30 or 50 years for the Russian working class to seize power. His impatience was rewarded by the Bolshevik experience. In Russia, the revolution of 1917 was an organized, purposive uprising, led by a self-conscious, conspiratorial Communist Party. The Bolshevik experience proved that one needn’t wait until the internal contradictions of capitalism were fully ripened for the workers to rise up. One could increase their revolutionary awareness through focused propaganda and indoctrination, thereby enabling the proletariat to comprehend its “true” historical mission.

One could also organize the workers into secretive, clandestine cells for purposes of revolutionary agitation and mobilization. One could, in short, plan and orchestrate a coordinated class uprising--thereby wilfully hastening the development of Marx’s historical dialectic. Such was the purpose and mission of the Soviet Communist Party, the organization of which was perhaps Lenin’s greatest contribution to the theory and practice of revolution.

In China, where capitalism remained in its virtual infancy, and where the industrial working class represented no more than two or three percent of the total population, Lenin’s prescription for accelerated social revolution, organized and led by a Communist Party, proved instantly appealing to growing numbers of impatient young radicals. Indeed, in many respects, Lenin’s theories seemed virtually tailor-made for China.

Estranged from European capitalism and virtually isolated in their Russian homeland, Lenin and the Bolsheviks began to search for potential allies abroad. Hoping to exploit the radical intellectual ferment of China’s May 4th Movement, in 1919 the international arm of the Soviet Communist Party, the Communist International (also known as the
“Comintern”), dispatched several undercover agents to China to explore the possibility of linking up with newborn revolutionary forces there. (show photo of 3rd International)

What these Soviet agents found in China was a country descending into disorder. No national government commanded obedience in the provinces, which were in the tenuous grip of shifting coalitions of regional warlords. They also found in China a situation in which two distinct types of revolutionary organization and ideology were developing on separate tracks, quite independent of each other. The first was the small, emerging Communist movement centering around the Marxist study group of Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu at Peking University. The other was a newly-reborn republican revolutionary movement under Sun Yat-sen. (show photo/painting of early Marxist study group)

Since being forced to flee from China by Yuan Shikai in 1913, Sun had been living in exile in Japan. But as China descended into chaos after Yuan Shikai’s death, he began to look for an opening to re-enter the Chinese political scene. His opportunity came in 1917, when a group of southern provinces, including Guangdong, rebelled against the dissolution of the national parliament in Beijing. Returning from Japan to his native Canton, Sun now set about trying to reassemble the scattered remnants of his failed republican movement, incorporating them into a reorganized Nationalist party, the Guomindang.

Recognizing that his 1912 failure was due in large measure to his lack of a loyal, well trained army, Sun placed high priority on organizing and training a revolutionary military force. Under the patronage of a sympathetic Cantonese regional warlord named Chen Qiongming, Sun in 1921 proclaimed the birth of the “Military Government of the Republic of China,” with himself as commander-in-chief.

It was also in 1921 that Sun Yat-sen had his initial encounter with agents of the Communist International. A Comintern operative named Maring had been sent by Lenin to seek out potential revolutionary allies in China. Although Sun was suspicious of Maring’s—and Lenin’s—underlying motives, he was clearly attracted by the prospect of gaining Bolshevik financial and military support for his reborn revolutionary movement.

For twenty years Sun had sought Western aid for his republican movement; and for twenty years he had failed. For the Europeans and the Americans as well, it seemed that the “devil they knew” (first the hapless Manchus, then the inept Warlords) was preferable to the devil they didn’t—the visionary revolutionary Sun Yat-sen. There was thus no small irony in the fact that Sun, a pro-Western liberal, should ultimately be forced to turn for assistance to one of the world’s most illiberal, anti-Western countries.

After being expelled from Canton by his erstwhile warlord patron, Sun in 1922 moved his headquarters to Shanghai, where his conversations with Lenin’s representatives grew more focused and intense. Determined to remedy the military weakness that had been the source of his undoing a decade earlier, Sun sought, above all, Soviet military assistance. The Comintern was only too happy to comply—for a price.
In January 1923 Sun hammered out an agreement with a Soviet diplomat named Adolf Joffe. In exchange for receiving substantial Soviet military training, arms and equipment, Sun agreed to mute his previous hostility toward Bolshevism and allow the Comintern to advise him in reorganizing his Guomindang party, to turn it into an effective revolutionary weapon. (show photo of Sun meeting with Comintern representative)

Though Lenin’s Comintern agents readily collaborated with Sun, they did not put all their eggs in Sun Yat-sen’s basket. Even before Maring and Joffe courted Sun Yat-sen, their Comintern colleague, Gregory Voitinski, had secretly begun liaising with leaders of the infant Chinese Marxist movement in Beijing. As early as 1920, Voitinsky had met with Li Dazhao at Peking University. Li, in turn, introduced Voitinski to Chen Duxiu.

From all reports, Voitinski was not terribly impressed with these two rather naïve and unsophisticated Marxist enthusiasts. Between them, moreover, Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu could only count on the loyalty of a few dozen vaguely radicalized members of their Beijing study group. Nevertheless, Lenin ordered Voitinski to cultivate Li and Chen, and their followers, and to educate them in Communist doctrine. (show photos of Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu)

Throughout the summer and fall of 1920, Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu received concentrated instruction in the theory and practice of Bolshevism from their Comintern tutors. In the process, they managed to rid themselves of much of their lingering “bourgeois” sentimentality and May 4th-era romanticism. By the late fall of 1920, serious discussions were underway concerning the formation of a bona fide Chinese Communist Party.

But the warlords who controlled Beijing were well aware of the Comintern’s subversive intentions. Paid informants and foreign concession police provided a steady stream of information about the comings and goings of key Bolshevik agents. Alerted that the newborn Chinese Communist Party was about to convene its first National Congress in July of 1921, treaty port police hounded dozens of known or suspected communists, forcing many of them to go into hiding. Of the 50 original members of the CCP, only a dozen managed to attend the founding Congress, which was held amid deep secrecy at a private girl’s school inside Shanghai’s French Concession. Show photo of original Shanghai girl’s school) When the Concession’s foreign police, acting on a tip, raided the girl’s school in the middle of the meeting, the delegates fled. Later they reassembled on a pleasure boat in the middle of scenic South Lake, in neighboring Zhejiang province. Unhappily, no written records of this first meeting have been preserved.

(On a personal note, when I first visited the Shanghai Girl’s School in 1978, it had been converted into a small, dank backstreet museum, with no external identifying markers to indicate its historical significance. I was accompanied by a young Chinese-American electrical engineer who was the son of one of the original participants in the 1921 Party Congress, named Chen Gongbo. The elderly proprietor, surprised at receiving an unexpected visit from two foreigners, happily showed us around. There were some musty
old photographs on the walls, including a group photo showing the original participants, including Mao Zedong. But there was no photo of my friend’s father, Chen Gongbo.

This was no great surprise, since Chen Gongbo was known as a traitor to China. In 1922, a year after attending the first Communist Party congress, he terminated his membership in the Party; and in 1925 he joined the rival Guomindang. Following the Japanese invasion of 1937, Chen Gongbo collaborated with the Japanese; and at the end of the war he was put on trial in China for treason. He was executed by firing squad in 1946.

So it was no surprise that Chen Gongbo was among the “missing persons” who had been banished from the Shanghai Girls’ School Museum. No photos of him were in evidence, and there was no mention of him in any of the documents on display. After walking around the one-room exhibition hall for a while, I remarked on Chen Gongbo’s absence to the elderly proprietor. He became quite animated as he repeated the story of Chen’s treason. After he finished relating his tale, I gestured toward my friend and said, “Do you know who this man is?” No, he answered. “Tashi Chen Gongbo de erzi” I replied. “He’s Chen Gongbo’s son.”

At that point the old man’s face reddened noticeably. Gesturing for us to follow him, he unlocked the museum’s back room and invited us inside. There we found hundreds of historical photos and documents laying around on tables and in cabinets. Sorting through a stack of them, he finally pointed with pride to one faded photo—“Here he is” he said eagerly. “Here’s Chen Gongbo, standing next to Chairman Mao.”

This incident nicely captures a feature of Chinese communism that we shall return to later, and that is, Mao Zedong’s engrained habit of attempting to excise from the country’s collective memory all favorable references to Party members who were later accused of betraying Mao or China. Eminent “missing persons” of the Maoist era include not only Chen Gongbo, but also such top-level Party leaders (and erstwhile Maoist comrades) as Wang Ming, Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Zhao Ziyang and even Mao’s own wife, Jiang Qing. This “missing persons” syndrome is well illustrated by the literal airbrushing of Jiang Qing and the “gang of four” out of official photos of Mao’s funeral service in 1976. (show photo of Mao’s funeral service)

Interestingly, the traditional-style brick building that once housed the Shanghai Girl’s School Museum was bulldozed in the 1990s as part of a major urban renewal project. The museum was rebuilt in a larger space a short distance away from its original site, in the upscale Shanghai commercial development of Xintiandi, where it now stands a few short steps from the local Starbucks. When I last visited the museum in 2001, none of the original photos or documents from the First Party Congress were on display. Instead, the space was dedicated to an exhibition of the life and times of the late Mme. Sun Yat-sen, Song Qingling (show “before” and “after” photos of museum)

With the Comintern holding the purse strings and providing organizational guidance to both the infant Chinese Communist Party and the larger, more well-established
Guomindang, Soviet agents in 1923 began to press for a working coalition, or “united front”, between the two Chinese parties. Such an alliance was made possible by the fact that despite their divergent long-term objectives—Sun’s Western-style liberalism vs. the CCP’s “proletarian dictatorship”—both parties were committed, in the short-run, to the eradication of the so-called “three big evils” of warlordism, foreign imperialism, and feudal landlordism.

Under the watchful guidance of a Soviet agent named Mikhail Borodin, an agreement was hammered out between the GMD and the CCP in the autumn of 1923. (show photo of Borodin) Under its terms, the two parties agreed to share leadership within a single, integrated “united front.” Because the CCP at this point numbered a mere 300 members and was still in its infancy, the GMD, as the united front’s senior partner, was given a dominant leadership role in the new organization. For his part, Sun Yat-sen drove a hard bargain with Borodin: as a condition of his collaboration with the CCP, Sun insisted that Communist Party members must renounce their organizational autonomy and join the newly-reorganized GMD as individuals. Borodin pressed the Chinese Communist leaders to concede the point, and the United Front was born.

Moving his headquarters back to Canton in 1924, Sun set up a Peasant Training Institute there. Its goal was to arouse the revolutionary consciousness of the Chinese peasant masses. (Interestingly, one of Sun’s lieutenants at the Peasant Training Institute was Mao Zedong.) (show photo of Peasant Institute)

In Sun’s Canton headquarters, a widening flow of Soviet arms, equipment and advice was helping to lend both discipline and muscle to the forces of the united front. Under Sun’s overall leadership, a modern military training institute—the Whampoa Academy—was established in 1925. Its commandant was a rising young GMD military star named Chiang K’ai-shek, who had recently returned from a year of advanced military training in the Soviet Union, under Bolshevik tutelage. Chiang’s second-in-command was a young Communist political organizer named Zhou Enlai, himself a rising star within the CCP. (show photo of Sun, Chiang and Soong Qingling at Whampoa Academy, in Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, p 71).

Under the watchful eye of Soviet instructors, preparations were made at the Whampoa Academy for a final military campaign to liberate China from the grip of warlords, imperialists, and feudal landlords. In preparation for the coming military confrontation, Sun traveled extensively, both within China and in Japan, making a number of speeches calling, among other things, for the immediate abolition of all unequal treaties with foreign powers.

Before Sun could complete his preparations for China’s military reunification, however, his health began to fail. Diagnosed with liver cancer, he was hospitalized at the Rockefeller-funded Beijing Union Medical College in Beijing, where he died in March of 1925, at the age of 58. Shortly before his death, Sun praised the Soviet Union and famously declared, in his “last testament, that China should ally with all nations “who
treat [us] on an equal footing.” His last words were, “Let us rise and fight together! The revolution is not yet accomplished!” (show deathbed picture of Sun Yat-sen)

Sun Yat-sen’s death set off a bitter power struggle within the Guomindang, between left- and right-wing factions. Eventually the right-wing, led by Sun’s strong-willed protégé, Chiang K’ai-shek, would emerge victorious. But the intra-party split that burst into the open in 1925 was a deep and damaging one; and its effects would continue to be felt for years to come.
Lecture 9: The Birth of Chinese Communism (1917-1925)

In the swirling vortex of the May 4th Movement, all the ambivalent elements in China’s long-simmering love/hate relationship with the West were powerfully amplified and recapitulated. While one group of Chinese nationalists gravitated toward Western liberalism, another group was strongly attracted to its Bolshevik antithesis, represented by the triumph of the Russian Revolution. Disillusioned with a century of cruel and callous Western treatment of China, as well as Western hypocrisy at Versailles, a growing number of radical Chinese intellectuals were drawn to the example of the Bolsheviks who, in the name of empowering the “toiling masses,” had successfully thrown off centuries of Czarist oppression and seized the property of the ruling classes. For Chinese struggling to overcome a century of national impotence, this was an extraordinary achievement.

Shortly after the Russian revolution, Chinese scholars began translating the works of Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin into Chinese; and a Marxist study group was formed in 1918 under the guidance of a Peking University history professor, who was also the university’s head librarian, Li Dazhao.

Part anarchist and part socialist, Li Dazhao believed that for China to regain its lost national energy, patriotic intellectuals would need to replace the fatalistic pessimism that had paralyzed the Chinese psyche with a new spirit of intense mental and physical struggle. Patriotism, he believed, would play a vital role in this national mobilization.

In this belief, Li differed from his principal collaborator, Chen Duxiu. Where Li believed that patriotism was the key to preparing the country for its coming liberation struggle, Chen distrusted patriotism as a blind, non-productive emotion, one that could arouse people, without necessarily enlightening them. And he stressed the need for deep self-knowledge and knowledge of society as essential pre-requisites for effective social action. Together, Li and Chen – the emotional patriot and the introspective rationalist—founded China’s first quasi-Marxist journal, Xin Qingnian, or “New Youth,” in 1917.

A year later, in 1918, the 25 year-old Mao Zedong applied for a job as assistant librarian at Peking University. Armed with a letter of introduction from his middle-school teacher in Hunan, Mao got the job. Right from the start, Li Dazhao’s influence on the young Mao was apparent. Like Li, Mao believed that young Chinese intellectuals needed to toughen their minds and bodies for the coming struggle; and like Li, he was more of a populist than an elitist, believing that the main force for China’s national salvation would be the country’s impoverished rural masses.

These were not particularly Marxist ideas. Indeed they went against the grain of orthodox Marxism, which placed all revolutionary hopes on a violent upheaval by the urban proletariat. Still, under Li Dazhao’s guidance, in 1919 and 1920 Mao first began to study the Marxist classics, including Das Kapital and The Communist Manifesto.
While Marx’s predictions of violent class struggle between workers and capitalists certainly appealed to China’s radical intellectuals, it was Lenin’s Theory of Imperialism that made a far bigger impression. The reasons for this were not hard to find. For one thing, Lenin provided a clear, coherent theoretical explanation for China’s recent descent into national humiliation and degradation; for another, his writings contained a powerful revolutionary prescription for how to reverse China’s steep decline into national impotence. (show appropriate photo of Lenin here).

Lenin suggested, first, that the global commercial expansion initiated by the Western powers in the 18th and 19th centuries was not merely random or accidental, but was the inevitable outgrowth of an ever-intensifying competition for profits within maturing European capitalist economies. In other words, imperialist expansion abroad was, in Lenin’s view, the direct result of diminishing returns on capital and labor at home.

With any number of traditional, pre-industrial societies available for commercial exploitation abroad, Western capitalists could cooperate among themselves in the gentlemanly sport of carving out colonies and “spheres of influence” abroad. (show Western/foreign diplomats together in Beijing, ca 1900-1915) As a source of cheap labor, industrial resources and raw materials, and as a potential market for Western exports, such pre-industrial societies as China and India were powerful magnets attracting foreign mercantilists to their shores. As we saw in our earlier discussion of the virtual “carving up” of China after the Opium Wars, the existence of vast, untapped overseas markets, resources and labor made it possible for the Western powers to observe a mutually benign strategy of “share and share alike” in exploiting China’s national wealth. This strategy was clearly exemplified, for example, in the ubiquitous “Most Favored Nation” agreements that were incorporated into successive “unequal treaties” forced upon China by the foreign powers after 1842. Moreover, it was this same, cynical ethos of “honor among thieves” (dressed up in the lofty, self-justifying language of noblesse oblige, that lay at the heart of Europe’s agreement to accept the moralistic American “Open Door” proposals of 1898.

But that was not the end of Lenin’s remarkable story. For as overseas European commercial expansion continued apace, it eventually led to the exhaustion of easily-exploitable profit-making opportunities. That is, as the “low-hanging fruit” of foreign privileges and concessions was effectively harvested, commercial rivalries among the various imperialist powers would inevitably heat up, as they rubbed up against each other in the increasingly frictional competition for markets, resources, and labor abroad. (In China, as we have seen, such zero-sum competition would eventually result in Japan’s attempt to impose the “21 Demands” on Yuan Shikai, representing an attempt to unilaterally close the “Open Door” and thereby obtain exclusive Japanese pre-eminence in China.)

With competition among imperialists growing more and more intense, the inevitable end result, in Lenin’s view, was world war. In a nutshell, this was Lenin’s theory of imperialism: War is the highest stage of imperialism; and imperialism is the highest stage
of capitalism. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to understand why this theory proved so appealing to many radical young Chinese intellectuals of the May 4th era.

But Lenin’s theory offered even more. In addition to providing a cogent diagnosis of the reasons for China’s 19th century humiliation, the outbreak of World War I, and Japan’s increasingly desperate attempts to close the Open Door, Lenin also provided a timely prescription for putting an end to the evils of imperialist expansion, exploitation, competition, and war.

Karl Marx had argued that proletarian revolution was a spontaneous act that could—and would—occur only when the objective economic contradictions of industrial capitalism had fully intensified and played themselves out. At that point, and only at that point, the exploited industrial workers, having “nothing to lose but their chains,” would rise up in revolt against their capitalist masters, seizing the factories and abolishing all private property. Precisely because such a revolution was an example of spontaneous combustion, and was not a product of purposive human agency, it could not, in Marx’s view, be hastened or accelerated. It would happen when it was ready to happen—“no revolution before its time”.

Lenin, however, was not content with such a simple, mechanistic view. He was unwilling to wait 20, 30 or 50 years for the Russian working class to seize power. His impatience was rewarded by the Bolshevik experience. In Russia, the revolution of 1917 was an organized, purposive uprising, led by a self-conscious, conspiratorial Communist Party. The Bolshevik experience proved that one needn’t wait until the internal contradictions of capitalism were fully ripened for the workers to rise up. One could increase their revolutionary awareness through focused propaganda and indoctrination, thereby enabling the proletariat to comprehend its “true” historical mission.

One could also organize the workers into secretive, clandestine cells for purposes of revolutionary agitation and mobilization. One could, in short, plan and orchestrate a coordinated class uprising—thereby wilfully hastening the development of Marx’s historical dialectic. Such was the purpose and mission of the Soviet Communist Party, the organization of which was perhaps Lenin’s greatest contribution to the theory and practice of revolution.

In China, where capitalism remained in its virtual infancy, and where the industrial working class represented no more than two or three percent of the total population, Lenin’s prescription for accelerated social revolution, organized and led by a Communist Party, proved instantly appealing to growing numbers of impatient young radicals. Indeed, in many respects, Lenin’s theories seemed virtually tailor-made for China.

Estranged from European capitalism and virtually isolated in their Russian homeland, Lenin and the Bolsheviks began to search for potential allies abroad. Hoping to exploit the radical intellectual ferment of China’s May 4th Movement, in 1919 the international arm of the Soviet Communist Party, the Communist International (also known as the
“Comintern”), dispatched several undercover agents to China to explore the possibility of linking up with newborn revolutionary forces there. (show photo of 3rd International)

What these Soviet agents found in China was a country descending into disorder. No national government commanded obedience in the provinces, which were in the tenuous grip of shifting coalitions of regional warlords. They also found in China a situation in which two distinct types of revolutionary organization and ideology were developing on separate tracks, quite independent of each other. The first was the small, emerging Communist movement centering around the Marxist study group of Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu at Peking University. The other was a newly-reborn republican revolutionary movement under Sun Yat-sen. (show photo/painting of early Marxist study group)

Since being forced to flee from China by Yuan Shikai in 1913, Sun had been living in exile in Japan. But as China descended into chaos after Yuan Shikai’s death, he began to look for an opening to re-enter the Chinese political scene. His opportunity came in 1917, when a group of southern provinces, including Guangdong, rebelled against the dissolution of the national parliament in Beijing. Returning from Japan to his native Canton, Sun now set about trying to reassemble the scattered remnants of his failed republican movement, incorporating them into a reorganized Nationalist party, the Guomindang.

Recognizing that his 1912 failure was due in large measure to his lack of a loyal, well trained army, Sun placed high priority on organizing and training a revolutionary military force. Under the patronage of a sympathetic Cantonese regional warlord named Chen Qiongming, Sun in 1921 proclaimed the birth of the “Military Government of the Republic of China,” with himself as commander-in-chief.

It was also in 1921 that Sun Yat-sen had his initial encounter with agents of the Communist International. A Comintern operative named Maring had been sent by Lenin to seek out potential revolutionary allies in China. Although Sun was suspicious of Maring’s—and Lenin’s—underlying motives, he was clearly attracted by the prospect of gaining Bolshevik financial and military support for his reborn revolutionary movement.

For twenty years Sun had sought Western aid for his republican movement; and for twenty years he had failed. For the Europeans and the Americans as well, it seemed that the “devil they knew” (first the hapless Manchus, then the inept Warlords) was preferable to the devil they didn’t—the visionary revolutionary Sun Yat-sen. There was thus no small irony in the fact that Sun, a pro-Western liberal, should ultimately be forced to turn for assistance to one of the world’s most illiberal, anti-Western countries.

After being expelled from Canton by his erstwhile warlord patron, Sun in 1922 moved his headquarters to Shanghai, where his conversations with Lenin’s representatives grew more focused and intense. Determined to remedy the military weakness that had been the source of his undoing a decade earlier, Sun sought, above all, Soviet military assistance. The Comintern was only too happy to comply—for a price.
In January 1923 Sun hammered out an agreement with a Soviet diplomat named Adolf Joffe. In exchange for receiving substantial Soviet military training, arms and equipment, Sun agreed to mute his previous hostility toward Bolshevism and allow the Comintern to advise him in reorganizing his Guomindang party, to turn it into an effective revolutionary weapon. (show photo of Sun meeting with Comintern representative)

Though Lenin’s Comintern agents readily collaborated with Sun, they did not put all their eggs in Sun Yat-sen’s basket. Even before Maring and Joffe courted Sun Yat-sen, their Comintern colleague, Gregory Voitinski, had secretly begun liaising with leaders of the infant Chinese Marxist movement in Beijing. As early as 1920, Voitinsky had met with Li Dazhao at Peking University. Li, in turn, introduced Voitinski to Chen Duxiu.

From all reports, Voitinski was not terribly impressed with these two rather naïve and unsophisticated Marxist enthusiasts. Between them, moreover, Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu could only count on the loyalty of a few dozen vaguely radicalized members of their Beijing study group. Nevertheless, Lenin ordered Voitinski to cultivate Li and Chen, and their followers, and to educate them in Communist doctrine. (show photos of Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu)

Throughout the summer and fall of 1920, Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu received concentrated instruction in the theory and practice of Bolshevism from their Comintern tutors. In the process, they managed to rid themselves of much of their lingering “bourgeois” sentimentality and May 4th-era romanticism. By the late fall of 1920, serious discussions were underway concerning the formation of a bona fide Chinese Communist Party.

But the warlords who controlled Beijing were well aware of the Comintern’s subversive intentions. Paid informants and foreign concession police provided a steady stream of information about the comings and goings of key Bolshevik agents. Alerted that the newborn Chinese Communist Party was about to convene its first National Congress in July of 1921, treaty port police hounded dozens of known or suspected communists, forcing many of them to go into hiding. Of the 50 original members of the CCP, only a dozen managed to attend the founding Congress, which was held amid deep secrecy at a private girl’s school inside Shanghai’s French Concession. Show photo of original Shanghai girl’s school. When the Concession’s foreign police, acting on a tip, raided the girl’s school in the middle of the meeting, the delegates fled. Later they reassembled on a pleasure boat in the middle of scenic South Lake, in neighboring Zhejiang province. Unhappily, no written records of this first meeting have been preserved.

(On a personal note, when I first visited the Shanghai Girl’s School in 1978, it had been converted into a small, dank backstreet museum, with no external identifying markers to indicate its historical significance. I was accompanied by a young Chinese-American electrical engineer who was the son of one of the original participants in the 1921 Party Congress, named Chen Gongbo. The elderly proprietor, surprised at receiving an unexpected visit from two foreigners, happily showed us around. There were some musty
old photographs on the walls, including a group photo showing the original participants, including Mao Zedong. But there was no photo of my friend’s father, Chen Gongbo.

This was no great surprise, since Chen Gongbo was known as a traitor to China. In 1922, a year after attending the first Communist Party congress, he terminated his membership in the Party; and in 1925 he joining the rival Guomindang. Following the Japanese invasion of 1937, Chen Gongbo collaborated with the Japanese; and at the end of the war he was put on trial in China for treason. He was executed by firing squad in 1946.

So it was no surprise that Chen Gongbo was among the “missing persons” who had been banished from the Shanghai Girls’ School Museum. No photos of him were in evidence, and there was no mention of him in any of the documents on display. After walking around the one-room exhibition hall for a while, I remarked on Chen Gongbo’s absence to the elderly proprietor. He became quite animated as he repeated the story of Chen’s treason. After he finished relating his tale, I gestured toward my friend and said, “Do you know who this man is?” No, he answered. “Tashi Chen Gongbo de erzi” I replied. “He’s Chen Gongbo’s son.”

At that point the old man’s face reddened noticeably. Gesturing for us to follow him, he unlocked the museum’s back room and invited us inside. There we found hundreds of historical photos and documents laying around on tables and in cabinets. Sorting through a stack of them, he finally pointed with pride to one faded photo—“Here he is” he said eagerly. “Here’s Chen Gongbo, standing next to Chairman Mao.”

This incident nicely captures a feature of Chinese communism that we shall return to later, and that is, Mao Zedong’s engrained habit of attempting to excise from the country’s collective memory all favorable references to Party members who were later accused of betraying Mao or China. Eminent “missing persons” of the Maoist era include not only Chen Gongbo, but also such top-level Party leaders (and erstwhile Maoist comrades) as Wang Ming, Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Zhao Ziyang and even Mao’s own wife, Jiang Qing. This “missing persons” syndrome is well illustrated by the literal airbrushing of Jiang Qing and the “gang of four” out of official photos of Mao’s funeral service in 1976.) (show photo of Mao’s funeral service)

Interestingly, the traditional-style brick building that once housed the Shanghai Girl’s School Museum was bulldozed in the 1990s as part of a major urban renewal project. The museum was rebuilt in a larger space a short distance away from its original site, in the upscale Shanghai commercial development of Xintiandi, where it now stands a few short steps from the local Starbucks. When I last visited the museum in 2001, none of the original photos or documents from the First Party Congress were on display. Instead, the space was dedicated to an exhibition of the life and times of the late Mme. Sun Yat-sen, Song Qingling) (show “before” and “after” photos of museum)

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Guomindang, Soviet agents in 1923 began to press for a working coalition, or “united front”, between the two Chinese parties. Such an alliance was made possible by the fact that despite their divergent long-term objectives—Sun’s Western-style liberalism vs. the CCP’s “proletarian dictatorship”—both parties were committed, in the short-run, to the eradication of the so-called “three big evils” of warlordism, foreign imperialism, and feudal landlordism.

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Before Sun could complete his preparations for China’s military reunification, however, his health began to fail. Diagnosed with liver cancer, he was hospitalized at the Rockefeller-funded Beijing Union Medical College in Beijing, where he died in March of 1925, at the age of 58. Shortly before his death, Sun praised the Soviet Union and famously declared, in his “last testament, that China should ally with all nations “who
treat [us] on an equal footing.” His last words were, “Let us rise and fight together! The revolution is not yet accomplished!” (show deathbed picture of Sun Yat-sen)

Sun Yat-sen’s death set off a bitter power struggle within the Guomindang, between left- and right-wing factions. Eventually the right-wing, led by Sun’s strong-willed protégé, Chiang K’ai-shek, would emerge victorious. But the intra-party split that burst into the open in 1925 was a deep and damaging one; and its effects would continue to be felt for years to come.
Lecture 10: Chiang K’ai-shek and Mao Zedong: The Struggle Begins (1926-1934)

Last time, we traced the origins and early development of the Chinese Communist movement; and we saw how the Comintern worked to create a united front between the new Communist Party and Sun Yat-sen’s revived Guomindang. In 1925, Sun’s death triggered a severe power struggle among senior leaders of the Nationalist Party. The conflict was not resolved until a year later, when Chiang K’ai-shek, the rightward-leaning commandant of the Whampoa Military Academy, finessed his leftist civilian competitors in a series of cunning political maneuvers, including an elaborate scheme to implicate one of Chiang’s key rivals, Hu Hanmin, in the assassination of a second rival, Liao Zhongkai. As a result of such machinations, by mid-1926, Chiang had cleared the field of major competitors, emerging as the undisputed successor to Sun Yat-sen.

With political and military leadership of the Guomindang now firmly grasped in his own hands, Chiang Kai-shek—who gave himself the rather lofty title of “Generalissimo”--quickly completed preparations to launch a massive military campaign against the warlords. Chiang’s principal military force, the “Northern Expeditionary Army,” was made up of 7,000 Soviet-trained Whampoa Academy graduates plus 85,000 Soviet-equipped combat troops, mainly recruited from among impoverished workers and peasants in southern China.

With considerable fanfare, in July 1926 Chiang’s Northern Expeditionary Army set out from Canton toward the Yangzi River, some 800 miles to the north. Although Sun Yat-sen did not live to see this epoch-making campaign, it was the culmination of his dream to reunify China under revolutionary auspices.

From the very outset, the Northern Expedition was stunningly successful. (show photo of Northern Expedition) Marching northward in two parallel columns, the Soviet-trained troops of Chiang’s National Revolutionary Army quickly overwhelmed the ill-disciplined, poorly-equipped peasant conscripts mustered by panicky regional warlords. Moving ahead of the advancing revolutionary forces, Communist propaganda teams urged the warlords’ peasant conscripts to lay down their weapons and join the revolutionary cause. To encourage the warlords to cease armed resistance, they were offered commissions in the National Army. At least half a dozen warlords—and a substantially larger number of their second-tier field commanders—accepted the offer, changing sides within a matter of weeks. (show map of Northern Expedition—e.g., Hsu, The Rise of Modern China, p. 524.)

Within half a year, Chiang’s Nationalist Army controlled seven southern provinces. But as victory grew more certain, inherent strains within the united front began to be revealed more clearly. Chiang’s increasing right-wing tendencies now caused his leftist detractors within the GMD to form their own separate governmental headquarters in the newly-“liberated” central Yangzi River city of Hankow, under the leadership of a former Sun Yat-sen protégé named Wang Jingwei.
Meanwhile, Chiang led his own troops toward Shanghai, 400 miles to the east of Hankow, near the mouth of the Yangzi. The tensions between these two Nationalist leaders—Chiang K’ai-shek and Wang Jingwei, grew steadily sharper during the winter and early spring of 1927. Also growing more intense was the degree of mutual suspicion and distrust between Chiang and his increasingly uneasy Communist allies.

By late March of 1927, Chiang’s troops had reached the outskirts of Shanghai. As they prepared to enter the city, the Communist-dominated Shanghai General Labor Union launched a general strike. Timed to coincide with Chiang’s arrival, some 600,000 industrial workers walked out of their jobs, virtually paralyzing the city. Ordered by their Communist labor organizers to embrace the Nationalist Army as liberators, the workers turned the city over to Chiang K’ai-shek’s troops—without a single shot being fired.

For the thousands of foreign nationals living in Shanghai’s foreign concessions, Chiang’s arrival caused a wave of panic. They had been led to believe (by Sun Yat-sen’s deathbed rhetoric) that a Nationalist victory would spell the end of 90 years of foreign privilege and “spheres of influence” in China. To prepare for a possible confrontation, the foreigners mustered 42 warships in Shanghai’s harbor, manned by thousands of troops. Fearing the worst, the foreigners waited nervously for some sign of Chiang’s intentions.

In the event, they needn’t have worried. For unbeknownst either to the terrified foreigners or to Wang Jingwei and his left-wing GMD government upriver in Hankow, the victorious Generalissimo had entered into a clandestine agreement with Shanghai’s notorious “Green Gang” (Qing bang)—a criminal secret society that controlled gambling, prostitution and drug trafficking in the city. (show photo of Green Gang, in Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, p 87) Under the terms of this agreement, all foreigners in Shanghai, along with their property and privileges, would be fully protected. In return, the Green Gang would be allowed to continue to operate under Chiang’s patronage. Because of this secret agreement, the liberation of Shanghai was largely a matter of “business as usual” for the city’s foreign residents; and the warships in Shanghai harbor were soon taken off ready-alert status, as the foreign community breathed a collective sigh of relief.

But it was anything but business as usual for the Chinese Communists and their local supporters. Deeply concerned about Chiang’s political shift to the right, and his alliance with powerful financial and underworld interests in Shanghai, Communist Party leaders urged their Comintern advisors to dissolve the united front. But before they could act on their fears, Chiang launched a sudden, pre-emptive coup against his erstwhile allies.

At 4:00 am on April 12, 1927, Chiang’s forces launched a series of coordinated attacks against Shanghai’s communist labor unions. Moving swiftly and brutally, with the aid of armed civilian “goon squads” from the Green Gang, Chiang’s forces shot down suspected Communists on sight, disarmed worker pickets, and arrested hundreds. When the Shanghai townspeople staged a large protest demonstration the next day, Nationalist troops fired on them, killing 100. By dusk on the evening of April 13, a crippling blow
had been dealt to China’s fledgling Communist movement. (show photo of Shanghai massacre of April 12-13)

Within days of the Shanghai debacle, the systemic liquidation of Communists began in the Nationalist-controlled cities of Nanjing, Hangzhou, Fuzhou, and Canton. Thousands died as the reign of “White Terror” began.

On April 18, a supremely confident Chiang K’ai-shek announced the formation of a national government in Nanjing—symbolic site of Sun Yat-sen’s earlier, failed republican experiment of 1912. Meanwhile, 400 miles upriver in Hankow, Wang Jingwei’s disheartened left-wing GMD supporters decided against engaging in an armed confrontation with Chiang’s superior forces. As the Soviet advisor Mikhail Borodin put it,

“Since we have been sold out by the reactionaries and…do not have the strength to launch attacks against the imperialists, we have no choice but to stage a temporary, strategic retreat…” (Dun J. Lee, ed., The Road to Communism: China Since 1912, p. 90).

Although the Comintern’s united front strategy now lay in tatters, rendered largely irrelevant by Chiang’s April 1927 coup, the new Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, was not prepared to declare the policy a failure. Lenin had died three years earlier, in 1924, and a bitter struggle among his potential successors had raged thereafter. Stalin’s leading rival, the radical “leftist” Leon Trotsky, had argued that the united front policy was a “rightist” error, and that Chiang’s anti-Communist Shanghai coup, far from being anomalous or unpredictable, was the inevitable result of Stalin’s decision to pressure the CCP into continued cooperation with an increasingly reactionary Chiang K’ai-shek. (show photos of Stalin and Trotsky) The Chinese Communists, argued Trotsky, should immediately join forces with Wang Jingwei’s left-wing GMD forces and rise up to make revolution on their own initiative.

For Stalin, this presented a serious dilemma, for he could hardly acknowledge the failure of the united front policy without validating Trotsky’s scathing criticism. Caught between a rock and a hard place, in May of 1927 Stalin naively ordered the CCP to seize control of Wang Jingwei’s left-wing GMD government in Hankow. But it was already too late for that. With Hankow’s demoralized leftists having gone into “strategic retreat” at the end of April, Chiang K’ai-shek, aided by two powerful northern warlords who had been persuaded to change sides during the Northern Expedition, easily regained control of the city. Deeply depressed by these developments, the chief Comintern advisor Mikhail Borodin retreated to Mother Russia to lick his wounds.

(As a historical footnote to these events, Wang Jingwei’s deep-seated bitterness toward Chiang K’ai-shek would play itself out with tragically ironic consequences a decade later, when Japan army invaded China in 1937. With Chiang electing to retreat in the face of the overwhelming superiority of the advancing Japanese forces, Wang elected a different strategy altogether—he collaborated with the Japanese, who for their part were only too
happy to exploit Wang’s well-known animus toward the Generalissimo. Wang was soon rewarded for his defection by being named head of the pro-Japanese puppet government in Nanjing. Like PuYi and Chen Gongbo before him, Wang Jingwei was forever afterward reviled as a traitor to his country. He died in disgrace in Japan at the end of the war.)

Driven from the major cities of central and south China, the defeated Communists split into three parts. One group followed Borodin’s lead and hightailed it to Moscow, where they regrouped under Comrade Stalin’s scrutiny, and set themselves up as a CCP Central Committee-in-exile. A second group of survivors remained in China’s major cities, going underground to engage in clandestine revolutionary agitation and propaganda. (They came to be called the “White Area Communists”) A third group abandoned the cities altogether, heading not for Moscow but for the mountainous hinterland of south-central China (where they later became known as the “Red Area Communists”).

Among these three groups of Communist survivors, it was the third group that went on to change the direction of modern Chinese history. In the course of their escape from Chiang’s campaign of “White Terror,” they staged a number of ad-hoc local uprisings. (show map of Autumn Harvest Uprisings) On August 1, 1927, a force of several thousand communists entered the Nationalist-held city of Nanchang, capital of Jiangxi province, seizing temporary control of it. For three days they held out, before being beaten back by superior Nationalist forces. A month later a second insurrection took place in neighboring Hunan province. There the rebels optimistically proclaimed the birth of a “Hunan Soviet”; but it, too, soon fell before the superior might of Chiang’s Nationalists. A third uprising took place in Canton in December, but like the others before it, it was brutally suppressed—at a cost of 5,700 revolutionary lives. (show photo of bloody aftermath of Canton uprising, from Spence and Chin, The Chinese Century, pp. 90-91; Spence, Search for Modern China, p. 388, overleaf.)

Among the survivors of these ill-fated “Autumn Harvest Uprisings” were men who, decades later, would be inducted into the pantheon of Chinese Communist immortality—people like Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Ye Jianying, Lin Biao, Ho Long, Nie Rongzhen, Chen Yi, Liu Bocheng, and—last but by no means least—Mao Zedong. From the ashes of inglorious defeat, these men would ultimately fashion an entirely new type of communist revolution, one with its roots not among the industrial workers of the treaty port cities, but rather among the poor and landless peasants of the rural Chinese hinterland.

By the end of October 1927 the remnant forces of the failed Autumn Harvest Uprisings had begun to converge and regroup along the mountainous border between Hunan and Jiangxi provinces. There, deep in the rugged Jinggang Mountains, they established a revolutionary base. (show map of Jinggangshan base area) Combining forces, they created a “Red Army,” numbering, at the outset, no more than a few thousand tattered soldiers, only one-fifth of whom possessed rifles. Not content merely to lick their wounds, however, the Red Army leaders--Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and the now 35-year-old Mao Zedong among them—began to fashion an entirely new strategy of agrarian revolution.
One year earlier, in the spring of 1927, Mao, while on an inspection visit to his native Hunan province, had written an essay urging his comrades to pay close attention to the revolutionary potential of China’s poor peasants. “In a very short time,” he wrote prophetically, “in China’s central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a might storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back…. They will sweep all the imperialists warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants and evil gentry into their graves…” (Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Zedong, p. 30).

To those who argued that Mao’s ideas amounted to giving China’s crude and backward peasants carte blanche to slaughter landlords, gentry and government officials willy nilly, Mao responded: “A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate kind, courteous, restrained an magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another…. “ (ibid.)

At the time these provocative lines were written, they were not supported by the Comintern. According to Marx and Lenin, a socialist revolution was an insurrection of the urban proletariat, the industrial working class. Neither Marx nor Lenin, nor Stalin after them, believed that peasants had the innate capacity to perceive their own objective interests, let alone to grasp the fundamental truth that it was the system of private land ownership itself that was the real enemy, not merely rapacious local landlords. Only the working class possessed the capacity for such sophisticated consciousness. At best, they argued, peasants could merely serve as auxiliaries of the proletariat—never as a leading force. But Mao disagreed, arguing that “without the poor peasants there will be no revolution.” (ibid.)

Mao’s unorthodox views led him to be censured by his superiors within the Communist organization. Indeed, had it not been for Chiang Kai-shek’s bloody coup of April 1927, Mao might have lived his life in relative obscurity. But with the brutal destruction of the Party’s urban working-class base, Mao had his big chance; and he seized it with both hands.

According to a recent, highly controversial biography by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (Mao: The Unknown Story), Mao set out single-mindedly to grasp supreme power in the CCP’s Jinggang Mountain stronghold. Skilfully playing his more senior CCP comrades off against one other, he was ostensibly able to scheme, conspire, blackmail, and betray his way to ultimate power. Although this is probably an exaggeration, there could be little doubt about either Mao’s determination, or his ruthlessness.

Nor could there be any doubt of his independence of mind. Ensconced in his Jinggang Mountain hideaway, with a force of perhaps 10,000 “worker-peasant” soldiers and a land area of only around 200 square miles, encompassing half a dozen peasant villages, Mao could now do his own thing.
But the Red Army’s existence was precarious, and its survival was hardly assured. A series of armed engagements with local bandits and remnant warlord forces made life very difficult for Mao and his colleagues. Things looked even worse by the middle of 1928 when they were attacked by pursuing units of the Guomindang. By the end of the year they had been forced to abandon their Jinggang Mountain base, moving steadily eastward toward the border between Jiangxi and Fujian, where they made their headquarters in the town of Ruijin. There, in 1931, they declared the birth of a new regime—the Jiangxi Soviet Republic. (show map of Jiangxi Soviet).

With the brilliant Zhu De as his principal military strategist, Mao now began to fashion his essential principles of “people’s war”:

- When the enemy outnumbers you and has superior firepower, never fight merely to hold territory; and stand toe to toe fighting a war of attrition;
- Never enter a battle unless you enjoy clear tactical superiority of at least 5 or even 8:1.
- Husband your forces; choose carefully the time and place to engage the enemy.

This latter principle was elaborated upon in a famous quatrain composed by Mao in the early 1930s:

- The enemy attacks, we retreat;
- The enemy encamps, we harass;
- The enemy tires, we attack;
- The enemy retreats, we pursue. (Mao, Selected Works Vol 1, p. 124).

Recognizing that to wage a successful “people’s war” it was necessary to gain the support of the civilian population in the Red Army’s base area, Mao and Zhu De formulated an approach to civil-military relations known as the “fish in water” theory. In this formulation, the Red Army guerilla fighters were the “fish”; while the water was the peasant population in the base area. These people must be won over to your cause by carefully cultivating them through periodic political education, benevolent treatment, and “leadership by example.” Only then could the Red Army “fish” swim safely in the village “water”.

This latter concept was the key premise of the Maoists’ famous “mass line” leadership method, which dictated that army officers and party leaders must never coerce the masses into compliance, or issue commands from on high. Rather they must live and work among the masses, sweating with them in the performance of menial tasks, in order to demonstrate by example their unity of purpose and spirit with the peasant masses.

In order to set a good example for the masses, Mao and his lieutenants early on established very strict rules of behavior for Red Army soldiers. As early as 1928, they promulgated a code of conduct containing “three main rules of discipline” and “eight
points for attention.” Popularly known as the “three-eight work style,” this code spelled out the Party’s expectations for the treatment of civilians in warfare:

The Three Main Rules of Discipline:

- Obey orders in all your actions.
- Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses.
- Turn in everything captured.

The Eight Points for Attention:

- Speak politely.
- Pay fairly for what you buy.
- Return everything you borrow.
- Pay for anything you damage.
- Do not hit or swear at people.
- Do not damage crops.
- Do not take liberties with women.
- Do not ill-treat captives.

In a further effort to build a mass base of peasant support for the Communist cause, Mao introduced a program under which Red Army soldiers, when not engaged in combat, would serve in a multiplicity of civilian roles-- as ordinary farmers, teachers, militia organizers, or local administrators. This idea of the guerilla soldier as a “jack of all trades” (or duomianshou) rather than a narrow “specialist” (or zhuanjia) became a hallmark of Mao’s revolutionary strategy.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in the early 1930s Mao launched on an experimental basis what was later to become his signature social program-- land reform. Under this program, all farmland and associated property belonging to landlords and members of the rural gentry were confiscated and redistributed to the poor and landless. Now, for the first time, Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary slogan of “land to the tiller” was being massively translated into social action in China. With the rural poor outnumbering the rich by 9 or 10 to one, this made very good political sense indeed; and it contributed to substantially to the success of the Communists in mobilizing peasant support.. (show photo of Mao in Jiangxi with first wife He Zizhen, from Spence and Chin, TCC, 114).

Although the years between 1931 and 1934 were marked by several divisive power struggles within the Communist Party, and by a series of deadly Guomindang “annihilation campaigns” launched against the Red Army’s Jiangxi base area, the rural policies of Mao and his chief military strategist, Zhu De, met with considerable success. Between 1931 and 1934, the Red Army added well over 100,000 new recruits, while the territory under the direct control of the Jiangxi Soviet Republic increased to 12,000 square miles (roughly the size of the state of Maryland), encompassing a civilian population of over 3 million people. Clearly, the Maoists had done something right.
But they were hardly home free. Indeed, far greater challenges lay ahead—including a series of near-fatal military engagements with Chiang’s Nationalist Army, and steadily deepening incursions by an imperial Japanese army determined to reduce China to the status of a Japanese colony. Before the 1930s were over, China would descend into the unspeakable hell of a full-blown Japanese invasion.
Lecture 11: The Republican Interlude (1927-37)

While the Communists in their Jiangxi refuge were perfecting Mao’s strategic principles of “people’s war” and peasant mobilization, Chiang K’ai-shek was seeking to consolidate his political power. Under Chiang’s military-style leadership, the Guomindang embraced former warlords, foreign imperialists, wealthy financiers and criminal gangs. In making his peace with these reactionary classes and strata, and co-opting them into his inner circle, he essentially neutered Sun Yat-sen’s original “Three People’s Principles,” reducing them to hollow cant. By the mid-1930s the Nationalist Government had ceased being a progressive political force, and came to resemble more and more an authoritarian dictatorship.

Although the regime Chiang and his associates established in Nanjing was nominally republican in nature, it proved to be increasingly corrupt, ineffectual, and ultimately repressive. Dominated by a handful of rich and powerful families closely interlinked by marriage and by overlapping financial interests, Chiang’s elitist regime never effectively addressed the problems of the country’s 500 million impoverished peasants; nor did it ever learn how to deal with growing urban pressures for working class and middle class political participation. Ironically, although it was Sun Yat-sen who turned the Nationalist Party into a disciplined, hierarchical organization under Comintern guidance, it was Chiang K’ai-shek who first realized the full autocratic potential of the new, Bolshevized Guomindang.

Emblematic of the new regime’s elitist ethos was the city of Shanghai—crown jewel of the Republic of China. Ruled by an unholy alliance of Nationalist financiers and underworld chieftains, Shanghai in the late 1920s became a playground for the rich and near-rich, a place to enjoy a slice of the European “la belle vie” in East Asia. (show photos of bourgeois life in Shanghai) Western high fashion and social mores were aped wholesale in the new Shanghai. Modern schools and hospitals were built, along with theaters, parks, race tracks, gambling parlors and, of course opium dens.

But while Shanghai’s elites enjoyed the good life, all around them, for those who cared to look, were signs of deepening malaise. Two problems were of particular concern: growing Japanese military pressure in the northeast, and a renascent Chinese Communist movement in the south, where it was achieving success by mobilizing land-hungry peasants.

In the early 1920s Japan had experienced a post-war surge of democratic development and international reconciliation. Under Western pressure Tokyo had withdrawn its harsh 21 Demands. But Japanese military power was growing. And a civil-military split was looming. In 1921 Japan was invited to join the Washington Naval Conference as a full Participant—marking its emergence as a “great power.”

By the middle 1920s, imperial Japanese commanders were openly coveting the rich mineral, industrial and agricultural resources of Manchuria. By the end of the decade, hard-line militarists were laying plans for broadening their country’s strategic footprint in
northeast China. But Japan’s freedom of action in the northeast was being threatened by Chiang K’ai-shek’s efforts to create a unified Chinese national government in Nanjing. As China consolidated his political control in China, the Japanese were forced to calculate the relative costs and benefits of early vs. late military action in China. Their conclusion was essentially this: The longer we wait, the more difficult it will be to overcome Chinese resistance.

Making matters more difficult for Tokyo’s military planners in the late 1920s was the presence of serious problems in Japan’s domestic economy. They included a sharp rise in urban unemployment and a deepening agricultural recession. The US stock market crash of 1929 further exacerbated these domestic strains by triggering a collapse in the Japanese silk market.

Frictions between Tokyo and the Nanjing regime reached a critical point in 1928, when a group of Japanese army officers planted a bomb on a railroad car that carried the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin. Zhang, the Manchuria’s most powerful political and military figure, had fought against Chiang K’ai-shek during the Northern Expedition, and he was one of a handful of warlords who refused to be co-opted by the new Nationalist regime.

Japan’s goals in assassinating Zhang Zuolin were two-fold: the first objective was to stir up internecine conflict between Zhang’s Manchurians and Chiang K’ai-shek’s Nationalists, thereby disrupting the process of national unification; the second goal was to create a general atmosphere of military crisis in Japan that would discredit the moderate civilian government in Tokyo and give imperial hardliners an excuse to mobilize for war.

But the militarists’ plan hit a temporary roadbump. The civilian government in Tokyo reacted to the assassination of Zhang Zuolin not by giving the army a greenlight to prepare for war, but by seeking to restrain Japanese military forces in China. At that point, the militarists decided to act pre-emptively. On the night of September 18, 1931, they detonated a series of bombs on a railroad track outside the city of Mukden (now Shenyang), in Southern Manchuria. (show map of pre-1931 Manchuria)

In the confusion that followed, Chinese and Japanese troops began shooting at each other. Though the civilian cabinet in Tokyo urged restraint, Japanese commanders on the ground pressed their advantage, attacking the Nationalists’ barracks at Mukden and capturing the city itself. For reasons of his own, Chiang K’ai-shek ordered the commander of his Northeast Army, General Zhang Xueliang to retreat rather than fight toe-to-toe with the advancing Japanese. Meeting scant resistance, the Japanese pressed on. By the end of 1931 all of Manchuria was under their control. But not before the seeds of a bitter conflict had been sown between Zhang Xueliang and his commander-in-chief, Chiang K’ai-shek. For Zhang Xueliang was none other than the son of the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin, who had been assassinated by the Japanese three years earlier. After his father’s death, the younger Zhang had joined the Nationalist Army precisely in order to fight the Japanese; and when Chiang K’ai-shek gave him the order not to fight,
but to retreat, thereby handing Manchuria over to the Japanese without a struggle, the “Young Marshall”, as Zhang Xueliang was called, was furious. His unhappiness simmered for several years, bursting forth in December of 1936 when he took revenge on his commander-in-chief by kidnapping Chiang K’ai-shek and holding him hostage for 13 days. (We shall return to this fascinating story at the conclusion of this lecture.)

A few months after the Japanese occupied Manchuria, Tokyo announced the creation a new, nominally-sovereign state of “Manchuguo” (Manchu country). To lend a semblance of legitimacy to this naked act of territorial banditry, the Japanese installed a native Manchurian as chief executive of Manchuguo. As puppet ruler, the Japanese chose Henry Puyi – the last Manchu emperor, who had first been installed on the Chinese Dragon Throne in 1908, at the tender age of 3 by his aunt the Dowager Cixi. Puyi was now 26 years old. (An excellent dramatization of this episode appears in Bertolucci’s film, “The Last Emperor”) (show map of Japanese Manchuguo and photo of Puyi as puppet ruler)

In response to Japan’s actions in Manchuria, the United States government introduced the so-called “Stimson Doctrine,” named after Herbert Hoover’s Secretary of State, Henry L. Stimson. The new doctrine called for preserving the “Open Door” in China and stated unequivocally that the United States would not recognize any territorial gains seized by force of arms. Although it was a bold statement of moral principle, the Stimson Doctrine lacked any real teeth; and America’s verbal scolding of Japan was not accompanied by any concrete economic or military sanctions.

In similar fashion, the League of Nations, created by the victorious allied powers after World War I to protect world peace, failed to enact meaningful sanctions against Japanese aggression in Manchuria. In consequence, Japan’s militarists were neither deterred nor punished, with the result that they were further emboldened to commit further acts of aggression against China. (With the benefit of hindsight, many people believe that the failure of the United States and the League of Nations forcefully to resist Japan’s 1931 expansion in Manchuria was a primary enabling cause of World War II.)

But Japanese military expansion was only one of Chiang K’ai-shek’s worries. A second worry was the burgeoning revolutionary mass mobilization being conducted by a revived Red Army in its new Jiangxi Soviet stronghold. There, Mao Zedong and Zhu De had begun to expand their agrarian base, using land redistribution as a weapon to mobilize peasant support.

Caught between relentless Japanese pressure in the north and a growing Communist menace in the south, Chiang made a fateful decision: he would first exterminate the Communists, then resist the Japanese. As he put it: “The Japanese are a disease of the skin; Communists are a disease of the heart.” (quoted in L. Eastman, et. al., The Nationalist Era in China, 1927-49, p. 33)

Between 1930 and 1934 Chiang launched five successive “encirclement campaigns” against the Jiangxi Soviet Republic. Surrounding the Communist stronghold with large numbers of well-armed troops, the Nationalist armies plunged deep into the Soviet’s
territory, looking to annihilate the “communist bandits.” But by then the Red Army had begun applying Mao’s principles of “people’s war”—the prime tenet of which was that one should never fight toe-to-toe with a superior enemy force.

Mao’s guerilla fighters drew back; and the Nationalists pursued them willy-nilly. The attacking armies soon overextended their supply lines, outpacing their logistical support. At that point, the Red Army employed tactics of mobile warfare to throw the enemy off balance. In essence, the Maoist version of guerilla warfare was the military equivalent of Muhammed Ali’s strategy for subduing the larger, more powerful heavyweight boxer Joe Fraser: “Float like a butterfly; sting like a bee.” (show photo of Mao with Red Army forces in Jiangxi)

Not only did the highly mobile Red Army seize the tactical initiative against a confused, overextended, lumbering enemy that couldn’t find them; but they also enjoyed the support of the local civilian population. Because of their successful peasant mobilization techniques, and the Red Army’s benevolent treatment of civilian non-combatants, the Communist guerillas had truly become, in Mao’s terminology, “fish in water.” The water was the Jiangxi countryside, within which friendly peasants would house Red Army fighters, feed them, and provide them with timely intelligence about enemy troop movements and concentrations.

Though Chiang threw as many as half a million well-armed troops against the 100,000 or so lightly-armed Communist defenders of Jiangxi, a combination of superior guerilla tactics and unanticipated external contingencies (including the September 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria) enabled the Communists to avoid defeat.

Exasperated by his failed military campaigns, Chiang in 1933 brought in a German military advisor, General Hans von Seeckt, to fashion a new approach. Under Seeckt’s guidance, the Nationalists built a series of airfields and highway networks around the perimeter of the war zone. They then constructed a line of brick blockhouses around the entire perimeter of the Jiangxi Soviet. These interconnected, multi-purpose blockhouses served as defensive fortifications, supply storehouses, field hospitals and forward operations bases.

Once the outer perimeter was secure, an effective economic blockade could be imposed on the Communists. Then the Nationalist forces would move forward in limited, measured advances, pausing to consolidate their gains and create a new ring of blockhouses. As Chiang’s armies repeated this process, the communists found themselves squeezed into a smaller and smaller space at the center of their shrinking Soviet Republic. If Communists were “fish in water,” swimming in a friendly pond, then the Nationalists were methodically “draining the pond to catch the fish.”

By mid-1934, the stresses of five successive Nationalist “encirclement” campaigns had engendered serious internal divisions within the Communist leadership. The most significant of these splits was between the survivors of the 1927 Autumn Harvest Uprisings, including Mao, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai, and a group of late-arriving Chinese
Communists who had been sent to the Jiangxi Soviet from Moscow on Joseph Stalin’s orders in 1930. Their instructions had been to take control of the Soviet government from Mao. Dubbed the “Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks” because of their extended sojourn in Moscow following Chiang’s bloody Shanghai coup of 1927, these pro-Moscow latecomers viewed the Autumn Harvest veterans, and Mao in particular, with deep suspicion and more than a little hostility—feelings that were entirely reciprocated.

By the autumn of 1934, the Communists had seen their base area in Jiangxi shrink from 12,000 square miles to a little over 1,500. At that point, the Red Army faced a critical decision: it was either break out of the tightening Nationalist stranglehold, or die. On October 15 the Red Army executed a hastily-planned, two-pronged escape. With 85,000 soldiers, 15,000 party and government officials, and only 35 women accompanying them, the evacuees managed to break through the Nationalist defense lines in two places, escaping toward the southwest. (Because of the physical risks and hardships involved, the vast majority of Communist women, including wives of Red Army soldiers) were left behind to fend for themselves. In the ensuing “mopping up” operation, many of the women who stayed behind were killed by Guomindang troops; and thousands of children were either orphaned or permanently separated from their parents.

Thus began the Red Army’s fabled “Long March.” Although it began as an urgent and rather chaotic retreat, and though 90 percent of those who began the march failed to complete it, by the time it ended some fifteen months later the Long March would be transformed forever in popular Chinese folklore from a desperate flight to a feat of legendary heroism. (show map of Long March)

In January 1935, the retreating Red Army forces paused to rest at the town of Zunyi, in eastern Guizhou Province. There the Communist Party held an important leadership meeting, in the course of which the pro-Moscow “28 Bolsheviks” received a sharp rebuke for having failed to prevent the Red Army’s ouster from Jiangxi. Their top leader, Bo Gu, was held responsible and was toppled from power. With that, the Autumn Harvest veterans assumed control, with Zhou Enlai in overall command, and Mao as his number two.

We next get our first clear view of Mao’s darker side—his overweening ambition, his manipulativeness, and his ruthless nature. Dissatisfied with his status as number two, the ever-ambitious Mao moved to neutralize Zhou’s paramount status through a combination of carrots and sticks—notably including the use of blackmail. According to one credible account, Mao threatened to draft a resolution exposing Zhou’s co-responsibility for Bo Gu’s failed military policies in the last stages of the Jiangxi Soviet. Whether the allegation was true or not, the threat of exposure worked; and Zhou’s political wings were effectively clipped. From that point on, until both men died 41 years later, in 1976, Mao Zedong was able completely to dominate Zhou, manipulating him virtually at will. Also from that point on, although Mao nominally remained number two within the Chinese Communist hierarchy, it was he who called the shots. (show photo of Mao, Zhou on Long March)
With Mao assuming overall direction of the Long March, the Communists now set as their final destination the city of Yan’an in northern Shaanxi province, some 800 miles to the northwest, as the crow flies. (However, being closely pursued over extremely difficult terrain by Chiang’s Nationalist armies, the retreating Communists could hardly travel “as the crow flies”!)

By the time the first scattered units of the Red Army reached Yan’an at the end of 1935, the Communists had traveled 6,000 miles under harrowing conditions, traversing nine provinces, crossing uncounted snow-covered peaks, raging rivers, and uninhabitable forests, from Western Guangdong to eastern Tibet. Only 8,000 of the original 100,000 sojourners remained. The rest—more than 9/10 of the original group—had either been killed, taken prisoner or dropped out along the way. Having finally reached sanctuary, out of reach of Chiang K’ai-shek’s Nationalist armies, Mao’s forces rested. (Having heard the story of this incredibly difficult and harrowing journey, perhaps you can understand why, as a 20 year-old youth, I had been so deeply affected when I read Edgar Snow’s dramatic account of the Long March in his book, “Red Star over China.”)

Meanwhile, back in Nanjing, at about the same time the Communists were undertaking their arduous Long March to Yan’an, Chiang K’ai-shek and his American-educated wife, Soong Mei-ling, were launching a new movement of moral and spiritual awakening for the Chinese people. Drawing broadly from China’s Confucian tradition, and seasoned with just a pinch of libertarian rhetoric drawn from Sun Yat-sen’s “Three People’s Principles,” Chiang’s “New Life Movement,” as it was called, was designed to inculcate in the Chinese people a new national consciousness, one that stressed plain living, personal hygiene, cleanliness, and self-discipline, as well as the traditional Confucian virtues of propriety (li), justice (yi), integrity (lian), and self-awareness (chi). In announcing the new campaign, Chiang declared that if properly implemented, the New Life Movement would lead to the “social regeneration of China.” (Spence, The Search for Modern China, p. 415)

In reality, it did no such thing. For not only were the precepts of the New Life Movement essentially a reprise of China’s failed Confucian traditions, they were also highly reflective of Chiang’s own deepening right-wing authoritarian tendencies. Offering no economic reforms to placate China’s long-suffering workers and peasants, and no political reforms to involve ordinary Chinese in deliberations on the great issues of the day, Chiang’s New Life Movement was a paternalistic formula for creating an orderly, well-disciplined, highly conformist, and obedient society. As Chiang himself put it, the goal of the movement was “to thoroughly militarize the life of the people…It is to make them nourish courage and alertness, a capacity to endure hardship, and especially a habit and instinct for unified behavior. It is to make them willing to sacrifice for the nation at all times.” (Ibid) If this seems to bear more than a passing resemblance to neo-fascism, well……

But even as Chiang was urging his countrymen to discipline themselves and prepare for personal sacrifice, the Japanese were making new inroads into China. In 1932, in response to a growing Chinese patriotic movement to boycott Japanese goods, a shipload
of armed Japanese marines came ashore in Shanghai. After a brief exchange of fire with Nationalist soldiers, the local Japanese commander ordered an aerial bombardment of the city, followed by a full-scale ground attack on Shanghai’s Chinese defenders. Three divisions of Japanese forces were committed to the battle, which ended in an armistice three months later.

But Japan was only beginning. Early in 1933, Japanese forces struck south of their Manchuguo stronghold, attacking Jehol province, north of Beijing. (Show map of Japanese thrusts into China) In the spring of the year they occupied a strategic mountain pass at the eastern end of the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan, less than 150 miles from Beijing. Shortly thereafter, they moved into northern Hebei province, south of the Great Wall. Surprisingly, Chiang K’ai-shek once again ordered his outmanned troops to stand down and seek a cease-fire, rather than standing toe-to-toe with the Japanese.

Still believing that it was necessary to wipe out the Communists before he could take on the full might of Japan, Chiang K’ai-shek took the news of the CCP’s escape from Jiangxi badly. Determined to catch them at their point of maximum vulnerability, in 1936 he ordered an all-out assault on the CCP’s new headquarters in Yan’an.

But anti-Japanese sentiment had been building steadily in China since the Japanese seizure of Manchuria; and in December of 1935 thousands of Chinese students demonstrated in several Chinese cities demanding that Chiang cease his vendetta against the Communists and instead create a “united front” to resist Japan. Chiang stubbornly refused, and pushed forward with his plan to attack Yan’an.

However, the man he entrusted to carry out the attack, The “Young Marshal” Zhang Xueliang, turned out to be a poor choice. Though he was arguably Chiang Kai-shek’s best commanding officer, and though his Northeast Army troops were the best in all China, Zhang Xueliang had no stomach to fight fellow Chinese—be they Communists or otherwise. Ever since the Japanese militarists assassinated his father, the Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin, the Young Marshal had been itching to fight Japan.

And so the Young Marshall refused to carry out Chiang K’ai-shek’s orders. As his Northeast Army troops bivouaced in the city of Xian, 100 miles south of Yan’an, Chiang flew to the city to confront him. What followed was one of those extremely rare, strikingly clearcut turning points in history, as Zhang Xueliang turned the tables on his commander-in-chief, kidnapping him in the middle of the night and holding him hostage.

The Young Marshall’s demands were simple: Chiang Kai-shek must call off his planned attack on the Communists and form a second united front with them, directed against the Japanese. At first the Generalissimo stubbornly refused; but when his wife, Soong Mei-ling, learned of his predicament, she flew to Xian and convinced him to agree to the rebels’ demands. And so a second GMD-CCP united front came into being in December 1936, a decade after the first one.
Observing these events from their base in Manchuguo, the Japanese militarists saw their worst fears coming true: the termination of the GMD-CCP civil war and the formation of a national anti-Japanese united front. In response, in July 1937 they launched a full-scale invasion of China. World War II had begun.
Lecture 12: “Resist Japan!” (1937-45)

When Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka visited China in 1972 to inaugurate the “normalization” of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations, he apologized to his Chinese host, Zhou Enlai, for Japan’s World War II invasion of China. It was reported that Zhou shrugged off Mr. Tanaka’s apology, observing that if it had not been for Japan’s invasion, “We might still be living in caves in Yan’an.” While perhaps apocryphal, Zhou’s retort contained a substantial grain of truth.

In this lecture we shall see how the Chinese Communists went from the edge of annihilation in 1936 to brink of victory a decade later. While a number of different factors were involved in this stunning reversal of fortune, the Japanese invasion was, in fact, a key turning point. For it was the sheer brutality of the Japanese invasion—the vast, inhuman destruction of civilian lives and property—that served to unify the rural population of North China under CCP leadership.

By the time the Communists completed their Long March early in 1936, their ranks had been decimated by the pursuing Nationalist armies and by the rigors of their perilous 6,000 mile trek. They were exhausted and they were vulnerable. Had the GMD “Young Marshall” Zhang Xueliang obeyed Chiang K’ai-shek’s order to attack the Communists in Yan’an in December 1936, there is little doubt that the CCP would have been wiped out in short order. But Zhang Xueliang rebelled, and the Communists were spared a final, fatal Nationalist assault. In the negotiated truce that followed, the CCP was able to revive itself, regroup, and gradually regain its lost momentum.

When war with Japan broke out six months later, it was marked by a great deal of initial confusion on all sides. On July 1, 1937 a minor confrontation between GMD and Japanese troops occurred at Luguoqiao—the Marco Polo Bridge—a few miles west of Beijing. This incident, which was evidently unplanned, served to light the fuse of war. For the better part of a month the fuse smoldered as the two sides maneuvered for diplomatic and propaganda advantage, engaging in a war of nerves in which each side blamed the other for a series of hostile provocations. Meanwhile, both sides mobilized for war. At the end of July, Japanese forces decisively seized the Marco Polo Bridge, as the government in Tokyo ominously called for a “fundamental solution of Sino-Japanese relations.” Chiang K’ai-shek responded to the Japanese action with a call to war. “The only course open to us now,” he said, “is to lead the masses of the country, under a single national plan, to struggle to the end.” (J. Crowley, Japan’s Quest for Autonomy, pp. 338-39).

The massive Japanese assault that followed proved disastrous for Chiang K’ai-shek. In the first few months of the war the Nationalists suffered more than 250,000 battlefield deaths, losing over 50 percent of their most battle-ready troops. Most of the fatalities were inflicted in the course of the Nationalists’ unsuccessful defense of Shanghai, which fell to the invading Japanese in the autumn of 1937. In addition to the huge number of GMD military casualties, Shanghai’s civilian population also suffered incalculable
After occupying Shanghai and several key cities on the North China Plain—including Shijiazhuang, Baoding, and Taiyuan—the Japanese next trained their sights on the Nationalists’ capital city of Nanjing. What began as a conventional military operation quickly degenerated into uncontrolled havoc. The debacle began when the GMD general who had sworn to defend Nanjing “to the last breath” suddenly and without warning abandoned the city, leaving Nanjing’s civilian population completely vulnerable both to the attacking Japanese and to the now suddenly leaderless and demoralized Nationalist troops. The storm of wanton violence that followed was among the worst in modern recorded history. While estimates of total civilian deaths range widely—from 90,000 to 300,000—there can be little doubt of the human cruelty and horror that marked the "Nanjing Massacre."

In the six weeks between mid-December 1937 and the end of January 1938, at least 20,000 Chinese women and young girls were raped, mutilated, and killed, some for the mere “sport” of it, by out-of-control Japanese troops. Grainy motion pictures and still photographs taken by missionaries and other eyewitnesses recorded a small portion of the carnage; the diaries of Japanese soldiers documented additional atrocities. Because Japan’s Emperor Hirohito had personally renounced the international convention governing humane treatment of enemy prisoners, the distinction between captive Chinese soldiers and civilian non-combatants was disregarded by the invading Japanese; in consequence, tens of thousands of disarmed GMD troops were slaughtered outright; and an equal number of civilians were killed on suspicion of being disguised combatants. By the end of January 1938, widespread looting, robbery and arson had left much of the city in ruins.

After pacifying Nanjing, the Japanese conducted an all-out offensive throughout the urban centers of the Yangzi River Delta. Forced to retreat up the Yangzi in the summer of 1938, GMD troops made a major stand at Wuhan, where they suffered more than 200,000 casualties, along with the loss of most of their air force. By October, the Nationalist forces had been forced to retreat hundreds of miles farther upriver, past the fabled “Three Gorges” and deep into the rural interior of Sichuan province, where they made their headquarters in the teeming riverfront commercial hub at Chongqing. Life in Chongqing was difficult, to say the least. From 1939 on, the Japanese bombed the city with chilling regularity and devastating results. War materiel was sparse, and existing GMD military supply routes came under frequent Japanese aerial attack. By 1939 only a single secure overland route linked Chongqing with the outside world—the 715-mile “Burma Road,” which stretched from Rangoon to Kunming, in neighboring Yunnan province. Built by tens of thousands of conscripted Chinese laborers, the Burma Road was
completed in December 1938, and provided a slow but steady trickle of military supplies to the beleaguered Nationalists.

With war materiel and industrial supplies, as well as consumer durables and foodstuffs all in extremely short supply, inflationary pressures mounted in Chongqing. These pressures were compounded by ill-advised governmental policies that responded to growing commodity shortages by increasing the supply of money—and thereby fueling still further the inflationary spiral. Between 1937 and 1942, the face value of Chinese banknotes in circulation—denominated in yuan—rose 17-fold, while the purchasing power of the yuan plunged to 2 percent of its former value against the US dollar.

To satisfy its massive need for military manpower, the GMD forcibly conscripted millions of young men for the war effort. Like other government employees, these military conscripts were paid small, fixed salaries. But with Chinese currency constantly undergoing inflationary devaluation, their pay quickly lost its meager purchasing power. Unable to support themselves and their families, hundreds of thousands of GMD conscripts deserted; countless others survived by preying on civilians in the countryside—victimizing those more helpless and vulnerable than themselves. Popular morale steadily eroded, while corruption rose to dangerous levels. Making matters worse, a number of well-positioned GMD officials and their families reaped huge windfall profits by cornering supplies of war-scarce commodities.

Meanwhile, in their rural Yan’an headquarters, the Chinese Communists were reorganizing their forces and refining their message. Able to avoid the brunt of Japanese offensives against the major Nationalist-held cities, rail lines and commercial centers in east and northeast China, the Communists adopted a strategy of decentralized guerilla operations against the Japanese invaders. They also greatly modified their earlier policy of radical land confiscation and redistribution, substituting instead a policy of moderate rent reductions. By moderating their hostility toward landlords and rural gentry, the CCP sought to mobilize a broad base of support among all “patriotic” rural classes and economic strata—including even major landowners—in order to focus popular hostility against the common enemy: Japan.

In this endeavor, the Japanese proved to be unwitting allies of the CCP. In their desire to counteract growing Communist influence in the villages of north China, the Japanese pursued a scorched-earth policy of “kill all, burn all, destroy all.” Entire villages, believed to be harboring Communist agents, were burned to the ground, their inhabitants slaughtered. As a result of this policy of terrorizing civilians into submission, a deep and abiding rage against Japan took root among the peasants of north China—a rage that eventually helped to propel the Chinese Communists to power.

To mobilize peasant support, the Red Army—now renamed the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—devoted major attention to politically indoctrinating its recruits—so that they would not exploit local farmers, or steal food and supplies, or molest peasant women. In this respect, their wartime behavior quite compared very favorably to that of their more undisciplined-- and increasingly predatory—Nationalist counterparts.
Meanwhile, Yan’an served as a magnet for patriotic Chinese from across the country, as tens of thousands of people made their way to the Communist base area between 1937 and 1942 to join the anti-Japanese resistance. (Show wartime “study session” at Yan’an)

By early 1941, the fragile “united front,” in effect between the Communists and the Nationalists since the “Xi’an Incident” of December 1936, had become deeply frayed. Sporadic armed clashes between the two sides were increasing in frequency, and both sides now seemed less interested in cooperating against the Japanese than in maximizing their own political and military gains. The tensions between them reached a boiling point in July 1941, when several thousand Communist troops from the PLA’s New Fourth Army were ambushed by Nationalist forces in the mountains of south-central China. The Communists suffered over 3,000 soldiers killed; additional thousands were shipped off to GMD prison camps. Although from a purely military standpoint the massacre was a disaster for the PLA, the Communists were able to capitalize on the “New Fourth Army Incident” in their propaganda, using it as a concrete example of Chiang K’ai-shek’s cold-blooded perfidy and lack of sincerity in resisting Japan.

With the anti-Japanese war going badly for Chiang K’ai-shek, the lack of significant foreign military assistance was proving critical. Although the USSR had provided a certain amount of air defense support against Japan from 1937 to 1939, the conclusion of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact of 1939 meant that the USSR was no longer an ally of China against Japan. For its part, the United States in this period sympathized with China’s plight and provided a certain amount of economic support. To prop up the GMD’s plummeting currency, Washington bought up millions of dollars in devalued Chinese yuan, while also providing $40 million in loans to Chiang’s government-in-exile in Chongqing. But American largesse was sharply limited by President Roosevelt’s declared policy of neutrality in the Sino-Japanese War.

The first significant boost in U.S. military aid to China came in late 1940, when FDR authorized the “informal” transfer of 100 U.S. Air Force P-40 fighter planes, and their “volunteer” pilots, to Chongqing. Under the command of ex-US Army pilot Claire Chennault, who had been detached from active military service to serve as an informal advisor to Chiang K’ai-shek, these “Flying Tigers” helped to defend the Nationalist capital against Japanese air attacks. (show photo of Flying Tigers).

But foreign assistance was merely a drop in a very large—and increasingly leaky—bucket. On the ground in Chongqing and throughout the GMD-held areas of southwest China, the Nationalists continued to squander both their limited resources and, increasingly, the goodwill of the people they had sworn to defend.

Under these circumstances, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor of December 7, 1941, came as a godsend to Chiang K’ai-shek. No longer could America remain “neutral” in the war in Asia: With the attack on the the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the defeat of Japan—and the survival of “Free China”—had become vital American national interests.
Suddenly, U.S. financial and military assistance began pouring into China. In 1942 alone, Washington provided Chiang with over a billion dollars in lend-lease supplies and unsecured loans. At the same time, Roosevelt named a senior American military officer, General Joseph Stilwell, as commander-in-chief of US forces in China.

Almost immediately upon arriving in China, “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell came into conflict with Chiang K’ai-shek. Stilwell wanted to reorganize the Nationalist military command, to get rid of incompetent and corrupt officers, and to introduce proper military training and discipline among conscripts. He also wanted Chiang’s troops to play a more pro-active role in seeking out and engaging Japanese ground forces. In his diaries he disparagingly referred to the recalcitrant Chiang as “the Peanut”. (show photo of Chiang and Stilwell)

At every turn, Chiang resisted Stilwell’s “meddling.” Expressing his displeasure to FDR, Chiang requested that Stilwell be recalled. When Roosevelt balked, Chiang obliquely threatened to withdraw from the war effort if Stilwell wasn’t removed. Since the United States needed Chiang’s troops (bad as they were) to help pin down a million Japanese ground troops in China (so they wouldn’t be available to fight American troops elsewhere in the Pacific), Roosevelt eventually capitulated to Chiang’s blackmail. In October 1944 he pulled Stilwell out of China and replaced him with General Albert C. Wedemeyer, who, unlike Stilwell, was an unabashed admirer of Chiang K’ai-shek.

Another U.S. advisor, Patrick J. Hurley, a one-time coal miner and mule Skinner from Oklahoma who had become a lawyer in mid-life, was also sent to Chongqing to help smooth relations with the prickly Generalissimo (or “Gimo,” for short). (As a historical note, Patrick Hurley often referred to himself as “General Hurley”, though he held no military commission). (show photo of Hurley and/or Wedemeyer)

In order to keep American goodwill—and material assistance—flowing uninterrupted to Chongqing, Chiang K’ai-shek wangled an invitation for his elegant—and eloquent—wife, Soong Mei-ling, to visit the United States in January 1943. The story of how the invitation was secured raised a number of eyebrows, with its hint of soap opera and seduction.

It seems that Soong’s invitation was personally issued by Wendell Willkie. A wealthy Republican Party patrician, Willkie been defeated by FDR in the 1940 presidential election. Roosevelt had then sent Willkie to China on a good-will mission. While visiting the Chiangs in Chongqing in October 1942, the dapper Mr. Willkie was clearly smitten with the flirtatious Mme. Chiang. One evening, while attending a diplomatic reception, Wilkie and Soong slipped quietly out of the reception hall. Wilkie, age 50, returned to his guesthouse at 4:00 am. According to a reliable witness, he looked “very buoyant... cocky as a young college student after a successful night with a girl”. That evening, Wendell Willkie invited Madame Chiang to visit the United States. (Jonathan Fenby, Chiang Kai-shek and the China he Lost)
With her sultry, sophisticated, good looks, her Christian missionary background, her Wellesley education, and her flawless, unaccented spoken English, Mme. Chiang was the perfect “goodwill ambassador.” She wowed packed audiences in New York, Chicago, Hollywood and Washington DC—including a private dinner with the Roosevelts at the White House and a special address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress—where she was introduced by Wendell Willkie.

At Madison Square Garden, she was introduced to a capacity crowd as “an avenging angel…. a soldier unafraid to fight for justice.” To a Hollywood Bowl audience packed with cinematic celebrities including Mary Pickford, Rita Hayworth, Marlene Dietrich, Ingrid Bergman, Ginger Rogers, Shirley Temple and David O. Selznick, Soong Mei-ling described in vivid detail the horrors of the Japanese “Rape of Nanking.” There were few dry eyes in house. By the end of her coast-to-coast speaking tour she had won the hearts of the American people as well as the U.S. Congress. In the process, she raised tens of millions of dollars in private donations for her charitable fund, United China Relief. (S. Seagrave, The Soong Dynasty, pp.386-391). (show photo of Soong addressing Congress)

While Chiang and his media-savvy wife were busy alternately seducing and blackmailing Washington, the Chinese Communists launched a goodwill offensive of their own, extending an invitation to a U.S. military advisory group to visit their wartime Yan’an headquarters. Against the advice of the Gimo, the “Dixie Mission,” as the U.S. advisory group was called, set out by airplane from Chongqing in July 1944. When they reached Yan’an, they were cordially welcomed by PR-conscious Communist leaders, including Mao himself as well as Generals Zhou Enlai and Zhu De. The party chieftains took great pains to ensure that their American visitors would receive a favorable (albeit highly gilded) impression of Chinese Communism. The image they sought to convey was one of the CCP as a moderate, progressive, and democratic movement of agrarian reformers. (show photo of Dixie Mission)

After Patrick Hurley was named US ambassador to China by FDR, he expressed a keen desire to participate in direct talks with the Chinese Communists. In November of 1944 he flew, unannounced, to the Communists’ headquarters in Yan’an. Arriving in a driving rain, he stood stiffly at attention, then deplaned briskly. Attired in full-dress military uniform adorned with three rows of military campaign ribbons, he paused to have his picture taken with CCP leaders, who had been hastily assembled for Hurley’s surprise visit. As the rain continued to fall, Ambassador Hurley startled everyone present by emitting a blood-curdling Choctaw war-whoop.

Though he prided himself on his negotiating skills, and though he conducted several rounds of “hands on” discussions with top CCP leaders-- even accompanying Zhou Enlai to Chongqing to meet with Chiang K’ai-shek on one occasion-- Hurley had only the vaguest understanding of the issues that divided the Nationalists and Communists; and he made no progress in bridging the vast divide that separated them. (show photo of Hurley in Yan’an)
As members of the Dixie Mission continued their observations in Yan’an, their findings tended to be sharply at odds with declared American policy, which held that Chiang K’ai-shek and the GMD represented the one best hope for China’s democratic salvation. In a series of internal memos, members of the Dixie Mission portrayed the leadership of the Guomindang as corrupt, ineffectual, and alarmingly isolated from the common people. By contrast, the Communists were found to be well-led, highly-disciplined and uncorrupt. In one rather prescient memo, a State Department observer attached to the Dixie Mission, named John Stewart Service, predicted that if present trends continued—with the Guomindang becoming increasingly undemocratic, unpopular and economically irresponsible-- the future of China would belong not to the Nationalists but to the Communists. But Service’s memo never reached Washington. It was quashed by Chiang’s chief American patron in Chongqing, Ambassador Hurley. And for the remainder of the War, Chiang K’ai-shek and his irrepressible wife, Soong Mei-ling, remained the unchallenged American symbols of “Free China.”

When the war against Japan ended abruptly in August 1945, it was not mainly due to the military efforts of either the Nationalists or the Communists. It was American air and naval power, culminating in two atomic bombs being dropped on the Japanese homeland, that ultimately proved decisive. (show atom bomb blast at Hiroshima) For their part, the Chinese Nationalists, while suffering catastrophic losses of manpower, territory, and materiel during the war, inflicted little lasting damage upon the Japanese enemy. The Generalissimo, of whom Stilwell once said that he was more concerned with husbanding his forces for the ultimate showdown with the Communists than with actively engaging Japan on the battlefield, emerged from the war a proud --but weakened--warrior. But he did have one important ace-in-the hole: the firm support of the United States.

Meanwhile, the Communists, employing to maximum effect Mao’s policy of mobilizing anti-Japanese patriotic resistance, had recruited hundreds of thousands of new soldiers and millions of new civilian supporters in the Japanese-occupied rural areas of north China. As an indicator of Communist wartime success, between 1937 and 1945 CCP membership increased more than twenty-fold, from 50,000 to 1.2 million, while the PLA increased its troop strength from 80,000 to 900,000. In that same eight-year period the civilian population under Communist administrative control grew from one million to 95.5 million.

Returning to a point made at the outset of this lecture, it would appear that Zhou Enlai was not greatly exaggerating when he thanked Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka in 1972 for his country’s role in aiding the Communist Party’s rise to power in China. Without the Japanese invasion, the Chinese revolution might well have had a different outcome.

Next time we shall examine the post-war situation in China, and the resumption of civil war between Mao Zedong and Chiang.K’ai-shek.
Lecture 13: Chiang’s Last Stand (1945-1949)

As soon as the war against Japan ended, there was a brief period when all sides held their collective breath, uncertain about the future. Could the uneasy 8-year truce between Mao and Chiang be extended? Could some sort of power-sharing arrangement avert the renewal of hostilities? Or would these two old and bitter enemies renew their longstanding civil war, with unknown consequences for China and the world at large?

For the United States, a top priority after the defeat of Japan was to stabilize the political situation in China in order to prevent an open rupture between the two sides. Toward this end, the top-ranking US representative in China, Ambassador Patrick Hurley, flew to Yan’an for a second time in the summer of 1945. His mission? To coax Mao Zedong to return with him to Chongqing to talk with Chiang K’ai-shek about creating a coalition government. Fortuitously, both Mao and Chiang were eager to portray themselves to the world (and to the Americans in particular) as cooperative, peace-loving democrats; and so both sides readily agreed to Hurley’s proposal; and when Chairman Mao deplaned in Chongqing in late August (it was the Chairman’s very first airplane flight—he had a well-known “fear of flying”), he was duly—albeit rather coolly—welcomed by the Generalissimo—an occasion that featured a famous photo op showing them drinking a toast together. (show photo of Mao, Chiang and Hurley drinking a toast in Chongqing)

But even as the two leaders toasted and talked, Chiang K’ai-shek was preparing to deal a severe blow to hopes for a negotiated agreement. With major logistical support from the U.S. Air Force, Chiang’s forces quickly moved to reoccupy major Chinese cities as the defeated Japanese forces withdrew. By the autumn of 1945, the Nationalists had occupied Shanghai, Nanjing Wuhan, Tianjin, and Beijing.

But in these recaptured cities the GMD faced a host of new problems. For one thing, Communist partisans in the urban areas, rather than actively contest the GMD’s return, melted away into the countryside, where they were able to practice Mao’s guerilla tactics of operating among the peasants as “fish in water.” By contrast, the Nationalists, lacking any base of popular support in rural areas, became increasingly “ghettoized”—confined to operating inside their urban enclaves.

But even within these major urban strongholds trouble was brewing. The GMD’s occupation policies had been hastily conceived and implemented, and they lacked effective safeguards against predatory behavior by Nationalist forces. Consequently, the recovery of Japanese-held cities and towns rapidly degenerated into an opportunistic and undisciplined exercise in looting, profiteering, embezzlement, and general corruption by Nationalist forces. Acting more like scavengers than liberators, GMD officials grabbed for themselves and their associates all the confiscated Japanese properties, factories, food and funds they could get their hands on. And they further indulged themselves in such decadent pastimes as gambling, opium and prostitution.

In north China, one foreign reporter noted shocking acts of pilferage committed by occupation officials: “There has been great confusion in the takeover… First there was a
scramble for industrial equipment, then for public buildings and real estate, and now
government officials are competing for furniture…. A certain army officer has already
taken over several thousand houses” [S. Pepper, Civil War in China, p. 26].

Even the Generalissimo was alarmed by the lawless behavior of his representatives. In a
letter to the mayor of Shanghai, he wrote:

It has been reliably brought to my [attention] that the military, political and party
officials of Nanking, Shanghai, Peiping and Tientsin [sic] have been leading
extravagant lives, indulging in prostitution and gambling, and have forcibly
occupied the people’s larger buildings as offices under assumed names… I have
been greatly distressed… on hearing of such conditions…. Any case of
blackmailing or illegal occupation of the people’s houses must be severely dealt
with…. No culprit is to be harbored by personal favors. [Ibid].

If only! Compounding the problems created by predatory Nationalist officials and army
officers was the sharp inflationary surge that followed the GMD’s reoccupation of
China’s cities. In many cases, opportunistic officials from Chongqing brought truckloads
of Nationalist currency with them when they returned to the eastern seaboard. Because
coastal cities were in increasingly dire financial straits due to the collapse of the Japanese
“puppet” currency at the end of the war, Nationalist carpetbaggers (euphemistically
called “reconversion officers”) were able to buy up vast tracts of residential real estate
and distressed commercial property at bargain basement prices. These urban predators
were also able to reap huge windfall profits by purchasing gold at low fixed prices and
then hoarding it. With inflation surging ever upward, by the beginning of 1946 the cost of
living index in Shanghai had spiralled to 900 times its pre-war level.

But there was more. Further compounding the Nationalists’ reconversion difficulties was
their policy of lenient treatment toward those Chinese officials and military officers who
had collaborated with the Japanese. With post-war anger against Japan running very
high, the Nationalists were caught on the horns of a dilemma: If they punished all high-
and middle-ranking Chinese civil and military “puppets” who had collaborated (and there
were a lot of them in the occupied areas), they risked driving large numbers of
experienced administrators, policemen and army officers into the arms of the
Communists. Yet if they embraced the collaborators, they risked further alienating the
general public.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, the Nationalist reconversion authorities tried to
have it both ways. Publicly, they renounced former collaborators as criminals and traitors
and executed several high-profile quislings—-including our old friend Chen Gongbo, who
after defecting from the CCP in 1922 went on to become a key associate of the left-wing
GMD leader, Wang Jingwei. Like Wang, Chen despised Chiang K’ai-shek; and after the
Japanese invasion the two men elected to collaborate with the Japanese rather than join
Chiang’s government in exile in Chongqing. Wang died in Japan during the latter stages
of the war, while Chen was executed for treason in 1946.
But while a few traitorous “big fish” were being publicly fried, the Nationalists quietly and without fanfare went about the task of rehabilitating tens of thousands of lesser-known governmental and civic collaborators, employing them in a variety of official posts to help restore urban services and to maintain law and order.

As the Nationalists continued their urban reconversion project in the autumn of 1945, a new and deadly competition was taking shape in China’s far northeast. At stake was control over Manchuria, heartland of Japan’s military-industrial empire in Asia.

Unlike China’s eastern seaboard, where the Nationalists enjoyed a strong numerical and logistical advantage in the race to reclaim urban centers from the surrendering Japanese, in Manchuria the Communists held a distinct advantage. They had been conducting guerilla operations in the Manchurian countryside for years, while the Nationalists had no significant presence there at all.

