

# China 1911-90

China is a very large country with a huge population. Nearly one in every four human beings is Chinese. It underwent frequent and substantial changes during the course of the twentieth century.

## CHINA IN 1900



For many centuries China was cut off from the rest of the world. This was partly because China is surrounded by mountains, jungle, deserts or oceans. Except for the Japanese, the Chinese met few other peoples. To them, China was everything. In fact, the word 'China' means 'the earth' or 'the world'. It was visited by few foreigners and largely ignored.

## The people

There had been a great increase in the population of China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – from 100 million in 1700 to 400 million in 1900. At the top of Chinese society was a small select group of highly educated officials, large landowners and rich merchants. At the bottom were the poor – the peasants who made up 80% of the population. Most of them lived in villages, owned a little land and kept a pig and a few chickens. For the peasants, life was a constant struggle. In 1930, for example, the average peasant holding was under four acres in size. The rising population made this shortage of land worse.

Half, or even three-quarters, of the crops had to go to the landlord as rent. Then there were taxes to pay. Money-lenders took advantage of the peasants, charging high interest rates. If the crops failed, the peasant would not be able to meet these bills. He would have to sell all he owned, even his wife and children. In a really bad year, millions died.

## SOURCE A

A Chinese peasant describes his lifestyle in J. Myrdal, *Report from a Chinese Village*

*We have always been farmers. But we do not have our own land. We rented it for three generations from the landlords, Wang. Landlords did not eat as we others did. They ate meat and vegetables every day. He was very hard. People hated the landlords, but there was no way of getting round them. 'As long as we have our daily food we are satisfied', people said. 'We must do what our masters say. They own the land and the oxen'. Everybody owed him money. As long as you owed him money you could not get permission to leave the village in order to look for a better landlord. The landlords ate up people's work. They ate and we worked.*

The peasants of China were used to this poverty and did not think of change. They were ruled by custom and tradition. Women were inferior and had no rights. They had to be completely obedient to their fathers or husbands.

## The Government

China was ruled by an emperor, living in Peking. Since the seventeenth century, the emperors had all come from the Manchu dynasty. They had conquered China and made every Chinese person wear their hair in a pigtail, Manchu-style, as a sign of conquest.

Under the emperors, the work of governing China was carried out by the Mandarins. These were educated, upper-class Chinese. They also believed in custom and tradition and were against change. They studied the writings of Confucius, who said that in the past everything was good, and that therefore all change is bad. The Mandarins made sure that the laws were obeyed.

Power in China was in the hands of a small group of landlords, Mandarins and the Emperor, which made up about 10% of the population. They resisted change and lived by traditions which were more and more out of date.

