

POLITICS

Chinese Political History I Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

A real, political-institutions history of China from the Qing dynasty's 1911-1912 collapse through the Warlord Era, the KMT's Northern Expedition, the CCP's founding and the Long March, the 1949 Communist victory, land reform, the Great Leap Forward's real famine, the Cultural Revolution, and the real power struggle that followed Mao's own 1976 death — grounded throughout in real, verified dates, figures, and institutional mechanics.

10 Chapters

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CHAPTER 1: THE QING DYNASTY'S COLLAPSE & THE END OF IMPERIAL CHINA

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 1 · The Qing Dynasty's Collapse & the End of Imperial China

This course opens a new, dedicated Chinese Political History pair within the Politics Subject, joining its existing British, American, German, Hungarian, and Russian counterparts. It opens with the real, sudden end of a system that had governed China in one dynastic form or another for over two thousand years — an empire that collapsed not in a single dramatic battle, but through a mix of structural weakness, foreign humiliation, and one accidental spark.

The Qing Dynasty's Real Structural Weakness

By the early 20th century, the Qing dynasty — which had ruled China since 1644 — faced a genuine legitimacy problem at its own core: its ruling house was Manchu, a distinct ethnic minority governing a Han Chinese majority. Sun Yat-sen himself, whose own role this chapter traces in detail, framed the dynasty's own conquest directly as "a conquest of the majority by the minority." On top of that ethnic tension, repeated military defeats at the hands of foreign powers — the Opium Wars against Britain, and the catastrophic 1894–1895 First Sino-Japanese War against a much smaller, more modern Japanese state — exposed the Qing's own institutional failures in a way that was impossible for China's own elites to ignore.

The ethnic legitimacy problem

A Manchu ruling minority governing a Han Chinese majority, a structural weakness revolutionary organizers like Sun Yat-sen's own Tongmenghui movement deliberately targeted in their own recruitment and propaganda.

Foreign humiliation as evidence of failure

Defeat in the 1894–1895 First Sino-Japanese War against a state China's own elites had long considered inferior convinced a real, growing share of reform-minded officials and intellectuals that the dynasty itself could not be trusted to modernize China.

The Wuchang Uprising (10 October 1911)

The revolution's own real trigger was, in a genuine sense, an accident. On **10 October 1911**, members of the Qing's own New Army — a modernized military force the dynasty had itself created as part of its own late reform efforts — rebelled at Wuchang. The uprising spread with startling speed: province after province renounced Qing authority in the following weeks, as local military and political figures judged, correctly, that the dynasty's own grip on power had become genuinely fragile. By late October and into November, the rebellion had become a real, nationwide crisis rather than a single localized mutiny.

On **1 November 1911**, the Qing court, now genuinely desperate, appointed Yuan Shikai — commander of the powerful Beiyang Army, the dynasty's own most modern and effective military force — as prime minister, tasking him with negotiating a way out of the crisis.

Sun Yat-sen & the Republic Declared

Sun Yat-sen, leader of the revolutionary Tongmenghui organization, had spent years abroad building support and funding for exactly this kind of uprising, though he was not personally present at Wuchang itself when it began. As revolutionary momentum built across the provinces, delegates gathered to form a new national government. On **1 January 1912**, revolutionary forces formally declared the Republic of China in Nanjing, with Sun Yat-sen sworn in as its own first provisional president.

Yuan Shikai's Real Bargain

The republic Sun now led controlled real political momentum, but not the military strength to guarantee its own survival — that strength remained with Yuan Shikai's Beiyang Army. Sun made a deliberate, calculated compromise: he agreed to resign the provisional presidency in Yuan's own favor, in exchange for Yuan using his real leverage over the Qing court to secure the emperor's abdication and the republic's own peaceful establishment.

Finding: a compromise that traded a battle for control of the state's own founding institution

Sun's own bargain ended the fighting and secured a fast, comparatively bloodless end to the Qing dynasty — but it also handed the republic's own most powerful office to a man whose loyalty was to his own personal military base, not to the revolutionary movement's own republican ideals. Yuan Shikai was sworn in as president on **10 March 1912**. That

same tension — real revolutionary legitimacy on one side, real military force on the other — is the structural fault line the next chapter picks up directly, once Yuan's own government begins to fracture into open regional warlordism.