Though both sides coveted the Manchurian prize, neither side was immediately able to claim it. For under the terms of the February 1945 Yalta Agreement, signed by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, the Soviet Union had promised to enter Manchuria in the final stages of the war against Japan. And when the war ended— with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki— over a million Soviet troops were on hand to accept Japan’s surrender.

As stipulated in the Yalta agreement, the pullout of Soviet forces from Manchuria was due to take place by early November of 1945. But as the withdrawal date drew near, Chiang K’ai-shek found that he did not have enough troops in place in the Northeast to prevent the Communists from reaping the benefits of the Soviet withdrawal.

Playing for time, Chiang struck a cynical bargain with the Russians—who agreed to delay their departure long enough for Chiang to airlift half a million Nationalist troops into the major cities in the Northeast.

For their part, the Soviets used the extra time to systematically plunder the extensive Japanese industrial base in Manchuria, removing $2 billion dollars worth of industrial plant and equipment. About the only thing left behind by the departing Soviet occupation forces were hundreds of thousands of Japanese rifles and assorted small arms, many of which fell into the hands of PLA guerillas.

Commenting on the post-war Stalinist pillaging of Manchuria, one United Nations observer described the scene he encountered there in surrealist terms, as if a “giant swarm of steel-eating locusts had descended, devouring everything in sight.” (“The Struggle for China,” BBC film documentary, 1972).

With a strong assist from Claire Chennault and the US air transport services he commanded, Chiang’s troops reoccupied Manchuria’s key cities without a struggle. His confidence growing, the Gimo now demanded, as a precondition for any power-sharing
agreement with the Communists, that all of Manchuria should be recognized as belonging to the Nationalist government.

But the Nationalist commander-in-chief had overplayed his hand. Even as Chiang’s forces were re-occupying the major cities of the northeast, 100,000 PLA guerilla fighters, under the command of General Lin Biao, were infiltrating the Manchurian countryside. Traveling mostly on foot and on horseback, they readied themselves for the forthcoming showdown. It was a classic scenario straight out of Mao Zedong’s theory of “people’s war.

By November 1945, with the two sides positioning themselves for a final showdown, and with little or no progress having been made on a coalition agreement, Ambassador Hurley submitted his resignation. Two weeks later, President Truman dispatched General George C. Marshall to replace Hurley as his “special representative” in China. Marshall’s primary task was to keep the two sides talking in an effort to head off an all-out civil war.

General Marshall remained in China for thirteen months. For most of this time, both Chiang K’ai-shek and the Communists’ chief negotiator, Zhou Enlai, continued to pay lip service to the American mediation effort—this despite the fact that neither side had any faith whatsoever in the likelihood of a peaceful resolution of their differences.

In March of 1946, with the icy Manchurian winter beginning to thaw, Communist forces attacked a strategic railway junction in southern Manchuria, cutting off the GMD’s main supply lines to the northeast. With Communist troops controlling the rural countryside and Nationalist forces entrenched in the cities, the stage was set for a showdown.

Unfortunately for Chiang, he mistook the PLA’s tactic of avoiding large-scale, pitched battles as a sign of Communist military weakness. His confidence growing, he ordered one of his field commanders to attack Yan’an, the Communists’ central headquarters. It was intended as a major coup, a bold stroke to convincingly demonstrate the GMD’s invincibility. (show map of military situation in 1946-47)

Unknown to the Generalissimo, however, the personal secretary of the general in charge of the Yan’an offensive was a long-time Communist secret agent, who was able to alert the Maoists in plenty of time to allow them to evacuate. Thus, when the Nationalist forces reached the Communist headquarters, they found an empty nest. Though dutifully heralded by Chiang as a decisive blow against the “communist bandits,” it was at best a hollow victory. As Mao himself prophetically put it, “We will give Yan’an to Chiang; but he will give us China.” (J. Fenby, Modern China, p. 338).

For the second time in a little over a decade, Chiang’s obsession with capturing the Communists’ Yan’an stronghold ended in disaster. In 1936, he had been kidnapped by the patriotic “Young Marshal,” Zhang Xueliang. A decade later his decision to storm Yan’an resulted in his troops badly over-extending their supply lines and their strategic command-and-control capability. With the PLA in control of the surrounding countryside, the Communists were able to disrupt vital Nationalist rail and
communications links, effectively cutting off the GMD’s urban strongholds. Though the Nationalist armies still enjoyed roughly a 2:1 numerical advantage over the forces of the PLA (approximately 3.7 million soldiers to 1.95 million), the bare military odds were beginning to narrow rapidly.

In January 1947 General Marshall returned to Washington, with little to show for his 13-month effort to avert a civil war. By then, the PLA had achieved sufficient strength to concentrate its forces for offensive operations against Nationalist strongholds. Also by then, the futility of Chiang’s strategy of simultaneously recapturing and then holding all Japanese- and Communist-occupied territories began to become apparent.

One of Chiang’s more successful strategies during the Northern Expedition of 1926-27—the co-optation of regional militarists—now came back to haunt him. Several of his top field commanders were, in fact, aging former warlords, whose allegiance to the GMD was suspect and who were now proving increasingly inept. Ignoring Chiang’s directives, they imposed their own form of local order—often brutal and predatory—on the populations they were nominally committed to defending.

When the Communists went on the offensive in mid-1947, the capital city of Shandong province, Jinan, was among the first to fall. Over 100,000 Nationalist troops were killed or wounded in an eight-day PLA assault. Further to the north, Lin Biao, adopting tactics of “sudden concentration and sudden dispersal,” assembled a force of 700,000 Communist fighters to encircle the industrial city of Changchun, in Manchuria’s Jilin province, Lin’s forces launched a siege that lasted five months, ending in mass defection by the starvation-weakened GMD garrison forces. (show map of Manchurian campaign, 1947-48).

Thereafter, the Nationalists’ heavily garrisoned cities in the northeast began to fall like so many pieces of overripe fruit. Jinzhou, in Liaoning province, was the next to go, followed by Mukden (aka Shenyang). Altogether, the Nationalists lost 400,000 troops in the battle for Manchuria. Even worse for the GMD, whole armies now began to defect en masse, as the erosion of popular confidence in the GMD created a crisis of political will and legitimacy that served to accelerate the Nationalists’ military deterioration. Troop morale was further lowered when Chiang ordered his field commanders to blow up their own arsenals, bridges, railroad depots and food stores, rather than letting them fall into Communist hands.

The decisive blow was delivered at the battle of Huai Hai, which commenced in November 1948. Half a million Nationalist troops were surrounded in the city of Xuzhou, a major railway hub in northwest Jiangsu province. Conducted in three distinct phases over a two-month period, the Huai Hai battle resulted in the decimation of five entire Nationalist army groups, the defection of hundreds of thousands of GMD conscripts (along with their officers), and the capture by the Communists of vast stores of American-supplied weapons. (show map of East China campaign)
As the two-month battle of Huai Hai ground toward its inevitable conclusion, a PLA advance unit approached the northern bank of the Yangzi River, opposite Nanjing. Nanjing had been restored as the Nationalist’s capital city in 1946, and was bustling with government activity. But with Communists now on the far bank of the river, Nanjing’s governing class experienced massive pre-combat jitters. Anticipating an imminent PLA attack, hundreds of high-level GMD officials and military officers beat a hasty retreat by air, while thousands of others, less well-connected, jammed onto so-called “dispersal trains” heading south. Left without an effective governing apparatus, Chiang K’ai-shek announced that he was stepping down as president, in favor of Vice-President Li Zongren.

Before leaving Nanjing in January 1949, Chiang visited the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, at the edge of the city, for one last time. Ascending its 392 steps, he bowed three times before the stately marble likeness of the founder of the Republic of China. Visibly dispirited, he then flew off to Hangzhou. Even the habitually upbeat Time magazine now observed that Chiang’s prestige had “sunk lower than the Yangzi.” (J. Fenby, Modern China, p. 343)

Further to the north, PLA troops entered Tianjin in early January. The inhabitants surrendered without a fight. Beijing was next. At the end of January, the Nationalist General Fu Zuoyi surrendered the city—after having first negotiated his own exclusion from the Communists’ list of most-wanted war criminals. (show photo of PLA entering Beijing)

Marching six abreast in icy weather, a PLA advance guard marched into Beijing, followed by students bearing portraits of top Communist leaders, and soldiers riding in abandoned American trucks. A large portrait of Chiang K’ai-shek, hanging at the entrance to the Imperial Palace, was replaced by an even larger portrait of Mao Zedong. (Today, sixty years on, it still hangs there, guarding the entrance to the Forbidden City.) Chairman Mao himself entered the city in a procession of two dozen motor vehicles. “Today,” he said to Zhou Enlai, riding next to him, “we are going to sit for the imperial examination.” “We should be able to pass it,” replied Zhou, ever the obliging yes-man. (Fenby, Modern China, p. 344).

In the spring of 1949, with the Communists continuing to sweep down from the north, the Nationalists concentrated their forces along the southern bank of the Yangzi River in preparation for a major defensive stand. GMD generals confidently declared the mile-wide, slow-moving Yangzi to be virtually impassible and predicted that the Communists would suffer catastrophic losses if they attempted a mass crossing. In late April, however, the PLA surprised the defenders by enlisting the services of thousands of local “boat people” to ferry them across the river under cover of darkness. When the Nationalist troops on the south bank saw the approaching armada of small fishing boats, many panicked and fled. The last major natural barrier to the Communist conquest of China had been breached. (show photo or artist’s depiction of Yangzi crossing)
Two days later, Communist troops entered Nanjing, taking the city without a fight. As the civilian populace looked on, last-ditch Nationalist defenders blew up the railroad station before stripping off their uniforms to blend in with the crowd. In the confusion, the Nationalist Mayor of Nanjing attempted to drive off with 300 million yuan in cash; but his chauffeur and bodyguards beat him up and took the cash. Meanwhile, roving bands of looters plundered government administrative offices.

The “liberation” of Nanjing was followed swiftly by the capture of Wuhan. Meanwhile, two hundred miles downriver, Hangzhou fell, leaving the vital Nationalist stronghold of Shanghai isolated and vulnerable. In Shanghai’s outlying rural suburbs, heavy fighting between Maoist guerillas and GMD regulars broke out, creating a massive flood of refugees.

As the PLA tightened its noose around Shanghai, food supplies grew short. Within the city a black market flourished, and inflation skyrocketed. Profiteers, thieves, and suspected Communists alike were paraded through the streets in trucks by Nationalist soldiers before being shot in a public park.

The city fell to the Communists in late May, as PLA forces marched into Shanghai’s Foreign Concession, where they hoisted a giant portrait of Mao outside the iconic Great World Entertainment Center—once a symbol of Shanghai’s decadent, freewheeling culture of the roaring ’20s. (show photo of “liberation” of Shanghai)

As the victorious PLA continued its southward march, they took Changsha in August, Canton and Xiamen in October, and Chongqing in November. Choosing Beijing as his new capital, on October 1, Mao Zedong ascended a platform atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace at the southern entrance to the Forbidden City. Looking down from the same majestic edifice where a succession of Chinese emperors and court officials had displayed the awesome might of the Middle Kingdom, Mao proudly proclaimed the birth of the People’s Republic of China. (show photo of Mao giving speech)

Meanwhile, a defeated and dispirited Chiang K’ai-shek, having forfeited the trust and confidence of his own people, quietly left the Chinese Mainland in December of 1949, retreating to the island of Taiwan, 95 miles off the coast of Fujian provence. The revolution was over. The Mandate of Heaven had changed hands.

Postscript: For decades afterwards, scholars, journalists and diplomats would debate the root causes of the Communist victory in China. Was it mainly due to Mao Zedong’s brilliant military thinking, and his keen awareness of the importance of mobilizing peasant support? Or was it primarily the result of Chiang K’ai-shek’s monumental ego, his inability to limit corruption among his subordinates, and his insensitivity to the concerns of ordinary Chinese? Or perhaps the key factor was the horrendous human suffering and economic dislocation induced by the brutal Japanese occupation, actions which would have sorely tested the governing capacity of any regime, let alone a brand new, untested regime that was already facing a serious domestic insurgency.
A full and complete accounting of the Communist victory requires some mix of these three factors, individually seasoned to taste: Mao’s brilliance, Chiang’s hubris, and Japan’s savagery all played a part. But one explanation we may comfortably reject out of hand is the notion, advanced in the early 1950s, that Free China was “lost” in 1949 because of the sinister machinations of alleged Communist sympathizers within the U.S. government -- people like John Stewart Service, whose sharply critical wartime appraisals of GMD corruption and ineffectiveness were alleged by some to have shaken America’s confidence in Chiang K’ai-shek. Such tortured logic fails to withstand even cursory scrutiny. In point of fact, China was never “ours” to win or to lose.

Next time we will examine the early years of the People’s Republic of China. The period from 1950 to 1956 has sometimes been referred to as the “golden age” of Chinese communism; and there is some truth to this. But it was also a period of increasingly stressful relations between the Communist Party and the Chinese “people.” And as we shall see, societal tensions that first emerged in these early years would later help to shape the massive national traumas that defined Mao’s declining years-- most notably the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

End of Part I
The Fall and Rise of China

Part II: The Age of Mao Zedong, 1949-1976

Lectures 14-28
Lecture 14: “The Chinese People Have Stood Up!” (1949-1952)

A few days before Mao Zedong proclaimed the birth of the People’s Republic, he addressed the inaugural session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in Beijing. In his speech, Mao famously claimed that “the Chinese people… have now stood up.” (Zhongguo renmin xianzai zhanqlai le.) For all its theatrical drama, however, it was only a half-truth.

To be sure, the upstart Chinese Communist Party had come from nowhere, out of the wilderness, to miraculously defeat the much larger, US-backed forces of Chiang K’ai-shek. And to be sure, they had done it by stressing ingenuity, improvisation and self-reliance, making use of whatever materials they had at hand, while receiving precious little aid, comfort or assistance from the Soviet Union. Indeed, Stalin had essentially written off the Chinese Communists’ prospects for seizing power. In 1945, following Japan’s defeat, the Soviet dictator had strongly urged Mao to form a coalition government with Chiang K’ai-shek. Stalin simply didn’t believe Mao could defeat his old adversary. Four years later, when the CCP emerged victorious from the civil war, Stalin engaged in a rare display of contrition, apologizing for his lack of confidence in his Chinese comrades.

Though the Chinese Communists had won the war, they had not yet secured the peace. Devastated by more than three decades of almost continuous revolution, civil war, and foreign invasion, the Chinese economy was a shambles. With at least 30 million more mouths to feed than in 1937, total farm output in 1949 remained well below its prewar peak levels. As for China’s cities, four years of Nationalist corruption and mismanagement had robbed them of their economic dynamism, leaving them awash in demobilized GMD soldiers, displaced government functionaries, and “puppet” collaborators—many of whom sought to conceal their shadowy pasts. Finally, in the immediate post-“liberation” confusion of 1949, a plurality of political groups and ideologies competed for influence in the intellectual marketplace.

As for the Chinese Communists themselves, having operated in the primitive “mud and shit” of the rural hinterland for more than twenty years, they knew precious little about how to organize and run an urban economy. Indeed, notwithstanding Mao’s boastful bravado, it would take several more decades, marked intermittently by Herculean national achievements and horrific national disasters, for the Chinese people to truly “stand up.”

In a remarkable speech that he delivered at the end of June 1949, entitled “On People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” Mao acknowledged the difficult, uncharted road that lay ahead. “Soon,” he said, “we shall put aside some of the things we know well and be compelled to do things we don’t know well.” Acknowledging the CCP’s lack of experience in urban reconstruction, he said: (show cover of Mao’s speech, from his Selected Works)
Our past work is only the first step in a long march of ten-thousand li. Remnants of the enemy have yet to be wiped out. [and] the serious task of economic construction lies before us. . . . We must learn to do economic work from all who know how, no matter who they are. We must esteem them as teachers, learning from them respectfully and conscientiously. We must not pretend to know when we do not know. We must not put on bureaucratic airs. (Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Zedong, p. 313)

Desperately in need of international assistance to consolidate his new regime and rebuild its shattered economy, Mao swallowed his pride, bowing long and deep in the direction of the Soviet Union and its “wise leader,” Comrade Stalin—this despite the fact that the Soviets had essentially written off Mao and his guerilla army throughout most of the 1930s and ‘40s. “Just imagine,” Mao swooned, “If the Soviet Union had not existed . . . could we have won victory? Obviously not . . . . The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is our best teacher, and we must learn from it.” (ibid., pp 307, 314). (With the Cold War now blooming in earnest, Mao was not about to bite the only hand that had the capacity—and the willingness—to feed him.)

As far as looking to the West for inspiration and support was concerned, that was a different matter altogether. Emulating the West had been tried before, more than a half-century earlier, and had been found seriously wanting. As we saw in an earlier lecture, Mao was quite blunt about the role of the West in China’s early development. His words, written in 1949 bear repeating here:

“From the time of China’s defeat in the Opium War . . . Chinese progressives went through untold hardships in their quest for truth from the Western countries. [Prominent Chinese intellectuals] . . . who sought progress would read any book containing new knowledge from the West . . . Every effort was made to learn from the West . . . “(Mao, “On People’s Democratic Dictatorship”)

Yet the results were disappointing. As Western imperialism continued to batter away at China’s defenses, eroding Chinese pride and sovereignty, admiration turned to anger, and envy to resentment. As Mao himself put it,

“Imperialist aggression shattered the fond dreams of the Chinese about learning from the West. It was very odd—why were the teachers always committing aggression against their pupil? . . . [Then] the Russians made the October Revolution and created the world’s first socialist state . . . Then, and only then, did the Chinese enter an entirely new era in their thinking . . . and the face of China began to change.” (ibid.)

If any doubts remained about China’s future ideological orientation, Mao quickly dispelled them. Summing up the history of the Chinese revolution, he said: “Forty years of experience have taught us [that] . . . all Chinese without exception must lean either to the side of imperialism or to the side of socialism. Sitting on the fence will not do; nor is there a third road.” (ibid., p. 306).
With this seminal statement, Mao set the political compass for the People’s Republic of China. Externally, China would align itself with the “socialist camp,” led by the U.S.S.R, eschewing collaboration with the “imperialist camp” headed by the United States.

Within China, the policy prescribed by Mao for dealing with putative class enemies—whose ranks included former GMD officials and military officers as well as feudal landlords and other assorted “rightist” elements—was a dualistic one, combining leniency toward those who admitted the error of their ways and conscientiously turned over a new leaf, with iron dictatorship over traitors, diehard counter-revolutionaries and others who betrayed or oppressed the laboring masses.

This bipolar dualism was built into the very name of the new government, which was defined as a “People’s Democratic Dictatorship” (Renmin Minzhu Juanzheng). Its core principle was the offer of full rights of democratic citizenship and participation to members of the laboring classes, who were collectively known as “the people.” On the other hand, those designated as “enemies of the people” were deprived of all political rights and were subjected to the ruthless dictatorship of the Party-state. If these categories sometimes seemed a bit opaque or stereotyped, investigations could be undertaken in individual cases to resolve any lingering uncertainty.

During the Yan’an period the Chinese Communists had gained considerable experience in drawing the line between “friends” and “enemies,” and in isolating and controlling the latter. Throughout World War II, Yan’an had served as a powerful anti-Japanese magnet, attracting Chinese patriots from various classes, strata, and political persuasions, from illiterate peasants to highly-cultured intellectuals, from social democrats to Trotskyites. To bring ideological unity and political discipline to this rather unruly melange of disparate social classes and forces, Mao Zedong in 1942 convened a lengthy, Party-led forum on art and literature. His intent was to popularize a common, unified set of Communist Party attitudes, values, orientations and work methods, and to embed these firmly in all who wished to partake of the Yan’an experience.

Although Mao’s ostensible focus was on the reform of art and literature, the Yan’an Forum of 1942 was no mere academic seminar on varieties of cultural expression. After demanding that all artistic and literary workers must faithfully reflect and serve the political interests of workers and peasants, Mao went on to stress the need to “rectify” the incorrect thoughts and class standpoints of all Party members. In order to ensure that “correct’ ideas and actions would prevail, all CCP members would be required to undergo intensive, group-oriented “study and criticism.” At these sessions, trained cadres would read out key central Party texts (often Mao’s own speeches), highlighting their main ideas and explaining their significance. Next, each participant would be required, by turns, to “speak from the heart,” revealing their innermost responses to what was being discussed. In the course of self-examination each person was expected to openly acknowledge any lingering doubts or uncertainties they might have about Party policies. They were further expected to expose and criticize any politically incorrect behavior on
the part of their friends and co-workers. And finally, they were required to disclose any errors or imperfections in their own work.

Those who unburdened themselves to the satisfaction of the group’s leaders were considered “rescued,” and were welcomed back into the embrace of the Party. But those who were stubborn or insincere in their self-examinations, or who were suspected of harboring reactionary views, were subjected to varying degrees of discipline, including, in some cases, incarceration and physical abuse, even torture. For any who might have viewed Mao and the CCP essentially as a romantic band of land-reforming liberals, the Yan’an experience would prove to be a real eye-opener.

With the Communist victory of 1949, the rectification campaign model first devised in Yan’an was applied to Chinese society as a whole. “The people” and their “enemies” were now sharply delimited, at least notionally, with the former category encompassing China’s workers and peasants, who formed the “core” of the Party’s support base, along with members of the intelligentsia, the petit bourgeoisie and even the national bourgeoisie (including law-abiding businessmen, managers and entrepreneurs). In extending an olive branch to members of these classes, the Party’s goal was to enlist their talents in the work of restoring China’s shattered economy. By way of contrast, “enemies of the people” included landlords, members of the urban upper classes (or “big bourgeoisie”) and their local Chinese agents, known as compradors, as well as hard-boiled GMD reactionaries and assorted “counter-revolutionaries” and “rightists.”

The last-named label—“rightists”—was applied to tens of thousands of so-called “bourgeois intellectuals” who had either actively supported the old regime or maintained suspicious foreign contacts, or simply resisted the Party’s efforts to impose uniform standards of “correct” thinking on the population at large. These independent thinkers now found themselves subjected to an intensive process of group criticism and confrontation known as “thought reform.”

In the process of thought reform, the intellectuals (many of whom had been educated abroad—which was itself grounds for suspicion) were required to recount their personal histories and write lengthy, detailed confessions in which they revealed their personal contacts and humbly acknowledged their questionable past actions – including things as trivial as associating casually with foreigners, or thinking politically “impure” thoughts. They were often required to go through several successive iterations of their written confessions, until these were judged to be “sincere,” whereupon they would be “liberated” and allowed to resume work.

Along with the thought reform of bourgeois intellectuals, a campaign to “suppress counterrevolutionaries” was another innovation introduced by the new regime. Launched in 1950 by one of Mao’s top lieutenants, party organizational specialist Liu Shaoqi, this campaign was designed to root out those groups and individuals who were actively resisting the new regime, including bandit gangs (of which there were well over one hundred in the Chinese countryside), as well as saboteurs, GMD spies, arsonists and
assorted other “diehard” enemies of the people. Punishment for those found guilty was harsh, including imprisonment, torture, and public execution.

The severity of punishment was intended both to assuage popular feelings of anger against criminals and saboteurs, and to serve as a deterrent. As Mao himself put it in April of 1951, when it came to counter-revolutionaries, “There should be no policy of benevolence… As for killings, the principle is that in cases where blood debts are owed or … when failure to execute would mean popular indignation would go unassuaged, then the death sentence should be carried out without hesitation…. ” (Mao, Selected Works, Vol VI).

A few days after Mao issued this exhortation, the party’s flagship newspaper People’s Daily, reported that a massive crowd of 100,000 people had filled Shanghai’s Hongkou Stadium to “watch with thunderous shouts and applause” the public execution of 300 “arch-criminal” counterrevolutionaries-- including the Godfather of the infamous Shanghai Green Gang, a man named “Pockmarked Huang,” who had helped Chiang K’ai-shek suppress the Communists in Shanghai in 1927. (show mass condemnation rally)

According to the Party’s own statistics, in the course of the two-year campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries, 2.3 million suspects were detained. Of these, 1.3 million were imprisoned and 710,000 were executed.

While the campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries continued apace in 1951, two other mass movements were initiated in urban China. A “three-anti” campaign targeted the growing phenomena of corruption, waste and bureaucracy among the party’s basic level cadres, many of whom had become arrogant, officious, and politically lazy in the two years since liberation. A companion campaign—the “five antis”-- was designed to expose and punish crimes of bribery, tax evasion, embezzlement, and theft of state secrets by industrialists and merchants. In each case, the “Yan’an model” of small-group study, criticism, and struggle was employed to rectify petty offenders, while in serious cases-- involving harm to the state’s core interests—harsher punishments were meted out.

In the course of the “five anti” campaign, a pattern was established that would be repeated again and again in mass campaigns over the next two decades: neighbors informing on neighbors, children denouncing parents, workers spying on colleagues; and all the while, dossiers – known as dang’an—were being compiled on virtually everyone.

Turning from the cities to the vast Chinese countryside, the first order of business in rural China in the early 1950s, apart from suppressing counter-revolutionaries, was implementation of the CCP’s ambitious “land reform” program. First introduced in the Jiangxi Soviet Republic in the early 1930s, land reform—involving the confiscation of land owned by landlords and its redistribution to poor peasants—was shelved during the anti-Japanese struggle in favor of a milder, less abrasive policy of rent control. In the later stages of the civil war, from 1947 to 1949, land reform was resumed in the so-called
“old liberated areas,” i.e., those rural districts where the Communists had been in control since the end of the anti-Japanese war.

In 1950 the land reform campaign was extended nationwide. It was a complex, multi-stage movement, having both political and economic components. Politically, the goal was to put an end, once and for all, to the traditional, feudalistic rural power structure, dominated by the landlord-gentry class. Economically, the goal of land reform was to stimulate the rapid recovery of agricultural production, which had been stagnant since the mid-1930s.

In the first stage of land reform, party-led work teams were dispatched to rural townships and villages around the country. The work teams recruited local peasant “activists” to form the backbone of a village peasants’ association. Under the watchful eye of the work teams, the peasants associations gathered detailed information about village wealth and land ownership—who owned what, where and how.

Once this inventory was completed, each family in the village was assigned a “class status” (jieji chengfen). There were four main categories: Poor peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants, and landlords. Poor peasants, who comprised around two-thirds of the rural population, were at the bottom of the economic ladder. Their chronic poverty rendered them highly vulnerable to venal landlords and unscrupulous moneylenders, and they were consequently regarded by the CCP as the most potentially revolutionary of rural classes. (show data on rural class composition)

Middle peasants accounted for another 20% or so of the farm population. They were generally self-sufficient in land and labor, and for this reason were less likely than poor peasants to harbor deep grievances against local landlords. Inherently ambivalent, the party treated them as a force to be “united with,” but not “relied upon.”

Rich peasants made up about 10% of the rural population. They owned more farmland than they could cultivate themselves. Being relatively well-to-do, rich peasants had little or no enthusiasm for land redistribution; but insofar as they worked at least part of their own land with their own hands, they had a dual character—part “laboring people”, part “exploiters”

Finally, landlords accounted for roughly 5% of the farm population. Drawing their income wholly from land rents and interest on loans to the village poor, they were, by CCP definition, a wholly parasitic “exploiting class”; and they were thus consigned to the category of “enemies of the people.”

Once the class status of each family in the village was determined, the results were posted publicly, for all to see. “Intermediate” categories such as “lower-middle” and “upper-middle” peasants were recognized at this stage, along with distinctions between “law-abiding” and “evil” landlords. The posting of everyone’s class status was generally a time of high anxiety, as families receiving upper-level classification knew that their future prospects under the CCP would be dim.
Next came the political mobilization of peasants’ anger and resentment. At “speak bitterness” meetings, organized by the work teams, older poor peasants would publicly recount the abusive treatment they had suffered at the hands of “evil” landlords and their agents in the old society. (show photo of “speak bitterness”/struggle meeting) Once the villagers’ indignation had been thoroughly aroused, the accused landlords (and their local agents) would be paraded, their heads bowed and their hands bound, in front of the assembled peasants, who subjected them to harsh verbal and physical abuse.

At this stage of the movement, many landlords were beaten; and though the party’s directives on land reform did not specifically call for killing landlords, executions were clearly tolerated under Mao’s 1951 dictum that killing was to be permitted where a “blood debt” was owed, or where failure to execute would arouse popular indignation. Altogether, an estimated 15-20% of all landlords were killed during the movement—between 800,000 and one million in all. Generally, only male heads of household were executed; women and children were spared.

The final stage of land reform involved the ritual burning of old land deeds in a public bonfire, and the ceremonial redistribution of the confiscated lands to the poor and lower-middle peasants. In this manner, the CCP effectively cemented its popularity among the poorest two-thirds of the rural population. (show deed-burning ceremony)

Although rich peasants were technically defined as “reactionaries,” their land was not subject to confiscation; nor were they forced to undergo mass struggle and criticism. This was due to a tactical decision by party leaders to avoid alienating those well-to-do, law-abiding families whose cooperation in the drive to raise farm production was deemed necessary to the country’s economic recovery. Later on, when collectivization was introduced, the rich peasants would have their “protected” status revoked.

By the end of the land reform campaign in 1952, rural China’s age-old rural power structure had been completely overturned—fanshen, in the Chinese terminology of the time. (show cover of William Hinton’s Book). The grip of the landlord-gentry class had been broken forever, and the CCP, through its leadership of peasants’ associations, had penetrated virtually every rural community in China. (As a footnote, those landlords who were spared execution were generally given a small portion of land -- usually of poor quality—to subsist upon; and they were expected to demonstrate their loyalty to the new regime by becoming honest laborers. However, along with their sons, daughters and even their grandchildren, they carried with them a political stigma, a “scarlet letter” that could not be altered or erased—the label of “class enemy.” Thereafter, their lives would never be the same.)
Lecture 15: Korea, Taiwan, and the Cold War (1950-1954)

As we have seen, the Chinese Communists’ military victory in 1949 brought with it two fundamentally new challenges for the CCP: first, to consolidate their political control (by eliminating opposition groups and erstwhile “class enemies”), and second, to get the economy moving again by distributing rural farmland to peasant families, and by welcoming all “patriotic” urban businessmen, merchants and entrepreneurs who were willing to cooperate with—and even participate in-- the new regime.

While pursuing these twin domestic goals of political consolidation and economic reconstruction, in international affairs the Maoist regime cast its lot firmly with the “socialist camp.” In dire need of economic and technical assistance as well as military support, Mao swallowed his pride and “leaned to one side”—turning to Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union for help.

In this lecture we examine China’s international orientation and behavior in the early 1950s.

By 1949 the Cold War was well underway. The Soviet Union had dropped an “iron curtain” over eastern and central Europe, extending its dictatorial grip, in Winston Churchill’s famous phrase, “from the Baltic to the Adriatic.” In 1947 President Harry S. Truman intervened to prevent Communist insurgencies from toppling pro-Western governments in Greece and Turkey. In proclaiming his “Truman Doctrine,” Truman framed the conflict in Southern Europe as a contest between "free" peoples and "totalitarian" regimes. Still later in 1947, President Truman announced the birth of the Marshall Plan, designed to accelerate the economic recovery of Western Europe and thereby counteract rising Soviet power and influence in the East. In that same year, 1947, an American career diplomat named George F. Kennan articulated a new strategic blueprint for the United States in its dealings with the Soviets:

Wrote Kennan: “The main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” To that end, Kennan called for countering “Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world” through the “adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points…” For the next 30 years, Kennan’s “containment” policy would remain the cornerstone of U.S. policy toward the Communist Bloc. ([http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/A-D/Containment-Kennan-s-public-statement-of-containment.html](http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/A-D/Containment-Kennan-s-public-statement-of-containment.html))

By 1949, Truman had taken the lead in creating a trans-Atlantic anti-Soviet military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO. Thus, by the time Mao and the Chinese Communists assumed control of China, the lines of conflict in the Cold War were already clearly drawn. Given the intense hostility between Moscow and Washington, Mao in reality had little choice but to align himself with Stalin and the “socialist camp.”
Now, some “revisionist” historians, including Barbara Tuchman and Joseph Esherick, have argued that far from being committed to Stalin from the get-go, Mao was initially inclined to pursue cordial relations with the United States in the middle and late-1940s, and that it was American intransigence and shortsightedness that prevented this from happening.

In support of this contention, “revisionist” historians point to two main pieces of evidence: first, toward the end of World War II, Mao openly expressed his wish to visit Washington DC to hold talks with President Roosevelt. In conveying this wish to members of the U.S. Dixie Mission in Yan’an, Mao said: “America need not fear that we will not be cooperative. We must cooperate and we must have American help. …We cannot risk crossing you -- cannot risk any conflict with you.” This message never reached President Roosevelt, however, as its transmission was blocked by US Ambassador Patrick Hurley.

Second, those who support the “squandered American opportunity” theory note that on the eve of the Chinese Communists’ victory in 1949, a high-level Maoist emissary held a series of secretive “back channel” meetings with the outgoing US ambassador to Nationalist China, Leighton Stuart. Among the various subjects discussed at these meetings was the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the PRC.

The problem with the “squandered opportunity” hypothesis is that it neglects contextual and environmental factors. With respect to Mao’s wartime request to visit Washington, for example, there is little doubt that the Chairman’s primary goal was not to befriend the leader of the world’s “imperialist camp,” but rather to drive a sharp wedge between FDR and Chiang K’ai-shek—a classic application of the Maoists’ patented “united front” tactics, where a less threatening adversary is wooed and cajoled in order to isolate (and ultimately defeat) a more immediately dangerous enemy.

As for the CCP’s 1949 cloak-and-dagger meetings with US Ambassador Leighton Stuart, the chief Communist negotiator at those meetings made it clear that the establishment of cooperative relations between the US and China after the revolution was contingent upon the severance of all US ties to Chiang K’ai-shek. But this was clearly farther than the US Government was prepared to go--especially in view of Washington’s increasingly tense Cold War relations with Moscow.

Finally, there is scant evidence to substantiate the claim, made by some historians, that Mao was consciously trying to “play off” the Americans against the Russians, and that he was seeking to escape from a tightening Soviet bear-hug by courting American support (a tactic which Mao would later successfully utilize with Richard Nixon). On the contrary, we now know that throughout Ambassador Stuart’s meetings with his Chinese counterpart, the Chinese side kept Stalin fully informed about the contents of the discussions; and that it was Stalin, rather than Mao, who proposed that the CCP should
keep the door open to possible future cooperation with the Americans, even if the US refused to sever its ties with Chiang K’ai-shek.

Ultimately, then, the bulk of the evidence points to the conclusion that Mao’s decision to “lean to one side” in 1949 was almost certainly the product of overarching geopolitical and ideological factors, and the deepening of Cold War global bipolarity-- rather than being the result of careless American blundering and shortsightedness—though, God knows, we saw enough of that in the late 1940s and 50s.

In any event, Mao’s mild flirtation with the United States ended abruptly with his declaration of the birth of the PRC on October 1, 1949. Two months later, the Chairman boarded a train for Moscow.

It was Mao’s first trip ever outside of China’s borders; and it came in the middle of a brutal Russian winter. Expecting Stalin to welcome him personally, Mao was greeted at the Moscow train station by second-rank Soviet officials. Indeed, Mao was made to wait an entire week at a suburban dacha before being granted an audience with the mighty Stalin. Historians suggest that this slight was intended as a reminder to Mao that in any arrangements that might be entered into between them, Stalin was the senior partner, with Mao the junior supplicant.

Left to cool his heels, the Chairman expressed his growing impatience: “I have only three tasks here,” he complained to an aide. “The first is to eat; the second is to sleep; the third is to shit.” (J. Fenby, Modern China, p. 364)

With difficulty, Mao once again swallowed his pride. Having already burned his bridges with the United States, he had nowhere else to turn. After six weeks of arduous haggling, the two men struck a bargain in February of 1950. Its terms clearly revealed Stalin’s ambivalence toward his Chinese “comrades.”

In an ostensible gesture of fraternal generosity, Stalin extended to Mao credits worth a total of US$300 million. Half the funds were earmarked for the purchase of Soviet military hardware, while the other half was for the purchase of Soviet heavy industrial plant and equipment—including power stations, metallurgical and mining facilities, and railroad stock.

To Mao’s dismay, the Soviet credits amounted to far less than Stalin had given to the new Communist governments in East and Central Europe in the late 1940s. Worse yet, whereas the aid to Stalin’s European satellites had been in the form of outright grants, the credits to China were written up as loans, to be repaid over a ten-year period-- with 1% annual interest. The irony of the Soviet “big brother” charging interest—a device denigrated by Karl Marx as an instrument of capitalist exploitation— on a loan to a ”fraternal” socialist ally was not lost on the thin-skinned Chairman Mao.

Adding insult to injury, there were a number of strings attached to this rather modest display of Soviet largesse. For example, as a condition of receiving Soviet credits, China
was obliged to temporarily grant to the USSR a controlling interest in a number of strategic military and industrial assets in Manchuria – including naval bases, harbors and railroads that had been seized by Soviet occupation forces in 1945. In addition, a number of Sino-Russian “joint stock companies” were set up for the purpose of jointly exploiting metallurgical and oil resources in Manchuria and in China’s northwest border province of Xinjiang.

In yet another bit of irony that could not have escaped the notice of Mao or his colleagues, the terms of the February 1950 Sino-Soviet “Treaty of Friendship” appeared to fly in the face of a solemn Soviet pledge, issued shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918, to renounce all Russian special privileges and territorial concessions in China that had been extracted by the “imperial” Czarist regime. Now, more than thirty years later, a new imperial Russian regime was picking up where the czars had left off. Chinese resentment over such apparent Soviet hypocrisy was one of the issues that would smolder for the better part of a decade, before erupting into bitter polemics when the Sino-Soviet dispute burst into the open in the 1960s.

On the eve of Mao’s return to Beijing in February 1950, Stalin gave him a parting gift: he handed over to the Chinese chairman a list of all Soviet spies, moles and double-agents operating in China. When senior Soviet intelligence officers learned that Stalin had turned the names over to Mao, they were horrified; a short time later they watched helplessly as Chinese security forces systematically rounded up, tortured, and executed hundred of their compromised colleagues.

Whatever misgivings Mao and Stalin may have had about their initial encounter, they kept to themselves. For all the outside world knew, Mao and Stalin were the closest of fraternal allies, joined at the hip in the global struggle against “U.S. imperialism and its running dogs.”

The first major test of the new Sino-Soviet alliance came in the early summer of 1950. For years, tensions had been running high on the Korean Peninsula. At the Yalta Conference, held in the final stages of the Pacific War in February 1945, the task of “liberating” Korea from Japanese control had been jointly assigned to the Soviet Union and the United States. Soviets troops would occupy the northern half of the country, down to the 38th parallel, while Americans would occupy the south.

This situation of partitioned occupation remained in effect until 1948, when the Americans and the Russians withdraw their respective occupation forces. Before departing, however, each side set up a “friendly” government in its own zone. In the north, a Communist regime was established under a loyal pro-Soviet military officer named Kim Il-Song; while in the south, a pro-Western regime was installed under Syngman Rhee, an intensely nationalistic, American-educated political activist.

Following the withdrawal of Soviet and American forces, relations between the two Korean regimes became increasingly strained. Both sides advocated reunification—under their own auspices. And each side repeatedly engaged in provocative behavior designed
to paint the other side as an “aggressor.” By 1950 tensions were running very high along the 38th parallel.

In North Korea, Kim Il-song had grown increasingly confident that he would prevail quickly and overwhelmingly in a military contest with the South. But since he was heavily dependent upon Soviet military and economic assistance, he could not launch an attack on his own initiative, without Soviet consent. In the spring of 1950 Stalin, after a considerable amount of hesitation and waffling, signed off on the North Korean plan of attack.

Although China played no direct role in planning or launching the Korean War, Stalin and Mao exchanged several telegrams about the situation in Korea. Mao was initially highly skeptical, wanting to complete the liberation of Taiwan before “unleashing” Kim Il-sung in Korea. But once he became convinced that Stalin was going support a North Korean invasion in any event, Mao reluctantly went along.

Although Stalin did not expect the U.S. to intervene, he was not willing to risk a Soviet armed conflict with the United States. In a telegram to Kim Il-sung, Stalin warned the North Korean leader in no uncertain terms, that “If you should get kicked in the teeth by the Americans, I shall not lift a finger. You’ll have to ask Mao for all the help.” (Shen Zhihua, “Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War,” p. 63). This warning was to prove prophetic.

The surprise attack came on June 25, 1950; and it was overwhelmingly successful. Within two days, South Korean forces – outnumbered and outgunned – were in full retreat, with many defecting to the enemy. On the third day, North Korean troops entered the South Korean capital of Seoul. Within three weeks they had driven down the length of the Korean peninsula. (show map of initial N. Korean thrust, June-July 1950).

Acting under intense U.S. pressure, the United Nations unanimously condemned the North Korean invasion as an act of unprovoked aggression—a vote made possible because the Soviet Union had been boycotting the UN—ironically, over its failure to oust the Chinese Nationalists in favor of the PRC.

As soon as the UN acted, Harry Truman, on June 27, ordered the US 7th Fleet to patrol the Taiwan Strait to prevent either side in the still smoldering Chinese civil war from taking advantage of the fighting in Korea to launch an attack against the other.

With the U.N. having authorized a “police action” to repel North Korean aggression, the United States led an international military force into Korea, under the command of General Douglas McArthur—hero of the Pacific War against Japan. But by the time MacArthur could get substantial U.N. troops on the ground, the North Koreans had occupied 90% of the Korean peninsula.

In mid-September General MacArthur, supported by massive American supplies, transport and combat troops, launched a surprise amphibious counterattack behind North
Korean lines. The attack, on the port city of Inchon, caught the North Koreans totally unprepared, and the tide of battle quickly turned. By early October, the North Korean army was retreating in disarray back across the 38th parallel. In “hot pursuit”, MacArthur’s forces advanced into North Korea, capturing the capital city, Pyongyang, on October 19.

At this point, MacArthur and President Truman had a serious falling out over how to proceed. MacArthur wanted to march his troops right up to the Yalu River—North Korea’s border with China. Arguing that the Chinese would not dare to intervene, the general asserted that “There is no substitute for victory.” Truman strongly disagreed, declaring that the conflict in Korea was a “limited war,” fought for limited aims, namely, the punishment of aggression and the restoration of the status-quo ante. By this time, however, Mao Zedong had become deeply alarmed by MacArthur’s blatant disregard of Truman’s attempts to restrain him.

In early October, Mao gave the order to assemble a “Chinese People’s Volunteer Army” (CPV) to combat the American-led UN forces. In a telegram to Stalin, Mao wrote: “If we allow the United States to occupy all of Korea, Korean revolutionary power will suffer a fundamental defeat, and the American invaders will run more rampant, and have negative effects for the entire Far East.” (Wikipedia, “Korean War”)

At the end of October, advance units of the CPV crossed into North Korea. On November 1 they launched a surprise attack on American forces, administering a stinging defeat. The Chinese forces then pulled back, waiting to see if the Americans had gotten the intended message—namely, that any further advance into North Korea would meet with a massive Chinese response.

When MacArthur ignored the Chinese warning, Mao in late November ordered a full-scale military response. Once again, the tide of battle turned decisively, as hundreds of thousands of Chinese “volunteers” poured across the border into North Korea. Using controversial “human sea” tactics, they quickly overran U.N positions, inflicting heavy casualties and forcing a hasty retreat. By January of 1951 the U.N. forces had been pushed back across the 38th parallel. (Show dynamic sequence of shifting battle-lines, 1950-53, at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/eb/Korean_war_1950-1953.gif)

At that point, early in 1951, Truman fired MacArthur for insubordination; and the Chinese side began to show interest in negotiating a cease-fire agreement with the UN. But Stalin refused to go along. Consequently, the war dragged on for another two years, with heavy casualties on both sides but with very little territorial advantage gained by either one.

The deadlock was ultimately broken by Stalin’s death in March 1953. Thereafter, a ceasefire was quickly arranged, taking effect in July. The final line of demarcation was set at the 38th parallel—an exact reversion to the status-quo ante. Three years of deadly warfare had ultimately changed-- nothing.
But though the Korean War ended in a draw, it nonetheless marked a decisive turning point in China’s relations with the United States. Until China’s entry into the war, the U.S. had been reluctant to commit itself to the defense of Chiang K’ai-shek’s exiled Nationalist government on Taiwan. Indeed, on the eve of the Korean War, the American Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, had conspicuously excluded Taiwan from a list of “vital American interests” in Asia.

In the aftermath of Korean War, however, the U.S government sharply revised its strategic calculus with respect to Taiwan. Chiang K’ai-shek was now a vital ally of the “Free World” in its struggle against world communism. Accordingly, in December 1954 President Dwight Eisenhower signed a Treaty of Mutual Defense with Chiang’s government-in-exile. Under the terms of the treaty,

> “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the West Pacific Area directed against the territories of either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” (TIAS 3178; 6 UST 433-438 )

Pursuant to the aims of the US-Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty, ships from the US Seventh Fleet continued to patrol the 90-mile-wide waters of the Taiwan Strait to prevent the Chinese from launching an attack. For the next 20 years, these naval patrols remained a potent symbol of the US commitment to defend Taiwan. (Note: in truth, the symbol was more potent than the reality, since at no time were there more than two small American naval vessels in the Strait at any one time.)

If the Korean War served to bolster Taiwan’s relations with the United States, it had a far more negative impact on China’s national security. Indeed, the costs to China were enormous.

- For one thing, China lost the opportunity—perhaps forever-- to conclude its civil war by “liberating” Taiwan. A cross-Strait invasion of Taiwan had been planned for 1950, but it had to be postponed—indeinitely—when Harry Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet to patrol the Taiwan Strait.

- Secondly, the PRC was condemned as an aggressor by the United Nations for its decision to intervene in Korea to prevent the defeat of its North Korean ally. Because of this, China also lost its chance to replace the ROC in the United Nations. It took two more decades for China to gain admission to the UN.

- Third, as a result of the war the Unites States entered into a series of military treaties in Asia designed to “contain” Chinese aggression. These included the US-Taiwan Defense Treaty, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and the Anzus pact involving Australia and New Zealand.
Finally, Chinese troops suffered more than one million casualties, including 300,000 killed in the last two years of the war, during the prolonged—and ultimately pointless—stalemate that began in the spring of 1951.

But not every outcome of the Korean War was bad for China. On at least two fronts Mao scored clear gains: First, the Chinese Communists received substantial amounts of Soviet military aid during the War, including up-to-date Soviet tanks, artillery, and some 3,000 warplanes. Second, by fighting the world’s most powerful country to a complete standstill in Korea, Mao Zedong greatly elevated his—and China’s—stature within the “socialist camp” as well as in the nonaligned Third World. He would soon leverage this rising stature both to gain increased influence among Third World leaders and to substantially increase the flow of Soviet economic and military aid from Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev.

In the next lecture we shall look at China’s post-War development, including the socialization of the economy and the collectivization of agriculture.
Lecture 16: Socialist Transformation: The First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957)

In 1953 China entered a new stage of development. The Korean War was over; land reform was completed; counter-revolutionaries had largely been suppressed; and the Communist Party was now firmly in control. It was time to move forward.

The new stage began with the promulgation of a Soviet-Style “Five-Year Plan” for the development of the national economy.” Its principal content was a blueprint for achieving the “socialist transformation” of the Chinese economy.

Centerpiece of the First Five-Year Plan was China’s wholesale adoption of Stalinist techniques of centralized economic planning, agricultural collectivization, and the rapid expansion of urban heavy industry. At one level, Mao’s embrace of the Soviet model reflected an underlying ideological affinity between the two countries. At another level, it reflected China’s dire need of economic assistance and technical support.

In this lecture we shall examine China’s economic transformation in the First Five-Year Plan. Though Chinese leaders would hail this transformation--with some justification--as a major victory for socialism, the full record of the period was fare more complicated, containing not just short-term policy triumphs, but also, and more ominously, the seeds of future disaster.

By 1953, China’s long, costly involvement in the Korean War had left the country drained and exhausted. In dire need of foreign economic assistance and technical assistance, Mao cast his gaze northward. Soon after Stalin died, Mao reminded the new leaders of the USSR that China had born the brunt of the fighting in Korea, and that it was China’s heroic sacrifices that had made it possible for the Soviet Union to avoid being drawn into the War. Mao’s bottom line? It was simple: the Russians owed China--big-time!

For his part, Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, needed to enlist China’s support in his drive to be recognized as the undisputed head of the Socialist Camp. Like a politician stumping for votes, Khrushchev listened carefully to Mao’s pointed reminder about the Soviet debt to China. And in a display of solidarity with his Chinese “little brothers,” Khrushchev generously agreed to revise the terms of the 1950 Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Aid. Promising several hundred million dollars in new Soviet economic and military assistance to China, the new Soviet leader also offered to terminate Soviet special privileges in Manchuria; and he agreed to send thousands of technical specialists to China at Russian expense. Mao was pleased.

As a result of this fresh burst of Soviet generosity, more than 150 major new industrial projects were initiated in China in the mid-1950s; and several thousand Chinese students were sent abroad to the Soviet Union for advanced technical training, mainly in the fields of engineering and the applied sciences.
Military aid also increased, as the Soviet Union built several new aircraft and munitions factories in China from 1953 to 57. In response to Mao’s request for Soviet help in acquiring nuclear weapons—which Mao treated as an “entitlement” because of China’s enormous sacrifices in Korea—Khrushchev agreed to share blueprints for an atomic bomb and to provide China with a prototype nuclear weapon.

Not surprisingly, this fresh burst of Soviet largesse ushered in a new era of Sino-Soviet friendship and cordiality, as the Chinese Communists openly embraced their “big brothers” to the north. And from 1954 to 1957, the Chinese emulated their Soviet sibling in almost every respect.

In its bare essentials, the “Soviet model” of socialism called for the elimination of private ownership of the “means of production”—i.e. capital, technology and land. In its place would be constructed a system of state and collective ownership of all property, with centralized state planning to replace the corrupted system of bureaucratic capitalism that had characterized Nationalist China.

In 1954 a new Chinese constitution was adopted, largely modeled after the Soviet constitution of 1936. It described a unitary state system similar to the Soviet “dictatorship of the proletariat.” But there was one major difference. Where the Russian system was narrowly rooted in the notional sovereignty of the working class, the Chinese variant was more broadly inclusive, welcoming peasants and other law-abiding, “patriotic” groups and strata under its protective umbrella. Reflecting the idea of a multi-class ruling coalition, the new Chinese state structure was called a “people’s democratic dictatorship.”

A number of fundamental rights and freedoms were guaranteed under the 1954 Chinese constitution, including freedom of expression and assembly, and the right to vote for local people’s deputies. But all such freedoms were to be enjoyed exclusively by “the people,” and were categorically withheld from putative “enemies of the people.” And in a clear departure from the Soviet constitution, the 1954 charter enshrined “The Thought of Mao Zedong” as the guiding doctrine illuminating the Chinese path to victory in revolution and socialist construction. Slowly but steadily, a “cult of personality” was taking shape around the dominating, iconic figure of Chairman Mao.

Under the guidance of Soviet advisors, China’s urban economy underwent a two-stage transition to socialism. Beginning in 1955, shares in private companies were purchased by the state, with payment to the former owners amortized over a period of several years. This created an intermediary form of ownership, known as “joint state-private” ownership. Although this partial buyout was nominally voluntary, in fact the company owners had little or no choice but to agree to the terms offered by the state.

A year later, in 1956, the second stage kicked in, with all urban industrial and commercial assets now converted into state property. Over the next few years, annuity payments to former owners were quietly terminated. In most cases, a company’s former managers were permitted to stay on as salaried employees of the state. By the end of 1956 virtually
the entire urban economy had been nationalized. Although there was a good deal of grumbling among former factory owners and managers, few dared to openly resist the state’s takeover of their productive assets.

In the countryside the process of socialist transformation, or collectivization, was more complex, and took longer to complete. The process was divided into three consecutive stages—“mutual aid”, “cooperative farming”, and full “collectivization.” The entire process was carried out under the watchful eye of the Communist Party.

In the first stage, beginning in 1953, small groups of six or eight neighboring farm families within a village were encouraged to form seasonal “mutual aid teams” for the purpose of sharing farm tools, draft animals and even labor on a temporary basis during the busiest periods of planting and harvesting. Since many (if not most) rural families still suffered from a shortage of essential “means of production,” the seasonal sharing of tools, animals and labor would arguably contribute to raising farm output for everyone concerned—and hence increase each participating family’s personal income.

For centuries Chinese peasant families had individually tilled small plots of self-owned or rented land. The point of “mutual aid” was to gradually habituate the peasants to working together in larger groups, for the benefit of all. At this preliminary stage of agricultural cooperation, all property remained privately owned; and each family was entitled to consume (or sell) all produce grown on its own land (minus local taxes and mandatory state grain deliveries).

Based on the demonstrated success of “mutual aid teams” in raising income for most of their members, after one or two harvest cycles the next stage in the collectivization process was initiated. In this second stage, the “cooperative” aspects of farm production were expanded, along with the size of the basic group. Now, instead of six or eight families aiding each other on a seasonal basis, 20 or 30 families—comprising approximately 100 to 200 people—were grouped together to form a “cooperative farm” on a year-round basis. At this stage, all productive property—including land, animals and tools—remained privately owned, at least in theory; but now the property was permanently “invested” in the co-operative. In this new form of half-socialist, half-private ownership, family income was determined by a combined calculus that included, first, a return proportional to the assessed “share value” of all productive assets invested in the co-op—that is, land, tools, and animals; and second, a return proportional to the family’s actual labor contribution (which was based on the number of “work points” earned by each family member during any given farming cycle).

Like mutual aid, the cooperative farms were expressly intended to be voluntary in nature. Coercion in the recruitment of new members was strictly forbidden. Unlike mutual aid, however, peasant families were not free to sell or consume crops grown on their own land. The harvest now belonged to the co-op as a whole, with the profits shared out according the dual criteria of the number of investment shares owned (which favored well-to-do farmers) and work points earned (which favored families with many able-bodied laborers).
Where the mutual-aid teams had been largely successful in fostering an attitude of shared responsibility and welfare, the results of cooperative farming were more mixed. On the plus side, the year-round pooling of land, labor, tools and draft animals from 20 or 30 households made possible both a more well-defined division of farm labor and larger, more efficient economies of scale in farm production. Moreover, from the CCP’s ideological perspective, the cooperative farms, by reducing (but not eliminating) the return on private investment, also encouraged the socialist habit of working for the benefit of the entire group, rather than for one’s own immediate self-interest.

The main problem with the principle of voluntary membership in the co-ops was that they tended to attract mainly the poor, less self-sufficient families in the village. Drawn by the prospect of sharing the land, tools and labor of their better-off neighbors, poor and lower-middle peasants flocked to join the co-ops.

But an entirely different rationale was at work for the more affluent families in the village. If they joined the co-op, they would lose half the return on their family-owned property, while having to make up for this loss by earning work-points through “ordinary labor.” This meant that the well-to-do peasants would be subsidizing those with few productive assets of their own. To a “rational” rich or upper-middle peasant, this was not a particularly attractive option. So they thought, “Why join?”

Why indeed?! After a full year of cooperative farming, the results bore out this logic of calculated self-interest. Poor peasants flocked into the co-ops, while rich and upper-middle peasants held back, preferring to “go it alone.” Consequently, rural China began to become polarized into two distinct economic strata: the first comprising hundreds of thousands of so-called “paupers’ co-ops,” whose impoverished members generally possessed low quality land, few if any draft animals, insufficient labor power, and low levels of technical skill. By contrast, the second stratum was made up of a much smaller number of relatively affluent, self-sufficient farm families who were endowed with superior land, labor power, technical skills and productive assets. These relatively upscale farmers had no inclination to join the co-ops.

By the spring of 1955 Mao had become increasingly distressed by the polarization of wealth in rural China. His concern centered primarily on the emergence of a new class of self-sufficient, capitalistic rich peasants, who were flourishing outside the boundaries of the socialist economy. Adding to the Chairman’s worries was the fact that in some provinces, well-off peasants who had initially been persuaded to join the co-ops were now demanding to leave, and to take their property with them. Worse yet, local cadres in a few provinces were allowing them to do so. It was in response to these dual tendencies of rising class polarization and the abandonment of cooperative farming by the well-to-do-- that Mao put his foot down in the summer of 1955.

Originally, the cooperative farms were intended to be formed and consolidated gradually, over a period of several years, before giving way to the third and highest stage of full-scale agricultural collectivization. But when the co-op movement stalled early in 1955—
and began to actually reverse itself, moving back toward private farming for rich and middle peasants—Mao Zedong stepped in.

Speaking in July 1955, Mao strongly criticized those of his comrades who had retreated meekly in the face of pressure from rich peasants to abandon the co-ops. Mao accused these comrades of “tottering along like women with bound feet.” (This was a phrase Mao would use again and again to decry the conservatism of anyone he deemed guilty of the sin of “Right opportunism”).

Arguing that the nationwide co-op movement was taking (in his words) “tremendous strides forward,” he chastised his comrades for wanting to “wait and see” before pushing ahead with the next stage of collectivization. As for the dissolution of thousands of existing co-ops, Mao argued that allowing co-ops to dissolve “caused great dissatisfaction among the masses and was altogether the wrong thing to do.” (all quotes from Mao, Selected Readings, pp. 316-339)

To counteract what he termed the “Rightist error” of “going too slow” and permitting “drastic dissolution” of co-ops, Mao predicted that there would soon be a dramatic upsurge in mass enthusiasm for collectivization in the Chinese countryside. The masses are demanding it, he said. They are eager to realize the full fruits of socialism. Having spoken his piece, the Chairman then sat back to measure the impact of his words.

That impact was not long in coming. Within two months, a “high tide” of collectivization took shape. Throughout the Chinese countryside, rural officials read the Chairman’s words as a mandate for accelerated collectivization. Originally expected to take four or five years to complete, the timetable for third-stage collectivization was moved ahead by anxious officials who were afraid of being labeled as “women with bound feet.” If one was going to err in the process of collectivization, it was clearly safer politically to err on the side of excessive enthusiasm. If one valued one’s career, “too much, too soon” was better than “too little, too late.”

By February 1956, more than half the villages of China had been pushed into the higher stage of collectivization—a full two years ahead of schedule, and in many cases without ever having gone through the intermediate co-operative stage. By the end of 1956, more than 90% of China’s 500 million peasants had been organized into collective farms. It was, as Mao had predicted, a “high tide” of socialism.

But it was a problematic high tide, at best. In pushing China’s peasants into these new, larger and more fully-socialist farms, local officials throughout the country had routinely violated the CCP’s longstanding principles of voluntarism, patient persuasion, and leadership by example. With cadres up and down the line anxious to demonstrate their enthusiasm for socialism, rich and upper-middle peasants were no longer offered a choice. Now they were ordered to join the collectives, their land and other property subject to total confiscation. Those who balked were punished. In many cases, recalcitrant well-to-do peasants, rather than handing their family assets over to the collectives, went on a massive binge of “conspicuous consumption,” slaughtering and
eating their animals, chopping down their trees for firewood, and spending their savings on food and drink.

The collectives themselves were large, impersonal units of production. Far larger than the co-ops that preceded them, each new collective farm encompassed, on average, 100 to 200 families—between 500 and 1,000 people. In most cases, a collective was physically coterminous with the village itself, so that the administration of village and collective farm were effectively merged into one.

Within the collectives, most distinctions between mine and thine were obliterated. All “major” productive property—land, tools, and farm animals—was collectively owned. All income was distributed according to work points, based on the socialist distribution principle of “to each according to his work; he who does not work, nor shall he eat.” No longer was income based partly on shares of property invested. The only vestiges of private property that remained were the tiny, scattered pieces of land within the family’s courtyard, called “private plots”, used for growing vegetables to supplement the family’s diet, and one or two chickens and the occasional pig raised within the family compound. All else was owned in common.

The coercive aspect of accelerated collectivization meant that there was now—for the first time since 1949—growing alienation and resentment in rural China. Having been deprived of the means of earning their own independent livelihood, upper-middle and rich peasant families, accounting for perhaps 20% of the rural population, deeply resented their enforced “pauperization.” Even the poor and lower-middle peasants, presumptive beneficiaries of socialist agriculture, suffered from diminished motivation to work in the new, large-scale, impersonal collectives.

In a classic case of what economists call the “free-rider problem,” work points earned by each collective farm worker had their cash value determined by the net value of the farm’s total harvest. Thus, each farmer’s income depended, in substantial measure, on the labor performed by all others. With as many as 500 or 600 able-bodied peasants in a single collective farm, “personal responsibility” for agricultural productivity and output could not reasonably be assigned to individuals or families. Hence, the incentive to work diligently was correspondingly diminished for each individual, with the strength of that disincentive being directly proportional to the size of the collective.

With all work-points assigned the same, fixed value at the end of the harvest, people tended to just “put in time” in the fields, content to become free-riders on the efforts of others, with little attention paid to the quality or efficiency of work performed. Largely as a result of these two negative factors—rich-peasant alienation and the widespread “free rider” problem—the “high tide” of collectivization of the mid-1950s failed to yield the anticipated “leap forward” in agricultural output; indeed, farm production limped forward at growth rates of barely 2 or 3 percent annually—hardly enough to keep pace with China’s burgeoning population.
Parenthetically, it should be noted that this very same “free rider problem” has doomed large-scale collective farming schemes to failure everywhere in the socialist world. Whenever individual reward is determined by group effort, the incentive for each individual to work hard—and the ability of the group members to monitor each other’s performance—diminishes as the size of the group increases.

Despite clear evidence that free-riders were undermining the effectiveness of collective farms, Mao steadfastly denied that there was any such problem. In his belief system, the worker-peasant masses could be educated to understand the benefits of working for the good of the collective, rather than for themselves. “Serve the people,” was Mao’s oft-repeated mantra. But the reality of the free-rider problem was not lost on some of the Chairman’s top comrades—in particular CCP Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Party General-Secretary Deng Xiaoping. Both Liu and Deng recognized the disincentive effects of large-scale collective farming. A decade later, during the Cultural Revolution, this awareness would cost both men dearly, as Mao accused them of “taking the capitalist road.” In Mao’s view, the failure of the collectives—and later the massively larger rural people’s communes—was due to sabotage by rich peasants and counter-revolutionaries, rather than to the flawed logic of collectivization itself.

Notwithstanding the lack of a major “leap forward” in agriculture, the year 1956 marked an important watershed in China’s post-1949 development. In that year, the transition to socialism was completed. Landlords, counter-revolutionaries, rich-peasants and Rightists had been dealt a severe blow; and private wealth and property ownership were a thing of the past. Although agricultural growth was painfully slow, the industrial economy had surged as a result of Soviet aid. Consequently, between 1953 and 1956, the economy as a whole expanded at a reasonably impressive rate of 6-1/2 % annually.

In a generally celebratory mood, CCP leaders convened the Eighth National Party Congress in September of 1956. It was the first Party Congress to be held since the founding of the People’s Republic. For most of those in attendance, there was a palpable sense of satisfaction in the achievements of the past half-dozen years. Speaker after speaker praised the fruits of China’s economic and political transformation; for most, it was a time to bask in the superiority of socialism, with many leaders now calling for an extended period of consolidation and adjustment to correct existing imbalances in the system, rather than pushing impulsively ahead. It was a time, in short, for the country to catch its collective breath.

In a display of ideological optimism, CCP Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi confidently declared that the question of “who will win in the struggle between socialism and capitalism in our country has now been decided.” (S. Karnow, Mao and China, p. 75); in a similar vein, the official resolution of the Party Congress stated that henceforth the country’s principal task would shift from winning victory in the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, to redressing economic imbalances between “the advanced socialist system and the backward forces of production.” In other words, class struggle was now to be de-emphasized in favor of economic development as the
country’s number one priority. (Resolution of the Eighth National Party Congress, Part 1, 1956).

But not everyone shared the optimism expressed by Mao’s lieutenants. The Chairman himself was growing noticeably restless and uneasy with the displays of complacency and self-congratulation that dominated the proceedings of the 1956 Party Congress. In the next lecture we shall examine the sources of Mao’s rising dissatisfaction, and the extraordinary measures he initiated to address them.
As we saw in the previous lecture, by the fall of 1956 the twin pillars of China’s socialist transformation—the Sino-Soviet alliance and the socialization of the national economy—had been more-or-less completed. But soon afterward, the façade of national harmony and well-being began to show cracks; and by 1957 a series of deepening domestic and international fault-lines could no longer be ignored or papered over.

Unlike the majority of his comrades, Mao Zedong did not feel particularly complacent about China’s situation in 1956. Due to the unexpected stagnation of farm production, the urban industrial sector was running short of investment funds. Mao wanted to speed up the pace of industrial development, which would require extracting even more resources and revenues from the collective farming sector. The economy was out of balance, and Mao knew it.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev suddenly and without warning launched an attack on Joseph Stalin. In a secret speech delivered to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s “cult of personality” and held the late Soviet dictator personally responsible for initiating massive, devastating purges in the 1930s. Suddenly, alarm bells went off in Mao’s own supremely egotistical mind.

The Chairman had reason to be concerned: shortly after Khrushchev’s attack on Stalin’s “personality cult,” a group of Mao’s own close comrades, including Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, began to downplay the role of individual leaders in their speeches and writings; and at the Eighth Party Congress they collaborated in excising from the Chinese constitution all references to the guiding role of “The Thought of Mao Zedong.” Mao was piqued; but he was evidently resigned to this downgrading, for he had no wish to openly contradict Khrushchev at this point, on this issue.

But Mao had other reasons for concern as well. Throughout the Communist bloc, the fall and winter of 1955-56 had brought a general relaxation of heavy-handed Stalinist policies toward intellectuals. Khrushchev was the trend-setter in this movement, as he promised Russia’s creative intellectuals greater freedom of expression. Taking their cue from Mother Russia, intellectuals throughout the Soviet bloc began to voice their pent-up frustrations. Thus, by the time Khrushchev gave his de-Stalinization speech in February 1956, teachers, writers, artists and students throughout Eastern and Central Europe were calling for a roll-back of repressive Stalinist policies. In Moscow, Warsaw, and Prague, workers joined dissident intellectuals in calling for greater freedom. In Budapest, massive street protests, some involving as many as 200,000 people, paralyzed the country’s hard-line Stalinist leadership, causing the government to collapse. Fearing the spread of chaos, Nikita Khurschchev sent in hundreds of Soviet tanks and 17 divisions of combat troops to crush the Hungarian protest. More than 3,000 people died in the ensuing battle.

In China, intellectual ferment was also on the upswing. After years of being subjected to rigid ideological and political controls, Chinese writers, teachers, scientists and students
were growing visibly restless. With one eye on the worsening situation in East and Central Europe, the Eighth Party Congress in September 1956 held out an olive branch to China’s alienated intellectuals.

Dusting off a classical Chinese aphorism, Party leaders promised to introduce a new policy of tolerance and acceptance toward China’s “thinking class.” Under the slogan, “Let 100 flowers blossom; let 100 schools of thought contend,” the Party promised that the opinions and grievances of intellectuals would henceforth be conscientiously attended to, and that they would henceforth be treated with dignity and respect as valued members of socialist society. Thus began China’s famous “Hundred Flowers” campaign.

Although it was initially proposed by Premier Zhou Enlai in the summer of 1956, the campaign was soon appropriated by Mao Zedong himself. In the fall of 1956 Chairman Mao expressed his belief that by encouraging China’s habitually wary and reserved intellectuals to express themselves freely and openly, without fear of reprisal, they would be able to “shed their [psychological] burdens.” Relieved of their anxieties, they would overcome their traditional passivity and participate more eagerly and enthusiastically in the cause of building socialism. Such, in any event, was the theory behind the “Hundred Flowers” campaign. In practice, however, things turned out rather differently.

Conditioned by years of shoddy treatment at the hands of the Communist Party, the intellectuals failed to respond to Mao’s invitation to “shed their burdens.” Once bitten, they were twice shy. As one scholar put it, “Experience had shown that [Party] policy could change suddenly, with today’s license becoming tomorrow’s [prison] sentence.” (Benton and Hunter, Wild Lily, Prairie Fire, p. 13). Sensing a possible trap, the intellectuals held back, hesitant to expose themselves.

After waiting in vain for the intellectuals to respond to his invitation, Mao decided that even stronger assurances were needed to coax them out of hiding. In a famous speech delivered in late February 1957, entitled “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,” Mao affirmed the need for vigorous intellectual debate and criticism. Once again employing a floral metaphor, he called for unfettered intellectual “blooming and contending” in China.” Arguing that “Plants raised in a hothouse are unlikely to be hardy,” the Chairman sought to reassure China’s writers, artists, scientists and scholars that the bulk of their concerns belonged to the category of benign “contradictions among the people,” rather than antagonistic “contradictions with the enemy.” (full text in Mao, Selected Readings from the Works of MZD, pp350-387). To coax the intellectuals out of their shells, the CCP sponsored a series of open forums in May and early June of 1957, in which they sought to engage intellectuals in open debate, hoping thereby to clear the air. At around the same time, a new form of political expression—called dazibao, or “big-character posters”—made its debut on billboards and classroom walls on Beijing’s college campuses.

Now, at last, the intellectuals began to express themselves—cautiously at first, but then with growing boldness. Many wall poster-writers elected to hide behind a shield of anonymity, from which they directed a growing stream of criticism at Communist Party
cadres and bureaucrats. Among other things, they blistered Party officials for being “dogmatic,” “arrogant,” “undemocratic,” “opportunistic,” “officious,” and just plain “corrupt.” One angry young law student at People’s University in Beijing complained bitterly that the CCP’s promises of a just and democratic future under socialism had been betrayed: (show “100 flowers” wall poster)

I hold that the socialism we now have is not genuine socialism… Genuine socialism should be very democratic, but ours is undemocratic… [Under Communism] A man is judged not by his virtues and abilities, but by whether or not he is a Party member…. Even desks and wastebaskets are distributed according to one’s Party status…Once I was ill and needed medical care, but I had to be of the 13th rank to qualify. How could I climb to the 13th rank? (D. Doolin Communist China: Politics of Student Opposition, pp. 27, 31)

Another critic, in an anonymously-written pamphlet whose title, “J’accuse” (I accuse), echoed the famous 1898 broadside by the French writer Emile Zola, bemoaned the unprincipled opportunism and opulent life-styles of high Party officials:

A great meany cadres are enjoying a luxurious life of banquets and villas. Why should I live so frugally? How many people have learned to fake obedience, bow to the leadership, [and] turn their backs on the masses, [in order to] become high-ranking officials?...

[It seems] we have given our blood, sweat, toil and precious lives to defend not the people, but the bureaucrats who oppress the people and live off the fat of the land. They are a group of fascists who employ foul means, twist the truth, band together in evil ventures, and ignore the people’s wish for peace…. (ibid., p. 60)

Not even Mao himself was immune from criticism. One essayist asked rhetorically,

What does it mean when the Communists say they suffer so that the people may not suffer, and that they let the people enjoy things before they do the same? … These are lies. We ask: Is Chairman Mao, who enjoys the best things in life, …having a hard time? … That son of a bitch. A million shames on him…

Our pens can never defeat Mao Zedong’s Party guards and his imperial army. When he wants to kill you, he doesn’t have to do it himself. He can mobilize your wife and children to denounce you and then kill you with their own hands! Is this a rational society? This is class struggle, Mao Zedong style! (ibid., p. 63).

Stung by the mounting intensity and ferocity of the intellectuals’ attack, Mao waited six weeks; then he struck back. In early June the Party Central Committee issued a substantially revised version of the Chairman’s February speech. The new version was considerably more hard-line and confrontational than the original. Where the February speech had stressed the importance of free “blooming and contending” among competing
ideas, Mao now added a stern warning against sabotage by class enemies, including counter-revolutionaries, rich-peasants and Rightists. In Mao’s newly revised view, China’s overthrown class enemies remained unreconciled to their defeat; and they constituted a dangerous threat to the socialist cause.

In emphasizing the need for remaining vigilant against class enemies, Mao directly contradicted the Eighth Party Congress’s formal conclusion that class struggle was “essentially over” in China. On the contrary, the Chairman now claimed that “the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie…will be long and tortuous and at times very acute…. In this respect, the question whether socialism or capitalism will win is still not really settled.” (quoted in MacFarquhar, Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol 1, p. 268).

After warning against the “frenzied attacks” of counter-revolutionaries and Rightists, Mao went on to enumerate six criteria for distinguishing between the “fragrant flowers” of healthy debate and the “poisonous weeds” of noxious capitalism. The flowers, he said, should be lovingly nurtured, while the weeds should be pulled out at the root:

“What,” asked the Chairman, “should be the criteria…for distinguishing fragrant flowers from poisonous weeds?…Broadly speaking, we consider the criteria should be as follows:

(1) Words and actions should help to unite, not divide, the people of our various nationalities;
(2) They should be beneficial, not harmful, to socialist construction;
(3) They should help to consolidate, not weaken, the people’s democratic dictatorship;
(4) They should help to consolidate, not weaken, democratic centralism;
(5) they should help to strengthen, not discard or weaken, the leadership of the Communist Party;
(6) They should be beneficial, not harmful, to international socialist unity.

“Of these six criteria,” concluded the Chairman, “the most important are the socialist path and the leadership of the Party.” (Mao, Selected Readings…., p. 378)

Having clearly narrowed the limits of “free speech” for intellectuals, Mao instructed his associates to punish those who had dared to attack the Party. In the summer of 1957 an “anti-Rightist rectification campaign” was launched. Led by Deng Xiaoping (who had evidently had reservations about the “hundred flowers” policy from the outset), the new movement brought with it a harsh crackdown on China’s “bourgeois intellectuals.”

In a throwback to the repressive days of the Yan’an Forum of 1942, hundreds of thousands of non-Communist teachers, writers, scientists and artists were now subjected to intense “criticism and struggle.” Teachers were paraded in front of their students, made to wear dunce cups identifying their alleged crimes, and forced to sign confessions. Tens
of thousands were beaten; many were imprisoned; and not a few died, some by their own hand. (show Hundred Flowers struggle session.)

In addition to denunciations, beatings and imprisonment, the majority of those labeled as Rightists were dismissed from their jobs and sent to the countryside to be “reformed through labor.” Much later, Deng Xiaoping acknowledged that up to half a million people had been falsely accused and punished as “Rightists” in the course of the rectification movement, which lasted until 1958.

In recent years, a debate has raged among scholars over whether Mao deliberately led China’s intellectuals into a trap, enticing them to expose their true feelings as a prelude to cracking down hard. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that the Chairman had been known to disarm adversaries with praise before pouncing on them; and on more than one occasion, he had set elaborate traps for his colleagues to test their loyalty.

On the other hand, there is no direct evidence of Maoist pre-meditation in 1957. Indeed, the conciliatory tone of his February speech bore the mark of sincerity. Moreover, Mao’s initial “soft line” had been opposed by several of his top comrades at the time, including both Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, who complained that the Chairman was courting disaster by encouraging intellectuals to criticize the Party.

But Mao persisted; and when his conciliatory gestures produced an avalanche of intellectual criticism, he lost a great deal of face with his comrades—to the point where he actually began to consider personally retreating from the front line of policy-making. So, bottom line: Was Mao setting a trap for the intellectuals? To coin a phrase, “You pays your money and you takes your choice.”

Whatever the truth of Mao’s motivation, his relations with Nikita Khrushchev were showing clear signs of deterioration. Shortly after Khrushchev’s February 1956 de-Stalinization speech, China’s flagship newspaper, the People’s Daily, published a lengthy, unsigned theoretical article which defended Stalin as an “outstanding Marxist-Leninist fighter” and which refuted Khrushchev’s verbal attack on Stalin’s “cult of personality.” While acknowledging that Stalin had made serious mistakes, the People’s Daily article defended the historical contribution of iconic leaders: “Marxist-Leninists hold that leaders play a big role in history...It is utterly wrong to deny the role of the individual, the role of forerunners and of leaders.” (“On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” April 5, 1956). Though Mao did not write this article, he personally signed off on it.

Later in 1956, in the aftermath of the Hungarian revolt, relations with the Soviet Union grew even more strained when Mao criticized the Russians for sending Soviet tanks into Hungary without first consulting other members of the Socialist bloc. In Mao’s view, such unilateral Soviet action violated the spirit of fraternal consultation and deliberation, and was symptomatic of Khrushchev’s growing attitude of “great-nation Chauvinism.”
At a November 1956 meeting of the Party Central Committee, Mao openly voiced his concern with the implications of Khrushchev’s February speech; and for the first time he issued a critique of another one of the Soviet leader’s recent ideological innovations, the idea that in the era of nuclear weapons, socialism could achieve victory peacefully, without revolutionary armed struggle, through parliamentary means. To Mao, the idea of a “parliamentary road to socialism” smacked of heresy, since it contradicted a major axiom of Lenin’s theory of imperialism, namely, the inevitability of war. In an obvious snit, Mao complained to his comrades:

The Sword of Stalin has been abandoned by the Russians….As for the sword of Lenin, has it too now been abandoned?… In my view, it has… to a considerable extent…. Khruschev’s report…says it is possible to gain political power by the parliamentary road, [and that] it is no longer necessary for all countries to learn from the October Revolution. Once this gate is thrown open, Leninism by and large is thrown out. (R. MacFarquhar, Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol. 1, p. 171).

Now, up to this point, Mao’s quarrel with Khrushchev had been kept separate and distinct from his rising alarm over the alleged destructive activities of rich peasants and bourgeois intellectuals at home. But over the next few months, these two concerns would begin to converge. Increasingly, Mao would view Khrushchev’s evident abandonment of the Leninist principles of revolution and war as the flip side of China’s intensifying domestic class struggle. To these twin heresies, Mao affixed a new label: “modern revisionism” (xiandai xiuzheng zhuyi).

Mao defined “modern revisionism” as the abandonment of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, and he traced its origins to a resurgence of bourgeois ideology and liberalism in post-revolutionary socialist society. In an address to his comrades in mid May of 1957, at the height of the Hundred Flowers “blooming and contending” in China, he signaled the shift in his thinking: “Over the past few months everyone has been repudiating [ideological] dogmatism, but [we have] done nothing about revisionism…. Now we ought to pay attention to repudiating revisionism.” (MacFarquhar, Origins, Vol 1, p. 261) As far as is known, this was the first appearance of what would later emerge as a full-blown Maoist obsession with preventing a “capitalist restoration” in China—an obsession that would eventually envelop China in paroxysms of revolutionary extremism.

As Mao’s unhappiness with Khrushchev intensified, so too did his impatience with the strategy of “blindly imitating” the Soviet model of socialism. Characterized by central planning, agricultural collectivization and urban heavy industrial concentration, the Soviet model had become bogged down in China. Rich peasants were sabotaging the collective farms; agricultural productivity was stagnant, and the resulting lack of extractable revenues from the rural areas was hampering the country’s industrial growth. Moreover, in the aftermath of the highly divisive anti-Rightist rectification campaign, China’s corps of industrial “experts”— engineers, scientists, and technicians—had become demoralized, showing little enthusiasm for socialism. In Mao’s view something needed to be done to kick-start the stagnant economy.
At the Eighth Party Congress in 1956, Mao’s colleagues had opted for a prolonged period of economic “consolidation and adjustment” to resolve existing economic problems and put the economy back on a sound footing. But Mao was far from satisfied with such a basically conservative game plan. For him, “more of the same” was not the answer. Rather, it was the problem.

With his anger at Khrushchev growing more intense, along with his frustration with China’s rich peasants and “bourgeois intellectuals”, Mao began to point the finger of suspicion at those of his colleagues who had exhibited a skeptical attitude toward the “high tide” of rural collectivization in 1955 and ‘56.

Worried about the spread of “revisionist” influence within his own Party, Mao in the fall of 1957 expanded the targets of anti-Rightist rectification from “bourgeois intellectuals” to the Communist Party itself. By the time the movement ran its course a year later, over one million Party members and cadres had been investigated, reprimanded, put on probation, or expelled outright for their alleged Rightist errors.

By the spring of 1958, Mao’s thinking had undergone a profound shift toward the Left. He now began to envision an entirely new form of socialist economic construction, based on the twin ideas of “uninterrupted revolution” and the unceasing liberation of the subjective energies of the Chinese people. There would be no more emulating the old Soviet model; there would be no more relying on bourgeois intellectuals for economic and technical progress; there would be no more advancing at a snail’s pace, “tottering along like women with bound feet”; and there would be no more nay-saying. The Chairman had made up his mind. A new “Leap Forward” was at hand! And China would never be the same.
Lecture 18: The Great Leap Forward (1958-60)

In this lecture we look at Mao Zedong’s unprecedented effort to accelerate China’s economic development by undertaking a “Great Leap Forward.” Distrustful of Khrushchev’s “revisionism,” Mao abandoned the Soviet model for constructing socialism; and in 1958 he struck out in a new and uncharted direction, hoping to leapfrog the Russians and beat them to the “promised land” of communism. It was an audacious gamble. And it failed, utterly.

The Great Leap Forward had its origins in a series of “outside-the-box” innovations intended to jump-start the Chinese economy, relying primarily on the creative energies of the peasant masses. For various reasons the Soviet model had not proved to be a good fit for China. For one thing, Soviet-style socialism spawned economic free-riders. For another, it was ill-suited to China’s economic and demographic conditions. China had little advanced technology for industrial development; few world-class scientists and engineers; little virgin land to put under cultivation; and a massive, unskilled rural population that still used thousand-year-old farming tools and techniques.

The Great Leap began not as a grandiose blueprint for human social engineering, but as a series of ad-hoc responses to specific developmental problems. The programs of the Great Leap were often improvised and experimental; and some of them made reasonable sense, at least in principle. The first major innovation, introduced at the end of 1957, involved the mobilization of tens of millions of collective farmers during the slack winter season, when there was sharply reduced demand for field labor. Instead of sitting around in their villages through the long Chinese winter, peasants could be put to work building large-scale water conservation projects—dams, reservoirs, dykes, and canals. The concept was rather simple, dating back to ancient imperial times: Large-scale water conservation projects meant higher, more stable crop yields; and stable crop yields meant greater tax revenues for the state.

Since China was short on both investment capital and advanced technology, but long on raw, unskilled human labor, idle males were conscripted from the villages to do the heavy work of building water conservation projects using whatever simple tools they had at hand—shovels, picks, and hoes. In some cases, as many as ten thousand peasants were transported to a single dam or canal-site from as many as a dozen or more nearby villages. Since the commuting distances involved often exceeding twenty miles, and were too great to complete on foot in a single day, temporary barracks were erected for the laborers at the work sites, where they would remain for weeks, or even months at a time, returning home only infrequently.

To maintain discipline and morale among the work force, a rudimentary military-type regimen was introduced: workers arose at dawn to recorded bugle calls, ate their meals in communal canteens, and marched in step to the work sites, with their tools over their shoulders like rifles. Once there, they synchronized their labor to the sharp, regular rhythms of work chants. Participating laborers received no paid compensation for their
efforts, though meals, housing and transportation were provided free of charge. (photo of Great Leap construction site)

Perhaps inevitably, this new, militarized form of large-scale, on-site construction was compared to the Red Army’s conduct of “people’s war” during the Yan’an period; indeed, the entire water conservation movement of winter 1957-58 was portrayed in the state media as a new “people’s war against nature.” And this, in turn, set a militaristic tone for the entire Great Leap Forward. (show great leap poster)

One key feature of the water conservation movement was the marked absence of “expert” scientific or technical input. Blueprints were done on-the-fly, often by inexperienced draftsmen; surveying was slipshod; materials specifications were mere approximations, based on crude estimates of load-bearing capacities and structural requirements. The fact that many of these huge projects later failed or collapsed because of construction flaws did not immediately dampen the regime’s growing enthusiasm for the triumph of the human spirit over material obstacles. In the “can-do” ethos that characterized the Great Leap in its early stages, “expert” scientists, engineers, and technical intellectuals were derogated as useless bookworms, while the politically mobilized, ideologically-motivated “red” peasants and cadres were given credit for achieving amazing feats of creativity and daring.

With millions of male laborers drawn away from the villages to work for months at a time on large-scale conservation projects, the spring of 1958 brought a growing shortage of able-bodied farm workers. As the busy spring planting season approached, women were mobilized to work in the fields. To conserve household labor, domestic chores were now communized: instead of each woman cooking for her own family, a few women would prepare meals for everyone in the village; child-care was also managed on a communal basis, with a few village grannies keeping watch over all the local children. Care for the elderly, sick and disabled was similarly arranged on a communal scale. The net effect was to free up large numbers of able-bodied women from the demands of household domestic chores, enabling them to participate in farm labor while their men were away, living and working at construction sites. Chinese propagandists praised the new system for having liberating Chinese women from household drudgery. But if it was “women’s liberation,” it was liberation with distinctively burdensome characteristics.

By the late spring of 1958, several of these ad-hoc innovations had become more-or-less permanent fixtures in the collective farms. Communal dining halls were now the norm, and were lauded in Party newspapers as a breakthrough for the Communist spirit of “serving the people.” In some areas, rural cadres began to experiment with greatly enlarging the scale of the existing collective farms by amalgamating ten or as many as twenty neighboring villages to form a single, integrated administrative unit, with a population as high as 10,000 or even 20,000 people.

The mass media were quick to applaud such experiments as the “first sprouts of communism”; and Mao himself was delighted with the sudden upsurge of enthusiasm for these “newborn socialist things.” On an inspection tour of rural Henan province in the
early summer of 1958, Mao visited one of the newly-amalgamated large-scale collectives. Impressed by the evident enthusiasm of the local peasants and cadres, Mao asked the name of their new organization. “Weixing renmin gongshe,” came the answer—the “Sputnik people’s commune.”

On Mao’s return trip to Beijing, a reporter from the People’s Daily asked the Chairman for his impression of the new Sputnik commune. Mao’s five-word response—“Renmin gongshe hao!” (people’s communes are good!)—appeared the next day as a banner headline on the masthead of Communist Party’s flagship newspaper.

All over China, rural officials now hurried to emulate the Sputnik experience. Mao had said “people’s communes are good,” and now, suddenly, like mushrooms after a rain, they began to pop up everywhere. All roads to the Weixing commune, where Mao had “discovered” the first people’s commune, were suddenly jammed with officials converging from all parts of the country, seeking to learn the secrets of organizing and running a people’s commune. Just what was a commune? And how did it work?

Alongside the reorganization and dramatic enlargement of China’s collective farms, extraordinary claims of unprecedented crop yields began to appear in the official media. In areas where people’s communes had been formed relatively early, the summer wheat harvest in 1958 was said to have doubled from the previous year. New breakthroughs in productivity were reported almost daily, as a wave of unbridled optimism spread like wildfire.

New innovations in farming techniques now began to be widely popularized. A revolutionary method of planting rice, called “deep plowing and close planting,” was promoted in the summer of 1958. The theory behind it was that if two tons of rice could be grown on a given plot of land by planting the rice seedlings twelve inches apart, and at a depth of six inches, then far larger yields could, in principal, be achieved by planting the young seedlings twice as close together, at twice the depth, and with twice the amount of fertilizer added per acre of rice. To facilitate deep plowing, a new, larger farm plow was introduced – the “two wheel, two-share plow.” Pulled by two men (or a water buffalo), it could dig a furrow up to eighteen inches deep.

Almost immediately, claims of the doubling or even tripling of crop yields were reported in the Party media, as rural officials across the country competed among themselves to meet and exceed established norms of per-acre crop production. A famous photo printed in the People’s Daily showed a group of children playing happily on the top of a thick, rich plot of mature rice plants. The plants in the photo were as thick as a straw mattress, easily supporting the weight of the children. (show PD photo)

With the new, larger size of the people’s communes, it now became possible, at least in theory, to broadly diversify the rural economy. By effecting a large-scale, well organized division of labor involving thousands of commune members, the people’s communes could, it was argued, become entirely self-sufficient-- not merely in food production, but in industry, commerce, education and military training as well. No longer bound by the
conventional bureaucratic constraints of the old Soviet model, China was blazing a new and original pathway to the future.

Perhaps the most famous example of rural economic diversification during the Great Leap Forward was the notorious campaign to create large amounts of high-quality steel in “backyard blast furnaces.” Here again, the idea was to substitute large-scale, mobilized human labor for the scientific, technical and capital requirements of making steel in modern urban factories. In launching the new campaign, Mao declared that his goal was to surpass Great Britain in steel production within 15 years. (show photo of backyard furnaces)

Throughout the countryside, millions of peasants were organized to build the small-scale clay, brick-and-mortar kilns. Operating around the clock, the kilns were fired to superheated temperatures. To keep the furnaces blazing, all available rural fuel supplies were consumed. Whole forests were denuded of trees; and all available household heating and cooking coal was requisitioned. To supply the needed pig iron, scrap metal was collected in every village—including old farm tools, bicycle parts, household pots, pans, and utensils. Anything and everything metallic was fed into the kilns. Nothing was spared.