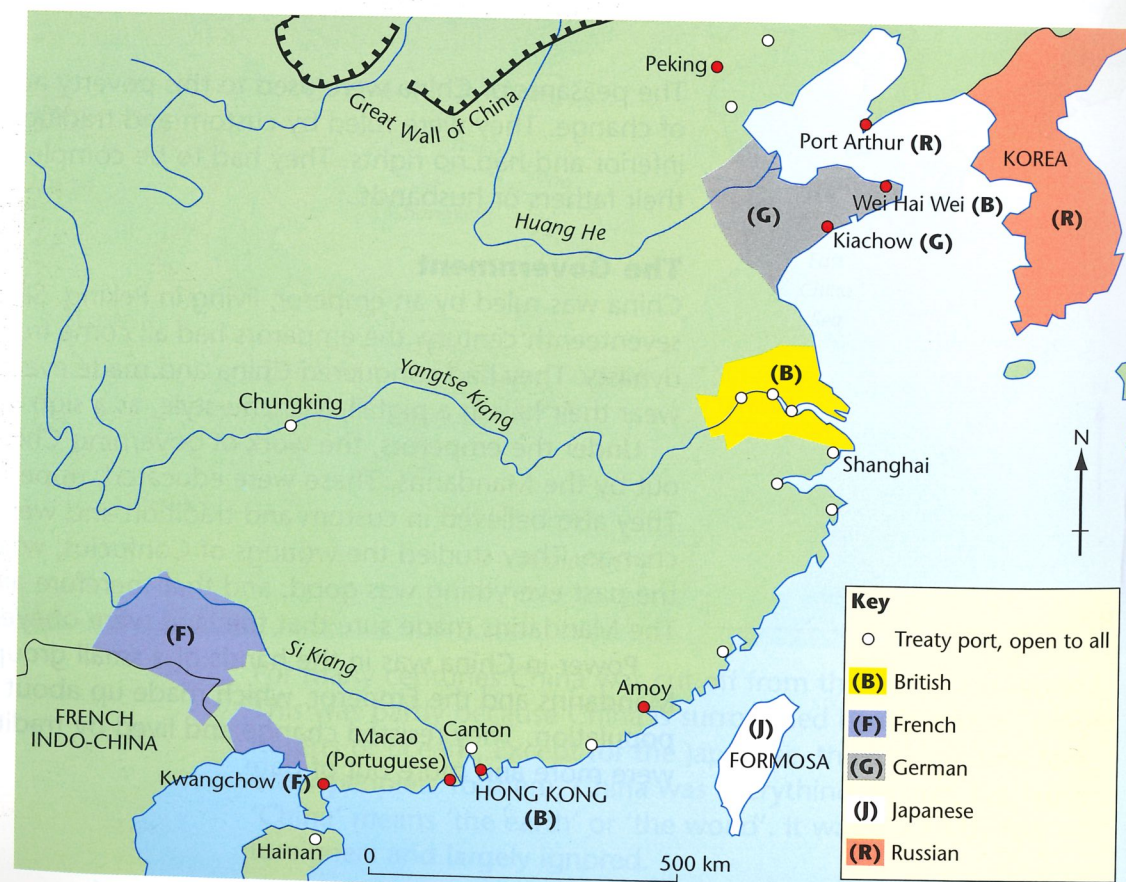


# SOURCE B

The Empress, Tzu Hsi



## Foreign influence



# SOURCE C

A favourite song of revolutionary students in the late 1890s

We are only afraid of being like India, unable to defend our land.  
We Chinese have no part in this China of ours.  
This dynasty exists only in name!  
Being slaves of the foreigners,  
They force us common people to call them masters.

From the 1840s onwards the European powers took advantage of the weakness of China and started to divide the country among themselves. These countries developed factories and produced goods which the Chinese could not match. European countries wanted to trade with China, and sell them industrial goods. At first the Chinese refused but Britain and then other countries forced the Chinese to trade. By 1900 many parts of China were really controlled by foreigners. These were known as 'Treaty Ports'. Soon the European countries controlled most of China's key industries.

The emperors were powerless to stop them. Their old-fashioned weapons were no match for European guns and warships. China's final humiliation at the hands of foreigners came in 1895 when the emperor was defeated in war by Japan. After this defeat, China could no longer claim to be the strongest power in Asia.

## The Boxer Rebellion, 1900

The Chinese, who had thought themselves superior for so long, were angry. In one city controlled by foreigners, there was a sign at the entrance to a park:

'CHINESE AND DOGS NOT ADMITTED'

The foreigners were hated and one of China's many secret societies, the Boxers, organised a rising to get rid of foreigners. The Boxers killed 200 foreign missionaries and 30,000 Chinese. The European powers acted quickly and sent in an international police force which crushed the Boxers.

# SOURCE D

A Boxer print. Christians are shown as pigs. The goats represent Westerners.





### Activity

You are a British person living in China just after the Boxer Rebellion. Write a letter to your family in Britain describing China. You could include:

- The government.
- Peasants and poverty.
- Foreign influence and the Boxer Rebellion.

This setback led to further criticism of the Manchus. For years, educated Chinese had argued that the cause of China's weakness was her outdated government. Now, under pressure, the Empress, Tzu Hsi, decided to introduce various reforms. The education system, the civil service and the army were all improved. There were even plans to set up a parliament. The days for reform had passed. An entirely new system of government seemed the only answer to China's problems.

### Questions

- 1 Explain the following:
  - a Manchu dynasty.
  - b Mandarins.
  - c the growth of foreign influence.
- 2 What can you learn from Source A about peasant grievances?
- 3 Which is the more useful source to an historian studying the attitude of the Chinese to foreign influence, Source C or Source D?