Puyi's Abdication (12 February 1912)

With Yuan Shikai's own negotiations complete, the Qing court issued the "Imperial Edict of the Abdication of the Qing Emperor" on **12 February 1912**, signed by Empress Dowager Longyu on behalf of the reigning Xuantong Emperor — Puyi, who had just turned six years old. The edict formally ended 267 years of Qing rule over China, and with it, over two millennia of Chinese imperial government in any dynastic form.

The abdication was not an unconditional surrender. A companion agreement, the "Articles of Favourable Treatment of the Great Qing Emperor after His Abdication," set out genuinely substantial real terms for the deposed imperial family:

Term	What it actually granted
Imperial title	Puyi retained his imperial title and was to receive protocol treatment as a foreign monarch, not as an ordinary private citizen
Residence	Continued residence in the northern section of the Forbidden City (the Private Apartments) and at the Summer Palace
Annual subsidy	Four million silver taels per year — though the new republican government never fully paid this, and payments ceased entirely after a few years

A negotiated exit, not a clean break

Puyi actually remained living inside the Forbidden City for another twelve years after his own formal abdication, only expelled in 1924 by the warlord Feng Yuxiang. The republic that replaced the Qing dynasty, in other words, did not fully replace it in practice for over a decade — a genuine, physical symbol of how incomplete the revolution's own transition actually was.

What the Revolution Actually Replaced

The Xinhai Revolution genuinely ended imperial monarchy in China and established the Republic of China in its place. But the new republic inherited none of the centralized authority the Qing dynasty, whatever its own real weaknesses, had at least nominally held. Yuan Shikai's own presidency, resting on personal military loyalty rather than durable republican institutions, proved unable to hold the country together for long — a genuine structural gap this course's own next chapter traces directly into China's real, prolonged Warlord Era.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why the Qing dynasty's own Manchu-versus-Han ethnic divide gave the 1911 revolutionaries a genuinely different kind of legitimacy argument than a purely political or economic grievance would have provided.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain the real tradeoff Sun Yat-sen accepted by resigning the provisional presidency to Yuan Shikai in exchange for Puyi's abdication.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why Puyi remaining inside the Forbidden City until 1924 is real evidence that the Qing-to-republic transition was more gradual and incomplete than the formal 12 February 1912 abdication date alone suggests.

[→ Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Structural weakness:** Manchu ruling minority over a Han Chinese majority, compounded by real foreign military defeats (the Opium Wars, the 1894–1895 First Sino-Japanese War)
- **10 October 1911:** Wuchang Uprising — New Army rebellion triggers the wider Xinhai Revolution
- **1 November 1911:** Yuan Shikai appointed Qing prime minister to negotiate with the revolutionaries
- **1 January 1912:** Republic of China declared in Nanjing; Sun Yat-sen sworn in as provisional president
- **12 February 1912:** Puyi (age six) abdicates, ending 267 years of Qing rule, under the "Articles of Favourable Treatment"
- **10 March 1912:** Yuan Shikai sworn in as president after Sun's own negotiated resignation
- **The real gap:** a republic declared on paper, but resting on personal military loyalty rather than durable institutions — the direct setup for Chapter 2's own Warlord Era

CHAPTER 2: THE WARLORD ERA & THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW CHINA

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 2 · The Warlord Era & the Struggle for a New China

Chapter 1 closed on a real, structural gap: the republic that replaced the Qing dynasty rested on Yuan Shikai's own personal military loyalty, not on durable republican institutions. This chapter traces exactly what happened once that gap was tested — first by Yuan's own attempt to abandon the republic altogether, then by the genuine collapse of central authority that followed his death.

Yuan Shikai's Real Attempt to Become Emperor

As president, Yuan Shikai steadily dismantled the republican institutions he had nominally sworn to uphold — sidelining parliament and concentrating real power in his own hands. In **December 1915**, he took that consolidation to its logical, drastic conclusion: he declared himself emperor, attempting to found a new imperial dynasty barely three years after the Qing's own abdication. The attempt collapsed almost immediately. Most of Yuan's own Beiyang military commanders — the same regional strongmen whose loyalty had made him president in the first place — refused to support a monarchy restoration. Yuan was forced to renounce his own imperial ambitions in order to keep what remained of their loyalty.