Working night and day, China’s mobilized peasants produced almost three million tons of backyard steel in 1958—accounting for roughly 30% of the nation’s total steel output. A few months later, an obviously exuberant Chairman Mao revised his goal of catching up with Great Britain-- from 15 years down to only three years.

And still the innovations kept coming. One problem that had long plagued rural China was the prevalence of grain-consuming pests—mainly birds, rats and insects. As part of the Great Leap, a “people’s war” was launched to eliminate the four leading crop-eating pests. In this new campaign, sparrows were designated as public enemy number one. To reduce the sparrow population, a low-cost, labor-intensive strategy was devised. Millions of peasants—mainly small children and the elderly-- were mobilized to bang pots and pans and wave sticks and brooms outdoors. The resulting din frightened the sparrows out of the trees and fields, and into the air. Unable to land because of the intense noise, they eventually dropped from exhaustion, whereupon they were set upon by the crowds and strung onto garlands, which were displayed as trophies. Those who killed the most sparrows were given commendation as advanced workers, or “Sputniks.” Tens of millions of sparrows were killed in this way. (show photo of sparrow campaign)

By the mid-summer of 1958, a national euphoria was in evidence. Fueled by extreme claims of success in the “war against nature,” and amplified by an overactive Communist propaganda machine, the belief in economic miracles led China’s leaders to claim that they had discovered a shortcut to Communism— the ultimate Nirvana. By the end of 1958, the country’s 750,000 collective farms had been consolidated into 23,000 people’s communes, each with an average size of 5,000 households. In the excitement of the moment, it escaped notice that many (if not most) of the communes had been set up in haste, without much advanced planning or preparation.
With Mao already engaged in a contest of wills with Nikita Khrushchev, the Chinese leader was eager to prove the superiority of China’s newfound pathway to Communist perfection. To bolster Chinese claims that the people’s communes would hasten the arrival of pure Communism, Mao gave his blessing to a new income distribution system used to pay China’s communal farmers. Instead of receiving payment proportional to the work points they earned performing farm labor, as in the past, commune members now received the bulk of their income based on the egalitarian distribution principle of “free supply.” In the new system, income entitlements were calculated for different demographic categories—that is, for men, women, children and the elderly—on the basis of their average daily caloric requirements. At the conclusion of the harvest, 70% of the commune’s distributable income was handed out according to these entitlements, without regard to labor contribution. Only 30% was passed out on the basis of work actually performed.

To ensure that all remnants of capitalism would be thoroughly eradicated in the new communes, the small private plots and domestic animals that individual families had been permitted to retain for their own use under collectivization were now confiscated and communized; and rural free markets—where peasants had traditionally sold or bartered their surplus produce after fulfilling their state tax and procurement quotas-- were summarily abolished. Across China, the “winds of Communism” were blowing with gale force.

To spur even greater increases in farm production, emulation contests were held throughout the countryside. First, the members of one commune would pledge to double their grain output at the next harvest; then a neighboring commune would counter-pledge to raise their grain harvest by 125%, and so on. Those communes that met or exceeded their pledges were awarded the honorary title of “Sputnik.” (show photo of “Sputnik” competition)

By August of 1958, Central Party leaders had become “dizzy with success.” Believing that food was abundant, they ratcheted up communal quotas for mandatory grain procurement by the state. Local officials, who were painfully aware that many of the reports were grossly exaggerated, were nonetheless obligated to fulfill their increased procurement quotas. Reluctant to offend their superiors, they lied to them, inflating their harvest estimates while squeezing every last drop of procurement grain out of the hapless peasants, who were forced to tighten their belts to survive. The result was a national orgy of official exaggeration and unreality, while—at the bottom of the food chain-- hundreds of millions of peasants began to suffer serious hardships.

The engine driving this entire upward spiral of inflated expectations was Mao himself. By the late summer of 1958 Mao had gone “all in” in his competition with Khrushchev, in effect betting his reputation on the success of the Great Leap. Because of this, he could not countenance the loss of face, the deep humiliation that would accompany any acknowledgement of failure. Aware of the intensity of Mao’s feelings, his lieutenants dared not question his judgment or dampen his enthusiasm.
Meeting in August of 1958 at the seaside resort of Beidaihe, Chinese leaders basked in their ostensible successes: China’s 1958 grain harvest had, at first estimate, exceeded 450 million tons, surpassing even that of the United States; and Party leaders were now told that the country could produce as much rice as it wanted. Mao went on record as suggesting that everyone should eat five meals a day.

By summer’s end, the Party’s propagandists were proclaiming unprecedented breakthroughs in almost every realm of human endeavor—from steel-making to medical science and even athletic competition. When the Chinese men’s table tennis team won the world championships in 1958, their victory was officially attributed to “the emancipation of mind wrought by the [Great Leap’s] mass education in socialist relations and values.” (Peking Review, July 8, 1958)

On the ground, in the provinces, however, the gap between rhetoric and reality was becoming painfully apparent. Although the initial crop harvest in the summer of 1958 was, in fact, larger than average, a number of serious problems had already begun to emerge. When the first heavy summer rains fell in 1958, many of the dams, canals, dikes and reservoirs hastily constructed in the previous winter began to fail, causing inundation of hundreds of thousands of acres of cropland. Of the 500 largest reservoirs under construction in the winter of 1957-58, over 200 were abandoned within two years.

Nor did the Great Leap’s water management failures end there. In 1975 a huge dam built in 1958 in Henan province collapsed, causing an estimated 200,000 deaths—the largest single dam disaster in human history.

The main causes of failure were inadequate engineering know-how and the routine use of substandard construction materials. The Maoist emphasis on mass mobilization over careful planning, ideological “redness” over technical “expertise,” had created not miracles, but vast misfortune.

The 1958 experiment with “close planting and deep plowing” also proved a failure. Rice sprouts, it turned out, could not be successfully transplanted to a depth of more than 10 inches—it tended to kill the delicate seedlings. And doubling the application of fertilizer per acre tended to burn the delicate young seedlings, rather than nourish them. It was later revealed that the famous People’s Daily photo that showed children playing on a thick bed of close-planted grain had been faked by local cadres for the benefit of visiting Party dignitaries.

The backyard steel mills were the next to fail. Although large amounts of scrap metal were successfully melted down and forged into crude steel, the resulting products were unusable. The steel’s composition was not standardized; its smelting temperatures varied widely, its chemical alloys were impure; and its tensile strength was so poor that it tended to crack under stress. Once again, the ascendancy of “red” ideology over “expert” planning and engineering had led to failure. To make matters worse, in the obsessive drive to keep the backyard furnaces firing 24/7 in 1958, the reckless, wholesale cutting
down of forests and underbrush from rural hillsides created a severe shortage of fuel for cooking and heating, as well as a massive problem of soil erosion, the effects of which are still being felt in China.

The systematic elimination of grain-devouring sparrows was also of dubious value. Though millions of sparrows were killed, it turns out that the tiny birds devoured their weight in insects. Without sparrows to control the insect population, crop damage was even greater than before.

On top of all this, the much-vaunted “free supply” system introduced in the people’s communes turned out to be a failure. With 70% of a commune’s income distributed to members without regard for work actually performed, the “free rider” problem worsened considerably. The communes were so large, and so impersonal, that is was virtually impossible to monitor individual work performance, let alone punish those who failed to pull their weight. Under such circumstances, the incentive to work diligently was seriously diluted. Field management was done carelessly; planting was haphazard; and mature grain was left to rot in the fields.

The combination of deeply-flawed technical innovations, diminished incentives to work hard, and a false sense of economic abundance and personal entitlement added up to a recipe for disaster. With Mao still basking in his late-summer euphoria, urging people to eat five meals a day, communal granaries in the autumn began to run low, and meals served in communal kitchens became plainer, sparser, and less appetizing. As one peasant recalled:

At first an individual got eighteen ounces of food a day, but later there was so little grain in the store[house] that they reduced it to nine ounces. With this you cannot make steamed buns, so they made a soup, a kind of gruel… (J. Becker, Hungry Ghosts, p 172)

Complaints began to pour into newspapers around the country, bemoaning the poor quality of communal food and the careless indifference of communal cooks. Rice stalks, wheat chaff and pieces of corn husk now found their way into communal meals with increasing regularity. And the gruel got thinner and thinner.

By the end of the year, the bubble of “irrational exuberance” began to burst. Crop yields in the second half of 1958 were much lower than the first half of the year; and the adverse effects of the wasteful backyard steel campaign and the motivation-killing free supply system were beginning to be felt; yet quotas for compulsory grain deliveries to the state remained unrealistically high. When peasants complained that they could not meet their inflated grain quotas, Mao accused them of “hoarding and dividing” surplus grain, and ordered rural cadres to search their homes and seize the grain. Caught uncomfortably between the demands of their superiors and the frantic pleas of the commune members, local cadres did as they were told. In many areas, they hired thugs to search peasants’ homes for “concealed grain,” beating up anyone who resisted. In a number of cases, rural cadres committed suicide rather than comply with such orders.
By the winter of 1959, the Party Central Committee—and even Mao himself—recognized that something had gone seriously wrong. At a meeting in late February, Mao grudgingly acknowledged that Leftist excesses had created problems; and he now ordered a reduction in steel and grain acquisition quotas and a readjustment of the “free supply” system to strengthen work incentives in the people’s communes.

Although Mao gave ground on some of the particulars of the Great Leap, he was too stubborn to acknowledge overall failure—especially to Nikita Khrushchev. And so, even as the grain supply situation became progressively worse, Mao unilaterally stepped-up China’s exports of grain to the Soviet Union, in repayment of Stalin’s 1949 loan.

Conditions worsened steadily in the first half of 1959, as the first of three consecutive years of extremely bad weather hit rural China. Famine was now reported in several provinces.

In the face of a growing crisis, a few of Mao’s lieutenants began to question the inflated claims of success. Previously afraid to speak out for fear of offending the Chairman, they now began to raise their voices in dissent. And in the summer of 1959 their newfound courage presented Mao Zedong with the single biggest challenge of his career to date.

The bubble of unreality that enveloped China during the Great Leap Forward caused a number of senior Party leaders to begin to doubt the wisdom of the entire enterprise. As reports of growing hunger and malnutrition began to filter up to Beijing from the provinces, a few bold souls dared to speak out. The most fearless of these was China’s plain-speaking Minister of Defense, Marshal Peng Dehuai.

Peng had been commander-in-chief of Chinese forces in the Korean War. Born into a poor peasant household, he had known famine in his childhood. Two of his siblings had starved to death. With little formal education, Peng was widely respected as an able, candid and forthright leader who stood up for what he believed in. He had crossed swords with Mao more than once in the past, and was not afraid to challenge the Chairman.

Hearing reports of severe rural hardship, Peng made an inspection tour of people’s communes in a number of provinces in the autumn and winter of 1958. He was dismayed to find that conditions on the ground did not resemble the idyllic portrait being painted in the Party’s own press. In his own home town in Hunan province, Peng observed the deteriorating economic conditions at first hand. Peasants were being worked to the point of collapse. Cadres were beating up people who failed to fulfill their grain quotas. Many women stopped menstruating prematurely as a result of overwork and undernourishment. Responding to this, Peng sent a cable to Mao in Beijing, urgently requesting that he further reduce grain quotas, and predicting a massive famine if something were not done to ease the plight of the peasants.

After receiving Peng’s telegram, Mao visited his own home town of Shaoshan, also in Hunan province—his first such home visit in over three decades. Conditions there were bleak, but the local peasants were so in awe of Mao—and so intimidated by their local cadres, who were eager to please the Chairman— that they did little other than genuflect to his wisdom and authority. When Mao asked if the communes were popular with the masses, they responded affirmatively (Salisbury, The New Emperors, p. 174). Only one brave soul mustered the courage to “speak truth to power”: “If you hadn’t come to Shaoshan,” he said, “we would all have starved to death.” To this, Mao responded somewhat cavalierly with the suggestion that that people should “be more thrifty with [their] food,” eating less in the winter, and a bit more in the spring and fall (Chang and Halliday, Mao: The Unknown Story, pp 446-47).

Though Mao kept his growing irritation at Peng Dehuai to himself, his behavior in 1959 became increasingly erratic—and bizarrely erotic as well. Long known as a womanizer, Mao preferred the company of pretty young peasant girls. At the Chairman’s behest, a private lounge, complete with oversized bed, was built adjacent to the main dance-floor in the CCP’s leadership compound at Zhongnanhai, in Beijing. (show photo of dance party/Mao surrounded by giggling young women) At Saturday night dance parties in the spring and summer of 1959, Mao, now in his mid-60s, would take teenage girls—often several at a time— into his private lounge to engage in sexual orgies. According to his
personal physician, the Chairman seldom bathed or brushed his teeth, and thus emitted a rather unpleasant odor. But Mao never permitted himself to reach a climax. Like many Chinese emperors before him, he feared it would diminish his potency. Evidently, Mao’s sexual appetite was greatest when he was under the most intense political stress.

By the early summer of 1959, the stress had been building steadily, and a confrontation between Mao and his Defense Minister seemed inevitable. The setting for their epic showdown was Mt. Lu—Lushan—a famously scenic mountain resort in Jiangxi province, near a picturesque bend in the Yangzi River. There, for six weeks in July and early August of 1959, Mao presided over a work conference attended by 100 top party and state officials—including Peng Dehuai.

Peng initially tried to beg off from attending the meeting, on grounds of fatigue. But a personal phone call from Mao persuaded him to attend. On the eve of the meeting, Peng composed a poem in the classical style of a Peking opera verse. In it, he revealed his unhappiness with Mao’s Great Leap Forward:

Grain scattered on the ground.
Potato leaves withered.
Strong young people have left to make steel.
Only children and old women harvest the crops.
How can they pass the coming year?
Allow me to raise my voice for the people.
(J. Domes, Peng Dehuai, p. 93)

When the Party’s leadership conference began at Lushan on July 2nd, Mao divided the participants into six regional groups. Peng Dehuai was assigned to the Northwest group. In the first few group meetings, Peng voiced his concerns over falsified grain statistics, and the fact that China was continuing to export grain abroad despite the famine. But his colleagues were reluctant to join in his criticism, afraid to challenge Mao’s judgment and authority. Consequently, they heaped ritual praise on the Great Leap and dutifully noted the masses’ “great enthusiasm” for the people’s communes. Peng grew alarmed. Surely his comrades knew that something was greatly amiss in the countryside?! But none were willing to express their doubts on the record.

Peng now changed his tack. Acutely aware that his base of support had dwindled to practically nothing, Peng decided to present his contrarian views directly to Mao. On July 14 he sent Mao a five-page handwritten “letter of opinion,” detailing the findings from his recent inspection tour.

Deferring at the outset of his letter to Mao’s superior wisdom and potency, Peng Dehuai took pains to reassure the Chairman that the Great Leap was without doubt a “great achievement,” and that it had brought “more gains than losses.” Choosing his words carefully, he skirted around such words as “famine” or “hunger.”
(Here I should note that the habit of using humble, self-deprecating language when addressing the emperor had been cultivated by Chinese court officials over many centuries—recall, for example, the Imperial Grand Secretary Wo-ren’s reference to himself as “your unworthy slave” in his memorial to the emperor opposing the “self-strengthening” reforms of Prince Gong in the 1870s. And later on, we shall see how the Tiananmen student demonstrators of 1989 adopted a similar tactic of ritualized imperial genuflection on at least one occasion prior to the bloody crackdown of June 3.)

After Peng Dehuai completed his obligatory kow-tow to the emperor, he got down to brass tacks. He noted that a “habit of exaggeration” had spread throughout the country in the summer of 1958, and that “tremendous harm” was done when reports of “unbelievable miracles” were published in the Party press. People had become “dizzy with success”, he said, believing that “communism was [just] around the corner.” This, in turn, led officials throughout China to engage in ever more grossly exaggerated production claims, which in turn led to the ratcheting further upward of compulsory grain quotas. “We considered ourselves rich,” he said, “while actually we were still poor…For a long time it was not easy to get a true picture of the situation.”

Peng went on to point out that despite the masses’ initial enthusiasm for the people’s communes, many communal dining halls had been poorly run; the backyard steel furnaces had “squandered material and financial resources”; and in general, the Great Leap had been launched hastily, without a “plan for achieving necessary balance.” The resulting wave of “Leftist tendencies”—including “petty-bourgeois fanaticism”—had “caused considerable harm to the socialist cause.” (all quotes from The Case of Peng Dehuai, pp. 7-13).

Although Peng Dehuai concluded his “letter of opinion” with the obligatory acknowledgement of Mao’s superior wisdom in blazing a path filled with “great achievements” en route to a “bright future,” there could be no denying the deeply critical message that he had conveyed to the Chairman.

Alert to the potential danger posed by Peng Dehuai’s “sugar-coated” challenge, Mao devised a two-pronged strategy to isolate his Defense Minister. First, he set out to test the loyalty of each person in attendance at the Lushan conference. To accomplish this, Mao personally circulated Peng’s letter of opinion to everyone present. By gauging their reactions, he could see who was steadfast in their support of Mao’s leadership, and who was not. Seeing what Mao was up to, Peng urgently requested to have all copies of his letter retrieved, claiming that it was a private missive intended for Mao’s eyes only. His request was denied.

Second, to prevent potential defectors from conspiring behind his back in their small group meetings, Mao convened a full plenary session of the Lushan conference. Speaking to the assembled Party leaders on July 23, he addressed head-on the question of rising dissatisfaction with the Great Leap Forward. By turns humble, rambling, introspective, egotistical, sarcastic and downright intimidating, Mao sternly confronted his chief critic, Peng Dehuai:
“Now that you’ve said so much,” he began, “let me say something… People say
we have become isolated from the masses, yet the masses still support us….
[Some of our comrades] are wavering. …They [pay lip service], affirming that
the Great Leap and the people’s communes are good and correct... But we must
see on whose side they [really] stand. I would advise them not to waver at this
crucial point in time. [Their] brinksmanship is rather dangerous. If you don’t
believe me, [just] wait and see what happens.“ (S. Schram, Chairman Mao Talks
to the People, pp. 131-139)

Having said this, Mao cast his gaze in the general direction of a group of top-level PLA
generals seated in the conference hall. Then he laid down the gauntlet: “If the People’s
Liberation Army won’t follow me, then I will go down to the countryside, reorganize the
Red Army guerillas and organize another Liberation Army.” Pausing for effect, he
continued: “But I think the Army will follow me.” At that point, several Chinese
generals stood up and shouted their pledges of allegiance to Mao. (ibid.; also Salisbury,
the New Emperors, pp.182-83.)

When Mao stopped speaking, Peng Dehuai’s famously short temper erupted. He accused
Mao of despotism, comparing him to Stalin in his later years; and he warned that “if the
Chinese peasants were not so patient, we’d have another Hungary [on our hands].” Mao
responded in kind, accusing Peng of being a Rightist, of sabotaging the people’s
democratic dictatorship, and of attempting to organize an opposition faction within the
CCP.

Things turned downright ugly when Mao attempted to cut short the Defense Minister’s
outburst, at which point Peng angrily reminded the Chairman of a quarrel they had had
two decades earlier, during the anti-Japanese War: “In Yan’an,” shouted Peng, “you
[sexually assaulted] my mother for forty days. Now, I’ve been [assaulting] your mother
for only 18 days, yet you want to call a halt--but you won’t [get away with it].” Peng then
stalked out of the room. (Salisbury, The New Emperors, p. 184; Schram, loc. cit)

The Defense Minister had overplayed his hand. Those key leaders who had initially been
inclined to support his criticism of the Great Leap—including such senior figures as Zhou
Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Zhu De-- now backed off completely, intimidated by the
Chairman’s display of full-bore combativeness. Mao had won. (J. Becker, Hungry
Ghosts, p. 90; Li, Private Life of Chairman Mao).

Leaving the conference room after his confrontation with Peng, Mao bumped into the
still-fuming Defense Minister. “Let’s have another talk,” suggested the Chairman.
“There’s nothing more to talk about,” replied the marshal. “No more talk.” (J. Fenby,
Modern China, p 412).

In the days that followed, no-one ventured to speak out in Peng Dehuai’s defense. At
Mao’s initiative, Peng and his small inner circle of supporters—including the PLA Chief
of Staff, a deputy foreign minister, and Mao’s own long-time political secretary-- were
officially condemned for having formed an “anti-Party clique,” and were subjected to varying degrees of punishment. Peng himself was stripped of his post as Defense Minister and placed under virtual house arrest in Beijing.

The lessons of Peng Dehuai’s abject humiliation at the hands of Mao Zedong were not lost on anyone: First, it was clearly safer to err on the side of “Leftism” than on the side of “rightism.” And second, despite Mao’s open invitation to his colleagues to “speak out” freely and openly, challenging the Chairman could be extremely hazardous to one’s health. As a senior Chinese diplomat put it, “After Lushan the whole Party shut up. We were all afraid to speak out.” (Salisbury, p. 184)

One big reason that Mao was able to intimidate his critics so consistently and so effectively—aside from his famous mercurial temper and iron will—was his chief of internal security, Kang Sheng. Ever since the mid-1930s, Kang had been entrusted by Mao with the task of compiling secret dossiers on all Party leaders at or above the provincial level. Knowing that potentially career-damaging “black materials” existed, and that Mao would not hesitate to use them to blackmail his colleagues, was a huge deterrent to would-be critics. In this respect, Kang Sheng was Mao’s chief “enabler”—in much the same way that Lavrentiy Beria had been Joseph Stalin’s enabler. Without such ruthlessly loyal security chiefs, both Stalin and Mao might not have enjoyed such apparent invincibility.

With opposing voices thus silenced, in the last half of 1959 the “Leftist wind” once again picked up momentum. Since it was now politically risky (if not downright suicidal) to oppose “rash advances,” cadres at all levels displayed exaggerated support for the Great Leap. Throughout the country, grain procurement targets were ratcheted upward once more. “Sputnik” competitions once again yielded absurd claims of unprecedented crop yields; and communal kitchens were ordered to reopen after having being shut down in the spring. Forced to surrender more and more of their meager harvest to the state, peasants became desperate; meanwhile, local cadres became more coercive than ever in their efforts to meet grain delivery quotas. In the search for concealed food, many peasants were tortured or beaten to death.

Although the regime announced record new increases in grain production in 1959, the reality was that the harvest had actually dropped by 30 million tons—almost 15% -- from the previous year. Yet in the face of growing food shortages, Mao insisted that the problem was not declining grain production, but willful sabotage. According to the Chairman, rich peasants were sabotaging the people’s communes by burying their food supplies deep underground, eating only thin gruel and turnips during the day, while feasting on their hidden contraband at night.

In truth, people were beginning to starve in large numbers. In the summer of 1959, a top Party official, Bo Yibo, conceded that 25 million people suffered from severe malnutrition. By the end of the year, peasants in many provinces had been reduced to eating the bark off of trees. Many people suffered from scurvy, while the stomachs of malnourished men, women and children became grotesquely swollen. When children
died, parents hid their bodies, not reporting the deaths, so they could continue to get the added ration of food.

In a few of China’s poorest provinces, instances of cannibalism were documented. Here is one first-hand report from Anhui province. It is not for the squeamish:

The worst thing that happened during the famine was… that parents had to decide [who] would be allowed to die first. They…could not afford to let their sons die, but a mother would say to her daughter, “You have to go and see your granny in heaven.” Then they stopped giving the girls food, just giving them water. [When the girls died] two families would swap the body of their daughter with that of the neighbor. Five or seven women would agree to do this among themselves. Then they boiled the corpses into a kind of soup. People had learned to do this during the famine of the 1930s. [Others] accepted this as a kind of “hunger culture.” (Becker, Hungry Ghosts, p. 138)

And still Mao refused to change course. He had silenced his critics, but in the process he had also shut down the regime’s most vital feedback mechanisms—debate and criticism—which were now needed more than ever to prevent an arrogant, willful dictator from indulging his utopian fantasies. To distract himself from his troubles, Mao now spent more time with comely young peasant girls at his dance-hall hideaway in Zhongnanhai.

But such distractions could not alter the basic situation, which turned even worse the following year. By 1960 there was nothing left to buffer the long-suffering peasantry from debilitating disease and agonizing death. By the end of the year, people in some places had been reduced to eating clay soil, in the hope of filling their empty bellies. By the spring of 1961, more than 30 million Chinese had died of malnutrition and related causes. Here is a description from a peasant woman in Anhui province:

All the trees in the village had been cut down. Any nearby were all stripped of bark. I peeled off the bark of a locust tree and cooked it as if it were rice soup….

More than half the villagers died…between New Year and April [of 1960]…. When people died, no-one collected the bodies. The corpses did not change color or decay because there was no blood in them, and not much flesh. (ibid., pp. 136-37)

No longer able to deny reality, Mao made a symbolic display of solidarity with the hard-pressed peasants. He announced he would temporarily stop eating meat. But he insisted that the difficulties were only temporary, and that they were the product not of his own wrongheaded policies, but of three consecutive years of bad weather and catastrophic natural disasters. Yet through it all, in the face of severe food shortages, Mao callously continued to export millions of tons of Chinese “blood grain” to the Soviet Union.

Though Mao’s colleagues dared not speak out against him or his policies, they knew that unless things changed, and soon, there was a real danger of regime collapse. And so they
quietly began taking matters into their own hands. In late 1960 and 1961, Mao’s second in command, Liu Shaoqi, joined with Deng Xiaoping and others to ameliorate the most egregious causes of the famine. Even Zhou Enlai, who had never openly crossed Mao--and never would--was sympathetic (Note: Kang Sheng reportedly had a great deal of “black information” on Zhou).

With Mao having voluntarily retreated to the “second line” of policy-making after the Lushan Plenum, Liu and Deng quietly set about dismantling the Great Leap Forward. Over the next two years they adopted a number of emergency reform measures: First, they drastically reduced the size of the people’s communes, dividing each one into roughly three smaller-sized units. To strengthen local production responsibility and remedy the endemic “free-rider problem,” they restored the accounting functions of the pre-1958 collective farms (which were now called “production brigades”), so that the peasants of each village would be responsible for their own production gains and losses, rather than folding these into the commune’s general accounts, as before.

When the incentive effects of this partial devolution of accounting and distribution proved insufficiently motivating, Liu and Deng went even further. In 1961 they shifted ultimate responsibility for accounting and income distribution down to the level of the old co-operative farms (now called “production teams”), consisting of 20 to 30 families each.

To generate additional food and income for hungry peasants, Liu and Deng restored to individual families the right to own small private plots of land and small domestic animals, which had been confiscated when the people’s communes were created in 1958. They also permitted families to engage in private sideline occupations such as brick-making or tool repair to supplement their meager farm incomes. And to spur local commerce, they reopened rural free markets, which had been shut down as “remnants of capitalism” in 1958.

By 1962, Liu and Deng had strengthened material incentives even further, by “contracting production to individual households.” Under this system, each family was allocated a piece of village land to cultivate for itself. After delivering its quota of compulsory grain to the state, a family was then free to consume, sell or trade the remainder, as it saw fit. Under this policy, there could be no more “free riding” on the collective, since each family was fully responsible for its own profits and losses.

By 1962, the reform policies of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping had brought about the first clear signs of an economic recovery. The worst of the famine was over, and throughout the countryside, 450 million peasant survivors began picking up the pieces of their shattered lives. But for the Communist Party, the job of restoring its badly damaged reputation and credibility had just begun.
Lecture 20: “Never Forget Class Struggle!” (1962-65)

In the early 1960s, Mao watched with growing discomfort as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping dismantled his cherished Great Leap Forward—brick by brick, backyard steel furnace by backyard steel furnace, communal dining hall by communal dining hall. Though they paid lip-service to the Chairman’s “wise” policies and leadership, in practice they increasingly ignored him. (Later, Mao would complain that throughout the early 1960s, Liu and Deng “treated me like a dead ancestor at a funeral….[They] never came to consult me.”)

In this lecture we shall examine Mao’s rising anger at his erstwhile top lieutenants. We shall see how the Chairman increasingly conflated their post-Great Leap reforms with the heretical policies of Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union. Lumping Liu and Deng together with Khrushchev, Mao in 1962 launched a blistering attack on “modern revisionism” and demanded an intensified “class struggle” against the “restoration of capitalism” at home and abroad. In doing so, he set off a series of profound shock waves that would erupt, a few years later, into China’s tumultuous Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Not only did Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping reverse the prevailing Leftist tendencies within the people’s communes, but they also poured cold water on Mao’s cherished technique of using mass campaigns to generate radical social change. Favoring careful planning, centralized leadership and cautious advance over spontaneous mass mobilization and frenetic “people’s wars” against nature, Liu and Deng restored the Communist Party’s traditional top-down, bureaucratic decision-making procedures.

But they went even further than that. They quietly rehabilitated thousands of Party members who had been wrongfully persecuted during Mao’s anti-Rightist rectification campaign of 1957-58. And finally, reversing Mao’s preference for ideological “redness” over technical “expertise,” they invited China’s much-maligned intellectuals to contribute their ideas and talents to China’s economic construction once again—this time, without fear of reprisal. Defending these pragmatic policy changes in 1962, Deng Xiaoping justified the shift to a more practical, scientific, and result-oriented approach to economic development by famously arguing that “It doesn’t matter if a cat is white or black, so long as it catches mice.”

But Chairman Mao was intensely—even viscerally—obsessed with the color of the cat. And as he watched from the “second line” of decision-making, he grew increasingly incensed at Liu and Deng for their seeming lack of concern for ideological correctness. As one of Mao’s key supporters would put it a few years later, “It is far better to have a socialist train running late than a capitalist train running on time.”

In January of 1962 Mao began to fight back. At a work conference attended by 7,000 party cadres—the largest such convocation in Party history—he delivered a lengthy speech in which he decried the lack of mass mobilization and condemned the emphasis on bureaucratic methods and procedures that had come to dominate inner-Party life since
the Great Leap. Employing his patented, indirect style of attack, Mao alleged that “certain comrades”—a favorite generic target of his—“are afraid of the masses... [they are] afraid that the masses’s views...will differ from those of the leading organizations.... They [even] suppress the masses.... This attitude is extremely evil...”

Harping on a theme he had first raised when he abruptly cancelled the Hundred Flowers movement in the spring of 1957, Mao spoke of the continued existence of class struggle in the ideological field: “The reactionary classes which have been overthrown are still planning a comeback,” he cautioned. And then he added a brand new warning:

In a socialist society, new bourgeois elements may still be produced... There are some people who adopt the guise of Communist Party members, but they in no way represent the proletariat—instead they represent the bourgeoisie. Our Party is not pure. (above quotes from M. Meisner, p. 270)

At the conclusion of the work conference, Liu Shaoqi gave his own view of the situation. His prepared remarks were moderate and conciliatory in tone, and had been circulated in advance to members of the Politburo for comments and suggestions. But after hearing Mao’s speech Liu hastily revised his remarks. And when he delivered his speech it took Mao—and everyone else-- by surprise. In it, Liu attacked the policies of the Great Leap Forward. Using language that was even stronger than that used by Peng Dehuai 2-1/2 years earlier, he candidly stated that “People do not have enough food, clothes or other essentials.” And he acknowledged that. “Agricultural output, far from rising in 1959, ’60 and ’61, dropped tremendously... There was not only no Leap Forward, [there was] a great deal of falling backward.”

Rejecting Mao’s explanation that the failures of the Great Leap were due mainly to bad weather and natural calamities, Liu stated that as far as he was aware, in most rural areas there had been “no serious bad weather” from 1959 to 1961; and he went on to assert that the many “difficulties” encountered during those years were 70% due to human error, and only 30% due to natural causes—a precise reversal Mao’s own 70-30 assessment. Liu further rejected Mao’s claim that with respect to the Great Leap as a whole, out of ten fingers, “mistakes are only one finger, while achievements are nine fingers.” When Mao interrupted to insist that the achievements were genuine, Liu stood by his statement. (Chang and Halliday, p. 476).

According to participants at the conference of 7,000 cadres, Mao had been caught completely off guard by the tone and content of Liu’s remarks. To minimize the damage to his prestige, Mao immediately ordered his new Defense Minister, the sycophantic General Lin Biao, to give a speech in defense of the Great Leap. Lin had replaced Peng Dehuai after the Lushan plenum of 1959; and he now proceeded to fawn obsequiously over Chairman Mao’s brilliance and the wisdom of his leadership:

“In times of trouble,” Lin enthused, “we must rely even more on the ...leadership of Chairman Mao, and trust [his] leadership even more....Facts prove that [our] troubles spring precisely from our failure in many instances to act according to
Chairman Mao’s directives... Whenever in the past our work was done well, it was precisely when Chairman Mao’s thought received no interference” (MacFarquhar, The Origins, Vol 3, pp. 166-67)

Sitting backstage while Lin delivered his remarks, Mao was pleased. “What a good speech,” he remarked, addressing his personal physician, Dr. Li Zhisui, who was seated next to him. “Lin Biao’s words… are simply superb,” he continued. “Why can’t other party leaders be so perceptive?” (Li Zhisui, Private Life of Chmn Mao, pp. 386-7.)

After Lin Biao finished his effusive praise, Mao took the stage once more. Now feeling more relaxed and expansive, he issued a seemingly contrite “self-criticism” in which, with evident humility, he asked his comrades to hold him personally responsible for any failings that may have occurred in the Great Leap. But to many of those in attendance, Mao’s “confession” did not ring true. It had a staged, theatrical quality to it; and his contrition seemed mainly designed to pre-empt his critics rather than to accept personal responsibility for the horrific disasters of the previous three years.

Following the conclusion of this pivotal meeting, Mao viewed Liu Shaoqi and, by extension, Deng Xiaoping with barely disguised contempt. Previously, he had interpreted their efforts to rescue the Chinese economy from the Leftist excesses of the Great Leap mainly as errors of judgment and policy, but hardly as evidence of counter-revolutionary intent. Now, however, his doubts about Liu and Deng began to merge with his fears about the effects of Khrushchev’s insidious counter-revolutionary “revisionism.”

By this time—early 1962—Mao’s anger at Khruschev was approaching the boiling point. A series of pointed Soviet barbs had deeply irritated the Chairman. It wasn’t bad enough that Khruschev had belittled the people’s communes, repudiated Lenin’s doctrine of inevitable war, and proclaimed the existence of a non-violent “parliamentary road” to socialism; but the Soviet leader had also begun to seek “peaceful coexistence” with the head of the imperialist camp, the United States of America.

Khrushchev’s reasoning in pursuing détente with the U.S. was that in a nuclear age, world war would have no winners, only losers, and was thus “unthinkable.” In Mao’s view, however, nuclear war was not only “thinkable,” but winnable. Referring to nuclear weapons as “paper tigers,” Mao challenged the Soviet leader to be more, rather than less, confrontational toward US imperialism. At the height of his Great Leap euphoria in 1958, Mao had boasted that “the East Wind prevails over the West Wind.”

For his part, Khrushchev was appalled by the radical excesses of the Great Leap; and he was afraid that Mao might just be naïve—or delusional-- enough to drag the Soviet Union willy-nilly into a nuclear war with America. In 1959, he responded to Mao’s reckless “adventurism” by reneging on his earlier promise to share nuclear weapons technology with China and to provide Mao with a sample atomic bomb. A year later, in 1960, he unilaterally withdrew all Soviet technical advisors from China, leaving hundreds of industrial projects half-finished. For good measure, the Soviet advisors took the blueprints with them when they left.
Mao’s growing anger at Khrushchev was expressed in a series of nine “open letters” addressed to the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee. Written between 1960 and 1964, the nine letters clearly reflected Mao’s view that Khrushchev was restoring capitalism in the Soviet Union. This “restoration” was marked by the emergence of a “new class” of bureaucratic and technocratic elites, made up of Party and government officials. Comprising a “new bourgeoisie,” members of this new elite class enjoyed, high salaries, special housing and shopping privileges, access to the best schools for their children, and private summer homes, or dachas. Completely “divorced from the [laboring] masses,” they had, in Mao’s view, lost sight of the original goals of the Bolshevik Revolution. At their head marched Nikita Khrushchev, who was derisively labeled, in one of the nine CCP “open letters,” as a “phony Communist.”

By 1962 Mao’s wrath at Khrushchev had begun to converge with-- and spill over onto-- his growing distrust of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Later, Mao would confirm this convergence when he scathingly referred to Liu Shaoqi as “China’s Khrushchev.”

In the late summer of 1962 Mao launched his first counter-offensive against “creeping revisionism.” At the Central Committee’s tenth plenary session in September, he announced a new rural mass campaign of ideological education and indoctrination-- which he called the “Socialist Education Movement.” It’s goal was to vaccinate China’s peasant masses against the rising danger of a “capitalist restoration” at home.

In his speech launching the new movement, Mao addressed the issue of continuing class struggle in China, making clear its link to Soviet ‘revisionism’:

“Do classes exist in socialist countries?” he asked rhetorically. “We can now affirm that classes do exist, and that class struggle undoubtedly exists. …We must acknowledge their existence… and admit the possibility of the restoration of the [overthrown] reactionary classes. We must raise our vigilance and properly educate our youth and our cadres…. Otherwise a country like ours may head in the opposite direction…. From this moment on, we must talk about [class struggle] every year, every month, every day; at conferences, at Party congresses… and at each and every meeting….

As Mao envisioned it, the new Socialist Education Movement would be mainly didactic in nature, with Party-organized work teams traveling throughout the countryside to conduct education in class struggle among the basic-level cadres and peasant masses, reminding them of the evils of the old landlord-dominated society, warning them against the pernicious machinations of “rich peasants”, and reinforcing the CCP’s traditional ethos of “serving the people.” The goal was to inoculate the masses against what Mao now referred to as “the sugar-coated bullets of the bourgeoisie.”

But Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping had a very different view of what was wrong with rural China, and how to fix it. In their view, the failures of the Great Leap had spawned not an urgent need for renewed class struggle, but widespread demoralization,
desperation, and an epidemic of petty corruption. With tens of millions of people starving to death and hundreds of millions more suffering from malnourishment in China’s villages, by 1962 socialist morality had all but broken down in the countryside.

Responding to extreme hardship, those rural dwellers with tradable resources—such as money, official position, and control over collective assets—had utilized these assets to their own advantage. In areas hard hit by famine, village cadres had routinely solicited bribes from local peasants—sometimes in cash, sometimes in goods, sometimes in labor donation, and sometimes in female sexual favors—in exchange for allowing the peasants to withhold grain from compulsory delivery to the state. Bribes in the form of sexual favors, or cigarettes, or other scarce commodities were also widely offered to those village-level cadres who tallied work points, or dispensed fertilizer, or weighed harvested grain, or dispensed job assignments. In addition, many rural cadres misappropriated collective funds—for example, using money earmarked for “collective welfare” to build private homes or to finance lavish banquets or weddings. In the lax, “everyone for himself” political atmosphere that enveloped the countryside in the wake of the Great Famine, even gambling and prostitution, which had been stamped out altogether in the early 1950s, made their reappearance in rural China.

To Liu and Deng, the root cause of rural moral decay was not counter-revolutionary sabotage by a few scheming former landlords and rich peasants, but wholesale organizational laxness and indiscipline within local Communist Party branches. Only when the Party cleaned its own house could it restore its reputation for integrity and set a good example for the peasants.

Moreover, unlike the populist Mao, who wanted to light a fire under the peasants to criticize “capitalist tendencies” from the bottom up, Liu and Deng were instinctive elitists. They believed in strict Party discipline. For them the preferred method of rectifying corrupt Party cadres was to dispatch higher-level work teams to conduct investigations behind closed doors, away from the prying eyes and ears of the laobaixing.

By the end of 1964, Mao had clearly lost patience with Liu and Deng. At a Party work conference in December of that year, he angrily confronted Liu, accusing him of undermining the Socialist Education Movement by altering both its ends and its means. In Mao’s view, corruption was not the main problem; capitalism was. And the solution was not closed-door investigations by work teams, but mass mobilization of the peasants.

In January of 1965 Mao’s displeasure was expressed in a Central Committee directive entitled “Some Problems Currently Arising in the … Socialist Education Movement”. In this important document, Mao made the unprecedented allegation that the central aim of the Socialist Education Movement was “to rectify those powerholders within the [Chinese Communist] Party who take the capitalist road.” While no individual Party leaders were singled out as “capitalist roaders,” Mao’s comments were clearly directed toward the very highest levels of the CCP, including the Central Committee itself.
In the 5-1/2 years that had elapsed since Peng Dehuai was purged at the Lushan conference, this was the first time that Mao had directly suggested that any of his closest associates might be hidden counter-revolutionaries. Viewed in the context of his rising dispute with his top lieutenants, there could be little doubt that the Chairman’s primary target was his own second-in-command, China’s State President and heir-apparent, Liu Shaoqi.

But Liu could not be as easily toppled as Peng Dehuai. For one thing, he and Deng Xiaoping, who shared many of his views, were still formally in charge of the Party’s day-to-day operations, while Mao remained on the “second line” of leadership, where he had retreated after the Lushan Plenum of 1959. For another thing, Liu and Deng were extremely popular; and they had many powerful allies and supporters within the Party apparatus--people who would not sit still for another Peng Dehuai-style Maoist purge. And finally, discontent with Mao’s growing obsession over class struggle was becoming more widespread both inside the Party and among the disillusioned Chinese intelligentsia. Thus, as Mao readied himself for the final showdown, he had to proceed cautiously, preparing his moves with all the skill and deliberation of an experienced chess player.

(In the interest of full disclosure, I was the one who first uncovered many of these developments. In 1967, while I was taking Chinese language classes in Taipei, I happened to stumble upon a cache of “top secret” Communist Party Central Committee documents in the reading room of Taipei’s Institute of International Relations. The documents had been seized by Taiwanese commandos during a guerilla raid on the Chinese mainland. I tried to convince the Institute’s librarian to let me read the documents; but he was most reluctant to let them out of his sight, and in the end he made me promise that I would make no copies, take no notes, and remove nothing from the library when I went home in the evening. I readily agreed to his conditions, and I began to read the documents.

Within the first few minutes I realized that I was in possession of a goldmine of hitherto secret information detailing many of the events described in this lecture. Most importantly, the documents clearly revealed the growing schism between Mao Zedong and his closest comrades, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

Of course, by 1967 Western scholars were already well aware of the existence of this schism, for the Cultural Revolution was already well underway. But no-one had yet uncovered direct evidence of its origins and early development. Here in my hands was the smoking gun, the trigger that set off Mao’s Cultural Revolution. I could hardly contain my excitement.

Just before I finished reading the documents I made one of the most fateful—and perilous—decisions of my young life. I hid the documents in a zippered inner compartment of my briefcase before leaving the Institute for the evening. My plan was to take them over to the nearby US Naval Hospital in Taipei, where a friend had once let me use the hospital’s Verifax —precursor to the Xerox machine. If everything went well, I
would photocopy the documents and return them first thing the next morning, before anyone was the wiser.

By then I was running on pure adrenalin, and in my adrenalin rush I never stopped to consider the consequences that would follow if I got caught with a set of stolen, top secret Communist documents in an authoritarian Taiwanese state ruled by a rabid anti-communist dictator. If I had thought about it, I probably wouldn’t have done it. But the gods must have been smiling. I didn’t get caught, and I was able to return the purloined documents without incident the next morning.

Having survived this harrowing adventure unscathed, I focused my attention on the extraordinary revelations contained in the purloined documents. For the next several years, the information unearthed in these documents fueled my academic career. By the time I was finished, I had completed a doctoral dissertation, two books, and four research articles, including my definitive 1975 study of the Socialist Education Movement, entitled *Prelude to Revolution: Mao, the Party and the Peasant Question*. Looking back, I have to admit that I was very fortunate indeed.

In the next lecture we shall see how Mao’s crusade against alleged “revisionists” and “capitalist roaders” within the Communist Party apparatus unfolded in the increasingly turbulent years of the middle-’60s. In this period, which immediately preceded the launching of the Cultural Revolution, Mao tested the loyalty of several of his senior colleagues, and found them wanting.
Lecture 21: “Long Live Chairman Mao!” (1964-65)

If Mao was going to neutralize Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, and generate the political traction needed to achieve his goal of defeating “modern revisionism,” he first needed to burnish his own image. In the parlance of modern political science, the Chairman needed to “activate his base.” To achieve this, he turned to his Defense Minister, Lin Biao, and the People’s Liberation Army. A sycophantic devotee of Chairman Mao, Lin had vigorously defended the Mao against Liu Shaoqi’s verbal assault at the conference of 7,000 cadres in 1962. Now, two years later, Lin Biao was put in charge of a nationwide campaign to revive Chairman Mao’s flagging “cult of personality.”

While Lin’s absolute devotion to Mao was beyond reproach, the loyalty of the PLA as a whole was more problematic. Two things had served to erode the army’s faith in the Chairman. First was the Great Famine. Although the PLA’s 3.5 million soldiers had been insulated from the devastating famine of the “three hard years,” many of them had family members who had suffered badly during the Great Leap. Secret documents obtained by Taiwanese espionage agents on the Mainland confirmed that the fallout from the Leap had seriously affected troop morale. And second, the army’s esprit de corps --and its faith in Mao-- had also been sorely strained by the Peng Dehuai affair. Several high-ranking PLA staff officers had been appalled by Mao’s cruel treatment of Peng. If the Chairman intended to wage a successful struggle against “revisionists” and “capitalist roaders” within the Party apparatus, he would need to be able to count on the full, unwavering support of the army.

In 1964 Lin Biao launched a mass movement within the PLA to systematically “Study the Thought of Chairman Mao.” To promote the movement, Lin personally edited a collection of Mao’s pithiest precepts, aphorisms and homilies, packaging them into a handy pocket-sized red-covered paperback volume entitled “Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong” -- more popularly known as the “Little Red Book” (display “Little Red Book”)

All army units were now required to hold regular study sessions in Mao Zedong Thought. At these sessions selected passages from the Little Red Book would be collectively recited from memory and sermonized upon. Akin to the worship of deities in fundamentalist religious schools, the study sessions focused on Mao’s strategic brilliance and his god-like qualities of omniscience, omnipotence and benevolence. The mantra “Long Live Chairman Mao! A long, long life to Chairman Mao” (Mao zhuxi wansui Mao Zhuxi wanwan sui!) had its origins in this campaign, as did the practice of starting public meetings with the phrase, “Chairman Mao teaches us….” (Mao zhuxi jiaodao women...)

Although some senior military leaders balked at the adulation being heaped upon Mao, few dared openly to object. One of those who did was the PLA Chief of Staff, Lo Ruiqing. Lo’s predecessor had been purged as a member of Peng Dehuai’s “anti-party clique” in 1959; and now he was openly incredulous. Lo viewed the national fetish of reciting quotations from the Little Red Book as “a needless exercise in forced memorization.” “If Mao Zedong Thought is the most advanced and creative form of
“Marxism-Leninism,” he asked rhetorically, “then does this mean there is no room for additional improvement?” (Li Zhisui, Private Life of Chmn Mao, p. 413). For his skepticism, Lo was purged a year later, in 1965.

With the Mao-study campaign unfolding on a massive scale within the army, the next target audience in the campaign to promote Mao’s personality cult was the younger generation. In 1965, PLA political instructors were sent out to schools, universities and local branches of the Communist Youth League throughout the country to promote group study of the “Little Red Book.” Later, in the Cultural Revolution, these army-led study groups would become the backbone of China’s youthful Red Guards.

(Aside: While it has been widely noted that the nationwide Mao study campaign of 1964-65 produced millions of overzealous revolutionary youngsters, it is also true that many young people took a calculated, opportunistic approach to the campaign, using it to advance their own personal agendas. One young man whom I later met in Hong Kong told me his personal story.

As the son of a former landlord growing up in a remote area of Guangdong province, his future had looked very dim. Whenever a new political campaign came along, he was singled out for struggle as a “typical” class enemy.

Then, in 1965, a mass Mao-study competition was held among young people in his province, to see who could memorize and debate most persuasively the “Thought of Mao Zedong.” Realizing that he had no future in Guangdong, he threw himself into the study of Mao’s Little Red Book, memorizing chapter and verse. He handily won his village’s Mao-study contest, and then the commune-wide competition that followed. He then traveled to the county headquarters, where he bested all other local contest winners. As his prize, he won an all-expense-paid trip to the Guangdong’s capital city of Guangzhou, where a province-wide competition was to be held.

But the young man had other plans. Using his expense money, he bought a train ticket to a small fishing village near the Hong Kong border, where he bribed a Chinese border guard to look the other way as he entered the water and swam to safety in Hong Kong. Despite 15 years of ideological indoctrination in Communist China, the spirit of individual initiative was evidently alive and well!)

While spreading Chairman Mao’s thoughts among the younger generation, the Maoists also began to attack what they called “unhealthy tendencies” in cultural and literary circles. During the second “Hundred Flowers” campaign from 1961 to 1963, a number of new literary works were published in violation of Mao’s cherished style of “socialist realism.” The Chairman’s absolutist views on culture, which date back to the 1942 Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature, mandated that all writers and artists should unambiguously reflect the class standpoint of the proletariat in their works, glorifying the heroic, selfless qualities of workers, peasants and soldiers, while at the same time vilifying the evil schemes of counter-revolutionaries, reactionaries and rightists.)
But in the new era of intellectual liberalization that characterized the reign of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping in the early ’60s, many writers populated their works of fiction with ordinary characters, who were neither perfect prototypes of the “new socialist man” nor degenerate, bloodthirsty villains. Unlike the simplistic cardboard cutout figures of the “socialist realism” school, these quintessentially flawed, human “middle characters,” as they were called, struggled on a daily basis with complex political situations and moral ambiguities. Heroic solutions were seldom available to them, so they did the best they could. Indeed, their flawed, imperfect behavior gave them a human quality with which readers could readily identify.

But Mao strongly objected to such an ideologically ambiguous portrayal of the everyday lives of ordinary people. And in 1964 he launched a counterattack against authors who wrote approvingly of “middle characters” in their fiction. In his view, the favorable literary depiction of moral uncertainty and class compromise in the face of existential difficulties served to undermine the combat spirit and proletarian will that were essential to achieve victory in the struggle against revisionism. As one left-wing propagandist put it in a literary journal of this period,

What sort of people are these so-called “middle characters”? According to their advocates, they are people from among the masses… who are midway between good and bad, advanced and backward… who vacillate between the socialist and capitalist roads….It is even said that people in this intermediate state constitute the great majority of the masses.

[But] the people are the makers of history and the masters of the new society. To describe the great majority of them as middling and colorless, dullards who are indifferent and phlegmatic…Does this not expose the hostile [class] standpoint of those who make such assertions? (The Great Cultural Revolution in China, pp 10-12)

In a parallel attack on intellectuals who urged adoption of a relaxed attitude toward class struggle in the philosophical realm, Mao lashed out at a group of educators who had popularized a school of thought known as “two combine into one.” The man who bore the main brunt of the Maoist attack was a veteran Communist Party philosopher named Yang Xianzhen. Yang was a Central Committee member who made the mistake, in several of his academic lectures, of placing roughly equal emphasis on both struggle and reconciliation in the handling of class contradictions under socialism. In philosophical circles, the principle of peaceful class reconciliation and synthesis was known as “two combine into one” (er he he yi), while its dialectical opposite, the principle of unremitting class struggle, was known as “one divides into two” (yi fenwei er). In the language of modern-day game theory, “two combine into one” was a formula for “positive-sum,” or “win-win” conflict resolution, while “one divides into two” was a formula for zero-sum, “win-lose” resolution.

In his lectures, Yang Xianzhen showed no particular preference for one or the other of these contrasting principles, which he viewed as mutually complementary rather than
antagonistic. But it was Yang’s great misfortune to have supported Peng Dehuai’s critique of the Great Leap Forward back in 1959. Mao hadn’t forgotten; and he clearly hadn’t forgiven. Now it was payback time.

In the summer of 1964, Mao was shown a newspaper article summarizing Yang Xianzhen’s lectures. His reaction was swift and decisive:

“Yang Xianzhen believes that two combine into one,” said Mao, “and that synthesis is the indissoluble tie between opposites. [But] what indissoluble ties are there in this world? Things may be tied [together], but in the end they must be broken apart. … You have all witnessed how two opposites, the Guomindang and the Communist Party, were combined into one on the Chinese Mainland. Their synthesis looked like this: their armies came, and we devoured them. We ate them bite by bite….

“‘Two combine into one’ is a theory of reconciling contradictions…[while] ‘one divides into two’ is [proper] dialectics. I’m afraid ‘two combine into one’ is revisionism…” (MacFarquhar, Vol 3, p. 395; Schram, Chairman Mao Talks to the People, p. 225)

In March of 1965 Yang Xianzhen was denounced as a “representative of the bourgeoisie inside the Party, a tool of Peng Dehuai, and a mini-Khrushchev.” No matter that the case against Yang was grossly exaggerated, if not wholly fabricated: the wording of the denunciation embodied a perfect Maoist ideological trifecta, lumping together the “revisionist” Khrushchev, the “anti-Party” Peng Dehuai and the “bourgeois powerholder” Yang Xianzhen into a single, one-size-fits-all conspiracy.

As another element in his emerging critique of revisionism in the cultural sphere, Mao turned his celebrated wrath upon China’s educational system, which, back in the mid-1950s, had been modeled after that of the Soviet Union. In 1964 the Chairman severely criticized the “erroneous methods” being used to educate China’s children. Complaining that “book learning” was being over-emphasized at the expense of more practical forms of learning, he urged a shortening of the school curriculum from 12 years to nine, to be supplemented by two years of hands-on vocational training in a factory or village, or in military training. The idea was to put students in direct contact with the day-to-day realities, and struggles, of workers and peasants.

He began his critique by accusing teachers of forcing students to study too much.

“This is exceedingly harmful,” said the Chairman, “and the burden is too heavy. It puts students in a constant state of tension…. The [school] syllabus should be chopped in half. …. It is evident that reading too many books is harmful….

“Our present method of conducting examinations,” he continued, “is a method for dealing with the enemy…It is a method of surprise attack, asking oblique or
strange questions. … I am in favor of publishing [exam] questions in advance and letting the students study them and answer them with the aid of books….

“At examinations, whispering into each others’ ears and taking other people’s places ought to be allowed. If your answer is good and I copy it, then mine should be counted as good. [These things] used to be done secretly. Now let them be done openly…. Let’s give it a try.

And finally, speaking of the bourgeois life-styles enjoyed by urban intellectuals, Mao proposed a drastic remedy: “We must drive actors, poets, dramatists and writers out of the cities,” he said, “and pack them all off to the countryside…Whoever does not go down will get no food….” (Schram, Chairman Mao Talks…, pp 201-205)

As we have seen, Mao’s mercurial moods and periodic, intense outbursts could be quite unnerving and intimidating to those around him. Particularly in the aftermath of the Peng Dehuai affair, few people had the fortitude to openly criticize the Chairman. To avoid incurring Mao’s wrath, Chinese intellectuals in the early 1960s revived a historical tradition borrowed from imperial times. Disguising their critiques of Mao and his policies as historical allegories, and using time-honored techniques of parable and satire, they produced a veritable blizzard of politically-incorrect works of art and literature.

A case in point is provided by a much-praised, award-winning painting that appeared on the back cover of the Communist Youth League’s flagship magazine, China Youth, at the end of 1964. The painting, which appeared to be a typical example of Mao’s preferred style of “socialist realism,” depicted happy, healthy Chinese peasants working diligently to secure a bountiful harvest in a golden-colored field overflowing with tall, abundant wheat stalks waving in the breeze. In the background, against a landscape of purple-grey hills, were three large piles of harvested wheat, with a red flag protruding prominently from each of them. In the foreground were a few scattered individual stalks and husks lying on the ground. (show close up of painting from China Youth).

After winning various awards for “socialist realism,” the painting was suddenly removed from exhibition early in 1965; and the issue of China Youth that featured it was withdrawn from circulation.

What had happened? It seems that when a local cultural watchdog took a magnifying glass to the painting, some hitherto unseen anomalies were revealed. For one thing, the contour of the hills in the background appeared to resemble the supine profiles of Vladimir Ilich Lenin and Mao Zedong, respectively. For another thing, one of the flag staffs protruding from the piles of harvested wheat was broken—snapped in half, with its red flag drooping on the ground. Now, one of the key loyalty tests during the famine years of 1959-61 had been the demand that cadres faithfully uphold the “three red flags” of the Great Leap Forward, the people’s communes, and the general line for socialist construction. The fact that the middle flag—representing the people’s communes—was broken in half in this painting, suggests that the artist was making a political statement. But the pièce de résistance were the randomly scattered wheat stalks and husks that
comprised the picture’s foreground. By scrutinizing them closely, in isolation, one could make out several Chinese characters formed by the not-so-randomly fallen stalks: Jiang Jieshi wan sui!—“Long Live Chiang K’ai-shek.” One can only wonder at the fate of the unfortunate artists who painted this prize-winning landscape.

Carefully disguised works of biting political criticism, parody and satire also appeared in the Chinese mass media in this period. Three senior, Beijing-based Communist Party propaganda workers were particularly active in producing such satirical works—Deng Tuo, Liao Mosha, and Wu Han. Beginning in 1961, these three men, using a collective nom de plume, wrote over 100 columns in the Beijing journal “Front Line” (Qianxian), under the generic column heading, “Notes from a Three-Family Village”.

In one fairly typical column, entitled “Great Empty Talk,” the three writers observed that

“Some people have the gift of the gab. They can talk endlessly on any occasion, like water flowing from an undammed river. After listening to them, however, when you try to recall what they have said, you can remember nothing. ... As chance would have it, my neighbour's child once again imitated the style of some great poet and put into writing a lot of "great empty talk" ... he wrote a poem entitled "Ode to Wild Grass," which is nothing but great empty talk. The poem reads as follows:

The Venerable Heaven is our father
The Great Earth is our mother
And the Sun is our nanny
The East Wind is our benefactor
And the West Wind is our enemy.

Although such words as heaven, earth, father, mother, sun, the East Wind, benefactor, and enemy catch our eye, they are used to no purpose here and have become mere cliches. ... Therefore, I would advise those friends given to engaging in great empty talk to read more, think more, say less and take a rest when the time comes for talking.” (T. Cheek, “Deng Tuo: Culture, Leninism and Alternative Marxism in the CCP,” p. 486)

Now, in view of Mao’s well-deserved reputation for making long-winded, rambling speeches at Party conferences, it didn’t take much imagination to see in this essay an oblique critique of the Chairman himself. Particularly telling was the embedded poem, which came perilously close to ridiculing a 1958 verse by Chairman Mao, in which he famously boasted that “the East Wind prevails over the West Wind.” Was Mao’s most famous poem an example of “great empty talk”-- a “mere cliché”?

A second illustration of the subversive impact of the authors of “Notes from a Three Family Village” involved a column they wrote entitled “A Cure for Forgetfulness.” In it, they argued that when someone suffers from repeated memory lapses, and is unable to speak sensibly, then it is necessary to refrain from criticizing or correcting him. Instead,
the recommended treatment was to “pour dog's blood on the head of the afflicted person, then pour cold water over him in order to stimulate him.” Alternatively, “one could use the shock treatment of beating him over the head with a special bludgeon.” (ibid., p. 156)

Once again, this came very close to being an indirect attack on Mao himself. It certainly did not resemble legitimate psychiatric advice.

But perhaps the deepest literary affront to Chairman Mao during the Hundred Flowers revival in the early 1960s was a modern Peking opera entitled “The Dismissal of Hai Rui” (Hai Rui baguan), written by a Peking University professor, Wu Han (who was also a member of the “Three Family Village” writing group). A noted playwright and historian in his own right, Wu Han had become prominent in Beijing political circles, rising to become a Deputy Mayor of the city. His opera, written in 1961, was about a famous historical figure, a Ming dynasty official named Hai Rui, whose deep and abiding concern for the plight of oppressed peasants was legendary in China. At a time of serious national famine in the mid-16th century, Hai Rui had stood up to the local tyrants who had unlawfully seized land from the peasants, returning the land to its rightful owners. For this Hai Rui had received official praise. But when he later pleaded with the Ming emperor to relieve the peasants’ unreasonable tax burdens, Hai Rui was rewarded for his efforts by being unceremoniously sacked and banished.

When Wu Han’s opera was first written and performed, it received a positive appraisal from Mao, who voiced the opinion that “the play is good; Hai Rui was a good man” (MacFarquhar, Origins, Vol 3, p. 253). However, the Chairman’s wife, Jiang Qing, had a different take on it. Jiang Qing was Mao’s fourth wife. In the early 1930s she had been a minor, B-movie actress in Shanghai. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out, she left Shanghai and headed for Yan’an, where she first seduced, and then married Chairman Mao—against the advice of his comrades, who believed her to be a gold-digging harlot. As a condition of their marriage, Jiang was prohibited from ever participating in politics.

When Jiang Qing first saw “The Dismissal of Hai Rui” performed in 1962, she found it offensive, and she tried to have it banned; but she was turned down by leaders of the cultural establishment—who further chastized her for having violated her “no politics” marriage contract.

In Jiang’s view, the story of Hai Rui was a reactionary allegory. As she saw it, Wu Han’s interpretation of the circumstances surrounding the Hai Rui’s dismissal paralleled all too closely the circumstances of Peng Dehuai’s 1959 dismissal. Both men had been widely esteemed for their integrity and courage; both had confronted local tyrants in an effort to redress wrongs inflicted on peasants; both had petitioned the emperor to relieve peasant burdens; and both had been fired for their efforts, their reputations destroyed by imperial fiat.

Pointing out these parallel circumstances to her illustrious husband, Jiang Qing eventually persuaded Mao that the opera was, in fact, an indirect defense of Peng Dehuai — and a slap in the face of the Chairman. Now utterly convinced that “bourgeois
intellectuals” were attacking him from all directions, Mao’s smoldering anger at the purveyors of class reconciliation and revisionism finally reached the point of combustion. He was ready to stop talking, and act. The “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” was about to begin.

Mao’s first move was a rather unexpected one. In the early autumn of 1965 the Chairman suddenly disappeared from public view. Speculation mounted: was the Chairman ill? One rumor had him suffering from Parkinson’s disease; another had it that he was dead. In fact, Mao had quietly left Beijing. He calculated that he could not launch an effective attack against his adversaries from the nation’s capital, where Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and their allies enjoyed the strong support of the Communist Party bureaucracy. Indeed, Mao would later complain that Beijing was controlled so thoroughly and tightly by his enemies that “no needle could penetrate, and no drop of water could enter.” (Karnow, Mao and China, p. 146; MacFarquhar, Origins, Vol 3, p. 440)

To bypass the regular Beijing Party establishment, Mao left the capital and moved to his private villa in the resort city of Hangzhou, near Shanghai. There, he gathered around him a group of loyal left-wing supporters. It was November 1965, and Mao was now 72 years old. With a brain trust consisting of his wife, Jiang Qing, his Defense Minister, Lin Biao, his security chief, Kang Sheng, his chief theoretician, Chen Boda, and the Shanghai Municipal Party leader Zhang Chunqiao, the Chairman mapped out his campaign. (show chart identifying Mao’s brain trust)

The opening salvo was delivered on November 10, 1965. On that date, a young left-wing propagandist in the Shanghai party organization, by the name of Yao Wenyuan, published a biting critique of Wu Han’s opera, “The Dismissal of Hai Rui.” Appearing in a Shanghai newspaper, Yao’s article accused Wu Han of “using the past to ridicule the present.” Specifically, Wu Han was charged with manipulating historical events in a veiled attempt to “demolish the people’s communes and restore the criminal rule of the landlords.” And the play was labeled a big “anti-Party poisonous weed.” (Karnow, Mao and China, p. 149). Implicit in Yao’s critique was an even more serious charge: namely, that Hai Rui was, in reality, a stand-in for the disgraced Marshal Peng Dehuai.

With the publication of Yao Wenyuan’s attack, an instant chill of anxiety went through the Beijing literary establishment. Most deeply disturbed, aside from Wu Han himself, was Wu’s boss and principal patron, Beijing mayor Peng Zhen. A member of the Party’s inner Politburo, Peng was a close associate of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. He had also been a supporter of Wu Han and the “Three Family Village” writing group. Was Mao now preparing to go after Peng? Was the mayor being set up for a fall?

In an obvious dilemma, Peng Zhen went into defensive mode. First, he stalled for time, ordering Beijing’s newspapers not to reproduce or even to mention Yao Wenyuan’s article. But when Zhou Enlai pressed him to reverse this directive, Peng instinctively knew that the Premier was speaking on Mao’s behalf. So he lifted the publication ban and ordered the People’s Daily to reprint Yao’s article—accompanied by a mitigating “editor’s note” which explained that the controversy surrounding Wu Han’s opera was entirely academic, and not political in nature; and that any political errors in its
underlying story were due to the author’s inadequate historical understanding rather than any subversive political motives.

To deflect further attacks from the left, Peng Zhen urged Wu Han to write a pro-forma self-criticism, acknowledging that he had failed to fully understand that “proletarian literature and art must serve contemporary politics.” Wu Han dutifully obeyed.

Mayor Peng undoubtedly hoped the incident would end there. But Mao was just getting started. Convinced that Peng Zhen was minimizing Wu Han’s errors in order to protect himself, he held the Beijing Mayor’s feet to the fire. In December he instructed Peng to conduct a thorough investigation into Wu Han’s misconduct, and to report back his findings in two months’ time. “What I want to know,” demanded Mao, “is whether Wu Han is truly anti-party, anti-socialist.” (Li Zhisui, Private Life, pp 447-48).

It must have been an agonizing two months for Peng Zhen, knowing that Mao was putting him to the test. Assembling a small group of five veteran Beijing politicians and propaganda specialists, Peng and his comrades tried hard to defend Wu Han against the charge of *lèse majesté*.

When their completed “Outline Report” was delivered to the Party Central Committee on February 12, 1966, Mao’s suspicions were confirmed. Peng Zhen was shielding Wu Han. That was all the Chairman needed to know. At a Politburo meeting held in Hangzhou, Mao labeled “The Dismissal of Hai Rui” as a “poisonous weed,” and denounced Wu Han for being “no better than a member of the Guomindang.” Peng Zhen was now in very deep trouble. Mao had set a trap for him, and he had stepped right into it.

Fearful of Mao’s intentions, Peng Zhen tried to distance himself from the “Three-Family Village” writing group. He sent Wu Han on a trip to inspect provincial agricultural products, while Deng Tuo, another member of the group, was quietly sacked as editor of the *People’s Daily*. Despondent over his sudden disgrace, Deng Tuo committed suicide. Thereafter, his immediate boss and chief literary patron, the Party propaganda chief Lu Dingyi (who had helped prepare Peng Zhen’s February Outline Report) suffered an anxiety attack so severe that he took indefinite medical leave, spending the next several months convalescing at a clinic in faraway Guangdong province, where he remained, for the time being, out of harm’s way.

Meanwhile, back in Beijing Liu Shaoqi himself was beginning to feel the Maoists’ heat. Seeking a brief respite from the capital’s increasingly volatile political climate, he took his wife on a three-week state visit to South and Southeast Asia in early April 1966. But Mao was ready for Liu’s evasive maneuvers; and two days after Liu’s departure the Chairman denounced Peng Zhen and his entire Beijing Municipal Party Committee by name, calling for their dismissal. And for good measure, he demanded the reshuffling of Lu Dingyi’s central propaganda department. Peng was now so thoroughly isolated that even his oldest friends stopped returning his calls.
Moving in for the kill, Mao convened an enlarged Politburo meeting in early May. At Mao’s initiative a strongly-worded circular was adopted, announcing Peng Zhen’s dismissal and a thorough reorganization of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee. The document further suggested, albeit obliquely, that Chairman Mao intended to go after even higher-level targets. “People of Khrushchev’s ilk,” said the May 16 circular, are still “nestled in our midst,” and it was thus necessary to “repudiate and strike down all counterrevolutionary revisionists.” In a characteristically perverse, cold-blooded twist of the knife, Mao chose Liu Shaoqi to deliver the official verdict on Peng Zhen. (Karnow, Mao and China, pp. 154-55; Fenby, Modern China, p. 438).

Peng’s Zhen’s downfall marked the climactic end of the first stage of Mao’s new “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution”—and the beginning of its even more dramatic second stage. In this new phase, the Chairman would bypass altogether the regular Communist Party apparatus—which he thoroughly distrusted—and instead appeal directly to the young people of China, who were the spiritual descendents of the May 4th Movement. Having been thoroughly indoctrinated in “The Thought of Mao Zedong,” China’s students would now be entrusted to carry out the struggle against “capitalist roaders.”

Shortly after the dismissal of Peng Zhen, political agitation commenced on the campus of venerable Peking University. Founded during the “hundred days of reform” in 1898, “Beida,” as the university is commonly known, is China’s oldest institution of modern higher education. It was there that the young Mao Zedong first studied Marxism with CCP co-founder Li Dazhao; and it was there that the largest student demonstrations took place during the May 4th Movement. (show photo of Peking U.). In late May of 1966, Beida once again became a hotbed of political agitation.

The purge of Peng Zhen had placed the President of Peking University, a man named Lu Ping, in a difficult situation. On the one hand, Lu felt obliged to demonstrate his loyalty to Mao by showing support for the new Cultural Revolution; on the other hand, he was a leading member of the Beijing academic establishment, and he had little or no enthusiasm for yet another chaotic mass movement. To resolve his dilemma, he did what many Chinese officials before—and after—him would do: He paid lip service to the need for a thorough exposure and removal of “bourgeois powerholders,” while at the same time arguing that class struggle should be conducted in a restrained and orderly manner, without mass meetings, public denunciations or wall posters. In the Maoist parlance of the time, Lu Ping was “waving the red flag to oppose the red flag.”

On May 25, a middle-aged female philosophy instructor named Nie Yuanzi and some of her leftist friends put up a wall poster outside the Beida student dining hall, challenging Lu Ping’s ban on wall posters and mass meetings: (show photo of Nie’s wall poster)

“To hold meetings and post dazibao are militant mass methods of the best kind. But you …prevent [the masses] from holding meetings and putting up posters…. You manufacture various taboos and regulations …to suppress the masses, in order to sabotage the Cultural Revolution. We warn you…. You are daydreaming!
Now is the time for all revolutionary intellectuals to go into battle… and resolutely wipe out all monsters, demons, and counterrevolutionary revisionists of the Khrushchev type….. (Karnow, Mao and China, p. 160).

Upon learning of Nie Yuanzi’s attack, Lu Ping fought back. He mobilized members of the university’s Communist Youth League branch to respond with wall posters of their own, denouncing Nie as a “renegade” and a “rightist”. (If the label “rightist” seems a bit strange here, given the radicalism of Nie’s rhetoric, just remember that in China is is always safer to attack one’s opponents as rightists rather than leftists—even if those labels are rendered meaningless in the process).

Pressing his counterattack, Lu Ping hauled Nie and her associates in front of an audience of university administrators, teachers and Party members, where the rebel leaders were harshly interrogated and accused of attempting to undermine the Party’s leadership.

Observing these events from the outside, the vast majority of Beida students were in a quandary. While they revered Chairman Mao, they didn’t dare disobey the commands of their own University President and Party committee. So most of them took the path of least resistance: they stayed out of the dispute. But when the Beida establishment stepped up its attack on Nie, many students felt pressured to show their support for President Lu —mainly out of their instinct for self-preservation, rather than any firm conviction. So they fell in line with the Beida establishment, and Nie’s radical faction was soon isolated.

Meanwhile, in his luxurious villa in the scenic West Lake district of Hangzhou, Mao listened as messengers informed him of the latest events at Beida. It didn’t take long for him to draw his own conclusion: Nie Yuanzi was a true revolutionary, while Lu Ping was a “bourgeois reactionary.” Signaling his support for the rebel faction at Beida, Mao hailed Nie’s dazibao as “China’s first Marxist-Leninist Big Character Poster.”

With Mao’s endorsement, Nie Yuanzi now went, literally overnight, from being a “right-wing renegade” to being a left-wing heroine. The next day, People’s Daily, now operating under left-wing editorial control, published a ringing endorsement of Mao’s call for deepening the Cultural Revolution. Under the heading “Sweep away all Monsters,” the editorial claimed that:

*The scale and momentum of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution…have no parallel in history. … Facts eloquently prove that Mao Zedong’s thought becomes a moral atomic bomb of colossal power once it takes root among the masses….*(RMRB June 1, 1966)

A day later, the same newspaper stressed the life-and-death nature of the current class struggle:

*Like two armies facing each other in battle, the antagonistic world outlooks of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are locked in a struggle which invariably results in one vanquishing the other. Either you crush me, or I crush you. Either the East*
wind prevails over the West Wind, or the West Wind prevails over the East Wind. There is no middle road. (RMRB, June 2, 1966)

Such authoritative articles, appearing in the CCP’s flagship newspaper, served to trigger a virtual tsunami of radical student activism at Beida, as well as on other college and high school campuses in Beijing. Suddenly, rebellious students in every school were writing wall posters and convening frenzied accusation and struggle sessions against local “powerholders”—from college presidents and principals to classroom teachers and office administrators.

At Beida, a group of student rebels seized President Lu Ping and a group of his colleagues, stuck pointed “dunce caps” on their heads, and forced them to kneel while the frenzied students spattered black ink on their faces, beat and kicked them, then paraded them around the campus in disgrace.

Caught completely off guard by the mounting chaos, the Central Committee, still under the day-to-day direction of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, played it strictly by the book. In cases of serious or widespread disorder, the standard CCP operating procedure was to send out work teams to investigate. And so a number of work teams were dispatched to schools and universities throughout Beijing to examine the nature and circumstances of rising factional turmoil. Their mandate was to identify the source of the problem—and then fix it. In overall charge of the work teams were Liu and Deng.

As agents of the Party establishment, work teams tended to be inherently conservative in outlook. Habitually accustomed to upholding hierarchical authority and Party discipline, they were unlikely to support rebellious students who were denouncing—and often abusing—established authority. It was all very disorienting. Unprepared for such anti-establishment turmoil, most work teams reacted instinctively by upholding the status quo and criticizing the unruly rebels for spreading disorder. In some cases they expelled radical student leaders and deprived them of poster-writing materials. When the Beida work team investigated the violent humiliation of President Lu Ping, their report characterized the incident as unprincipled hooliganism.

Informed of this latest turn of events in early July, Mao was livid. It was time for him to join the battle in person. Before leaving his Hangzhou hideaway in early July, the reclusive Chairman wrote to Jiang Qing in Shanghai, telling her that there would soon be “Great disorder under heaven” (Li Zhisui, p. 461; Fenby, p. 444) It was a prescient forecast.

Mao re-entered the Chinese political scene with a splash. On July 16, 1966 his photo was spread across the front page of the People’s Daily—swimming in the Yangzi River. It was the first time the Chairman had been seen in public since the previous November. According to accompanying press reports, Mao had swum fifteen kilometers (roughly 9.5 miles) down the Yangzi in 65 minutes—four times as fast as the current world record for that distance.
Eyewitnesses told a somewhat different story. As candidly described by Mao’s physician, Li Zhisui, the Chairman had not really swum at all, but rather had floated downstream on his back, taking advantage of a rather rapid current, his bloated belly causing him to bob up and down like a cork.

No matter how he did it, Mao was back. He was physically vigorous; and he was hopping mad. Shortly after his Yangzi River swim, Mao boarded his private train for Beijing, where he proceeded to shake the Chinese political establishment to its very foundation.

As soon as Mao returned to the capital on July 18, Liu Shaoqi sought a private meeting with him. The request was denied. Mao was shunning him. At a small leadership meeting, Mao strongly criticized the work teams, arguing that they had suppressed the masses and terrorized rebellious students at Beida and elsewhere. “We must not restrict the masses,” he exhorted. A week later Mao personally ordered the work teams to be withdrawn from Beijing’s schools and universities. Henceforth, the Cultural Revolution in educational institutions would be conducted by “mass organizations” whose leaders were to be elected from below by students and teachers, rather than appointed from above by the local authorities. (Here we see a clear recapitulation of Mao’s earlier anger at Liu and Deng for using elitist work teams to prevent mass mobilizing during the Socialist Education Movement.)

When they learned of Mao’s order, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping became deeply distressed. Liu’s daughter reported that she had never seen him so upset. Mao had tested his two top lieutenants by stirring up trouble, then waiting to see how they dealt with it; and they had failed the test—just as Peng Zhen had failed the test Mao had set for him earlier in the year.

At Mao’s initiative, the decision to withdraw the work teams was publicly announced on July 29 to a packed crowd of 10,000 students in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People. On stage were seated Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and Mao’s ever-faithful lap-dog, Zhou Enlai. Liu issued a vaguely worded self-criticism, in which he accepted personal responsibility for any errors committed by the work teams. But his apology was perfunctory, and he claimed that the errors in question were inadvertent, a result of an “old revolutionary [leader] facing new problems.” Seated backstage, out of sight, Mao snorted to his doctor, seated next to him, “Old revolutionary? What old revolutionary? Old counterrevolutionary is more like it.” (Li Zhisui, p. 470) Mao’s doctor shuddered when he heard this, knowing that Liu Shaoqi would soon be done for.

Shortly after this incident, Mao further fanned the flames of rebellion when he wrote a personal note to a young high school student in Beijing, praising him for helping to form a rebel organization at his middle school, which was attached to Beida’s sister institution, the prestigious Tsinghua University. The insurgents there had called themselves Hongweibing—“Red Guards.” Mao congratulated the young man and coined a new battle cry: “Zaofan youli!”—“To rebel is justified!” Mao’s words were reprinted in
student newspapers across the country, quickly becoming the most famous rallying cry of the entire Cultural Revolution.

On August 5th, People’s Daily published a short essay by Mao Zedong, entitled “My first dazibao.” In it, Mao charged that the Party’s work teams had “suppressed revolutionaries, stifled dissenting opinions, and … imposed a white terror.” To rectify such “poisonous” behavior, Mao exhorted the masses to “Bombard the Headquarters” [of the bourgeoisie].

Three days later, on August 8, Mao made a rare public appearance in Tiananmen Square, where he greeted thousands of gleeful, adoring young students. (show photo of Mao) It was the first of several such “meet and greet” events to be held by the Chairman during August and September. In the course of these public appearances, Mao received over a million ecstatic young Red Guards. Wearing olive-drab military-style uniforms adorned with bright red armbands, and waving copies of the Little Red Book (compliments of Lin Biao and the PLA), the students excitedly chanted “Long live Chairman Mao! A long, long life to Chairman Mao!”

At one of these mass receptions, a female student named Song Binbin spontaneously removed her own armband and gave it to the Chairman. On it, the characters “Hong-wei-bing” –Red Guard--were printed in gold letters on a field of crimson. Mao smiled broadly as he put it on. He had become an honorary Red Guard. (show photo of Mao with armband) The students were ecstatic.

Next time we shall see how Mao’s symbolic embrace of the Red Guards emboldened the impressionable youngsters to undertake a succession of ever more daring—and ever more violent--actions. The Cultural Revolution was about to get very ugly, and on a very large scale.

In August of 1966 Mao unleashed the Red Guards with a series of carefully-orchestrated, theatrical appearances at Tiananmen Square. Feeding on the mass frenzy of the adoring students, Mao spurred his “little generals” into action. In this lecture we shall see how Mao’s patronage caused the Red Guard movement to mushroom dramatically in the summer of 1966, and then to run off the tracks and out of control in the fall of that year. By the early winter of 1967, China was poised on the brink of anarchy.

In between meeting and greeting multitudes of youthful Red Guards at Tiananmen Square, Mao in August of 1966 chaired an important plenary session of the Party Central Committee. It was the first full plenum to be held in four years. Although the Party constitution called for annual sessions, Mao hadn’t wanted to convene the Party’s supreme decision making body until he was assured of controlling both its agenda and its outcome. Now, that time had come.

With hundreds of eager, excited young students packing the galleries above the main floor of the Great Hall of the People, the Central Committee plenum was dominated by leftists. Speaker after speaker denounced Mao’s putative adversaries-- including Peng Zhen, the “Three Family Village,” and the work teams controlled by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Not surprisingly, the final communiqué adopted by the plenum represented a decisive victory for the Maoists. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were demoted in rank, while Peng Zhen and Lu Dingyi were dismissed from the Party outright, along with PLA Chief of Staff Lo Ruiqing (the man who, a year earlier, had sharply criticized the mass campaign to study the Thought of Mao Zedong).

To fill the leadership vacuum created by these prominent demotions and dismissals, the plenum appointed leading members of Mao’s left-wing brain trust – Lin Biao, Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng, Chen Boda and Zhang Chunqiao – to head a new “Central Cultural Revolution Small Group”(or CCRG, for short). And Lin Biao was tapped to replace Liu Shaoqi as Mao’s designated successor. (show Lin Biao with Mao at TAM)

Mao’s decision to include Jiang Qing in the new Central CR directorate raised a number of eyebrows, since it clearly violated the CCP’s longstanding ban on Jiang’s participation in politics. Although Mao had stopped living with her years earlier, and though their relationship was quite stormy (she was furious at his constant womanizing; he resented her penchant for political intrigue), Jiang quickly became a major player in the Cultural Revolution and a key member of the so-called “Shanghai Clique.” (A decade later the four left-wing leaders of the “Shanghai Clique”—Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and an unheralded young factory worker named Wang Hongwen-- would be imprisoned and universally reviled as the infamous “Gang of Four.” But that was later. For now, in the late summer of 1966, the leftists were flying high. Soon enough, China would pay a heavy price for their ascendancy.)
With Mao having sounded the call for student rebellion, the Cultural Revolution entered its most turbulent stage yet. In September, fall semester classes were cancelled in all Chinese schools and universities, to allow students across the country to form Red Guard detachments and go forth to “make revolution.”

Almost immediately, differences of opinion emerged over who was eligible to join the Red Guards. Students from the “five good” class backgrounds—namely, the offspring of workers, peasants, soldiers, cadres and revolutionary martyrs—argued that they alone should have the right to be Red Guards, insofar as they had been “born red.” Other students—from bad or impure class backgrounds—intellectuals, rich peasants, and the petty bourgeoisie—countered by arguing that one’s revolutionary purity depended not on an accident of birth, but on one’s demonstrated political attitude and behavior. With no central directive available to resolve the question of who was eligible to join, many schools saw two separate, competing organizations of Red Guards spring up.

To bolster their contention that they were true revolutionaries, students from bad or “impure” class backgrounds often exhibited more radical and destructive behavior than the “naturally red” students, who were under less pressure to prove their revolutionary mettle. Imitating Nie Yuanzi and her Beida comrades, these “impure” students waged fierce, and at times brutal struggles against their unfortunate teachers and school administrators.

In many cases, the students’ radical political actions conflicted with their own personal feelings. One young Red Guard from Fujian province told of confronting a personal dilemma when his high school physics teacher came under attack from his own Red Guard faction. His vivid account of these events is worth quoting at some length:

The heaviest blow to me was the killing of my most respected and beloved teacher, Chen Gude. He had been imprisoned in a room under a stairway and tormented by class bullies…. I was powerless to stop them, and [besides,] it was reactionary even to try to protect someone….

Over 60 years old and suffering from high blood pressure, Teacher Chen was dragged out at eleven thirty a.m., exposed to the hot sun for more than two hours, …. Then he was beaten [repeatedly] with fists and broomsticks…

This lasted for six hours, until he lost control of his bowels. They tried to force a stick into his rectum. He collapsed… They poured cold water on him —but it was too late…. The killers were stunned momentarily, for this was…the first time they had ever beaten a man to death…. People began to run away, one after another…. The school doctor was summoned. [Terrified,] the doctor wrote on the death certificate: “Death due to a sudden attack of high blood pressure.“ (K. Ling, Revenge of Heaven, pp 11-12)

Some students were sickened by what they saw and tried to avoid taking part. After witnessing the brutal beating of his high-school principal, one student wrote:
At heart I was struggling with myself. Our principal had been very good to me….

[If I] turned against him….I would be acting against my own conscience….On the other hand, if I wanted to enter a university, I needed “political capital,” which I could acquire only by disregarding my conscience [i.e., by attacking the powerholders]….  

I thought about pretending to be ill. I even hoped that something might happen in my family…that could give me an excuse to withdraw from everything….  

But I dared not reveal these thoughts to others…. [And after a while] I became used to it; a blood-smeared body or a shriek no longer made me feel uneasy. (Ibid, pp 7-8)  

Throughout the late summer and autumn of 1966, similar scenes were enacted at tens of thousands of schools across the country, as teachers and administrators were systematically subjected to humiliation, physical abuse, and torture; thousands were beaten to death—no-one knows just how many. Suicides were common. (show photo of Red Guards abusing teacher)

How to explain this madness? In numerous memoirs and reminiscences of the events of this period, former Red Guards have acknowledged the destructiveness and brutality of their own behavior, yet without being able to satisfactorily explain how the boundaries of conventional civility had been so easily breached. Clearly, peer group pressure and the absence of adult supervisory authority were major factors—much as they had been key factors in William Golding’s fictional account of adolescent behavior in his terrifying novel, “Lord of the Flies.” In the case of the Red Guards, mass hysteria was an additional factor. A psychological contagion had been induced by the students’ frenzied devotion to Chairman Mao. In giving vent to their most destructive impulses, they truly believed they were acting on behalf of a living deity.

In such a hyper-charged atmosphere, the license to defy authority interacted with immature youthful absolutism and overactive teenage hormones to create an explosive, potentially deadly mix. Nowhere was this combustibility demonstrated more clearly—or more fiercely-- than in the Red Guards’ violent conflicts with rival groups of rebel students. Like the Sharks and the Jets in “Westside Story,” the “born red” students and the “impure” students in each school vied with each other to see who could be the most revolutionary. At first their competitiveness was expressed verbally; but before long it became intensely physical. And within a year, open warfare between rival Red Guard factions would destroy whatever unity of principle and purpose may have notionally existed at the outset.

Once the Red Guards had finished struggling against their own school officials, they were instructed by Mao’s leftist “brain trusters” on the CCRG to go forth and “Destroy the Four Olds” in society. The “Four Olds” were: old thinking, old culture, old customs and old habits; and students were given a free pass to “smash” them, quite literally-- in their own communities, their own neighborhoods, and even their own homes. Responding to
the call, roving bands of youngsters, some as young as fourteen or fifteen, ransacked homes, shops, and offices, burning "old" books, defacing works of art, smashing religious icons, and generally making mayhem. They tore down street signs and renamed them, “Anti-Revisionism Street,” and “Eradicate Capitalism Avenue.” Urban traffic patterns were rendered chaotic when the Red Guards decided that a red light should mean “go”, and a green light, “stop.” The world was, quite literally, being turned upside down in China.

In the fall of 1966 Red Guards were given a free pass on the nation’s railroads and bus lines. Encouraged to “link up” and “exchange revolutionary experiences” with their counterparts from other provinces, they roamed the country freely in groups, forming alliances with like-minded youngsters from other areas.

In a highly repressive society where young people normally enjoyed precious little freedom of movement or self-expression, the “linking up” movement unleashed more than just revolutionary impulses. The students also engaged in a good deal of petty vandalism, licentious sexual activity, and just plain hooliganism. As one former Red Guard later told me, “We were intoxicated with our own power. We were Chairman Mao’s ‘little red generals,’ and we were immortal. Who would dare to oppose us?” (show photo of Red Guards “linking up”)

As the Red Guards responded to Chairman Mao’s call to “Bombard the headquarters,” Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, was busy carrying out her own brand of revolution. Appointed to head the CCRG’s cultural subgroup, she became a one-woman censorship board—a virtual Culture Czar. Under her direction, all Western music and films (and many Western musical instruments) were banned as “bourgeois”; and traditional Chinese songs and operas were categorically banned as “feudal remnants”. In their place, Jiang Qing personally compiled a list of “approved” films, music and theatrical works. Eight—and only eight—“model” revolutionary operas and ballets were authorized for performance during the Cultural Revolution. All were highly political and militant in content.

Mme Mao also had a major impact on the world of fashion. From 1966 on, any form of personal expression of individuality in fashion, couture or clothing was prohibited: women were instructed to dress plainly and austerely, in simple green or blue military-style uniform jackets, with baggy trousers and flat shoes. (show typical Cultural Revolution dress for women) Hair was universally worn in austere page-boy cuts or in pig-tails, hidden under PLA-style peaked caps. Makeup and jewelry were forbidden altogether.

What few people knew was that while Jiang Qing was relentless in stamping out bourgeois culture among the Chinese masses, in the privacy of her own personal villa in the South of China she regularly and freely indulged her own taste for Western films, fashions, and accoutrements. As a former movie actress, she had a particular fondness for Greta Garbo movies. (Show cartoon slide of Jiang preening in front of mirror)

As autumn deepened, and student rebelliousness began to get seriously out of hand in many regions, frustrated party and government leaders at the provincial, county and
municipal levels began to mobilize their local constituents to resist and repel the unruly youngsers. Fighting fire with fire, they shouted revolutionary slogans of their own, claiming to be the “true revolutionaries,” while painting the young rebels as fraudulent opportunists.