### CHINA 1911-28

In 1911 the Emperor was overthrown and a republic set up which was controlled by a series of warlords.

#### SOURCE A

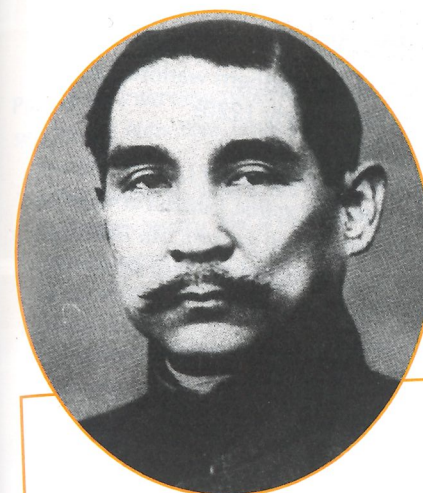
This woodcut, 'The Starving People Seize the Grain', shows hungry peasants attacking a landlord



#### Sun Yat-sen and the revolution of 1911

This was due to several reasons:

- 1 Hatred of foreign influence and control.
- 2 The failure of the emperor and the Mandarins to reform the government of China.
- 3 The death of the old Empress, Tzu Hsi, in 1908. She was replaced by her nephew, Pu Yi, who was only three years old. This was followed by three years of poor harvests, droughts, floods and rising taxes. There was a wave of peasant riots between 1909 and 1911.
- 4 The influence of Sun Yat-sen. He was trained as a doctor and had travelled outside China – to Britain, France and the USA. His ideas for the future of China were based on his 'Three Principles':
  - *Nationalism* The Manchu emperors and foreigners should be driven out of China.
  - *Democracy* China should be ruled by a president and a parliament, elected by the people.
  - *Socialism* The government should take over all businesses, all transport and all farms. These should be modernised so that everyone had a good standard of living.



#### Profile on

Sun Yat-sen, 1866-1925

Sun Yat-sen was the son of a peasant family. He knew what it was like to spend hours in the rice fields trying to grow enough to eat. His life changed when his brother, who had emigrated to Hawaii, invited Sun over to join him. In Hawaii, Sun received an education from English missionaries. He learned all about how England was governed, with a Parliament and laws and compared this with the emperor and mandarins of China. When his education was finished he returned to China and began to criticise the outdated government and society. In 1894 he began to work as a doctor in Canton, a city in southern China. However, he also worked for revolution and when his first attempt failed in 1895 he fled to Tokyo, the capital of Japan.

In 1894 he set up the Revive China Society. During the next few years Sun went abroad and organised a series of unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the Manchus. While abroad he spread his ideas among educated Chinese in speeches and newspapers. Sun even visited China many times under a false name and using a forged Japanese passport.

Sun's supporters were working towards revolution in 1911 when their plans were discovered, but they decided to go ahead anyway. This was known as the 'Double Tenth' as it took place on the tenth day of the tenth month – 10 October 1911. Military headquarters at Wuchang were seized. Within a month, 15 of China's 18 provinces had rebelled in support of the revolution. A republic was declared on 29 December. All over China, people cut off their pigtails, the hated mark of Manchu rule. Sun Yat-sen was in the USA at the time but hurried back to become the first President.

#### Yuan Shi-kai

Unfortunately, Sun was not supported by the mass of Chinese people, who did not know what was going on. Furthermore the northern provinces, near Peking, had stayed loyal to the Manchus. Sun's supporters were few in number as only a few Chinese were educated. In a final effort to save the dynasty, the Manchus had handed over power to a powerful local general named Yuan Shi-kai. In order to avoid war, Sun offered to give up the presidency to Yuan if Yuan could force the Emperor to give up the throne. Yuan accepted. On 12 February 1912 the Emperor abdicated. Three days later, Yuan became President of the Republic of China.

China's new government was supposed to be a democracy with an elected parliament. It was expected that Sun's old revolutionary party, now named the Kuomintang (or Nationalist Party), would have most of the say. Yuan, however, ignored parliament and terrorised the Kuomintang. In desperation Sun's followers staged a 'second revolution' to overthrow Yuan. It failed and Yuan now ruled as a dictator.

#### The impact of the First World War

The First World War had a great effect on China and nationalism. This was due to events during and soon after the war.