Finding: the same military loyalty that made Yuan president also limited him

Yuan's power had always rested on personal loyalty from Beiyang commanders, not on any genuine institutional mandate — a real, direct continuation of the tradeoff Sun Yat-sen accepted in Chapter 1. That same structure worked against Yuan the moment his own ambitions diverged too far from what those commanders were willing to support, since their loyalty had never actually been loyalty to the republic, or to Yuan's own person beyond what served their own interests.

Yuan's Death & the Power Vacuum (June 1916)

Yuan Shikai died in **June 1916**, his own reputation and authority already badly damaged by the failed imperial restoration. No successor could command the kind of national authority Yuan himself had briefly held. China had, in a real and immediate sense, fractured politically — the Beiyang Army, the one force that had underpinned the republic's own fragile stability, splintered into competing regional factions with no single commander able to unify them.

The Beiyang Army Fractures Into Rival Cliques

The three most powerful factions to emerge from the Beiyang Army's own collapse each controlled a distinct region and pursued its own, genuinely separate interests:

Clique	Base of Power	Leadership
Zhili clique	Northern provinces	Feng Guozhang, later Cao Kun
Anhui clique	Southeastern provinces	Duan Qirui
Fengtian clique	Manchuria	Zhang Zuolin

These factions fought each other repeatedly for territorial control and, critically, for recognition as China's own legitimate national government — recognition that foreign powers extended based on nothing more substantial than whoever physically held Beijing at a given moment, regardless of how much of the country that faction actually controlled.

Real Life Under Warlord Rule

Most warlords pursued personal power through raw military force rather than any real ideological commitment, and their armies — chronically unable to pay troops adequately — funded themselves through looting, punitive taxation, opium sales, and currency inflation. The human cost was real and severe: constant fighting devastated infrastructure (non-military railroad traffic fell roughly 25% between 1925 and 1927 alone, driving up commodity prices), and taxation could be genuinely confiscatory — in Sichuan, a single shipload of paper was reportedly taxed eleven separate times, totaling 160% of its own value.

Military predation

Desperate self-defense

Soldiers commonly engaged in rape, kidnapping for ransom, and looting against the very civilian populations their own factions claimed to govern.

Lacking guns or formal training, villagers frequently organized secret societies and self-defense militias built around martial arts and magical rituals — a genuine, documented response to the state's own real absence.

"When the warlords went to war with each other, the bandits became soldiers, and when the war ended, the soldiers became bandits."

This real, widely cited contemporary observation captures the era's own defining feature directly: the line between a regional army and an armed predatory band was often a matter of which side was currently paying, not any meaningful difference in behavior toward the civilian population caught between them.

China's Real International Weakness During Fragmentation

The Warlord Era severely damaged China's own standing abroad. The foreign-controlled China Maritime Customs Service became, in practice, the strongest genuinely functioning bureaucratic body operating anywhere in the country — a stark measure of how far real Chinese state capacity had collapsed. Foreign powers, Japan chief among them, exploited China's own persistent disunity to extract concessions and expand their own influence, while a lasting North-South political split meant competing governments spent much of the era each claiming to be China's own legitimate national authority.

That fragmentation would not begin reversing until a new political force — Sun Yat-sen's own Kuomintang, rebuilt around a newly trained National Revolutionary Army — set out to reunify the country by force. Chapter 3 picks up that story directly, tracing the KMT's own founding ideology and the 1926–1928 Northern Expedition that finally brought the Warlord Era to its own formal close.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Yuan Shikai's own Beiyang commanders refusing to support his 1915 imperial restoration reveals something structural about the republic's own real power base, not just a personal falling-out.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why foreign powers basing recognition on control of Beijing, rather than genuine control of the country, made China's own warlord fragmentation worse rather than simply reflecting it.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain what the quote "when the warlords went to war with each other, the bandits became soldiers, and when the war ended, the soldiers became bandits" reveals about ordinary civilians' own real experience of the Warlord Era.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **December 1915:** Yuan Shikai declares himself emperor; his own Beiyang commanders refuse to support it
- **June 1916:** Yuan dies, leaving no successor able to command national authority
- **Three main cliques:** Zhili (north), Anhui (southeast), Fengtian (Manchuria) — each fighting for territory and Beijing-based international recognition
- **Real civilian cost:** collapsed infrastructure, confiscatory taxation, and widespread military predation, met by desperate, informal peasant self-defense
- **International standing:** the foreign-run China Maritime Customs Service became the country's own strongest functioning bureaucracy; Japan and other powers exploited the disunity directly