To resist the conservative backlash, the Maoists in November put out an order to their followers across the country to mobilize members of the working class to repel the “frenzied counterattacks” of the powerholders. No longer confined to schools, universities and cultural institutions, the Cultural Revolution now spread to industrial and commercial enterprises.

The first major city to experience a systematic assault by mobilized industrial workers—who called themselves “revolutionary rebels”—was Shanghai. In early January 1967, a city-wide organization of 100,000 leftist factory workers confronted a 20,000-strong militia organization set up by the municipal government. The insurgents surrounded the government headquarters on Shanghai’s famous Bund and the standoff ensued, with each group claiming to represent the “true” revolutionaries. When two local members of the CCRG—Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan—arrived on the scene and endorsed a “seizure of power” by the radical workers against the municipal powerholders, they were strongly denounced by the pro-establishment militia. A standoff ensued.

At this critical juncture, Mao and Zhou Enlai personally intervened, praising the rebellious Shanghai workers for correctly “grasping revolution.” Thus empowered from above, leftists dismissed three-fourths of the members of the Shanghai party committee and reorganized the entire municipal government. Four of the dismissed officials later died as a result of injuries suffered in the accompanying violence.

In mid-January Mao formally approved this transfer of power, thereby bringing into existence a new form of popular governance—which was referred to as the “Shanghai People’s Commune.” Loosely modeled after the Paris Commune of 1871 (when Parisian workers had risen up to seize control of the city), the new Shanghai Commune turned out to be a fiasco. With no clear lines of command, no well-demarcated functional jurisdictions, little or no administrative experience, and no discipline whatsoever, the victorious insurgents made what can only be described as a proper hash of things. Their constant quarreling over spoils of victory made any form of rational governance impossible.

By the end of January Mao was forced to backtrack on his notion of a “people’s commune”; instead, he now proposed an alternative model of governance—the so-called “revolutionary committee.” In this new model, political and administrative authority would be wielded by a single committee composed of three evenly-weighted constituencies: representatives of the rebellious mass organizations; former cadres who had “passed the test” of loyalty to Chairman Mao; and representatives of the People’s Liberation Army. Military participation was deemed necessary for the maintenance of discipline and order.
In the aftermath of the Shanghai uprising, radical Red Guards and revolutionary rebels throughout China began to “seize power”—in factories, villages, government offices, commercial establishments, schools and universities. Sometimes, insurgent factory workers used the pretense of “making revolution” to press for higher wages, or to demand the abolition of the exploitative system of labor contracts, whereby millions of temporary workers enjoyed no job security or welfare benefits, or simply to seek revenge against their factory managers, foremen, and co-workers.

As the scope of working class participation broadened, the motives of the participants became murkier, less principled, and more patently self-aggrandizing. With all sides loudly claiming to uphold Chairman Mao’s revolutionary mandate, it become extremely difficult—nay virtually impossible—to tell which groups (if any) were the true revolutionaries, and which were merely self-promoting opportunists.

As violence mounted, and began to edge over into anarchy, Mao intervened once more. In the spring of 1967, he ordered all schools to be reopened, and itinerant Red Guards were instructed to return to their places of origin to attend classes. At the same time, workers were told to make revolution only in their spare time, after completing their daily 8-hour work shifts. To restore order in those work units that had been worst-hit by factional violence, Mao ordered Lin Biao to dispatch PLA propaganda teams to the most troublesome units, where their mandate was to sort things out and “support the leftist faction.” For reasons already mentioned, however, this was easier said than done. More often than not, the army propaganda teams, at a loss to determine who were “true” revolutionaries and who were merely “waving the red flag,” simply upheld the established powerholders rather than turn power over to unruly insurgents, who often conducted themselves like hooligans.

Meanwhile, the power struggle in Beijing entered a new stage. Encouraged by members of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, radical students at Tsinghua University, sister institution of Beida, demanded to “drag out” Liu Shaoqi and his wife, Wang Guangmei, to face the wrath of the masses. Though Zhou Enlai tried to protect Liu and Wang by refusing to grant the students access to them, the rebel students devised a clever ruse to lure Wang Guangmei out into the open.

An elegant woman from a well-to-do family, Wang Guangmei had worked as an interpreter for the US military in Chongqing during the anti-Japanese War. Her beauty, grace, and charm, while widely admired within China, were a source of considerable irritation—and envy—to Jiang Qing. Of more immediate political relevance was the fact that Wang Guangmei had led a Cultural Revolution work team to Tsinghua University in June of 1966. Under her guidance, the work team had suppressed the rebel faction and defended the local party establishment. Now it was payback time.

One day in the early spring of 1967 Wang Guangmei was lured out of her well-guarded residence by an anonymous phone caller who claimed that her daughter, Liu Pingping, had been badly injured in a traffic accident. Alarmed, Wang rushed to the hospital, where
she was grabbed by a group of Tsinghua students who had cooked up the incident as a hoax.

The rebels took Wang Guangmei back to the campus of Tsinghua University, where they forced her to put on an elegant traditional silk *qipao* that she had worn while on a state visit to Indonesia with her husband the previous year. Jiang Qing had seen a photograph of Wang decked out in her fancy gown, accented with an expensive string of pearls, high heels, bright red lipstick and fashionable coiffure. And Jiang had been livid. Now she would take her revenge. (show Wang Guangmei at Tsinghua struggle session)

After forcing Wang to don the silk dress, her student captors added silk stockings and high-heeled shoes. They then draped a string of white-painted ping-pong balls around Wang’s neck, representing the pearl necklace, and slashed a wide streak of bright red lipstick across her face, from cheek to cheek. Wang remained defiant as they led her away to a mass struggle meeting on the Tsinghua campus. There she was given a mock trial in front of hundreds of students, who shouted epithets at her, including “whore” and “harlot.” Shaking with fear and anger, Wang refused to bend to the will of her tormentors. After a while, she was allowed to return home. One Red Guard leader later confirmed that Jiang Qing “[told] me …to humiliate Wang Guangmei… We could insult her any way we wanted.” (Kuai Dafu, quoted in Chang and Halliday, *Mao*, p. 531).

A few months later, Liu Shaoqi himself was dragged out to face “arraignment” before a kangaroo court of Red Guards. As he tried to speak, he was shouted down by the crowd, which rained blows down on his head. He was punched, kicked and forced to assume the painful “flying sparrow” position—with knees bent and arms outstretched to the rear. Thereafter, he was sent away to the industrial city of Kaifeng, where he was kept in solitary confinement for two years. Suffering from diabetes and pneumonia contracted during his long incarceration, Liu was denied medical care. He died in November 1969 on a surgical gurney, alone and naked in a bare, unheated room in a Kaifeng prison hospital. Cause of death was medical neglect.

Other top leaders and their families were similarly brutalized in 1967. Bo Yibo, a top CCP economic planner, was beaten into unconsciousness at a mass rally in Beijing’s Workers’ Stadium. The former PLA Chief of Staff Lo Ruiqing was paralyzed in a suicide attempt while under Red Guard interrogation. Peng Dehuai, Peng Zhen and other erstwhile “revisionists” were driven around Beijing to a series of mass rallies in the back of an open truck, wearing dunce caps and placards. At the rallies they were beaten mercilessly. Peng Dehuai and Lo Ruiqing died of their cumulative injuries, as did the revered Long March veteran, Marshal He Long. Even Mao’s oldest comrade, Zhu De, co-founder of the Red Army in 1928, was beaten and repeatedly struggled against.

As for Deng Xiaoping and his family, Deng’s son Pufang broke his back when he jumped (or was pushed) off the roof of a building where he had been interrogated by militant Red Guards. He remained paralyzed for life. Deng Xiaoping himself, it should be noted, avoided serious physical harm when he and his wife were sent to the relatively safety of a
remote rural township at Zhou Enlai’s initiative. At least some of the time, Zhou did what he could to protect his old comrades.

But it was not nearly enough. The Chinese Communist Party was being systematically shattered; its leaders brutalized; its morale crushed. Slowly but surely, Mao and his radical minions were pushing the country toward the brink of anarchy.
Lecture 24: Mao’s Last Revolution III: The Storm Subsides (1968-69)

Last time we saw how Red Guards and revolutionary rebels used—and abused—their Maoist mandate to destroy the “four olds,” attack bourgeois powerholders, and seize local power throughout the country. In this lecture we examine the consequences of the ensuing chaos.

As China descended into wider and deeper disorder, two unspoken questions began to form on many people’s lips: Just what did Mao know about the extent of the spreading violence and cruelty? And why did he do nothing to stop it? Without doubt, Mao had personally set in motion the radical events of 1966 and ’67 with his periodic oracular pronouncements, which called on Red Guards and revolutionary rebels to “bombard the headquarters,” “expose all demons and monsters,” and “drag out” the bourgeois powerholders. Nor did he lift a finger to protect his old comrades from physical abuse and even violent death (only Zhou Enlai did that, and only to a very limited extent).

Based on the testimony of his personal physician, Li Zhisui, Mao was an aloof and cold-blooded Olympian deity, a philosopher-king who professed deep devotion to the popular masses but showed little concern for individual human beings. Seated on high, far above the sturm und drang of mortal life, not even his closest comrades—not even his own wife—could see him without an appointment. It is thus quite possible that, living inside this personal imperial cocoon, Mao did not fully comprehend the destructive consequences of his own Delphic pronouncements.

One person who clearly did understand and appreciate the Chairman’s power to unleash the fury of the masses was his wife, Jiang Qing. It was she most of all, with the help of her allies in the CCRG and the “Shanghai clique,” who led the violent assault against “powerholders.” Driven partly by pent-up resentment at Party elders who had barred her from politics for thirty years, and partly by personal ambition and an evident intoxication with political power, she relished playing the role of “patron saint” to the Red Guards and revolutionary rebels—a role that, as a former actress, she played to the hilt. (More than a decade later, however, when she was put on trial for treason in 1980, Jiang Qing refused to accept responsibility for instigating the violence of 1967-68. “I was [just] Chairman Mao’s lap dog,” she demurred. “When Chairman said bite, I bit.” (Quoted by Andrew J. Nathan, The New Republic, April 6, 1992, p. 32.)

Whether lapdog or master instigator, Jiang Qing urged Red Guards in the summer of 1967 to direct their criticism against alleged “bourgeois powerholders” in the PLA. Thus emboldened from on high, rebellious students broke into several PLA armories, carrying away with them large stocks of arms and ammunition. Under standing orders from Mao not to use force in confronting revolutionary students, the army sat on its collective hands, offering no resistance as its weapons were hauled away. When military commanders sent urgent alarms to Beijing, Mao personally intervened to prohibit Red Guards from entering any more army bases. But the damage had already been done; and
shortly afterward, the seized weapons were used in a series of deadly civil wars involving pitched battles between rival Red Guard factions.

In the early spring of 1967 a group of senior Party leaders tried to stop the spiraling madness. Appealing directly to the CCRG, the former agricultural minister, Tan Zhenlin, spoke out on behalf of the dissenters. But Jiang Qing and her comrades rudely dismissed his concerns. At that point, the notoriously thin-skinned Tan Zhenlin exploded with rage: “Your purpose is to get rid of all old cadres… They made revolution for decades, yet [now they] end up with their families broken and themselves dying. It is the cruelest struggle in the history of our Party.” When Tan’s outburst elicited no response, he sent a personal note to Lin Biao: “I have come to the absolute end of my tether. I am ready to die to stop them.” Another member of the dissident group, Foreign Minister Chen Yi, said of the Cultural Revolution that “[it] is one big torture chamber.” (Chang and Halliday, Mao: The Untold Story, p. 526)

But such *cris de cour* went for naught. For their efforts in trying to halt the madness, Tan Zhenlin and Chen Yi were both purged. It seemed there would be no stopping the leftist juggernaut.

By the spring of 1968, China was perched on the thin edge of anarchy. Governing bodies in virtually all Chinese provinces and municipalities were being replaced by new “three-in-one” revolutionary committees. But many of these new committees were themselves paralyzed by disputes over just who had the authority to do what. To instill a greater sense of discipline, military officers were appointed to the top positions in most of the new revolutionary committees—generally at the expense of the quarrelsome “revolutionary masses.”

Meanwhile, Red Guards and revolutionary rebels throughout the country routinely ignored Beijing’s increasingly urgent requests to reconcile their factional differences and create a “great unity.” Resisting all entreaties from above, the rebels engaged in increasingly large-scale, destructive acts of violence.

In a major escalation of factional violence, whole cities now became battlegrounds. In Wuzhou Municipality, in the southern province of Guangxi, a pitched battle took place in April 1968 between two rival alliances of rebel organizations, the “Grand Army” and the “Alliance Command,” each with several thousand fighters. Using light artillery, antiaircraft guns, mortars and machine guns seized from PLA arsenals, the two sides skirmished in streets and alleys, in government buildings and private homes. In two weeks of fighting, more than 2,000 buildings in Wuzhou were laid waste and 40,000 inhabitants were rendered homeless. Eventually, the Alliance Command routed the Grand Army, taking 3,000 prisoners in the process. The unfortunate captives were systematically interrogated and tortured, after which the victors staged three mass executions, by firing squad. More than 300 bodies were dumped into shallow graves at a local cemetery. Other bodies were thrown into the West River, where the current carried them downstream. For weeks afterwards, bloated corpses from the civil
war In Guangxi were seen floating in the harbors of Hong Kong and Macao, three hundred miles downriver.

Also in Guangxi province, there were reports in 1968 of particularly gruesome forms of ritualized violence, including acts of cannibalism, where one group of rebels would ceremonially carve up and then devour the vital organs of their slain enemies. Here is one contemporaneous account of such cannibalism from Binyang County, Guangxi, in 1968 (Please note: the following passage is not for the faint of heart):

“After lighting their kerosene lamps, the hunters searched for victims… Once they had seized their prey and indulged in some small talk, one of them would sit on the body of a victim… while another cut open the stomach with a five-inch knife. The liver popped out with a little squeeze or kick…. Cutting away the lung and some other adjacent body parts, they then searched for the gut. At that point someone went home to fetch some garlic and rice wine. After boiling the liver…seven or eight people sat around a table…and silently consumed the liver by the light of the stove. Some used chopsticks, and some simply ate with their hands….” (Zheng Yi, Scarlet Memories, pp 25-26)

According to local records, over 3,000 people in Binyang county were killed in 1968.

In June of 1968, armed Red Guards stormed the North Vietnamese consulate in Guangxi’s capital city of Nanning, forcing the startled Vietnamese diplomatic staff to evacuate the building. The young rebels screamed anti-revisionist slogans at the diplomats as they left. Other roving groups of Guangxi rebels, anxious to get hold of heavy weapons, boarded and looted a number of Soviet military trains carrying weapons and war materiel to Hanoi for use in the war against the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese regime.

By the late spring of 1968, Mao himself had become seriously alarmed over the escalating violence. With large-scale disorder spreading to several provinces, Zhou Enlai sent a directive to the PLA’s military headquarters in Guangxi, demanding that law and order be restored immediately throughout the province. But there was no accompanying instruction to use “necessary force,” and the warring factions refused to lay down their arms. Shortly afterward, a second directive was issued from Beijing, this time bearing Mao’s personal imprimatur, warning that the rebels’ continued refusal to obey orders would be “severely punished.” Again there was no sign of compliance by the warring factions.

By this time, Chairman Mao’s words had begun to lose their once-magical potency. The genie of mass anarchy was out of the jar; and the only institution capable of pushing it back inside—the People’s Liberation Army—was still sitting on its collective hands.

Three years earlier, in 1965, Mao had called for class struggle to be waged to the bitter end, under the slogan “one divides into two.” And he had heaped scorn on the philosophy of class reconciliation and moderation, known as “two combine into one.” But in the
intervening three years, Mao had seen the bitter fruits of his thesis on class struggle devolve into widespread, unprincipled chaos. Finally, he had had enough. It was time to combine two into one.

On July 27, 1968, Mao took the dramatic step of summoning five of the most recalcitrant student leaders—including Nie Yuanzi of Beida and Kuai Dafu of Tsinghua—to a 4:00 a.m. emergency meeting at the Great Hall of the People. The meeting went on for several hours, with the Chairman sternly imploring the fractious students to stop their fighting and unite for the greater good. The students agreed to cooperate, but once the meeting was over they resumed bickering, their factional antagonisms undiminished.

A few days later, on August 1, 1968—which was the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Red Army by Mao and Zhu De—Mao approved a directive authorizing the PLA to suppress factional conflict by force, if necessary. A few days later, the first contingent of “Worker-Peasant-Soldier Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams” arrived on the campus of Tsinghua University. Under the direct command of uniformed PLA officers, these “propaganda teams” were tasked with restoring order and imposing military discipline over the unruly Red Guards.

In a symbolic sign of the Chairman’s personal support for this PLA initiative, on August 5th Mao sent a highly-publicized gift to the Tsinghua University propaganda team—a basket of fresh mangoes. (show photo of Mao’s mango gift) The next day, the entire front page of the People’s Daily was given over to the news of Mao’s “precious gift of mangoes.” The message was clear: The Chairman had decreed an end to factional conflict; the PLA was taking control; and force would be used to quell the violence if necessary. Having outlived their usefulness to the Chairman, the Red Guards would now be decisively muzzled.

All over China, tens of thousands of Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams entered schools and universities in August 1968. In some places they encountered rebel resistance; but for the most part they succeeded in bringing violence to a halt.

Under a new slogan—“purify class ranks”—revolutionary committees across the country began to cull fractious students and rebellious workers from their ranks, subjecting them to considerable verbal abuse and humiliation.

In a move to permanently disband the Red Guards, Mao revived a program, first introduced during the Great Leap Forward, designed to send large numbers of urban middle-school students “up to the mountains and down to the villages.” While earlier rustication movements in China (known as xiaxiang) had been short-term in nature—a year or two at most—this time it was to be an indefinite relocation.

Designed as a form of mass, compulsory re-education, rustication was accompanied by a Maoist admonition to the sent-down youth to use their residency in the countryside to learn humility, industriousness, and plain living from the peasantry. (As we shall see in a subsequent lecture, Lin Biao would later accuse Mao of cruelly turning the Red Guards
into “cannon fodder” by first seducing them and then turning against them when they exhausted their usefulness to him.)

Notwithstanding the thinly-disguised punitive purpose of the rustication movement, it was packaged for public consumption as a patriotic opportunity for young people to serve the socialist Motherland. And while the program was nominally voluntary in nature, intense political and peer-group pressure was exerted on the students to sign up—lest they appear selfish and unpatriotic. For good measure, those who resisted such pressure soon found their food ration cards cancelled.

Pre-departure rituals played upon the patriotic sentiments of the students. There were banquets, fireworks displays, and stirring send-off speeches by local officials. It is a measure of the remarkable resiliency of youthful optimism in China that a great many former Red Guards accepted their new assignments as an opportunity to “serve the people.” As their trucks departed, many of them sang revolutionary songs. (show photo of Red guards departing) Only later would they realize just how bleak their future prospects had become.

By the late winter of 1969, the rustication movement had witnessed the largest, most intensive human migration in Chinese history—perhaps in all of human history. Within six months, over 10 million youngsters, ranging in age from 14 to 23, were sent from Chinese cities to rural areas and remote border regions. Half a million Shanghai students were sent down, along with more than 200,000 from Beijing. For the vast majority, xiaxiang would be a one way ticket, as the students’ “household registrations” were permanently transferred to the countryside along with them. Because of this, and because precious few of the “sent-down” youths would ever have an opportunity to pursue a college education, these 10 million-plus young people have been collectively referred to as China’s “lost generation.”

With the Red Guards effectively banished to the countryside, the next step in the restoration of political order was to revive “normal” political institutions and administrative services. After two years of unremitting power struggles and power seizures, the Communist Party was in a shambles. Between 1966 and 1968, tens of thousands of middle- and high-ranking Communist Party officials had been overthrown, including almost 40 percent of Central Committee members. In counties, townships and villages across the country, the assault on local “powerholders” was even more widespread and violent, though reliable statistics on the full extent of the damage have never been made available.

In the population at large, death and destruction were more widespread still. Years later, after Mao had died and Jiang Qing and her “Shanghai clique” (now collectively known as the “Gang of Four”) were placed on trial for their role in the murder and mayhem of the Cultural Revolution, they were charged with persecuting 729,511 people. Of these, 34,800 had died.
Most objective observers, however—including several leading Chinese scholars—believe these figures are far too low—orders of magnitude too low; and the most reliable estimates suggest that between 750,000 and 1.5 million people died as a result of Cultural Revolution violence, with roughly equal numbers suffering permanent injuries. (MacFarquhar and Schoenhaps, Mao’s Last Revolution, p. 262)

After the Red Guards had been dispersed, the next step in restoring a semblance of political and administrative normalcy in China was to rebuild the badly shattered and demoralized Communist Party. Under the circumstances, it would ne no mean feat to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. But who would do the job?

Because Lin Biao’s PLA had survived the power struggles of the previous two years more-or-less in tact, with a minimum of internal purges and factional disruptions, the army would, by default, assume a major role in Party reconstruction. And as more and more provinces completed the task of forming revolutionary committees in the last half of 1968, the vast majority of these new ruling bodies – 23 out of 29--were dominated by uniformed military officers.

Along with the rise in military representation on the new organs of provincial and local governance, large numbers of veteran Communist Party cadres who had been subjected to criticism and struggle during the power-seizure stage of the CR were now investigated and cleared of allegations of wrongdoing. A substantial number were even restored to active leadership positions. However, Mao’s personal adversaries—people like Liu Shaoqi, Wang Guangmei, Deng Xiaoping, Peng Dehuai, Peng Zhen, and Lo Ruiqing—remained under detention (if they weren’t already dead). Their exoneration would come only later. For now, they remained condemned as “bourgeois powerholders.”

There was no small irony in this outcome: The CR had been fought in the name of unleashing the revolutionary masses; yet when the dust settled, and the winners emerged, the revolutionary masses were nowhere to be seen. True, Mao had succeeded in toppling his worst enemies—real or imagined. But not a single provincial revolutionary committee was headed by a member of Mao’s cherished worker-peasant-student masses. To paraphrase a song made popular by The Who, the “new boss” looked a whole lot like the “old boss.” The one big difference was that more often than not, the new boss wore a shiny green military uniform, with brass stars on the collar.

The Ninth National Party Congress met in the spring of 1969 --the first such Congress to be held since the onset of the Great Leap Forward more than a decade earlier. Not surprisingly, its main theme was “party rebuilding.” Also not surprisingly, the army was a highly visible presence at the Congress. Almost 45% of the members and alternate members of the newly selected Party Central Committee were uniformed military officers. At their head stood Lin Biao, who was now officially anointed as Chairman Mao’s chosen successor, replacing the disgraced (and soon to be deceased) Liu Shaoqi. The state propaganda media now referred to Lin glowingly as Chairman Mao’s “best student” and “closest comrade-in-arms.”
Along with the PLA, the other big winners to emerge from the Ninth Party Congress were members of the CCRG. Two members of that group—Mao’s security chief Kang Sheng and radical theoretician Chen Boda—were now added to the Politburo’s all-important inner sanctum, the Standing Committee, to replace Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Although Jiang Qing was not included on the five-member Standing Committee, she and two additional members of her “Shanghai clique”—Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan—were promoted to the 17-member Politburo.

A certain number of workers and peasants were also selected to sit on the new Central Committee, as tokens of the Maoist commitment to “mass democracy”; but almost without exception, these mass representatives were excluded from leading positions in the Party. In terms of its core leadership, the CCP was now overwhelmingly dominated by two major factional groupings—Lin Biao’s army and the radical leftists of the CCRG.

Soon enough, these two factions would become serious rivals for political power. For now, however, they were allies, each with a major stake in defending the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. Standing between these two main groups were the only two holdovers from the Party’s pre-Cultural Revolution leadership: Chairman Mao and Zhou Enlai.

In Lin Biao’s keynote address to the Ninth Party Congress, he declared that the Cultural Revolution had won a “great victory” against the forces of revisionism in China. And he wrapped himself firmly in Mao’s mantle, declaring that the “Thought of Mao Zedong” had achieved co-equal status with Marxism and Leninism as a source of Communist theological orthodoxy throughout the world.

With the country having so recently pulled back from the edge of anarchy, Lin was also extremely cognizant of the need to rebuild the shattered unity and morale of the Communist Party—and the country as a whole. And so, even as he was trumpeting the brilliance of Chairman Mao, Lin Biao held out an olive branch to Mao’s defeated foes, offering leniency to purge victims and eventual rehabilitation for disgraced Party cadres. It was a message designed to begin the process of national healing.

That healing process took on even greater urgency because of events that were taking place in the spring of 1969 along the Sino-Soviet border. After several years of escalating hostility between China and the Soviet Union, the two sides had begun shooting at each other. Once entirely unthinkable, all-out war between the two Communist giants was growing increasingly possible—even likely. Next time we shall examine the rising drums of war.
Lecture 25: The Sino-Soviet War of Nerves (1964-69)

In this lecture we turn from the domestic consequences of Mao’s tumultuous Cultural Revolution to consider its external impact, in particular its effect upon Beijing’s already badly frayed relationship with Moscow. After a decade of gradually escalating polemics between Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev, in the late 1960s the Sino-Soviet dispute veered toward open military conflict.

Tensions between the two had grown noticeably worse since the early 1960s. In the summer of 1962, China and India fought a brief border war over some disputed territories high up in the Himalayas. In that conflict, the Soviets had maintained a studied neutrality, refusing to back their erstwhile Chinese ally-- and thereby violating the “golden rule” of fraternal solidarity in Communist bloc relations. Later that same year, the Chinese side repaid the Russians in kind by openly criticizing Nikita Khrushchev for backing away from a military confrontation with the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In the summer of 1963 a final attempt was made to heal the deepening Sino-Soviet rift. A high-profile summit meeting was held in Moscow; but it broke down in mutual accusation and recrimination. Thereafter, the two sides escalated their denunciations.

In mid-October 1964, with great patriotic jubilation, China successfully tested its first atomic bomb, a low-yield (25 kt) fission device that had been built entirely without Soviet assistance. The test was a powerful declaration of China’s strategic independence from the USSR, and its impact on Moscow was instantaneous.

Aware that a Chinese nuclear test was imminent, the Soviet Communist Party Praesidium abruptly removed Nikita Khruschev from power. Among other reasons for the purge, the Praesidium cited Khrushchev’s repeated blunders in the international arena, including his inept handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis and his botched relations with China. In truth, Khrushchev’s reformist tendencies and erratic personal behavior had increasingly alienated many in the top Soviet leadership. In this situation, the Chinese nuclear test was merely the last straw.

For a short while, it appeared that Khrushchev’s ouster might open the way for a thaw in Sino-Soviet relations. The Russians clearly hoped for such a thaw. Early in 1965, in response to America’s escalation of the war in Vietnam, the new Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, held out an olive branch to Beijing. He offered to collaborate with China in providing a coordinated flow of new military assistance to Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam.

But Mao flatly rejected Brezhnev’s offer; and shortly afterward he angrily denounced the idea of peaceful reconciliation with Soviet “revisionists.” (Indeed, this was the hidden meaning of Mao’s bitter 1965 critique of the theory of “two combine into one”—it was a mortar shell lobbed at those Chinese leaders (including Deng Xiaoping) who had urged repairing the Sino-Soviet rift). As far as Mao was concerned, so long as the Soviets...
refused to acknowledge the error of their ways, there could be no “combining” with them, only “dividing.”

To Mao, Khrushchev’s ouster hadn’t changed a thing. The Soviets were still heretics. On the other side, as Maoist radicalism intensified during the run-up to the Cultural Revolution, the new Soviet leaders increasingly saw the Chinese Chairman as an overzealous, out-of-control ideologue, and a megalomaniac whose lack of appreciation for the destructive power of nuclear weapons put the USSR—and the world--deeply at risk.

By 1964, the Russians and Chinese had begun openly vying for leadership of the World Communist Movement. The competition was particularly intense in Asia, Africa and Latin America, where Russia and China each wooed the leaders of Third World Communist parties and “National Liberation Movements” with promises of stepped up aid and support.

In this mounting rivalry, the Russians enjoyed a huge material advantage. More economically and industrially developed than China, the Soviet Union could afford to provide generous commercial credits, modern weapons and sophisticated technical know-how, while the Chinese were mainly able to provide large quantities of unskilled manpower --and Mao Zedong’s doctrine of people’s war.

This fundamental resource imbalance produced some very strange and sometimes paradoxical results. For example, although Beijing and Moscow each enjoyed warm relations with Cuba’s Fidel Castro prior to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, by 1965 the Russians had successfully frozen the Chinese out of Cuba. To secure Castro’s undivided loyalty, Khruschev committed the USSR to massively subsidizing Cuba’s most important export industry-- sugar cane-- by purchasing the island’s entire annual sugar crop at a price well above the going world market price. To sweeten the pot still further, Moscow offered to fully meet Cuba’s need for petroleum products at below-market prices. It was an offer Castro couldn’t refuse. And for the next quarter century, Cuba remained a Soviet client state, while China remained on the outside, looking in.

A similar scenario played itself out in other Third-World arenas of Sino-Soviet competition, including Vietnam. As the war in Vietnam intensified beginning in 1965, Ho Chi-minh found himself growing more and more dependent on Soviet aid—much to Mao’s annoyance. In a famous speech given by Chinese Defense Minister Lin Biao in September 1965, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, Lin urged the Vietnamese Communists to reject the Russians’ conventional military advice and large-scale military assistance, and to instead adopt the Maoist strategy of “people’s war”, with its emphasis on light armaments, mobile operations and “fish in water” guerilla tactics. Attempting to make a virtue of necessity, Lin Biao downplayed China’s inability to compete with the Soviets on a ruble for ruble, MIG-17 for MIG-17 basis. Instead, he emphasized the virtues of revolutionary “self-reliance” and “surrounding the cities from the countryside”-- principles which he elevated to the status of a universally valid “great strategic plan.”
Although Ho Chi-minh welcomed increased Soviet assistance, he remained stubbornly independent. To maximize his freedom of maneuver, Ho began to play off the Russians against the Chinese. While accepting Soviet money, T34 tanks, and MIG-17 jet fighters, he also readily accepted Mao’s offer to send substantial numbers of non-combat troops from the PLA’s “Production and Construction Corps” to help repair the damage inflicted by America’s stepped-up bombing campaigns against North Vietnam.

Sino-Soviet rivalry in Vietnam came to a head in the late winter of 1968, when Ho Chi-minh launched his famous Tet Offensive, over China’s strenuous objections. In that most celebrated of military operations, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces simultaneously launched a series of concentrated surprise attacks against all major South Vietnamese cities.

Although the Tet Offensive was eventually repulsed, with great loss life to the attacking NVA and VC troops, the psychological damage done to the American sense of military invulnerability marked a major turning point in the war, demonstrating that the enemy could attack in force anywhere, at any time.

But the Tet offensive infuriated Beijing’s leaders. Chinese advisors had been urging Hanoi to follow the Maoist revolutionary playbook, that is, to persist in small-scale guerilla-style mobile warfare operations in the countryside, and to avoid large-scale, concentrated urban assaults until much later in the conflict, when the insurgents had secured a decisive shift in the overall balance of military forces.

Beijing’s growing impatience with North Vietnam spilled into the open in the spring of 1968, when radical Red Guards in Nanning, Guangxi, stormed Hanoi’s consulate, verbally and physically harassing the Vietnamese diplomats inside the compound. At around the same time, Red Guards in southern Guangxi began to raid Soviet supply trains loaded with arms and military equipment bound for Vietnam. Though Mao was visibly upset by the rising anti-Vietnamese violence in South China, he nonetheless made little effort to hide his growing frustration with Ho Chi-minh.

The strain in Beijing’s relations with Hanoi was clearly displayed on the occasion of China’s annual National Day celebration on October 1, 1968. Normally a showcase for patriotic displays of China’s rising global prestige and diplomatic successes, the 1968 National Day celebration was a particularly austere and underwhelming affair. In response to escalating Chinese verbal and physical hostility toward the Russians and their allies within the Soviet bloc, virtually every member of the foreign Communist diplomatic community in Beijing—including the North Vietnamese—boycotted the National Day festivities. Indicative of China’s growing diplomatic isolation, only two foreign countries sent official representatives to observe the occasion (Pop Quiz: Who were they? Pakistan and tiny Albania).

Meanwhile, Sino-Soviet relations continued to slide dangerously downhill. With the activation of the Red Guards in the summer of 1966, thousands of Chinese students,
carrying portraits of Mao and Stalin, demonstrated outside the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, shouting anti-revisionist slogans and renaming the street leading to the embassy “Struggle against Revisionism Street.”

In response to the rising shrillness and intensity of the Red Guards, the Soviets began to quietly reinforce their combat units along China’s northern border. With more than a dozen Soviet divisions amassed along the Manchurian and Mongolian borders, in December of 1966 Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi accused the Russians of conspiring with the United States to launch a surprise attack on China. “The Chinese people are ready for war,” he said in a press interview, “and [we] are confident of final victory…[Any] nuclear bombs which fall on China will be returned with interest….” (Keesings, The Sino Soviet Dispute, p. 94).

In January 1967, a group of overseas Chinese students got into a brawl with Russian police and bystanders in Moscow’s Red Square. Fist-fights broke out when the students lined up at the entrance to Lenin’s mausoleum and began shouting quotations from Mao’s Little Red Book. A few weeks later, Red Guards besieged the Soviet Embassy in Beijing for a second time.

In the spring of 1967 Chinese youths went on simultaneous rampages in Hong Kong, Macao, London, Rangoon, and along the Sino-Soviet border in Northern Manchuria. Encouraged by the CCRG, Red Guards in July stormed the Chinese Foreign Ministry compound in Beijing, temporarily taking control of the building and attempting to seize Foreign Minister Chen Yi himself. Only the timely intervention of Zhou Enlai prevented the incident from becoming a total diplomatic debacle for China.

By the first half of 1968, Sino-Soviet relations had reached the breaking point, with the two sides routinely excoriating each other in the strongest possible terms. The straw that broke the camel’s back was the Soviet decision to send tanks and troops into Czechoslovakia, in August 1968.

In Prague, a liberal, reform-minded communist leader, Alexander Dubcek, had recently become the head of the Czech Communist Party. With Dubcek promising to dismantle the country’s neo-Stalinist institutions and pursue a path of social democracy, Moscow intervened in force, removing Dubcek and restoring to power a more “orthodox” regime. This unilateral Soviet action was the first direct military intervention by Soviet troops in an Eastern bloc country since Russian tanks ruthlessly crushed the Hungarian uprising in 1956.

Although the Chinese Communists had no love for either the liberal Dubcek or his reformist government, they bitterly protested the unilateral Soviet military action. China’s leaders were particularly upset over the official Soviet rationale for the invasion, which was stated by Leonid Brezhnev himself, in what became known as the “Brezhnev Doctrine”: 
"When forces hostile to socialism try to turn the development of a socialist country towards capitalism, it becomes not only a problem for the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries." ("Brezhnev Doctrine", Wikipedia)

The core of the Brezhnev Doctrine was the idea that members of the Socialist camp enjoyed only limited, conditional sovereignty-- at the pleasure of the USSR. In Mao’s view, it was a convenient rationale that could be invoked by Soviet leaders to legitimize the unilateral use of force against any member of the Communist bloc, at any time, and under any circumstances Moscow viewed as posing a threat to its own vital interests. In short, it was a one-size-fits-all excuse for Soviet armed intervention. Today Prague; tomorrow-- Beijing?

Though Mao has often been called paranoid, in this case his fears were not entirely unwarranted. The Soviet Union was gearing up for war. Since the late 1950s Moscow had watched Mao’s growing radicalization with alarm. Repeatedly, Kremlin leaders had accused Mao of leading China onto the road to ruination; and in response, the Soviet Union had amassed more than a dozen combat-ready divisions along the Chinese border-- many of them equipped with tactical nuclear weapons.

Adding insult to injury, one of Mao’s oldest and bitterest rivals—the pro-Stalinist Wang Ming, whom Mao had defeated in a nasty power struggle more than 30 years earlier, on the eve of the Long March, suddenly reappeared in public-- alive and well and living in Moscow. After three decades spent in quiet obscurity in the Soviet Union, Wang Ming’s political image was suddenly given a fresh coats of paint and polish. The Soviet media began extolling his revolutionary virtues, heaping praise on him as the one true leader of the Chinese revolution. Was the timing of Wang’s sudden political revival a mere coincidence?

Mao Zedong, for one, thought not. To Mao and his radical minions, the sequence of events -- starting with the Soviet troop buildup and followed in short order by the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Brezhnev Doctrine, and the launch of a propaganda campaign on behalf of Wang Ming-- were part and parcel of the Kremlin’s preparation for a pre-emptive military strike against China.

All along the 4,000-mile Sino-Soviet border there were increasingly tense confrontations. Most often the encounters were marked by shouting back and forth; other times fist fights broke out; and occasionally, shots were fired. More than once, Chinese border guards turned their backs on their Soviet counterparts, dropping their pants and “mooning” the Russians. Such behavior ceased only when the Russian soldiers began arming themselves with photos of Mao Zedong, which they held in front of their faces whenever the Chinese started to drop their drawers. No Chinese soldier would dare to “moon” the image of the Great Helmsman.

Armed conflict finally broke out in early March 1969, when a Chinese border patrol ambushed a Soviet patrol on a small island in the middle of the frozen Ussuri River in
Northeast Manchuria. The Soviets suffered 31 dead and 14 wounded in the initial skirmish. Two weeks later, on March 15, a much larger battle ensued, in the course of which a devastating Russian artillery barrage against Chinese troops concentrated on the other side of the river inflicted over 800 Chinese casualties. Reportedly, the Russians suffered just 60 dead and wounded.

Why would Mao deliberately provoke the Russians if he wished to avoid a war with them? There are a number of available explanations, some more plausible than others. In my view the most likely (though by no means firmly proven) of these holds that Mao, in his desire to portray the Russians as expansion-minded aggressors, tried to frame them for initiating the March 2 incident in the hope of convincing the United States of Brezhnev’s warlike intentions. This might well have succeeded, except for the fact that high-altitude American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft had photographed the battlefield. The photos clearly showed that the Soviet patrol had been caught out in the open, where they were totally exposed to enemy fire—a fact that strongly suggested a deliberate Chinese ambush.

Regardless of why the attack was ordered, the border conflict of March 1969 served to trigger a nationwide civil defense mobilization in China. In anticipation of a possible Soviet invasion and/or nuclear attack, Mao instructed his people to “Dig tunnels deep, store grain everywhere.” In response to Mao’s call, massive networks of subterranean tunnels were dug under dozens of large- and medium-sized Chinese cities. Large quantities of food, clothing, medicine, and military supplies were stored in these underground complexes.

Concerned that the Maoists would stop at nothing to provoke a larger conflict, the Russians proposed to negotiate a border settlement with China, covering the disputed island in the Ussuri River along with other, unresolved boundary issues left over from the latter decades of the Manchu dynasty.

The Chinese refused, insisting that before they would sit down to negotiate with the Russians, Kremlin leaders must first acknowledge the illegality of all 19th Century Czarist land acquisitions in Manchuria. The Russians refused, and a stalemate ensued.

With both sides now actively preparing for war, Russian diplomats abroad began floating rumors to the effect that the Kremlin was contemplating a pre-emptive strike against China’s nuclear weapons installations and production facilities. In August 1969, a Soviet embassy staffer in Washington DC approached an American counterpart at a local coffee shop with a hypothetical “what if” proposition: “What do you think the United States would do if we [the Soviet Union] took out the Chinese nuclear installations at Lop Nor?” he asked—hastening to add that this was merely a “hypothetical” question. (Patrick Tyler, A Great Wall, p. 67) According to subsequent accounts of this incident, the Russians hoped that the Americans would simply look the other way in the event of such an attack, maintaining an attitude of “benign neutrality” while the Russians proceeded to decimate the Chinese nukes.
The Cold War had now reached a critical crossroad. The response of the US Government was absolutely critical. A new Republican administration had recently taken over in Washington, headed by President Richard Nixon and his National Security advisor, Henry Kissinger. This was the biggest, most strategically consequential decision they could possibly be forced to make—whether to tacitly conspire with the Soviets to neutralize China’s war-making capacity; or, alternatively, to somehow try to turn the intense hostility between Russia and China to America’s own strategic advantage.

Nixon and Kissinger were desperately looking for a way out of the Vietnam War, which had already cost one American president, Lyndon Johnson, his chance for re-election. And they believed that the Russians held the key. In the first half of 1969 Nixon had dropped a number of hints to the effect that the U.S. might cooperate with the Soviets on a broad range of initiatives if the Russians would prevail upon their clients in Hanoi to settle the war in Vietnam peacefully.

But the Russians didn’t respond, for they knew something that Nixon and Kissinger did not (and could not) then know—namely, that Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues were stubbornly independent, and would not be bullied by the Kremlin or anyone else into making peace on any terms but their own. Thus, by the time the Russians made their bombing proposal in August, the US had already backed away from the idea of a joint Soviet-American condominium in East Asia. Indeed, Nixon was now moving in the opposite direction—considering a diplomatic initiative with China in order to gain additional leverage with Moscow—a tactic that came to be known as “playing the China card.”

Had Nixon and Kissinger given the Soviets any encouragement at all in August of 1969, the history of the next forty years would have been written very, very differently. But they did not. Nixon and Kissinger strongly rejected the “hypothetical” Soviet proposal, pointing out to the Russians that an attack on the Chinese heartland, no matter how precisely targeted and well-intentioned, would have a strongly destabilizing effect on the balance of power in Northeast Asia, and would not be acceptable to the United States.

Possibly the Russians were merely bluffing—hoping the Chinese would get wind of their nuclear threat and “come to their senses.” Or possibly Nixon and Kissinger effectively put the kabosh on Soviet plans for a pre-emptive strike. In any event, the strike never came. Soon afterward, Chinese diplomats were quietly informed, through “back channels,” that the Americans had nixed the Soviet proposal. And this, in turn, caused Mao to begin to think seriously about the possible benefits of a Sino-American rapprochement. A major strategic turning-point in Cold War politics was now at hand.

In the next lecture we shall see how this situation played itself out in Beijing and Washington, culminating in “The week that changed the world”—Richard Nixon’s historic visit to China in February 1972.
Lecture 26: Nixon, Kissinger, and China’s “Opening” to the United States (1969-72)

In this lecture we shall consider the profound strategic consequences that flowed from China’s deepening conflict with the Soviet Union. In particular, we will use a microscope to examine the remarkable thaw in Sino-American relations that began in 1969.

More than a year before Richard Nixon was elected president, he had written an important article in the October 1967 issue of the influential American journal, *Foreign Affairs*. In it, Nixon noted that

“The threat from China is clear and present... The world cannot be safe until China changes. [China must be persuaded] “that its own national interest requires a turning away from foreign adventuring and a turning inward toward solution of its own domestic problems. …” Nixon then continued: “Taking the long view, “we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hatreds and threaten its neighbors.” (Tyler, *A Great Wall*, pp 42-43).

For a veteran red-baiting anti-Communist like Nixon, this was a remarkable statement. More importantly, it provided a preview of a changing American approach toward China. But it took two to tango, and in 1967, When Nixon’s article appeared, China was still deep in the throes of Mao’s tumultuous Cultural Revolution.

As remarkable as Nixon’s shift in attitude was, no less remarkable was Mao Zedong’s subsequent decision, taken after the Sino-Soviet border clashes of March 1969, to consider the possibility of reopening long-blocked channels of communication with Washington. With both Nixon and Mao now looking to change the strategic equation between their two countries, the delicate dance of détente was about to begin.

Nixon and Kissinger made the first move. Their chosen venue was Warsaw. For over a decade, from the mid-1950s to the mid-‘60s, the United States and China had maintained periodic, informal contacts in the Polish capital. Broken off by the Chinese side at the outset of the Cultural Revolution, the Warsaw talks offered a possible site for the renewal of contacts. But the approach would have to be made discreetly, so as not to arouse Soviet suspicions.

As it turned out, however, the initial contact was anything but discreet. In early December 1969, the US Ambassador to Poland, Walter Stoessel, had a chance encounter with his Chinese counterpart at an international fashion show in Warsaw. Stoessel was under standing instructions to deliver a verbal message to the Chinese envoy at the earliest possible opportunity; however, Chinese diplomats throughout the Soviet block were under their own standing orders: to avoid the Americans at all costs. The result was a comedic chase, worthy of Charley Chaplin.
After spotting the Chinese diplomat exiting from the fashion show, Ambassador Stoessel pursued him down the frozen steps of Warsaw’s Cultural Palace, trying to pass on the message from Washington; meanwhile, the nervous Chinese ambassador hastened to get away. Finally, Stoessel caught up with him and delivered his message: “President Nixon…would like to have serious, concrete talks with the Chinese.” (Tyler,  *A Great Wall*, p.75)

Stoessel received no direct response to his verbal message; but a week or so later he got a note from his Chinese counterpart notifying him that two American citizens who had been arrested when their boat strayed into Chinese territorial waters earlier in the year were being released. This was followed a short time later by an invitation for Ambassador Stoessel to visit the Chinese embassy in Warsaw. It was mid-December 1969; a new Sino-American dialogue was about to begin.

The decision to respond to the American initiative was taken by Mao and Zhou Enlai. In the aftermath of the Ussuri River incident in March, they had ordered a comprehensive foreign policy review to be undertaken. The final report, issued in September, was jointly authored by four senior PLA marshals—all veterans of the Long March and “heroes of the Chinese revolution.” In it, they argued that the Soviet Union was planning to launch a war of aggression against China, and that the U.S. imperialists “do not want to see the Soviets achieve victory” in such a war, since that would leave the Russians with military and geo-political dominance over the entire Eurasian land mass. The four marshals further noted that Nixon appeared to be quite serious about improving relations with China; and they concluded that China’s strategic advantage lay in “making use of tensions between the Americans and the Soviets…to strengthen our position.” (Tyler,  *A Great Wall*, pp. 71-72)

But direct contact would not be easy to initiate. Neither Nixon nor Mao had a clear, free path to detente. In China, both Lin Biao and Jiang Qing were strongly opposed to reconciliation with the United States. In their view the Americans and the Russians were equally imperialistic, and equally dangerous. Moreover, the radicals believed that the two superpowers were actively colluding to keep China “in its place.” In their view, no constructive purpose could be served by trying to play one side off against the other.

On the American side there was also strong resistance. Conservative members of the pro-Chiang K’ai-shek “China Lobby” intensely supported the government of “Free China” on Taiwan. With key backers in the US Congress, they were a potent source of opposition to any American contacts with the evil “Chicoms.”

Because of intense political resistance on both sides, resumption of the Warsaw talks was not easily accomplished. Twice, American and Chinese diplomats quietly agreed to resume the talks, and twice Chinese hard-liners prevented them from reaching fruition. On the first occasion, early in 1970, hardliners in the CCRG used the defection of a Chinese diplomat in far-off Holland as a pretext for launching a vicious propaganda attack accusing the United States of tampering with its diplomats.
A few months later, in May 1970, Chinese radicals used a similar pretext to once again torpedo resumption of the Warsaw talks. This time they accused the Americans of conspiring with a group of right-wing Cambodian generals to overthrow the neutralist government of Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk. (Despite Washington’s adamant denial, this particular charge later turned out to contain a substantial grain of truth.)

Meanwhile, back in Washington, Henry Kissinger was growing visibly frustrated with the disruptive tactics of China’s leftists. But Nixon remained optimistic, continuing to express hope for a breakthrough. At one point in 1970, Nixon’s chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, told Kissinger that Nixon “seriously intends to visit China before the end of his second term.” Kissinger smiled at Haldeman, pausing a moment before he replied, “Fat chance!” (Tyler, *A Great Wall*, p. 57). But visit China Nixon did; and it happened during his first term, not his second. Here is the whole improbable, story:

In October of 1970, Nixon delivered a private message to the visiting foreign secretary of Pakistan, Sultan Muhammed Khan. Pakistan enjoyed close diplomatic relations with both the United States and the PRC, and Nixon asked Muhammed Khan to pass his message along to China’s leaders. The message said: “It is essential we open negotiations with China. We will send a high-level emissary to Beijing.” As an indication of his good faith, Nixon promised that the United States would refrain from entering into any anti-Chinese alliances with the USSR. (J. Mann, *About Face*, pp. 26-27).

After waiting several months for a response from the Chinese side, the breakthrough came unexpectedly. In April 1971, Zhou Enlai sent a message to an American table-tennis team which was then participating in the World Championships in Nagoya, Japan. The American team was invited to stop over in Beijing for “friendly competition” with the Chinese national team at the conclusion of the tournament in Japan. The message had been personally approved by Mao Zedong.

The ping-pong matches proved to be no contest. In Beijing, the world’s #1 ranked Chinese players toyed with their 28th-ranked American counterparts, deliberately (and conspicuously) tossing a few matches to avoid totally humiliating their guests. But despite the lopsided scores, an important connection was established, as the American and Chinese players fraternized cordially during and after their matches. One Chinese ping-pong player was even photographed wearing a “Give Peace a Chance” t-shirt, given him by an American team member. At the closing banquet, Zhou Enlai personally greeted the visiting Americans. That same night, President Nixon lifted sanctions on non-strategic trade between the United States and China. Détente was beginning to gain momentum.

The initial round of “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” was followed shortly by an affirmative Chinese response to Nixon’s offer to send a “high-level emissary” to Beijing. Nixon and Kissinger were euphoric. Generally known as a tightwad, Nixon opened his most expensive bottle of vintage Courvoisier brandy to celebrate the occasion.
In early July, 1971, Henry Kissinger was on a routine tour of Asia. Midway through the trip, while in Pakistan, he was reported to be suffering from heat exhaustion. Whisked off to an isolated mountain resort for a few days of rest and relaxation, an elaborate ruse was set in motion. A Kissinger look-alike took his place at the mountain resort, while the real Henry K. was whisked off under cover of darkness, in total secrecy, to a nearby airfield, where a Pakistani jetliner was parked on the tarmac. Taking off without so much as a fresh change of clothing, Kissinger and a team of his hand-picked aides touched down in Beijing six hours later. (Note: Kissinger conducted his negotiations with Zhou Enlai while wearing a borrowed shirt that was several sizes too large for him, and bore a “Made in Taiwan” label.)

Kissinger’s “secret trip” would ultimately set the stage for Richard Nixon’s historic visit of February 1972. But first some vital ground rules had to be established. In Kissinger’s meetings with Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier insisted that the Taiwan question must be the centerpiece of any US-China negotiations. China would not, Zhou said, accept any American policy that recognized “two Chinas” or “one China and one Taiwan.” And the U.S. must agree to withdraw its armed forces from Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait.

Surprisingly, Kissinger met the Chinese Premier more than half-way. Stating that the U.S. government was not wedded to long-term support of an independent regime on Taiwan, Kissinger offered to draw down US military forces in the Taiwan area “as relations improve between the People’s Republic and the United States.” Zhou was quite satisfied with this response. “These talks may now proceed,” he said. (Tyler, A Great Wall, pp. 98, 99)

In their subsequent conversations, Kissinger sought to play on Chinese fears of the Soviet Union; and he promised the Chinese premier that President Nixon would never collude with Moscow against Beijing. Going further still, he agreed to report to the Chinese any future Soviet efforts to draw Washington into any agreements that might affect China’s security interests.

Kissinger further intimated that the U.S. government was prepared to see the PRC occupy the Chinese seat in the United Nations, even it it meant Taiwan’s expulsion-- though he added the caveat that President Nixon would be duty-bound to publicly oppose Taipei’s expulsion, in order to pre-empt right-wing criticism from the pro-Taiwan “China Lobby.” More surprising, Kissinger revealed to Zhou Enlai that President Nixon privately intended to have US military forces leave Vietnam at the earliest feasible opportunity. However, Kissinger added the caveat that for the US to leave “honorably” would require a “decent interval” between the US withdrawal and any final political resolution on the ground in Vietnam. Zhou Enlai remained impassive as he listened to this indiscreet revelation. He now knew that it was Nixon’s intention to cut America’s losses in Vietnam.

Most outside observers credit Zhou Enlai with gaining the upper hand in these preliminary negotiations. The Chinese Premier conceded very little—not even a promise
to refrain from using force in the Taiwan Strait after the Americans withdrew-- while gaining a great deal in return.

When Kissinger’s secret mission ended on July 11, the two sides released a joint statement, tersely informing the world that Zhou Enlai had invited Nixon to visit China; that Nixon had accepted; and that the leaders of the two countries would “seek a normalization of relations” and an exchange of views “on questions of concern to the two sides.” Cabling Nixon at the conclusion of his visit, Kissinger was gleeful.

True to Kissinger’s word, when the annual resolution to seat the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations was introduced in October 1971, the United States did not strong-arm its allies into opposing the motion, as it had done for the previous 20 years. Sensing that the political winds had changed, the Taiwanese delegation withdrew from the General Assembly before a vote could be taken on a motion to expel them. With Taiwan’s departure, the PRC now became the sole Chinese representative in the United Nations and all its member agencies, gaining veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

To prepare for the Nixon visit, which was scheduled for the last week in February, 1972, an advance team of US officials was sent to China in January to do an informal run-through. The team was led by the US Deputy National Security Advisor, General Alexander Haig. In the course of their visit, Haig’s party unexpectedly encountered strong evidence of hard-line opposition to Zhou’s policy of détente with the United States.

At one point, a boat ride on Hangzhou’s scenic West Lake was arranged for Haig and his associates. Normally, tour boats used to entertain visiting dignitaries were well heated and lavishly stocked with food and drink. On this occasion, however – a bitterly cold, blustery day in January – the boat was unheated, and there was no food or drink aboard. A female Chinese interpreter assigned to escort the American delegation was astonished by the lack of amenities, and she hastily put thorough a phone call to Zhou Enlai’s office in Beijing. Zhou, in turn, contacted Chairman Mao, who made clear his indignation with the discourtesy shown to the American guests.

In China, when it comes to relations with foreign countries, and in particular with important foreign visitors, nothing is left to chance; so it was inconceivable that such an obvious diplomatic slight could have occurred accidentally. Someone pretty high up had meant to send a not-so-subtle signal of defiance. This conclusion was later confirmed by the Chinese interpreter herself, who revealed in an interview that the order for a “bare bones” boat ride had come straight from the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee—operational headquarters of Jiang Qing and the “Gang of Four.”

Despite such attempted disruptions, President Nixon’s week-long visit went off smoothly, without a hitch. Early in the president’s trip, Nixon and Kissinger were granted an audience with a visibly frail and infirm Mao Zedong. In the course of their conversation, which ranged broadly over a variety of historical and philosophical issues, Nixon
approvingly quoted Mao’s poetry, while Mao affirmed that it was necessary for the Chinese to speak to “rightists” like Nixon to solve major international problems. Both men laughed frequently, and at one point Mao (himself a notorious womanizer) made a humorous reference to Henry Kissinger’s reputation for charming the ladies.

But the smoothness of the televised images shown around the world concealed deep underlying tensions—on both sides. On the Chinese side, well hidden from public view, there was considerable confusion and perplexity over Chairman Mao’s sudden change of heart toward the Americans. After more than two decades of uniformly hostile Chinese policies and propaganda toward the evil “US imperialists,” the idea of suddenly turning on a dime to make peace with the American devils raised numerous eyebrows—and not only among Madame Mao’s radical Shanghai associates. Also deeply unhappy about this latest turn of events was Mao’s newest heir-apparent, Lin Biao. Lin had lobbied hard against détente with the United States; soon, he would pay heavily for his opposition.

On the American side as well, there were serious policy disagreements. Behind the scenes, a bitter turf war had broken out between Henry Kissinger’s National Security Council staff, who had been “present at the creation” of the US-China détente, and top officials in the Department of State, including Secretary of State William Rogers, who had been virtually frozen out of the negotiating loop from the outset. The State Department’s top Asia experts were furious over what they regarded as Kissinger’s ego-driven penchant for making indiscrete revelations to the Chinese, and for playing fast and loose with America’s treaty commitments to Taiwan.

From the outset, the process of drafting the famous “Shanghai Communiqué”—cornerstone of the Nixon visit—was beset by deep disagreements within the American delegation. Kissinger’s NSC staffers, who dominated the drafting process, had decided to avoid antagonizing the Chinese side by deleting all references to existing U.S. diplomatic and military commitments to Taiwan. When he learned of this, Secretary Rogers strenuously objected. The Secretary had also wanted to write into the final Communiqué a Chinese “guarantee” that they would use only peaceful means to reunify Taiwan—an idea that Kissinger’s NSC staff had rejected as unnecessarily divisive. The Chinese side refused.

With the entire, carefully-orchestrated negotiation hanging in the balance, Zhou Enlai personally intervened to smooth out the situation. Paying an impromptu midnight visit to Secretary Rogers’ hotel room just hours before the scheduled release of the Shanghai Communiqué, Zhou proposed to the startled Secretary of State a makeshift solution: Why not simply eliminate from the final communiqué all references to specific US treaty commitments, thereby drawing attention away from the unique exclusion of Taiwan? At 1:40 am, a clearly unhappy Richard Nixon agreed. The last thing he wanted was for his right-wing Republican critics to discover that Kissinger had been playing fast and loose with America’s commitment to Taiwan.

As released to the public on February 27, 1972, the Shanghai Communiqué was a masterpiece of diplomatic ambiguity and obfuscation. The document began with the two
sides presenting separate, parallel statements summarizing their respective foreign policy principles and priorities. The Chinese affirmed their opposition to “superpower bullying” and proclaimed that around the world, “nations want liberation and people want revolution.” They reiterated Beijing’s perennial claim that Taiwan is “a province of China which has long been returned to the Motherland”; and that “The liberation of Taiwan is China’s internal affair in which no other country has the right to interfere.” Finally, the Chinese restated their longstanding opposition to any “two China” or “one China, one Taiwan” solution to the impasse over Taiwan’s status.

For its part, the American side affirmed its commitment to resisting military aggression and upholding freedom and self-determination for all peoples. Then the Americans stated their position on Taiwan. It was breathtaking both in its simplicity and in its diplomatic sleight-of-hand:

The United States acknowledges [renshidao] that all Chinese, on either side of the Taiwan Strait, maintain there is but one China, and Taiwan is a part of China. The United States does not challenge that position.

Now, on the face of it, this seemed like a fairly straightforward American concession to the PRC’s bedrock “one China” principle. But was it really? Note the specific language: rather than accepting China’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, the US side simply “acknowledged” the fact that both Beijing and Taipei claimed to speak for all Chinese. By “not challenging” that view, the US merely affirmed, without taking sides, that there were conflicting claims as to which of the two governments legitimately spoke for the Chinese people.

With this highly ambiguous formulation as the foundation of a new American China policy, the Shanghai Communiqué went on to state that the US Government:

“….reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. With this prospect in mind, it affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all US forces and military installations from Taiwan. In the meantime, it will progressively reduce its forces and military installations on Taiwan as the tension in the area diminishes.” (text of Communique in R. Solomon, The China Factor, appendix 1)

Nixon’s embrace of a watered-down version of the “one China” principle, together with his declaration of intent to work toward an eventual, complete withdrawal of US forces and installations from Taiwan, gave Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai the political capital they needed to move ahead with the process of “normalization.” And it also gave them a positive incentive to help bring about a reduction of tensions in East Asia—both in the Taiwan Strait and in Vietnam, where the Americans were desperately trying to find an “honorable” exit strategy.

In retrospect, the Shanghai Communiqué was all things to all people. For Nixon and Kissinger, as well as for Mao and Zhou Enlai, the communiqué represented a major
diplomatic coup. For Jiang Qing’s “Shanghai clique,” on the other hand, and for America’s right-wing anti-Communists as well, it was a bitter blow. And finally, for tiny Taiwan, it was a devastating betrayal of American trust.

After more than two decades of mutual hostility, marked by near-constant recriminations and periodic military confrontations, the United States and China had agreed to move toward a more “normalized” relationship. What that meant in concrete terms remained to be seen. But for the moment, a major breakthrough had been achieved. Equally momentous, in a single stroke of diplomacy Nixon’s re-election had been secured—for better and for worse.
Lecture 27: The Lin Biao Affair and the Death of Mao Zedong (1971-76)

While Richard Nixon coasted toward reelection on a wave of favorable publicity generated by his “opening” to China, the political situation in Beijing was becoming more and more unsettled. In this lecture we look at the sources of rising political tensions inside China.

For one thing, Mao Zedong was growing seriously ill. Unbeknownst to anyone outside of his immediate entourage, the Chairman had begun to display characteristic symptoms of ALS, a motor-neuron disorder more commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease. Symptoms include increasing muscular atrophy, loss of motor control and slurred speech. Further complicating the issue, Mao had recently suffered a serious bout of pneumonia. Indeed, the Chairman was so ill that his personal physician, Li Zhisui, almost called off his meeting with Richard Nixon. At Dr. Li’s insistence, the room adjacent to the one where Mao met the Americans was outfitted as an emergency medical center, complete with a fully equipped operating theatre.

As Mao’s health deteriorated, the post-Mao succession struggle began to heat up. In Communist systems, the approaching death of the supreme leader is generally a signal for would-be successors to step up their factional intrigues and infighting. China in the 1970s proved to be no exception to this rule.

Although Lin Biao had been officially designated as Mao’s heir-apparent, Lin’s fortunes took a sudden turn for the worse in the wake of Henry Kissinger’s secret visit to Beijing in July 1971. Lin had strongly opposed détente with the Americans, and in the aftermath of the Kissinger visit he paid dearly for his opposition.

The story of Lin Biao’s startling demise is a confusing jumble of fact, speculation, and official fabrication-- with a good bit of B-movie melodrama mixed in. The basic facts, as we know them, are these: Lin Biao died in a fiery airplane crash in Outer Mongolia on the night of September 12, 1971. At the time of his death he stood accused of conspiring to assassinate Mao and seize power, with the assistance of his son, an air force pilot, and a small group of high-ranking military officers. The motive behind their attempted coup was said to be Lin’s ambition to install a military regime in China, with himself as its titular head.

According to the official account of Lin’s death, published several months after the fact, the plotters planned to assassinate Mao on the night of September 12, 1971, while the Chairman was en route to Beijing on his private train. But before they could set their plan in motion, Lin’s daughter, who was not one of the core conspirators, inadvertently revealed the plot’s existence to an associate of Premier Zhou Enlai, whereupon Zhou ordered the immediate arrest of the conspirators—including Lin Biao, his wife and his son.
Tipped off that the plot had been exposed, Lin’s family fled from their home-- in the middle of the night-- to a nearby military airfield. There they commandeered a British-made Trident jet and took off. Originally intending to fly to Guangzhou in southern China, they suddenly altered their route and headed toward Moscow. (Just why they did so remains shrouded in mystery. After the fact, the Maoists claimed that Lin was planning to defect to the Soviet Union). In any event, in their haste to get away, the conspirators somehow neglected to refuel their Trident aircraft, which proceeded to run out of gas over Mongolia. In the ensuing crash, all occupants of the plane were killed.

In a document captured from Lin’s son, who was not aboard the ill-fated Trident jet when it crashed, sensational details of the plot were revealed. Allegedly drafted by the younger Lin himself, the document referred to Mao Zedong as “Old B-52” -- an allusion to the Chairman’s practice of remaining above the fray, out of sight, while he dropped powerful “bombs” on others—just as the Americans were then doing in Vietnam. Throughout the document Mao was described in strikingly negative language— as unstable, evil, vindictive, mercurial—and very, very dangerous:

“Today he uses sweet words and honeyed talk to those whom he entices; tomorrow he puts them to death for fabricated crimes….Today he woos A and strikes at B; tomorrow he will woo B and strike at A… Viewed from the perspective of several score years, has there been anyone promoted by him who later escaped a political death sentence? … Has there been any political force which can cooperate with him from beginning to end?” (Michael YM Kao, The Lin Biao Affair, pp. )

The conspirators went on to accuse Mao of turning the Red Guards into “cannon fodder”-- first using them to attack his enemies in the Cultural Revolution, and then discarding them when they became unruly.

As additional details of the Lin Biao affair leaked out, the story proved to have a number of internal gaps and contradictions. Most intriguing of all were the glaring inconsistencies between the official Chinese version of Lin Biao’s fatal flight and an on-scene investigation by a team of Russian and Mongolian forensic pathologists, who were the first to visit the crash site. According to their report (details of which were given to me by a sympathetic Soviet journalist of my acquaintance), Lin’s airplane could not have crashed as a result of running out of fuel, since there had clearly been an armed struggle on board, involving multiple gunshots, followed by an explosion and an intense fire at the point of impact. When the badly charred bodies of the pilot and passengers were recovered from the wreckage, several of the corpses bore bullet wounds, thus further contradicting the Chinese claim that the airplane’s occupants had all perished in the crash.

As implausible as the official story seemed, more implausible still was the campaign of character assassination devised by CCP propagandists to explain Lin Biao’s alleged treachery. Among other high crimes and misdemeanors, Lin was posthumously (and rather incongruously) accused of being “a hidden son of the landlord class,” “a secret admirer of Confucius,” a “swindler like Liu Shaoqi,” and a pro-Soviet “revisionist and
traitor” who wanted “to practice the fascist dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.” (all quoted material from Kao, loc. cit)

In an attempt to wipe the Chinese memory banks clean of any references to the traitorous defense minister, all extant photos of Lin were withdrawn from circulation, and his published works were banned. Even the second edition of Mao’s all-time best-selling “Little Red Book” – with over 500 million copies in print -- was quietly removed from Chinese bookstores and libraries: its preface had been personally inscribed by Lin Biao.

The charge that Lin was a Soviet mole was especially curious. Although he had earned a pro-Stalin reputation early in his career (he spent time recuperating in the U.S.S.R. during WWII), Lin later became, next to Mao himself, China’s most outspoken critic of Soviet revisionism—an outlook he carried with him right up to the time of his death.

So why did Lin really fall? It is now widely accepted that at the time of Lin’s alleged coup attempt, Mao had already decided to remove his newly-designated successor. The Chairman hinted at the underlying reason when he told Richard Nixon, during their February 1972 meeting, that Lin had been the leader of “a reactionary group which is opposed to our contact with you.” Evidently, Lin had become aware of Mao’s rising discontent toward the end of 1970. Soon afterward, according to one insider’s report, Lin’s son, an air force pilot with political ambitions of his own, devised the assassination plan in an effort to beat “Old B-52” to the punch. It was, in the son’s own words, a case of “eat or be eaten.” (ibid.)

With Lin Biao and several of his top PLA generals now either dead or in prison, there remained two main competitors for Mao’s mantle—Jiang Qing’s leftist “Shanghai clique” and a veteran group of senior Party leaders who had managed to survive the purges of the Cultural Revolution. The latter had no love for the radical leftists, and they generally looked to the more moderate Zhou Enlai for leadership.

With Mao’s health continuing to deteriorate, and with factional conflict beginning to heat up, in 1973 the Chairman instructed Zhou Enlai to bring Deng Xiaoping back from involuntary exile. Despite Mao’s anger at Deng for having dismantled the people’s communes in the early 1960s, Deng was a talented and experienced administrator, with strong personal ties to China’s senior civilian and military leaders. In the aftermath of the Lin Biao affair, the country was politically adrift, its leaders dangerously divided. Mao needed Deng’s organizational skills to help restore political discipline in his troubled kingdom.

The irony in this was exquisite: Having purged Deng in 1966 for being too elitist, too bureaucratic, and too intolerant of the “revolutionary masses,” the Chairman now did a virtual 180: he brought Deng back to power precisely in order to make use of these same qualities.
But Deng’s rehabilitation did not sit well with Mme Mao and her radical cohort. With Mao in bad health, they harbored succession ambitions of their own; and they now viewed Deng as a serious rival. Having had his Politburo membership restored, Deng was also appointed chief deputy to Premier Zhou Enlai and chief of staff of the PLA. By occupying key positions in each of China’s three major ruling bureaucracies—the Party, the army, and the government—Deng now had the capacity to block the leftists’ ascent to supreme power.

In a series of political maneuvers that can only be described as byzantine, Jiang Qing and her leftist allies set about methodically trying to undermine the Deng Xiaoping-Zhou Enlai axis. First they went after Zhou. In 1973 they published a series of oblique historical allegories in leftist-controlled newspapers and magazines. In form, these allegories were similar to the veiled criticisms directed at Mao a decade earlier by Wu Han and the “Three-Family Village.” In the new articles it was claimed that a popular folk hero of ancient China, tellingly named Zhou Gong—the Duke of Zhou-- had opportunistically betrayed his king and sold out his country to a foreign power solely in order to advance his own career. Veteran China watchers quickly concluded that the allegations of opportunism and treason were really aimed at Zhou Enlai—a classic case of “using the past to criticize the present.”

But even more bizarre than the literary attacks on Zhou was the revelation that it was Mao himself who had initially authorized them. In one of his increasingly frequent mood changes, the mercurial Chairman had reportedly become resentful of all the media adulation that had been heaped on Zhou Enlai since the Premier signed the Shanghai Communiqué. In most of the world’s press, it was the dapper diplomat Zhou, rather than the ailing, drooling Mao, who was credited with being the architect of China’s opening to the United States. In Mao’s opinion, Zhou had become too enamored of all the publicity, and far too cozy with Henry Kissinger. At one point, the Chairman pointedly reminded his premier that “When joining hands with the bourgeoisie, one tends to forget struggle.”

At the end of 1973 Mao ordered Zhou to endure a series of humiliating criticism sessions organized by his Politburo colleagues. Not surprisingly, Jiang Qing took the lead. Among other things, she accused Zhou of “getting down on your hands and knees to the Americans.” Zhou tried to defend himself. At one point he pounded his fist on the table and exclaimed “I, Zhou Enlai, have made many mistakes in my life; but I cannot be accused of rightist capitulationism.” (quotes from Gao, Zhou Enlai, p. 242).

Having forcefully reminded the premier just who was boss, Mao ordered an end to the ordeal, sparing Zhou any further indisgnities. It had never been the Chairman’s intention to purge Zhou, but merely to humiliate him. The nation was still reeling from the Lin Biao affair, and Mao badly needed Zhou, along with Deng Xiaoping, to pilot China’s lurching ship of state.

With Zhou Enlai now effectively shielded from further criticism, Jiang Qing and her allies next shifted the brunt of their attack onto Deng Xiaoping. Launching blistering media campaigns in 1974 and again in 1975, they leveled sharp attacks against a certain
“unrepentant capitalist roader” in the Party who had allegedly sought to dismantle China’s socialist economy, weaken the Communist Party’s class dictatorship, and suppress the masses in the Cultural Revolution. While no names were named, it was widely understood that Deng was the target.

The use of veiled, oblique criticism was necessary in this (and other) instances because Party rules strictly prohibited direct attacks on named officials without prior Central Committee authorization. Furthermore, Mao had personally rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping. To now openly label Deng as an “unrepentant capitalist roader” would inevitably cast doubt on Mao’s own judgment. But if the rationale for using obscure historical parables and Aesopian language was clear, such opacity made the job of China Watchers like me a good deal more taxing, and at times quite perplexing.

With the internal dynamics of Beijing’s factional conflicts carefully concealed from view, the “black box” of Chinese politics remained, in many crucial respects, what Winston Churchill once called, in reference to Stalinist Russia, “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” As fresh rumors of palace intrigue swept through Beijing in the mid-’70s, fueled by reports of Mao’s approaching death, I was reminded of yet another Churchillian metaphor. On the eve of WWII, the famous British statesman had famously likened politics in the Kremlin to “bulldogs fighting under a rug. An outsider hears just the growling, and [only] when he sees the bones fly out from beneath is it obvious who won.”

Outsiders like me could hear plenty of growling under the Chinese rug in the mid-1970s; but in the absence of flying bones, there was no way to tell for sure who was winning, who was losing, or who was doing what to whom. It was all very frustrating.

Political tensions ratcheted sharply upward again in the first half of 1976. In early January, Zhou Enlai died of bladder cancer. Though his disease had been diagnosed as early as 1972, Mao’s distrust of Western medicine led him to impose a curtain of silence, banning additional diagnostic testing and refusing permission for Zhou to undergo surgery. By the time Zhou was finally hospitalized in 1974, the cancer had metastasized. The last two years of Zhou’s life were spent in considerable pain and discomfort.

Immediately after Zhou’s death on January 8, 1976, Jiang Qing and her associates put out a notice banning all public displays of grief or mourning for the deceased premier. Fearful of an anti-leftist backlash, they sought to prevent any public gatherings. Zhou’s many admirers were deeply resentful of this crude attempt to silence them, and they quietly bided their time.

Three months later their opportunity came. In early April, on the eve of the annual Qingming Festival, a day set aside for sweeping and decorating ancestral graves, thousands of mourners defied the ban on public grieving. Converging on the Heroes’ Monument at the center of Tiananmen Square, they placed hundreds of funeral wreaths at the base of the massive obelisk. Dozens of memorial poems were pasted up on the four
sides of the monument, celebrating Zhou’s life and mourning his death. (show photo of memorial wreaths and crowd)

But not all the poems were somber elegies to Zhou Enlai. Some were bitter, emotional diatribes. One pointedly asked, “Who killed our beloved premier Zhou?” A few brave souls dared to point the finger of guilt at Mme. Mao and her fellow leftists. One poem ominously announced:

\[
\text{Lady X, …you are insane,} \\
\text{To be empress is your ambition…} \\
\text{Yet for types like you} \\
\text{The good times won’t last long. (Fenby, Modern China, p. 519)}
\]

Another angry broadside posted on the Heroes Monument warned: “If there are monsters who spit out poisonous fire, there will be men who dare to seize them.” Yet another expressed a sentiment that was very much on people’s minds: the comparison between Jiang Qing and the Empress Dowager Cixi: “Down with the Dowager Empress” was all it said. (Baum, Burying Mao, p. 32)

Alarmed by such sentiments, and by the massive demonstration of public affection for the late Premier Zhou, Jiang Qing and her associates dispatched a convoy of over 100 trucks, under cover of darkness, to remove the wreaths and poems on the evening of April 5. The next morning, large crowds of Beijingers showed up at the Square and angrily protested the surreptitious removal of the wreaths. At that point Mme. Mao called in teams of club-wielding paramilitary “workers’ militias” to forcibly disperse the demonstrators. In the ensuing melee, dozens of protesters were beaten and hundreds were arrested.

Sensing an opportunity to turn this unexpected rioting to their political advantage, the leftists sought, and were granted, an urgent audience with Chairman Mao. By this time—April 6, 1976--Mao was near death, and was living in virtual seclusion in his private villa inside Zhongnanhai. Not even Jiang Qing could get in to see him without permission.

At their late night audience with the Chairman, the leftists put forward their own highly skewed version of the events of the previous 36 hours. They described the laying of wreaths and poems in Tiananmen Square--and the subsequent uproar over their removal--as a “counter-revolutionary incident.” And then they got really creative: They accused Deng Xiaoping of personally stage-managing the entire event—from the placing of the wreaths and poems to the rioting that followed their removal—in a vain attempt to discredit the Cultural Revolution and Chairman Mao himself.

Mao was in the final stages of his terminal illness, and it is highly doubtful that he was capable of rationally evaluating the information being conveyed to him. According to his private nurse, Mao’s deterioration was so advanced that during the 1976 Chinese New Year destival that he refused to receive any visitors—not even family members. His chief nurse and long-time companion, Zhang Yufang, recorded her observations on that occasion:
I had to feed him his…dinner with a spoon, since he could not use his hands. It was hard for him even to open his mouth and swallow…. Suddenly, from somewhere in the distance, we heard firecrackers. In a low, hoarse voice, Mao asked me to explode some for him… A faint smile crept over his old and weary face…. (Short, Mao: A Life, pp. 621-22)

Predisposed to believe that conspirators were out to sabotage him, a severely enfeebled Chairman Mao listened to his wife’s distorted version of the events in Tiananmen Square. When she finished, he slowly affixed his initials to a document she had prepared, ordering Deng Xiaoping to be struck down yet again. The next day, April 7, 1976, Deng was dismissed from all posts inside and outside the Party. Jiang Qing was ecstatic.

But her jubilation was short-lived. In an earlier lecture we saw how Jiang had risen to power by cultivating a loyal following among youthful Red Guards and “revolutionary rebels”. But as the “moon” to Mao’s “sun,” she shined entirely in the Chairman’s reflected light. From the mid-‘60s to the mid-‘70s, her marital connection to “the Great Helmsman” enabled the “Shanghai clique” to become the guiding force behind the radical excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Though she was widely despised by leading officials at the highest levels of the Party and government, as the Chairman’s wife she was beyond criticism.

But that was before Mao died. Once the Chairman’s bright light was extinguished, Jiang Qing’s reflected glow quickly dimmed. Widely reviled for her role in spreading terror and anarchy during the Cultural Revolution, Jiang soon found herself politically isolated, without powerful patrons or protectors.

Less than a month after Mao’s death in early September 1976, a coalition of “moderate” Chinese military and political leaders, many of them survivors of left-wing Cultural Revolution attacks, placed Mme. Mao under arrest, along with the other three leading members of her Shanghai clique. Collectively, Jiang’s clique was now openly reviled as the “Siren bang”—the “gang of four.”

(Ironically, the term “gang of four” had originated with Mao Zedong himself. Since the early 1970s Mao had been growing increasingly impatient with his wife’s erratic behavior, and with her disruptive intrusions into the world of Sino-American diplomacy; and on a number of occasions, according to his personal physician, he had berated her privately. In 1974, Mao warned his ambitious wife and her three radical colleagues to cease their intrigues and conspiracies, and to stop acting like a “gang of four.” Now that Mao was dead, the name “gang of four” stuck.)

With the arrest of the four radical leaders, the Mao Zedong era ended with a jolt. But the surprises did not end there. And three more years would elapse before the question of the succession to Chairman Mao would finally be settled.
Before we begin our exploration of the post-Mao transition, in the next lecture we will turn our gaze backward in time to reflect upon the life and times of Mao Zedong. By focusing on several formative experiences in the life of this unique revolutionary icon, we can hope to better illuminate the essence of Mao’s elusive character, and thereby gain deeper insight into his unique role in the making of modern China.
Lecture 28: The Legacy of Mao Zedong: An Appraisal

Shortly after midnight on September 9, 1976, Mao Zedong died. He was 82. The cause of death was listed as ALS—Lou Gehrig’s disease—complicated by various respiratory and heart ailments. As his corpse lay on the embalming table, a team of morticians and medical pathologists argued over the best method for permanently preserving the Chairman’s remains. There were no precedents in modern China for permanent preservation of a corpse, so the team members were flying blind—and they were very, very nervous, lest they make any mistakes.

Unhappily, they botched the job. Mao’s body was pumped so full of embalming fluid that it swelled up to the point of grotesqueness. Here is how Mao’s personal physician, Dr. Li Zhisui, described the scene in his 1994 memoir, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*:

> We injected a total of twenty-two litres. The results were shocking. Mao’s face was bloated, as round as a ball, and his neck was now the width of his head. His skin was shiny, and the formaldehyde oozed from his pores like perspiration. His ears were swollen too, sticking out from his head at right angles…. (Li Zhisui, *Private Life*, p. 20)

By the time the morticians finished draining off the excess formaldehyde and applying cosmetic touches, Mao appeared shrunken, slack-jawed, and slightly greenish in color. In short, he looked just terrible. I know this because a little more than a year later I viewed his badly embalmed corpse in its final resting place, in a mausoleum built specially for him at the south end of Tiananmen Square.

Six years later, in 1983, I viewed Mao’s body for a second time. To my great surprise, the Chairman now appeared in top physical form—rosy-cheeked, firm-jawed, skin glowing, and peaceful in repose. It was an astonishing transformation, for which I could think of no logical explanation. Only years later did I learn the truth. According to Dr. Li Zhisui’s memoir, on the eve of Mao’s death a paraffin *doppelgänger*—a life-sized wax copy—of the Chairman had been prepared, just in case his corpse could not be properly preserved. Presumably, the “bright shiny Mao” I saw in 1983 was the wax imitation.

This “tale of two Maos” is interesting partly because of the deception involved, but also because, in death as in life, it seems that there was more than one Mao Zedong. The officially-licensed Mao, as featured in CCP history books, was a brilliant poet and a great statesman, a philosopher and a warrior-king; a master military strategist and an organizational genius. In the words of his official biographer, Mao’s greatest contribution lay in “integrating the universal truths of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution.”

But to a significant extent this officially-authorized Mao, like the wax image lying encased in glass in Tiananmen Square, is a heroic caricature. Artificially embellished, its features have been cosmetically enhanced to create a grossly idealized version of the flesh and blood Mao Zedong. The real Mao, the unofficial Mao, whom we have met in
the last several lectures, was a deeply flawed human being. His cold-blooded manipulations, conspiratorial fantasies and callous whims had inflicted enormous damage upon his countrymen—while he himself remained appallingly indifferent to the suffering he caused. In this lecture we shall try to reintegrate these two divergent images of Mao. With apologies to the Chairman, we shall endeavor to “combine two into one.”

In fact, the cruel, brutal Mao is also something of a stereotype. For if he were simply an evil, calculating tyrant, how could he have successfully led the largest revolution in the history of the world? How could he have inspired such legendary adoration and reverence, among so many, and for so long? In truth, Mao was a very complicated human being, and it does both him and the Chinese people a disservice to dismiss him simply as a sadistic thug—as Jung Chang and Jon Halliday do in their recent bestselling biography, *Mao: The Unknown Story.* To realistically assess Mao’s legacy, we need to examine him in his full complexity.

For clues as to what made Mao tick, we must consider his formative years, which he spent in Shaoshan village, in rural Hunan. Born in 1893, Mao was the eldest son of a hot-tempered, self-made father, who had risen from middle peasant status to become a successful, if tight-fisted businessman. His father was abusive, and when he mistreated Mao’s mother or their hired hands, as happened rather frequently, Mao identified with the victims. For this he received periodic beatings from his father. Most biographers reckon that Mao’s early inclination to side with the powerless victims of patriarchal abuse played a major role in shaping his adult identity, when he became a champion of China’s poor, downtrodden masses and a sworn enemy of all landlords, capitalists and rich peasants.

Mao’s adolescent rebelliousness was well described in the following account of a tiff he had with his father when he was only 13:

> My father invited guests to his home, and while they were present…my father denounced me before the whole group, calling me lazy and useless. This infuriated me. I cursed him and left the house. My mother ran after me and tried to persuade me to return. My father also pursued me, cursing…. I reached the edge of a pond and threatened to jump in if he came any nearer….My father insisted that I apologize and kow-tow as a sign of submission. I agreed to give a [modified] one-knee kow-tow if he would promise not to beat me. (S. Schram, *Mao’s Road to Power*, Vol. 1, pp. 154-55)

More interesting than the incident itself was the lesson Mao drew from it: “I learned that when I defended my rights by open rebellion my father relented, but when I remained weak and submissive he only beat me more.” (P. Short, *Mao: A Life*, p. 29).

A tall, handsome youth, Mao was married off at the age of 14 to a woman six years his senior. In a display of passive aggression against his father, who had arranged the marriage, Mao ignored his bride and refused to consummate the marriage. When he left home two years later to attend school in the nearby town of
Xiang Xiang, he did not take his wife with him; indeed, he never even acknowledged their marriage.

At school, Mao was a loner. He was not treated well by his classmates, who found him moody and taciturn. Mao nonetheless managed to impress some of his teachers with his scholarly aptitude for literature, poetry and history. He particularly enjoyed reading historical novels of righteous rebellion drawn from China’s imperial past—popular novels such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*. In the view of historians such as Benjamin Schwartz, Mao’s attraction to the rebellious heroes in these classic novels suggested a strong affinity for the virile “man of action” over and against the traditional Chinese role model of the refined Confucian gentleman. In any event, throughout his life Mao’s crude language and inelegant manners bore strong traces of his origins in the “mud and shit” of rural China. Not for him the long fingernails, effete manners and pretentious airs of the Confucian gentleman.

Though some teachers were attracted to Mao’s “bad boy” demeanor, others were not. And he soon found that his enthusiasm for adventure novels was not shared either by his history teacher or by his headmaster, both of whom dismissed epics such as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* as pure fiction. By this time, however, Mao had become quite obstinate: rather than capitulate to higher authority he drew up a petition to the mayor of the town demanding that the headmaster be replaced; and he browbeat several of his classmates into signing it.

This incident made his life increasingly difficult at school, and after just one year, he left Xiang Xiang for the urban hustle and bustle of Changsha, Hunan’s capital city, with its population of 800,000. There, a friendly introduction from one of his former teachers got him accepted into an elite private middle school.

It was the fall of 1911. Mao was not yet 18. At his new school in Changsha, Mao was looked down upon by his fellow students, most of whom were well-heeled sons of upper class families. Indeed, his classmates generally treated him as a country bumpkin. It does not require a great stretch of the imagination to see in such rejection a foreshadowing of Mao’s well-known resentment toward “bourgeois intellectuals,” which emerged full-blown later in his life.

Mao’s personal experience of an arranged marriage also made him a bitter critic of the subjugation of women. Once, while he was living in Changsha, a young woman in that city was forced by her parents to become the second wife of an elderly merchant. Rather than submit to this arrangement, on her wedding day she cut her own throat with a razor. The event received considerable publicity in local newspapers, and it stirred Mao deeply. He participated in a public debate over the incident, publishing a number of articles in a local newspaper. In them, he bitterly denounced the “darkness of the social system” that had forced a young woman to marry an old man whom she did not love.

Here and in several other scraps of his early writings, we glimpse a Mao strongly committed to sexual equality. Like many young radical nationalists of his era, Mao
viewed the subjugation of women as a repressive function of China’s patriarchal-Confucian legacy.

Shortly after Mao’s arrival in Changsha in the fall of 1911, the republican revolution broke out in Wuchang, 180 miles further up the Yangzi River. Anti-Manchu feeling was widespread in Changsha, and the young Mao was inspired to write a wall-poster—his very first—calling for the overthrow of the Manchus and the formation of a new government with Sun Yat-sen as President. It was Mao’s first act of broad political rebellion; but it would not be his last.

After the Manchu abdication of 1912, Mao resumed his studies; later he taught school for a while in Changsha. But he was becoming restless. It was the beginning of the warlord era in China, and a patriotic wave of revulsion at the country’s worsening predicament was sweeping through China’s major cities.

On the eve of the May 4th Movement, in 1918, Mao left Changsha for Beijing. There, he courted and married Yang Kaihui, the daughter of his favorite teacher. They were deeply in love, and Kaihui bore him two sons before she was arrested and brutally beheaded by the Guomindang in 1930. At times during their marriage, Mao revealed himself to have a deeply romantic and sentimental side. On one occasion, after he and Yang Kaihui had quarreled, he wrote:

A wave of the hand, and the moment of parting has come.
Harder to bear is facing each other dolefully,
Wrath looks out from your eyes and brows,
On the very of tears you hold them back.
We know our misunderstandings sprang from [my] last letter.
Let it roll away like clouds and mist.
For who in this world is as close as you and I….
Let us once again be two birds flying side by side,
Soaring high as the clouds. (Schram, Mao’s Road to Power, vol 2, p. 195-96)

Such tender emotions, expressed by Mao at the age of 30, are difficult to reconcile with the insensitive, autocratic Mao who, 40 years later, would visit such pain and suffering upon comrades and country alike.

But Yang Kaihui was important in Mao’s life for another reason as well. For it was her father, Professor Yang Changji, who first introduced the 25 year-old Mao Zedong to Li Dazhao, head librarian at Peking University and later a co-founder of the CCP. As a favor to Professor Yang, Li Dazhao hired Mao as a librarian’s assistant. It was menial work, and he was rudely treated by some of the distinguished nationalist leaders who came to the library to read newspapers. As Mao himself put it, “I tried to begin conversations with them…but they were very busy men. They had no time to listen to an assistant librarian speaking southern dialect.” (Snow, Red Star over China, p. 176.)
On one occasion Mao attended a lecture by the eminent May 4th intellectual Dr. Hu Shi. After the lecture, Mao tried to ask a question, but when the “great man” discovered that he was merely a librarian’s assistant, rather than a Beida student, he abruptly brushed aside Mao’s question. Again, one can only speculate about the impact of such incidents on Mao’s growing anti-intellectualism.

What is clear is that Mao’s hostility toward China’s formal educational system first took root in the course of his middle school experience in Changsha, when he rebelled against the traditional pedagogy that emphasized rote memorization and mechanical recitation of the Confucian classics. Mao dismissed such techniques as mind-numbing and meaningless.

For all Mao’s youthful love of adventure novels, he also developed a deep sense that the traditional Confucian worship of book learning was a wasteful conceit. While still in Changsha, at the age of 21 he wrote: “Of the little progress I have made over these last few years, only the smaller part was achieved through books. The larger part…was the result of questioning and seeking solutions to [practical] problems.” (S. Schram, Mao’s Road to Power, Vol 1, p. 68). This insistence on practical application would color Mao’s approach to education throughout his entire adult life. As we saw in an earlier lecture, his attitude was clearly revealed in his sarcastic rejection of the traditional examination system and in his insistence that education must be combined with productive labor.