In 1915 Japan presented China with a list of Twenty-One Demands. These proposed to give Japan control of much of China's industry. China also had to accept Japanese advisers to help run the affairs of the country. The Chinese were shocked. Yuan was able to get some of the demands dropped but had to accept others. Once more China had been humiliated by the foreigners. Yuan was blamed for giving way and had to give up his plans to become emperor. In 1916 he died a 'broken-hearted man'.

Yuan's death was followed by chaos. Real power fell into the hands of the various generals or warlords who ran the provinces and were always fighting each other. Robberies, killings and lootings became everyday events. As a result of these events, in Chinese history the years 1917 to about 1928 are known as the 'warlord era'.



### SOURCE B

From Han Suyin, *The Morning Deluge*, 1972

China was shredded by warlord wars. The peasants and labourers paid for these feudal wars in grain levies and very high taxes, for armies had to be paid and fed, and only China's peasantry – 80% of the population – could do it. Armies also need recruits and only the peasantry could supply them. In some areas men were press-ganged while working the fields. In Szechuan provinces taxes were raised seventy years in advance.

### SOURCE C

A peasant recalls the visit of the northern warlord, Hu Tsung-nan, to his village in the early 1920s

When Hu Tsung-nan came, almost everyone left Liu Ling. We went up into the hills. I was in the people's militia (citizen's army) then. We had buried all our possessions and all our corn. Hu Tsung-nan destroyed everything and his troops ate and ate. They discovered our grain stores and they stole cattle.

### SOURCE E

Part of an interview given by Sun Yat-sen to the *New York Times* in 1923

The real trouble is China is not an independent country. She is the victim of foreign countries. If the foreign countries leave us alone, China will have her affairs in shape within six months. The Peking Government could not stand twenty-four hours without the backing it receives from foreign governments.

In 1917 China entered the First World War on the Allied side in the hope that, once peace came, the foreign powers would give up some of their Chinese territories. In 1914 Japan had captured Shantung from Germany. China wanted Japan expelled from Shantung. In 1919, news arrived from Paris that the peace-makers would allow Japan to keep Shantung. To make matters worse, the warlord government in Peking had agreed to Japan's claim as part of a secret deal for a loan.

### The May 4th Movement

The First World War and Japanese gains upset many Chinese. A storm of protest known as the May 4th Demonstrations, swept China in 1919. Demonstrations, strikes and boycotts of Japanese goods were held in all the major cities, including Peking. The

government was forced to dismiss three 'traitor ministers' and the Chinese representatives in Paris refused to sign the peace treaty.

The May 4th Movement was a turning point in China's history:

- For the first time students, workers, teachers and merchants had combined in a national movement.
- It showed that the Chinese were beginning to care what happened to their country.
- It also showed the even greater resentment of foreign control of their country.
- It gradually brought the Chinese people to think and act together.

### SOURCE D

Student slogans of the May 4th Movement

DON'T FORGET  
OUR NATIONAL  
HUMILIATION

THROW OUT  
THE WARLORD  
TRAITORS

BOYCOTT  
FOREIGN  
GOODS

### The Kuomintang (also known as Guomindang)

Meanwhile, the Bolshevik Revolution had taken place in Russia in 1917 (p. 416). Sun Yat-sen had been disappointed that Britain and the USA had failed to support him. He admired the Russian Communists and asked them for advice.

Sun had been working in southern China trying to gain a base from which the Kuomintang could operate, but progress was slow. Twice Sun had set up a government in Canton (1917–18, 1920–22) and twice he had been driven out by local warlords. Sun needed a strong army. Only then could he hope to defeat the warlords and unite China under his control.

Finally, in 1923, Sun turned to Russia for help. Russia agreed:

- They trained Sun's soldiers, setting up a military academy at Whampoa.
- They provided arms, money and supplies.
- They set up a small Chinese Communist Party.

Sun was not a Communist but he worked with them and allowed Communists to join the Kuomintang. This was now reorganised and strengthened and ready to carry out a revolution to overthrow the warlords. Suddenly, in 1925 Sun died. He was succeeded by a young general named Chiang Kai-shek.

### Chiang Kai-shek and civil war



Chiang Kai-shek can be seen here on the left