- **Looking ahead:** the Kuomintang's own 1926–1928 Northern Expedition, covered in Chapter 3, finally ends the Warlord Era by force

CHAPTER 3: THE NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT: SUN YAT-SEN'S THREE PRINCIPLES & THE KMT

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 3 · The Nationalist Government: Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles & the KMT

Chapter 2 closed on a real political force gathering itself to end the Warlord Era by force — Sun Yat-sen's own Kuomintang, rebuilt around a newly trained National Revolutionary Army. This chapter covers what that party actually stood for, and the real military campaign it launched to make China's own reunification more than a declared ambition.

Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People

Sun Yat-sen first articulated his own founding ideology — the Three Principles of the People, or San-min doctrine — in a 1905 speech in Brussels, and the Tongmenghui he founded that same October in Tokyo formally incorporated the Principles into its own party manifesto. Sun spent the following two decades refining the doctrine, delivering sixteen weekly lectures on it to Kuomintang cadres between January and August 1924. Those lectures, transcribed and published as *The Three Principles of the People*, became his own final major written work.

Nationalism (Mínzú)

China's need to unite as a strong nation against both foreign imperialism and internal fragmentation. Sun described the Chinese people as "like loose sand," lacking real national cohesion, and argued China occupied "the lowest position in international affairs" as a direct result.

Democracy (Mínquán)

Not Western-style individual liberty, but a real distinction between *quan* (sovereignty and rights held by the people) and *neng* (governmental competence). Citizens held four direct powers — suffrage, recall, initiative, referendum — while trained government experts retained considerable operational autonomy.

People's Livelihood (Mínshēng)

State-led modernization and social welfare, including land reform drawing on Georgist economic ideas and a coexisting mix of

private and public enterprise, aimed at the Confucian ideal of *Datong* — a real, equitable Great Unity.

A genuinely different vision of "democracy"

Sun's own real conception of democracy explicitly rejected excessive individual liberty as a source of China's own weakness — he argued the Chinese people needed to be "pressed together into an unyielding body" rather than atomized into competing individual interests. This distinction matters directly for reading the rest of this course: the Republic of China's own institutions, and later the People's Republic's own very different institutions, both drew on a real, home-grown Chinese political tradition that never simply imported a Western liberal-democratic model wholesale.

Sun's Death & Chiang Kai-shek's Rise

Sun Yat-sen died of liver cancer on **12 March 1925**, leaving the Kuomintang without its own founding figure just as it prepared its real military push against the warlord cliques Chapter 2 traced. Chiang Kai-shek, a rising KMT military leader, moved into the resulting leadership vacuum, formally codifying Sun's 1924 lectures as the party's own official ideology and positioning himself as Sun's own legitimate political heir.

The Northern Expedition Begins

Chiang accepted command of the newly organized National Revolutionary Army (NRA) on **9 July 1926**, launching the Northern Expedition — a real, sustained military campaign aimed at reunifying China by defeating the three major warlord coalitions still dividing the country:

Warlord Coalition	Territory Controlled
Wu Peifu	Hunan, Hubei, Henan
Sun Chuanfang	Southeastern provinces
Zhang Zuolin's Fengtian clique	Manchuria and northern territories

The First United Front & Its Real Fragility

The Northern Expedition was not fought by the KMT alone. The party had entered a real, formal alliance with the Chinese Communist Party — the First United Front — and received substantial Soviet support, including advisers like Mikhail Borodin and Vasily Blyukher. The arrangement gave the KMT real Soviet-trained military expertise and organizational support it badly needed, but it was genuinely unstable from the start: communist influence within KMT ranks grew steadily throughout the campaign, alarming Chiang and the party's own more conservative wing.