Like many radical young intellectuals of the May 4th era, Mao dabbled in a variety of “isms”—including anarchism, social Darwinism, liberalism, and democratic socialism—before becoming converted to revolutionary Marxism. In his earliest published political tracts he focused on the importance of physical culture and self-discipline, that is, the need to strengthen one’s own body, and to cultivate physical and mental toughness, as a precondition for national strengthening. Under the influence of his Marxist mentor Li DaZhao, Mao wrote in 1918: “Our nation is wanting in strength; the military spirit has not been encouraged…If our bodies are not strong, we will tremble at the sight of [enemy] soldiers….” (Short, Mao: A Life, p. 58)

In another essay, written around the same time, he wrote:

“Exercise should be savage and rude. To charge on horseback amidst the clash of arms and to be ever-victorious; to shake the mountains by one’s cries and the colors of the sky by one’s roars of anger…. All this is savage and rude and has nothing to do with delicacy. In order to progress…one must be savage.” (Schram, Mao’s Road to Power, Vol 1, pp 121, 124.)

Note how these early ideas about “rudeness” and “savagery” seem to prefigure his famous 1927 essay on the Peasant Movement in Hunan, which we examined in an earlier lecture. There, you may recall, Mao famously noted that “a revolution is not a dinner party, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery…. A revolution is an … act of violence by which one class overthrows another.”
As Mao underwent the process of revolutionary “toughening” in the mid-1920s, he also experienced a certain loss of emotional empathy. In his youth, Mao would often share his lunch with a poor classmate, or stop to give coins to a crippled beggar; and the plight of the young woman who committed suicide rather than endure an arranged marriage moved him deeply, as did Yang Kaihui’s warmth and affection. In those days his humanity, inherited from his caring, nurturing mother, was widely acknowledged.

But as his involvement in revolution deepened, his political views began to harden; his earlier sensitivity to personal suffering began to give way to more abstract, class-based stereotypes. And as his empathy for ordinary people—or “middle characters”—diminished, he became inured to the pain and suffering of the individual. Thinking more and more of the revolutionary omelette, he worried less and less about the broken eggs. As he wrote in his 1927 Hunan Peasant Movement essay, “To put it bluntly, it is necessary to bring about a … reign of terror in every rural area….To right a wrong, it is necessary to exceed proper limits.” What Mao gained in revolutionary will and determination, he lost in simple humanity.

Now in his early 30s, Mao began to condone killing class enemies simply because of their class. “Executing one important member of the local gentry,” he wrote, “reverberates through a whole county…. The only effective way of suppressing reactionaries is to execute at least one or two in each county.” (Short, Mao: A Life, p. 173.) From there, it was but a short step to setting quotas of class enemies to be struggled against—and killed, if necessary—in the course of a mass campaign. Though he clearly approved of revolutionary violence, Mao seldom gave a direct command for anyone be killed. He simply let his general wishes be known, leaving it to his subordinates to translate those wishes into specific actions.

In the late-1930s, the left-wing American writer Agnes Smedley, visited Yan’an. There she met Mao, and captured in writing Mao’s iron will and emotional aloofness:

He was as stubborn as a mule, and a steel rod of pride and determination ran through his nature. I had the impression that he would wait and watch for years, but eventually have his way. His humor was often sardonic and grim, as though it sprang from deep caverns of spiritual seclusion. I had the impression that there was a door to his being that had never been opened to anyone. (A. Smedley, Battle Hymn of China, pp. 121-123).

It would be more accurate, I think, to say that the door to Mao’s being had been open in his youth; but by the time Yang Kaihui was tortured and executed in 1930, that part of Mao’s early life had been locked away—forever.

It is instructive that after Mao shed his early humanistic idealism, he began to consciously model himself after the First Emperor of China, the great unifier Qin Shihuang Di. The Qin emperor was renowned for his cruelty. He took great pride in burning the books of Confucian scholars--before burying the scholars themselves alive. As a contemporary of the Qin emperor put it:
Qin Shihuang is a bird of prey….There is no beneficence in him, and he has the heart of a tiger or a wolf. When he is in difficulties he finds it easy to humble himself. But when he has achieved his aim, he finds it just as easy to devour human beings…..” (Edouard Chavannes, The Historical Memoirs of Sima Qian, vol. 2, pp. 144-45).

Such language brings readily to mind Lin Biao’s warning about “Old B-52”, issued shortly before his fatal flight of September 12, 1971: “Today he uses sweet words and honeyed talk to those whom he entices; tomorrow he puts them to death for fabricated crimes….Today he woos A and strikes at B; tomorrow he will woo B and strike at A… “

Along similar lines, Mao once bragged to a group of Chinese bourgeois intellectuals, “You accuse us of acting like Qin Shihuang. [Well], you are wrong. We surpass him a hundred times. When you berate us for imitating his despotism, we are happy to agree! Your mistake was that you did not say so [strongly] enough.” (JPRS, Miscellany of Mao Zedong Thought, vol 1, p. 98.)

So what, then, do we finally make of this man, Mao Zedong? What did he accomplish by all this violence? His victory over Chiang K’ai-shek revealed him to be an outstanding military strategist and a gifted tactician. In the course of protracted revolutionary struggle, Mao’s tacitcal flexibility, together with his legendary ruthlessness and sangfroid, were among his greatest assets; and his theory of “people’s war” was nothing short of brilliant. He managed to unify the country and organize it effectively in a way that had not been seen in China for centuries.

His record as a revolutionary thus remains largely in tact. By and large it is an extraordinary record, but with the important caveat that in the process of creating his great revolutionary omelette, Mao broke a great many eggs.

In retrospect, it wasn’t so much Mao’s ultimate ends that leave us shaking our heads. His utopian vision of a world without individual greed, a world without mandarins, landlords, capitalists or imperialists, has been widely shared by idealistic intellectuals through the ages. Moreover, his vision of the “just” society clearly inspired his countrymen to accomplish legendary feats of revolutionary bravery and endurance. Yet the very ruthlessness and callousness of the means used by Mao to achieve his visionary ends calls to mind the playwright Molière’s tragic warning: “More men die of their remedies than of their illnesses.” If there is a more fitting epitaph for the latter half of Mao’s life, I have not seen it.

End of Part II
The Fall and Rise of China

Part III: China in the Age of Reform
1976 - Present

Lectures 29-48
Lecture 29: The Post-Mao Interregnum (1976-77)

Mao's death, which followed closely upon that of Premier Zhou Enlai, left China politically adrift and rudderless. There were other mortal passings as well. In the span of less than one year, both the co-founder of the Red Army, Zhu De, and Mao’s long-time security chief, Kang Sheng, also passed away. With Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao and Peng Dehuai already deceased, the original, close knit group of CCP guerilla heroes of the late 1920s and early 1930s was being decimated. The founding fathers were dying off, and a generational shift was in the offing.

But where would the new leaders come from? And how would they be able to restore the shattered trust and confidence of a dispirited nation? Mao’s track record of anointing a series of successors—and then cruelly discarding them—was a source of deep concern to many Party leaders. Mao’s erratic personal behavior, along with widespread dismay over the chaos and cruelty of his Cultural Revolution, had spawned a deep "crisis of faith" in China, affecting both the political class and the laobaixing alike.

In 1977 the official media openly revealed, for the first time, the bitter economic truth about the last two decades of Mao’s rule. Since 1957, China’s national economy had been essentially stagnant. There had been no overall increase in the per-capita production or consumption of food. Crop yields had barely kept pace with population growth, while the quality and reliability of industrial products had plunged. Reacting to twenty years of economic turmoil and political repression, ordinary Chinese were starting to openly question the benefits conferred on them by a rigid and seemingly insensitive Communist Party.

Superimposed upon this growing crisis of faith were a series of intense political rivalries and personal antagonisms that served to split the Chinese Communist leadership into a number of contending factions. At one level, these intraparty cleavages centered on such issues as the extent of Mao Zedong's personal responsibility for the Cultural Revolution, and the deteriorating quality of Mao's leadership during his declining years. At another level they concerned more primitive, rudimentary questions of political power: Who would win out in the struggle to succeed Mao? Who would lose? And equally important, what would the winners do to the losers?

The question of who would succeed Mao had been anticipated—and presumptively resolved-- by the Chairman himself. A few months before his death, Mao had called a relatively unknown newcomer to his bedside within Zhongnanhai. At this meeting, on April 30, 1976, Mao anointed his latest—and last-- heir-apparent, scribbling in his halting, crabbed calligraphy a simple, six-word phrase: “Ni ban shi, wo fang xin”: With you in charge, my heart is at ease”. (show painting of anointment scene)

The middle-aged cadre whom Mao Zedong ultimately chose to succeed him was Hua Guofeng. Fifty-five years of age, Hua had been the Party secretary of Mao’s native Hunan province throughout the Cultural Revolution. He had a reputation for intelligence and hard work, and he had gained Mao’s confidence during the last years of his life by
remaining personally loyal to the Chairman, refusing to align himself with any of Beijing’s notoriously fractious political cliques and factions.

Hua’s unexpected ascent was the indirect result of an intense factional struggle that broke out at the time of Zhou Enlai’s death in January 1976. On that occasion, a bitter dispute broke out between members of the “gang of four” and supporters of Deng Xiaoping over who would succeed the late Premier Zhou. After three weeks of bitter infighting, neither side could muster a clear majority of votes in the Politburo. Although Mao had personally designated Deng as first deputy premier, and hence Zhou’s presumptive heir, the leftists had enough votes to block Deng’s promotion; but they were unable to muster the majority needed to elect one of their own. With the Politburo hopelessly deadlocked, Mao personally intervened, nominating a complete outsider--Hua Guofeng—to be China’s interim, “Acting Premier.” With that, the two warring factions fell grudgingly into line. Abruptly, without any prior warning, Hua was thrust onto the front line of Beijing’s tumultuous political scene.

When Hua’s name was first announced in a press release at the end of January, China Watchers everywhere were stunned. I remember picking up the telephone in my UCLA office and calling a few colleagues around the country. No-one even knew his name: “Hua GuoWHO?” we asked each other. A frantic search of “Who’s Who in Communist China” finally yielded some concrete information: After serving in Hunan for more than a decade, Hua been brought to Beijing at the end of 1971 to serve on the official commission of inquiry appointed to investigate Lin Biao’s conspiracy and death. Evidently, Hua impressed Chairman Mao with his performance on this commission, and in 1974 he was promoted to the important post of Minister of Public Security—China’s top policeman.

Staring at “Acting Premier” Hua Guofeng’s photograph in a Chinese newspaper in late January 1976, I had a strong feeling that I had seen him before. On a hunch, I began rummaging through the memorabilia from my first—and up to that point, my only--trip to Mainland China, which had taken place eight months earlier, in the spring of 1975.

By 1975, three years after the Nixon visit, informal cultural exchanges were being regularly held between the two countries. Routinely, and as a matter of course, each American exchange group sent to China was accompanied by an “academic escort,” a professional China Watcher whose role was to provide expert in-country advice and guidance to the delegation’s leaders. My opportunity came when I was invited to serve as academic escort for the US National AAU track and field team on its three-city tour of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in May 1975.

Reasonably certain that I had seen the man in the newspaper photo at some point during my trip to China eight months earlier, I began sifting through my souvenirs. Sure enough, I came across a photograph that brought me up short: It was a picture of me and Hua Guofeng—just the two of us. It had been taken at a track meet in Beijing. (show photo of Hua and me)
In his capacity as a Minister of the State Council, Hua Guofeng had been assigned to be our delegation’s “host” for the final day of track competition in Beijing. When we were introduced before the track meet, I neither caught his name nor recognized his face (As a point of full disclosure, I have always had trouble remembering Chinese names).

Sitting next to Hua for several hours on a warm spring afternoon, I tried valiantly to chat him up, using my best Mandarin, or putonghua. I tried talking about track and field, the weather, the civil war in Lebanon, even Chairman Mao’s health—but he clearly wasn’t interested in talking. He seemed bored, and he kept looking at his watch. After a while I stopped trying to converse, and we just sat there, side by side, silently, for the last few hours of the track meet.

Seeing that photo staring back at me from my souvenir album eight months later, I could have kicked myself. Why hadn’t I recognized him? Why hadn’t I persisted in trying to chat with him at the track meet? For years afterward I kept that photo pinned to a bulletin board in my UCLA office as a memento of my close encounter with Mao’s soon-to-be successor, Hua Guofeng-. It was also a painful reminder of my need to work harder on remembering Chinese names.

When Mao died, Hua tried bravely to fill the Chairman’s big shoes. But it was a daunting challenge, to say the least; for he still had to deal with the machinations of Jiang Qing and her leftist allies. They felt cheated by the Chairman’s unexpected elevation of an unknown outsider to succeed him. And in a final, desperate effort to block Hua’s succession, they contrived to alter Mao’s last will and testament in an attempt to prove that Mao had really intended to have his wife succeed him as Party Chairman.

In an audacious maneuver, Jiang Qing managed to gain access to the archives of the Party Central Committee, where Mao’s personal papers were kept under lock and key. Retrieving some notes he had scribbled in the last few months of his life, she added some marginal notations in a scrawl that was meant to resemble Mao’s own very shaky calligraphy. Unfortunately for her, however, one of Mao’s most highly trusted lieutenants, a PLA general named Wang Dongxing, was in charge of the Central Committee archives; and General Wang blew the whistle on Jiang Qing’s attempted forgery. Shortly thereafter, Hua Guofeng and a coalition of senior Chinese military and political leaders arrested her and her three co-conspirators.

Though these events were initially kept secret within the walls of Zhongnanhai, it did not take long for word of Mme Mao’s arrest to leak out. And in the streets and alleyways of Beijing a profusion of wall posters suddenly appeared—at first a few dozen, then hundreds—all excitedly celebrating the downfall of the “siren bang”. (show anti-gang poster)

With Mao dead and the “gang of four” under arrest, Hua Guofeng now set about trying to consolidate his newly-acquired authority. At that point his only real claim to holding supreme power was a hastily scrawled six-character bequest from Chairman Mao; and Hua soon found himself facing a new and potentially devastating challenge, not from the
“gang of four” on the left, but from a group of senior party and military leaders on the right—the “friends of Deng Xiaoping.”

As I watched these events unfold from afar in the latter half of 1976, I found myself both mesmerized and perplexed by the surreal, dreamlike quality of the political intrigues unfolding in Beijing. It was high theater, rich in political posturing, melodrama and deception. Trying to make sense of the facts and circumstances surrounding Mao’s death, Hua’s rise, Deng’s disgrace and Jiang Qing’s arrest was enough to make one’s head swim. The bones were now flying out from under the rug at a dizzying rate, yet it was still almost impossible to put everything together. Too many pieces of the puzzle were still missing.

It occurred to me then, in the late fall of 1976, that the entire murky situation of the post-Mao succession lent itself nicely to humor. So I did what any thoroughly befuddled Sinologist would do: I hid behind a fictitious literary persona and composed a light-hearted political limerick to convey the depths of my exasperation. On a lark, I submitted my poem to an academic journal, *Contemporary China*, using the pseudonym “Lim Rick”. Since *Contemporary China* was a serious journal devoted to scholarly analysis of Chinese society and politics, I did not expect its editor, Columbia University Sociologist Edwin Winckler, to publish my rhyming verse. Much to my surprise, however, the poem appeared in the December 1976 issue:

Ode to Jiang Qing

They say that Mao’s widow, Jiang Qing
Did the most terrible thing
As Mao lay deathly ill
She forged his Last Will
And scandalized all of Beijing

A malevolent influence, she
Conspired to drive Mao up a tree
She squelched his last breath
And nagged him to death
In order Chairwoman to be

Upon hearing the news, Hua Guofeng
Whose virtues were largely unsung
Brought armed guards along
To arrest Madame Jiang
And silence her very sharp tongue
....

Her scheme having failed to succeed
Jiang Qing for her life had to plead
But the masses were clued
For knew they’d been screwed
By a woman corrupted by greed

Now that this story’s been told
The moral appears rather bold:
If you would be King
Just remember one thing:
You’d best wait till the body is cold.

Much to my regret, the journal *Contemporary China* folded three years later. I can only hope that its demise was not hastened by my little piece of tongue-in-cheek doggerel.

Far more serious, in any event, was the political fallout from the demise of the “gang of four.” For one thing, all extent photographs of the “gang” now had to be withdrawn from circulation, à la Lin Biao. That was no easy trick—especially since the four members of the gang had been prominently featured in publicity photographs taken at Mao’s memorial service in Tiananmen Square just two weeks before they were placed under arrest. What to do?

Borrowing a page from Joseph Stalin’s playbook, China’s new leaders acted quickly and decisively. They ordered the four “gang” members to be airbrushed out of all official photos of Mao’s memorial service, leaving several conspicuous gaps in the ranks of the mourners. (show airbrushed photo).

But airbrushing his jailed rivals turned out to be the least of Hua Guofeng’s worries. For no sooner had Jiang Qing and her cronies been thrown in jail, than the supporters of Deng Xiaoping began lobbying hard for the “rehabilitation” of their fallen hero. (Deng had been in disgrace ever since Madame Mao convinced her ailing husband that Deng had instigated a “counter-revolutionary incident” at Tiananmen Square in April, when thousands of Beijingers spontaneously vented their grief for the late Zhou Enlai and their rage at Jiang and her fellow radicals.

On the face of it, Deng’s comrades made a compelling argument. Deng’s purge had been engineered by Jiang Qing and her allies, who themselves now stood accused of committing a series of treacherous crimes—including forgery and conspiracy to seize power. Seeking to take full advantage of her downfall, Deng’s supporters demanded that the verdict on Deng should be reversed, and that he should be fully exonerated.

Hua was caught between a rock and a hard place. If he gave in to the demand to exonerate Deng, he might well be setting the stage for Deng to eclipse him. On the other hand, if he upheld Deng’s dismissal as a “counterrevolutionary,” he would be perceived as being in cahoots with the “gang of four.” For Hua it was a lose-lose situation, and it would eventually help to secure his downfall, as we shall see in a later lecture.

For our present purposes, though, the important point is that Hua did not simply fold up his tent and go quietly into the night. As the pressure to “reverse the verdict” on Deng...
mounted in late 1976 and early 1977, Hua’s own supporters ginned up a full-blown public relations campaign designed to furnish him with a personality cult all his own, to rival Mao’s famous cult. Newspapers and magazines began to run stories glorifying Hua’s proletarian virtues and celebrating his deep affection for the laobaixing. Dozens of new songs and dances in praise of “wise Chairman Hua” were commissioned and performed at every festival and holiday occasion.

Portraits of Hua’s benign visage were routinely hung in public places and private homes, alongside Chairman Mao’s. Hua’s handlers also worked on his physical image. In 1977 he began to appear in public wearing a loose-fitting Mao-style PLA uniform—even though he had never been in the army. He also grew his hair long, abandoning his traditional close-cropped crew cut in favor of slicked-back hair combed back from his sloping forehead, a la Chairman Mao. And he even altered his calligraphy to make it resemble that of his illustrious predecessor.

The *piece de résistance*, however, was a national campaign, begun in 1977, to saturate China’s cities and towns with billboard-size posters depicting the now-famous “anointment scene,” showing Hua sitting with Mao receiving the dying Chairman’s last bequest: *Ni ban shi, wo fang xin* — “With you in charge, my heart is at ease.”

This was Hua’s indispensable ace-in-the-hole, and he played it for all it was worth: Mao had personally selected him as his successor. Not even the “gang of four” had been able to overcome such a potent trump card.

But Hua’s luck was already beginning to run out. My first personal inkling that he was in for serious trouble came in the spring of 1978. I was in Beijing, taking a leisurely stroll along the city’s main thoroughfare, Chang’an Boulevard, east of Tiananmen Square. As I strolled, I saw a sizeable knot of 30 to 40 mostly young people gathered near the base of a large billboard. Everyone was looking up at group of workmen on a scaffold. They were changing the billboard’s display, pasting one vertical panel after another over the freshly whitewashed surface. By the time the second of the five panels was pasted down, it was evident that the new poster was an artist’s idealized rendering of the now-famous deathbed scene of Hua Guofeng receiving Mao’s benediction: *Ni ban shi, wo fang xin*.

I watched quietly for several minutes as the third and fourth panels were pasted in place. By that time, all but the final word of the six-character legend at the bottom were visible: “*Ni ban shi, wo fang* . . .” But just then, before the final panel was unrolled and put in place, a young man standing immediately in front of me turned to his equally youthful companions and, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, completed the phrase by substituting an entirely different sixth and final character, thereby giving the phrase a completely altered meaning. What he said, with sarcasm dripping in his voice, was “*Ni ban shi, wo fang pi*” -- “With you in charge, I fart.” There was an immediate ripple of laughter in the crowd.
Now, such a gleeful public display of irreverent scatological humor might not have been remarkable in most countries, and most settings but in post-Mao China it was nothing short of stunning. During the Cultural Revolution people had been “struggled against,” beaten and imprisoned for far more innocuous offenses against the Supreme Leader. Punishable acts of lese majeste in the late 1960s included one man’s “crime” of wrapping fresh fish in a newspaper containing Chairman Mao’s photo, so that the fish oil leaked through and smeared Mao’s picture. For the crime of “defacing Mao’s image,” the man received a multi-year prison sentence. Another incident involved an Australian reporter in China, who was “struggled” by Red Guards for the crime of idly drawing a cartoon depicting Charley Brown’s dog Snoopy jumping up and down, clicking his heels, yelling “Long Live Chairman Mao!” A Red Guard had seen the cartoon, and believing it to be deliberately demeaning to the Great Helmsman, he told the other members of his group about it. Late at night they stormed into the cartoonist’s hotel room and detained him. After an all night struggle session, they let him go—but not before forcing him to write a “confession” in which he humbly apologized for giving offense to Chairman Mao. These were actual incidents—they really happened.

The very idea that a sarcastic bathroom joke could be publicly made at the expense of China’s new supreme leader, Hua Guofeng”–or, even worse, that a crowd of teenagers would openly laugh at such a remark—suggested to me that Hua’s attempt to create a personality cult to emulate Mao’s had failed to gain traction. At that moment it struck me that the reign of the “Wise Leader” Chairman Hua was likely to a short and rather rocky one.

Nevertheless, and despite the obvious, unflattering comparisons to his illustrious predecessor, Hua Guofeng worked hard to establish his credentials as a far-sighted economic reformer. Recognizing that China’s economy had been stagnant for the past two decades, and that Mao’s policy of “self-reliance” had effectively cut China off from the outside world, he formulated grand plans for a dynamic Chinese economic recovery, which he called the “Four Modernizations.”. Next time we will examine the nature and consequences of Hua’s economic innovations.
Lecture 30: – Hua Guofeng and the “Four Modernizations” (1977-78)

Although Hua Guofeng was destined to be a transitional figure, his role in jump-starting the Chinese economy after Mao’s death has been widely overlooked. And though he shamelessly wrapped himself in Mao’s mantle in an effort to bolster his own authority, he also helped bring to an end some of the worst radical excesses of the Maoist era.

A good example was his role in raising academic standards. Beginning in 1966 leftists had succeeded in watering down college admission requirements and abolishing standardized national college entrance examinations. Instead, preference in admissions was given to children from worker, peasant, army and cadre backgrounds, and to those youngsters who proved themselves politically worthy by displaying their ideological zeal and their selfless devotion to “serving the people.”

In a famous case in Liaoning province, a young man by the name of Zhang Tiesheng applied for college admission in 1973. Like millions of other urban youths, he had been “sent down” to the countryside in the latter part of 1968, when Mao disbanded the Red Guards. Required to take an entrance examination to become eligible for college admission, the young man rebelled. He turned in a blank paper, on which he scrawled a brief note claiming that entrance examinations gave unfair advantage to “bookworms” who, contrary to Chairman Mao’s instructions, spent all their time cramming for tests rather than devoting themselves to the masses and to productive labor.

Shortly after this “blank examination” incident, a newspaper controlled by radical allies of the “gang of four” published Zhang Tiesheng’s note of protest, along with an editorial commentary lauding Zhang for his bold revolutionary spirit. Shortly afterwards, sympathetic university officials devised a tailor-made, pro-forma entrance exam for Zhang alone to take. In this manner, the young rebel was admitted to the university through the “back door.” This set a precedent of sorts for other rebel youths to demand— and gain--college admission on the basis of their political, rather than academic credentials. And for a while, Zhang Tiesheng was celebrated by leftists as a “proletarian hero.” But soon after Mao died, and the “gang of four” were placed under arrest, the worm began to turn.

Under Hua Guofeng, educational standards were raised, and in 1977 the uniform nationwide college entrance examinations were reinstated. No longer was preferential treatment given to radical political activists or students from worker-peasant-soldier backgrounds. Henceforth, only academic performance would count toward college admissions.

As for Zhang Tiesheng, like many other so-called “helicopters”—young rebels who rose rapidly in fame and rank because of their defiance of authority during the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Tiesheng was brought rapidly back down to earth. He was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison for the crimes of “counter-revolutionary propaganda and attempting to subvert the government.”
In addition to promoting educational reform, Hua Guofeng also showed himself to be open to pragmatic economic innovation. With the Chinese economy in a deep stall after a decade of leftist domination, he borrowed a series of proposals that had first been put forward by Deng Xiaoping.

Early in 1978 Hua introduced a “ten-year plan for national economic development” that was designed to comprehensively modernize Chinese industry, agriculture, national defense, science and technology. Known as the “Four Modernizations” (a term originally coined by Zhou Enlai), Hua’s 10-year plan subtly reversed Mao’s traditional insistence on such things as self-reliance, egalitarianism, and the abolition of material incentives. In their place he called for such things as the accelerated acquisition of foreign industrial technology; the expansion of rural free markets; the use of the “economic methods” to guide economic activity (rather than administrative methods); and the widespread adoption of incentive-based wage systems, including piece rates and bonuses to reward individual performance. Previously, each of these proposals had been denounced as “revisionist” by China’s leftists. (show poster advertising “four modernizations”

Equally important, Hua Guofeng began to advocate a policy of “opening wide” with respect to China's much-maligned intellectuals. To overcome what he called the “cultural poverty” that stemmed from the “fascist dictatorship” of the radical Left, Hua called for a lively intellectual environment marked by “spirited discussions” of science, philosophy, literature and the arts. “Where there is controversy in academic discussions and literary criticism,” Hua said, “we should avoid hasty conclusions. We should seek solutions not through such overly simple measures as administrative commands, but through full discussion and practical experience.”(ibid)

Although Hua clearly leaned toward greater openness in economic, scientific, educational and cultural activities, his willingness to “think outside the box” was clearly bounded. For unlike Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic “black cats, white cats” approach to economic development, Hua insisted upon preserving traditional Maoist norms and values. His insistence on employing Maoist labels to sanction reformist policies inevitably lent his economic programs the appearance of being self-contradictory—and at times downright schizophrenic. For example, in one passage of his ten-year economic plan he urged his comrades to “resolutely implement Chairman Mao's revolutionary line” and to “always act on Chairman Mao's instructions”; yet in the very next passage he urged them to “break free from conventions” and “seek truth from facts.”( Peking Review, March 10, 1978) At the very least, Hua was revealing himself to be a highly complex character.

At the heart of Hua’s new economic plan was a proposal to accelerate the pace of China’s modernization by constructing 120 major industrial projects, including iron and steel complexes, coal mines, oil and natural gas fields, power stations, railroad lines, and harbors. To achieve these ambitious objectives, Hua called for opening the country to large-scale, modern technological imports from the West and Japan.
By calling for expanded hi-tech imports, Hua sharply reversed the “nativism” that had been a hallmark of Mao's post-1957 developmental policies which stressed the virtues of self-reliance and the superiority of small-scale, indigenous production technologies. Now, Hua opted for the large and the foreign. To pay for high-priced industrial imports, he proposed exporting large quantities of petroleum and natural gas, to be supplied by China’s newly-developed oil fields, which were believed to hold vast quantities of proven and probable underground reserves.

In the initial rush to accelerate China's industrial modernity, a large number of state-of-the-art, “turn-key” factories were imported virtually “out of the box” from the West and Japan. In many cases, the plants were designed, contracted and built in great haste, without adequate consideration of technical feasibility, infrastructure requirements, or cost-effectiveness.

As a result of inattention to such things as conducting cost-benefit analysis and “due diligence,” a series of high-tech industrial fiascos occurred. These included a multi-billion-dollar boondoggle involving the Baoshan Iron and Steel Works, which was financed by Japan and built along a bank of the lower Yangzi River, near Shanghai. A number of basic design flaws doomed this project from the start. In the first place, the plant was situated on geologically unstable ground, so that the foundation shifted after construction work began. Second, the plant’s Japanese-built blast furnaces were designed to burn a type of high-quality, low-sulphur coking coal that had to be imported at great expense from far-off Australia—this despite the fact that China had the world’s highest proven coal reserves.

Third, even if China could afford to import large quantities of foreign coking coal, which was problematic, it was necessary to have a deep-water port along the Yangzi River to enable the deep-draft Australian ore tankers to off-load their massive supplies of coal. Fourth, even if such a deep-water port in existence near the plant (which it was not), the amount of electricity needed to run the entire iron and steel complex would strain the output capacity of the entire eastern Yangzi River energy grid. This meant that operation of the complex would cause massive, prolonged brownouts throughout the entire greater Shanghai area. For all these reasons, the project was halted after about a year, pending radical design changes and downsizing. In the process, almost $2 billion was wasted. Sadly for Hua Guofeng, he never fully recovered from the damage to his reputation inflicted by this hugely expensive boondoggle.

In retrospect, it is evident that the very grandiosity of Hua's ten-year economic plan contributed heavily to its eventual failure—and to Hua’s eventual demise. Committing himself to the pursuit of a wide range of massive new construction projects, whose benefits seemed clear enough, he only dimly perceived the enormous downstream costs and upstream technical requirements that would prove so intractable.
Further complicating things for the hapless Hua Guofeng, the anticipated export boom in oil and natural gas, with which China expected to pay for all the expensive industrial imports, never materialized. China’s crude oil reserves proved to be of rather low quality—being too heavy and too highly sulfurous to be competitive on international markets.

Hua Guofeng's “quick-fix” approach to modernization also led to some serious imbalances in the national economy. In the first full year of the "Four Modernizations" program, China's capital investment rate exceeded 38 percent of the national budget—the highest figure since Mao's calamitous Great Leap Forward. Such massive capital investments severely overtaxed the state's existing transportation infrastructure and resource capacity, leading to huge bottlenecks in construction materials and capital goods.

At the same time, in order to assuage the increased grumblings of China’s 100 million industrial workers, who had not received a wage increase in over a decade, China’s industrial workers were granted substantial across-the-board pay and bonus increases in 1978. This created a sharp increase in the nation’s money supply, which in turn triggered a spike in consumer demand. But in the absence of any significant expansion in the production or importation of durable consumer goods, the result was that too much money was chasing too few goods—which is the classic definition of inflation.

Now, it would be highly unfair to pin the blame for all this on Hua Guofeng. After all, it was Mao’s policies that had kept China in a state of severe economic backwardness; and it was Mao who systematically punished all those who possessed the requisite knowledge, expertise and experience needed to modernize the country. If Hua and other Party leaders were flying blind, it was because Mao had applied the blindfold.

It is also true that many of the flawed policy initiatives introduced by Hua in 1978 had first been proposed by Deng Xiaoping before his second purge in 1976. But the policies had been carried out on Hua’s watch; and when some of them turned out badly, because of excessive haste and inadequate planning, it was Hua, rather than Deng, who shouldered the blame.

Another problem that was not of Hua’s making, but which created serious difficulties for him, was the question of how to frame public criticism of the “gang of four” without casting deep shadows across Mao’s own reputation. Because Mao had clearly indulged tolerated many of the leftist excesses initiated by the “gang,” repudiating them without implicating him in the process was no simple matter.

Moreover, because Hua’s authority derived entirely from Mao having personally anointed him as his successor, Hua needed to preserve Mao’s reputation for wisdom and good judgment at all cost. In effect, he needed to build a firewall around Mao to protect him from being implicated in the evil machinations of the gang of four.
By late 1977 the “gang” had become a handy, “one-size fits all” symbol of evil, a universal scapegoat for all that had gone wrong in China during the Cultural Revolution’s “decade of destruction.” Among other things, the leftists’ abrupt fall from grace required a major behavioral adjustment on the part of the Chinese people, from the highest officials down to the lowliest street peddlers. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, tens of millions of Chinese had loudly echoed and endorsed the radical ideas and slogans of the ultra-leftists-- some out of genuine conviction, some merely taking the path of least resistance,. But now these ideas and slogans were being denounced as heresy. Called upon not merely to criticize the “gang of four” but also to rectify their own “misguided” thinking, a massive national attitude adjustment was called for. Social psychologists refer to this adjustment process, which can be quite stressful, as “cognitive dissonance reduction.” In post-Mao China, it was everywhere in evidence, and its effects at times were rather bizarre.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate this point. In the summer of 1978, I happened to accompany a delegation of American computer scientists on a visit to the Shanghai Turbine Plant. It was the largest facility of its type in the country, and it produced the giant turbine engines used to generate hydroelectric power. In the reception room, the plant’s public relations director gave us the standard, obligatory “Brief Introduction” (BI) to the facility and its history.

He proceeded to tell us how, during the Cultural Revolution, local agents of the “gang of four” had sabotaged production in the plant. “Revolutionary rebels” had disrupted the factory’s normal operations, overthrowing the management committee and spreading anarchy on the factory floor. Freed from all work rules, which were denounced as “oppressive”, the workers played cards during their shifts, while managers were ruthlessly “struggled.” Engineers and technicians stayed home, unwilling to risk criticism as “bourgeois authorities” if they showed initiative in solving technical problems. Consequently, he said, both the quantity and quality of turbine production suffered badly. Over 70 percent of all turbine engines produced at the plant between 1968 and 1976 were rejected as substandard.

But then, he said, things began to change. In the past year or more, under the “wise leadership of Chairman Hua,” the workers had come to understand that their thoughts had been seriously poisoned by the “gang of four.” Now, the plant’s former managers, engineers and technicians were being rehabilitated and welcomed back to their old jobs. Piece rates were introduced to reward diligent workers, and monthly bonuses were paid for over-fulfillment of quotas. Consequently, he concluded, production had rebounded, and the factory was well on its way to breaking previous records for production, innovation, and product quality. At the end of this inspirational spiel the young PR director looked around the room and asked if we had any questions.
Now a brief digression: It just so happened that I had visited that same factory once before, with a different delegation, some three years earlier, in the spring of 1975. At that time, Mao was still alive and the radicals were running the economy. By chance, the same PR director who briefed us in 1978 had given the BI on my previous visit as well. But the content of his earlier briefing had been very, very different.

Before the Cultural Revolution, he had told us on that earlier occasion, “revisionists” among the plant’s managers and engineers had oppressed the workers, forcing them to comply with hundreds of detailed work rules. Moreover, factory managers had shown favoritism to educated workers, and had looked down on the uneducated and the unskilled. Consequently, worker morale had suffered, and productivity had lagged.

But with the launching of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he said, things changed for the better. The workers became “masters of the house,” while the old managers, engineers and technicians were sharply criticized for their arrogant attitudes and bourgeois work styles, and were forced to scrub toilets and do menial work on the factory floor. Worker morale reportedly improved greatly under this revolutionary regime, and the plant registered outstanding improvements in both the quantity and quality of turbine production. At the time, this story had struck me as a piece of Cultural Revolution performance art-- a typical example of over-the-top “socialist realism” that was highly stereotyped, overly melodramatic, and almost certainly untrue.

So, what it came down to was this: same factory, same PR director, but delivering very different and very contradictory narratives, three years apart. So when the PR director asked for questions, I promptly raised my hand. “Three years ago,” I reminded him, “you stood in this same room and gave a very different BI to another group of foreign guests.” I then highlighted the contrasting elements in his past and present narratives, asking him how he could reconcile such strikingly different stories. He stammered and sputtered for a moment before blurting out his answer—which was the only possible explanation under the circumstances: “My thinking was poisoned by the gang of four,” was all he said.

“Poisoned by the gang of four” (bei siren bang duhaile). By 1978 that simple phrase had become China’s ubiquitous national mantra. With 800 million people struggling to reconcile their recent “revolutionary” behavior with the pragmatic new requirements of political correctness in the post-“gang of four” era, there was now an urgent need for a simple, exculpatory formula to explain away bad behavior. In the new world of post-“gang” China, the ability to turn on an ideological dime, to minimize personal culpability and shame, had become an essential survival skill.

The widespread use of the “thought poisoning” rationale as an all-purpose excuse for prior bad behavior was striking. On another occasion, also in 1978, I was taking an early morning stroll through one of Beijing’s traditional urban neighborhoods, a rabbit warren of narrow hutongs, or alleyways, when an elderly man with a weather-beaten face and tattered clothing, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, invited me into his home. I was surprised by the spontaneity of his gesture, since ordinary Chinese-- the laobaixing-- were normally not permitted to socialize with foreigners without official authorization.
Eagerly accepting his unexpected invitation, I entered the front gate of his residence and found myself in a small courtyard. I followed my host to his bedroom, a tiny, windowless cubicle barely large enough for a small bed and folding stool. As I sat on the edge of his bed, he offered me a cigarette. We had barely begun to chat when an obviously agitated, gray-haired woman in her fifties burst into the room. Wearing a red armband that identified her as a member of the neighborhood residents’ committee, she began angrily berating the old man. “You cannot behave like this,” she scolded. “You are not allowed to bring a foreign guest (laowai) into your home.”

Unofficial guardians of public morality, China’s ubiquitous “granny police” were on the job. I quickly stepped in to defend my host. “It was my fault,” I pleaded in my best Chinese. “I invited myself in. This old comrade was just being polite to a foreign guest.” Unimpressed by my explanation, the woman continued to browbeat the elderly gentleman. By then—no more than five minutes after I first stepped through the front gate--a crowd had formed in the courtyard, spilling over into the street; and the entire neighborhood was abuzz. A uniformed policeman soon came on the scene. He listened patiently to my explanation, then interviewed the other participants. The gray-haired granny finally calmed down a bit. Satisfied that the entire incident had stemmed from a misunderstanding, the policeman eventually shooed away the onlookers and politely invited me to continue on my way.

Later that morning I related the details of the incident to my local Chinese guide and asked him, as a favor, to look in on the old man to make sure he hadn’t gotten into any further trouble after I left. That evening the guide reported back to me. The ill-tempered granny had been required to undergo “criticism and self-criticism” for having scolded the old man in front of a “foreign guest.” In her defense, she had invoked the now-familiar phrase: “My thinking was poisoned by the ‘gang of four.’”

Then, as now, it struck me as extremely odd that so many people could speak, so freely, and so often, about being “poisoned by the gang,” without anyone openly raising the question of Mao’s role in mixing the poison. Who was it that enabled the “gang” in the first place? Who was it that encouraged the Red Guards to “bombard the headquarters,” to “destroy the four olds,” and to “seize power.”

In Hua Guofeng’s eagerness to shift blame away from Mao—and to thereby deflect questions about his own tenuous hold on power, he clearly underestimated the ability of the Chinese people to comprehend what had happened to them, and who had caused it. Although the four Shanghai radicals—and in particular, Jiang Qing-- were indeed widely and deeply despised, by 1978 it had become commonplace for ordinary Chinese, when discussing the crimes of the “gang,” to raise up not four fingers, but five. Often accompanied by a sly wink, this five-fingered gesture was a powerful reminder that while the laobaixing did not dare to speak openly of Mao’s shortcomings, Hua Guofeng was nonetheless living on borrowed time. Next time we will examine Hua’s downfall, as brilliantly orchestrated by Deng Xiaoping.
Lecture 31: Deng Takes Command (1978-79)

As Hua Guofeng’s grandiose modernization program began to stall out, Deng Xiaoping took full advantage. His supporters began to press for their hero’s rehabilitation. He had been framed by the gang of four, so now the verdict would have to be reversed.

Hua stalled as best he could, for as long as he could; but at the 11th Party Congress in July 1977 he gave in to the inevitable, acknowledging that Deng had, in fact, been falsely accused by Jiang Qing. But he papered over his own failure to repeal this miscarriage of justice by arguing that he had merely been trying to protect Chairman Mao’s failing health. Here are Hua’s own words, taken from his political report to the 11th Party Congress:

"In 1976, as Chairman Mao’s illness worsened, the gang of four became more unscrupulous in their antiparty activities. However, in consideration of Chairman Mao’s health … [we] comrades of the Politburo . . . exercised restraint."

Though Hua tried valiantly to shun personal culpability for Deng’s dismissal, he could not easily explain away Mao’s own role in the Qingming incident. For it was Mao who had personally ordered Deng’s dismissal, based on fabricated evidence supplied by the “gang of four.” At the very least, this raised questions about Mao’s judgment during the last months of his life. More damaging still, it called into question the Chairman’s presumed infallibility. And this, in turn, could not but cast doubt on Hua’s categorical insistence on upholding Mao’s every word as gospel.

But Hua’s problems didn’t end there. For if Mao had been muddled and confused at the time of the Tiananmen incident in early April 1976, how could anyone be sure that he had been entirely in his right mind three weeks later, when he scribbled the famous phrase, “With you in charge, my heart is at ease.”

For all of these reasons, Hua had to tiptoe very gingerly around the entire Qingming-Tiananmen episode. Indeed, Qingming was the proverbial elephant in the room at the 11th Party Congress. So lightly did Hua tread, that in his two-hour speech to the Congress—a speech in which he devoted much time and detail to illuminating the various evil deeds and devious machinations of the gang of four—he never once mentioned, or even alluded to, the Tiananmen incident of April 1976. It was as though Qingming never happened. Soon enough, however, Hua’s blind loyalty to Mao would prove to be his undoing, his Achilles heel.

By the late summer of 1977 a showdown between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng had become all but inevitable. Knowing Hua’s vulnerability on the question of Mao’s fallibility, Deng played his cards carefully—and masterfully. He was an inveterate bridge player—honorary chairman of the Chinese Bridge Association. Now he used his card-playing skills to perfection. Placing Hua on the defensive, he first finessed him, then sandbagged him, and then effectively blitzed him.
In late 1977 Hua proclaimed that it was impermissible to question “whatever Chairman Mao instructed or approved.” In response, Deng’s supporters sarcastically referred to Hua Guofeng and his allies as the “whatever faction” (fanshi pai). They argued that no-one, not even Chairman Mao, had a monopoly on truth and wisdom. To support their point, they quoted a pithy aphorism plucked from the corpus of Mao’s own writings: “Practice is the sole criterion of truth.” Truth can only be found, they insisted, by analyzing facts on the ground, not by reciting quotations from the printed page.

The issue of how best to seek truth was addressed head on at an important Party political work conference held in the spring of 1978. At that meeting, Deng launched a sharp attack on the very concept of “whateverism”; and in the process he neatly hoisted Hua Guofeng and his fellow loyalists on their own Maoist petard. Said Deng:

“Some comrades maintain that those who persist in seeking truth from facts . . . are guilty of a heinous crime… In their view, one need only parrot what was said by Marx, Lenin, and Comrade Mao Zedong --that it is enough [just] to reproduce their words mechanically…. [But] Comrade Mao Zedong admonished all comrades in the party not to “regard quotations from Marxist-Leninist works as a ready-made panacea which… can cure all maladies.” . . . Comrade Mao Zedong [repeatedly] pointed out that correct ideas “come from social practice, and from it alone. . . ; there is no other way of testing truth.”(Deng Xiaoping, Selected Works, pp. 128-31)

After the work conference ended, the beleaguered members of Hua’s loyalist faction tried to blunt Deng Xiaoping’s attack by claiming that Deng had one-sidedly and disingenuously employed Mao’s words to “cut down the banner of Mao’s Thought.” (Zhengming (Hong Kong) No. 34, August 1980, p. 51) But their counterattack failed to generate traction, and by the early summer of 1978 it was apparent that Deng had succeeded in capturing the ideological high ground with his “seek truth from facts” salvo. Thereafter, his offensive against “whateverism” rapidly gained momentum, and a bandwagon effect took shape, as a growing number of party and army leaders began publishing articles echoing Deng’s position in the mass media.

After opening the door to questions about Mao’s infallibility, Deng next sought to cast doubt on other aspects of the Maoist legacy—including the Chairman’s presumptive right to appoint his own heir and successor. Deng’s supporters now decried this practice as a remnant of China’s “feudal” past, and a clear violation of the Communist Party’s long-established principle of “collective leadership.” (Conveniently, Deng’s friends never mentioned the embarrassing fact that for over forty years Mao had made all the important decisions by himself, and that not even his top associates—including Deng Xiaoping himself—had openly or directly challenged Mao’s singular dominance over policy making. Like so many other lofty Communist Party principles, the norm of collective leadership had been honored far more in the breach than in the observance)
Deng also began to question the propriety of Mao’s frequent, angry attacks on China’s hapless intellectuals. In 1978 Deng called for an across-the-board reclassification of all so-called “brain workers” (including scientists, teachers, artists and writers) from the ideologically suspect category of “bourgeois intellectuals” to the more politically neutral category of ordinary “working people.” With a single stroke of the rhetorical pen, Deng thus welcomed them into the ranks of “the people”-- no longer to be reviled or discriminated against as class enemies.

Deng also hit hard at the “gang of four” for sabotaging China's educational system. He chided the radicals for opposing unified college entrance examinations and academic achievement standards of any kind. And in a clear reference to the famous “blank examination” case involving Zhang Tiesheng, Deng openly derided the view that “the more book learning [one has], the more reactionary [one becomes].” (Peking Review, May 5, 1978, p. 7)

As his offensive gathered added steam in mid 1978, Deng called for sending large numbers of Chinese students and scholars abroad to receive advanced training in the West. Toward this end, he supported a plan to establish "sister institution" relations between a number of leading Chinese universities and their American counterparts. I happened to stumble upon this latter plan quite by accident during my 1978 travels with the American computer science delegation. Here’s what happened.

While our delegation was on a visit to the campus of Nanjing University, I requested a tour of the university’s library—which was reputed to be one of the finest in all of China. Accompanied by a local professor of Chinese history, I was deeply impressed by the library’s incredible collection of original historical materials. On a whim I asked my host if it would be possible, in the future, for myself, or any of my UCLA colleagues, to access these archives on a regular basis.

He hesitated for a moment, then asked me to repeat the name of my university. I replied, Jiazhou daxue Losanjī –“UCLA”-- whereupon he shook his head discouragingly. “That won't be possible,” he said. “I’m afraid only those scholars from the University of Wisconsin will be allowed access to our library. UCLA professors will have to go to Zhongshan Daxue [Sun Yat-sen University] in Guangzhou.”

Taken aback by his response, I asked for clarification. He told me then that Deng Xiaoping had recently proposed to establish a set of “sister university” relationships between China’s ten leading institutions of higher learning and their American counterparts. Since this was the first that I, or any American, had heard of such a plan (it had not been made public), I pressed my host for additional details. He proceeded to lay out a full list of ten proposed pairings, which included institutional ties linking Peking University with Harvard; Tsinghua University with MIT; Fudan University (in Shanghai) with U.C. Berkeley; Nanjing University with Wisconsin; and Sun Yat-sen University with UCLA.
There seemed to be a clear logic to the pairings, which sought to match institutions with similar academic profiles. The list had evidently been prepared by people with extensive academic experience in America.

As soon as our visit to Nanjing ended, I telephoned a friend at the U.S. Information Agency in Beijing, and recounted my recent conversation. He took down the information and promptly alerted his State Department superiors that a major Chinese educational initiative was in the offing.

It was a real coup, and I was excited about the possibilities that lay ahead. (Postscript: Armed with this knowledge, my university, UCLA, was able to stay one step ahead of the other paired American universities; and when the two countries formally established diplomatic relations in January 1979, I was part of the very first academic exchange delegation to visit the PRC.)

Deng’s efforts to upgrade China’s educational and technological capabilities was given further impetus when a group of CCP officials visited Tokyo in the fall of 1978 to negotiate a peace treaty with Japan. Since the onset of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, few of China’s top leaders had traveled outside the Soviet block; and fewer still had ever visited a capitalist country. Meanwhile, as China turned inward for two decades, the so-called “dragon economies” of East and Southeast Asia—Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan—had dramatically outstripped China in economic performance and modernization. So when a group of Chinese leaders—including Deng Xiaoping himself—arrived in Japan in the autumn of 1978, they were visibly taken aback by what they saw. Stunned by Japan’s advanced levels of industrial development, technological sophistication, and consumer affluence, members of Deng’s delegation returned to China determined to modernize China's socialist economy as rapidly as possible, and by any means necessary.

Soon afterward, the slogan “Reform and opening up” became Deng’s new universal mantra; and his long-discredited 1962 aphorism was now revived: “It doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice.”

Though the similarities between Hua Guofeng’s “Four Modernizations” and Deng Xiaoping’s new policies of “reform and opening up” were greater than their differences, Hua nonetheless stood on the wrong side of a major historical divide. He was—and always would be—irrevocably tied to Chairman Mao’s coattails. By contrast, Deng was much freer to experiment with new institutions, new economic mechanisms, and new ways of thinking.

With support for Deng growing within the higher levels of the CCP apparatus, his allies began to make sweeping proposals for economic reform. One important proposal called for ending Mao’s widely-criticized policy of requiring each Chinese county to achieve basic economic self-reliance in food and small-scale industrial production. This led to wasteful redundancies in local manufacturing (for example, each country was required to have its own machine tool factories and power plants), as well as serious irrationalities in
crop planting patterns (since each country was mandated to become self-sufficient in staple grains regardless of the suitability of soil, climate, or local market conditions. Mao’s insistence on such production redundancies stemmed from his fear of a Soviet military assault, and his belief that local self-sufficiency was the best way to ensure that China would survive such an attack.

But now, with the threat of a Soviet attack waning, Deng’s economic advisers argued for permitting regional and even local economic specialization based on conventional notions of “comparative advantage” – with some areas concentrating on food grain and others on cash crops or processed foods. This, in turn, required the creation of larger inter-regional and even national transport and marketing networks, which was yet a strong priority of Deng’s reform team.

Another important proposal floated in 1978 called for introducing “economic methods” to replace the existing system of centralized planning, resource allocation, and pricing. In place of such top-down control, state enterprises would now be permitted, on their own initiative, to sign legally-binding contracts with their suppliers and end-users, with the pricing of both inputs and finished products to be based on laws of supply and demand, i.e., the “invisible hand.” A related proposal called for giving enterprise managers greater personal responsibility in setting production targets, in awarding pay raises and bonuses to workers, and in hiring and firing workers and staff. Black cats, white cats, indeed!

Each of these proposals went well beyond Hua Guofeng’s more limited proposals for administrative reform, and Hua’s loyalists did their best to block them. But as support for Deng’s reforms snowballed, control of the media was wrested away from the loyalists, who found it harder and harder to have their views publicized and promoted.

Throughout the late summer and autumn of 1978, the Deng machine gathered momentum. Around the country, remnant leftists and their collaborators were gradually dislodged from their local strongholds, while one after another, China’s provincial party and military leaders lined up in support of Deng’s reforms. It was a classic “bandwagon effect.” Sensing Deng’s imminent victory, officials up and down the line cut their losses and signed on to the new regime.

As autumn deepened, the mass media published a number of outspoken articles on sensitive subjects, including a critique of the cult of Mao-worship. There were even open journalistic allusions to the "blood-soaked legacy" of the Cultural Revolution. A new exhortation to "emancipate thinking" (jiefang sixiang) began to gain currency as a catchword of the new pragmatism.

Slowly but surely, the ideological categories, “sacred cows” and “forbidden zones” constructed by leftists between 1966 and 1976 came under assault. For the most part, Mao himself was exempted from direct, open criticism in this period; but some oblique, poison-tipped arrows were now being aimed in his general direction.
November 1978 was a historic watershed in the annals of post-Mao China. In Beijing the winds of change were blowing with gale force as a Central Committee working conference was convened on November 10. At this important meeting, which lasted for more than a month, several senior CCP military chiefs, political leaders and economic planners issued a strong appeal to “reverse the verdicts” on a group of sixty-one high-level victims of Cultural Revolution purges, all of whom had been wrongfully persecuted by leftists.

One by one, Deng’s friends and supporters attacked both the architects and the architecture of the Cultural Revolution. Leading the charge was Chen Yun, Deng’s close friend and the Party’s senior economic theorist. Like Deng himself, Chen Yun had been a long-time critic of the Great Leap Forward. In his scathing review of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution decade, Chen directed the brunt of his criticism at Mao’s newly-deceased security chief, Kang Sheng, for having created a brutal reign of terror within the Party. (You will recall from an earlier lecture that it was Kang Sheng who had compiled and maintained detailed personal dossiers on all top Party leaders for more than 30 years. Kang knew where all the skeletons were hidden, and during the Cultural Revolution he had deliberately leaked confidential personal information about Liu Shaoqi, Peng Dehui, Peng Zhen and others to radical Red Guards and “revolutionary rebels,” who then used this information to persecute Mao’s designated “enemies.”) Chen's passionate denunciation of Kang Sheng evoked a wave of sympathetic responses from members of the Central Committee, many of whom now began to demand a reassessment of a wide range of Cultural Revolution-related persecutions.

Chen Yun concluded his long rant against the purveyors of Cultural Revolutionary chaos by insisting that it was not enough simply to absolve Deng Xiaoping of responsibility for the “counterrevolutionary” incident of April 1976. Arguing that the masses had been perfectly justified in displaying grief for the passing of Zhou Enlai, and in venting their anger at Jiang Qing for persecuting him, Chen insisted that Tiananmen incident itself must be resoundingly affirmed as a “fully revolutionary” event.

Listening to Chen Yun’s speech, Hua Guofeng must have felt like the air was being sucked out of the room. Aware that the tide had turned decisively against him, he tried valiantly to salvage what little prestige he had left. Prodded by Chen and others who had been chipping away obliquely at Mao’s reputation for infallibility, Hua issued an open apology to the Central Committee, in which he humbly acknowledged that the placing of wreaths at the foot of the Heroes Monument in Tiananmen Square had been “completely revolutionary.” In the event, however, Hua’s self-criticism was a case of too little, too late..

In his closing address to the Central Committee work conference, Deng Xiaoping did not gloat over his stunning triumph over Hua; nor did he call for his rival’s ouster. Instead, took the high road, calling for the Communist Party to unite to meet the profound challenges of the new era: “Practice is continuously developing,” said Deng. “Engels never rode on an airplane; Stalin did not wear dacron…. We must study the new situation

When the decision to reverse the Tiananmen verdict was publicly announced in the mass media in mid-November, it created an immediate surge of popular enthusiasm. Equally electrifying were the effects of two other announcements that appeared in the media on the same day. One of these conveyed the Central Committee’s decision to rehabilitate the remaining victims of Mao’s 1957 "anti-Rightist rectification campaign"; while the other contained a scathing rebuke of Yao Wenyuan’s toxic 1965 essay denouncing Wu Han’s opera, “The Dismissal of Hai Rui” as a “poisonous weed.” At one stroke, three of Chairman Mao's most controversial initiatives--his crackdown on “bourgeois intellectuals,” his decision to launch the Cultural Revolution; and his verdict on the wreath-laying incident at Tiananmen--were decisively rescinded. Gone, too, was Mao's carefully nurtured reputation for wisdom and perspicacity. And along with it went any chance that Hua Guofeng might be able to salvage his political authority. By December 1978, to coin a phrase, Hua Guofeng was toast.

With Deng’s decisive victory in the late fall of 1978, the decisive stage of China's post-Mao succession struggle came to an end. Mao's wife and her three Shanghai cronies were imprisoned and powerless; Mao's self-designated heir was politically isolated and marginalized; Mao's judgment was conceded to be fallible; and Mao's policies were being openly criticized. Though Deng stopped short of demanding Hua Guofeng’s resignation, he and his supporters now held all the high cards. Very soon, Deng Xiaoping would use his considerable leverage to usher in the most dramatic economic reforms in the history of world Communism.

Deng Xiaoping’s rise to the status of “paramount leader” was officially confirmed at the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee. Held at the conclusion of the November 1978 party work conference, this meeting marked a major watershed in modern Chinese history—closing out the Mao era and ushering in the era of reform.

As its first order of business, the plenum declared an immediate shift in the main focus of party work away from the Maoist goal of promoting class struggle to the pragmatic pursuit of economic growth and “socialist modernization”. In pursuit of these new goals, a decision was made to begin decentralizing, rationalizing, and incentivizing the Chinese national economy (specific measures for achieving this would come later). Third, and closely related, was a declared commitment to henceforth abandon Maoist-style mass mobilization campaigns in favor of more routinized, low-key methods of policy implementation.

Fourth, was a decision to rehabilitate large numbers of Party officials who had been toppled during the Cultural Revolution. Among those whose verdicts were now reversed were Marshal Peng Dehuai, the hero of the Lushan Plenum; and Peng Zhen, the former mayor of Beijing. Also exonerated were Lo Ruiqing, the ex-PLA Chief of Staff, and Bo Yibo, the Party’s chief financial planner, both of whom had dared to question Mao’s infallibility. These and other “revolutionary heroes” had been brutally humiliated, beaten and incarcerated by “revolutionary rebels” during the Cultural Revolution; and now they were cleared of all wrongdoing—in some cases, posthumously.

Fifth, and finally, in an effort to prevent a repetition of uncontrolled autocratic leadership and Cultural Revolution-style chaos, the Third Plenum committed the CCP to strengthening the basic institutions of collective leadership, socialist democracy, and socialist legality.

In their bold sweep and far-reaching implications, these reforms seemed to represent a confirmation of Newton’s second law of motion: Every action produces an equal but opposite reaction. It was as though the chaotic policies of the past two decades had called forth their exact antitheses. In any event, it was a stunning display of historical dialectics in action. In this and in following lectures, we shall consider the nature and consequences of these path-breaking reforms in greater detail.

As we saw earlier, Deng Xiaoping’s ascent to power in 1978 received a strong boost from his ability to skillfully tap into deep-seated anger and resentment within the Party over the nightmarish Cultural Revolution. But equally important was Deng’s uncanny ability to connect with the hopes and aspirations of hundreds of millions of ordinary Chinese—the long-neglected laobaixing.

As an illustration of Deng’s popularity with the masses, around time of the 3rd Plenum the streets of Beijing were spontaneously decorated with thousands of small bottles draped from fenceposts and lampposts around the city. The small bottles were a sign of
welcome, hailing the return of the diminutive (4’11”-tall) Deng Xiaoping, whose given name—Xiaoping-- meaning “small peace,” can also be read as a homophone for “small bottle.”

(In a rather chilling historical footnote to this episode, in the aftermath of the bloody Tiananmen crackdown a decade later, in June of 1989, thousands of small broken bottles were hung from fenceposts and lightposts around Beijing, signifying that Deng Xiaoping had broken the trust of the people. But that lay some distance in the future. For the moment, at the end of 1978, Deng enjoyed an enormous wave of popularity.)

Being an extremely canny politician (among other things), Deng sought to take maximal advantage of his newfound popularity (and the equally intense unpopularity of the previous regime). Nowhere was this better illustrated than in the fascinating saga of “Democracy Wall.”

In November of 1978, when the Central Committee reversed the verdict on the Tiananmen wreath-laying incident of April 1976, citizens of Beijing celebrated by posting dazibao on a two-hundred-meter stretch of city wall along Chang’an Blvd, Beijing’s main thoroughfare, west of Tiananmen Square near the Xidan market. Dubbed Minzhuqiang (“Democracy Wall”), the wall at Xidan soon became the focal point for a remarkable display of free, unfettered public political discourse. (show photo of Democracy Wall)

As we saw in earlier lectures, wall-posters have long served as both a pressure release valve and as an informal conduit for disseminating “inside” information and opinion in China. In the spring of 1978, the people's right to post dazibao was enshrined in a new state constitution, along with the right to engage in “big debates” and “big blooming and contending.” The idea—redolent of the 1957 Hundred Flowers movement—was to allow the masses to express themselves more freely and openly, and thereby relieve pent-up frustration.

Among the many diverse opinions and ideas expressed in posters at Xidan Wall in the fall of 1978, three inter-related themes stood out: First was a spontaneous expression of relief that the mourners of April 1976 had been fully vindicated; second was an outpouring of bitter emotions directed against the tyranny of the “gang of four” and their lieutenants; and third was mounting criticism of Hua Guofeng’s “whateverist faction,” which was now derisively referred to as a “xiao siren bang,” or “little gang of four.”

By late November the wall posters at Xidan had begun to attract considerable attention. Individually and in small groups, citizens of Beijing gathered there to read the latest dazibao and participate in an unprecedented public discussion of pressing national issues.

Initially Deng Xiaoping was supportive of the new climate of “free speech,” since it served to reinforce his own claim to political legitimacy as well as highlighting Hua Guofeng’s shortcomings. In a meeting with a group of visiting Japanese politicians in late November, Deng himself warmly endorsed the appearance of the wall posters,
saying, “We do not have the right to deny…the blossoming of democracy….If the people are angry we must let them blow off steam.” All but lost in the excitement over Deng’s endorsement was the important caveat he added at the end: Mao Zedong must not be criticized. (New York Times, Nov 27, 1978).

When news of Deng’s conditional endorsement spread throughout the city, the crowds at Xidan Wall and other public venues in and around Tiananmen Square quickly swelled. Within a relatively short time, what had begun as a small fringe movement of disaffected youths, workers and former Red Guards was transformed from the realm of guerrilla theater for the few into participatory democracy for the many.

Now, Xidan activists became bolder and more outspoken. At the end of November a startling sixty-six-page wall poster appeared on Mao's Memorial Hall at the south end of Tiananmen Square. Its anonymous authors boldly called on the Chinese people to rise up and “settle accounts” with all dictators, “no matter who they are.” Also called for-- in violations of Deng’s explicit prohibition--was a reassessment of Mao's fallibilities and shortcomings. One audacious poster writer dared to suggest a clear link between Mao and the traitorous conspiracies of Lin Biao and the gang of four:

“[Just] Ask yourself: How could Lin Biao reach power without the support of Mao? Ask yourself: Did Mao not know that Jiang Qing . . . [and] Zhang Chunqiao [were] traitors? Ask yourself: Without the consent of Mao, would it have been possible for the Gang of Four to launch the campaign against Deng Xiaoping? Ask yourself: Without the consent of Mao, would it have been possible to label the Tiananmen episode a counter-revolutionary incident?” (author’s personal translation, quoted in Baum, Burying Mao, p. 71)

By early December, as the wall poster movement spread from Beijing to Shanghai, Wuhan, Guangzhou and other major cities, a unifying theme began to emerge among the disparate groups participating in the new movement: the call for political democratization and respect for human rights as prerequisites of successful economic modernization. As one Xidan dazibao put it:

China's system of government is modeled on the Russian system [which] produces bureaucracy and a privileged stratum. Without changes in this system, the “four modernizations” will stop halfway . . . , as in Russia where the state is strong and the people are poor. . . . We need a state where all delegates are elected and responsible to the people. (ibid., p. 73 )

If, at this point, you are beginning to experience a frisson of déjà vu-- the sense that you’ve seen this all before—you are not mistaken. For this does indeed resemble something we encountered in an earlier lecture—to wit, the suddenly shifting dynamics of the 1957 “100 Flowers” movement. Like that earlier campaign, Democracy Wall began as a “cleansing breeze” of honest, unfettered speech, but soon morphed into a bitter indictment of the entire political establishment.
Like Mao Zedong in the late spring of 1957, Deng Xiaoping now grew visibly irritated with the irreverence and “ultra-liberalism” of some of the posters at Democracy Wall. In response, he sternly repeated his earlier warning against direct criticism of Mao and of the Chinese political system.

Undeterred, however, a few bold activists responded by openly chiding Deng for trying to curb free speech. One poster-writer admonished: “Vice-Premier Deng, you are wrong, completely wrong. . . . There is no doubt that, a long time ago, the Chinese people took note of Chairman Mao's mistakes. Those who hate the Gang of Four cannot fail to have grievances against Chairman Mao.” (ibid.)

Another particularly controversial statement came from a twenty-eight-year-old electrician-turned-political activist named Wei Jingsheng, whose lengthy wall poster, entitled “Democracy--The Fifth Modernization,” appeared at Xidan Wall on December 5. The writer began by noting that the hopes and aspirations of the Chinese people had been greatly raised by the arrest of the “gang of four” and the return to power of Deng Xiaoping; but these expectations had been dashed when the new leaders turned out to be nearly as rigid and undemocratic as the old ones. Here is what Wei Jingsheng said:

[When] Vice-Premier Deng finally returned to his leading post . . . how excited people were, how inspired. . . . When Deng Xiaoping raised the slogan of “getting down to business” . . . the people wanted to "seek truth from facts," to investigate the past. . . . But “some people” warned us: . . . Chairman Mao is the great savior of the Chinese people. . . . If you don't agree with this you will come to no good end! . . . Regrettably, the old political system so hated by the people was not changed, the democracy and freedom they hoped for could not even be mentioned. . . . When people ask for democracy they are only asking for something they rightfully own. . . . [Under such circumstances] are not the people justified in seizing power from the overlords? (ibid., pp. 73-74)

By the turn of the New Year, 1979, the political climate in Beijing contained a curious mix of palpable excitement tinged with anxiety and uncertainty. After decades of stifling political conformity, revolutionary chaos and economic mismanagement, the Chinese capital seemed to be waking up from a prolonged slumber. Poised on the knife-edge of momentous changes, Beijing was coming alive politically. But where would it all lead? Where would it end? No-one could say.

Here let me insert an autobiographical note: It was at this critical juncture in China’s post-Mao transition—early January 1979-- that I arrived at Beijing’s international airport with nine of my UCLA colleagues. Officially, we were there to negotiate academic exchange agreements with Sun Yat-sen University and the Chinese Ministry of Education. But what really made my pulse quicken was the anticipation of being able to observe—and perhaps even participate in—the extraordinary conversations about China’s
future that were being conducted daily at Democracy Wall. For a political scientist, it was like being present at the creation of a new nation—or so it seemed.

Fortunately, our group was booked into the Peking Hotel, which was just a stone’s throw from Tiananmen Square. The date was January 9, 1979. Once the UCLA delegation had checked into our hotel rooms, I set out on foot for Tiananmen Square. Despite the bone-chilling cold of early January, the Square was alive with activity. Clusters of people were gathered around the base of the Heroes’ Monument at the center of the Square, which was now festooned with elaborate floral wreaths commemorating the third anniversary of Zhou Enlai’s death. Wall posters attached to the monument’s balustrades welcomed the news that several prominent former Communist Party leaders, disgraced during the Cultural Revolution, had been rehabilitated at the 3rd Plenum.

On a temporary plywood construction wall along the eastern edge of Tiananmen Square a huge multi-panel poster had been put up, containing excerpts from Thomas Paine’s classic American revolutionary broadside, “The Rights of Man.” (show photo of this poster) The poster exhorted Chinese citizens to demand democratic reform and human rights. Many passages in the poster’s dozen or more 3’x5’ panels had been underscored for emphasis by eager readers using red and black marking pens. It was an incredibly vibrant scene, as scores of people engaged in passionate (but civil) discussions about China’s past and future.

When one group of ardent young debaters discovered a Chinese-speaking foreigner in their midst—an American at that—they began peppering me with questions about American democracy, human rights and President Jimmy Carter. It was all very exhilarating.

Eventually I made my getaway, and continued my journey westward, past Tiananmen Square to Xidan Wall. There I saw hundreds of hastily scrawled notices (called xiaozibao, or “small-character posters”), many addressed to individual Chinese leaders, containing detailed descriptions of horrendous persecution and suffering endured by Chinese citizens during the Cultural Revolution. (show crowd scene at Democracy Wall)

In some cases the authors named their tormentors, appealing to the authorities for long-overdue justice. Other entreaties were posted by educated urban youths, sent down to the countryside during the “rustication” (xiaxiang) campaign at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Thousands of these exiled young people were now flocking back—illegally—to Beijing and other large cities in hopes of having their cases reviewed and their urban household registration permits restored.
Most of the petitioners were poor; and many were in visibly dire straits. Some had traveled long distances on foot, carrying their possessions in knotted bundles; others had hitched rides into the city on freight trains or trucks. Gathering in clusters near railroad stations and around the city center, petitioners took to begging food or peddling small household items while waiting for their cases to be reopened. One foreign journalist described a group of petitioners, living in squalor at a temporary encampment, as having come “straight out of a Goya painting . . . sick, on crutches, dressed in rags and tatters, wretchedly poverty-stricken.” (Translated in Baum, ibid, p. 76.)

Taking all this in, I was overwhelmed with the sheer pathos of it all. The deep, silent scars of a long-suffering people were being exposed to the light. Old wounds were being torn open, old antagonisms aired. A national catharsis was in progress. It was painful, yet fascinating, to watch.

As I prepared to return to my hotel, one “small character poster” caught my eye. Scrawled hastily in black ink against a pink background, under the heading “gonggao” (“public announcement”), it called on those Chinese who had “suffered persecution at the hands of the gang of four” to assemble in Tiananmen Square for a protest demonstration at 1:00 pm on the following Sunday. (show photo of Fu Yuehua’s poster) The poster bore the name of the demonstration’s principal organizer, Fu Yuehua.

Fu was a 32-year old female construction worker who had been fired from her job after she reported being raped by the Party secretary in her work unit. Unable to gain a fair hearing, Fu soon became impoverished, suffering a nervous breakdown. Later she organized rural petitioners and “sent-down youth” in Beijing to demand an end to hunger and oppression in China. I made a mental note of the date of her scheduled demonstration—Sunday, January 14.

As it happened, January 14 was our last full day in Beijing, and our delegation had scheduled a final, all-day negotiating session with the Ministry of Education. The meeting was held in a conference room on an upper floor of the Peking Hotel. As the day wore on we were getting close to a final agreement on future academic exchanges. At that point my one of my colleagues got up to stretch his legs. Strolling over to a nearby window, he looked out. After a moment or two he came back to the conference table. As he passed my chair, he whispered, “Take a look outside.”

I waited a few moments, then sauntered casually over to the window. Looking down at the street below, I saw hundreds of demonstrators marching slowly, in uneven columns, along Chang an Boulevard toward Tiananmen Square to the west. They carried banners (in Chinese) proclaiming “End hunger,” “We want jobs,” and “Human rights and democracy.” Our double-glazed windows were shut tight against the cold, so I couldn’t hear their chants. But their meaning was clear enough.

At the head of the procession marched a woman I assumed to be Fu Yuehua. I watched for a few minutes, fascinated. Now, if this had been Berkeley, where I went to graduate school in the turbulent 1960s, such a demonstration would have drawn hardly any
notice at all. But this was not Berkeley, it was Beijing. And it was broad daylight. And the protestors were marching toward Tiananmen Square along the most famous boulevard in the country—scene of the May 4th Movement of 1919 and Mao Zedong’s proclamation of the birth of the PRC in 1949. It was mind-boggling.

Reluctantly, I went back to the conference table. Over the next twenty minutes or so, I kept looking at my watch, my pulse pounding, wanting the meeting to end. I wondered if our Chinese hosts had any inkling of what was going on outside—or if they even cared.

Just before dusk we reached a final agreement with the Ministry. The appropriate documents were signed, and there were smiles and handshakes all around. I immediately dashed out to the nearest stairwell, bounding down half a dozen flights of steps. By the time I hit the street twilight was closing in, and no demonstrators were in sight. It was bitterly cold, with a chill wind blowing from the northwest. I turned up my collar and jogged as fast as I could toward Tiananmen, but could see no unusual activity in the Square. Continuing on, I spotted movement in the road ahead. By the time I reached the well-guarded front entrance to Zhongnanhai, a half mile further on, it was getting dark.

A minor traffic jam was causing confusion. Winded from my exertion, I could make out the silhouettes of perhaps 150 people sitting down in the street, still carrying their banners. They shouted no slogans, but merely sat quietly in front of the CCP leaders’ residential compound, blocking traffic on Beijing’s busiest thoroughfare. The guards in front of Zhongnanhai stood rigidly at attention, unblinking. At the edge of the crowd I watched, fascinated, wishing I had brought my camera. After about 15 more minutes of this silent vigil, people began to disperse, in groups of three or four. Fu Yuehua was one of the last to leave. By now it was almost totally dark. I tried to approach Fu, but two of her associates nudged me aside, fearful of having her photographed by police in the company of a Westerner.

Fu Yuehua’s audacity was stunning. She had succeeded in organizing a large-scale, peaceful display of civil disobedience. But her triumph was short-lived. Four days later, on January 18, the Beijing municipal police, alarmed by the rising boldness of the petitioners’ movement, arrested Fu, making her the first known political casualty of the Democracy Wall Movement. By then, however, my UCLA colleagues and I had returned to Los Angeles, where we could only read with alarm the news of mounting police harassment of pro-democracy activists. We had no way of knowing then that Fu Yuehua’s petitioners’ demonstration of January 14 had touched off an intense, heated debate within the Chinese leadership over the limits of allowable expression; nor could we know that another seven years would elapse before the next pro-democracy demonstration would be held in Tiananmen Square.

But the news about Fu Yuehua’s protest and incarceration was all but drowned out by a far bigger news story that crested at the turn of the New Year, 1979. After seven years of chronic dithering, the United States and China, in a fresh burst of diplomatic initiative, at long last completed their process of normalization. A new era in US-China relations was
about to begin. In the next lecture we will examine this unexpected breakthrough in Sino-American diplomacy.

When Deng Xiaoping first launched his program of “reform and opening up” in 1978, he made a vital strategic calculation, namely, that if the program was to succeed, it would need a positive response from the United States. As the dominant global commercial power, America guarded the gates to international trade, technology and finance. Only the Americans could provide the international access needed to help China to achieve a smooth economic liftoff.

But relations with the United States had hit a snag after the initial, spectacular success of the Nixon-Mao “opening” of February 1972. During Richard Nixon’s 1972 re-election campaign, a team of security experts employed by the Republican National Committee botched an attempted burglary at the headquarters of the Democratic Party at the Watergate apartment complex in Washington DC. Nixon’s role in covering up the Watergate burglary and resultant scandal led to his resignation in disgrace in 1974.

Thereafter, US-China relations drifted inconclusively for several years.

To be sure, there was some expansion of informal relations of trade, technology transfer, and cultural exchange. Shortly after the Nixon visit, for example, a Chinese ping-pong team became the first group of private PRC citizens (excluding the Chinese UN Mission in New York) to venture onto American soil since 1949. This was followed shortly by basketball and orchestral exchanges, among others. In 1973 the two countries established unofficial diplomatic missions in their respective capitals, called “Liaison Offices”; and companies such as Boeing Aircraft and Pullman-Kellogg became the first major American firms to get a foot in the door of the newly-opening China market.

Notwithstanding these early business deals and cultural exchanges, there was little tangible progress on the diplomatic front after 1972. And it was not just Nixon’s untimely downfall that impeded the progress of normalization. Within China, there were continuing obstructions as well.

In an earlier lecture we noted that both Jiang Qing and Lin Biao had strongly opposed Zhou Enlai’s policy of “sleeping with the enemy.” Mme. Mao, you may recall, had tried, unsuccessfully, to disrupt preparations for President Nixon’s visit. And Lin had resisted rapprochement with the Americans right up to the point of his fatal airplane crash in September 1971. Although Lin’s death cleared a path for Zhou Enlai to consolidate his diplomatic breakthrough with Henry Kissinger, Jiang Qing remained steadfast in her opposition.

Signs of left-wing defiance became even stronger as the political infighting in China heated up in 1974 and 1975. By that time, with Mao’s blessing, cultural exchanges between China and the United States had become a regular occurrence. The one major rule governing the exchanges, which was agreed upon by both sides, was that they were to be totally non-political in nature: no propaganda; no polemics, and no proselytizing allowed.
Since there were no official diplomatic contacts between the two countries at that time, all bilateral exchanges had to be arranged informally, by non-governmental organizations. On the American side, there were two NGOs that helped organized and administer the exchange programs: one was the Committee on Scholarly Communication with China, set up by the National Academy of Sciences, which was responsible for coordinating scientific and technical exchanges; the other was the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, which handled cultural exchanges.

The National Committee on US-China Relations had been established in 1966 to educate American opinion leaders about China. Eight years later, in 1974, I was invited to join the Committee’s board of directors. Shortly thereafter, in 1975, I got my first personal taste of Jiang Qing’s efforts to derail the normalization process.

In the early spring of 1975 I received a phone call from the National Committee headquarters in New York, asking if I’d be interested in accompanying a delegation of American mayors to China. They were due to go in September. I was ecstatic. I had been studying China from afar for more than a decade—first as a graduate student in Berkeley, then doing doctoral research in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and finally as a tenured professor at UCLA. Naturally I was thrilled to go. I immediately renewed my passport and hired a tutor to help me polish my conversational Chinese.

All too soon, however, ecstasy turned to agony. Just two weeks after receiving my invitation, Jiang Qing struck again. A Chinese performing arts troupe was scheduled to arrive in the US in April. At the last minute, however the Chinese side abruptly informed the National Committee that it was adding a new vocal number to the troupe’s announced American repertory. The newly inserted song contained the following lyric: *Taiwan tongbao, qilai; women yiding yao jiefang nimen!* – “Taiwan compatriots, arise. We shall certainly liberate you!”

This was in clear violation of the “no politics, no propaganda” rule for cultural exchanges. After hasty phone conference with State Department advisors, the directors of the National Committee informed the Chinese side that the proposed program change was unacceptable. The Chinese responded by peremptorily canceling the tour.

I began to panic. September was close at hand. Would there be additional fallout from this incident? More to the point, would my delegation of U.S. mayors be cancelled in retaliation?

Seeing my fondest hopes on the verge of being dashed, I immediately picked up the phone and called National Committee’s senior administrator in New York. “What’s the next delegation leaving for China?” I asked urgently. “In two months,” was the reply, “the AAU national track and field team.” Without a moment’s hesitation, I requested a swap: I offered to give up my September gig with the mayors if I could hitch a ride with
the track and field team in May. After a few hasty phone calls, my proposal was accepted.

(Footnote: it so happened that my hunch was correct: As “payback” for the American veto of the Taiwan liberation song, the Chinese side refused to issue a visa to a key member of the U.S. mayors’ delegation. Predictably, the National Committee responded by canceling the mayors’ trip altogether—tit for tat. But by that time, I had already completed my China tour with the US track and field team—a trip that had culminated in my awkward and wholly unsuccessful effort to chat up the Chinese Communist Party’s future Chairman and “wise leader,” Hua Guofeng.)

Of course, Jiang Qing was elated by the U.S. side’s cancellation of the mayors’ delegation. There could be no doubt that she had been the architect of the musical “Taiwan liberation” incident that had triggered the series of cancelled exchanges. As China’s culture czar, her authority over the performing arts world was supreme. No-one else could have issued such instructions with such impunity.

Encouraged by her success in temporarily derailing the cultural exchange process, Jiang Qing redoubled her efforts to sabotage the budding U.S.-China relationship. Her efforts peaked in February of 1976, when President Nixon and his wife Pat made their second trip to China. The occasion was the fourth anniversary of the Nixons’ first triumphal visit of February 1972.

This time, however, China was a nearly rudderless country. Zhou Enlai had died a month earlier; Mao Zedong was living out his final months in near-total seclusion in Zhongnanhai; and Hua Guofeng had only recently begun to emerge from a lifetime of relative obscurity. Thus the Nixons’ “second coming” to China was notable mainly for the absence of fanfare, pomp, and ceremony. Indeed, a major highlight of the Nixons’ second visit was an evening of musical entertainment in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People, hosted by—who else?—Jiang Qing herself.

The program included a variety of outstanding song-and-dance performances. At one point during the program Mme. Mao jumped to her feet to enthusiastically applaud a young tenor’s bravura solo performance. Politely emulating their hostess, the Nixons also rose from their seats and began clapping along with her—only to be sharply restrained by an alert U.S. State Department escort, who had recognized the inflammatory lyrics of the tenor’s song: *Taiwan tongbao, qilai; women yiding yao jiefang nimen*—“Taiwan compatriots arise; we shall certainly liberate you!”

The Nixons quickly sat back down in their seats, remaining silent until the applause faded. Thus did Jiang Qing narrowly fail in her attempt to finesse the former president of the United States into openly cheering for Taiwan’s liberation.

With Mao hovering near death, with China’s political future in limbo, and with Nixon’s successor, Gerald Ford, lacking in both the political resources and the political will
needed to push US-China relations to the next level, the mid-70s were marked by a sort of holding pattern—with no new initiatives, but no serious backsliding, either.

When Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford in the 1976 U.S. presidential election, there were few indications that a major upgrade in US-China relations was in the offing. Carter had campaigned on a platform pledging to regain the lost momentum in US-China relations, but at the same time he made it clear that America’s new friendship with the People’s Republic “must not come at the expense of the independence and freedom of the people of Taiwan.” This latter formulation clearly rankled China’s leaders; and they responded by lobbing a few rhetorical grenades at the new U.S. president, denouncing his “questionable tricks” and reaffirming the “strong and solemn resolution of the 800 million people of China to liberate Taiwan.” (above quotes in R. Baum, “Jimmy Carter and China,” Asia Mail, April 1978)

In an effort to break this impasse, President Carter sent his Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, to Beijing in August of 1977. There, according to unofficial sources, Vance sounded out the Chinese on a possible compromise arrangement with respect to Taiwan. The essence of his proposal was that the United States would be willing, in principle, to derecognize Taiwan and sever its treaty commitment to defend the island—but only in exchange for a Chinese agreement to permit the U.S. to continue “unofficial” trade and cultural relations with Taiwan; and, in addition, the United States would be permitted to continue facilitating the-sale of military hardware to the ROC government pending a final, peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the two Chinese sides themselves. Under Vance’s proposal, the bargain would be sealed either by a credible Chinese pledge not to use military force to "liberate" Taiwan; or if (as expected) the Chinese refused to issue such a pledge, by a unilateral American declaration to the effect that the continued peace and tranquility of the Taiwan Straits area constituted a vital American interest.

When the Chinese failed to respond to this initiative, Secretary Vance returned to Washington empty-handed. But in an effort to put the best possible face on Vance’s failed initiative, the White House claimed that the Secretary’s mission had made a “good beginning” toward the normalization of relations with China.

But the Chinese side refused to co-operate with this face-saving gambit. Shortly after Vance’s return, Deng Xiaoping, who had been officially rehabilitated just one month earlier, told a group of visiting American journalists that the normalization process had suffered a setback as a result of Secretary Vance’s visit. Accusing Vance of raising false hopes concerning China’s possible willingness to renounce the use of force against Taiwan, Deng categorically denied that there was any such possibility. Taiwan was Chinese territory. Full stop. China alone would decide the terms and conditions of reunification. It was none of America’s business. (Ibid)

Deng’s flat-out rejection of the Vance initiative seemed to end any hopes of advancing the normalization process during the Carter presidency. To some observers, including yours truly, it appeared that a Chinese compromise on the Taiwan question was simply
too risky, too fraught with potentially career-damaging pitfalls, to be broached by Deng so early in his comeback. Better to play it safe: stick to well-established Chinese positions and kick the can of normalization down the road for a while, at least until Deng’s contest with Hua Guofeng was settled.

But if China’s new leaders were unwilling to make a deal with the Americans in 1977, by the last half of 1978 a series of events had conspired to make them change their mind. Three things contributed to the Chinese about-face. First was Deng Xiaoping’s success in eclipsing Hua Guofeng and in promoting his own reform program. With the Communist Party now committed to all-out economic modernization and global engagement, America’s good will suddenly seemed more important than ever to Beijing. Second, the Russians had recently been making threatening military noises along China’s northern border, as well as in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. In light of such increased Soviet aggressiveness, Deng reckoned that he needed to enlist American support against the hegemonic “polar bear” to the north. And third, mirroring Deng’s own balance-of-power logic, on the American side, President Carter’s National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, convinced the president that it was now time for the United States to “play the China card” against the Soviet Union.

In May of 1978, Carter sent Brzezinski on an exploratory trip to China. In the course of that trip an unexpected diplomatic breakthrough occurred. While on a sightseeing excursion to the Great Wall with officials from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Brzezinski suddenly pointed to a long, steeply inclined stairway leading to the top of the Wall. And he then proposed a startling sporting wager: I’ll race you up, he challenged. “Last one to the top fights the Russians in Ethiopia!” He then led his Chinese hosts in an impromptu scramble up the stairs. Brzezinski won, and then stopped to chat with a group of Chinese sightseers at the top of the wall, who asked to have their picture taken with him. “Do you know that you are posing with an imperialist?” he asked them. Not so, said one of the Chinese. “We are having our photograph taken with the tamer of polar bears.” (Time, June 5, 1978)

Brzezinski’s stair-climbing challenge was music to Chinese ears. From 1974 through 1977, Presidents Ford and Carter had carefully avoided giving the appearance of any “tilt” toward either the USSR or the PRC in their ongoing war of words. The Chinese had repeatedly sought, but never obtained, an American commitment to oppose Soviet “hegemonism.” Indeed, as late as 1977 Cyrus Vance had refused to lean toward China, as he insisted on maintaining an “evenhanded” policy toward the two feuding Communist giants. Under these circumstances one only can imagine the excitement that must have surged behind the walls of the Zhongnanhai state residential compound after word of Brzezinski’s startling challenge reached the Chinese leaders living there.

At an official banquet the next evening, Brzezinski proposed a toast in which, for the first time, he specifically acknowledged a mutual Chinese-American security interest in opposing hegemonism. And he clearly stated that the United States had “made up its mind” to normalize relations with China. Though he did not mention the Soviet Union by name, the intended target of his remarks was clear.
Almost immediately thereafter, the two sides moved into rapid negotiation mode. The normalization talks proceeded smoothly and quickly. In July 1978 a high-level U.S. government delegation, led by President Carter’s science advisor, arrived in Beijing to discuss the initiation of Sino-American cooperation in science and technology. Although no major breakthroughs were publicly announced, the American side introduced a significant anti-Soviet initiative at this meeting: a proposal under which the United States would install a top-secret, sophisticated CIA electronic listening post in a remote area in northwest China to monitor Soviet missile tests and military communications. (At this point, the U.S. government was deeply concerned about rising political instability in Iran, and it was looking to relocate its existing surveillance facility in Northern Iran. Under the proposed arrangement, the C.I.A. would share with China all communications intelligence—known as “comint” gleaned from the operation of the new listening post.)

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing along China’s southern border, where the Vietnamese Communists—exclusive clients of the Soviet Union since the late-1960s—had been pursuing a policy of discrimination and harassment against Vietnam’s large Chinese minority population. As a result of systematic ethnic persecution, a steady stream of overseas Chinese were leaving Vietnam by boat or fleeing by land across the Chinese border to the north.

Already tense, the strained relations between China and Vietnam were further exacerbated by Vietnam’s increasing aggressiveness toward its neighbor, Cambodia. In Cambodia, a Chinese-backed Communist guerilla movement, the Khmer Rouge, had come to power in 1975, when the United States withdrew from the Indochina region. Hostility between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists had been running very high in the mid- to late-70s, reflecting both a deepening of historic ethnic tensions and the more recent effects of the deepening feud between their respective Chinese and Soviet patrons.

Adding to the tension was a brutal Khmer Rouge drive to eliminate Cambodian intellectuals as a class and to depopulate the country’s urban areas—a campaign that led, directly or indirectly, to the deaths of more than 20 percent of the country’s 8 million people.

Mutual provocations between the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge escalated steadily between 1975 and 1978, with threats, curses, and even armed incursions occurring on both sides. Finally, on Christmas Day, 1978, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia in force, driving the Khmer Rouge out of the capital city of Phnom Penh and deep into the countryside. The Vietnamese then set up a puppet regime made up of pro-Vietnamese Cambodians to replace the Khmer Rouge government.

At this point, Deng Xiaoping concluded that it would be necessary to teach Vietnam a lesson. A display of military force was needed. But six weeks earlier, Hanoi had signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union, thereby raising the probable costs of Chinese military action against Vietnam. Ever the astute bridge player, Deng
realized that he needed major “backup” of his own before daring to take on Hanoi and its Russian patrons.

Thus it was that by the late autumn of 1978, a series of major new developments—including Deng’s domestic victory over Hua Guofeng, Washington’s declared willingness to lean toward Beijing in the Sino-Soviet dispute, and Hanoi’s invasion of Cambodia—combined to convince China’s leaders that the normalization process needed to be completed with all possible speed.

Signaling his intention to move quickly, Deng stated on November 18 that he was looking forward to restoring relations with America. When the time comes, he promised, the final deal can be done in “two seconds.” (Tyler, A Great Wall, p. 260)

Immediately thereafter, the long-stalled normalization talks went into high gear. Surprisingly, the Chinese side agreed to accept almost exactly the same terms they had rejected out of hand a year earlier, when Cyrus Vance had first offered them. What a difference a year makes!

