

# **How China Became a Powerful Nation**

*By Josh Yohe*

The rise of China is one of unique nature. The country of China is constantly trying to be seen as an important player in the global stage. China is an enigma, as it is one of the few countries that was a great nation and fell but has risen once again. However, to understand where China gained its power, and where China plans to take the power they have in modern times, we must examine the China of the past.

Ancient China's first, but possibly mythical, dynasty was the Xia Dynasty (c.2070-c.1600 B.C.) and was followed by the Shang Dynasty (c.1600-1046 B.C.), which provided the first written record that we still have. It was in the succeeding Zhou Dynasty (c.1045-c.221 B.C.) that the base of Chinese religion was started. These two major dynasties provided the bases for politics and religion, two heavily intertwined aspects of China and most Eastern Asian countries.

Under the Zhou Dynasty, China went from tribal societies to feudal societies. Europe and Western Asia wouldn't experience the same feudal system on a major scale for another 1,000 years. Change came, however, under Qin Shi Huang, the emperor during the Qin Dynasty. The Chinese empire at this time became a unified state, subservient to a ruler bent on keeping himself in control.

Emperor Qin Shi Huang centralized the power and set up laws to govern China. Economically, he set up a system of measures and a unified writing system. However, this dynasty was short lived and the next dynasty, Han, would be one of China's most powerful dynasties.

Under the Han dynasty, China determined to expand its trading power by starting the Silk Road. This dynasty set up a more bureaucratic government while utilizing Confucianism. The Han dynasty saw an early agricultural revolution, and commerce between Asiatic countries boomed. However, like most empires, the powerful Chinese empire fell around A.D. 220 and would not be united again for another 300 years.

In A.D. 581, Yang Jian came to power, took the name of Emperor Wen, and united all of China. His Sui dynasty was short, yet its impact was seen for centuries. The most lasting impact that Emperor Wen instituted was the imperial examination system to weed out the talented people from the untalented for government positions. His government reforms were implemented by most Chinese dynasties thereafter. During the same time, Europe had just receded into the Dark Ages and major European countries were not even founded. The United States would not have a merit-based bureaucratic position for another 1,300 years.

The conquering Mongol empire stretched from Europe to the edge of Eastern Asia, and this unified empire brought the wealth of China into the European traders' sight. Marco Polo travelled China extensively during this time and wrote of his adventures in China. He described it as far more advanced than Europe, leading in social reform, trade, production, and much more. He saw a postal system, paper books, and paper money. He reported that "There are very great merchants here, who trade on a great scale." His reports brought increased European trade to China.

The Qing Dynasty began around the 1640s and lasted until 1912, when the Republic of China was established. During the Qing Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty, European colonial powers began to take coastal areas and enforce their ideals and belief systems in the surrounding areas. It was during this dynasty that the modern boundaries of China began to take shape. With the rise of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, China was only further broken up and destroyed by civil war. From 1912 to 1945, many millions of Chinese were killed, either by warring Chinese factions or by invading powers. The power struggle would be resolved when Communist Mao Zedong took control of China.

Under Communist rule, China began to decline on the world stage economically and politically. Khrushchev viewed the Chinese leadership as "madmen" who wanted to unleash a nuclear war, and their constant internal struggle held them back from succeeding globally. Mao's reform plans, the Great Leap Forward and his Cultural Revolution, only destroyed any hope the Chinese had for success in the post-WWII era. The failure of the Great Leap forward, further exiled China from their Communist counterpart, Russia. The failure of his plan also lowered his status within the party, and multiple leaders began to run the different aspects of China. After Mao and the others passed, Deng Xiaoping took control and began to normalize relations with the United States and Europe. However, when Chinese students organized a protest against the government at Tiananmen Square in an effort to bring democracy back to China, Xiaoping ordered the army to end the protest with force.

Many of the Chinese leaders following the fall of Mao and Xiaoping had family members effected by the Cultural Revolution. Many of them remembered their family hardships and implemented that remembrance into how they ruled. Hu Jintao, who led China from 2002 to 2013, promoted his "Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces." Some of these maxims included "Serving the People is honorable, neglecting the People is disgraceful; Unity and cooperation are honorable, using others for profit is disgraceful; Honesty and keeping one's word are honorable, seeing personal gain and forgetting justice is disgraceful; Suffering for the struggle is honorable, conceit and lasciviousness are disgraceful." He strove for the Chinese people to work together to rebuild the nation but didn't want them to succeed at a level that could challenge the status quo. His successor, however, had a completely different plan in mind.

Xi Jinping, who has been leading China since 2013, is viewed as an economic liberal but a political conservative. He encouraged the country to become wealthy through hard work. However, instead of allowing for a more democratic approach to ruling, he—like those before him—wanted to control the power of China with just one man.

So how did China become a powerful nation? There is no quick answer to this question. Like most countries, it took time to form a system of government that would create a powerful, prosperous nation. Yet China was a powerful, prosperous, bureaucratic nation many centuries before Europe or the Americas were. Hence, did they become powerful centuries ago? Yes. Did they ever truly lose their power? No. During the Post WWII Communist regime in China their power internally waned, but ultimately, they expanded in territory and growth.

Since they never lost their power, why is China only now being seen as a powerful nation? Because a nation's power is objective. The United States saw them as a major threat and tried to limit them from being seen as a world power. Yet while China was seen as a major power and threat to capitalistic freedom, the U.S. began to normalize relations with them and showed the world that they were a powerful nation.

Once the Cold War ended, the world finally began to recognize that China was powerful, even though China was already powerful. China has begun to further its power in more recent times by joining in the War on Terror and the fight against ISIS. However, more controversial moves like building artificial islands within disputed territory, violating human rights, and supporting North Korea proved to the world that they will work and do what they want. Some might say that it was China's buying up the U.S. debt that made it a powerful nation, yet they have been buying U.S. debt for decades and are only now becoming a more powerful opponent. China did benefit from the United States' reopening trade ties with China, allowing for their economy to quickly grow, and they have since become the largest trading nation.

So how did China become a powerful nation? China got its power in two ways. The first way is its people. As the people work together, they achieve greater internal power, and those people will work together as long as they do not feel oppressed. The second reason is the world. When other nations of the world recognized China as a major power and began shifting foreign policy to deal with them, it basically certified their place on the world stage and allowed them to continue their own expanding world policy. China became powerful hundreds of years ago, however, they are only now considered powerful because the world decided they should be.

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