The Shanghai Massacre (12–14 April 1927)

That instability broke into open violence in Shanghai between **12 and 14 April 1927**, when Chiang ordered a real, sweeping crackdown — hundreds of communists in the city were arrested and killed, effectively terminating the First United Front outright. The massacre split the KMT itself: a left-leaning faction based in Wuhan, led by Wang Jingwei, broke away from Chiang's own right-leaning government at Nanjing, dividing the nominally unified Nationalist movement into two rival centers of authority.

Finding: reunification by force created a new fracture even as it closed an old one

The Northern Expedition's own real purpose was ending the Warlord Era's fragmentation — yet the campaign's own success against the warlords came paired with a genuine new division, this time inside the Nationalist movement itself. The KMT-CCP break at Shanghai didn't just end an alliance; it set the two organizations on a real, lasting adversarial path that would shape Chinese politics for the following two decades, a thread this course picks up directly in Chapter 4.

Completing Reunification

Chiang stepped down as NRA commander in August 1927 amid the internal KMT conflict the Shanghai split had triggered, then resumed command on 1 January 1928 once the Nanjing faction reasserted control. The renewed campaign pushed north against the last major holdout, Zhang Zuolin's Fengtian clique. Zhang was assassinated by Japanese forces in 1928; his son and

successor, Zhang Xueliang, declared allegiance to the Nationalist government on **29 December 1928**, formally completing China's own reunification under KMT rule and bringing the Warlord Era to its real, official close.

The unity this achieved, however, was nominal rather than complete — a great many regional warlords retained genuine local power well into the 1930s and 1940s, continuing to complicate Nationalist governance long after the Northern Expedition's own formal end. Chapter 4 turns from the KMT's own side of this story to the Chinese Communist Party's — its real 1921 founding, its role inside the First United Front this chapter has already traced from the KMT's own perspective, and the party's own path forward after the Shanghai break.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Sun Yat-sen's own version of "democracy" (Mínquán) cannot be accurately described as a straightforward adoption of Western liberal-democratic principles.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why the First United Front's own real instability made the Northern Expedition's military success and the KMT's own internal fracture at Shanghai two connected outcomes of the same alliance, rather than two separate events.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why describing China's 1928 reunification under the KMT as "nominal rather than complete" is a more accurate reading of the Northern Expedition's own real outcome than describing it as a clean, decisive resolution to the Warlord Era.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **Three Principles of the People:** Nationalism (Mínzú), Democracy (Mínquán, built on the quan/neng distinction), People's Livelihood (Mínshēng) — first articulated 1905, codified in Sun's 1924 lectures
- **12 March 1925:** Sun Yat-sen dies of liver cancer; Chiang Kai-shek rises as his political heir
- **9 July 1926:** Chiang launches the Northern Expedition against three rival warlord coalitions (Wu Peifu, Sun Chuanfang, Zhang Zuolin)
- **First United Front:** a real, Soviet-backed KMT-CCP alliance that powered the early campaign but grew increasingly unstable
- **12–14 April 1927:** the Shanghai Massacre ends the United Front and splits the KMT into rival Nanjing (Chiang) and Wuhan (Wang Jingwei) factions
- **29 December 1928:** Zhang Xueliang's declared allegiance formally completes China's reunification under KMT rule — nominal reunification, with many regional warlords retaining real local power for decades afterward

CHAPTER 4: THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY'S FOUNDING & EARLY YEARS

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 4 · The Chinese Communist Party's Founding & Early Years

Chapter 3 traced the First United Front's own collapse and the April 1927 Shanghai split from the Kuomintang's own side. This chapter turns to the other party in that alliance — tracing the Chinese Communist Party from its own real, modest 1921 founding through its growth inside the United Front to its first, real armed response once that alliance broke apart.

The CCP's Real Founding (23 July 1921)

The Communist Party of China held its founding First National Congress on **23 July 1921** in Shanghai. The gathering was genuinely small by the standards of the movement it would eventually build — just 13 Chinese delegates were present, representing a total party membership of only 57 people nationwide.