Under the terms of the normalization agreement, which was announced on December 15, the United States would terminate its diplomatic relations with Taiwan on January 1, 1979, and would thereafter recognize the PRC as the sole legal government of China. On the same date, January 1, President Carter would give notice to the ROC government on Taiwan that the United States intended to terminate the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty exactly one year hence. (An advance notice clause had been built into the Treaty itself. By giving a year’s notice, Carter was thus able to avoid the ignominy of violating a longstanding American treaty commitment.)

Also under the terms of the normalization agreement, the United States would be permitted indefinitely to maintain informal, non-governmental economic, cultural, and “other” ties (of an unspecified nature) with Taiwan.

Finally, and most controversially, over Deng Xiaoping’s strenuous objection, President Carter made a verbal declaration of his intention to continue selling U.S. arms of a “defensive nature” to Taiwan after the normalization agreement went into effect. Though Deng loudly protested that this was a clear violation of China’s sovereignty over Taiwan, he had too much at stake in the success of the normalization process to allow US arms sales to become a deal-breaker. To ease the sting, President Carter issued a personal invitation to Deng to visit the United States as soon as the normalization agreement went into effect.

Accordingly, in mid-January 1979 Deng embarked upon a triumphal tour of the United States. Like untold numbers of wide-eyed foreign visitors before him, Deng did the “tourist thing”: he donned a ten-gallon hat at the Houston Astrodome; attended the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, rode a stagecoach at a Texas rodeo, and test-piloted a NASA flight simulator. At a Kennedy Center concert in Washington DC, the orchestra played
“Getting to Know You” as Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter walked across the stage, hand in hand. For the moment, at least, all was sweetness and light.
Lecture 34: – Beyond Normalization: Deng Consolidates His Power (1979-80)

Last time, we looked at the circumstances surrounding the sudden breakthrough in US-China relations at the end of 1978. In this lecture, we shall look at the repercussions of that breakthrough, including China’s ill-fated attempt to “teach Vietnam a lesson” and Deng Xiaoping’s efforts to open China’s economy to the outside world.

Although Deng’s visit to America was widely viewed as a public relations triumph, it was not without its misunderstandings, and its occasional abrasive moments. One of the more amusing incidents occurred at a banquet held in Deng’s honor at the Lincoln Center in Washington D.C. Sitting next to China’s new “paramount leader” at the head table along with other VIPs was the Hollywood film actress Shirley McLain. During the meal, McLain told Deng how, on a recent trip to China, she had been deeply impressed by a Chinese scientist whom she had met while visiting a rural people’s commune. The scientist told her that he had once been an elitist, ivory-tower intellectual; but after studying Chairman Mao’s thought he had seen the error of his ways. Sent to the countryside in 1968 to redeem himself through farm labor, the scientist said he had been extremely happy to “serve the people” by growing cabbages rather than writing meaningless, egoistic essays. When Shirley McLain finished recounting this motivational tale of Maoist inspiration, Deng Xiaoping, ever the polite listener, looked her squarely in the eye and said earnestly, “He was lying.” (Baum, China Watcher, p. )

At another point during his American visit, at a White House meeting with President Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinksi and Cyrus Vance, Deng argued that the United States should give China “Most Favored Nation” trading status. If granted, MFN would permit Chinese goods to enter the United States at the lowest possible tariff rates—an obvious advantage to any prospective US trade partner. In response, the Americans’ reminded Deng that under congressional legislation passed a few years earlier, MFN status could only be granted to a Communist country on condition that the citizens of that country were permitted to emigrate freely abroad. When asked if China was willing to permit free emigration, Deng laughed jauntily and said “How much would you like? Is ten million [people] enough?” (Tyler, A Great Wall, p. 276). A few months later, China was granted MFN status—the very first Communist country to be so privileged.

The most unsettling moment of Deng’s January 1979 visit occurred toward the end of the trip, when he informed the White House of his solemn intention to punish Vietnam for its Christmas Day invasion of Cambodia: “We consider it necessary to restrain the wild ambitions of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate… lesson,” said Deng. (Ibid.) President Carter was clearly taken aback, and he argued strongly against Chinese military action.

But when push came to shove, Carter, too, wanted to teach the Vietnamese (and their Soviet patrons) about the perils of invading other countries. And so, having gone on
record opposing China’s plan—and thereby covering his own ass diplomatically-- Carter decided to let the Chinese do what they felt they needed to do. (Ibid., p. 277)

The attack was not long in coming. Within weeks of Deng’s return to Beijing, he launched a massive “punitive counterattack” against Vietnam. Though the State Department formally protested the Chinese attack, the U.S. government basically sat on its hands, taking no concrete action.

The fact that the United States did nothing to oppose the Chinese invasion spoke volumes about shifting great power interests in East Asia. China and the United States had now become unspoken allies in resisting aggression by the Soviet Union and its client states. Though the new partners were in many respects a very “odd couple” indeed, their mutual distrust of the USSR kept them locked in a strategic embrace for more than a decade, until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Deng’s original plan for invading Vietnam had been to launch a sudden, massive attack across a broad swath of the Sino Vietnamese border, penetrating a few dozen miles into enemy territory. There they would seize and hold a few cities and towns to demonstrate both China’s military superiority and its determination to punish Vietnamese aggression. Once Hanoi’s leaders had absorbed these lessons, the Chinese would retreat back across their own border. Mission Accomplished!

But in this instance the Vietnamese refused to play the role that Deng Xiaoping had assigned to them. Instead of displaying “shock and awe” at the initial assault (which involved 80,000 Chinese infantrymen, 200 Chinese tanks, and another 200,000 reinforcements held in ready reserve), the well-armed and battle-tested Vietnamese troops gave the invaders more than they could handle.

Right from the get-go, Chinese troops became bogged down in the dense jungle terrain south of Vietnamese border, and they suffered heavy casualties in the initial assault. Moreover, the PLA’s field maps turned out to be horribly out of date, with many of them dating back to World War I. To make matters even worse, when Chinese fighter jets flew in to provide close air cover for their advancing infantry troops, several of the planes were shot down-- by friendly fire. So thick was the “fog of war”—and the resulting confusion -- that Chinese pilots refused to fly anywhere near their own troops. (Tyler, p. 280; Fenby, Modern China, pp. 542-43).

After more than three weeks of bloody ground combat, the Chinese troops finally managed to take one of their key objectives, the city of Lang Son. (show map) After putting the city’s defenders to flight, they briefly celebrated their success—and then abruptly turned around and headed for home. But the Vietnamese blocked their escape routes; and they inflicted heavy losses on the withdrawing Chinese soldiers. In the end it took the PLA almost three weeks—and thousands of additional casualties-- to fight their way back across the border. By that time, the Chinese had lost an estimated 26,000 dead and 35,000 wounded. Casualties were also high on the Vietnamese side--including at least ten thousand civilians killed.
As the surviving Chinese troops struggled to get home, Beijing’s propagandists painted a smiley face on a very ugly situation. Declaring victory, the Chinese government claimed that the punitive campaign had been a resounding success.

But few people were fooled—least of all the Vietnamese. Not only had the mighty PLA been fought to a standstill by the smaller, more mobile Vietnamese units, but Vietnam army remained very much in control of neighboring Cambodia. When it came to summing up “lessons learned” from China’s Vietnam war, then, the clearest lesson of all was that Deng Xiaoping had suffered his first major setback as China’s new commander-in-chief.

In the aftermath of the botched Vietnam campaign, Deng was furious. He unleashed a barrage of criticism at the PLA general staff; and he resolved to thoroughly revamp the army and upgrade its fighting capacity. True to his word, over the next two years hundreds of superannuated senior generals—some of them veterans of the Long March—were forced into retirement; the army’s budget was severely slashed; and hundreds of thousands of poorly-trained, indisciplined peasant conscripts were demobilized and sent home. Perhaps most important, Mao Zedong’s sacrosanct principles of people’s war were subject to wholesale rewriting and updating for the first time in almost 50 years. When completed a few years later, the newly revised doctrine was christened “peoples war under modern conditions.”

Within the United States, China’s use of naked military force against Vietnam served to alarm members of both houses of Congress. Many Congressmen on both sides of the isle were already unhappy with Carter’s failure to extract a Chinese pledge to renounce the use of force against Taiwan. And so, less than one month after the conclusion of China’s Vietnam War, in April 1979, the US Congress voted overwhelmingly to enact the “Taiwan Relations Act,” also known simply as the TRA.

The Taiwan Relations Act was designed to clarify the nature of America’s ongoing security commitment to Taiwan. At the heart of this important piece of legislation was a strong declaration of America’s intention to prevent a Chinese military assault on Taiwan.

“It is the policy of the United States...[first] to make clear that the United States decision to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means; [second] to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, as a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area, and of grave concern to the United States; [third] to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; [and fourth] to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social...
or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.” (R. Solomon, *The China Factor*, p. 305)

When President Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act into law on April 10, the Chinese were furious. Beijing regarded the TRA as a clear violation of the “one China principle” that Carter himself had endorsed in signing the normalization agreement. (Indeed, right down to the present day, Beijing has adamantly refused to recognize the TRA as a binding component of the US-China diplomatic framework.)

By the end of his first six months at the helm in China, Deng Xiaoping had suffered significant setbacks at the hands of both Vietnam and the US Congress; but he had nonetheless succeeded in his two larger priorities, namely, enlisting American cooperation in the struggle against Soviet hegemonism, and securing U.S. support for his domestic agenda of “economic reform and opening up.” And it was to this latter agenda that Deng next turned his attention—and to which we now turn ours.

Three pressing domestic economic concerns preoccupied Deng in the spring and summer of 1979. First was the urgent need to reform China’s dysfunctional agricultural sector; second was the need to introduce productivity-enhancing incentives and quality control standards in industry, education, science and technology; and third was the need to create a series of special coastal economic zones to lure overseas trade, investment and technology to China.

In agriculture, the year 1979 witnessed the introduction of a series of experimental reforms that would radically alter the face of the Chinese countryside. Stimulated by the Third Plenum's decision to allow the country's five hundred million farmers to engage in family-based, incentive-driven agricultural production and marketing, rural areas began to experiment with the idea of contracting production to individual households—the very same systems that Deng had tried to introduce in 1962, after the collapse of the Great Leap. The difference this time was that Mao and the “gang of four” were no longer around to attack him for it.

There’s an interesting story about the revival of household farming in post-Mao China. At least a full year before the Third Plenum gave the green light to initiating such a revival, a daring—and potentially quite dangerous—experiment was begun secretly by a group of desperately poor peasants in Xiaogang Village, in Anhui province. There, in the spring of 1978, 18 villagers met one night under cover of darkness to sign a secret pact, sealed with their own blood. In it, they committed themselves to divide up the commune’s land for farming by individual families. (show photo of “blood pact”)

Although the parceling out of land went entirely against the established agricultural policy of large-scale collective farming, the experiment proved highly successful in raising food output in this perennially impoverished part of China.

When the story of Xiaogang’s success came to the attention of the Party Secretary of Anhui province a year later, in 1979, he endorsed the Xiaogang experience and
vigorously defended the villagers’ actions against the defenders of collectivist farming orthodoxy.

Soon Deng Xiaoping had also heard the story of Xiaogang; and he, too endorsed what the villagers there had done. Indeed, why wouldn’t he endorse it? Sixteen years earlier, in 1962, at the height of the famine induced by the Great Leap Forward, Deng and Liu Shaoqi had proposed a similar family-centered solution to the problem of dismally low communal farm production. On that earlier occasion, however, Deng and Liu had fallen afoul of Mao, leading to their downfall as “capitalist roaders” during the Cultural Revolution. Thereafter, the very idea of “contracting production to individual households” had been anathema in China, a “forbidden zone” where none dared venture.

But now Mao was dead and the Cultural Revolution had been discredited. And the whole country was in the mood for change. Ably assisted by his long-time comrade and top economic advisor, Chen Yun, Deng set out to test the superior mouse-catching abilities of privatized “white cats” against those of Mao’s collectivized “black cats.”

By mid-1979 decollectivization was gathering steam in the countryside. Farmers were signing multi-year contracts with village cadres to farm particular parcels of land, with each family undertaking to deliver a specified quota of grain to the state at a low fixed price, as a form of annual “rent.” Once these compulsory deliveries were made, families could grow whatever they wanted, consume what they needed, and sell the rest on the open market. They were also permitted to supplement family income by engaging in non-agricultural sideline commerce.

In addition to allowing household contract farming, the central government granted farmers an across-the-board increase of 20 percent in the purchase price paid for all compulsory grain delivered to the state. And to encourage farmers to sell even more than the compulsory minimum of grain to state purchasing agents, the price paid for above-quota grain sales was raised higher still --by a whopping 50 percent.

Within one year, the combination of household contract farming, the re-opening of rural free markets, and the higher prices paid for state grain purchases had generated substantial increases, averaging around 10 percent, in both total food production and average rural family income. Additional income and output increases were achieved annually over the next half decade, before leveling off in the mid-1980s. Evidently, Deng’s “white cats” were excellent mouse-catchers.

New measures were also introduced in late 1978 and 1979 to boost productivity and performance in state-owned industrial enterprises. In factories, across-the-board pay raises were granted to the bottom half of the industrial labor force—the first such raises since 1956. At the same time, piece-rate wage systems were introduced to motivate workers to accelerate the flow of their production. And finally, cash bonuses were paid out to those workshops, shifts and groups that over-fulfilled their quotas. At first, these bonuses were allocated collectively to the entire group. But the free rider problem
soon reared its ugly head, and the rewards were subsequently apportioned on an individual basis.

Industrial managers were now given enhanced responsibility for enterprise operations. No longer were they required to undergo regular, repetitive political study, or to spend half their time each week working on production lines, as previously mandated by the Maoists. Now, their career mobility was made dependent on the overall performance of their enterprise. To give them added leverage over the work force, managers were granted the authority to promote high-achieving employees and to discipline slackers.

In higher education, long-suffering professors and research scholars who had received no pay increases for over a dozen years now had their status and incomes raised. Substantial cash bonuses were paid for the design and diffusion of scientific and technological innovations. Bonuses were also paid for scholarly translations of foreign books and journals into Chinese. And professors who published original works in Chinese were similarly rewarded. (Interestingly, the size of the bonus was determined entirely by the length of the work, rather than its quality. The normal compensation rate was the equivalent of about US$1.00 per page—which predictably led to the publication of a lot of overly long, overly boring books).

In another reversal of Cultural Revolution norms, college students were now recruited directly out of high school, solely on the basis of competitive, nationally standardized entrance exams. Henceforth, there would be no more “blank examinations.”

Another major focus of economic reform in the spring of 1979 was the introduction of “Special Economic Zones,” or SEZs. The idea for SEZs originated in 1978 in She’kou township, just across the border from Hong Kong. The owners of Hong Kong’s largest shipping firm had come to She’kou in search of a suitable location to build a new facility for salvaging scrap metal from old ships. With Hong Kong’s labor and material costs steadily rising, the company’s owners were seeking a low-cost alternative site. When Deng Xiaoping heard about their proposal to situate the plant on Chinese territory, his response was positive.

Soon afterward, four Special Economic Zones were provisionally approved. Two of them—Shenzhen and Zhuhai—were located at the mouth of Guangdong’s Pearl River Delta, immediately adjacent to Hong Kong and Macao, respectively; while a third, SEZ, Xiamen (or Amoy), was directly across from Taiwan, on the coast of Fujian province.

Modeled loosely after export processing zones found elsewhere in Asia, the four coastal zones were expected to become advanced centers of high-tech manufacturing and industrial processing, geared to the rapid expansion of China’s export trade. Offering foreign investors reduced taxes and import duties as well as low labor costs, flexible terms for repatriating profits, and various other managerial incentives, the SEZs were destined to become the leading edge of China’s economic “opening” to the outside
world-- and the engine driving China’s spectacular export manufacturing boom in the 1980s and 90s. (show “before” and “after” pictures of Shenzhen)

But the SEZs also proved to be a major bone of contention between Deng Xiaoping and some other members of his reform coalition, including his close friend, Chen Yun. Chen was critical of the special privileges Deng proposed to offer foreign investors in the SEZs, which he viewed as reminiscent of the concessions made to foreign imperialists in the 19th Century. As a result, Chen Yun famously refused to allow his home town, Shanghai, to become China’s fifth special economic zone.

As a result, throughout the 1980s Shanghai’s economic growth lagged well behind the more dynamic, foreign-invested coastal areas of Guangdong and Fujian. And it was only a decade later, in the early 1990s, that Shanghai belatedly joined the ranks of the fast-paced, free-wheeling “special zones.”

While Chen Yun endorsed the idea of undertaking limited experiments with market reforms in order to raise productivity, he was, by training and by instinct, a devotee of socialist planning. And in the early 1980s he began to chafe at Deng’s willingness to allow market forces to replace central planning willy nilly. His differences with Deng were expressed metaphorically, in Chen’s famous “birdcage model” of economic reform,

[Of course] one cannot hold a bird tightly in one's hand without killing it. It must be permitted to fly-- but only within its cage. Without a cage it would fly away and become lost. [Naturally], the cage must … have appropriate space, [and] one may [thus] enlarge its size . . . [But] regulation of economic activity by the market must not entail abandonment of … [socialist] planning. (Chen Yun, Selected Works, p. 287.)

The emerging dispute between Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping over the proper limits of “opening up” and the optimal size of the socialist birdcage were destined to grow wider and more contentious throughout the 1980s. But for now, the Chinese people, freed from the iron grip of Jiang Qing’s cultural dictatorship, were beginning to experience a renaissance in popular culture.

The rebirth, which began in 1979, was visible first and foremost in China’s major eastern cities. In Beijing, a Pierre Cardin fashion show was held in the shadow of Tiananmen Square, while nearby, disco dancers shimmied nightly and swilled martinis at Peking's International Club. In the same year American businessmen signed deals for a chain of modern tourist hotels in China—including such future Beijing landmarks as the Hyatt Jiahuo and the Sheraton Great Wall. Meanwhile, between their classes, Chinese college students openly discussed the virtues of romantic love, President Carter's human rights policy, the films of Laurel and Hardy, and the virtues of Coca Cola. Had Mao Zedong suddenly come to life again at the end of 1979, he might well have been moved to ask, “Zheshi shenma difang”--"Where the hell am I?" Certainly, he would not have been amused.
Next time, we’ll look at Deng Xiaoping’s efforts to reform China’s deeply damaged political and legal institutions. Political reform proved to be a highly contentious issue in the early 1980s. And as we shall see later on, the differences that emerged between CCP liberals and conservatives in this period directly foreshadowed the Tiananmen Square explosion of 1989.
Lecture 35: On “Socialist Democracy” and the “Rule of Law” (1979-80)

Early in 1979 the state-controlled media in China began addressing a highly sensitive question: How could something as destructive as the Cultural Revolution have been permitted to wreak such unchecked havoc upon China for so long?

This was delicate territory, for it was inevitable that in searching for the roots of institutional failure and dysfunctionality, the trail would eventually lead back to Mao Zedong, and thence to Mao’s principal enabler, which was the Chinese Communist Party itself. For this reason, the state-owned media had to tread very carefully indeed. In this lecture we shall see how the press and the Party approached the problem of political and legal reform in post-Mao China.

Early in the year, the press began to paint a grim picture of a Chinese political and legal system in tatters--paralyzed by the absence of constitutional checks and balances and enforceable political liberties, and thus vulnerable to grotesque abuses of power. Here is a fairly representative assessment, taken from a state-run magazine published in January of 1979. You will not note how powerfully it indicts China’s pre-existing political and legal institutions, yet without assigning agency—that is, ultimate responsibility--for the murderous rampages of the “gang of four”

“…Because there were no clear laws [to define] what constituted a counterrevolutionary crime.... the [Chinese] people could not safeguard their right to free speech; ... Since the people could not safeguard their right to free [speech], the ‘gang of four’ were free to ... make the mass media toe their line. Because the people could not safeguard their freedom of assembly, the ‘gang of four’ wantonly prohibited all meetings, parades and demonstrations against them on the grounds that these were ‘counterrevolutionary.’ ... As the people could not safeguard their freedom of conviction, the ‘gang of four’ had a free hand to imprison those who thought for themselves.... As people could not safeguard their freedom of person, the ‘gang of four’ could set up kangaroo courts and slaughter innocent people at will.” (Beijing Review, January 12, 1979, p. 28)

Though ultimate blame remained undisclosed, this was nonetheless a powerful indictment against the system itself. And it was in response to such revelations that people's courts at all levels began the arduous task of reviewing a virtual avalanche of allegations concerning illegal political persecution that had occurred during the Cultural Revolution. By June of 1980 over 1.1 million cases had been reinvestigated, and verdicts were reversed in more than 260,000 of these.

To begin building a more orderly and predictable legal system, in March 1979 the National People’s Congress enacted two important new pieces of legislation: a criminal code and its companion-piece, a code of criminal procedure. Among other things, these two laws narrowly restricted the definition of “counterrevolutionary” crimes and limited the scope of arbitrary police powers of arrest and detention. They also mandated speedy
public trials for accused criminals, and guaranteed the right of defendants to retain legal
council and to confront their accusers.

Significantly, the man tasked with primary responsibility for drafting and overseeing this
new legislation was Deng Xiaoping’s long-time association, Peng Zhen— the former
mayor of Beijing. You will recall that Peng had been a principal victim of leftist
persecution during the Cultural Revolution. If anyone in China had a motive for building
institutional safeguards against a repetition of the anarchy of the 1960s, it was Peng Zhen.

But even as progressive new legislation was being enacted to protect people from
arbitrary abuse and detention, behind the scenes an intense debate was taking place
within the Communist Party over the proper limits of citizens’ rights to free expression
and assembly.

With the regime officially acknowledging such horrendous wrongdoing, the months of
February and March 1979 witnessed a massive increase in the size, scale and volatility of
petitioners' protests in Beijing and elsewhere in China. Although Fu Yuehua had been
arrested as a troublemaker for organizing the first mass petitioners’ demonstration in
January, now other angry petitioners began to assemble for the purpose of demanding
redress of grievances. In many cases they forced their way into factories and work units
to confront enterprise cadres and coworkers who had persecuted them; in other instances
angry petitioners broke into party and government offices in search of records pertaining
to their cases. Violence broke out in several cities.

In response to these rising tensions, an important split developed within Deng Xiaoping’s
reform coalition. Some younger leaders—including two of Deng’s more progressive
protégés, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, argued in favor of relaxing the restrictions on
protest by petitioners. (We shall have occasion to discuss these two remarkable men in
subsequent lectures). Even the normally staid and sober-minded Chen Yun felt that
petitioners had a right to express their grievances. “People are impatient and tired of
waiting,” he said. “They’ve been waiting for decades….Why must they go on suffering
without end? Unless we win [their] trust…there can be no [peace].” (Inside China
Mainland, April 1980, pp. 2-3).

However, other Party traditionalists showed little sympathy for the petitioners, and
favored a firm response. One veteran official, the former agriculture minister Tan Zhenlin
(who you may recall had pleaded with the CCRG in 1967 to stop overthrowing veteran
cadres), denounced the petitioners’ protests as part of an organized cabal by
“troublemakers.” Dismissing the arguments for tolerance advanced by Hu Yaobang, Zhao
Ziyang and Chen Yun, he heaped scorn on the reform coalition's “bleeding hearts”:

“The amazing thing,” he charged, “is that among us there are some
. . . leading individuals in the party Central Committee who… talk a lot of
nonsense. . . . They babble such absurdities as: ‘It is because these people
have suffered such grave injustice over the last ten years… that these
consequences now occur.’ Even more ridiculous are such statements as
‘China needs more democracy’…. What utter nonsense!...” (Inside China Mainland, May 1980, p. 2)

Caught in the middle of this intense intra-Party crossfire, Deng Xiaoping wavered, ambivalent in his own views. Not wanting to curtail the free speech he had so recently endorsed, he was nonetheless growing increasingly irritated by the envelope-pushing tactics adopted by activists like Fu Yuehua and Wei Jingsheng.

Toward the end of March, Wei Jingsheng decided to test the limits of Deng's tolerance by publishing a biting critique of China’s new “paramount leader.” Entitled, “Do We Want Democracy or a New Dictatorship?,” Wei accused Deng Xiaoping of shedding his mask as protector of democracy, betraying the people's trust, and becoming a “dictatorial fascist” in the mold of the recently deposed ultra-leftists.

Wei’s insolence was the final straw. Deng was furious. On March 30, he gave a speech in which he drew a clear, red line in the sand. Reviving Mao’s controversial six criteria for distinguishing “fragrant flowers” from “poisonous weeds,” first promulgated by the Chairman at the outset of the anti-rightist movement of 1957, Deng distilled Mao’s six criteria down to just four, which he now called the “Four cardinal principles” (sixiang jiben yuanze). Henceforth, he said, the only words and actions that would be deemed politically acceptable were those that uphold socialism, uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, uphold the people’s democratic dictatorship, and uphold Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong’s Thought.

“In the recent period,” Deng said, “a small number of people have provoked incidents . . ., seriously disrupting public order. . . . They have raised such sensational slogans as ‘Oppose hunger’ and ‘Give us human rights,’ inciting people to hold demonstrations and . . . [even going] so far as to put up wall posters requesting the president of the United States to ‘show concern’ for human rights in China. Can we permit such an open call for intervention in China's internal affairs? . . . Can we tolerate the kind of freedom of speech which . . . slanders Mao Zedong and proclaims that ‘proletarian dictatorship [i.e., Communist Party rule] is the source of all evil’ . . . ?”

Deng continued:
“To depart from the four cardinal principles and talk about democracy in the abstract will inevitably lead to the unchecked spread of anarchism, the complete disruption of political stability and unity, and the total failure of our modernization program.” (Deng Xiaoping, Selected Works, pp. 166-85)

Here we get our first clear glimpse of Deng Xiaoping as a no-nonsense authoritarian and political disciplinarian. It was this Deng Xiaoping who, a decade later, in June of 1989, would give the order for the PLA to use “all necessary force” to clear student demonstrators from Tiananmen Square. (But that is for a later lecture.)
Once Deng had expressed his support for the hard line, Beijing police moved to arrest Wei Jingsheng. Ironically, the circumstances of Wei’s detention, which began in April 1979, clearly violated the country’s new criminal procedure law, which had been specifically designed to prevent arbitrary abuses of police and judicial authority. Yet, in contradiction to the new law code, no formal charges were filed against Wei; he was not given access to legal counsel; and he was held incommunicado for six months. It was a shaky start, to say the least, for the new Chinese commitment to strengthen “socialist legality.”

When Wei Jingsheng was finally brought to trial in October, things got even worse. For starters, the trial was hushed up and held in secret. And it lasted but a single day. Wei was found guilty of the crimes of “counterrevolutionary incitement” and conveying “official secrets” to a foreign journalist; and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

By the end of 1979, the Chinese Democracy Movement had been effectively silenced, and the petitioners’ movement had been stifled. Deng’s coalition was now split right down the middle, with its more progressive reformers—generally the younger ones—supporting greater openness and tolerance in the political sphere, while older, more orthodox Communist cadres emphasized the vital importance of party discipline and the “four cardinal principles.” This was a fissure that would resurface many times in the 1980s.

In the wake of Wei Jingshen’s controversial trial, the next major test of the new regime’s commitment to the rule of law came in the long-awaited court appearance of the “gang of four.” After languishing in prison for four years, the “gang” finally stood in the dock toward the end of 1980. Unlike the government’s case against Wei Jingsheng, the case against the four “gang” members was remarkably thorough and detailed. Mountains of evidence were collected and sifted; and twenty-four special prosecutors were assigned to argue the government's case in a special court presided over by no less than thirty-five judges. The 20,000-word indictment against the four took more than two hours for the court clerk to read aloud. (show “gang of four” in the prisoners’ dock)

Because the trial of the "gang" was such a high-profile test of the new regime’s commitment to “socialist legality,” strict observance of legal norms—in particular the norm of due process—was deemed essential. And for the most part, the proceedings adhered rather closely to the letter, if not always the spirit, of the new criminal codes.

At the heart of the indictment the four defrocked radicals was their alleged personal responsibility for the deaths of 34,800 people and the persecution, imprisonment and torture of 726,000 others. For good measure, they were also charged with conspiring to carry out a coup d'état in the immediate aftermath of Mao's death.

Three of the four “gang” members were represented in court by a gaggle of defense attorneys. Having agreed in advance to cooperate with government prosecutors, the three readily admitted their crimes and threw themselves on the mercy of the court. (In the
tradition of Chinese criminal justice, leniency is generally shown to those who confess fully and show contrition, while maximum severity is reserved for those who stubbornly insist on their innocence.)

But the fourth defendant steadfastly refused to admit guilt. To the bitter end, Jiang Qing remained contemptuous. Refusing the offer of a state-appointed lawyer, she argued her own case. Head held high in dramatic defiance, she curtly dismissed prosecution allegations that she had been the ringleader of ultra-left, cleverly shifting ultimate responsibility onto Mao himself: “I was [just] Chairman Mao’s lap dog,” she said. “When Chairman Mao said bite, I bit.”

Denouncing prosecution witnesses as traitors, Jiang Qing derided the court and challenged its very legitimacy. On two separate occasions, she was ejected from the courtroom after engaging in a shouting match with witnesses, judges, and prosecutors.

For all of her theatrics, the outcome of the trial was never in doubt. The government had invested too much of its own credibility in assuring the “correct” verdict. The only real question concerned the severity of the sentencing. After a post-trial delay of several weeks, Jiang Qing and her principal co-defendant, former Shanghai Party boss Zhang Chunqiao, were sentenced to death—but with their execution stayed for a period of two years. This was a rather unique feature of China’s criminal law, in which death sentences were often delayed for two years—pending possible commutation to life in prison in the event of subsequent confession and sincere repentance.

The two remaining members of Jiang Qing’s Shanghai clique, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen, were sentenced to twenty years and life in prison, respectively.

In a parallel trial that took place at the same time as that of the “gang,” the five surviving members of Lin Biao’s “counterrevolutionary clique” were convicted of conspiracy to commit treason; they drew prison terms ranging from sixteen years to life.

Meanwhile, events taking place elsewhere in the Communist world were beginning to cast their shadow across China. In the summer of 1980, Poland experienced massive labor unrest, with a wave of wildcat strikes and anti-government demonstrations threatening to cause a general breakdown in public order. Among their many grievances, Polish workers were demanding large wage hikes, the firing of corrupt government officials, the right to organize independent unions, an end to media censorship, and a rollback of price increases on food products.

Fearful of rising industrial disorder, the Polish Communist government first dithered indecisively, then backed down, making a number of concessions to the workers’ demands. This had the immediate effect of damping-down labor unrest, as strike actions and street demonstrations dwindled in mid-summer.

At this particular point in time, 1980, it did not take a great stretch of imagination to transpose this scenario from Poland to the PRC. Popular discontent was on the rise in
China in as well. With the most restrictive political and ideological controls of the Cultural Revolution having been loosened somewhat, long-repressed grievances were bubbling up to the surface around the country-- as exemplified by the massive nationwide petitioners’ movement.

Alarmed over China’s increasingly volatile political situation, liberal members of Deng’s reform coalition—including Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang-- drew inspiration from the recent Polish experience; and they concluded that a few well-aimed political reforms could go a long way toward disarming popular unrest in China as well.

Evidently, Deng was receptive to this argument; for in August of 1980 he proposed a wide-ranging blueprint for systemic political reform. Though lacking in operational details, it went well beyond the Polish government’s commitment to promote industrial democracy. In addition to offering Chinese workers the right to elect their own labor representatives, Deng also addressed some of the most deep-seated structural pathologies in the Chinese political system—pathologies which he grouped together under the general heading of “feudal despotism.”

To prevent another senile dictator from concentrating all political power in his own hands, to the detriment of the country, Deng proposed ending the Party’s established practice of granting lifetime tenure to its leading cadres; instead, he called for a system of fixed term limits with mandatory retirement. To prevent meddlesome Party secretaries from intruding arbitrarily in the realm of economic policy, he proposed a clear separation of functions between the government and the Party. Government officials would be responsible for making and implementing policy, while Party organs would limit their role to ensuring that government policies were in conformity with the regime’s broad ideological principles and political guidelines.

Had Deng’s reform blueprint been implemented in a timely fashion, it might have gone a long way toward revitalizing the Chinese political system and ameliorating some of its lingering Maoist pathologies. But we will never know. For most of the reforms were not enacted—at least not in the 1980s; and some of them have never been enacted.

To understand why Deng’s proposed reforms never got off the ground, we must look once again to far-off Poland. There, by the autumn of 1980, the optimistic political outlook of the previous summer had begun to break down. Having won the right to organize Poland’s workers, the independent labor union Solidarity began to escalate its demands for even more fundamental political reforms. Other occupational groups quickly followed suit, including students, teachers, health and transportation workers, with each sector pressing its own specific demands upon a vacillating, uncertain government. Even the Polish Catholic Church got into the act, demanding substantially greater religious freedom. By the end of November 1980, the Polish government, deluged by rising societal demands, appeared on the brink of paralysis. With street protests rising in frequency and intensity, the threat of Soviet military intervention hung heavily over the country’s weakened leaders.
What was particularly striking about the rising disorder in Poland was that a similar phenomenon was occurring in China. In the aftermath of Deng’s August reform proposals, Chinese state enterprise workers began demanding higher wages and stronger unions; college students began to take seriously reform slogans such as “seek truth from facts” and “emancipate thinking”; some intellectuals even began questioning the scientific validity of Marxism; and a bold few dared to invoke Deng’s favorite mantra—“practice is the sole criterion of truth”—to challenge the legitimacy of the “four cardinal principles.”

Further adding to China’s rising political temperature, the fall of 1980 witnessed the first experimental direct elections, conducted in a handful of Chinese cities. Unexpectedly, a few non-Communist candidates, running as independents in district people’s congress elections, actually defeated their Party-sponsored opponents. This proved deeply embarrassing to local Communist Party officials, and in some districts the authorities intervened to declare the unwanted election results null and void. So humiliating was the Party’s loss of face that direct popular elections were shelved in China for over a decade.

In yet another sign of rising political activism, at the annual National People’s Congress meeting held in September of 1980, dozens of delegates refused to play their traditional, assigned role as rubber stamp of the Party. Instead, they relentlessly interrogated government ministers about a series of large-scale industrial accidents and boondoggles, including the highly embarrassing Baoshan Iron and Steel fiasco. Even the normally docile and compliant mass media now proclaimed the virtues of challenging government spokesmen.

Like the Polish workers before them, the Chinese people were starting to “act up.” And in light of their growing inclination to challenge authority, Deng’s more conservative colleagues openly fretted that to enact further political reforms now would merely stir up more fervent protest and dissent, thereby gravely endangering China’s vital “political stability and unity.” Even Deng’s closest comrade, Chen Yun, now pointedly warned him: “If we're not careful, China may develop its own Polish-style situation.” (Ruan Ming, *Deng Xiaoping Diguo*, pp. 106-108)

With one eye on Poland and the other on growing disturbances at home, Deng changed his mind. Reversing himself abruptly, he called in December of 1980 for new legislation to outlaw unauthorized organizations, protest marches and demonstrations, and to ban the printing and distribution of unapproved publications. Reneging on his previous support for autonomous grass-roots participation, Deng now called on the Party to strengthen its propaganda and organization work within China’s state-dominated Federation of Trade Unions as well as within the All China Women's Federation, the Communist Youth League, and the All-China Students’ Association.

Authorizing decisive action in cases of serious civil disturbance or acts of sabotage, Deng stated that where necessary, martial law could be declared, with public order in such cases to be ensured by “specially trained troops.” (Deng, *Selected Works*, pp. 350-353).
China’s brief springtime of political reform was now over. Next time we’ll examine the consequences of this fateful decision.
Lecture 36: Burying Mao (1981-83)

As we saw last time, Deng Xiaoping’s sudden turnabout on the question of political reform was symptomatic of a deep division within his ruling coalition. In this lecture we will see how this schism became more open, more intense, and more antagonistic as the 1980s progressed.

Deng’s coalition was anything but monolithic in nature. Containing a broad mix of liberals and conservatives, along with a generous sprinkling of middle-of-the-roaders, the one thing that cemented them all together was a strong commitment, borne of bitter experience, to the idea that China must never, ever go back to the days of one-man dictatorship, radical utopianism and vigilante justice. Beyond that, they differed widely over just how far, and how fast, China should proceed down the uncharted road of market reform, political relaxation, and opening up to the outside world.

Within the reform coalition, Deng played two different roles. One role was that of “paramount leader”—China’s top dog. The other, less publicized role was that of “power balancer”. In this latter role, Deng mediated among the contending factions in his coalition in an attempt to keep the whole thing from flying of the tracks.

In his role as China’s “paramount leader,” Deng lacked Mao’s autocratic powers. He was neither Party Chairman nor Prime Minister nor President. Instead, he was “first among equals.” Key decisions were made by Deng in consultation with a small group of a half dozen or so of his senior colleagues, including Chen Yun, Peng Zhen and Bo Yibo. Operating mostly behind the scenes, these veteran cadres comprised an informal “council of elders.” They advised Deng and, with his approval, they provided on-the-job guidance to the younger, more progressive-minded members of the coalition—people like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who represented the public face of the new regime.

Zhao Ziyang had been responsible for popularizing China’s agricultural reforms in 1978 and 1979, and he was Deng’s choice to succeed Hua Guofeng as Premier of the State Council. Hu Yaobang was a long-time leader of the Communist Party’s Youth League. He had a reputation as an innovative politician who was capable of thinking “outside the box.” At Deng’s urging, Hu succeeded Hua Guofeng as Party Chairman—a post that was subsequently renamed “General Secretary” in order to avoid invidious comparison with Mao Zedong.

At the apex of this carefully counterbalanced leadership system was Deng Xiaoping himself. It was Deng’s job to make sure that neither the youthful reformers nor their relatively more conservative elders gained exclusive dominance over the policy making process. And it was in his role as mediator and political balancer that Deng steered China through a series of deepening policy conflicts and mini-crises in the 1980s.

By tacking first one way and then the other, sometimes seeming to reverse himself entirely, Deng navigated the treacherous, uncharted waters of “reform and opening up.”
No Communist country had ever successfully reformed itself from within by reshaping its fundamental institutions. There were simply no useful precedents to follow. The Polish reform experiment, so promising a year earlier, had ended disastrously in 1981, with the government declaring martial law and cracking down on striking workers to end the chaos. And Gorbachev’s sweeping Soviet reforms—including his trademark policies of glasnost and perestroika—were still a half-decade away.

China’s reformers were, in fact, flying blind. Without a detailed, coherent plan for the country’s overall development, they made it up as they went along. As Chen Yun put it, their basic strategy was to “cross the river by groping for stones” (mozhi shitou guohe). Such improvisation inevitably lent Deng’s stewardship a schizoid appearance, as China zig-zagged its way erratically through the 1980s.

One of the first tasks confronting Deng and his associates was that of rendering a definitive assessment of Mao Zedong’s role in modern Chinese history. At the Third Plenum Deng had promised to appoint a blue-ribbon panel for this purpose.

But rendering a final verdict on Mao was no easy task. Older Party members, especially veterans of the Long March and the anti-Japanese War, had considerable sympathy for Mao; and they balked at judging him harshly. Younger members, on the other hand, were more willing to make a clean break with past by thoroughly repudiating the “feudal despotism” of the Mao era. With opinion so deeply divided, consensus proved elusive. Though Deng did not wish to whitewash Mao, he instructed the drafting committee to “affirm” Mao’s contributions.

After fifteen months of bargaining, the final verdict, when it was announced, was on the whole rather generous to Mao. The Chairman’s “errors” were whittled down to a relative handful. These included his willful persecution of hundreds of thousands of intellectuals at the end of the 1957 Hundred Flowers movement; and his reckless disregard for the welfare of the peasants during the Great Leap Forward. He was not, however, held personally responsible for causing any of the 30 million deaths that occurred between 1959 and 1961.

Mao’s role in the transition from the Great Leap to the Cultural Revolution drew somewhat harsher criticism. His decision to purge Peng Dehuai and then launch an all-out class struggle in the 1960s was said to be “entirely erroneous,” leading to massive social chaos and the unjust persecution of large numbers of true revolutionaries.

Also singled out for criticism was Mao’s action during the Qingming incident of April 1976. The Chairman was held personally responsible for having wrongly judged the wreath-laying at Tiananmen Square to be “counter-revolutionary”; and Mao’s error was said to have “plunged the [entire] nation into turmoil.”

Nevertheless, and despite such occasionally harsh judgments, Mao’s overall contribution to modern Chinese history was positively affirmed. He was called “a great revolutionary.” As Deng had wished, Mao’s successes were judged to have substantially
outweighed his failures.  (all quotes above are from the 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party”)

Thus, five years after his death, the unquiet ghost of Mao Zedong was finally—if gingerly—laid to rest. But the costs of “Burying Mao” were enormous. China had paid dearly for the Chairman’s sins; and the country’s one billion people would never again put their blind trust in a single Godlike figure—or in the party that had worshipped him so uncritically. The age of skepticism had begun.

Toward the end of 1979, around the time of the Third Plenum, a number of Chinese artists and writers began to openly pick at China’s unhealed cultural and political wounds. The result was a spontaneous “bubbling up” of new popular literary forms and genres. One new genre was called the “literature of the wounded.”

“Wounded literature” portrayed in graphic terms the personal sufferings of ordinary Chinese people—the laobaixing—during Mao’s “decade of destruction.” Taking their cues from the downtrodden petitioners at Democracy Wall, writers in this genre took the raw, fragmentary complaints of individual persecution and injustice in everyday life and lent them added literary poignancy and gravitas.

A close relative of “wounded literature” was “scar literature.” Writers in this genre sought to express the rising cynicism and cultural despair experienced by China’s long-suffering intellectuals. Like their forebears of the May 4th era some 60 years earlier, contemporary writers in the “scar literature” school expressed their anguish over the spiritual emptiness and cultural desolation of Mao’s China. Others wrote of the widespread corruption and mind-numbing bureaucratic insensitivity and incompetence that had become prevalent in Mao’s later years.

One well-known “scar” writer, by the name of Ye Wenfu, published in 1979 a thinly-veiled satirical poem about a famous PLA general, who had become notoriously corrupted by power. Entitled “General, You Cannot Do This,” Ye Wenfu’s poem caused a major stir when it first appeared in print in 1979. A brief excerpt will serve to show why.

What can I say? How can I put this? . . .
You are a respected man of the older generation
And I am but a Johnny-come-lately. . . .
My general, . . .
Your voice, which once rang out like thunder
    is now . . . but a thin, feeble whisper:
"Give to me . . . give to me . . .," it says. . . .
If we gave you the moon
      you'd complain it's too cold.
If we gave you the sun
      you'd complain it's too hot. . . .
We offer you everything for your enjoyment. . . .
How is it that you forgot the oath you took
when you first entered the party?

. . . .
Ah, my general, with all your rank and power…
[It seems] you have torn down a kindergarten
To make way for your "modern" palace.
What do you care for the generations to come! . . .
How many years will you live in comfort? . . .
The people must not remain silent. . . .
We hear the voice of future generations
. . . crying aloud with one voice:
"General, you cannot do this." (Zhengming 28, February 1980, pp. 20-21)

Conservative members of Deng’s reform coalition were not at all happy with writers like Ye Wenfu. In their view, intellectuals who focused on the darker side of Chinese society were doing their country a grave disservice. By portraying China in harshly negative light, they were demoralizing the laobaixing and robbing them of patriotic inspiration. As one conservative commentator put it, “Photographing depressive spasms may be useful to medical science, but such things have nothing to do with art.”

By the end of 1980, signs of tightening political censorship were becoming increasingly abundant. One writer had his grain ration cut off after he published an article criticizing government bureaucracy and waste. A popular Shanghai television drama was banned for having cast the army in a less-than-heroic light. Several new plays were cancelled and their authors and actors harassed for having dared to present “politically provocative” themes. And teachers at several major Chinese colleges and universities were warned against introducing any “unauthorized materials” into their classroom curricula. A literary cold wave was spreading over China.

When Deng Xiaoping withdrew his blueprint for political reform in December 1980, in the wake of Poland’s spiraling political chaos, China’s traditionalists felt emboldened. Shortly thereafter, they launched a new campaign against “bourgeois liberalization” in culture and the arts. Foreign films, fashions, and even hair-styles now came under attack for being decadent. Also criticized was the latest trend in the fine arts of featuring overtly sexual themes and titillating display ads. One provincial newspaper ran a scathing editorial attacking the cinematic portrayal of young lovers "rolling on the grass, swimming romantically, and hugging and kissing" each other. In the view of the newspaper’s straight-laced editor, such scenes reflected an "unhealthy social trend."

By setting a censorious tone in the mass media, and by emphasizing the patriotic duty of artists and writers to provide cultural content that was “uplifting,” rather than decadent or depressing, the conservatives managed to silence the purveyors of “wounded literature” and “scar literature.” They also succeeded in banning a substantial number of avant garde foreign cultural and literary works.
Although writers like Ye Wenfu were subjected to an intense barrage of media criticism, and their offending works were temporarily withdrawn from circulation, they were not “labeled” as rightists; nor were they dismissed from their jobs, as would certainly have happened in the past. In this sense, the 1981 literary rectification campaign was considerably milder and less destructive than those of the Maoist era.

After retreating for a while, waiting for the storm to pass, China’s irrepressible liberal intellectuals launched a fresh wave of philosophical “blooming and contending” in 1982. On a number of college campuses, vigorous debates broke out on the question of whether Western concepts such as “individual alienation” and “universal humanism” had any contemporary relevance for China.

The debate heated up when a liberal-leaning editor of the People’s Daily published a provocative commentary in which he defended the concept of “universal humanism” against orthodox Marxist theoreticians who dogmatically asserted the primacy of class-based ideas and interests, and thereby “denied the very possibility of intrinsic human worth.” (Baum, Burying Mao)

Publication of this essay, and others like it, triggered a new firestorm of controversy within the CCP. Predictably, liberals rallied to defend the concept of “universal humanism”, while conservatives attacked it.

After sitting on the fence for several months, watching the two sides attack each other with growing intensity, Deng Xiaoping finally intervened. At a Central Committee meeting in the fall of 1983 Deng vented his growing irritation with the liberal humanists. Complaining that some Party theorists preferred to indulge in “abstract contemplation of human nature” rather than trying to understand and resolve practical problems encountered by “real” people, Deng rejected the concept of universal humanism as “un-Marxist” in character. (ibid.)

But he didn’t stop there. Broadening his attack, he went on to suggest that a number of other “unhealthy” ideas had become fashionable among liberal intellectuals of late. Much of his ire was directed at questionable cultural imports and influences that were entering China from abroad. Under Deng’s “open policy,” tens of thousands of foreign tourists, students, entrepreneurs and merchants had begun to descend on China’s coastal cities and SEZs, bringing with them many of their own “decadent” and “materialistic” cultural habits and values.

From the outset, Party conservatives complained that foreign commercial and cultural imports would seriously “pollute” China’s pristine socialist values. But Deng had been adamant. It didn’t matter, he said, if a few unhealthy flies came in when China opened up to the outside world. The important thing was that China would be able to keep such things under control.
But now Deng seemed to be having second thoughts. He expressed impatience at the “money fetish” displayed by Chinese commercial artists and writers. Many such artists, he said, had begun to ape their Western counterparts, pandering to the low tastes of their audience in order to make a “quick profit.” Such people, he said, were “unworthy” of being called artists. (Baum, Burying Mao)

Deng then turned a critical eye toward a new breed of unscrupulous Chinese merchants who, influenced by Hong Kong’s free-wheeling commercial culture, were resorting to extravagant ad campaigns and misleading product claims to con credulous consumers out of their hard-earned money. Employing a new term to describe such evil tendencies, Deng referred to them as “spiritual pollution.”

"Do not imagine" [he said] "that a little spiritual pollution doesn't amount to very much and is not worth making a fuss over. . . . If we do not immediately . . . curb these [tendencies] . . . the consequences could be extremely serious." (Issues & Studies 20:4, April 1984, pp. 99-111).

With Deng’s blessing, the Party’s conservative culture warriors launched a full-blown attack on “spiritual pollution” in the autumn of 1983. Initially aimed at liberal intellectuals and theoreticians, the campaign soon spilled over into Chinese society and popular culture at large. Its targets were now expanded to include anything and everything that could be regarded as decadent or immoral in bourgeois society.

There was no shortage of targets to aim at. In Mao’s day, all personal income, over and above what was needed for daily necessities, had been directed toward savings and investment; and anyone who displayed a tendency toward personal acquisitiveness or material self-indulgence invited harsh criticism for harboring “capitalist tendencies.” As a result, even moderate displays of conspicuous consumption would end up in an unfriendly visit from the local “granny police,” followed by a round of “self-criticism.”

By the early 1980s, however, a new culture of personal consumption had taken root in China. People were rejecting the rigid austerity of the Cultural Revolution, and were openly coveting the material comforts and symbols of modernity. Department stores now began to stock basic black-and-white television sets, refrigerators, and motorbikes. Most coveted of all consumer goods were those luxury items that bore foreign brand labels—such as Sony, Toshiba, Yamaha, and Seiko.

Women also began to dress more colorfully, wearing cosmetic makeup and jewelry. Western-style miniskirts and long boots were fashionable, as were sheer, see-through blouses. Beauty parlors offering Western-style permanent waves were filled with customers. Meanwhile, young urban males preened themselves, wearing “cool”-looking motorcycle jackets and dark sunglasses, and slicking back their hair in well-moussed imitation of the Wild Bunch.

Also making their appearance in kiosks and specialty shops in the early 1980s were local knock-offs of foreign movie-star magazines and fashion magazines. It was in such a
shop in Guangzhou, in 1982, that I saw my first pirated audiotape copy of Michael Jackson’s epic album, *Thriller*. In a back room of the same shop, a wide array of pornographic magazines and videos from Hong Kong were for sale.

In their eagerness to throw off the repressive personal austerity of the Maoist era, urban Chinese now seemed ready to embrace anything and everything that was “foreign.”

Given China’s history of catastrophic encounters with foreigners, it is hardly surprising that conservative cultural watchdogs would categorically reject the fetishism of “worshipping foreign things.” And with Deng’s evident blessing, they now went on something of a rampage.

In some cities, groups of self-styled spiritual-pollution police began harassing people whose hair was unusually long, or who wore bell-bottomed trousers. In other places, factory workers were mobilized to search employees’ dorm rooms for pornographic books and tapes. In one province, the local police chief ordered his gendarmes to issue citations to any man who sported “whiskers or a mustaches” or who sang off-color songs. (Thomas Gold, “Just in Timee,” pp. 956-58). In Beijing, the following notice was posted on the front gate of the headquarters of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee: "No admittance to persons with hair too long, skirts too short, slacks too tight, or face powdered and rouged." (Liu Binyan, “A Higher Kind of Loyalty,” p. 173).

With cultural vigilantism on the rise throughout the country, foreign investors began to grow decidedly uneasy. Having been induced to invest in China by Deng’s promise of a benign and tolerant commercial environment, Western businessmen began complaining to their government intermediaries that the campaign against “spiritual pollution” was seriously undermining their ability to do business. And when Deng Xiaoping was informed that a number of foreign firms were threatening to terminate their investments in China, he personally put out an order to terminate the campaign. As abruptly as anti-pollution patrols had begun a few months earlier, they now ended with equal abruptness. For the time being, at least, the conservatives were silenced.

Next time we shall look at the introduction of small-scale private enterprise in urban China; and we shall see how Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” of supply and demand famously began to reshape the country’s basic economic institutions. But this was not an altogether smooth or happy transition; and at the end of a very turbulent road lay a monumental tragedy—the massacre at Tiananmen Square.
Lecture 37: “To Get Rich is Glorious” (1982-86)

Back in 1962, with China still suffering from the catastrophic Great Leap Forward, Deng Xiaoping had deeply offended Mao by arguing that economic performance was more important than ideological purity. Now twenty years had passed. Mao was dead and (mostly) buried. His economic policies had collapsed, and Deng’s willingness to experiment with new forms of economic activity was everywhere in evidence. One of these experiments involved the introduction of small-scale private commerce in China’s cities.

Until the early 1980s private commercial activity was strictly prohibited in urban China. It was openly derided as a “vestige of capitalism.” But now, with as many as ten million “rusticated” youths flooding back into Chinese cities from a decade of enforced exile in the countryside, massive numbers of young people had little or nothing to do. In this situation, government leaders decided that small-scale private commerce could help relieve the pressure of burgeoning unemployment. Thus were born the getihu—self-employed individuals.

I’d like to illustrate the rise of the getihu with a personal story. In the summer of 1983 I took a morning stroll through Tiananmen Square. My intention was to get in line outside Mao’s Memorial Hall to take a second look at the Chairman’s embalmed body. (His corpse, you may recall, had somehow recovered its glowing semblance of health since my previous inspection five years earlier; and I wanted to see for myself).

But my route through Tiananmen Square was blocked by two scruffily-dressed young men, standing next to a pushcart. “Pai ni zhaopian ma?” asked one of the young men, holding up a battered old camera—“Take your picture?” Mao’s corpse could wait. I was about to have my first encounter with China’s getihu. (show photo of Guangzhou photo kiosk)

The two shabbily-attired “sent-down youths” who intercepted me told me they had recently returned from the countryside. With the aid of a group of friends, they pooled their meager resources to purchase a second-hand reflex camera and a battered pushcart. Setting up a their cart in the northwest corner of the Square, near the Great Hall of the People, the young men were offering to take photos of tourists anywhere in the Square, either singly or in groups. For three poses, they charged ¥0.4 --about US 20¢ at the current exchange rate. The price included same-day pick-up of the finished prints. Under the disinterested gaze of a policeman patrolling nearby, they were doing a rather brisk business among early morning tourists. After I paid to have three photos taken, one of the young men told me they had grossed ¥14 (US$7.10) on the previous day, almost half of which was pure profit.

As I resumed my walk toward the Memorial Hall, I passed a second photo kiosk a few hundred meters further on, near the Heroes’ Monument. Its two employees, who were busily chatting with each other, hadn’t even noticed my approach. They also had a reflex camera and a pushcart, and, like the getihu, they were offering to photograph visitors in
the Square—but only against the single, uniform backdrop of Mao’s famous portrait above the Gate of Heavenly Peace. (show Mao’s portrait in Tiananmen)

But these guys were charging ¥0.4 for a single pose—three times as much per print as the getihu; and they weren’t even offering same-day pick-up. My curiosity was piqued. They clearly weren’t doing any business, so I asked them why they didn’t just lower their price or improve the quality of their service to meet the competition. They just shrugged and pointed to the small print on their neatly lettered sign: “Beijing Municipal Service Bureau.” They were state employees. The two fellows then resumed their conversation, ignoring me completely. Not a single customer had appeared since I first approached them. I made a mental note to come back after viewing Mao’s corpse.

When I had finished paying my respects to the healthy, glowing Mao (or his wax likeness), I retraced my steps back to the municipal photo booth. I circled around it, at a distance. Not a single prospective customer was in sight. The two young state employees were still chatting lazily, sitting on their stools, not bothering to try to drum up business. Looking toward the other end of the Square, I saw a knot of people clustered around the getihu booth. Business was still booming there.

In and of itself, this “tale of two photo kiosks” may not seem particularly fascinating; but it carried profound implications for China’s future. Under socialist ownership, the prices of all goods and services in the urban economy were set by the state; customers could take it or leave it. Sales clerks were state employees: their jobs, wages and benefits were guaranteed for life under the regime’s “iron rice bowl” policy. Their firms didn’t need to turn a profit or provide high quality goods and services. And since all sales revenues were remitted directly to the state, there was no incentive for enterprise managers to improve the quality of their product or their service. Staff employees didn’t care, because they didn’t have to. They just put in their time and picked up their paychecks. Ditto their managers.

That, in a nutshell, was the story of China’s centrally planned economy, as it was played out daily in hundreds of thousands of state-owned enterprises. But now the getihu had begun to expose the endemic weaknesses of the socialist planned economy; and it did not take long for enterprising young men and women to begin challenging state monopolies throughout the service sector, from photography and fast food to haircutting and taxicabs. (show private barber)

Wherever private challengers arose, either to contest existing state monopolies or to fill visible gaps in the service sector, consumers were the big winners. To give just one example, between 1982 and 1986 the quality of food available in many Beijing restaurants improved noticeably, as enterprising getihu began setting up fast-food stalls and sidewalk cafes around the city, drawing customers away from established state restaurants by offering better service and better food at competitive prices. By the middle of the decade, state restaurants that were losing out in competition with self-employed providers were warned that the state would no longer automatically cover their losses. If
they couldn’t turn a profit, they’d have to face the consequences—including the possibility of being forced to close their doors.

Slowly, state restaurants began paying more attention to customer satisfaction, and their food began to improve. As a crude barometer of rising food quality, a chain of three famous, state-owned Peking Duck restaurants in Beijing (cynically dubbed by locals as the “Old Duck,” the “Sick Duck” and the “Big Duck”) served a standard three-course Peking Duck dinner. When I first ate at these restaurants in the late 1970s the food was incredibly greasy and tasteless—hardly the delicacy of legendary imperial repute. But within less than a decade, the quality improved markedly. The Peking duck was now crisp, fragrant and fresh.

After thirty years of heavy-handed state socialism, Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” had finally come to China; and Chinese reformers were gradually introducing a broad range of urban economic innovations. In addition to permitting small-scale private commerce, the fiscal system was now decentralized to encourage provinces and localities to display greater entrepreneurial initiative by allowing them to retain a significant share of their profits.

In the countryside, agriculture had been decollectivized several years earlier. By the end of 1979 farmland was being routinely divided up and leased out to individual households; and free markets were thriving.

But reform took longer in China’s cities. Unlike the rural areas, where there were no basic income guarantees or state welfare benefits for peasants, in urban enterprises the “iron rice bowl” policy provided every state employee with a guaranteed lifetime job, as well as major food and housing subsidies and free health, education and welfare benefits. Understandably, many state employees were reluctant to exchange these familiar, tangible benefits for the vague and unknown world of market competition, profit-motivation and the attendant risks of unemployment.

Resistance to change was widespread among urban state workers; but it was even more intense among those Communist Party traditionalists who continued to believe in socialist central planning. To them, Deng’s economic reforms smacked of the dreaded “C-word”: capitalism. And despite the many failures of the socialism under Mao, most Chinese remained highly resistant to the very idea of capitalism. (For a relevant analogy, think of how most Americans recoil reflexively at the term “socialized medicine”)

Recognizing that the word “capitalism” produced intensely negative responses in China, Deng Xiaoping cleverly coined a new, more neutral term to describe his economic reform program. He called it “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

To put a more appealing face on urban economic reform, and to provide new incentives to induce people to work harder in order to earn (and keep) more money for themselves, the new Chinese Premier, Zhao Ziyang, with Deng’s blessing, shifted the traditional
function of many state-owned factories from heavy industrial manufacturing to the production of consumer durables and luxury goods.

In Mao’s day, all available personal income, over and above what was needed for daily necessities, had been directed toward savings and investment; and anyone who displayed a taste for luxury invited criticism for harboring “capitalist tendencies.” As a result, a bicycle, a wristwatch and a primitive sewing machine were about the only high-end items an average Chinese household could own in the 1960s and ‘70s without triggering a unfriendly visit from the local “granny police.”

By the early 1980s, however, black-and-white television sets, refrigerators, and motorbikes had become widely available—and widely coveted—in urban China. Most desirable of all were those luxury items that bore foreign brand labels—such as Sony, Toshiba, Yamaha, and Seiko. For the first time in 15 years, urban Chinese women now dared to wear makeup, jewelry and fashionable clothing.

Gradually, a new culture of personal consumption began to take root, first in China’s coastal cities and then spreading to the interior. “Liberate the productive forces,” was the reformers’ oft-repeated mantra. “Let some people to get rich before others,” exhorted Deng Xiaoping in 1984-- implicitly repudiating the Maoist ethos of egalitarian austerity.

By the middle of the decade, a generation of newly-affluent Chinese entrepreneurs—known as wanyuan hu, or “10,000 yuan households,” had made their presence felt as high-end consumers.

The year 1984 was an important watershed in China’s urban reforms. For one thing, the growth-inducing benefits of the four original Special Economic Zones were now officially affirmed, and fourteen new “open cities” were designated for the purpose of liberalizing the rules and requirements of foreign trade and investment. Henceforth, these “open cities” would be empowered to contract directly with foreign investors for the import of industrial plant and equipment, without having to go through the cumbersome process of seeking approval from squadrons of higher level bureaucrats.

Up until 1984, all major administrative and managerial decisions in China’s state-owned enterprises were imposed from above and were specified in the annual state plan. Specific planning targets included product selection and pricing, supply and marketing arrangements, staff wages and promotions.

For example, the plan for a shoe factory might call for the firm to produce 10,000 pairs of black, high-button shoes, and to sell them for Y20 a pair to a state-run department store chain. It mattered not if the department store’s customers actually wanted black high-button shoes, or if the price was reasonable, or if the quality was high or low. Whatever the planners called for, the planners got. Factory managers were paid not to please their customers, but to fulfill the letter of the plan. If customers didn’t buy their shoes, or if the shoes fell apart when people put them on, it was no sweat off the manager’s brow. There were no returns, and any unsold shoes would simply pile up in state warehouses until the
planners, two or three years down the line, decided it was time to produce 10,000 pairs of red, low-top shoes. It was a monumentally inefficient system.

Much the same top-heavy planning process governed heavy industrial production. Just substitute machine tools, rolled steel and turbine engines for high-button shoes, and you get the picture. It was a system that rewarded plodding conformity, and it was guaranteed to produce industrial stagnation. Worse yet, because 100% of enterprise revenues had to be remitted back to the central government, there was absolutely no managerial incentive to innovate or to improve labor productivity--let alone turn a profit.

Under Zhao Ziyang’s 1984 urban reforms, factory managers were for the first time granted a limited amount of discretion over production functions such as product selection and pricing; and they were allowed to negotiate their own contracts for supply and marketing. They were also empowered to reward their most diligent workers with bonuses and performance-based pay raises. Finally, they were allowed to retain a portion of their total revenues as a reward for improved productivity and profitability. These self-retained funds could be used, at the managers’ discretion, for such things as paying bonuses to employees, or purchasing modern equipment, or even building new housing for workers and staff members. To give managers a strong incentive to improve operational efficiency, their own pay, promotions and bonuses were now pegged to increases in the profitability of the enterprise.

One thing that managers were not empowered to do, however—at least not in the mid-1980s—was to fire redundant, lazy or unproductive workers. Such non-essential employees comprised, on average, 15 to 20 percent of an enterprise’s work force. Because Communist Party elders were reluctant to provoke an angry backlash by workers threatened with the loss of guaranteed lifetime jobs and welfare benefits, Premier Zhao Ziyang, had to postpone “breaking the iron-rice bowl.”

Another taboo faced by China’s economic reformers in the 1980s was the strong opposition, among workers and conservative Party elders alike, to the idea of forcing inefficient, unprofitable state enterprises to close down if they couldn’t turn a profit. Even some moderate reformers feared that China’s precious “stability and unity” would be endangered by massive urban unemployment if widespread plant closures were permitted. So strong was this fear that it would take several more years before the government finally decided to “bite the bullet” by forcing into bankruptcy chronically inefficient enterprises.

While the introduction of market forces spawned an upsurge of domestic entrepreneurship and competition, Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “opening up” to the outside world also facilitated growing trade and investment ties with more advanced industrial societies. Reversing two decades of Maoist insularity and austerity, the Special Economic Zones began to thrive in the 1980s, drawing first millions, then billions of foreign dollars into new manufacturing joint ventures. Along the Guangdong-Hong Kong border, the sleepy village of Shenzhen soon morphed into a nascent industrial powerhouse. (show “before” and “after” photos of Shenzhen)
The opening of China’s domestic market to foreign manufactured goods in the 1980s provided added incentive for Chinese manufacturers to upgrade their products and improve their efficiency. For if they hoped to be competitive in an increasingly globalized marketplace, they would have to meet more stringent international quality standards.

Another effect of China’s new “open policy” was a rapid expansion in China’s tourism industry. From just over 300,000 foreign visitors in 1979, tourism mushroomed to almost 1.5 million in 1986. Most foreigners eventually wound up in Beijing, where more than a dozen new four and five-star hotels opened their doors in 1984 and ’85. For many Western tourists and businessmen alike, Maxim’s bar in the new Hyatt Jianguo Hotel was Beijing’s after-hours watering hole of choice, followed closely by the ground-floor lounge in the newly refurbished Peking Hotel.

Elsewhere along China’s eastern seaboard, equally dramatic changes were taking place. Shiny new hotels and office buildings-- usually developed as joint ventures with Hong Kong or Western partners-- sprouted up in city after city. New trains with air-conditioned first-class coaches and “soft” sleeping compartments were added to existing railroad stock; and large fleets of air-conditioned Japanese tour buses and taxicabs were put in service.

One thing that didn’t change very quickly, however, was the quality of public toilets in China. They were appallingly filthy, fetid, and famously user-unfriendly.

Personal digression: Each summer, from 1984 until the late-1990s, I spent two relaxing weeks giving guest lectures aboard a posh commercial cruise ship, the Pearl of Scandinavia (later rechristened the Ocean Pearl), plying the coastal waters of China. One frequent port of call was Qinhuangdao, on the Bohai Gulf in Northeast China. There the ship’s complement of 400+ passengers would be offloaded onto a caravan of buses for the three-hour overland trip to Beijing. The road was crude, at least in the early years, and the buses made a routine pit-stop about halfway to Beijing. And I do mean “pit”-stop, for what greeted the tourists as they piled out of their luxurious air-conditioned coaches was a primitive earthen outhouse containing two sets of “his” and “hers” holes-in-the-ground.

As the passengers approached these primitive, fetid latrines, the looks on their faces generally turned from casual contemplation and mild amusement to varying degrees of shock and horror. Many would gasp and groan audibly, holding their noses as they waited in line. Some refused to go anywhere near the fly-infested outhouses, preferring to suffer the discomfort of a full bladder. Year after year, in the interest of good taste, I resisted the urge to photograph this scene, which repeated itself like clockwork on each trip.

But the local residents were not nearly so polite or self-restrained as I was. The cruise line’s buses arrived on a predictable weekly schedule; and the locals had learned the schedule, so that each time our caravan pulled up to the outhouses, dozens of local farmers, children in tow, would be there waiting, taking a break from their labor in
nearby fields. They would gather directly across the road from the latrines, gawking and grinning and occasionally guffawing with laughter as they observed the bizarre bathroom behavior of the barbarians. Talk about your culture shock!

Giving way to inevitable progress, however, this classic piece of privy pageantry passed into history a few years later, when a brand-new multi-lane expressway was built to replace the old two-lane road, and a shiny new full-service convenience center—replaced the old two-hole latrines—complete with tiled bathrooms, self-flushing toilets, mini-market, gift shop and gas station. Thereafter, the bus ride from Qinhuangdao to Beijing, though much faster and more convenient, wasn’t nearly as much fun.

By the early 1980s, with China’s doors thrown open to the West, English had replaced Russian as the foreign language of choice. Millions of young Chinese were seeking to position themselves favorably in the linguistic marketplace, trying to anticipate “the next big thing” that might improve their chances of a successful career.

On a research trip to China in 1981, I stayed at Shanghai’s stately old Peace Hotel, on the famous waterfront Bund. The hotel catered mainly to foreign businessmen; and each morning my wakeup call was delivered by a conscientious young female telephone operator, who greeted me promptly at 6:30 am with a freshly memorized sentence from her English textbook. One day it was “Good morning, sir. Would you like your eggs scrambled or over easy?” (This was a hollow invitation, to be sure, since the hotel’s restaurant served only boiled eggs.) The next day it was, “Good morning, sir. Our city has many famous historical landmarks.” And on the third day, “Good morning, sir. We study English for the revolution.” That one definitely caught my attention, so I asked her, in English, what that sentence meant. A long silence ensued, so I repeated the question in Chinese. She replied that she wasn’t sure what it meant (“wo buqingchu”), but that she had copied it out of her English textbook to practice on hotel guests.

In the early 1980s English became a virtual national obsession in China. Tourist hotels, public parks and recreational venues catering to foreigners now became linguistic magnets, attracting swarms of eager young Chinese looking to practice their English conversation skills. But since Chinese were generally not permitted to enter hotels catering to foreign tourists without written authorization, they would often hover just outside the front gates of the hotel, waiting patiently for unsuspecting laowai—foreigners—to venture out. “Speak English?” was their universal mantra. They could be very persistent, and I often found myself being trailed by a small phalanx of aspiring Anglophones whenever I left my hotel.

Personal sidebar: I took up jogging in the early 1980s, shortly after quitting my twenty-year smoking habit. Whenever I was in China in those years, I made it a practice to jog two or three miles a day. I preferred running at dawn, which was the best time to view any Chinese city and its inhabitants in a natural, unrehearsed state; and when air pollution levels were at their lowest (Aside: air pollution was already a major problem in many Chinese cities, where highly sulfurous coal bricks were burned by every household for heating and cooking).
It didn’t take long for the enterprising young men who habitually clustered outside my hotel to twig to my daily jogging routine. And some of them began showing up at the crack of dawn— in shorts and sneakers. Matching my pace as I headed out the front gate, they would conduct their conversations with me on the fly. Now, as a newly reformed ex-smoker and lifelong asthmatic, my breathing was inevitably labored while jogging, and I panted audibly when I ran, making coherent speech in any language all but impossible for me. And so, after a few frustrating days of trying to converse with a gasping, out-of-breath American, most of my young running mates gave up their pursuit, returning to the hotel to lie in wait of more promising quarry.

One young fellow at a Xi’an guesthouse, however, proved particularly persistent. I was in Xi’an for an academic conference in 1982, and this fellow ran with me day after day, chattering away long after all the others had given up the chase. When I finally pleaded with him to stop pursuing me, he agreed—but only after inviting me to his home for lunch. When I demurred, he said that his 20-year-old jiejie—big sister—would be gravely disappointed if I failed to show up. “She really wants to meet you,” he said earnestly, at which point he magically extracted a photo from his tunic. Jiejie was stunning— a lithe, long-legged Chinese beauty. A silent alarm went off in my brain. Was I being set up? Was this a honey trap? Or was it just a common everyday form of ingratiating—known in Chinese as guanxi—involving an unsolicited offer of a gift “in kind” in exchange for something the gift-giver values—in this case, private English lessons from an American visitor? Despite my curiosity, I did not take the bait. I shook my head, bade the young man goodbye, and jogged back to my hotel for a long, cool shower.

Next time we’ll look at the downside of China’s economic reforms. In particular, we’ll examine a number of reform-induced socio-economic stresses that emerged in the mid-1980s; and we will see how those stresses served to fuel a strong conservative backlash directed against the reforms themselves.
Lecture 38- : The Fault-lines of Reform (1984-87)

As the ethos of economic competition and individual enrichment spread through China in the mid-1980s, new cultural role models began to replace the stoic model peasants, workers and soldiers of the Mao era. In Mao’s time, the virtues of self-sacrifice and “serving the people” were typified by the martyred PLA conscript Lei Feng. When Lei’s diary, published after his death, revealed that his highest ambition had been to serve as a faceless, nameless, “rust-proof screw of the revolution,” he became a national hero. But now China was marching to a different drummer, and it required more up-to-date role models, people who embodied “modern” virtues like ambition, entrepreneurship and achievement.

The results were sometimes rather odd. For example, under the headline “Prosperous Girls Attract Husbands,” a newspaper in 1984 publicized the story of several unmarried women in their 30s from a poor farming village near Shanghai. The women had been unable to attract husbands while working on a collective farm. But once they shifted to private farming, their monthly incomes shot up and they suddenly found themselves besieged by marriage proposals. To its author, the moral of this story was clear: to snag a desirable husband, a woman needs to be commercially successful.

Successful individuals in various walks of life were now given favorable media publicity as possible role-models, from short-order cooks and free-lance photographers to young girls who hired themselves out as personal maids and nannies.

The mass media also began to celebrate the achievements of trail-blazing entrepreneurs, such as the director of a privately-operated shirt factory in Zhejiang province, who composed new lyrics to a popular Cultural Revolution song whose original lyrics had praised the revolutionary bravery of Red Guards. The new lyrics spoke not of proletarian virtue but of variable piece rates, individual bonuses, and other productivity-raising incentives; and its refrain contained a rousing call for workers to rededicate themselves—not to struggle and self-sacrifice, but to making life beautiful. The times they were a-changin’!

Not only was life now supposed to be prosperous and beautiful, but people were now freer than ever before to express their individual ambitions. Before the mid-1980s, whenever I would ask a Chinese youngster what he or she wanted to do when they grew up, there was but one standard, obligatory response: Anzhao guojiade xuyao—“Whatever the state requires.” In the middle ‘80s when I asked the same question in various parts of China, I received a wide range of idiosyncratic responses, ranging from astronaut to pop star, from primary school teacher to NBA superhero, from taxi driver to business tycoon. Clearly, young Chinese were privatizing their personal ambitions even as they raised their hopes for a “beautiful life.”

In a previous lecture we noted the rising consumer consciousness of many urban Chinese in the early 1980s, and their tendency to imitate western fashion styles. In the winter of 1984, two of the three highest ranking Communist Party officials in China—General
Secretary Hu Yaobang and Premier Zhao Ziyang—appeared in public, for the first time, wearing not their traditional Mao jackets, but Western-style suits and ties. It was a fashion statement that spoke volumes about China’s desire to join the modern world. Later in that same year, Hu Yaobang publicly praised the hygienic superiority of Western eating utensils—knives, forks and spoons—over China’s traditional chopsticks. (show photos of Hu and Zhao in western suits/eating with western utensils)

In the rush of “globalization fever” that spread through China in the mid-1980s, a number of Western intellectual icons—from free-market guru Milton Friedman to the “futurologist” Alvin Toffler and the political scientist Samuel Huntington—made well publicized lecture tours in China, drawing standing-room-only crowds at major universities. The mid-’80s also witnessed a proliferation of various avant-garde art forms which, a few years earlier, would have been condemned for their “bourgeois decadence.” The glossy government magazine Beijing Review, for example, published a series of photos of semi-nude female sculptures in 1984.

As China shifted toward a more open, individualistic and outward-looking economy and society, growing pains were inevitable. Although the country’s economic growth rate rose dramatically—averaging almost 9 percent annually in the 1980s—an uneven patchwork of partial policy reforms and half-reforms generated a number of new societal problems and faultlines.

Prostitution, which had been stamped out completely in the early 1950s, began to flourish again in the “go-go” atmosphere of the mid-’80s. On several trips to China after 1985 I received late-night phone calls from giggling young women asking me if I wanted a “massage girl” to come to my hotel room. Drug trafficking also increased in this period. On one occasion in the late 1980s a shabbily-dressed Uighur migrant from Xinjiang boldly offered to sell me hashish at the front of the entrance to my hotel—not 50 feet away from a uniformed policeman who may or may not have been paid to look the other way.

For the first time since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the country was experiencing a significant rise in levels of income inequality, as some people took maximum advantage of new opportunities for economic entrepreneurship, while others remained rooted in fixed-wage state employment. Further compounding the problem of rising income disparities was the growth of urban inflation. Increased consumer demand, in combination with the decontrol of prices on many consumer goods, pushed the urban inflation index upwards into double-digits for the first time since the late 1940s. In addition, the partial decontrol of prices created a two-track pricing system which generated many opportunities for local officials and enterprise managers to capture windfall profits by engaging in illicit commercial arbitrage.

To illustrate how this worked, in the mid-1980s the retail price of coal sold to urban householders to heat their homes and cook their meals was decontrolled. Traditionally, coal was provided to households at a subsidized price well below its actual production cost. But now, in the drive to rationalize China’s price system, the retail price of coal sold...
to households was permitted to float upward until it reached its true market price. But at the same time, the wholesale price of coal sold by the state to industrial manufacturers, remained fixed at the artificially low, subsidized rate. The result was a dual-pricing system.

Sensing an opportunity to arbitrage the price gap between wholesale and retail coal, many factory managers were able to earn substantial profits by selling their fixed allotment of cheap, state-subsidized coal directly to urban consumers at a substantially higher price than they paid for it. Some factories even closed down their production lines altogether in order to specialize in the “grey market” brokering of industrial raw materials. Caught between the sharp upward drift of retail prices and the quest for windfall profits by commodity speculators and arbitrageurs, many urban householders began to experience a rising sense of economic frustration.

By the mid-’80s, moreover, a significant income gap had opened between semi-skilled, self-employed getihu, who were free to charge market prices for their goods and services, and skilled professionals such as teachers, scientists, and doctors, who generally lived on low fixed incomes in the state sector.

The hardship experienced by members of the underpaid white collar and professional classes was revealed in a number of poignant aphorisms that made the rounds in Chinese cities. To give one example, in the summer of 1986, while I was in Nanjing attending an academic seminar, I heard the following complaints voiced on the street: “Those who make atomic bombs earn less than those who sell hard-boiled eggs” (gao yuanzidande buru mai chajidande); and “The one who operates on your brain makes less than the one who cuts your hair” (kaidaode buru lifade).

The term widely used in China to describe the envy stemming from rising income disparities was hongyanbing, or “red-eye disease”. It was not so much a problem of “some people getting rich before others,” as Deng had anticipated; rather, those who were getting rich first as often as not did so through no particular talent or virtue of their own—either through the happenstance of being self-employed at a time of mounting inflation, or (in the case of many government officials and enterprise managers) being well positioned to collect corrupt, under-the-table “rents” for the preferential allocation of scarce state-controlled resources such as business licenses, building and zoning permits, foreign exchange certificates, and other regulatory instruments used to control market access in the new, partially reformed Chinese economy.

Before the onset of China’s economic reforms in 1979 the ratio of average incomes earned by people in the top and bottom 20 percent of the Chinese population was only about 2.5:1. By the late 1980s this ratio had more than doubled, to almost 6:1. In the same ten-year period, China’s gini coefficient—a measure of relative income inequality, where 0 equals perfect equality (where everyone has exactly the same income) and 1 equals perfect inequality (where one person earns all the money), rose dramatically. The rise was from .18 (one of the lowest in the world) to .38 (which was at that time the highest of any socialist country).
(In this connection it should be noted that economists disagree on the implications of a rising gini coefficient. This is because the early stages of market-driven economic growth are most often accompanied by a significant rise in income disparities. Consequently, most economists regard a modest rise in the gini coefficient in the early stages of development as a sign of economic health and dynamism. But when the coefficient nears .40, as China’s did by the end of the 1980s, many economists regard this as a potential danger sign, portending a rise in social discontent. Today, the world’s highest gini coefficients--those above .55-- are generally found in places like Bolivia, Columbia, Brazil, South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, which have high rates of crime and societal tension. In 2006 the U.S. gini coefficient stood at just over .40.)

Reflecting growing uneasiness over China’s rising income disparities, public opinion polls in the mid-1980s began to show a decline in the public’s enthusiasm for market reform. One poll conducted early in 1986 revealed that only 29 percent of urban residents surveyed felt that the reforms were providing equal (or near-equal) opportunity for all. By November of the same year, three-fourths urban respondents were expressing dissatisfaction with rising prices. Other opinion polls revealed a changing youth culture, one that was becoming significantly more materialistic and hedonistic--and considerably less idealistic--than that of preceding generations.

As socio-economic stresses in the marketplace grew stronger, orthodox Marxists ratcheted up their efforts to maintain the sanctity of traditional socialist institutions and values. In an earlier lecture we saw the first signs of this in the anti-liberalization and anti-“spiritual pollution” campaigns of the early ‘80s. Those early campaigns had targeted the cultural decadence and moral degeneracy ostensibly spawned by Deng Xiaoping’s policies of economic reform and “opening up.” Now the conservatives sharpened their knives once again, this time in an effort to roll back the reforms themselves.

Although Deng Xiaoping and his more open-minded associates had studiously avoided using the scare-word “capitalism” to describe their reforms, more orthodox Marxists were not nearly so inhibited; nor were they fooled by Deng’s use of euphemisms such as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” As social satisfaction diminished, the traditionalists took advantage of mounting urban distress to launch an ideological counterattack against capitalism and its corrosive effects.

The “C” word soon became a cudgel wielded by self-styled guardians of the socialist faith. Unnamed “capitalist forces” were now accused of “seeking to corrupt and harm our country.” Attacking Deng’s key premise that it was all right for some people to get rich before others, conservatives countered that under socialism people should all get rich together—or else not at all. In an angry rebuff to those who eagerly embraced Western ideas and institutions, the venerable elder statesman Peng Zhen—who had become increasingly intolerant of rash young progressives like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang--publicly complained that “for those who worship bourgeois liberalization. . . it seems that
even the moon in the capitalist world is brighter than the sun in our socialist society.” (People’s Daily, January 15, 1987; Issues & Studies 23:6, June 1987, p. 17).

The debate over the dangers of “capitalism” and “bourgeois liberalization” was punctuated in 1985 and again in 1986 by an epidemic of small-scale social disturbances. On the surface these disturbances appeared random, spontaneous, and almost wholly unrelated. In May of 1985, a riot occurred at a Beijing sports stadium when a Hong Kong soccer team unexpectedly defeated the local Chinese club. Shortly afterward, a group of three hundred “sent-down youths” staged a sit-in at the headquarters of the Beijing municipal government, demanding the right to return to their homes in the Chinese capital. In Tianjin, a race riot erupted on a local college campus on “Sino-African Friendship Day.” A similar incident occurred in Nanjing, where a group of male Chinese students accused African exchange students of sexually harassing local Chinese women.

And in Tiananmen Square, over 1,000 students demonstrated in September 1985 in protest over Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, a Shinto War Memorial that honored, among others, the militarists who launched World War II. It was China’s largest street demonstration since Fu Yuehua’s petitioners’ march of January 1979. Urban distress was clearly rising, and China’s college students – long a barometer of underlying societal tensions – were growing increasingly restive.

Specific student complaints were varied and diverse, ranging from dissatisfaction with unhealthy dormitory conditions, inadequate stipends and rampant inflation, to flagrant corruption by school administrators and the dangers of Japanese economic “neo-colonialism.” For the most part, there was little overall coherence or direction to their grievances. But all that changed in the autumn of 1986, when campus discontent began to coalesce around a single common denominator: the demand for democratic empowerment.

Two developments served to drive this coalescence: the first was a revival of Deng Xiaoping’s ill-fated 1980 proposals for systemic political reform. In mid-1986, Zhao Ziyang, on Deng’s instructions, appointed an advisory commission, made up largely of liberal-leaning Party intellectuals, to address anew the question of political reform; and he instructed its members to draw up a set of concrete proposals for presentation at the next National Party Congress. When news of Zhao’s instructions reached college campuses around the country, expectations of political change were understandably raised.

The second development that served to increase political activism among college students in the second half of 1986 was a multi-campus speaking tour by a free-thinking, free-speaking university professor. Professor Fang Lizhi was vice president of the Chinese University of Science and Technology in Anhui province. In the Mao era, Professor Fang had been repeatedly criticized and persecuted for his political views, first during the 1957 “anti-rightist” movement and again during the Cultural Revolution. A lifelong liberal, he gave voice to the feelings of powerlessness and frustration experienced by large numbers of Chinese students. (show photo of Fang Lizhi)
In a series of campus lectures given in November and December of 1986, Fang Lizhi boldly criticized by name several Party leaders who had been charged with corruption; and he heaped scorn upon Party autocrats who denied the people their constitutional right to free expression. Challenging Chinese students to “break all barriers” that served to impede open intellectual inquiry and creativity, he urged young people boldly to take their future into their own hands. Democracy cannot be bestowed paternalistically from above, he said; it must be seized firmly from below.

Wherever the charismatic Fang Lizhi spoke, he drew large crowds of young admirers. In the wake of his speeches at half a dozen college campuses in Hefei, Shanghai and Beijing, tens of thousands of students poured out of classrooms and dormitories and into the streets. Altogether, in December of 1986 some 75,000 students from 150 colleges in seventeen Chinese cities took part in pro-democracy demonstrations.

Predictably, Party leaders were divided over how to view these events. Progressive politicians, like the liberal-leaning mayor of Tianjin, Li Ruihuan, urged the citizens of his city not to be unduly alarmed by student demonstrations. “There is nothing strange about these incidents,” he said. “There’s no reason for us to lose our composure.” In a similar vein, Hu Yaobang, the politically permissive Party General-Secretary, adopted a relaxed attitude toward the protesting students.

Others were less tolerant, however—including Beijing’s conservative municipal government. When more than 20,000 Beijing students turned out for a pro-democracy rally in Tiananmen Square in late December, the official newspaper Beijing Daily, responded with an editorial accusing them of stirring up “turmoil” and questioning their patriotism. In a show of angry defiance, the students built a bonfire in the Square in which they burned several hundred purloined copies of the offending newspaper.

With that, the CCP’s elderly hard-liners, already upset with the students for their display of “bourgeois liberalism,” began to fume. The students had impudently thumbed their nose at authority; and what is worse, they had gotten away with it. One senior conservative, the fiery PLA General Wang Zhen, became so agitated while giving a talk at the Central Party School in Beijing that he knocked over his microphone. Directing his fury at a group of students in the audience who sympathized with the demonstrators, General Wang exploded: “You have three million college students,” he raged, “but I have three million soldiers; and I will cut your freakin’ heads off!... If you don't believe it, come and try me!”(Ruan Ming, Deng Xiaoping Diguo, p. 190) (Aside: It was not for nothing that Wang Zhen was nicknamed by his peers, “Big Cannon Wang.”)

Even the usually placid Deng Xiaoping was furious. Blaming Fang Lizhi for inflaming student passions, Deng now demanded—and got-- Fang’s expulsion from the CCP. But Party conservatives weren’t content to stop there. Sensing that the momentum had shifted in their favor, they now demanded a firm response to the “outrageous” conduct of the students in Tiananmen Square; and they even went so far as to propose that Hu Yaobang should be held personally responsible for encouraging the students’ show of defiance.
Buffeted by conflicting advice and opinion, Deng initially hedged and waffled. But the burning of the newspapers in Tiananmen Square convinced him that a stand had to be taken, and at the end of December he came around to support the hard-line position. Though he preferred not to use force, he was convinced that a dangerous precedent would be set if the Party gave in to student demands. Clearly, Deng had in mind the Polish crisis of 1980.

Under these circumstances, putting an end to the Tiananmen protests became an important test of wills for Deng, a test that he was determined to win. On December 30 he made his feelings known to the inner circle of Party elders.

“We cannot,” he said, “allow people who turn right and wrong around . . . to do as they please.” Specifically alluding to events in Poland, Deng praised the Polish government’s handling of the crisis, saying that the Polish leaders had showed “cool, level-headed judgment. Their attitude was firm. . . . They imposed martial law to bring the situation under control.” For Deng, the lesson was clear: “This proves,” he said, “that you cannot succeed without recourse to . . . dictatorship.” (Chinese Law and Government 21:1, Spring 1988, pp. 18-21)

And in remarks that would ominously foreshadow the events of May and June 1989, Deng raised the question of how to deal with students who are intent on provoking a confrontation:

“[I]f they are determined to create a bloody incident, what can we do? . . . We want to avoid bloodshed…. But the most important thing is to firmly grasp the target of struggle. . . . If we do not take appropriate steps and measures, we will not be able to control such incidents. If we pull back now, we will encounter even more trouble later on. . . . Don't worry if foreigners say we have stained our reputation. . . . We must show foreigners that the political situation in China is stable.” (ibid.)

Though Deng was prepared to take firm action, the situation fortuitously resolved itself without resort to violence. On January 1, 1987, municipal police arrested thirty student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Sobered by this show of governmental determination, and chilled to the bone by Beijing's bitterly cold winter winds, the students decided to end their protest in a face-saving manner. At one final, highly-spirited mass rally in Tiananmen Square, they sang revolutionary songs and quietly dispersed, returning to their campuses to resume studies and prepare for the Lunar New Year holidays ahead.

With that, the crisis went into remission, and Deng’s dark side was once more hidden from view. When next it surfaced, in the spring of 1989, the consequences would be far more serious. This time, the fire was contained with a minimum of force; but the fire next time would prove catastrophic.

Although cold weather intervened to help bring a non-violent end to the student demonstrations of December 1986, the underlying social and political tensions remained unabated. More ominous still, the split between liberals and hard-liners within the Chinese Communist Party was growing visibly deeper. Though no-one could know it at the time, the volatile social chemistry of rising student unrest, urban frustration, and the vindictiveness of Party elders was fast becoming a recipe for disaster. In this lecture we will examine how this volatile mixture erupted into a dramatic—and ultimately deadly—confrontation between Chinese students and the Chinese government in the spring of 1989.

When elderly conservatives demanded the ouster of Deng’s liberal-leaning protégé Hu Yaobang, for his alleged role in aiding and abetting student demonstrations, Deng Xiaoping went along with them for the sake of Party unity.

But Deng was not willing to allow hard-liners to use Hu Yaobang’s ouster as an excuse to roll-back his hard-won economic reforms; and so Deng insisted that the post of Party General Secretary should go to his other reform-minded protégé, Zhao Ziyang.