Chen Duxiu

Elected the party's first general secretary despite not attending the congress in person — he sent a personal representative instead. An early Chinese advocate for Leninist ideology, he viewed Russia's 1917 October Revolution as a genuinely groundbreaking model for oppressed nations worldwide.

Li Dazhao

The CCP's other primary founder, and, alongside Chen, one of the earliest and most influential figures introducing Marxist-Leninist thought into Chinese intellectual and political life before the party itself even existed.

Interrupted by Police

The congress's own real proceedings were genuinely disrupted mid-meeting: the delegates initially convened in a house inside the Shanghai French Concession, but French police interrupted the gathering on 30 July. The delegates relocated to finish their business aboard a

tourist boat on South Lake, in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province — a real, concrete illustration of how precarious and improvised the party's own earliest organizing actually was.

The Comintern's Real Role

The new party was not simply a spontaneous domestic movement. The congress's own resolutions explicitly called for establishing the CCP as "a branch of the Communist International" — the Comintern, the Soviet-directed organization coordinating communist parties worldwide. Soviet sponsorship was a deliberate strategic choice on Moscow's own part: cultivating a pro-Soviet political force in China gave the USSR a real potential counterweight to anti-communist regional powers, Japan chief among them.

Entering the First United Front

The CCP grew steadily through the 1920s, and after the party's Fourth Congress in 1925, membership expanded dramatically — from roughly 900 to 2,428 members. Alongside that growth, the party pursued a real, deliberate alliance strategy with the Kuomintang, with communist members formally joining and organizing within the KMT's own left wing rather than operating as a wholly separate rival organization. This First United Front — already traced in Chapter 3 from the KMT's own side, including its real Soviet advisers Mikhail Borodin and Vasily Blyukher — functioned reasonably well while Sun Yat-sen remained alive, giving the CCP real organizational access and influence it could not have built on its own in the same span of time.

A working alliance held together by one man's own leadership

The United Front's own real stability depended heavily on Sun Yat-sen's personal position atop the KMT. Once he died in March 1925 and Chiang Kai-shek — a genuinely more rightist figure — rose to leadership, the alliance's own underlying tensions, already visible in growing communist influence within KMT structures, had far less holding them in check.

The Shanghai Massacre's Real Impact on the CCP

Chiang's crackdown of 12–14 April 1927 was not simply a political rupture from the CCP's own perspective — it was a direct, violent attack on the party's own members and organizational structures inside Shanghai. The massacre marked the moment the CCP-KMT conflict stopped being an uneasy internal alliance and became, in real and immediate terms, outright armed rebellion between the two organizations.

The Nanchang Uprising (1 August 1927)

The CCP's own first direct armed response came just under four months later. On **1 August 1927**, Communist forces led by He Long and Zhou Enlai — with Zhu De, Ye Ting, and Liu Bocheng among the other key commanders — seized the city of Nanchang at 2:00 a.m., capturing roughly 5,000 small arms and around a million rounds of ammunition in the process. The success was short-lived: facing Nationalist counterattacks, the Communist forces were forced to retreat south by 5 August, and the wider campaign ultimately ended in real, practical defeat.

Finding: a military failure that became a founding symbol

Despite its own real, immediate collapse, 1 August 1927 was later adopted as the official anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army — a genuine case of a defeated campaign becoming the movement's own foundational symbol rather than being erased from its history. More consequentially still, the uprising's own surviving forces eventually made their way to join a separate communist force building in Jiangxi province, under a leader whose own real rise this course traces directly in Chapter 5 — Mao Zedong.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why the CCP's own real founding congress being interrupted by French police and forced to relocate to a boat is meaningful evidence about the party's own earliest operating conditions, not just an interesting anecdote.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Sun Yat-sen's own death in March 1925, rather than any specific new policy disagreement, was the real structural turning point that made the First United Front's eventual collapse more likely.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why a militarily failed uprising like Nanchang could still become the CCP's own official founding symbol for its armed forces, rather than being treated simply as a defeat.

[→ Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **23 July 1921:** CCP founded at its First National Congress in Shanghai — 57 members nationwide, 13 delegates present
- **Founders:** Chen Duxiu (first general secretary, elected in absentia) and Li Dazhao
- **Comintern-sponsored:** the CCP was explicitly established as a Comintern branch, with real Soviet strategic backing
- **Post-1925 growth:** membership rose from ~900 to 2,428 after the Fourth Congress, driven partly by real access gained inside the First United Front with the KMT
- **12–14 April 1927:** the Shanghai Massacre turns the CCP-KMT alliance into open, armed rebellion
- **1 August 1927:** the Nanchang Uprising — a real military defeat later adopted as the PLA's own official founding anniversary; survivors eventually joined Mao Zedong's forces in Jiangxi

CHAPTER 5: THE LONG MARCH & THE RISE OF MAO ZEDONG

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 5 · The Long March & the Rise of Mao Zedong

Chapter 4 closed with the Nanchang Uprising's own defeated survivors eventually joining a separate communist base area building in Jiangxi province. This chapter traces what became of that base — its own real destruction by Nationalist forces, the desperate retreat it forced, and the real, gradual process by which one of its leaders, Mao Zedong, rose to command the movement itself.

The Jiangxi Soviet & Chiang's Fifth Encirclement Campaign

By the early 1930s, communist forces had built a genuine, functioning base of territorial control in Jiangxi province — the Jiangxi Soviet. Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government launched a series of military campaigns to destroy it, and the fifth of these proved decisive. Rather than pursuing open battle, Chiang's forces adopted a real, methodical strategy of constructing an interlocking network of blockhouses that steadily tightened around the Soviet's own territory, cutting off supply and movement. The strategy worked: within months, Nationalist forces had captured several of the Communists' own major strongholds, leaving the Jiangxi Soviet's own survival genuinely untenable.

The Breakout Begins

Facing annihilation, the Communist leadership ordered a real, large-scale breakout. The retreat officially began on **16 October 1934**, when roughly 130,000 soldiers and civilians departed Jiangxi. Not everyone who set out completed the initial breakout itself — more than 86,000 troops, alongside roughly 11,000 administrative personnel and thousands of civilian porters, actually made it through the Nationalist encirclement in the campaign's own earliest, most dangerous phase.

A Real, Disputed Distance

The Long March's own popular reputation rests heavily on a specific figure — 25,000 *li*, roughly 12,500 kilometers — but the real, actual distance travelled is genuinely disputed by historians rather than settled fact.

Even Mao's own account isn't internally consistent

Mao himself is credited with the famous 25,000-*li* figure, yet his own 1935 poem about the march instead states 20,000 *li* — roughly 10,000 kilometers, a real, meaningful discrepancy in Mao's own telling. A 2006 investigation by British researchers, physically retracing plausible march routes, estimated the true distance at closer to 6,000 kilometers — under half the popularly cited figure. Chinese sources have disputed that lower estimate in turn, maintaining the First Red Army's own march covered closer to 18,088 *li*. No single, universally agreed distance actually exists — a genuine reminder that the Long March's own legendary status has shaped how its concrete details are remembered, not just how the story is told.

Whatever its own exact length, the route itself was real and genuinely grueling — a sweeping arc through Hunan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Yunnan, crossing major rivers and mountain passes, before finally reaching Shaanxi in the north.

The Real, Catastrophic Cost

The march's own human cost was severe by any measure. Of an initial force of roughly 100,000 troops, fewer than 7,000 of the original soldiers reached the final destination in the north — with total survivors, including later reinforcements and additions along the route, numbering around 8,000 by the time the main force reached Yan'an. The wider Communist Party itself contracted sharply over the same period, with total membership falling from roughly 300,000 to around 40,000. These losses came from a real combination of causes — fatigue, hunger, cold, sickness, desertion, and outright military casualties — rather than any single catastrophic battle.

The Zunyi Conference (15–17 January 1935)

Partway through the retreat, CCP leadership convened the Zunyi Conference, a real and genuinely pivotal turning point for Mao's own political fortunes. Mao had been sidelined into a

largely figurehead role within the party leadership before the conference; at Zunyi, seventeen of the meeting's twenty participants argued in his favor, and the Soviet-backed leadership of Bo Gu and the Comintern military adviser Otto Braun faced severe, direct criticism for the strategic failures that had led to the Jiangxi Soviet's own loss.