In an countermove designed to offset Deng’s tactical gambit, Party elders nominated one of their own young rising stars, a hydraulic engineer by the name of Li Peng, to succeed Zhao Ziyang as premier of the state council. Li was a no-nonsense conservative who subscribed to Chen Yun’s “bigger birdcage” school of limited, incremental economic reform. With the completion of this quid-pro-quo arrangement, Zhao Ziyang became Party general secretary, with Li Peng occupying the office of premier. It was an uncomfortable compromise at best. Zhao and Li were like oil and vinegar; and they seldom spoke to one another.

But it was not merely widening personal antagonisms within the ruling coalition that made Party unity more difficult to sustain. Adding substantially to the intensity of the gathering storm was a decision made by Party elders behind closed doors.

In the wake of Hu Yaobang’s dismissal, a group of elderly conservatives met in secret and agreed that in future, to ensure the country’s long term political stability, it would be advisable to have an “emergency arrangement” under which the two highest-ranking revolutionaries of the older generation—Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun—would be empowered in time of crisis to override the decisions made by younger Party and government leaders.

This extraordinary grant of emergency power was quietly incorporated into the Party’s operational code in the fall of 1987. Thereafter, it was invoked on only one fateful occasion—when Deng Xiaoping used the override clause in May of 1989 to bypass Zhao Ziyang and directly order a military crackdown on student “turmoil” in Tiananmen Square. (More about that later.)
With a certified hard-liner now in the premier’s office, elderly conservatives showed less and less self-restraint in launching a new campaign against “bourgeois liberalization”. In the course of this new offensive, which began early in 1987, a number of liberal Communist Party intellectuals—including Professor Fang Lizhi—were expelled from the Party.

Press censorship tightened noticeably in the spring of 1987. Several liberal magazines (and writers) now found themselves being black-listed, unable to publish their work. But at Deng’s insistence, there were no large-scale crackdowns against those who had supported or participated in the 1986 student demonstrations. And in stark contrast to the anti-spiritual pollution campaign of 1983, no mass cultural vigilantism was allowed.

The reason for this low-key approach was Deng’s realization that if the anti-liberalization forces were allowed free rein, they would sabotage his hard-won policies of economic reform and “opening up.” Here we see, once again, Deng’s internal contradiction fully revealed: Deeply and unwaveringly committed to economic reform, he was also, by instinct, a law-and-order authoritarian who could not abide spontaneous, uncontrolled expressions of dissent or defiance. It was this internal contradiction that would hold the key to the catastrophic unfolding of events in May and June of 1989.

As Deng struggled to hold Party hard-liners in check, tensions between Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng, and between their respective patrons, continued to mount. In the fall of 1987, Zhao issued his long-awaited report on political reform to the 13th National Party Congress. Although Zhao’s new proposals fell short of being “democratic” in the Western sense of the term, they went well beyond the earlier guidelines proposed by Deng himself in 1980.

Among Zhao’s more controversial proposals, he called for a complete separation of Party and governmental functions, to be achieved by totally eliminating organized “party cells” within state administrative agencies. These small groups had traditionally allowed a minority of Party members to have a dominant voice within all state organs. Now they were to be dissolved.

Next, Zhao proposed terminating the longstanding double standard employed in dealing with Communist Party members under suspicion of violating the law. Henceforth, argued Zhao, Party members suspected of crimes should have their cases investigated by public prosecutors and argued in open court, just like ordinary citizens. No longer would the Communist Party shield its own members from criminal prosecution. In arguing this point, Zhao insisted that all citizens—including even Party leaders--must be “equal before the law.”

Third, Zhao Ziyang called for a major overhaul of the state’s personnel system, in order to eliminate the traditional practice of promoting cadres based on factional allegiance and political loyalty. In its place, there would be an examination-based civil service mechanism permitting impersonal, professionalized evaluation of all candidates. (This proposal was
particularly ironic in view of the fact that the idea of a professional civil service had been invented in China almost 1300 years earlier).

Fourth, Zhao rejected the conventional Leninist notion that public opinion under socialism should be completely “unified” and homogeneous. Instead, he argued, the Party and government should take into consideration the divergent needs, interests and opinions of its citizens. Arguing that “socialist society is not monolithic,” he stressed that “conflicting interests should be reconciled,” rather than repressed.

Finally, Zhao recommended a slow and gradual process of “controlled pluralism.” Noting that the forces of instability were still very strong in China, he argued against the early introduction of such things as direct, competitive elections, multiple parties, constitutional checks and balances and complete freedom of expression. Instead, he urged a gradual enlargement of the roles and responsibilities of indirectly elected people’s congresses at all levels, to give greater voice to grass-roots citizen constituencies.

In each of these respects, Zhao Ziyang’s recommendations to the 13th Party Congress broke important new ground. Though they fell short of providing a detailed programmatic blueprint for China’s democratic transition, Zhao’s proposals nonetheless offered the first tentative sketches of an emergent Chinese “soft-authoritarian” political system, one that contained at least the seeds, if not yet the full sprouts, of political pluralism, constitutionalism and—ultimately--democratization.

Unfortunately for Zhao, however—and even more unfortunately for China—his recommendations were never acted upon. Party hard-liners, understandably disturbed by Zhao’s ideas, rallied their supporters to block any attempt to have the proposals formally adopted by the Party Congress. And shortly after the Congress adjourned, the conservatives began to sharpen their knives.

In 1988, Zhao’s authority as General-Secretary came under renewed challenge by the new hard-line Premier, Li Peng. Backed behind the scenes by elders Chen Yun, Wang Zhen and Bo Yibo, Li Peng spearheaded a drive to undermine Zhao’s authority by attacking his key economic policies.

Li got the opening he needed in the late spring of 1988, when unconfirmed rumors of an imminent deregulation of all remaining state-imposed price controls began circulating along China’s eastern seaboard. Fearful of an imminent inflationary spiral, anxious urban consumers went on a sudden binge of panic-buying. Banks were flooded with people rushing to withdraw their savings, in order to stock up on luxury goods like refrigerators, color TVs and air-conditioners before the rumored price hikes could take effect.

Thought it was never proven, there was widespread speculation that the rumors triggering the wave of panic-buying had been planted by the hard-liners themselves, precisely in order to embarrass Zhao and discredit his economic policies. If that was indeed their plan, it worked to near-perfection. Li Peng and his patrons managed not only to put the blame squarely on Zhao for the consumer panic of 1988, but in process they were also able to
persuade Deng Xiaoping that Zhao was ill-suited to be in charge of China’s overall economic policy-planning.

As a result of this episode, Zhao suffered a substantial blow to his prestige—and a partial loss of Deng’s confidence. These were blows from which he never fully recovered; and by the time Beijing’s students took to the streets in the spring of 1989, Zhao was already a deeply wounded leader.

Meanwhile, urban problems continued to mount. Fueled by the rumors of imminent price reform, the urban inflation rate reached 20 percent in the summer of 1988. This caused severe hardship among many urban wage-earners, whose fixed incomes could not keep pace with the spiraling cost of living. The spike in commodity prices even led some city dwellers to long for a return to the “good old days” of Maoist egalitarianism. As one urban housewife lamented in the late summer of 1988, “under Mao, society was in chaos, but prices were stable; under Deng, society is stable, but prices are in chaos.” (Baum, Burying Mao, p. )

But society was evidently not so stable either. In addition to widespread fears of inflation, there were other signs of malaise. One focal point of rising urban discontent was the government's plan to privatize state-owned housing and to decontrol rents for urban dwellers, moves that would force families to pay a substantially larger share of their disposable income for rent—and this at a time when food prices were already rising rapidly.

Labor problems also began to increase in 1988. Following the enactment of a 1986 enterprise reform law, which for the first time empowered factory managers to lay off redundant workers and cut the wages of unproductive ones, there was a surge of industrial unemployment—the first since 1949.

By the middle of 1988, more than half a million redundant workers had been laid off from state-owned enterprises, their “iron rice bowls” shattered. In August it was announced that the nation’s unemployment rate had doubled over the past year.

Under the new rules of market competition, inefficient and poorly-managed state enterprises found that they were unable to earn sufficient profits to meet their tax obligations to the state. According to government estimates, more than half of all state-owned firms failed to remit their full taxes in 1988. For private entrepreneurs, the figure was higher still, officially estimated at 80 percent.

Enterprise failures were especially common in rural townships and villages, where large numbers of indigenous, low-tech manufacturing ventures had sprung up in the early 1980s to serve local needs in the aftermath of agricultural decollectivization. But as China’s national economy became more highly specialized and more regionally integrated in the mid- and late-‘80s, and as price reforms gradually eliminated the raw-material subsidies that had benefited small, inefficient rural factories, large numbers of township and village enterprises, or “TVEs,” found they were unable to survive in
competition with larger, more highly-capitalized urban firms. Consequently, tens of thousands of small and medium-sized TVEs were forced to shut down by 1988.

Also by the late-1980s the early productivity and income-boosting benefits of household contract farming and rural free markets had also begun to level off, and in some cases to decline. The easy gains of decollectivization—the low-hanging fruit of household farming and higher grain procurement prices—had been captured early on, at the outset of the reform movement. Now farm incomes were stagnating once again. And with village and small-town industries beginning to fail in large numbers, labor emigration from the countryside increased dramatically.

By the end of the ‘80s tens of millions of rural dwellers had migrated to China’s urban areas in search of employment. For the most part, they clustered in cities and Special Zones along the country’s highly commercialized eastern seaboard. In Beijing alone, migrants rural workers comprised a “floating population” of over a million people, most of whom lived a squalid existence on the margins of “polite” society. The numbers were even higher in Shanghai.

Forming a broad urban underclass, migrants generally occupied unpleasant low-wage jobs shunned by local workers. Many became street vendors, hawkers, or panhandlers. Young rural women turned increasingly to prostitution. For the first time since 1949, beggary was widely observed in many Chinese cities, accompanied by a dramatic rise in the incidence of street crime, particularly petty larceny.

With the threat of industrial layoffs and bankruptcies now looming larger and larger, labor unrest also began to spike. In the first half of 1988 forty-nine major industrial work stoppages were reported; by the end of the year the total had risen to more than 100.

To cap off this picture of growing societal distress and dislocation, a major upsurge of official corruption, commercial speculation and profiteering by Party members and their families was reported in 1988. In the spring of that year a leading Communist Party newspaper published an editorial commentary listing several types of economic crimes and misdemeanors that had recently reached epidemic proportions. According to the article’s author, the laobaixing were getting very angry; and they had good reason to be:

“The decay of party discipline; bribery and corruption; covering up for friends and relatives; deceiving and taking advantage of [honest] cadres and Party members; open violations of law [which are] covered up through “special connections” of various kinds . . . --all these types of flagrant misconduct have produced . . . harmful social results and have led to a deterioration of the Party's image . . . ; the damage done is inestimable.” (Dagong Bao, April 12, 1988).

My first clear inkling that serious trouble lay ahead came in the fall of 1988, while I was on a visit to Peking University. There I was introduced to a young Chinese assistant professor who had recently returned to Beijing after completing his Ph.D. degree in the United States. When he was first recruited to the faculty at Beida, he had been promised a
comfortable new apartment on the campus, along with various other professorial perks. However, when he arrived to claim his apartment a couple of months later, he was told that it had been rented out to a private bidder, who also just happened to be a mid-level Party cadre. When he protested, the housing authorities just shrugged and said “meiyou banfa” – which is the ubiquitous Chinese expression meaning, essentially, “fuhgeddaboudit.” Until he could find another apartment, the professor would have to live in an overcrowded, underheated graduate student dormitory.

When I first met the young professor a couple of months later, he was still living in the tiny dormitory room, which he shared with five grad students; and his books were still packed in crates. His wife and young son remained in the United States, unable to join him in Beijing for lack of living space. He was furious. “There’s going to be a rebellion soon,” he predicted.

The rebellion wasn’t long in coming. It started in mid-April of 1989. The occasion was the sudden, unexpected death of Hu Yaobang. You will recall that Hu had been fired from the post of Party General Secretary in January 1987, at the behest of hard-liners who blamed him for encouraging the forces of “bourgeois liberalization.”

On April 8, 1989, Hu suffered a massive myocardial infarction. He died a week later. When his death was announced, tens of thousands of Beijing college students spontaneously left their campuses. Marching to Tiananmen Square, they demanded the restoration of Hu’s good name and reputation. When the government refused to acknowledge the students’ demands, the demonstrations spread. Concerned about China’s fragile political unity and stability, Deng Xiaoping cautioned the students that they were being manipulated by “unpatriotic elements”, and that their protests were creating “turfmoil” (dongluan).

Far from calming the situation, however, Deng’s warning, published in a People’s Daily editorial toward the end of April, served to catalyze even larger, more widespread urban protests. In the second week of May, a student hunger strike was initiated in Tiananmen Square, capturing the attention (and sympathy) of the world’s media on the eve of the first official visit to China by Soviet Party Chief Mikhail Gorbachev.

Deng was humiliated. Refusing to negotiate with the rebellious students until they first ceased their hunger strike and evacuated the Square, Deng was determined not to back down. Things were moving rapidly toward some sort of confrontation. Although the student protests were political in nature, much of the unhappiness that fueled them stemmed from the increasingly stressful socio-economic circumstances of the times.

By sheer coincidence, I was in China at the height of the 1989 student demonstrations. I had been attending an academic conference in Ma’anshan, a gritty industrial city located about 50 miles up the Yangzi River from Nanjing.

Each night after our conference session was over for the day, the participants would gather together in the hotel’s lounge to watch televised news coverage of the
extraordinary events unfolding in Beijing. The Chinese scholars were mostly younger and middle-aged academics from a major Shanghai research institute. They were overwhelmingly sympathetic toward the Beijing students. The authorities’ hard-line stance and categorical refusal to negotiate with the hunger strikers was, in their view, a sign of incredible governmental arrogance and insensitivity.

But one incident in particular served to greatly astonish—and deeply trouble—the Chinese scholars present. On the morning of May 18, Premier Li Peng and a small delegation of high-level government officials met with leaders of the student hunger strike in a last-ditch effort to resolve the conflict peacefully. As we sat, spellbound, watching a delayed evening telecast of that meeting, we could see that things had gotten off to a very bad start. Two of the student leaders, named Wang Dan and Wu’er Kaixi (who was wheeled dramatically into the meeting wearing pajamas, an intravenous drip tube attached to his wheelchair), began by brashly refusing to accept Premier Li’s patronizing display of concern for the welfare of the hunger strikers. Here’s how the conversation went:

*Li Peng:* Today we will discuss one issue: How to relieve the hunger strikers of their present plight. The party and the government are most concerned about the health of the students. You are all young, the oldest among you is only 22 or 23, younger than my youngest child. . . .

*Wu'er Kaixi:* Excuse me for interrupting you, premier Li, but time is running short. We are sitting here comfortably while the students outside are suffering from hunger. You just said that we should discuss only one issue. [At this point Wu’er thrusts his index finger at premier Li] But the truth is, it was not you who invited us to talk, but we, all of us in Tiananmen Square, who invited you to talk. So we should be the ones to name the issues to be discussed. . . . (show photo of Wu’er and Li Peng)

When Wu’er Kaixi thrust his finger disdainfully at Li Peng, the Chinese scholars around me let out an audible, collective gasp. They were horrified at the sight of a 20-year-old college student contemptuously lecturing China’s top government official. Sitting on the edge of their seats, they watched in disbelief as the drama continued to unfold:

*Wang Dan:* . . . For the students to leave the Square and call off the hunger strike, our conditions must be met in full. . . . First, [there must be] a positive affirmation of the current student movement as a democratic and patriotic movement, not as ‘turmoil.’ Second, a dialogue [must] be held as soon as possible. . . .

*Li Peng:* . . . The fact is, social disorder has occurred in Beijing and is spreading to the whole country. The current situation . . . is out of control. . . . Anarchy has reigned in Beijing for the past several days. . . . The government of the People's Republic of China . . . cannot disregard such phenomena. . . .
Wu'er Kaixi: . . . . I want to repeat what I just said: We don't want to be bogged down in discussions. Give an immediate response to our conditions, because the students in the Square are starving. If … we remain bogged down on this question, then we will conclude that the government is not at all sincere…. Then there will be no need for us… to stay here any longer.

When the meeting adjourned with Wu’er Kaixi refusing to shake hands with a visibly shaken Li Peng, the Chinese premier gritted his teeth in a forced smile, valiantly trying to maintain his composure for the television cameras.

As the TV newsclip ended, the Chinese scholars around me fidgeted nervously, and one of them muttered under his breath, *Meiyou shenma hao jieguo*—“Nothing good will come of this.” He was right, of course; and just how right would become apparent in short order.
Lecture 40: The Empire Strikes Back (1989)

One day after Wu’er Kaixi delivered his nationally televised insult to Li Peng, Deng Xiaoping approved Li Peng’s request to impose martial law in Beijing. Deng was furious at the students’ insolence. And he was equally furious at Zhao, who had openly sympathized with the students.

For more than two weeks, Zhao had been trying to orchestrate a peaceful resolution of the mounting crisis in Tiananmen Square. He had upheld the students’ patriotism, and he had pleaded with Deng to give him time to persuade the students to end their hunger strike. But some of the more radical students remained distrustful of Zhao, fearing that he was a captive of the hard-liners; and they thus rejected his proposal that they leave the Square in advance of any negotiations with the government.

In truth, Deng had balked at permitting Zhao to offer the students more favorable terms. Once again making reference the Polish situation of 1981, Deng argued that “Events in Poland prove that making concessions provides no solutions. The greater the concessions made by the government, the greater the opposition forces became.” (Baum, Burying Mao, p. )

Downcast over his inability to broker a peaceful solution, Zhao next attempted to submit his resignation; but Deng Xiaoping refused to accept it. By now deeply distraught, Zhao then did something remarkable. He paid an unscheduled, unescorted visit to the hunger strikers in Tiananmen Square. There, in the pre-dawn hours of May 19, Zhao addressed the students through a hand-held, battery-driven megaphone. “I’ve come too late,” he said. His eyes filled with tears. “I’ve let you down.” (show photo of Zhao addressing students).

Infuriated by Zhao’s tearful farewell to the students, Deng Xiaoping next invoked the emergency “override” powers that had been granted to him after Hu Yaobang was dismissed from office in 1987. Convening an extraordinary meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, Deng stripped Zhao Ziyang of all formal authority as General-Secretary.

Later that same day, May 20, something equally remarkable happened. As thousands of uniformed PLA troops poured into the city in truck convoys to enforce the martial law declaration, they found their path blocked by tens of thousands of irate citizens, including students and non-students alike. Jamming Beijing’s major access roads and thoroughfares, dense crowds of people sat down in the middle of the street, refusing to budge. The truck convoys were stopped in their tracks. The people of Beijing had spoken. And their verdict frightened the wits out of the government. (show photo of impacted troop trucks)

With our academic conference in Ma’anshan now concluded, the participants departed for Shanghai by bus on May 20. En route we made comfort stops at a couple of small towns, where the local people seemed largely uninterested in the ongoing political drama
in Beijing. When I asked an unscientific sample of townsfolk how they felt about the hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, my queries generally produced blank stares. For these rural dwellers, there were evidently more important things to attend to than the antics of a few thousand noisy, self-indulgent college kids in far-off Beijing.

In Nanjing, our next stop, it was a far different story. There, a massive anti-government rally was in progress in the main public square. Tens of thousands of people of all ages and walks of life were crowded into the city center at the Drum Tower, seemingly unified in their support for the Beijing students and in their open contempt for Li Peng.

Large posters were draped on walls and fences bordering the main square. They lampooned Li, caricaturing his nerdy appearance, and demanding that he xiatai (“step down”). Some banners called for Deng Xiaoping to retire as well, but they were relatively few in number. Many posters demanded the exposure and punishment of corrupt, profiteering high-level officials and their families.

In more than 300 other large and medium-size Chinese cities, anti-government demonstrations broke out in the last ten days of May. While the total number of people participating in protests is unknown, estimates range from 10 to 20 million, including hundreds of thousands of Communist Party members and cadres.

In a handful of cities, violence broke out, as roving bands of unemployed workers and youthful delinquents took advantage of the mounting political unrest to engage in an orgy of vandalism, looting, and property destruction.

Within 48 hours after he declared martial law in Beijing, Li Peng had become a ubiquitous national target of public derision. It was the first time I had ever witnessed such a massive, spontaneous display of contempt for a sitting Chinese leader. (The Cultural Revolution orgies of denunciation against Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao weren’t in the same category; they had been orchestrated by Mao and his followers). This was entirely different. It was stunning.

After our brief stopover in Nanjing we continued on to Shanghai, where I hastened to book the first available train ticket to Beijing. Forced to wait 24 hours for a hard coach seat, I spent the day in Shanghai walking around People’s Park and the riverfront Bund, where tens of thousands of citizens were gathered in a show of solidarity with the Beijing students. Once again the spirit of open contempt and defiance of the central government was in full blossom. How, I wondered, could any government--even a self-selected, autocratic Leninist government--possibly survive such a sudden, massive loss of popular confidence?

I thought of the abortive anti-Communist uprisings in Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968. In both cases liberal reformers had led short-lived rebellions against their neo-Stalinist masters. But the parallels ended there. In both earlier cases, popular protest had been smothered by Russian tanks. But there were no Russian tanks in
China; nor would there be any. Surely, I thought, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army would not turn its weapons upon its own people!

After an all-day train ride, I had less than 24 hours in Beijing before catching my flight back to Los Angeles. Just before I arrived in the Chinese capital, a command was issued by the PLA’s top leadership, ordering the army’s immobilized troop convoys to pull back to the outskirts of the city. By the time I reached Tiananmen Square on the evening of May 22, a celebration had begun.

The atmosphere of jubilation was palpable. The people had won a huge victory. By ordering the army’s withdrawal, the government had tacitly conceded defeat. Or so it seemed. The street demonstrations that day and the next were the biggest—and most enthusiastic ever, with over one million people participating. Sprinkled among them were hundreds of sympathetic PLA soldiers who had abandoned their posts. (show photo of TAM demonstration)

When I flew back to Los Angeles on May 23, I was in a state of near euphoria. I had seen history in the making. Never before—with the temporary exception of Poland in the summer of 1980—had a Communist regime been forced to back down in the face of massive civil disobedience. In a handful of media interviews over the next few days I confidently suggested that Li Peng’s days were numbered, predicting that his government would most likely fall before the end of the month.

I was hardly alone in my naïve optimism. Although some Chinese had predicted a violent denouement, very few Western experts anticipated the government’s use of overwhelming, deadly force. The carnage that followed thus came as a real shock. Perhaps I should have studied recent Polish history a bit more carefully.

On Friday evening, June 2 (mid-afternoon Saturday, June 3, in Beijing) I was doing a live interview with CNN in Los Angeles, when the studio in Atlanta broke in with a report that tear gas was being used by Chinese army units against demonstrators in Beijing. The demonstrations fought back with rocks and bottles. Shortly afterward, CNN reported that an army jeep had run over three civilians near Tiananmen Square, killing them. Other acts of scattered violence ensued.

Things had reached the point of no return. Now there could be no question of a peaceful political transition. For me, it was a humbling moment. My 25 years’ experience as a China watcher had failed to prepare me for what was about to happen. The deluge had begun. (show photo of beginning of violence)

The PLA’s deadly drive to recapture Tiananmen Square from student demonstrators commenced shortly after dark on June 3. From several outlying muster points, armored military columns slowly converged on the center of the city. Their instructions were to clear the Square by dawn’s early light, using all necessary force. The order was issued by Deng Xiaoping himself—chief architect of the very reforms that had inspired China’s students to question the autocratic power of the Communist Party.
The horror that followed was equally surreal. Scratchy news film showed tracer bullets flying overhead as PLA soldiers fired into massive crowds blocking their advance on Chang’an Boulevard. Pedi-carts hauled the civilian dead and wounded to city hospitals, as armored personnel carriers ran amok, scattering crowds before them while being attacked from the rear by angry citizens armed with iron rods, bricks, and makeshift Molotov cocktails.

Hundreds of buses and trucks were set ablaze. In the confusion, a few dozen unfortunate PLA soldiers became separated from their units, only to be set upon by enraged mobs. Some of the soldiers were beaten to death; others were disemboweled; still others were hanged, or incinerated, or both. (show photos of PLA victims)

When the dust settled at dawn, Tiananmen Square had been physically “liberated,” but at a dreadful cost: hundreds of civilians—perhaps more than a thousand—had been killed and several thousands wounded. The real totals may never be known.

Forty soldiers also died and up to a thousand others were injured. But the damage to China’s national psyche—and international prestige—was greater still. As Deng Xiaoping was heard to comment shortly after June 4, “We restored order, but lost the hearts of the people.”

Amid the confusion that surrounded the deadly events of June 3rd thought 5th, 1989, one image stands out above all others: the image of a young man in civilian clothes, a sport coat slung casually over his shoulder, stepping out into Chang’an Boulevard to single-handedly block an approaching column of tanks near Tiananmen Square. This stunning image remains frozen in memory, a timeless trope containing the entire universe of Liu Si—June 4-- in a single grain of sand. (show photo of Tank Man)

Almost immediately after the carnage ended, the government circulated a list of its most-wanted “counterrevolutionary criminals.” The list was topped by a number of prominent intellectuals, students and labor activists. Among them were Wang Dan, Wu’er Kaixi, and Fang Lizhi.

Throughout the country thousands of alleged rioters were hunted down and arrested, while dozens of alleged “thugs” and “hooligans”--mostly unemployed youths and migrant laborers-- were hastily tried, sentenced, and summarily executed. Television stations around the country covered these events in solemn, sobering detail—a graphic warning of the dire consequences of active rebellion.

Watching bits and pieces of the June 4 carnage and its aftermath from Los Angeles, it occurred to me that this must be an incredibly difficult moment to be a Chinese diplomat abroad, tasked with defending the brutal actions of the country’s leaders. China was under global siege, as foreign governments and the international media directed a cascading chorus of condemnation against the “Butchers of Beijing.”
Thousands of Chinese students in the United States, Australia and Western Europe demonstrated nightly in front of local Chinese embassies and consulates. A handful of Chinese diplomats abroad defected, while China’s highly esteemed Minister of Culture resigned in protest. At least one senior government official, the widely respected Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Wenjin, committed suicide, despondent over the brutal suppression of the student movement.

More than a year after the brutal crackdown, I received a phone call from the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, inviting me to an informal dinner with the Consul-General and a small group of Chinese diplomats and local scholars. The C-G’s principal concern was with how to deal with the starkly negative images and attitudes toward China that had been propagated in the American media since June 4. “Tell us what we can do to improve our image,” he asked the scholars present.

After a few rather polite and tentative suggestions had been raised by others, I cut to the chase. “You might start,” I suggested, “by withdrawing the official characterization of the student demonstrations of April and May as ‘counterrevolutionary turmoil’ and their leaders as ‘unpatriotic’”. Speaking in a mixture of Chinese and English, I ventured the opinion that until the Chinese government—and Deng Xiaoping in particular-- had the courage to acknowledge committing serious mistakes during the run-up to June 4, there could be no final healing of China’s deep national wound.

This was not exactly what the Consul-General wanted to hear. Around the table conversation suddenly stopped. An awkward silence ensued, as the Chinese diplomats present averted their eyes and looked down uncomfortably at the food on their plates. The subject was quickly changed, and though we eventually bade our hosts a cordial farewell, several more years would elapse before I was invited to dine again at the Chinese Consulate.

In retrospect, although the Chinese government, and Deng Xiaoping in particular, bore unmistakable responsibility for provocatively labeling student demonstrations as “turmoil” and for later sanctioning the use of deadly force to disperse them, there was plenty of blame to go around. In the escalating moral theatrics that led to the bloody end-game of June 3-4, for example, some hard-line confrontationists among the student leaders, filled with righteous indignation and apparently relishing their own newfound media star-power, had brashly rejected the entreaties of well-meaning government emissaries, sent by Zhao Ziyang to urge the students to compromise with the government and thereby avert a potentially catastrophic confrontation.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is apparent that mistakes were made on both sides, and that there were precious few moral triumphs to be savored in the aftermath of the June 4th carnage. Most tragic of all, however, was the death of political idealism in China. Millions of college students had naïvely believed, that by throwing themselves under the wheels of a corrupt, autocratic political machine, the machine could be forced to stop, or at least to change direction. They were wrong.
The high cost of this misplaced idealism was brought home to me in a recent conversation I had with Wang Chaohua, one of the Beijing student leaders of 1989. In May of ‘89 Wang had tried to mediate between Communist Party moderates, representing Zhao Ziyang, and student protesters in Tiananmen Square. But her efforts to arrange a negotiated settlement were blocked by the intransigence of some hunger-strikers. After the crackdown on June 4, Wang’s name had appeared on the Chinese government’s “Most Wanted” list of “counter-revolutionary” fugitives. She evaded arrest and was eventually smuggled out of China.

I first met Wang Chaohua in 1990 when she enrolled as an undergraduate student at UCLA. Over the years we had many conversations about Chinese politics, but I never pressed her to reveal her innermost feelings about the events of the period. Then, a couple of years ago, I shed my self-restraint.

In an interview for my book, “China Watcher”, Wang confided that shortly after June 4 she began to experience deep feelings of guilt, along with a crushing sense of personal remorse for her inability to prevent the bloodbath. Even today, she said, twenty years after the fact, she continues to be haunted by recurring nightmares in which she hears the screams of Chinese students. Where, she asked me, does the responsibility of an arrogant, imperious government end, and that of immature, self-righteous students begin? Where indeed?

Ten weeks after the trauma of June 4, I returned to China at the request of UCLA’s Dean of International Studies. The bloodshed at Tiananmen had raised concerns about the viability of the university’s exchange programs in China; and the Dean wanted me to make a first-hand assessment of the situation there. Many Western universities and research institutions had already elected to break off all relations with China in the wake of the Tiananmen debacle. What should UCLA do?

I was there for ten days. Arriving in Beijing toward the end of August, I found the political situation to be very tense—almost surreal. Tiananmen Square was closed to pedestrian traffic. Soldiers armed with AK47s, always stationed in pairs, patrolled the perimeter of the Square as well as major intersections and bridges throughout the city. And armed martial law troops were posted at the entrances to all local universities and research institutes.

A journalist friend lent me a bicycle; and as I pedaled slowly along the perimeter of Tiananmen Square, I tried to take photographs of the military patrols there. Not a good idea. A heavily-armed soldier blocked my path and ordered me to expose the film in my camera. He seemed in no mood to bargain, so I meekly complied.

Meeting discreetly with Chinese friends, I learned that angry Beijingers had committed sporadic acts of violence against martial law troops throughout the summer. There had been a series of sniper attacks, and at least one Beijing resident had attempted to kill a squad of soldiers by offering them drinking water laced with poison.
Throughout the city, a condition that I have called PTSS—“post-Tiananmen stress syndrome”—was everywhere in evidence. For starters, there were ubiquitous signs of stepped-up political surveillance. None of my Chinese friends and acquaintances would talk to me indoors or on the telephone, for fear their conversations were being bugged. They would only talk outdoors—on the street, in a public park or riding in a private car.

When meetings did take place indoors, conversation tended to be strained and oblique, punctuated by nervous glances, rigid body language, and carefully chosen euphemisms. For example, when a group of scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Science agreed to discuss with me the extremely sensitive subject of civilian casualties suffered on the night of June 4, their comments were couched entirely in Orwellian circumlocution. By referring to civilian shooting victims as “hooligans and thugs” (in Chinese, “liumang”), rather than as “student demonstrators”, they were able to confirm that substantial numbers of civilians had, in fact, been killed and wounded. Such linguistic charades provided protective cover. Without them, one could not broach controversial political subjects.

Although my Chinese friends were under extreme pressure to toe the Party line, which could be readily be summed up as “Communist Party good; hooligans bad”—few of them made any effort to persuade me of their government’s righteousness. Aware that many US universities were cutting contact with their Chinese exchange partners, they pleaded for their American friends not to forsake them at their time of greatest need. Cutting off exchanges, they argued would only benefit China’s hard-liners, who resented foreigners anyway. The people who would suffer most, my friends said, would be the country’s progressive reformers and liberal intellectuals – people like themselves. It was a poignant, heartfelt plea.

When I returned to UCLA I argued strongly against terminating our exchange program. Happily, my recommendation was accepted.

Throughout the last half of 1989 the Chinese government made massive efforts to suppress any questions or criticisms of its own behavior during the “Beijing Spring.” Deng Xiaoping personally praised the “heroic” actions of the PLA in putting down the “counterrevolutionary turmoil” in Tiananmen Square. And Zhao Ziyang was officially condemned and stripped of all his posts for having “split the party” through his show of support for the students.

Although Zhao was never formally charged with any criminal offenses, he remained in disgrace and under house arrest until his death sixteen years later, in 2005. Even in death his memory was dishonored, as his passing was virtually ignored by the Party-controlled media. On the day of his funeral, several well-known dissidents were warned not to leave their homes. Outside the gates of Babaoshan cemetery, a group of defiant mourners gathered anyway. Silently, they unfurled a hand-lettered banner: “Zhao Ziyang’s spirit will live forever. Declare war on corruption.” (photo of mourners?) (quote is from Baum, China Watcher) It was a bittersweet epitaph for a true Chinese hero.
In the aftermath of the Tiananmen trauma, conservatives were in the catbird seat. Hu Yaobang was dead; Zhao Ziyang was in disgrace; and political reform was taken off the table yet again. To put it charitably, the Party’s liberal wing was in disarray.

Sensing an opportunity to press their advantage, the hardliners went on the offensive. In the process, they came very close to derailing Deng’s entire reform program. Next time we’ll examine China’s Thermidor—aka, the “revenge of the elders.”
Lecture 41: After the Deluge (1989-92)

In the summer of 1989, with Zhao Ziyang under house arrest and the Party’s liberal wing in utter disarray, China’s hardliners pressed their advantage. Searching for a more conservative successor to Zhao Ziyang as Party General Secretary, they nominated Li Peng, the dour, no-nonsense Premier who had enacted the martial law decree in May.

But Deng Xiaoping was wary. For one thing, Li Peng was highly unpopular among urban residents. For another, Deng was reluctant to let conservatives monopolize the Party’s top leadership posts—lest they attempt to roll-back his precious reforms. Deng needed a more moderate, less controversial pick. After waffling for a while, he settled on Jiang Zemin.

Jiang Zemin was the Party First Secretary of Shanghai. A colorless but competent technocrat, Jiang’s pragmatism had helped Shanghai to achieve enviable rates of economic growth in the 1980s. (show photo of Jiang Zemin) Equally important, he had impressed Deng Xiaoping with his display of grace under fire. In the fall of 1986, for example, Jiang had carefully avoided a direct confrontation with student demonstrators roused by Fang Lizhi’s inflammatory rhetoric. And in the spring of 1989 he had remained cool and level-headed, refusing to call PLA troops into Shanghai to crack down on protesters at the height of the “turmoil.”

Once Deng threw his support behind Jiang Zemin, the issue was settled; and Jiang was duly confirmed as Party General Secretary. In assuming this office, Jiang was well aware that each of the three men who immediately preceded him at the head of the Communist Party—Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, and Zhao Ziyang—had been driven from office by the sharp knives of rival factions; so the new Party leader was stepping into a potential minefield.

As Jiang took office, Deng Xiaoping began to falter. China’s “paramount leader” had aged noticeably under the stresses of the past few years. Now in his early 80s, Deng had developed a Parkinsonian tremor, and he was unsteady on his feet. On one occasion he was filmed clumsily dropping food from his chopsticks. As his public appearances became fewer, his grip on day-to-day policy-making also began to wane.

Meanwhile, Jiang Zemin did his best to play it safe. Aware that factional rivalries had undone his three predecessors, Jiang tried to be all things to all people. Cautious by nature, unwilling to stick his neck out, he bent with the wind.

One thing that urgently required Jiang’s attention was China’s precarious economic situation. For most of the previous five years, Zhao Ziyang had permitted China’s dynamic market economy to fly freely out of its socialist “birdcage”—with decidedly mixed results. The economy had grown rapidly, to be sure; but by the end of the ‘80s spiraling inflation, rampant commercial profiteering and burgeoning official corruption had contributed mightily to the rise of urban unrest, providing rich fuel for the Tiananmen demonstrations.
Even Deng Xiaoping acknowledged the need for a partial economic retrenchment. Naturally, the conservatives were only too happy to oblige him. And in the fall of 1989 they proposed a return to Chen Yun’s cautious, “inside the birdcage” approach to economic growth, with the central government once again assuming a major role in resource allocation and commercial regulation.

At its annual 1989 plenary session, the Central Committee issued a sober-minded call for “sustained, stable, and harmonious” development of the national economy. Calling for stringent new state controls on credit, commercial investment, wages, bonuses, and prices, the Central Committee imposed a stern and comprehensive austerity program.

Although Deng reluctantly signed off on the new program, he worried that opportunistic hard-liners would take advantage of the retrenchment to reverse his benchmark policies of “reform and opening up.” In his infrequent public appearances, Deng stressed that the retrenchment was only temporary, and that it by no means implied abandoning economic reform altogether. And he insisted on inserting into the new austerity program a strong defense of China’s “open policy,” including the practice of establishing Special Economic Zones. Though the bird of market reform was being temporarily confined to its socialist cage, the door to the cage would remain ajar.

As China’s leaders tightened their economic belts at home, a major new crisis exploded on the international scene. In the late summer and fall of 1989 the entire Soviet bloc erupted in turmoil, as a massive popular revolt against Communism spread like a tsunami throughout East and Central Europe.

Chinese leaders watched with morbid fascination as the aptly-named “Velvet Revolution” swept through the region, toppling Communist governments one after another, from Berlin and Budapest to Prague and Warsaw. When the unyielding, hard-line Romanian Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu refused to leave gracefully in mid-December, he was overthrown by an angry mob of citizens and then executed by his own army. Within the cloistered walls of Zhongnanhai, anxiety levels rose dramatically.

Seeking to assuage their own obvious discomfort, Beijing’s hard-liners put the blame for the East European debacle squarely on the shoulders of the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev’s liberal policies of “glasnost” and “perestroika” within the USSR had fueled massive popular demands for political and economic liberalization throughout the Soviet bloc.

After coming to power in 1984, Gorbachev had steered Russia toward becoming a more open and pluralistic society. Internationally, he ended the Cold War with the United States and pursued peaceful reconciliation with China. Indeed, it was Gorbachev’s impending peace-making pilgrimage to Beijing in May of 1989 that spurred Chinese students to launch their hunger strike. Aware that hundreds of international journalists would be on hand for Gorbachev’s historic meeting with Deng Xiaoping, the students had seen a rare opportunity to gain worldwide publicity for their cause—and they grabbed it. The rest, as they say, is history.
Later in 1989, when Gorbachev let it be known that he would not send Soviet troops and tanks to defend embattled Communist regimes in East and Central Europe, those regimes suddenly found themselves powerless to resist a rising tide of popular rebellion. Faced with a classic choice of fight or flight, most chose to flee. Romania’s Ceausescu was the sole exception, and he paid for his obstinacy with his life.

Following Ceausescu’s execution, China’s hardliners were quite blunt in their criticism of Gorbachev’s policies. Chen Yun charged that “the weakness of Gorbachev’s ideological line is that it is pointing in the direction of surrender and retreat. Our party cannot afford to stand by and watch this happen.” The legendary “Big Cannon,” Wang Zhen, also got into the act, accusing the Soviet leader of “abandoning socialism.” Even the normally cautious Jiang Zemin was constrained to join the anti-Gorbachev chorus. Early in 1990 he insisted that the Soviet leader should be held personally responsible for the debacle in Eastern Europe. (Zhengming 148, February 1990, pp. 6-8; South China Morning Post, January 8, 1990).

As the anti-reform backlash gathered momentum in China, it was given an enormous boost by the stunning collapse of the Soviet Union in the fall of 1991. With Gorbachev’s ouster and his replacement by the even more liberal Boris Yeltsin, the USSR simply imploded. Now Gorbachev could be blamed not only for the loss of Eastern Europe, but for the destruction of the Bolshevik homeland as well.

Even before the Soviet collapse, Chinese hardliners had begun to draw parallels between Gorbachev’s liberalization policies and those of Deng Xiaoping. Sensing the vulnerability of Deng’s reforms, they went on the ideological warpath. Thermidor was at hand.

Early in 1991, one of Chen Yun’s protégés, a sharp-tongued conservative propagandist named Deng Liqun (no relation to Deng Xiaoping), launched a nationwide campaign to print a new edition of Mao Zedong’s works, with free copies to be distributed to every schoolroom in China. Calling for a sharp increase in political and ideological indoctrination, Deng Liqun (who was known as “Little Deng” to distinguish him from China’s senior leader, aka “Big Deng”) promised to educate all Chinese students against the lure of Gorbachev-type pied pipers of pluralism.

Deng Liqun had a reputation as a rough-and-tumble hatchet man, and he certainly lived up to his reputation. Late in 1991, with backing from “Big Cannon” Wang and a few other Party elders, “Little Deng” set out to reverse a major thrust of the CCP’s 1981 “Resolution on Some Questions in the History of Our Party.” This resolution, you may recall, had criticized Mao for launching the Cultural Revolution, labeling it labeled a “total disaster.”

Now the “Big Cannon” and “Little Deng” joined forces to defend Mao’s 1966 decision to launch the Cultural Revolution. They lavishly praised the late Chairman for his timely
warnings about the rising threat of a “capitalist restoration” in China. And they applauded Mao’s effort to wage a life-and-death class struggle against socialism’s enemies.

Caught in the middle of a mounting ideological firestorm, Jiang Zemin tried to hold tightly to the center of an increasingly polarized political spectrum. Tacking first one way and then the other, Jiang sought to balance the conflicting demands and agendas of Deng Xiaoping and the hardliners. For example, while strongly reaffirming the Central Committee’s 1981 verdict on the “totally disastrous” nature of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang nonetheless endorsed the call for stepped-up “class struggle” against bourgeois liberalization at home and abroad. In one speech, Jiang went so far as to repeat hard-line allegations that “hostile foreign forces” were attempting to infiltrate China in an attempt to subvert socialism and promote bourgeois democracy through a process they called “peaceful evolution.” (Beijing Review, July 8-14, 1991, pp. 15-32).

As the political pendulum swung sharply toward the left in the last half of 1991, rumors began to circulate concerning the declining health of Deng Xiaoping. Deng had not been seen in public since mid-February. One persistent rumor held that Deng had prostate cancer; another (which later proved to be correct) held that he had advanced Parkinson’s disease. All such rumors were categorically denied by family members and government spokesmen. But where there’s smoke….

As Deng’s health faded, conservatives saw an opportunity to ratchet up their attacks on his economic reforms. In journals controlled by the Party’s propaganda apparatus, they began openly referring to Deng’s pro-market policies as “capitalistic reform and opening up.”

As usual, it was Deng Liqun who led the charge. In a blunt commentary in the People’s Daily, “Little Deng” invoked the dreaded “C” word, warning that, “If we fail to wage resolute struggle against liberalization and [against] capitalistic reform and opening up, our socialist cause will be ruined.” (People’s Daily, October 23, 1991). And in his most blunt and direct challenge yet to Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, “Little Deng” boldly asserted that “‘reform and opening up’ is itself a banner for peaceful evolution in China.” (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, January 7, 1992, p. 24)

From the sidelines, an infirm Deng Xiaoping watched uncomfortably as the hard-line offensive gathered momentum. Convinced that he had to act decisively to stem the growing leftist assault, Deng summoned his remaining energy to undertake what was to be the final, and perhaps most important, campaign of his political career.

Unable to walk unassisted, his Parkinsonian tremors noticeably worsening, China’s strong-willed patriarch set out in January 1992 on a five-week, five-city tour of southern China’s bustling coastal cities and SEZs. By calling attention to the remarkable economic prosperity of the special zones and open cities of the Southeast Coast, Deng hoped to bolster his claim that “reform and opening up” were all that stood between China and a Soviet-style political meltdown.
Deng’s trip, which began in Wuhan, was undertaken in the relative comfort of his private railroad car. The trip included stopovers in the prosperous enclaves of Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. En route, he gave a number of speeches and impromptu talks, the common denominator of which was the call for an immediate, rapid acceleration of reform and “opening up.” Not only was Deng not going to sit still while hardliners dismantled his reforms, he was going to hit back at them—hard.

Taking aim squarely at his critics, Deng borrowed one of Mao Zedong's favorite metaphors. Reform and opening up, he said, “must not be like a woman with bound feet,” but must “stride boldly forward.” Rejecting the leftist claim that “with each dose of foreign capital we become more capitalistic [ourselves],” Deng dismissed such arguments (and the people who made them) as lacking in “basic common sense.” (all quotes in this and following paragraphs from Lien-ho pao, March 2, 1992.)

Claiming that China’s leftists had got it exactly backwards, Deng maintained that it was not too much economic reform, but rather too little, that had led to the collapse of Communism in Europe and the USSR. “Without the economic results of reform and opening up,” he insisted, “we [i.e., the CCP] would not have survived past June 4.” (Minxin Pei, From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism...., p. 47)

Invoking the spirit of his “black cats, white cats” pragmatism, Deng denied the existence of a necessary link between markets and capitalism. “Socialism has markets, too,” he claimed. “Plans and markets are both just stepping stones . . . to universal prosperity.” Although he conceded that inequalities in personal income and regional growth rates had widened in the early stages of reform, he nonetheless argued that this was acceptable because, over time, there would be a broad spreading of new wealth, as more advanced regions pulled the more backward along in their wake.

Deng even had nice things to say about Shenzhen's fledgling stock market, long an object of ideological revulsion to conservative critics of “bourgeois” economics. Denying that stock markets were the exclusive preserve of capitalism, Deng argued that they were fully compatible with socialism. At one point, he even suggested that Karl Marx’s own wife had owned stocks. (Note: this claim reeks of hyperbole)

Toward the end of his southern tour, Deng issued a pointed warning to his conservative senior colleagues. Old age, he said, tends to make people stubborn, rendering them afraid to make mistakes. If such people cannot display greater flexibility and tolerance in their thinking, he admonished, they would be well-advised to lay down and “take a nap.”

Deng Xiaoping was now playing table-stakes poker. In his determination to rescue his endangered economic reforms, he had pushed in all his chips. One last hand, winner take all, mano-a-mano.

Strangely enough, the official state press in China maintained total silence throughout the course of Deng’s southern tour. Though occasional hearsay accounts of his attacks on
leftism were published in the Hong Kong press, his “southern tour” received absolutely no media coverage inside China—no newspaper stories, no film footage, no nothing.

The reason for the total news embargo soon became evident: a fierce battle was raging in Beijing for control of the Party’s propaganda machinery. Hard-liners like Wang Zhen and Deng Liqun, supported by Chen Yun and Li Peng, were struggling to prevent any news of Deng’s critical statements from being leaked to the laobaixing, lest it trigger an anti-leftist uproar among the masses. (In some ways, the news blackout was redolent of the “gang of four’s” efforts to silence criticism by removing commemorative wreaths and poems from Tiananmen Square after Zhou Enlai’s death in 1976.)

For more than three weeks not a word was mentioned to the Chinese people. As days turned into weeks, the entire future of reform in China hung in the balance.

Finally, in mid-February, two highly-respected “moderate” government leaders, the PRC’s ceremonial president and the Chairman of the National People’s Congress, broke the long silence. Both men were long-time associates of Deng Xiaoping, and both had grown increasingly impatient with the extremist policies of the hard-liners. Now they went public with their concerns, openly endorsing Deng’s southern statements.

Their intervention sent a signal to other moderates who had been holding back, waiting to see which way the wind would blow. Slowly, a groundswell of support for Deng began to build, as a number of high-ranking Communist Party fence-straddlers also declared their allegiance to China’s “paramount leader.”

A bandwagon effect soon took shape. At a Politburo meeting convened toward the end of Deng’s southern journey in late February, a majority of Standing Committee members, including both Jiang Zemin and a deeply humiliated Li Peng, endorsed Deng’s recent statements—calling them “important remarks”; and they went on record supporting Deng’s call for an immediate acceleration of “reform and opening up.” A few days later, the Central Committee published the full texts of Deng’s southern speeches. This was followed by a spate of pro-reform, anti-leftist articles and editorials in state-controlled newspapers and magazines. The tide had clearly turned.

But not all hardliners gave up without a struggle. At the end of February, a group of thirty-five Party retired CCP “old timers,” including Chen Yun, Wang Zhen, and Deng Liqun, signed their names to a letter requesting Deng Xiaoping to take prompt action to alter the country’s direction of development, which they claimed had departed from the path of socialism. In response, Deng urged his old comrades to stop “holding fast to [rigid doctrines]” and stop “listening to biased opinions.” Instead, he invited them to take a southern tour of their own, to see what was really going on there.

Elsewhere in China, Communist cadres who had staked their careers on the ascent of the leftists were stunned by their sudden reversal of fortune. At Peking University, conservative officials reacted angrily: “We’ve been sold out again,” complained one embittered cadre; “all our work [has been] in vain.” Another Beida official predicted that
if socialism were abandoned in China, the country would quickly plunge into chaos “worse than [anything] seen in the USSR.” (Zhengming 177, April 1992, pp. 8-11)

Faced with such pockets of entrenched conservative resistance, Deng’s allies scored a major victory in early March, when the Politburo formally endorsed Deng Xiaoping's claim that “leftism” currently posed a greater danger to China than “rightism.” Immediately afterwards, a subdued and ostensibly contrite Jiang Zemin issued a self-criticism to his Politburo comrades. In it, he acknowledged that he had not promoted reform and opening up with sufficient vigor; and he went on to offer a piece of comradely advice to those conservatives who had not yet embraced Deng's reform initiative, urging them to humbly accept criticism and self-criticism. Soon afterward, Li Peng took a leave of absence from his duties as Premier, on the pretext of a worsening heart condition.

With that, the remaining left-wing Politburo holdouts fell grudgingly into line, issuing self-criticisms and--outwardly at least—joining the ranks of the born-again reformers. Even stodgy old conservatives like Chen Yun, Peng Zhen and Bo Yibo half-heartedly endorsed Deng’s initiatives. But Wang Zhen and Deng Liqun never did. Bitter to the end, they would carry their unhappiness to the grave.

Deng had won. Though ill and infirm, at the age of 84 he had almost single-handedly fought off the leftist challenge, staking everything on the success of his southern tour.

Now it was full speed ahead on economic reform. The austerity measures of 1990 were quickly repealed, and all around the country people began preparing for what would soon become an unprecedented avalanche of high-energy entrepreneurship, investment, and foreign commercial activity. The good times were about to roll.

But scattered pockets of Marxist skepticism and doubt remained. One of these was centered at Peking University, where the university’s conservative president, Wu Shuqing, warned an assembly of university administrators of the dire consequences that would quickly follow the adoption of Deng's proposals:

“You'd better prepare yourselves,” he said, “because this year reform and opening up will be accelerated. The housing system will be [privatized], rents will go way up, . . . you will have to pay for your own medicine. Prices will certainly rise sky-high, and wages will be unstable as well. . . . Many people will find themselves out of work. You'd better get ready for this.” (ibid)

As it turned out, Wu Shuqing’s warning was hardly an idle one. In the next lecture, we shall examine the extraordinary aftermath of Deng’s remarkable coup.
Lecture 42: The “Roaring Nineties” (1992-99)

In the aftermath of Deng’s “southern tour,” China’s economy leaped forward. Spurred by an unprecedented building and construction boom, and by a major influx of foreign direct investment, economic growth shot upward into double digits in 1992 and 1993. By the end of the decade, both GDP and urban family incomes had more than doubled, and a new Chinese urban middle class had emerged.

By 1995 China had become the world’s number one manufacturer of shoes, sweaters, toys, and sporting goods. In terms of regional growth, by the mid-1990s China's booming southeastern coastal provinces had become so highly capitalized and so closely interlinked with the economies of neighboring Hong Kong and Taiwan that the resulting regional configuration--sometimes referred to as “Greater China”--easily surpassed the resource base of the other East Asian “dragon” economies.

It is not for nothing that this remarkable decade has been labeled the “roaring nineties.” For many Chinese, it was indeed the best of times, rich in opportunity and upward social mobility. But for others the ladder of success proved elusive--hard to find, and harder still to climb.

As had been prophesied by Peking University president Wu Shuqing, a better life for some was offset by increasing hardships for others. Especially in China’s interior and western provinces, the benefits conferred by Deng’s policies—to the extent they were visible at all—were painfully slow in coming. And for those left behind—the rural poor, the elderly, the unskilled and the unemployed-- the “roaring nineties” would be a time of great tribulation.

But all of that lay ahead, in the future. In the immediate aftermath of Deng’s anti-leftist offensive of 1992, the Party’s long-suffering liberal wing had good reason to be pleased. One particularly exuberant liberal, a Politburo member by the name of Tian Jiyun, couldn’t resist the temptation to twist the knife a little by giving the leftists a taste of their own medicine. Speaking at the Central Party School in Beijing, Tian offered up a tongue-in-cheek recommendation for dealing with conservative opponents of reform and opening up. His voice dripping with sarcasm, he proposed giving them a “special economic zone” all of their own:

“Let us,” said Tian Jiyun, “carve out a piece of land where policies favored by the Leftists will be practiced. For example, no foreign investment will be allowed there, and all foreigners will be kept out. Inhabitants of the zone can neither go abroad nor send their children overseas. There will be total state planning. Essential supplies will be rationed and citizens of the zone will have to queue up for food and other consumer products.” (South China Morning Post, May 7, 1992)

Tian Jiyun went on to poke fun at certain unnamed Party leaders who had withheld support for Deng’s southern initiative until they saw which way the wind was blowing.
Referring to them mockingly as the “wind faction” (fengpai), he chided them for being opportunistic and unprincipled. According to Chinese sources, Tian’s barb was aimed primarily at Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, who had initially supported the Leftist agenda, and afterwards had been slow to endorse Deng’s southern initiatives. (Tony Saich, “From Marxism to Authoritarianism: Peaceful Evolution with Chinese Characteristics,” p. 29)

With Li Peng now under a cloud, Deng Xiaoping stripped him of responsibility for economic policy, in favor of Vice-Premier Zhu Rongji. Zhu had been Mayor of Shanghai during Jiang Zemin’s tenure there as Party Secretary; and he had a reputation for being a tough-minded, no-nonsense pragmatist who, like Deng, valued results over doctrines. To save face, Li Peng was given a medical leave of absence, ostensibly to treat a heart condition.

With Zhu Rongji presiding over the economy, the State Council in July 1992 issued a major decree on enterprise autonomy, one that went well beyond Zhao Ziyang’s 1984 urban reforms, which had loosened the grip of central planners on enterprise management. The new regulations gave provinces and municipalities greater control over the collection and utilization of local tax revenues, and gave enterprises themselves far greater autonomy over a wide variety of managerial decisions affecting their performance. Finally, and most controversially, the decree clarified the conditions under which chronically under-performing or debt-ridden firms would be required to cease production and either be merged, dissolved, or declared bankrupt.

In October 1992, the National Party Congress formally ratified Deng’s proposal to shift from a “socialist commodity economy” to a “socialist market economy.” This shift, though seemingly a rhetorical one, was in fact vital, because the Party had never before formally accepted the “M-word”—markets—into its officially approved economic theories and doctrines. Because of this, conservatives had been able to malign free markets by associating them with the ideologically-noxious “C” word—capitalism. Henceforward, this invidious linkage would be forever broken.

But if market reform was given the green light to proceed with all appropriate speed, the same was by no means true for political reform. The history of the “Velvet Revolution” and the Soviet meltdown had demonstrated to China’s leaders—including Deng Xiaoping himself—that too much political reform, too soon, could be fatal to a Leninist regime. Accordingly, in 1992 Deng affirmed that throughout the period of market transition strong Party leadership would be necessary to keep the country on the path of “stability and unity.” In the Soviet Union, radical political reform had come before people’s economic situation had improved measurably; and the results had been catastrophic.

Firmly believing that the best way to avoid another June 4 debacle was to raise the people’s standard of living, and to do it quickly, Deng took a high-risk gamble: With one foot pressing hard on the accelerator of economic reform, and the other bearing down firmly on the brakes of political reform, he bet that the Chinese people were more deeply concerned with their immediate material well-being than with abstract political rights and
freedoms. Given the near-death experience suffered by the CCP in 1989, it was a wager Deng could not afford to lose.

With official curbs on market commerce now loosened or removed altogether, China’s economy surged in the second half of 1992. Credit controls were relaxed on new industrial and real-estate investments, and state enterprises were given ready access to new loans from state banks. The two-tier pricing system was eliminated; and the housing market was privatized, with low-interest, low down-payment mortgage loans making their first appearance since the 1940s.

Regulatory obstacles to foreign investment were greatly relaxed. Stock markets in Shanghai and Shenzhen flourished. As commerce accelerated in and around China’s special zones and open cities, exports began to surge and consumer demand skyrocketed.

For almost two years the good times rolled unabated, as the economy expanded at an unprecedented annual rate of 14%. Industrial output grew even more rapidly, expanding by 25% in 1993 alone. In that same year, retail sales increased by 25%. Meanwhile, the stock indexes on the Shanghai and Shenzhen exchanges more than doubled. Between 1991 and 1993, foreign direct investment in China rose seven-fold, from US$4 billion to $29 billion. With most of the new investment earmarked for export manufacturing along the eastern seaboard, coastal China was awash in money. Everything was moving quickly—perhaps even too quickly.

Then someone looked around and noticed that at such high velocity, the wheels of the economy were beginning to smoke, and then to burn. The first sign of malaise was a spike in retail prices. Under control since the inflationary scare of 1988, consumer prices in 35 major Chinese cities jumped more than 15% in the last six months of 1992; in 1993 the urban inflation rate unofficially peaked at 25%.

Reflecting the dramatic easing of credit and loan restrictions in China’s provinces, the first half of 1993 witnessed a 50% increase in the nation's money supply, and an even greater jump in new investment and construction. Among other things, the investment binge was fueled by the practice, widespread in rural areas, of local officials taking government revenues earmarked for payment to farmers (for state-procured food products) and diverting the funds into speculative local construction projects, stock market transactions, and real estate investments.

According to a report in the official Farmers' Daily News, less than one-third of the US$13 billion allocated by the central government for state agricultural purchases in 1992 actually wound up in the hands of farmers. The remainder—a whopping 10 billion US dollars—was reportedly diverted by local officials seeking to parley short-term real estate and stock market investments into quick, hefty financial gains.

In lieu of the diverted cash, farmers in many provinces were paid for their crops in “white slips”, or IOUs issued by local governments, which were redeemable for cash at a specified future time. But in many cases, redemption never came, as many of the
investment schemes collapsed, leaving peasants holding worthless paper IOUs. (A. Wedeman, “Stealing From the Farmers: Institutional Corruption and the 1992 IOU Crisis”)

Official statistics confirm that the plight of China's farmers was generally worsening in this period. Since the late 1980s, farm incomes had been stagnating, or even declining. Consequently, the rural-urban income gap grew wider. In 1993, farmers in a half-dozen provinces angrily protested—and in some instances rioted—against the unauthorized diversion of procurement funds by local officials. Also under protest were a wide variety of ad hoc local taxes, fees, and levies imposed on farmers by predatory rural officials. One of the worst outbreaks of violence took place in Sichuan province, where 15,000 farmers rioted in the spring of 1993, assaulting cadres and burning police vehicles in protest over a series of exorbitant local fiscal exactions.

The Sichuan eruption was just the tip of a larger iceberg. According to government statistics, in the sixteen months from January 1993 to April 1994 there were a total of 1,200 “large” rural disturbances (each involving more than 500 people and encompassing more than one village), plus 100 “very large” disturbances (involving at least 1,000 people), and 30 “especially large” ones (involving 5,000 people). Total casualties in these incidents were said to surpass 13,200, with property damage exceeding ¥20 billion. (Zhengming, August 1, 1994, pp. 28-29.)

Describing mounting rural unrest as a threat to China's political stability, the central government in 1993 issued a stern warning to village and township officials, prohibiting them from imposing local taxes in excess of 5 percent of farmers’ total incomes, and forbidding them from siphoning off state funds earmarked to pay farmers. Finally, local officials were ordered to redeem all outstanding IOUs. “If there are problems in the villages,” warned Politburo member Tian Jiyun, “the present regime will be unable to stay in power.” (South China Morning Post, March 22, 1993.)

In an effort to stem the rising tide of rural discontent, the Ministry of Agriculture in May 1993 announced the cancellation of 43 different kinds of ad hoc taxes, fees and levies imposed on farmers. To halt the diversion of funds intended to pay farmers, the Party’s top disciplinary commission formally banned party officials at all levels from trading in securities.

In the face of declining farm incomes, large numbers of farmers opted to leave the land. With coastal investment now surging, new jobs in construction and manufacturing were springing up in the “open” cities and Special Economic Zones of the eastern seaboard. By 1993 the number of migrant workers had swelled to over 100 million.

Under the impact of Deng’s decentralization initiatives, regional economic differences grew significantly wider. The eastern seaboard prospered, while the interior provinces stagnated. Writing in 1993, two Chinese social scientists noted that disparities in wealth between China's coastal and interior provinces had reached levels equal to or greater than those existing in socialist Yugoslavia prior to its disintegration in the early 1990s; and the
authors warned that unless steps were taken quickly to remedy this situation, “it is possible that a situation similar to that in post-Tito Yugoslavia will emerge. . . .[With]in a few years… the country …could move from economic collapse to political disintegration.” To prevent such an implosion, the two scholars urged the central government immediately to reclaim some of the fiscal and financial powers previously relinquished (or delegated) to the provinces. (Wang Shaoguang and Hu An’gang, “Strengthen the Central Government’s Guiding Role…”)

Alongside economic overheating, spiraling inflation, regional income polarization and rising rural anger, the early ’90s also witnessed a sharp increase in the number of Party and government officials charged with bribery, embezzlement and other forms of corruption. Notwithstanding Zhao Ziyang’s 1987 promise to treat all criminal suspects “equally before the law,” Party members continued to escape serious punishment for their crimes. By mid-year 1993, Jiang Zemin—who now held the three important posts of General Secretary, PRC President and Chairman of the Central Military Commission—publicly acknowledged that “Corruption is a virus that has infected the Party's healthy body. If we ignore this phenomenon, it will bring down our Party and our system.” (Baum, Burying Mao, p. )

Yet, despite Jiang’s entreaties, very few high-ranking officials faced criminal prosecution for their crimes, as the Party continued to shield its own. Clearly, some people were more equal than others.

In the roaring nineties, commercial speculation and profiteering were also rampant within China's military establishment. With the 1992 relaxation of restrictions on market commerce, the PLA began to invest in the development of a wide variety of profit-making ventures, including tourist hotels, golf resorts, upscale restaurants, karaoke bars, and even brothels. According to foreign intelligence estimates, profit from these enterprises added about ¥30 billion to the military’s revenues in 1992--accounting for almost half of the PLA’s total operating budget.

Moreover, because the army’s commercial operations lay beyond the scrutiny of any civilian watchdog agencies, there was minimal governmental oversight of these operations—a situation that readily lent itself to burgeoning corruption. To give but one example, army officers, using military vehicles that were not subject to cross-border customs inspection, were able to smuggle hundreds (if not thousands) of luxury Mercedes Benz and Lexus automobiles from Hong Kong and Macau into China. Many (if not most) of these vehicles had been stolen by triad gangs working in cahoots with military smugglers.

It was a situation straight from the pages of “Catch 22.” Milo Minderbinder and his US army supply-corps scavenger buddies would have felt right at home in China in the roaring nineties. Making matters worse was the fact that a substantial share of this illicit commerce was fronted by the sons and daughters of high-level Party officials, including one of Deng Xiaoping’s own free-wheeling entrepreneurial sons, named Deng Zhifang.
Among Chinese youths, evidence of a “spiritual vacuum” was everywhere in evidence. With the debunking of the Maoist infallibility myth and the loss of popular faith in Communist dogma, a deepening mood of alienation and rootlessness was spreading among China’s urban youth. Many youngsters now turned to religion, to the martial arts, or to sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll as quick-fix antidotes to their decaying belief systems, declining moral standards, and disintegrating social controls.

By the end of 1993 most stress indicators had turned strikingly negative, necessitating a cautious assessment of the country's outward appearance of economic dynamism and prosperity. The co-existence of high industrial and commercial growth rates alongside swelling armies of impoverished rural migrants, descending on corruption-plagued cities, gave the country an unsettled, schizophrenic appearance, lending a certain poignancy to the fading cries of alarm sounded by China's few remaining elderly conservatives.

Since 1979, the Party’s old-timers had warned anyone who would listen about capitalism's boom-and-bust nature and its polarizing tendencies, bitterly decrying the noxious cultural by-products of bourgeois liberalization. Now that their prophecy appeared in some measure to be coming true, their voices were barely audible. By the mid-90s, most of the revolutionary “immortals” of the Long March generation, including Chen Yun, Peng Zhen and Wang Zhen, had died.

With China seemingly perched precariously on an overheated, inflationary economic bubble, it was unclear just how, or when, the bubble might burst. To prevent a sudden rupture and to achieve a “soft landing,” Vice Premier Zhu Rongji--China's new economic czar--unveiled in July of 1993 a sixteen-point program designed to sharply curtail credit, limit new investment, reduce inflation, and generally cool down China's overheated economy. Just one year after stepping on the accelerator of reform, Zhu now began to apply the brakes.

Energetically attacking China's economic ills on a number of fronts, Zhu Rongji began trying to restructure China’s chronically dysfunctional banking system. Under the fiscal and administrate decentralization measures introduced in 1992, branch managers of the People’s Bank of China had indulged in an inflationary epidemic of binge lending, resulting in a huge increase in non-performing loans. To resolve the problem, Zhu sacked the bank’s governor and personally took over the job himself. Then he brought in a group of young technocrats to reorganize the bank and reform its lending practices.

Under the old system, local branch managers could make unsecured loans to local government agencies and SOEs at discretionary, sub-normal interest rates, without collateral and without performing due diligence. As a result, by 1994 non-performing loans, or NPLs, had mushroomed to the unprecedented level of $200 billion—equivalent to almost 25% of China’s total GDP. Under Zhu Rongji’s bank reforms, the central bank would now set interest rates and margin requirements, and local branch managers would be held accountable for all loans issued within their jurisdiction.
To increase the central government's dwindling share of total fiscal revenues, Zhu Rongji also introduced a new uniform national taxation system. The system had two key features: a 17% value-added tax on all manufactured goods, and a new revenue-sharing program that empowered the central government to collect 60% of each province’s total commercial tax revenues off the top, leaving the provinces and localities to split the remaining 40%.

Because China’s currency was not freely convertible, and was significantly overvalued relative to foreign currencies, a thriving gray market in currency exchange had grown up in China. To reduce currency speculation and arbitrage, Zhu Rongji next overhauled the country’s two-track currency system. He abolished so-called “Foreign Exchange Certificates,” which could be used to purchase foreign goods in certain authorized Chinese department stores, and he simultaneously devalued the Chinese yuan RMB from its official exchange rate of ¥5.7 to one US dollar, to a more realistic rate of 8.3 to the dollar. (As a postscript to this story, the fixed 8.3:1 exchange rate held firm for more than a decade, until 2005, when the US Congress pressured China’s leaders to revalue their currency. The exchange current rate stands at just under 7:1)

But arguably Zhu’s two most important contributions to “China’s rise” as a major economic power came after he was promoted in 1998 to become Premier of the State Council. No sooner had the nameplate been switched on the premier’s office than Zhu used the full authority of that office to tackle head-on the twin tasks of, first, reorganizing China’s inefficient, debt-ridden SOEs, and second, bringing China into the World Trade Organization.

Beginning in the summer of 1998 Zhu forced tens of thousands of unprofitable SOEs to sell-off their non-performing assets and consolidate their most productive ones. He then offered ownership shares in these consolidated enterprises to non-state investors. And finally, the very worst-performing enterprises—the ones that could not be sold, consolidated, or re-capitalized--were forced into bankruptcy.

As a result of these major reforms, the governance of China’s chronically “sick” state industrial sector was now subjected, for the first time, to the discipline of a competitive marketplace. Becoming noticeably “leaner and meaner,” many reorganized SOEs began to register a significant improvement in their bottom-line economic performance.

Zhu’s second major triumph as Premier came with the success of his decade-long drive to lead China into the World Trade Organization. After coming very close to reaching agreement with the WTO’s key Western gatekeepers in 1999, Zhu completed the deal in 2000. Under the agreement, China was required to: reduce tariffs on a wide variety of foreign imports; end price supports for Chinese farmers; eliminate export subsidies to the steel and auto-making industries; combat rampant theft of intellectual property such as computer software, video games and DVDs; and open China’s banking and insurance sectors to foreign competition. Though Zhu was widely reviled within China for giving up so many of China’s traditional sovereign prerogatives in exchange for membership in the WTO, most economists now agree that it was China’s entry into this exclusive trading
“club” that spurred China’s rise from a growing regional power to the status of a global economic giant.

Had it not been for Zhu Rongji’s timely corrective measures and far-sighted economic leadership, Jiang Zemin’s tenure as China’s President and General Secretary would very likely have ended in a dark cloud of disarray. And Deng Xiaoping’s reputation as the principal architect of China’s post-Mao economic miracle would have been seriously tarnished.

Unhappily for Deng, however, he did not live to see Zhu Rongji’s reforms reach fruition. In February of 1997, at the age of 92, Deng succumbed to Parkinson’s disease, complicated by a chronic lung infection. Though Zhu had rescued Deng’s legacy as a pioneering economic reformer, the terrible stain of the 1989 Tiananmen tragedy would follow Deng to his grave.

To the very end, China’s “paramount leader” would persist in his view that the Party’s monopoly of power must never be relinquished. And in his last known verbal “instruction,” issued in the summer of 1994, Deng enjoined his comrades to “properly draw the lesson from the former Soviet Union. . . . The Chinese Communist Party’s status as the ruling party must never be challenged.” (Xinbao, July 29, 1994.)

In the next lecture we shall see how China’s remarkable economic rise fostered a sharp revival of Chinese nationalism in the 1990s.

Last time, we saw how Deng Xiaoping’s “southern tour” ignited a virtual explosion in domestic economic growth and foreign investment. By the end of the 1990s, the combination of Deng’s initiatives and Zhu Rongji’s vital mid-course corrections had created the conditions for China to cross the threshold of global economic power.

In this lecture we continue our discussion by looking at two of the more fascinating byproducts of China’s economic explosion in the 1990s. The first of these was the visible rekindling of Chinese national pride and patriotism. Not since the early 1950s, when Mao reclaimed the wounded dignity of the Chinese people, had the laobaixing displayed such unabashed pride in their country and its accomplishments.

The second byproduct was more negative, a near mirror image of the first. It involved a revival of the darker side of Chinese nationalism—xenophobia-- and a venting of long-repressed resentments against those countries that had victimized China in the past.

Earlier in the course we saw how Chinese anger over a century of national victimization at the hands of Western (and later Japanese) imperialism played a major role in shaping the Chinese revolution during and after the May 4th era. Chinese scholars have coined a name for these feelings of victimization. They call it “guochi”-- the “national humiliation” syndrome.

My first personal encounter with the post-Mao revival of Chinese nationalism occurred in the fall of 1993, on the campus of Peking University, where I had been invited to give a series of guest lectures in the Department of International Communications. On my previous visit to Beida, in August of 1989, the campus had been swathed in a volatile mix of post-June 4th grief, rage and anguish.

In the interim, however, massive changes had taken place, both in China and in the world at large. Communism had disappeared in Europe and the USSR, and the new economic opportunities arising from China’s economic boom had begun to salve the wounds of June 4th, just as Deng Xiaoping had hoped—and gambled-- that they would.

My return to Beida came at the height of post-1992 economic boom. By then, the entrepreneurial spirit had begun to come alive. An epidemic of xiahai had broken out on the campus. (Xiahai literally means “jumping into the sea” of commerce.)

Students were no longer either in mourning or quietly seething about June 4th; nor were they resisting the new bargain that Deng had offered them in the course of his southern journey: Keep your mouths shut; don’t make political demands; and we will give you a better future. Not only were students not rejecting Deng’s bargain; they were eagerly embracing it.

When I was last at Beida in 1989, the campus felt a lot like Berkeley in the ’60s—teeming with righteous indignation and youthful zealousy. Four years later, in 1993, the
atmosphere seemed less like Berkeley and a lot more like the Harvard Business School. The students had traded their political dreams for a ticket to a successful career.

Alongside the emerging ethos of personal ambition and the pursuit of prosperity, Beida students were now also displaying a surprising degree of patriotic pride—something that had been almost totally absent in 1989.

A key turning point in this makeover occurred in the summer of 1993, when Beijing was selected as a finalist in the competition to host the 2000 Summer Olympic Games.

When I arrived at Beida in late September of '93, “Olympic fever” was sweeping the campus. I asked the students in my class on International Communications how they felt about the idea of Beijing hosting the Olympics so soon after the nightmare of 1989. To my surprise, the students were uniformly proud that their city had made it to the final round. Only one student registered an objection—a young man from one of China’s poorest provinces, who objected to paying a mandatory “Panda Tax” so that Beijing could spend ¥500 beautifying itself to impress the Olympic Selection Committee. The other students didn’t seem to balk at the price tag. Taking all this in, I puzzled over the rapidity with which the anger of 1989 had seemingly dissipated. Was PTSS (Post-Tiananmen Stress Syndrome) truly a thing of the past?

With the winning Olympic bid to be announced in mid-October, a huge crowd gathered at Peking University to watch the ceremony on a giant television screen, set up at the center of the campus. As the moment of truth drew near, the atmosphere was festive and expectant. Most students expected Beijing to win; and they were in a celebratory mood. But when Sydney, Australia, was declared the surprise winner, the mood changed abruptly.

Near me, a group of students grumbled resentfully that the Europeans and Americans on the selection committee had secretly conspired to support Sydney in order to prevent China from winning. Then one of the students from my International Communications class recognized me in the crowd. “Why do you Americans want us to fail?” he asked. Then one of his classmates chimed in: “It’s just like the Yinhe incident. America doesn’t trust China.” A third voice then joined the chorus: “We thought America was our friend.” The Yinhe incident?

In the summer of 1993 the CIA alleged that a Chinese merchant ship, the Yinhe, was transporting chemical warfare components from North Korea to Iran. The Chinese government vehemently denied the allegation, whereupon the U.S. Navy shadowed the Yinhe all the way from the South China Sea to the Persian Gulf, where, at the behest of the U.S. Government, the Saudi Arabian navy boarded the ship and searched its cargo holds. No contraband items were found, chemical or otherwise.

The incident proved hugely embarrassing to the Clinton Administration—and highly insulting to the Chinese government and people. China was experiencing the first
stirrings of revived anti-Western nationalism, and the feelings of resentment were palpable.

I encountered a further taste of reborn Chinese nationalism a few weeks later, in the city of Yichang. Yichang is a busy transport hub on the Yangzi River, about 500 miles southwest of Beijing. I had arrived in the city after a three-day cruise through China’s legendary Three Gorges, immortalized in hundreds of traditional Chinese poems and landscape paintings. (show photo of Three Gorges.) I had wanted to see the gorges before they were partly inundated behind the massive new Three Gorges Dam that was about to be built there.

After leaving the cruise ship, I checked into a hotel in Yichang, and then spent several hours walking around the city. By late afternoon my energy was flagging, so I hailed a passing pedicab and asked the driver to take me back to my hotel.

That’s when the trouble started. About five minutes into the ride, a middle-aged man wearing a sweaty undershirt, rolled-up blue work pants and flip flops jumped directly into the path of my pedicab, forcing it to stop. Addressing the driver in Chinese, the man shouted, *Ni qu nali?*—“Where are you going?” When the startled driver didn’t answer, the man admonished him: *Ni buyinggai dai yanggui; yanggui yinggai dai ni!* “You shouldn’t be carrying the foreign devil; the foreign devil should be carrying you!” Taken aback, the driver just nodded. After a few minutes the man stopped shouting and walked away, still staring back angrily at my driver as he left.

The driver, looking sheepish, apologized to me for the interruption and started pedaling again. But almost immediately he changed direction, and I soon noticed that we were heading away from my hotel rather than toward it. When I pointed this out to him, the driver assured me that he knew a shortcut. I didn’t argue with him: he had lost quite enough “face” for one day.

After ten or fifteen minutes the driver stopped abruptly on a shadowy street corner in what had to be the seediest section of Yichang. Pointing to a poorly-lit, unfriendly looking alley in which a handful of scruffy-looking youths were loitering around an outdoor pool table, the driver told me that my hotel was “just over there.” I paid him and watched him pedal off, self-satisfied in his knowledge that he had bested the foreign devil, and thereby regained lost face. I beat a hasty retreat and eventually flagged a taxi back to my hotel.

These three disparate incidents— the Beida student’s angry rant about their missed Olympic bid, the *Yinhe* incident, and the Yichang pedicab insult—occurred within a few weeks of each other. Before that, in almost twenty years of regular visits to China, I had never personally encountered anti-Americanism on the Chinese street. Quite the contrary: America was widely admired in the ’70s and ’80s. But much of that earlier good will seemed to evaporate in the 1990s.
As China rose, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of revolutionary Maoism, Chinese pride began to reassert itself; and along with it, came a new Chinese assertiveness. One of the first clear indicators was a rise in Beijing’s threatening posture towards Taiwan.

In the summer of 1995, Taiwan’s pro-independence president, Lee Teng-hui, delivered a speech at Cornell University in which he insisted that Taiwan was an independent country. The Chinese government reacted angrily and, in a show of bravado, conducted extensive military exercises – including guided missile tests—in the Taiwan Strait, not far from Taiwan itself.

Responding to China’s escalating military threat, the United States rattled some sabers of its own, as President Clinton dispatched two aircraft carrier groups to the Taiwan Strait area.

In the angry aftermath of this episode, a bestselling book appearing in Chinese bookstores with the provocative title, Zhongguo keyi shuo bu—“China can say no.” Its defiant message (like that of a similarly-titled Japanese bestseller published back in the late ’80s) was loud and clear: The United States should not take Chinese good will for granted, and must treat China with greater respect and dignity.

Citing the examples of the Yinhe incident and the U.S. aircraft carrier intrusions into the Taiwan Strait, the authors of “China can say no” argued that despite American talk about “constructive engagement,” America was really out to “contain” China, to clip its wings and to prevent it from become rich and powerful. The United States wanted China to fail.

The book further alleged that some Chinese intellectuals had become so “totally enamored” of Westernization that they had turned their backs on their own precious national heritage. Singled out special criticism was Professor Fang Lizhi, the pied piper of Tiananmen. The book’s authors charging Fang with betraying his country through his “slavish devotion” to Western-style “bourgeois democracy”.

On both sides of the Pacific, the Sino-American military buildup in the Taiwan Strait fueled growing distrust. In the aftermath of the 1996 U.S. presidential election, Republican members of Congress charged that the Clinton-Gore re-election campaign had accepted illegal campaign contributions from a variety of Chinese special interests, including a Mainland Chinese aerospace company whose chief spokesperson was the daughter of the former PLA Chief of Staff.

Shortly after that, in 1998, a Taiwanese-American nuclear scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, Dr. Wen Ho Lee, was dismissed from his job amid allegations that he had provided Beijing with the designs and codes for America’s latest nuclear warheads. (The charges were later reduced to unauthorized possession of classified documents).

A few months later, a Congressional investigative committee, the Cox Commission, issued an explosive report alleging that China had long been engaging in systematic
nuclear espionage against the United States, resulting in the theft of top-secret design information on U.S. nuclear warheads, radiation weapons, delivery systems and re-entry vehicles.

Predictably, Beijing bristled at these allegations; equally important, the Chinese street—the laobaixing—which had long been a repository of warm feelings toward the United States, turned distinctly negative, as Chinese opinion polls showed a sharp rise in feelings of resentment and distrust.

In America, too, the atmosphere soured substantially; and a sudden spurt of provocative books attacking China appeared in U.S. bookstores. Among some of their more breathless titles were: “The China Threat: How the People’s Republic Targets America”; “The Coming Conflict with China”; “Red Dragon Rising: Communist China’s Military Threat to America”; and “Year of the Rat: How Bill Clinton Compromised American Security for Chinese Money.” (show photo of book jackets)

In an effort to limit the damage done to US-China relations, Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin held two cordial, well-publicized presidential summit meetings in 1997 and 1998, respectively. But not even a joint declaration announcing that China and the United States had agreed to become “cooperative strategic partners,” or a unilateral American pledge not to support Taiwan’s independence, could stem the rising tide of mutual suspicion. On both sides of the Pacific, public opinion polls showed declining trust and good will.

Things went from bad to worse in May of 1999 when an American “stealth” bomber, flying under the NATO flag in the Kosovo conflict, accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in the Serbian capital of Belgrade. Three Chinese journalists were killed in the attack, and twenty PRC embassy staffers were wounded.

The official American explanation for the mishap was that U.S. Central Intelligence officers had used outdated maps in selecting their bombing targets, and that the building in question had previously been identified as a Serbian electronic air-support facility.

The American explanation was indignantly rejected by the Chinese government, which called the embassy attack “barbarous.” Massive anti-American protests followed, as students armed with rocks and crude Molotov cocktails demonstrated outside the U.S. embassy in Beijing. (show photo of anti-American banners) Shortly afterward, Chinese newspapers published a number of commentaries angrily accusing America of bullying others and deceiving the world about its hegemonic intentions.

In this atmosphere of deteriorating civility and rising tension, I had yet another personal encounter with China’s “guochi” (national humiliation) syndrome.

In the summer of 1999 I was vacationing with a Chinese friend at a famous Buddhist mountain retreat in Anhui province. The retreat, known as Huang Shan, or Yellow Mountain, is famed for its breathtaking vistas and scenic hiking trails. As my friend and I strolled through the town at the foot of the mountain, we were accosted on the street by a
visibly distressed middle-aged woman. I was wearing a t-shirt with the University of California logo on it. Jabbing her finger squarely into my chest, the woman angrily admonished me: “You Americans think you can bully us. Just wait til we’re stronger. We’ll show you!”

In the aftermath of the Belgrade embassy bombing and subsequent anti-American demonstrations in China, opinion polls in the United States registered a dramatic, four-fold increase in the number of Americans who viewed China as a “serious” or “moderately serious” threat. From just 21% in 1998, the figure jumped to 73% in the first half of 1999 (Yankelovitch Poll, cited in Milken Lecture)

By the turn of the new millennium, the revival of Chinese nationalism was causing deep concern over the implications of that country’s rapid rise to global prominence. In the run-up to the U.S. presidential election of 2000, the foreign policy brain trust of the Republican Party candidate, George W. Bush, appeared to veer sharply away from the traditional U.S. policy of “constructive engagement” with China, towards a more openly confrontational approach—an approach that specifically identified the PRC as a “strategic competitor” of the United States. Coming on the heels of China’s angry reaction to the Belgrade embassy bombing, such a clear rhetorical shift appeared to augur poorly for the future tranquility of U.S.-China relations.

Indeed, in the first few months of George W Bush’s presidency there was a visible escalation of Sino-American tensions. In mid-February of 2001, the new president indicated that the United States would sponsor a U.N. resolution condemning China’s record on human rights; a few days later Mr. Bush authorized an American air strike on Chinese-installed fiber-optic cables in Iraq, with the express intention of “sending a message to the Chinese.” (New York Times, February 23, 2001)

Then, on April 2, a Chinese F-8 jet fighter-interceptor collided in mid-air with an American EP-3 reconaissence plane over the South China Sea, killing the Chinese pilot and forcing the EP-3 to make an emergency landing on China’s Hainan Island. The 24-man American crew was taken captive, and as a condition of its release China demanded an acknowledgment of U.S. responsibility for the collision, along with a full apology and a large financial indemnity.

President Bush refused, demanding the “prompt and safe return” of the crew members. A standoff ensued, ending only after Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed America’s “regret” over the incident, while pointedly refusing to apologize.

A few weeks later, the Pentagon proposed a significantly enhanced, $4 billion package of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, including eight diesel submarines, ground-to-air missiles, and four destroyers with missile-defense capability. This was followed by president’s controversial pledge, issued on April 25, to do “whatever it took” to help Taiwan defend itself against an attack from the Chinese mainland. (New York Times, April 26, 2001)
In China, these developments were viewed with growing anger and alarm. Especially in the aftermath of the EP-3 spy-plane incident, China’s hostility toward the U.S. seemed boundless. Never mind the fact that the Chinese pilot had clearly caused the mid-air collision by his reckless hot-dogging. An official *People’s Daily* editorial captured the mood of deepening Chinese anger:

We would like to remind the US government: The gangster logic of hegemonism won't work with the Chinese people. You shouldn't be so arrogant on the basis of your might. You should know China's present position in the world has been gained through struggle, hard work, and the efforts of the Chinese people… Arrogance and haughtiness only court others’ resentment, and are... harmful to the international image of the United States. (*People’s Daily*, April 4, 2001)

But if the official media were dripping with righteous indignation, participants in Chinese Internet forums were in the grip of an even more intense frenzy of hypernationalism. Ironically, much of this emotion was directed against the Chinese government itself, for its ostensible timidity in releasing the captive American airplane crew without receiving either a full-blown U.S. apology or substantial reparations. Here is a small sampling of Internet commentary from China’s most popular interactive media website, *Qiangguo*, or “Strong country”:

*Blood-colored China*: I am sad for our country. I am ashamed of our... government. Will it take another bloody war to arouse the Chinese nation?

*Gracious*: My web comrades, how can we face the martyrs who have fought these past several hundred years for national self-respect and the strengthening of the country? How can we face our ancestors? I feel so ashamed today….

*Lin Zi*: To the Leaders of China: …My life belongs to my country. I cannot bear to allow her to be shamed…. I hope that our glorious Party will not be weak again. We... have our self-respect to maintain… Do not make the people distrust you, my Motherland! We need to wake you up…! (Source referenced in Baum, *Present Nationalism and Communist Power*)

In these fragments of highly-charged Internet chatter we see clear evidence of a late-20th century reawakening of China’s 19th-Century “national victimization” syndrome.

Fortunately for all concerned, neither the Chinese nor the American government was eager to let such “trash talk” get further out of hand; and both sides soon began using more restrained and measured language.

In May of 2001 the Bush Administration informally acknowledged that that the president had misspoken when he pledged to do “whatever it took” to defend Taiwan; two months later, Secretary of State Colin Powell disavowed the Bush Administration’s previous characterization of the US -China relationship as one of “strategic competition.” And for his part, China’s president Jiang Zemin acknowledged that the EP-3 collision had been an unfortunate accident.
With a hostile confrontation thus narrowly averted, Sino-American relations moved back onto the path of “re-normalization.” And when Al Qaeda launched its devastating attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, Beijing and Washington quickly reaffirmed their mutual desire to combat global terrorism and nurture their long-standing relationship of “constructive engagement.” Though a potentially serious crisis was thus averted, Napoleon’s “sleeping giant” had begun to stir.

Next time, we will explore one of the most controversial byproducts of China’s recent national reawakening: the drive to retrieve and reunify its “lost territories,” in particular, the lost territories of Taiwan and Hong Kong.
Lecture 44: “One Country, Two Systems”: Hong Kong and Taiwan

Since the onset of the Deng Xiaoping era, no single issue has signified China’s drive to restore its damaged national pride more than the quest to reunify the two lost Chinese territories of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

For more than 150 years, Hong Kong was a symbol of imperialist aggression against China. Seized by Great Britain at gunpoint after the Opium Wars, Hong Kong remained a British colonial enclave until 1997, when it finally reverted, peacefully, to Chinese sovereignty.

In anticipation of this historic handover, a large countdown clock was set up in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, ticking off the minutes until midnight, July 1, 1997. As 12:00 o’clock approached, tens of thousands of people in the Square began counting down the seconds. When the clock struck midnight, there was wild jubilation in Tiananmen.

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, when midnight struck a government fireworks show lit up its famous harbor, and Chinese President Jiang Zemin gave a patriotic speech welcoming Hong Kong back to the bosom of the Motherland. But outside, on the street, things were considerably more restrained.

As 155 years of British sovereignty came to a close, no one was quite sure what to expect. Would the PLA come marching into Hong Kong? Would pro-democracy activists be arrested? In anticipation of possible incidents, several thousand international journalists joined crowds of local citizens and assorted others in a post-midnight vigil in front of the Legislative Council building in Hong Kong’s Central District.

I was among that throng of humanity. I had brought a group of my UCLA students to Hong Kong in the spring of 1997 to observe the handover. We waited almost three hours on the night of the handover for something to happen; but nothing did—no jackbooted PLA troops; no political disturbances; and no arrests. Gradually, the crowds dispersed, as people moved on to Hong Kong’s myriad watering holes and all-night private parties.

The handover itself was surprisingly calm, orderly and uneventful. To mark Hong Kong’s retrocession, the next day, July 1, was declared a national holiday. In Hong Kong, the shopping malls opened early that day, and a new one-day record for retail sales was set—thus providing further evidence to support the old adage that when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.

The handover impacted not just Hong Kong island, which was the original British Crown Colony, dating from the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, but also two adjacent parcels of land across the harbor – the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. (show map of three component parts of HK). Kowloon had been ceded outright to Britain in 1860, while the
New Territories were leased to England in 1898, for a period of 99 years. Today’s Hong Kong includes all three of these contiguous territories.

The 1997 return of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of China took place after lengthy --and often acrimonious-- negotiations between Beijing and London. Because most of Hong Kong’s territory and population, as well as its major industrial and agricultural resources lay in the New Territories, the approach of the lease’s expiration date—June 30, 1997-- was a source of growing concern to the British government.

As the lease’s expiration date drew nearer, the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sought to secure a Chinese commitment to renew the lease for another 50 years. By 1982, however, it was clear that Deng Xiaoping was firmly opposed to such an extension. This put the British government in a quandary, for without the human, agricultural and industrial resources of the New Territories, the rest of Hong Kong could not sustain itself as a viable, self-sufficient entity. It would exist at Beijing’s pleasure, a permanent hostage to Chinese political, economic and military whims and pressures.

Under these circumstances, Prime Minister Thatcher decided to negotiate a complete “package deal” for the return of all of Hong Kong to China. Under the terms of the British proposal, all three territorial parcels would revert to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. In exchange, China would allow Hong Kong to exercise a “high degree of local autonomy” after 1997, and would pledge to retain Hong Kong’s existing economic, administrative and legal institutions in tact for a period of 50 years. These twin principles—local autonomy and a 50-year non-intervention pledge-- became the cornerstones of the Sino-British “Joint Declaration on Hong Kong,” signed in 1984.

Soon afterwards, a Sino-British drafting committee began writing a new “mini-constitution” for post-1997 Hong Kong. Known as the “Basic Law,” the document was completed in 1990. It’s various provisions spelled out in some detail Hong Kong’s political, legal and administrative arrangements for the next 50 years.

Under a general framework known as “One Country, Two Systems,” the Basic Law granted Hong Kong substantial autonomy over its domestic affairs and international commercial relations, while giving Beijing sovereign authority over diplomatic and military affairs.

Politically, the Basic Law defined a government featuring a powerful, non-elected Chief Executive and a weak, partially elected legislature. Although the drafters stipulated that universal suffrage would eventually be used to directly elect both the Chief Executive and the legislature, no date was specified; and up to now, this has remained an unfilled promise.

On the other hand, since the 1997 handover Beijing has scrupulously adhered to its principal obligations under the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law. Chinese leaders have made no attempt unilaterally to change Hong Kong’s political, legal, administrative
or economic institutions; and the basic legal rights, political and civil liberties of Hong Kong’s citizens have been retained largely in tact.

Media freedom also remains relatively high, although a certain amount of pressure has been exerted on radio, television and newspaper editors and programmers in Hong Kong to refrain from excessive criticism of the Chinese government. For the most part, however, media censorship has been more self-imposed than externally coerced.

In general, the principle of “One Country, Two Systems” seems to have worked out rather well in the Hong Kong SAR. Despite fears that the handover would spell the “death of Hong Kong,” in most respects it has been “business as usual” since 1997.

The same cannot be said for Taiwan. There, a sizeable majority of citizens continue to oppose the island’s reunification with Mainland China—under almost any circumstances. To entice the Taiwanese people into accepting the idea of reunification, in 1981 the Chinese government announced a liberal nine-point blueprint for Taiwan’s peaceful return to China; a year later, Deng Xiaoping incorporated this blueprint into his famous proposal for “One Country, Two Systems.”

Under the terms of Deng’s proposal, Taiwan would be given even more liberal terms than those offered to Hong Kong. In addition to a high degree of autonomy and a promise of non-intervention in local affairs, Taiwan would also be permitted to retain its own military forces, and would continue to maintain economic and cultural ties with foreign countries. Moreover, Chinese pledge of non-intervention would be permanent—with no built-in 50-year time limit on PRC self-restraint.

Despite their many similarities, the cases of Taiwan and Hong Kong were quite different. Most important, the New Territories indisputably belonged to China, which meant that Beijing was legally entitled to reclaim it when the lease expired. By contrast, Taiwan’s long separation from Mainland China was a de facto situation that was based not on a binding legal obligation, but on the vicissitudes of a bitter and protracted civil war. Indeed, the very bitterness of that civil war ensured that many, if not most Taiwanese people would reject the idea that their fate should be involuntarily dictated by the Communist regime across the Strait. Hence, Deng Xiaoping’s “One country, two systems” formulation never gained much traction in Taiwan.

By the time Taiwan began its transition to democracy under Chiang Ching-kuo in the late 1980s, the island’s demographic composition had shifted substantially. The Mainland-born Guomindang elites who had monopolized political and military power after 1949 were dying off; and a new generation of native-born Taiwanese were rising to middle-class economic status. As they did so, they also began to demand access to the instruments of political power.

By 1988, a rising opposition political party—the Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP—began to challenge the Guomindang’s long-established dominance in Taiwan politics.
And it also began to challenge the GMD’s traditional insistence that the Republic of China was the sole legal government of all of China.

The DPP served as a magnet for those who had been alienated by the rigid, dictatorial policies of Chiang K’ai-shek’s Guomindang. It also became a strong advocate for a separate and distinct Taiwanese ethnic and political identity. By the early 1990s, DPP candidates had gained a substantial number of seats in Taiwan’s legislature. The more successful the party became, the more its leaders began openly agitating for Taiwan’s independence.

This put the GMD in a bind. They could not continue to win elections without somehow appealing to substantial numbers of ethnic Taiwanese voters. One way to do this was to recruit a few Taiwanese politicians into the Guomindang’s leadership ranks.

Thus it was that a native-born Taiwanese, Lee Teng-hui, was selected as President Chiang Ching-kuo’s GMD running mate in the 1984 presidential election. When Chiang Ching-kuo died four years later, Lee Teng-hui became Taiwan’s first native-born President.

This proved to be an important turning point in Taiwan’s politics. For almost as soon as Lee assumed the presidency, he began to reveal his own strong attachment to the cause of Taiwanese independence. His increasing advocacy of the separatist cause soon precipitated a rebellion by the party’s hard-line pro-Mainland faction, which split off from the GMD in 1996 to form their own, pro-reunification party. Politics in Taiwan now became increasingly polarized into pro- and anti-independence camps.

But even as pro-independence sentiment was growing in Taiwan in the early 1990s, economic forces were beginning to draw the two sides of the Taiwan Strait closer together. Under Deng Xiaoping’s “open policy,” indirect cross-Strait commerce increased dramatically in the 1990s, as new opportunities were created for Taiwanese industrialists and investors to operate on the Chinese mainland. Particularly after Deng’s 1992 “southern tour,” South China’s Fujian province, and its Zhuhai Special Economic Zone, became focal points for dramatically expanded Taiwanese commercial activity.

Also in this period, informal negotiations were initiated between Beijing and Taipei, with the aim of establishing direct cross-Strait shipping, postal, and commercial relations—relations that came to be known as the “three links” (san tong).

In the course of these unofficial negotiations, which took place in Hong Kong and Singapore, representatives of the two sides sought to hammer out a compromise agreement enabling them to circumvent the roadblock posed by Beijing’s unyielding “one China” principle. The Taiwanese side nominally agreed to accept Beijing’s notion that there was only “one China,” but with the important proviso that the term “one China” was subject to “different interpretations” by the two sides. In Taipei’s official interpretation, “one China” still referred to the Republic of China, rather than the People’s Republic.
But in the event, all progress toward increasing cross-Strait cooperation came to a sudden, screeching halt in the summer of 1995, when President Lee Teng-hui made his provocative pro-independence speech at Cornell University. As we saw in lecture 43, this incident provoked an angry response from Beijing, which proceeded to conduct large-scale military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, accompanied by the test-firing of several unarmed Chinese missiles to within a dozen miles of the island. The mounting crisis ended only when President Clinton sent two aircraft carriers into the vicinity of the Taiwan Strait early in 1996, as a warning to Beijing.

Enraged by China’s blatant attempt to intimidate the people of Taiwan, voters there vented their anti-China feelings by defiantly re-electing Lee Teng-hui to a second four-year term in 1996. Lee responded by ratcheting-up his pro-independence rhetoric; and by 1999 he was loudly—and proudly-- proclaiming that Taiwan and China were separate and distinct national states.

Having failed to intimidate Taiwan’s voters in the 1996 presidential election, Beijing’s leaders stepped up their efforts to deter Taiwan from declaring independence. On the eve of the island’s 2000 presidential election, Beijing issued a harshly worded National Defense White Paper, which threatened to initiate military action against Taiwan unless the Taiwan authorities entered into early negotiations for reunification. This was followed by a blunt warning from Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, who stated that “there will be no good ending for those involved in Taiwan independence.”

Once again, however, the attempt to coerce Taiwan’s voters had the opposite effect; this time, it served mainly to rally support for the DPP, whose presidential candidate, Chen Shui-bian, was an avowed supporter of Taiwan independence.

Aided by a deep split within the GMD, the DPP won the election; and for the first time in its 55 year history, Taiwan had a non-Guomindang president— and a militantly pro-independence president at that.

Relations between Beijing and Taipei remained deeply strained throughout Chen Shui-bian’s presidency. During his eight years in office, Chen pursued a calculated strategy of gradually expanding Taiwan’s claim to sovereign independence. A key element in this strategy was Chen’s persistent effort to revise the ROC constitution to rename the Republic of China as the “Republic of Taiwan.”

On several occasions in the early 2000s, Chen baited China’s leaders with provocative rhetoric; and in return, the Chinese government denounced him in the harshest of terms. Enraged at his “envelope-pushing” tactics, Beijing, refused to have anything to do with him or his political party, the DPP.

Meanwhile, in Washington, by 2003 President George W. Bush’s foreign policy team had come to the conclusion that Chen Shui-bian was a “loose cannon,” a provocateur who, if left to his own devices, was fully capable of dragging the United States into a
military confrontation with China—something the Bush Administration strongly desired to avoid.

In December 2003, Bush put his foot down. In a well-publicized White House photo-opportunity session with visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, the president stated that United States does not support Taiwan independence; nor does it support efforts by either side to unilaterally alter the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

Pro-independence groups in Taiwan, including President Chen, were understandably upset by the president’s remarks. Chinese leaders, on the other hand, were quite pleased. For now Washington had begun to do some of the heavy lifting needed to restrain Taiwan’s head-strong president.

Notwithstanding this American rebuff, Chen Shui-bian won re-election to a second four-year term in 2004. This time, his election was aided by an unsuccessful assassination attempt against both Chen and his Vice-President, Annette Lu. Occurring just 24 hours before the election, the botched assassination attempt created a surge of popular sympathy for the incumbent president, enabling him to pull off an extremely narrow last-minute victory.

(In the interest of full disclosure, I was in Taiwan serving as an invited election monitor during the 2004 presidential election; and by sheer happenstance I was in the vicinity of President Chen’s motorcade when the assassination attempt took place. Here are a few personal recollections of this extraordinary event.

At the time of the shooting, I was interviewing a group of local politicians a few miles away from the presidential motorcade. Almost immediately, rumors spread to the effect that the president and vice-president had both been killed. These rumors were soon put to rest, as television footage revealed the president and vice president’s wounds to be relatively minor.

Seeking to maximize public sympathy, however, Chen held a photo-op session with the media in his hospital room, where he bravely displayed his abdominal wound while the TV cameras rolled.

Meanwhile, at the headquarters of the opposition Guomindang, allegations soon arose that the assassination attempt had been a fake, a last-minute gambit devised by the Chen camp to avoid defeat in the election.

Adding somewhat to the credibility of such suspicions, Taiwanese pollsters confirmed that at the time of the assassination attempt, the GMD candidate enjoyed a lead over Chen Shui-bian of between three and four percentage points. But the lead evaporated in a matter of hours, as a last-minute wave of sympathy for Chen enabled him to eke out the narrowest of victories. In the final vote-count, just one-tenth of one percent separated Chen from his GMD opponent, Lien Chan.
Was the assassination attempt staged? The evidence is inconclusive. But the GMD camp was irate, sensing that they had been robbed.)

In Chen Shui-bien’s second term, he came under intense American pressure to tone-down his pro-independence rhetoric. With the Bush Administration now concentrating its attention on the war in Iraq and the Global War on Terror, Mr. Bush was in no mood to be dragged by the headstrong Chen into a military showdown with China.

Meanwhile, Chinese leaders sensed an opportunity to take advantage of Chen’s growing difficulties by holding out an olive branch to Taiwan’s opposition party leaders. In 2005, Beijing invited the defeated GMD presidential candidate, Lien Chan, to visit Mainland China. It was a major public relations coup—for China as well as for the GMD, as the party’s approval ratings began to rise sharply among Taiwan’s voters.

In the wake of the GMD’s successful cross-Strait initiative, Chen Shui-bian’s polling numbers declined dramatically. Not only was the Taiwanese public growing weary of his provocative tactics, but there were also growing allegations of corruption involving members of the president’s immediate family, including his wife and son. By the time the 2008 presidential campaign came around, Chen’s approval ratings had dropped to an all-time low of less than 20 percent.

In the March 2008 presidential election, the DPP candidate, Frank Hsieh, was dragged down by his association with Chen Shui-bian (much as John McCain was dragged down by his association with George W. Bush). Meanwhile, a re-energized Guomindang fielded a formidable new candidate-- the young, charismatic former mayor of Taipei City, Ma Ying-jeou. (show photo of Ma Ying-jeou).

Ma Ying-jeou campaigned on a promise to work hard to improve relations with China. Specifically, he pledged to resume the long-suspended, informal cross-Strait negotiations on the establishment of the “three links”—that is, direct postal, commercial, and shipping ties between the two sides. (The talks, first initiated in 1992, had been abruptly cancelled in the wake of the 1995-96 missile-test crisis).

The election itself was a virtual landslide, as Taiwanese voters demonstrated their weariness with Chen Shui-bian’s China-baiting tactics. Ma Ying-jeou defeated Frank Hsieh by a decisive majority of 58% to 41%. The magnitude of Ma’s victory was widely interpreted as a mandate for repairing cross-Strait relations.

In a welcome change of tactics, Mainland China’s leaders carefully refrained from trying to influence the outcome of the 2008 presidential election. Evidently, they had learned a lesson from their earlier, heavy-handed attempts to coerce Taiwan’s voters in 1996, 2000 and 2004. In each of those earlier elections, Beijing’s bullying tactics had proved counterproductive, causing Taiwan’s voters to “rally ‘round the flag” of pro-independence candidates.
In the aftermath of the 2008 election, there were audible sighs of relief on both sides of the Taiwan Strait—not to mention in Washington, where Ma Ying-jeou’s victory was greeted with barely-disguised satisfaction. Although the Bush administration had maintained a façade of strict neutrality in the election, there was little doubt of the administration’s strong preference for Mr. Ma. And in Beijing, China’s leaders could barely contain their glee.

Within a few months of taking office, the atmosphere in cross-Strait relations had improved noticeably. By the late summer of 2008 negotiations had been resumed on the “three links”. In December of that year the first-ever direct commercial flights between Taiwan and China were inaugurated.

By the spring of 2009, cross-Strait relations were more relaxed than at any time since the early 1990s. More than 3,000 Mainland Chinese visitors were now arriving in Taiwan each day—a ten-fold increase over the previous year. One clear sign of the improving atmosphere was Beijing’s approval of Taiwan’s application to gain official observer status in international organizations such as the World Health Assembly.

Although China has for now substituted the carrot of “soft power” for the stick of military threat, the ultimate goal of reunification remains Beijing’s clear priority. And if soft-power fails to produce visible progress toward some form of political reintegration, hard power will remain an option.

Though we cannot predict whether peace or war will ultimately prevail in the Taiwan Strait, one thing seems clear. The “state of play” in cross-Strait relations will be strongly affected by deeper evolutionary forces that are at work within China itself. Major changes are taking place in China’s economy and society. In the next lecture we’ll take a closer look at these domestic changes; and we shall see how they are helping to reshape China’s national identity and self-image.
Lecture 45: China in the New Millennium (2000-2008)

In a previous lecture we saw how Zhu Rongji’s firm guidance in the last half of the roaring ’90s rescued Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms from overheating and running off the tracks. As a result of Zhu’s key initiatives – which included banking reform, tax reform, SOE reform and the PRC’s accession to the World Trade Organization—by the end of the millennium China’s stress-ridden economy had achieved a “soft landing.”

By 2002, the reform of China’s state-owned enterprises had finally and completely smashed the infamous “iron rice bowl”—the system of guaranteed lifetime jobs, wages and welfare benefits for state industrial workers. The iron rice bowl had been the very backbone of Chinese socialism for almost five decades. Now, it was gone.

One immediate result was a sudden upsurge in industrial layoffs, furloughs and forced retirements. Between 1998 and 2002, an estimated 35 million urban workers lost their jobs in the re-organization of state-owned enterprises. Most of the displaced workers were entitled to receive monthly pensions and/or lump-sum severance payments. But because managers in many factories had played fast and loose with workers’ pension and welfare funds, investing them in questionable real estate and stock market transactions—millions of workers found themselves holding a bag filled with empty promises. Sometimes they were paid a small fraction of the money that was owed them; other times they were paid nothing at all. Without any national system of unemployment insurance to cover enterprise obligations, these workers and their families had little recourse. Many joined the ranks of China’s migrant workers, moving from city to city in search of work. Others sought to eek out a living selling second-hand trinkets and low-end knick-knacks on the streets of their home town. Still others joined protest demonstrations at their former places of employment.

To deal with an increasingly tense unemployment situation, the government opened occupational retraining and relocation centers in dozens of Chinese cities; but there simply weren’t enough jobs available in the “new” private economy to quickly absorb all the displaced workers from the “old” state-owned enterprises. It was a classic lesson in what Joseph Schumpeter once called the “creative destruction” of capitalism—the Darwinian survival of the fittest in a market economy.

Over the longer run, continuing high rates of economic growth, generated mainly by the rapid expansion of export industries in China’s coastal regions, made it possible gradually to absorb many (if not most) of the displaced workers in new jobs, mainly in the private sector. And by the middle of the present decade, the unemployment crisis triggered by Zhu Rongji’s SOE reforms had largely abated. Employment was up, coastal export zones were flourishing, the middle class was expanding rapidly, and China’s GDP growth rate had surged above 11 percent per year.

By 2005, average per-capita income had increased seven-fold in China, from less than $200 a year in 1980 to over $1500. In the same period, China’s annual foreign trade volume rose almost 100-fold, from less than $10 billion per year to just under $1 trillion.
And total foreign direct investment ballooned from a few hundred million dollars in 1980 to almost $700 billion in by 2006.

As a result of China’s booming foreign investments and export manufactures, aided by a red-hot property market, a new class of affluent private entrepreneurs was emerging, along with an upwardly-mobile professional and managerial middle class. Made up of just under 10 percent of the population in 2007, this new middle class included approximately 100 million people.

A typical middle-class family consisted of an employed couple with one school-aged child and no pets. With an annual income of around US $7,500 a year, the family lived in a small, privately owned five-room apartment with two mobile phones, a large-screen color TV (with cable service), and an Internet-connected personal computer. Other common benchmarks of middle-class status included post-secondary education, white-collar employment and --increasingly-- a small family car, used mainly for weekend getaways.

Not surprisingly, most members of China’s emerging middle class lived in and around big cities, where the symbols of rising economic status were readily observable. By 2007 some 65 percent of the Chinese people lived in their own, privately-owned homes and apartments, while 32 million private automobiles clogged urban roads and highways—a figure that was increasing at the extraordinary rate of 10,000 cars per day. Additional material markers of China’s expanding urban middle-class included foreign travel (Chinese citizens took 34 million trips abroad in 2007), ATMs (120,000), lawyers (150,000), post-secondary education enrollments (23 million students) and KFC-McDonalds-Starbucks fast food outlets (3,000). For Chinese with access to middle-class life-styles, goods and services, life was good-- and getting better.

But under the surface of China’s remarkable urban economic miracle lay a more troubling phenomenon: a rapidly growing income gap between “winners” and “losers.” Earlier, we saw how the initial increase in this gap played a role in the genesis of “red-eye disease” in the mid-1980s, thereby contributing to the rising alienation that fueled the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989.

In the aftermath of Deng Xiaoping’s reform-accelerating “southern tour” of 1992, the income gap grew even faster. As a result, China’s gini coefficient —which is an index used to determine relative inequality in wealth and income-- reached its highest level ever in China in 2008, approaching .48. Economists differ in their estimates of what constitutes a critically high gini coefficient; but most agree that when it rises much above .50, it is an invitation to class conflict between rich and poor. (For comparison sake, in 2007 the US gini coefficient stood at .43, while that of the Russian Federation was .40. The world’s highest gini coefficients—between .60 and .73 are generally concentrated in the strife-torn countries of Africa South of the Sahara). According to a recent survey, income inequality between the richest 20 percent of Chinese households and the poorest 20 percent has risen six-gold since the advent of Deng’s market reforms in 1978.
Emblematic of the rising income gap in China was the vast army of rural migrant workers—members of the so-called “floating population”—who lived and worked on the fringes of urban society. Freed from the restrictive “household registration system” (hukou) that traditionally kept them moored to the land, between 150 and 200 million rural migrants—no-one knows precisely how many—poured into China’s cities and towns between 1984 and 2006, providing much of the manpower that fueled the country’s unprecedented development boom.

But these migrants, not being legal urban residents, have generally been treated as second-class citizens. Lacking basic labor protection as well as urban citizenship rights (such as access to public education, police protection, and affordable health care), they form a massive urban underclass. They are also severely underrepresented in government census tallies and public opinion surveys, thus rendering them largely invisible. In early 2007 Shanghai was estimated to have 5.6 million migrants—almost 1/3 of its total population, while Beijing had 5.4 million, and Guangzhou five million. But the national leader in migrant workers, with almost seven million, was Shenzhen.

Once a sleepy fishing village just across the border from Hong Kong, for the past two decades Shenzhen has been the fastest growing city in China—if not in the entire world. With annual economic growth averaging more than 25 percent over the past quarter-century, Shenzhen today is packed to the rafters with 12 million people, almost 60 percent of whom lack valid household registration. Because of its close proximity to Hong Kong and its status as one of four original Special Economic Zones designated by Deng Xiaoping in 1980, Shenzhen has long enjoyed preferential foreign investment status and tax benefits from the central government.

Today Shenzhen ranks first among Chinese cities in foreign direct investment (FDI), and third (after Shanghai and Beijing) in the number of high-rise buildings and star-rated hotels. It also has the country’s fourth largest container port. Among the other impressive byproducts of Shenzhen’s rapid development are a large, well-educated middle class, a wide array of civil society associations, a vigorous mass media, and a relatively efficient and responsive municipal government.

Not surprisingly, there is also a Dickensian underside to Shenzhen’s rising prosperity. In 2006, when I last visited Shenzhen, most of the city’s seven million migrant workers were young women between the ages of 16 and 22. Few had marketable skills or local support networks; and Shenzhen’s labor market was rife with unscrupulous recruiters and miscellaneous hustlers and scammers seeking to prey upon powerless, vulnerable transients. Some young migrant women wound up as prostitutes; others were kidnapped by human traffickers and sold elsewhere as wives or concubines.

For those migrants lucky enough to find regular factory or construction work, the pay averaged around $125 a month for a six-day work week, 12 hours a day, often with long hours of mandatory, unpaid overtime. Migrants generally lived in dingy, crowded dormitories, where they were frequently locked down at night. By the time fees for room
and board were deducted from their paychecks, little was left to send home to their families—if they got paid at all. In many factories, employers routinely fell three or four months behind in paying their workers. If a migrant should complain, she got sacked. Lacking municipal residency, migrants had no legal recourse. (show photo of migrant laborers looking for work)

Since the early 1980s Shenzhen has absorbed over US$50 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI). That’s a lot of outside money to be circulating in and around one city. Eventually, a good deal of that money winds up flowing into the Shenzhen Stock Exchange—one of only two legalized stock exchanges in China (the other is in Shanghai).

The Shenzhen exchange is a veritable beehive of activity. Almost 40 million people have invested there since the 1980s—most of them small, first-time investors looking for a one-way ride up the escalator of wealth. But in recent years, after a long, upward bull market, share prices have begun to fluctuate widely; and a series of sharply downward market adjustments in 2007 and the first half of 2008 saw the value of stocks listed in Shenzhen drop by more than 40 percent—and this was before the global recession hit China in the fall and winter of 2008. In this stock market plunge, large numbers of small Chinese investors, many of them already leveraged up to their eyeballs, took huge, unaffordable hits.

Along with a frenetic and volatile stock market, Shenzhen, like other rapidly expanding coastal cities, has experienced severe overheating in its real estate market. With an expanding middle class struggling to achieve homeownership, the combination of a booming local economy and an influx of speculative real estate investment from nearby Hong Kong, caused the property market in Shenzhen to soar. Between 2002 and 2005 housing prices rose 30 percent annually; and by 2006 the average cost of a flat in Shenzhen was US$160.00 per square foot—sixty percent higher than in Beijing, and four times higher than the national average. Consequently, a high percentage of Shenzhen’s apartment owners were dangerously overleveraged on their mortgage loans, spending upwards of 50 percent of their monthly income on mortgage repayment.

But if Shenzhen displays classic symptoms of unevenly distributed wealth, even more extreme are the disparities between China’s coastal cities and the country’s vast rural interior. Although more than 400 million Chinese have been lifted above the World Bank’s benchmark poverty income threshold of $1 per day in the past two decades, since the late 1990s there has been visible slippage in rural poverty alleviation; and in 2007 an estimated 400 million Chinese were still living on less than $2 per day. Overall, the average income gap between urban and rural Chinese families rose from a little more than 2:1 in the early 1980s to more than 3.3:1 in 2007. Clearly, new wealth has been slow to “trickle down” from city to countryside.

Compounding the problem of a steadily growing rural-urban income gap is the phenomenon of widespread official corruption. According to some estimates, illegal
graft, corruption, bribery, and kickbacks eat up as much as 8 to 10% of China’s gross
domestic product annually. Generally, the farther down the governmental ladder one goes
in China, the more rampant the corruption one is likely to find. Thus, one finds
proportionately more corruption occurring at district, township, municipal and county
levels of government, where administrative transparency is generally very low, and
where the accountability of local officials is very difficult to enforce in the absence of
direct popular elections. Moreover, a deeply entrenched local culture of gift giving, and
the formation of collusive, mutually profitable relationships between local officials and
local entrepreneurs has created a pervasive network of corrupt alliances that crisscross the
country. Such alliances have helped to defeat repeated efforts by the central leaders to
increase the openness and transparency of local government.

The problem of low public trust in local government was unintentionally exacerbated by
Jiang Zemin’s famous “theory of the three represents” (sāngé daibiao), promulgated in
2000. For 80 years, the CCP had identified itself as the vanguard of the worker-peasant
masses in China. But since 1992, the worker-peasant masses have taken a back seat to a
new class of local entrepreneurs, merchants, businessmen and brokers. To legitimize the
contributions of these high-flying new economic elites, Jiang Zemin offered them
membership in the CCP’s ruling coalition. Under the theory of “representing the
advanced classes,” some six million Chinese entrepreneurs and businessmen were
recruited into the CCP in the first half-decade of the new millennium. At the same time,
in an effort to become more “market friendly,” the Party abandoned its traditional
ideological hostility toward capitalists. The result was a new, and in some respects
unholy alliance between traditional political power and new economic wealth in the
provinces.

This is not to say that the Central Government in China was notably corrupt. Most
available evidence suggests that it was not the “dragons on high” but rather the so-called
“local snakes” who were responsible for most of the existing public distrust of the
government-business axis. A survey of 500 Communist Party officials in 2004 confirmed
this in terms that were both stark and distressing. While over 62 percent of the officials
who responded to the survey expressed a high level of trust in the integrity of the Central
Government, only 15 percent expressed similar trust in city government, 9 percent in
county-level government, and a mere 5.6 percent in township government. (Statistics
cited in Baum, China Watcher, chapter 14).

This was, in effect, a staggering admission of the growing lack of popular confidence in
government. Forced to take cognizance of this mounting problem, the Party Central
Committee, meeting in 2004, frankly acknowledged that the CCP was facing a serious
crisis in its ruling capacity:

“China’s reform and development has reached a critical stage in which new
problems are mushrooming. . . . The Communist Party’s ruling status . . . will not
last forever if the Party does nothing to safeguard it. . . . We must develop a
stronger sense of crisis. . . . and enhance our ruling capacity in a more earnest and
conscientious manner.” (Xinhua Wang Online [Beijing], September 26, 2004.)
Under Jiang Zemin’s immediate successors, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, major efforts have been undertaken to address the crisis in governance by “reinventing” the CCP as a more compassionate ruling party. Central to this effort has been a drive by Party leaders to level the economic playing field in China. Acknowledging that large numbers of Chinese citizens have fallen farther and farther behind in the quest for financial security, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have called on the Party to rein in its previous, all-out pursuit of “growth at any price.”

In laying out this new Party line, Chinese leaders have begun to emphasize welfare reform, and the need to reduce the heavy fiscal and financial burdens borne by those left behind in the rush to modernize—principally the rural poor, migrant laborers, ethnic minorities, and the unprotected elderly. Gradually, fiscal resources have been shifted from the haves to the have-nots. For example, in 2005, the central government abolished the national agricultural tax and placed a firm cap on the amount of fiscal exactions that could be imposed upon farmers by predatory rural officials. Two years later, the National People’s Congress drafted major new legislation designed to define and protect rural property rights, so that local officials would be barred from arbitrarily seizing farmers’ land on the cheap and re-selling it to developers at a hefty profit.

In many areas of the country the minimum wage has been raised in the past two years to an average of between US$60-$75 per month; and modest cash subsidies, called “baseline guarantees”, or dibao, have been given to the very poorest of China’s urban poor. In 2008, a new labor law was adopted that promised both better working conditions and union representation for China’s migrant workers. Also in 2008, tens of billions of yuan in educational funds were pledged for the development of rural schools, with the eventual aim of making nine years of rural education tuition-free. Finally, a national health insurance program was unveiled early in 2009 that will partially subsidize basic medical insurance for up to 80 percent of China’s rural dwellers.

These reforms are surely steps in the right direction, and they should be applauded. Still, to date they have not been matched by any significant movement toward meaningful political reform in China. Thus far, the ruling Communist party-state has strongly resisted all efforts to make it more transparent, more pluralistic, more democratic, and more accountable. Suffering from what I have called PTSS—“post-Tiananmen stress syndrome”—a condition characterized by an obsessive fear of dissent, disobedience and disorder—the CCP has shown no signs to date of tolerating (let alone welcoming) such things as checks and balances, media freedom, freedom of association, or the autonomous operation of pluralistic interest groups. Still less have there been any signs of judicial independence, legislative autonomy, or electoral democracy.

When a group of several hundred Chinese political activists signed a “Charter ‘08” petition in the fall of 2008, calling for human rights reform and political liberalization, their organization was declared illegal and their chief spokesman was arrested for “endangering state security.”
Far from becoming more permissive politically, China’s leaders have in recent years unswervingly emphasized the necessity for the Communist Party to strengthen its control over all aspects of the country’s political life. As Hu Jintao himself put it in 2004:

The Communist Party of China [must] play a dominant role and coordinate all sectors [of government].... The leading position of the Party is a result of long-term practice and is clearly stipulated by the Constitution. People's congresses at all levels ... must consciously put themselves under the Party's leadership. . . . The role of Party organizations and Party members should be brought into full play. . . so as to realize the Party's unified leadership over state affairs. (Hu Jintao, “Speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National People’s Congress”)

Here we come to the nub of the question of good governance. For if all political activity is, as Hu Jintao suggests, properly dominated by a self-appointed guardian organization, then we may well ask, in the immortal words of Plato, “Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?” – “Who guards the guardians themselves?” Who, indeed? As Montesquieu noted at the time of the French revolution, the absence of countervailing power is itself the very definition of tyranny. And it can thus be argued that without such mechanisms of guardianship as a free press to scrutinize the actions of state and Party officials; or a vigorous civil society to articulate the competing interests of various groups and strata; or an independent judiciary to help level the playing field between the powerless and the powerful—without such mechanisms, governmental integrity, transparency and accountability cannot be effectively achieved.

Still, the Chinese system does have its defenders. While taking note of the Party’s stubborn insistence on monopolizing all instruments of political power and authority, some analysts nonetheless claim to see in the new, welfare-oriented and user-friendly policies of the CCP under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao a potentially viable “soft authoritarian” alternative to the messiness and chaos of Western-style democracy—a sort of technocratic neo-Confucian nanny-state, one that is admittedly despotic, but arguably benevolent.

Typically, the defenders of Chinese “soft-authoritarianism” prefer a centralized, administrative-led form of government, with strong executive authority, possessing high technical competence, and featuring limited (or no) electoral contestation among rival political parties. To the extent that they have in mind a particular model of effective governance, it is generally that of contemporary Singapore.

But the Singapore model has only limited relevance to China. For one thing, Singapore’s successful modernization was underpinned by a historically unique constellation of economic, demographic and institutional factors that are largely absent in contemporary China. These include: a robust rule of law and a professional, uncorrupt civil service—both of which were legacies of British colonial rule; then there is Singapore’s unusually high per-capita income (seven times higher than China’s) and its well-educated citizenry. Moreover, Singapore is not really a country at all, but rather a tiny city-state, with a
population of barely 5 million. Singapore split off from its much poorer and more populous rural sibling, Malaysia, back in 1965.

Further straining the comparison between China and Singapore, the respected NGO Transparency International has judged Singapore to be one of the half-dozen least corrupt countries in the world, while China holds down 72\textsuperscript{nd} place, ranking behind Cuba, Brazil and Croatia.

And finally, despite Singapore’s intrusive, executive-led political institutions, despite its timid mass media and its anemic interest groups, and despite the continued dominance of a single political party, the People’s Action Party—despite all these things, the former British colony enjoys a degree of electoral competition that is wholly missing in China today. For all its non-democratic instincts, the ruling PAP is required regularly to compete in free and open public elections; and this arguably makes a big difference, forcing government ministers, for example, to pay close attention to public opinion. Lacking even such rudimentary mechanisms of grass-roots political accountability, China’s prospects for emerging as the “next Singapore” should not be overstated.

This does not mean that China is totally stagnant and unchanging politically, or that the iron-willed oligarchs of the Chinese Communist Party are impervious to important changes in their domestic and international environment. And in the next lecture we shall examine one of the most pervasive-- and potentially revolutionary-- sources of political change in China today: the “information revolution.” In the past decade, cellphones, the Internet and text-messaging have come to China, big-time; and the country will never be the same.
Lecture 46: China’s Information Revolution

On May 12, 2008, a massive earthquake, measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, struck Sichuan province in Southwest China, killing upwards of 80,000 people, including more than 5,000 schoolchildren. Most of the children died when their non steel-reinforced school buildings pancaked and collapsed in the first moments of the quake. Within 48 hours of the disaster, hundreds of Chinese journalists from around the country converged on the scene; in their initial reports, many of them noted the apparent anomaly of so many school buildings being flattened while other surrounding buildings remained upright, apparently withstanding the jolt.

By engaging in spontaneous, uncensored reporting of a fast-breaking news story in far-off Sichuan province, Chinese journalists were violating three longstanding official media taboos: a prohibition against reporting events outside their own localities; a ban on unscripted coverage of natural disasters; and a general taboo on reportage that directly or indirectly cast doubt upon governmental credibility.

One week later, a Chinese journalist who had been among the first on the scene at the source of the earthquake wrote in her personal blog that she had received strict instructions from her editor ordering her not to report on either the reasons for the massive collapse of school buildings or questions about the behavior of local government agencies in the quake’s immediate aftermath. Within a week of the Sichuan disaster, the media were ordered off the story and instructed to take their news leads exclusively from authorized state press agencies.

Flash forward to May 12, 2009— the first anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake. On that date the New York Times reported that “scores of foreign journalists trying to interview aggrieved parents [have been] intimidated and roughed up.” (NYT, May 13, 2009).

This was not the first time that the Chinese government had attempted to forcibly muzzle the mass media in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Back in the winter of 2003, when the SARS epidemic first spread throughout China’s eastern seaboard, Chinese and foreign journalists jointly revealed the existence of a deliberate government campaign to suppress information about the extent and seriousness of the epidemic. Embarrassed by the ensuing wave of adverse publicity, the Chinese government fired the officials ostensibly responsible for the coverup and pledged henceforth to permit more open, uncensored media coverage of public health crises. So far, so good. But no sooner did the furor over the SARS coverup subside a few months later than the old prohibitions against unauthorized publication of bad news were fully restored. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

In fact, the Sichuan earthquake and the SARS epidemic are but two recent illustrations of a steadily intensifying “information war” between the forces of media openness and candor, on the one hand, and the forces of media censorship and control, on the other.
In this lecture we will examine the intense controversy that has surrounded China’s ongoing “information revolution.” What makes this conflict particularly interesting is the fact that the Communist Party’s traditional insistence upon controlling the spread of all news and information in China is increasingly coming up against a broad array of new sources and technologies of information dissemination that are making censorship and content control far more difficult.

Three key developments help to explain this changing situation: first is the gradual but steady growth of individual discretion and personal freedom of choice in post-Mao China; second is the commercialization and decentralization of the mass media in the reform era; and third is spread of new electronic communications media, including mobile phones and the Internet.

With the state no longer micro-managing all aspects of the daily lives of individuals, ordinary people—the “laobaixing”—are freer now than ever before to decide important questions for themselves, including where to live, what schools to send their children to, what jobs to train for, where to work, what products to buy, what to watch on TV and what to read. Another way of saying the same thing is that under conditions of the marketization of everyday life in China since the 1980s, the state’s “zones of indifference” have grown dramatically larger. And while it is certainly true that there are very real and tangible limits to the state’s indifference (for example, it is not OK to unfurl a banner supporting the Falun Gong in the middle of Tiananmen Square!); still, compared with thirty years ago, personal freedom and autonomy are far broader.

The second reason for the weakening of state media censorship has to do with changes in the operation of the media themselves. Unlike the Maoist era, when all media were centrally funded and took their editorial instructions directly from the party’s propaganda apparatus, today there are a vast number of diverse, locally run sources of information available to Chinese media consumers. Since the post-Mao reforms began in 1978 there has been a ten-fold increase in the number of newspapers and magazines published in China. Today there are more than 1,900 newspapers and 9,700 magazines in print, most of them managed by local, rather than central agencies of government.

As a result of China’s market reforms and fiscal decentralization, the vast majority of newspapers and magazines are self-supporting, and are dependent on commercial advertising revenues, individual subscriptions and newsstand sales for their operating funds. This, in turn, means that for the print media to stay in business, their content has to be more lively, more varied, more user-friendly, and less blatantly propagandistic than in the past.

While a few major “flagship” newspapers like the People’s Daily continue to receive subsidized funding and editorial guidance directly from the Party Central Committee, these traditional propaganda mainstays have lost a substantial percentage of their readership over the years. Increasingly, younger, better educated readers are turning to new journalistic formats and styles. And because the vast majority of China’s newspapers and magazines are now responsible for their own profits and losses, they are expected not
merely to be the party’s faithful mouthpiece, as before, but also to entertain, to excite, and, above all, to sell. This commercial mandate helps to account, among other things, for the rapid rise of tabloid-style journalism in China, with its accent on soft news, sensationalism, and even a hint of scandal (think *National Enquirer* or *London Daily Mirror*).

Occasionally, the Chinese tabloids go too far. In the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, for example, one Chinese magazine, the *New Travel Weekly*, carried its mandate to attract new readers to unacceptable extremes when it printed photos of scantily clad women posing in the rubble of a collapsed apartment bloc for a special report on the quake. Within days, the magazine’s managing editor, editor, and deputy editor were all sacked, and the magazine was shut down for violating journalistic decency.

With editors and publishers increasingly forced to compete for market share in a highly commercialized media environment, some enterprising news managers and writers have taken to padding their bottom lines (as well as their personal incomes) by engaging in a practice known as “paid news.” Paid news takes two main forms: either the solicitation of cash donations from commercial businesses in exchange for favorable publicity (a type of paid media “infomercial” that is quite familiar to late-night television viewers in the West), or else a journalist may demand a hefty fee to refrain from publishing damaging information he or she has gathered about a particular firm or individual—a practice virtually indistinguishable from extortion. Both of these practices are said to be on the upswing in China.

The third development that has led to a gradual loosening of political controls over the Chinese media has to do with the proliferation of new electronic means of communications—most notably the Internet, mobile phones, and text-messaging.

At the time of Deng Xiaoping’s “Southern Tour” of 1992, China had a grand total of only 200,000 mobile phone subscribers and no Internet at all. The country had a grand total of six electronic mail servers, with just 18,000 individual email accounts-- and no online data services. Over the next decade and a half, however, a geometric explosion in Internet and cellphone use took place. By the end of 2008 there were over 540 million mobile phones and 315 million Internet users in China, along with 135 million individual Chinese IP addresses, 12 million registered Internet domain names and more than 1.5 million China-hosted websites. Although blogging is a relatively recent phenomenon, there are estimated to be 38 million active bloggers in China (up from only two million as recently as 2005). On average, two new blogs are posted in China *every second*.

When one adds to this veritable blizzard of Internet-based communications the extraordinary diffusive capability of the newest mass electronic medium, mobile phone-based text messaging, the task of controlling the flow of information becomes even more daunting. According to Chinese industry sources, in the first quarter of 2007 alone, China’s mobile phone subscribers sent 135.8 billion text messages – an average of 17,500
messages *per second*. (I should add that by the time you actually hear this lecture, all of these data will already be badly obsolescent.)

Now, none of this is to suggest that the Communist Party has given up on its goal of shaping and controlling the information that is available to ordinary Chinese through the mass media—and in particular, information pertaining to politically-sensitive issues. On the contrary, as the task of controlling the media has become more challenging in recent years, China’s media minders have sought to sharpen their tools of censorship, surveillance and supervision.

The government’s concern with ensuring that only favorable publicity would be disseminated in the mass media was particularly evident during the run-up to the Beijing Olympics of August 2008. In the four years preceding the Beijing Games, there were numerous examples of severely tightened media controls in China. Here are just a few examples:

- In 2005 The Party’s Central Propaganda Department dismissed the respected editor of a prominent investigative journal for publishing a story about the Communist Party’s efforts to manipulate news content. When his dismissal provoked a strong outcry from other journalists, the government closed down the journal and banned all media references to the incident.

- A year later, in June 2006 the National People’s Congress introduced a draft law on “emergency media management”. Under its terms, fines of up to US$13,000 (100,000 yuan) were imposed on media publishing unauthorized reports on natural disasters or any other emergency situations involving large-scale public distress or unrest.

- Also In 2006, reporters for two foreign newspapers, the *Straits Times* of Singapore and the *New York Times*, were convicted and imprisoned by Chinese courts on trumped-up criminal charges of “espionage,” “fraud” and “revealing state secrets.”

- In 2007, China’s State Council announced a list of 20 topics that could not be openly discussed in the mass media. Prohibited topics included the 1957 anti-rightist campaign, the Cultural Revolution, the 1937 “Rape of Nanjing,” and judicial corruption. In a supreme bit of irony, “media freedom” was also one of the 20 banned topics.

- Finally, in mid-March 2008, all foreign journalists were excluded from the Tibetan Plateau in the aftermath of a series of violent demonstrations there. Domestic journalists were also forbidden to report on the Tibetan unrest, with exclusive news feeds provided by CCTV and the Xinhua state news agency.

While by no means exhaustive, these examples confirm the general point that despite more than two decades of increasing consumer choice, media commercialization,
decentralization and tabloidization, the media in China today are neither free nor open politically.

Although civic-minded journalists are pushing hard to expand the scope of reportorial freedom, probably the greatest advances in the free flow of information in recent years have come not from newspapers and magazines, or even television and radio--but from Internet chatrooms, weblogs, and mobile text messaging. Because of their nature as “headless,” decentralized agents of mass circulation, these new electronic media have proved especially difficult to police effectively. Because of that difficulty, the authorities in charge of electronic media surveillance have tried to foster a climate that maximizes self-censorship and deterrence.

Under the watchful eye of the State Council’s Information Office, tens of thousands of Internet police have been recruited and trained since 2000. Collectively known as “Big Mama” (dama), these cybercops have, among other things, cracked down heavily on unlicensed Internet cafes, shutting down more than 100,000 nationwide since 2002. And on college campuses around the country, thousands of student monitors, called “little sisters,” have been hired to scrutinize postings in chatrooms, on electronic bulletin boards and blogsites, to remind users to observe self-restraint while promoting the regime’s goal of a “Civilized Web.” When self-policing proves ineffective, the “little sisters” are expected to report offenders to local Internet police. To remind netizens not to stray from approved content, the ubiquitous cartoon cybercop icons “Jingjing” and Chacha” regularly pop up on Chinese computer screens. (show photo of Jingjing and Chacha)

If such intervention is insufficient to deter undesirable online behavior, powerful automatic filtering software—much of it supplied by Western vendors such as Cisco Systems--has been installed by Chinese Internet portals and search engines to screen out such politically incorrect search terms as “Tiananmen incident,” “June 4,” “Dalai Lama,” and “Taiwan independence.”

Commercial webhosts and Internet portals find themselves under particularly intense pressure to police their own web content. When the head of China’s largest blog host, Bokee.com, was asked to explain why his company voluntarily screened out “offensive” subject matter, he responded by stressing corporate bottom-line consciousness: “We are a commercial company. . . . We have a responsibility to our shareholders. . . . if we allow anyone to publish sensitive content, the whole site will be blocked.” (BBC News, Shanghai, October 25, 2006). In similar fashion, major global Internet companies like Yahoo, Google and Microsoft have agreed voluntarily to remove politically sensitive content from their hosted services in order to ensure continued access to China’s fast-growing electronic market. Foreign news media have also come under pressure to sanitize their online content. When they fail to do so, they may find their websites blocked in China--sometimes indefinitely, as has happened to BBC and the New York Times, among others.

Personal cellphone communications are also subject to increasing state intervention. Major mobile service providers in China routinely post governmental “advisory” notices
to their subscribers. One such advisory was sent to over three million Beijingers in May 2005, following the eruption of massive anti-Japanese demonstrations in the nation’s capital. "Express patriotism rationally,” exhorted the boldfaced text message. “Don't take part in illegal protests. Don't make trouble.” (Taipei Times, May 2, 2005)

Notwithstanding the wide array of weapons available to the Chinese government in its efforts to control the impact of the Information Revolution, there are reasons for long-term optimism. First, as we have seen, consumers in the reform era have become more sophisticated, more demanding, and more media savvy. Second, the media themselves have become more diverse, more lively and more commercially-oriented than ever before. Third, there is a growing trend toward professionalization in the print and broadcast media. Journalistic standards are rising, and many editors and reporters are no longer content to serve as mere “mouthpieces” of the party. Increasingly, investigative journalists and their editors are playing “edge-ball” with their minders, testing—and where possible, pushing—the limits of government censorship and control. Fourth, given the staggering volume of electronic messages flying into, out of, and around China at any given moment, total content control of the new electronic media has become impractical, if not impossible. The fabled “Great Firewall of China” has numerous vulnerabilities, and many Chinese netizens have become quite adept at exploiting them, for example, by using sophisticated encoding software to evade keyword filters and by employing proxy servers to access blocked websites.

Taken together, these various factors make it unlikely that Chinese authorities will succeed in halting either the relentless, market-driven expansion of the information cascade or the envelope-pushing bravado of some journalists.

But there is yet another reason for optimism. Along with rising personal freedom and consumer empowerment, as fostered by market reforms and the relentless advance of the Information Revolution, there has also been a substantial expansion of the “public space” available for raising issues of civic concern. In 2006 Chinese sources claimed that there were over 317,000 non-governmental civil associations in China, though no-one knows the true number. For the most part, these NGOs are small in size and narrowly focused on issues of substantive local concern (such as environmental protection, poverty alleviation, rural education, HIV/AIDS awareness, etc.). They are also mostly a-political. But their rising numbers and heightened civic awareness have visibly enlarged the arena of public discourse where policies and actions of the Party-state and its agents can be discussed, debated and, with increasing frequency, contested.

Energized by market reforms and the Information Revolution, and enabled by the Party-state’s retreat from micro-managing individual behavior, Chinese citizens have begun to use legally prescribed channels to protect and promote their own interests. In the decade between 1993 and 2002, for example, the number of lawsuits filed annually by Chinese citizens against agents of the state, under the terms of the 1990 Administrative Litigation Law, rose from 27,000 to almost 100,000. In the single year 2005, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions reported 314,000 labor disputes, up 20 percent from the previous year. Also in 2005, according to the State Council, 30 million Chinese citizens
submitted petitions, both individual and collective, to “letters and visits” offices around the country, requesting government intervention to resolve a range of individual and collective grievances—marking a three-fold increase over 2004.

When peaceful petitioning fails, direct action increasingly ensues. Between 1993 and 2005, the number of annual “mass disturbances” in China grew from 8,700 to over 83,000—an average increase of almost 20 percent per year. In the past few years, angry groups of homeowners and farmers—sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands—have confronted local officials and property developers in dozens of Chinese cities and hundreds of rural townships to protest illegal land seizures and corrupt real estate development deals. One recent estimate put the number of rural dwellers who have been victimized in fraudulent land deals at over 50 million.

In China today, an emerging, rights-conscious civil society has begun to push back against the traditional boundaries and symbols of a rigid, authoritarian party-state. As public awareness of rights and rules grows, civil society begins to bump up against the system-preserving political logic of the regime. When this happens, the media are increasingly on hand to record and amplify the resulting frictional encounters. Quietly and without fanfare—indeed, without “intelligent design” of any kind-- the mass media in China have gradually become the natural ally of civil society—its public voice. And so, despite governmental efforts to prevent the spread of bad news, the bad news continues to bleed through. As one observer remarked, “various repressed discourses” keep “bubbling [up] to the surface.” (Yuezhi Zhao, “Media and Elusive Democracy in China,” *The Public* 8:4 (2001), p. 41)

While no aggregate data are available to confirm the importance of the media’s new role as civil-society watchdog, anecdotal evidence abounds. There has, for example, been a dramatic rise in the frequency and efficacy of investigative journalism in such areas of growing public awareness as environmental protection. In 2003, pressure jointly generated by environmental NGOs and the local media in Sichuan Province mobilized public opinion against a planned dam near Dujiangyan, an ancient irrigation system designated as a World Heritage site. The plan was eventually dropped. (Ironically, Dujiangyan was near the epicenter of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake). Similarly, in 2004 plans to construct a massive hydropower station on Yunnan’s Nujiang river were placed on hold pending detailed environmental impact studies--the result of negative publicity generated by NGOs, their lawyers, and the media. An even more dramatic display of the newfound potency of media-activated public opinion was the May 2007 announcement that in response to one million SMS protest messages sent by citizens of Xiamen on their mobile phones, construction of a new, environmentally hazardous $1.4 billion petrochemical plant in the city was being halted indefinitely.

Increased media scrutiny of courts, prosecutors and police has also begun to push China’s judicial institutions to become more fair, impartial and transparent. The case of Sun Zhigang provides a relevant illustration. Sun, a university graduate from Wuhan, was beaten to death in a Guangzhou migrant detention center in 2003 after having been taken
into custody for failing to display his temporary residence card. Guangzhou’s Southern Metropolis Daily broke the story, which was then widely circulated on the Internet. The resulting public outcry led the central government to abolish the temporary residence permit requirement and convert migrant detention centers into voluntary service centers.

The role of the media in exposing corrupt commercial transactions is also growing. In January 2007 the well-known print journalist Wang Keqin, of the China Economic Times, wrote a 13,000 word exposé concerning the death of fellow journalist Lan Chengzhang, who had been brutally beaten by thugs after threatening to publicly expose an illegal coal mining operation in Shanxi province. When censors at the China Economic Times red-penciled the sensitive concluding portions of Wang’s article, he boldly posted the entire, uncensored piece on his blogsite, whereupon the story—now including the censorship issue—was recycled back into the print media via Southern Weekend, a Guangzhou-based weekly known for its bold investigative reporting.

A final example of the newfound efficacy of media-voiced civil society pushback is provided by the saga of the Chongqing “nail house.” In this extraordinary case, which burst into the public’s awareness in March 2007, a Chongqing couple held out against intense pressure applied by property developers and local government agencies, refusing to evacuate their home without adequate financial compensation. Enlisting the support of local residents’ groups and a generally sympathetic mass media (which obligingly portrayed the couple’s struggle as a confrontation between David and Goliath), the couple parleyed widespread public sympathy – and the acute embarrassment this caused the Chongqing government-- into a nationwide media blitz. Hundreds of web forums, chatrooms and mobile phone networks all over China provided daily updates of the “nail house” saga, complete with stunning photos of the small house perched atop a tiny spit of land at the center of a gigantic excavation pit; after the Southern Weekend and a few other tabloids picked up the story in mid-March, the nail-house occupants received a generous financial settlement; and on March 29, the Beijing Youth Weekend hailed the “most awesome nail house” event as heralding “the birth of citizen journalism (China Youth Weekend, March 29, 2007 [online].)

Writing about this remarkable triumph of citizens pushing back against the state, a New York Times journalist commented:

On the face of it, theirs was a hopeless task, two simple citizens against a mighty and murky alliance of an authoritarian state and big development money.

In reality, though, the couple was anything but alone… because they figured out how to glue millions of discrete individuals together in sympathy for a cause not directed from above….

None of this mobilization would have been possible without media to transmit the message, and Chinese journalists, both traditional and virtual, carried the ball, spreading the word far and wide, turning this into a truly national story…. (Howard French, quoted in International Herald Tribune, April 6, 2007, p.2)
Obviously, no random collection of anecdotes can “prove” the efficacy of the mass media as guardians of civil society or as advocates of political liberalization. In fact, the record to date in China is very spotty at best. Arguably, for every example of successful media intervention, there are two examples of failure. But it is still early days in China’s Information Revolution; and what does seem clear is that some media voices, interacting with some sectors of civil society, have begun to give voice to the concerns of some hitherto powerless individuals and groups in Chinese society; and that the resulting “renao” (or commotion) is causing a good deal of consternation and hand-wringing inside the inner portals of the Chinese Communist party-state. In the next lecture we shall pursue this question even further, to consider China’s prospects for imminent political liberalization and democratization.

Of all the visible symbols of China’s rise to global prominence, perhaps the most compelling was the Opening of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. The Beijing Olympics served as a showcase, a globally televised “coming out party” for a reinvented, reinvigorated PRC. As was suitable for such a signature event, the Games featured breathtaking pageantry, spectacular venues, and abundant human drama—all well-amplified by cascading crescendos of media hype. In a word, the Beijing Games were awesome. According to the Nielson organization, the 2008 Summer Olympics were viewed by the largest global television audience in history, with some 4.7 billion people, or approximately 70% of the world’s population, tuning in. In this lecture we will put the Beijing Olympics under a microscope, examining the Games closely to see both what they revealed about the nature and character of the “new” China, and—equally important—what they sought to conceal from view.

When the 2008 Games were first awarded to Beijing back in 2001, the spotlight of global media publicity shined brightly on the no-longer-sleeping Chinese Giant. At the same time, hopes were raised that China’s quest for international respectability would push the country toward greater political liberalization and respect for human rights.

There were solid historical precedents for such elevated hopes. During the run-up to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, for example, South Korea’s military dictators bowed to mounting domestic and international pressure by initiating a process of democratic political reform. Memories of this democratic opening were clearly uppermost in many minds when the International Olympic Committee first awarded the 2008 Games to Beijing. Consciously playing to those memories, the head of the Beijing Olympic Organizing Committee boldly promised that China would use the Games “to promote… the development of … democracy and human rights.”

As it turned out, the South Korean experience was not replicated in China—not even close. Although the long-term gravitational pull of globalization continued to nudge China slowly and fitfully in the direction of greater openness, transparency and human rights awareness, the Chinese government’s immediate concern with maintaining social order and political stability during the prolonged run-up to the 2008 Olympics led not to accelerated liberalization, but rather to a visible tightening of state censorship, surveillance and repression. There was no small irony in this: For while the Olympics had been widely expected to help open China up, they served instead to close down China even more tightly.

As we saw in an earlier lecture, ever since the 1989 Tiananmen debacle the CCP’s near-obsessive concern with maintaining “unity and stability” has trumped all other political considerations. Although Chinese authorities promised long in advance of the 2008 Olympics that certain restrictions limiting freedom of the press would be lifted in the run-up to the Games, in fact, as we saw in the last lecture, there was a significant tightening...
of media controls. And according to the organization Reporters without Borders, in the
twelve months prior to the opening of the Beijing Olympics, more than 50 Chinese
journalists and Internet bloggers were detained by police for reporting on forbidden
subjects.

But the attempted “sanitization” of news and information did not end there. Dozens of
known political dissidents and human rights activists were placed under preventive
detention in the run-up to the Olympics; at the same time, hundreds (or even thousands)
of aggrieved “petitioners”—that is, ordinary citizens who had gathered in Beijing to
protest against abusive treatment by local government agencies—were rounded up and
placed under extra-legal detention in dozens of so-called “black jails” scattered
throughout the nation’s capital. (show still frame of “black jail” from Internet video)

Of particular concern to the government was the growing advocacy role played by the
mass media in investigating and exposing such things as corruption, social unrest, and
natural catastrophes. Media coverage of such “negative” news events has long been
suppressed in China because of its purported detrimental impact on popular morale. But
now, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, investigative reporting was especially
worrisome. With the whole world watching closely, the last thing Chinese leaders wanted
was for adverse media publicity to rain on their parade, casting a pall over their long-
awaited coming-out party. (In the next lecture we shall examine the important role played
by the “information revolution” in China’s post-reform political development.)

During the run-up to the August 2008 Olympics, the ranks of Beijing’s aggrieved
petitioners had swelled dramatically as a result of a spreading wave of coerced evictions
and corrupt housing relocation programs. Between 2002 and 2008, as many as 1.4 million
residents of central Beijing were subject to mandatory relocation to make room for new
Olympic venues, transportation facilities, high-rise office and apartment complexes, and
urban beautification projects. According to numerous sources, a substantial minority of
these dislocated residents were never supplied with either the upgraded housing or the
full financial compensation that had been promised to them—or both. With increasing
numbers of petitioners angrily protesting their forced eviction and underfunded
relocation, Beijing’s “black jails” soon became overcrowded. When a British television
news team tried to film one of these extra-legal detention centers, their camera was
confiscated and they were roughed up by plainclothes police.

As Olympic venue construction neared completion, tens of thousands of rural migrant
workers, hired to build and beautify the “New Beijing,” were forcibly repatriated to the
countryside. Identity checks were instituted by security personnel at hundreds of housing
complexes throughout the city, designed to find and expel temporary workers whose
labor contracts had expired.

In August 2007-- exactly one year before the start of the Beijing Olympics-- a group of
distinguished Chinese human rights activists defied the government’s repeated warnings
and publicly expressed their dismay over the deterioration of personal freedoms and civil
liberties.
“We find no consolation or comfort,” they wrote, “in the rise of grandiose sports facilities, or a temporarily beautified Beijing city, or the prospect of Chinese athletes winning medals. We know too well how these glories are built on the ruins of the lives of ordinary people, on the forced removal of urban migrants, and on the sufferings of victims of brutal land grabbing, forced eviction, exploitation of labor, and arbitrary detention.”

In the face of increased political repression, scattered bands of Chinese bloggers, displaced urban dwellers, migrant workers, environmental activists and assorted other civil society forces also began to protest the high price in civil liberties that Beijingers were paying for the “privilege” of hosting the 2008 Olympics. Even the co-designer of Beijing’s showcase “Bird’s Nest” National Olympic Stadium, the famous Chinese sculptor/architect Ai Weiwei, vocally opposed the Beijing Olympics. In 2007, Ai famously gave film director Steven Spielberg “the finger” in a widely viewed YouTube video, after Spielberg had accepted Beijing’s invitation to serve as an artistic consultant to the Beijing Games. (show photo of Ai Weiwei)

While domestic criticism of China’s Olympic selection was a relatively new phenomenon, international criticism was not. As early as 2001, shortly after the Games were awarded to Beijing, the media group Reporters Without Borders established a dedicated website critical of Beijing’s winning Olympic bid. At the same time, the Falun Gong mounted a global media blitz in support of an Olympic boycott. Although most international human rights organizations (including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International) stopped short of endorsing a boycott movement, the approach of the 2008 Olympics saw growing, albeit sporadic, support for such a movement. The key issue contributing to the boycott movement’s added momentum in 2007 and 2008 was a growing wave of international criticism of China’s economic and military assistance to oppressive “pariah regimes” in Myanmar, Sudan and Zimbabwe. (show photos of pro-boycott posters/demonstrations)

In the final run-up to the August 2008 Games, a number of high-profile politicians and international celebrities expressed support for the boycott movement. Britain’s Prince Charles and the Vice President of the European Parliament were joined by nine Nobel Peace Prize Winners and 119 U.S. lawmakers, among others, in publicly endorsing the boycott. In doing so, they publicly linked their action to China’s continuing support for repressive military regimes in Myanmar and Sudan. Taking a lead role in the boycott movement was the American actress Mia Farrow, who denounced the Beijing Games as the “Genocide Olympics.” Under mounting pressure to endorse the boycott, director Steven Spielberg canceled his agreement to serve as artistic consultant to the Beijing Games on the grounds that the situation in Darfur made it impossible to conduct “business as usual.”

Perhaps the most tense moments in the run-up to the Olympics involved the attempt by pro-Tibetan independence groups in Paris, London, and San Francisco to disrupt the Olympic torch relay. Expressing their anger at the Chinese government’s forcible
suppression of Tibetan street demonstrations in March of 2008, the pro-Tibetan
demonstrators physically confronted torch-bearing Chinese relay runners in several
European and North American cities. In Paris, they knocked over the wheelchair of a
disabled female torch-bearer. Back in China, the reaction to such televised disturbances
was immediate-- and overwhelmingly nationalistic. The Chinese Internet came alive with
pro-Chinese, anti-Tibetan and anti-French invective. In Beijing, taxicabs sported hand-
painted signs urging patriotic citizens to boycott Carrefour—the big-box French retailer.
Some of the signs were quite creative—harkening back to the late 19th Century, when
posters had appeared in public parks in China’s treaty ports warning, “No dogs or
Chinese allowed.” In this case, however, the signs read, “No dogs or French allowed.”
(show my photo of Beijing taxi placard)

The great majority of Chinese citizens were now in the grip of “Olympic fever.” Aside
from scattered pockets of aggrieved dissidents, activists, and petitioners, Chinese pride
and patriotism were the order of the day. China was reclaiming its rightful place among
the great nations of the world; and the Chinese people were not about to brook any
interference.

The disruption of the Olympic torch relay, and the intense Chinese reaction to it, further
polarized international opinion on the proposed boycott. In Washington, President Bush
was forced to defend his decision to attend the Beijing Olympics. When asked if he
would use the Olympics as a platform for publicly lecturing Chinese leaders about human
rights, he demurred. "I am not going to … use the Olympics” he said, “as an opportunity
to express my opinions to the Chinese people in a public way, because I do it all the time
with President Hu,” in private.

A number of other prominent Western political leaders--including German Chancellor
Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy-- decided to express their
opposition to Chinese policies in Darfur, Myanmar and Tibet in a mild and indirect
fashion—not by taking part in an organized boycott, but rather by not attending the
Opening Ceremony. Take THAT, you nasty China! (Parenthetically, it would seem that
in their attempt to have it both ways on the human rights question, Merkel and Sarkozy
may have hurt themselves more than they wounded China—since the Opening Ceremony
was by all odds the most spectacular single event of the 2008 Olympics.)

As the list of prominent Olympic nay-sayers grew longer in the months preceding the
opening of the Beijing Games, China’s response to foreign criticism began to soften. In
place of the defiant displays of self-righteous indignation that marked the government’s
initial response to Western criticism, Chinese leaders began to quietly backpedal on the
issues of Sudan and Myanmar. Fearing a bandwagon effect, the chairman of the Beijing
Host Committee declared that the Chinese government had made “unremitting efforts to
resolve the Darfur question.” In a similar vein, the Foreign Ministry announced that
Chinese policy in Myanmar was one of promoting a “democratic process of
reconciliation and peace.” And the official Xinhua News agency even had kind words for
the Olympic defector Steven Spielberg, noting that “the Chinese people still love his
movies.”
Proponents of the boycott movement were unmoved by such soft-line tactics. And in the spring and early summer of 2008 international human rights groups applied mounting pressure on key corporate sponsors of the Beijing Games—such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, General Electric and Johnson & Johnson—to cancel their participation in the Games. But the major sponsors were already locked into expensive, long-term commercial advertising campaigns; consequently, not a single major corporation pulled out.

China’s more conciliatory “soft-line” approach also proved effective in countering calls for an international diplomatic boycott. In the end, not a single head of state, foreign government or national Olympic committee endorsed the boycott. Even Taiwan participated—competing, as they had every four years since 1984, under the banner of “Chinese, Taipei.” (show “March of the Athletes” from Beijing Opening Ceremony)

At precisely 8 minutes and 8 seconds past 8:00 am on the 8th day of the 8th month of 2008, the Beijing Olympics commenced—without major incident or embarrassment. In Chinese culture, the conjunction of multiple 8s is considered highly auspicious. In Hong Kong, for example, one Chinese company pays $300,000 annually just to reserve its lucky telephone number: 8888-8888).

Whether due to auspicious numerology or, more likely, to meticulous preparation and a $43 billion budget, the Beijing Olympics were nothing short of amazing—marked by spectacular pageantry, stunning displays of patriotic pride, over-the-top media hype, and simply wonderful athletic competition. For some years I had been planning to attend the Games, and was eagerly anticipating their opening. As it turned out, however, the conjunction of multiple eights brought me something less than good luck on this particular occasion.

Seven weeks before the Olympics began, I was diagnosed with a rare, aggressive type of malignancy—a leiomyosarcoma. One month later I was surgically relieved of my cancerous prostate. By the time the Games opened on August 8 I was well on the way to recovery. But in consequence of this unplanned and unwelcome medical intrusion, I found myself watching the Olympics on high-definition TV from Los Angeles.

Along with 4.7 billion other television viewers, I was blown away by the spectacularly colorful, brilliantly-choreographed display of human artistry and ingenuity that marked the Opening Ceremony. Though Steven Spielberg had pulled out as an artistic consultant, his absence was hardly noticed, as master Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou created a magical world of Chinese performance art.

As for Beijing itself, the city looked—dare I say it?—exquisite, all dressed up in its gleaming new Olympic finery. The venues were breathtaking: who could forget the dazzling design of the Bird’s Nest, or the exquisite pastel luminosity of the Water Cube? And while attendance at many individual events was surprisingly sparse, the spirit of the Games was overwhelmingly festive and exuberant. Was it worth the $43 billion dollar
price tag? I think most Chinese would say unequivocally, yes. It was their national party, their moment in the sun, and they clearly relished it.

Even the weather cooperated. Notwithstanding numerous dire warnings of an environmental debacle, after two days of thick haze just before the Opening Ceremony, Beijing’s skies magically cleared, as periods of bright sunshine and heavy rain kept airborne pollutants to tolerable levels; and for the first time in memory Beijing’s pollution index actually dropped below that of Los Angeles--by a substantial margin. Even the traffic proved manageable, thanks to mandatory odd/even-day driving restrictions. It hardly mattered that the clean air was only temporary, a product of forced industrial closures and last-minute cloud seeding by the PLA; or that the driving restrictions were lifted after the conclusion of the Games. The Olympics were a viewer’s delight.

When it was all over, and notwithstanding Michael Phelps’s record-setting 8 gold medals in swimming, the host Chinese garnered an astonishing 51 gold medals, far more than any other country. The United States finished second with 36. Gold medals aside, however, for me one of the most enduring (and endearing) moments of the 2008 Olympics was when a lingering foot injury forced China’s world record-holding high hurdler, Liu Xiang, to withdraw from competition just moments before the final race in his event. Walking slowly and dejectedly from the stadium, he kicked a wall in frustration, crying out in his agony and his anger. It was a moment of enormous poignancy.

Another memorable moment—though not nearly so poignant—occurred during the Closing Ceremony, when Chinese President Hu Jintao was caught by the TV cameras in a candid moment of intense culture shock. On stage, British rock guitarist Jimmy Page and pop diva Leona Lewis were belting out a sanitized version of Led Zeppelin’s raunchy 1969 hit song, “Whole Lotta Love.” Meanwhile, up in his VIP box, Hu Jintao, a pained look on his face, was visibly biting his lip and grimacing. His expression spoke volumes about the ongoing “clash of civilizations.”

Amidst the multi-layered glitz and glamour, there were, inevitably, a number of Olympic foul-ups, foibles and faux pas. In the government’s desire to achieve a flawless display of Chinese progress, prowess and perfection, some troubling contretemps were on display: one young girl lost her moment of immortality when a censorious Politburo member decided that she wasn’t pretty enough to appear on-stage to sing her designated number at the Opening Ceremony. A more attractive substitute was found, and the song was lip-synched.

Meanwhile, travelers to Beijing from the provinces often found their access to public transport (and to the Olympic venues themselves) blocked by overzealous security guards; consequently, tens of thousands of ticket-holders never made it to the Games, a fact which helped account for the embarrassingly sparse attendance at a number of athletic events. In many cases, whole caravans of colorfully attired office workers and school children were bused in at the last minute to fill half-empty arenas.
Of greater concern was the fact that throughout the Olympic festivities there were recurrent, visible indications of police overreaction. At least a dozen political activists were arrested after they displayed concern for human rights in Tibet; and sixteen foreign journalists were roughed up during the Games while attempting to cover demonstrations of various sorts. Numerous international websites were locally blocked for the duration of the Games; and in Beijing, intrusive security measures at several four- and five-star hotels included clandestine scanning of guests’ computer hard drives.

More disturbing still, dozens of law-abiding Chinese citizens were subjected to extreme police harassment when they applied for permits to hold peaceful demonstrations at three officially-designated free-speech locations in Beijing. After the government publicly announced the new permit system, a total of 77 applications were submitted to the Beijing municipal police. However, all but a small handful of the applications were withdrawn under duress, as the police began harshly interrogating the applicants about their political attitudes and the political activities of their friends, family members, and colleagues. The remaining applications were categorically rejected. Indeed, not a single police permit was issued during the Olympics. And at least five applicants, including two women in their late 70s, were arrested and sentenced to extra-judicial “labor re-education” simply for applying for the permits.

Most troubling of all was the curtain of total media silence that was drawn during the Olympics over an emerging crisis involving contaminated Chinese milk products. Because of the government’s overriding concern with managing its image, information about widespread melamine poisoning among Chinese children was systematically suppressed throughout the summer of 2008. As a result, tens of thousands of children were poisoned before the alarm was finally sounded after the Games’ conclusion, in mid-September. Such was the double-edged nature of Beijing’s Olympic experience that while all was harmonious and celebratory on the outside, disturbing residues of deeply-engrained authoritarian insecurity, anxiety and overreaction were clearly visible just beneath the surface.
Lecture 48: China’s Rise: “Responsible Stakeholder” or “Strategic Competitor”?

We began this course with a quotation attributed to Napoleon, cautioning the nations of the world to let the slumbering Chinese giant sleep. “For when it wakes,” he warned, “it will shake the world.” In our concluding lecture, we return to this Napoleonic prophesy.

Sixty years have passed since the Chinese Communist revolution, and thirty years since the advent of China’s pathbreaking economic reforms and “opening up.” The slumbering giant has awakened—if not yet with a full-throttled roar, then at least with an audible growl. Beijing’s leaders have repeatedly proclaimed that the intent of China’s rise is entirely peaceful. In turn, skeptical Western policymakers have challenged the waking giant to demonstrate its peaceful intentions by becoming a “responsible stakeholder” in the international arena. In concluding this course, we focus on the $64,000 question of China’s future trajectory as a major international actor.

In a nutshell, the crucial question facing us—and China—is this: Will a more mature, modernized, and self-confident China be a cooperative partner or a strategic adversary in the 21st Century? For more than three decades, American foreign policy has been predicated on the desirability of encouraging China’s entry into the global community of nations, with the expectation (which was actually more of a hope) that a globally engaged China would be a less hostile, less dogmatic and more “civilized” China.

How well has this relatively optimistic scenario of China’s “peaceful evolution” fared to date? There is no simple answer. Expert opinion remains deeply divided. On the one hand, China’s rise has been marked by a generally cautious and non-confrontational approach to important international issues. With the sole major exception of the Taiwan question, on which Chinese policy remains generally rigid and unyielding, the PRC has displayed pragmatism and flexibility in world politics since 1980. Among other things, China has:

- Become a responsible member of the World Trade Organization.
- Displayed great restraint in exercising its veto power as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. To give just two examples, China has supported US-sponsored resolutions mandating UN nuclear weapons inspections in both Iraq and Iran.
- Since the early 1990s China has also supported international nuclear non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, and anti-drug trafficking initiatives.
- Since the late 1990s, China has contributed to at least 15 U.N. peacekeeping operations in such places as Cambodia, Haiti, East Timor, Lebanon, Congo, and most recently, Sudan.
Since 2002, China has taken the lead in organizing, hosting and sustaining the six-party talks on North Korean nuclear disarmament.

In the last ten years China has become an active, cooperating partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in a grouping known as “Asian +3”.

Entered into negotiations to resolve longstanding territorial disputes with several of its neighbors, including Russia, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Nepal, and India.

Most recently, in 2009 China dispatched three naval vessels to join the international anti-piracy task force off the coast of Somalia.

This is an impressive record of increasing multilateral cooperation. On the other hand, Beijing’s relentless drive to reunify the “renegade province” of Taiwan, by force if necessary, has at times appeared to belie its leaders’ oft-repeated claim of a “peaceful rise.” With more than 1,100 short-range ballistic missiles aimed at Taiwan, and with a defense budget that has been increasing annually at double-digit rates for the past two decades, Beijing’s ultimate military intentions are a source of growing international concern. Other causes for concern include:

A periodically rising tide of virulent Chinese nationalism, which is widely visible in Internet chatrooms, blogs, and mobile text-messages, and which is primarily directed against Japan and the United States.

A growing and seemingly insatiable Chinese appetite for natural resources and raw materials, resources which are often obtained by striking preferential “sweetheart” deals with illiberal regimes in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

A non-convertable, chronically undervalued Chinese currency, the yuan, has enabled hundreds of billions of dollars worth of low-cost, labor-intensive Chinese exports to flood world markets each year.

Beijing’s willingness to ignore (or downplay) egregious human rights violations in pursuing its diplomatic and commercial interests in such chronic “pariah” states as Burma, Zimbabwe and Sudan.

Finally, mention should be made of China’s less than sterling record on human rights, including periodic crackdowns on popular protest in Tibet and Xinjiang, tight control and censorship of the Internet, and the repressive treatment of domestic political activists and dissidents.
Such concerns are very real, and should not be discounted; yet they do not add up to an inevitable adversarial relationship between China and ourselves, as some have argued. And here is why:

For the past three decades, a slow and gradual, indeed almost invisible process of international accommodation and convergence has been quietly underway in China. Cumulatively, the results have quite remarkable. Among other significant changes, China has totally abandoned its revolutionary Maoist credo; accepted the principles of a free-market economy; joined the prevailing Western finance and trade regime; revalued its currency; and quietly improved its record as a “responsible stakeholder” in the international community. In each of these respects, China’s behavioral adjustments have been real and substantial, adding up to a major sea change in the Chinese world view, or Weltanschauung.

The fact that there remain significant differences of national interest and orientation between China and the West is hardly surprising. Whenever a dynamic, rising power seeks a larger niche in a world dominated by a single, status quo-defending superpower, a certain amount of friction is inevitable. Such friction is manifested in numerous ways—including mounting competition for resources and raw materials; mutual suspicion of the “other’s” military intentions; passage of legislation designed to protect domestic products and jobs against foreign competition; differing strategic definitions of “vital” international concerns; and a general tendency to view the “other” as a threat to one’s own peace and security.

Such friction is not illusory; it is real. But it need not be unduly alarming. For the true art of positive diplomacy lies not in suppressing or denying divergent national priorities, interests, and expectations, but rather in learning to live with them—seeking common ground where possible, agreeing to disagree where not possible, and contesting where necessary.

A recent projection by Goldman-Sachs suggests that the Chinese economy, measured in terms of total, aggregate purchasing power, is likely to surpass the U.S. economy some time around 2025. However, Chinese per-capita income and per capita GDP—currently around ten times lower than America’s—will remain substantially below ours throughout the present century. Militarily, the gap is expected to close somewhat faster. In 2004 the Pentagon estimated that Chinese military technology was about 15 to 20 years behind that of the United States, with the U.S. lead gradually shrinking as China accelerates its selective acquisition of advanced weapons systems, including aircraft carriers and mid-air refueling capability. The most recent estimates of time-to-parity have been revised further downward, with some analysts now suggesting that between 2015 and 2020 the United States will lose its theater military superiority in the Western Pacific, thus in effect rendering Taiwan vulnerable to Chinese attack. Moreover, Chinese techniques of cyber-warfare have become quite sophisticated of late, as they search for ways to neutralize U.S. electronic communications in the event of a looming military conflict.
These are troubling tendencies and projections. Yet, by focusing exclusively on China’s rapidly growing economic, military and cyber-warfare capacity, we risk begging the vital question of China’s actual intentions. Here the picture is more reassuring; for apart from the Taiwan case (which China continues to treat as a purely domestic matter) there is no empirical evidence to suggest that Beijing harbors aggressive designs on any other foreign country. On the contrary, Beijing has, since the early 1980s, behaved with considerable caution and restraint in exercising its rising diplomatic and military clout.

Might they simply be biding their time, staying out of harm’s way until they feel more confident of their ability to confront American military power? Conceivably, yes. Indeed, Deng Xiaoping, at the time of his retirement in 1989, instructed his chosen successor, Jiang Zemin, to “avoid excessive provocation, assume a low profile, and don't take the lead” in international affairs. But—again with the exception of the Taiwan issue--there is no hard evidence to support the notion that Chinese leaders are quietly preparing for an inevitable military showdown with the United States.

With few exceptions, China’s behavior in world politics over the past quarter century has tended to converge with, rather than diverge from, conventional norms and standards of international diplomacy. To borrow former US Undersecretary of State Robert Zoellick’s famous phrase, first coined in 2005, China has embarked on the road to becoming a “responsible stakeholder” in global affairs. Such a long-term trend should, I think, be reckoned as a cause for cautious optimism about the future.

We should not, however, expect even a substantially convergent and cooperative China indefinitely to take a back seat to unilateral American power, influence and interests. As China continues to rise, it will inevitably be drawn to probe the limits of American regional and global dominance and to “spread its wings” as an independent actor in world politics. As much as Americans may resist the idea of sharing the global stage with an energetic, self-confident Chinese “peer competitor,” such an accommodation will simply have to be made. The only alternative is a new Cold War—and the very real possibility of a hot one. In this respect it is America, rather than China, that faces the more daunting challenge —the challenge of gracefully accepting the eventual, inevitable diminution of its own unipolar global dominance.

In all this, considerable patience and understanding will be required. Demonizing China will prove counterproductive. For example, blaming China’s undervalued currency, the yuan, for our own prolonged national orgy of over-consumption and deficit spending will not help; neither will imposing punitive trade sanctions on China for “unfair competition”-- while we ourselves continue to protect and subsidize politically influential sectors of the American economy. To be sure, China has engaged in questionable trade practices (including flagrant copyright piracy); moreover, its domestic record on human rights and political reform remains a sorry one; and Beijing’s recurrent threats to reunify Taiwan by force have rightly been decried as bullying. But tectonic plates are shifting.

Between 2005 and 2008, China re-valued its currency by over twenty percent, thereby defusing a great deal of American and European criticism. And since the spring of 2005
Beijing has refrained from threatening military action against Taiwan, appealing instead to the common economic and cultural aspirations of the Chinese and Taiwanese people. In carrying out this peaceful initiative, Beijing enjoyed the tacit support of the Bush administration in Washington.

By the middle of his first term, President Bush had become visibly annoyed with Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian for the latter’s repeated attempts to “push the envelope” of Taiwanese independence—attempts that succeeded mainly in provoking threats of devastating military response from Beijing. In an indirect warning to Chen Shui-bian, President Bush in December of 2003 openly cautioned the Taiwanese president that the United States “opposes any unilateral decision …to change the status quo…in the Taiwan Strait.” Visibly pleased with Mr. Bush’s show of resistance to Taiwanese independence, Beijing’s leaders began to leave it to the Americans to apply the necessary pressure to restrain Chen Shui-bian.

In this situation of increasing Sino-American comity, the election of a new, reconciliation-minded Taiwanese President, Ma Ying-jeou, in March of 2008, appeared to usher in a period of greater cross-strait relaxation, restraint, and mutual accommodation. By the spring of 2009 preliminary negotiations to establish the long-delayed “three links” in cross-Strait relations had been completed, and for the first time since 1949 direct commercial flights, postal service, and freight transport were restored between Taiwan and the Chinese Mainland.

(As a footnote to these developments, in April of 2009 I was privileged to participate in a refreshingly candid and unscripted Question and Answer session with President Ma Ying-jeou in Taipei. I had first met Mr. Ma when he was mayor of Taipei ten years earlier. On that previous occasion I had been deeply impressed with Ma’s intelligence, his thoughtfulness, and his appreciation for the danger of unnecessary cross-Strait provocation. These initial impressions were strongly reinforced in our recent meeting, in which Ma strongly emphasized his commitment to working closely with all parties to reduce cross-Strait tensions. I came away from the meeting feeling considerably reassured about Taiwan’s future.)

Although China’s leaders have by no means given up on their long-term desire to reunify Taiwan, for the time being, at least, they have shifted their principal tactics away from hard threats of military attack, emphasizing instead the application of economic and cultural “soft power.”

In this situation, the onset of a severe global economic recession in the latter half of 2008 presented a fresh challenge to policy-makers in both Beijing and Washington. In China, foreign demand for Chinese-made consumer goods dropped sharply, forcing tens of thousands of factories along China’s eastern seaboard to shut down, and leaving upwards of twenty million workers, mostly rural emigrants, unemployed and without an adequate social safety net. In many cases, factory owners simply padlocked their gates and skipped town without notice, leaving their workers unpaid and angry. In Dongguan, a major coastal production center near Guangzhou, almost half of the city’s 3,800 toy
manufacturers went out of business in the winter of 2009. By the spring of the year, unofficial estimates placed China’s urban unemployment rate at around 10 percent--more than double the government’s official figure.

Powerful ripples from the economic downturn also affected home owners, stockholders, and recent Chinese college graduates--more than one million of whom were unable to find work after graduation. And in tens of thousands of villages across China, a steep decline in cash remittances from emigrant family members added to the economic worries of the rural poor. Meanwhile, projections of China’s GDP growth slid steadily downward in 2009, from 12 percent to 8 percent, with some analysts predicting year-end real growth of only 6 percent.

For years the conventional wisdom among economists has held that given China’s extreme polarization of wealth, inadequate welfare net, and oversupply of unskilled labor, a GDP growth rate of less than 7 or 8 percent annually would produce a sharp increase in the likelihood of political unrest. PRC leaders have not been unaware of such risk. In an effort to jump-start China’s ailing economy, the central government in December 2008 announced a US$600 billion stimulus package designed to raise public spending on infrastructure projects and social welfare. To put more money into circulation, central bank regulators lowered interest rates and instructed local branch managers to lend more money to small and medium-size firms struggling to survive in the face of reduced exports. At the same time, local governments in some areas handed out cash vouchers to new car shoppers and home buyers. And in January 2009, Beijing unveiled a three-year, US$123 billion program to build a network of rural hospitals and clinics and to provide rudimentary national health insurance.

Notwithstanding this impressive and classically Keynesian stimulus package, the potential for political instability remained worrisome. With unemployment rising and exports, GDP growth, property values, and share prices all falling, government spokesmen bluntly warned that the country was entering a period of increased hazard. “Without doubt,” said one official, commenting in the January 2009 issue of the authoritative Outlook magazine, “Chinese society in 2009 will face even more conflicts and clashes that will test the ruling capacity of the Party and government at all levels.”

To guard against spreading unrest, Chinese leaders stepped up their security precautions. Tibet was sealed off to tourists and journalists, and a fresh clampdown on liberal bloggers, investigative reporters, political dissidents, and civil society activists was vigorously--and at times violently--enforced.

Adding to the political stress was the conjunction in 2009 of several important political anniversaries, including the fiftieth anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan rebellion, thirtieth anniversary of the closure of Democracy Wall, twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown, and tenth anniversary of the persecution of the Falun Gong. With political anniversaries offering convenient occasions for organized protest, Chinese authorities were not inclined to leave anything to chance. In anticipation of rising turbulence, the CCP early in 2009 created an elite national task force to oversee security preparations
during the anniversary year. To underline the task force’s importance, it was placed under the overall command of Vice President Xi Jinping, widely regarded as the presumptive heir apparent to Hu Jintao.

As the global recession continued to deepen in 2009, no one could confidently predict just when, or how, it would end. But one thing was clear: For better or worse, the fates of Beijing and Washington were intertwined more closely than ever. Holding more than $700 billion in U.S. Treasury bills, along with a roughly equal amount of other dollar-denominated U.S. debt instruments, China is by far the United States’ largest creditor, while the United States is China’s largest debtor. Locked into financial codependency, the two countries are, in effect, joined at the hip.

In such a situation, neither side can take comfort from the other’s misfortunes. No longer an impotent, exotic “other,” China has become an important part of our own everyday world. Adjusting to this new and clearly discomforting reality, and to the compelling fact of China’s rise as a global power, will sorely test our own capacity—and China’s— to restrain narrow nationalistic impulses and to seek instead cooperative solutions to the shared problems of a shrinking planet.

And so, as we approach the end of this lecture series, we return to the question posed at the outset concerning China’s future trajectory. When fully awake, will the long-slumbering Chinese giant be friend or foe?

Our answer has of necessity been equivocal and conditional. While present trends are generally positive, we simply cannot be sure about the future. There are too many unknowns, too many sources of potential friction. At the end of the day, there is rather little we can do to guarantee a peaceful, cooperative China. That is mostly a job for the Chinese themselves. What we can do is to help to make their task a bit easier, their choices a bit more comfortable, their path a bit less rocky.

To encourage China to continue moving in the desired direction will take time and patience, as well as a strong determination to regenerate our own severely eroded “soft power.” Regaining squandered moral leadership in the world will not be easy. And even if we are on our very best international behavior, there are no guarantees that China will respond as we wish it to. Chinese progress on such things as rule of law, governmental transparency, human rights and political tolerance has been painfully slow, at best.

After four-decades as a dedicated “China Watcher,” my own feelings about China are thoroughly mixed, a jumble of contradictory attitudes and impulses. Some days I wake up with great hopes for this dynamic, restless country, with its incredibly resilient, industrious people. There is much to admire in the indomitable spirit of ordinary Chinese, the “laobaixing.” Economically and socially, they have come incredibly far, incredibly fast. After enduring untold historical hardships and humiliations, these modern bearers of an ancient, once-proud culture are searching once again for their place in the sun. I hope they find it; and I hope we are able to help.
But there are other days as well—days when I awake filled with despair at the web of official arrogance, corruption and deceit that enshrouds local officialdom, days when I can only shake my head at the Communist Party’s near-pathological fear of unauthorized political expression. There is something profoundly disturbing about a regime that routinely suppresses journalists who ask inconvenient questions, farmers who demand inconvenient rights, and intellectuals who tell inconvenient truths.

Still, in my more far-sighted moments I see a clear, if unsteady light at the end of the tunnel. I see a civil society beginning to flourish; I see people beginning to question authority; farmers standing up to corrupt officials; migrant workers demanding their legal rights; an urban middle class experiencing the mundane, everyday satisfactions of home ownership, mall shopping and vacation travel. I even see some members of the next generation of Communist Party leaders beginning to speak out—albeit timidly and tentatively—on the need for political pluralism and power-sharing.

Social scientists have found that when authoritarian countries reach an income threshold of between US$6,000-$8,000 per-capita, there is a relatively high probability that they will introduce -- and more importantly, sustain-- democratic political reforms. Below that income threshold democratic transitions, while not unknown, are seldom viable or stable. Thus, for example, Taiwan reached the $6,000 threshold in the late 1980s, while South Korea reached it in the early 1990s. Both countries have successfully transitioned from dictatorship to democracy.

Assuming that China emerges more-or-less in tact from the prolonged global recession of 2008-09, the PRC can be expected to reach the $6000 per-capita income threshold within the next decade. Barring unforeseen catastrophe, and given China’s continued global engagement, as well as continuity in its market-friendly economic policies, it would not be unreasonable to expect to see a more politically open and pluralistic China emerge by around the year 2020. We should all wish China well in this respect, for a more open and pluralistic China will in all likelihood be a more “responsible stakeholder” in the global community. So let us watch….and wait…. and hope….

End of Part III