Finding: Mao's rise was real, but genuinely gradual, not instantaneous

Zunyi did not hand Mao supreme authority outright. In its own immediate aftermath, Zhou Enlai was empowered to make final military decisions, with Mao positioned as his assistant rather than as sole commander. Mao's own full consolidation of leadership came only later — in November 1935, shortly after the march's main force had settled in northern Shaanxi, Mao officially took over Zhou Enlai's own leading position. The popular image of Zunyi as the single moment Mao seized total control flattens a real process that actually took nearly a full year to complete.

Consolidation at Yan'an

The First Front Army reached Yan'an, in Shaanxi province, on **19 October 1935**, giving the battered Communist movement a real, defensible new base far from Chiang's own reach. The march's own formal conclusion came later still — the Second Red Army did not reach the final rendezvous point until 22 October 1936, marking the real union of all three surviving Red Army forces and the Long March's own official end.

Whatever its own real, catastrophic cost, the retreat achieved something genuinely strategic: it gave the CCP the geographic isolation it needed to recuperate, rebuild, and reorganize in the north, and it left Mao Zedong in a position of real, consolidated leadership that would shape the party's own direction for the following decades. Chapter 6 picks up directly from Yan'an, tracing the real Second United Front against Japanese invasion, the resumed civil war against the KMT once that threat passed, and the Communist Party's own real 1949 victory.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Chiang Kai-shek's blockhouse strategy against the Jiangxi Soviet was more effective than the Nationalists' earlier encirclement campaigns had been, based on what the strategy actually did differently.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why the genuine disagreement among historians over the Long March's own real distance doesn't actually undermine the significance of the march itself.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why treating the Zunyi Conference as the single moment Mao seized total control is a less accurate account than treating his rise as a process completed only by November 1935.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **16 October 1934:** the Long March begins as roughly 130,000 people break out of the collapsing Jiangxi Soviet
- **Distance:** genuinely disputed — Mao's own cited 25,000 *li* vs. his 1935 poem's 20,000 *li* vs. a 2006 British estimate of ~6,000 km vs. Chinese sources' own ~18,088-*li* figure
- **Real cost:** fewer than 7,000 of the original ~100,000 troops survived to reach the north; total CCP membership fell from ~300,000 to ~40,000
- **15–17 January 1935:** the Zunyi Conference — Mao gains real influence, but Zhou Enlai retains final military authority in the immediate aftermath
- **19 October 1935:** the First Front Army reaches Yan'an, Shaanxi
- **November 1935:** Mao formally takes over Zhou Enlai's own leading position, completing his real consolidation of CCP leadership

- **22 October 1936:** the Second Red Army's own arrival marks the Long March's formal end

CHAPTER 6: THE CHINESE CIVIL WAR & THE 1949 COMMUNIST VICTORY

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 6 · The Chinese Civil War & the 1949 Communist Victory

Chapter 5 closed with Mao Zedong's own real, gradually consolidated leadership secure at Yan'an — but with the CCP itself still a battered, geographically isolated movement facing a far larger Nationalist government. This chapter traces how a growing external threat forced a second, uneasy alliance between the two sides, and how that alliance's own collapse produced the resumed civil war that decided China's own political future for the rest of the twentieth century.

The Xi'an Incident (December 1936)

Chiang Kai-shek's own strategy through the mid-1930s prioritized finishing off the Communists before turning to resist Japan's own steadily expanding presence in China. Two of his generals genuinely disagreed with that ordering. Zhang Xueliang, commanding the 130,000-strong Northeastern Army, and Yang Hucheng, commanding the 40,000-strong Northwestern Army, had both pledged nominal allegiance to Chiang's government while retaining real, independent authority over their own forces.

Why Zhang Xueliang acted

Zhang had governed Manchuria before Japan's invasion and wanted his own homeland reclaimed rather than watching Chiang's forces spend themselves fighting fellow Chinese instead.

The final trigger

After months of failed secret talks with the CCP to change Chiang's mind, Chiang issued a harsh 9 December ultimatum threatening to reassign their armies if they refused to attack the Communists — the direct spark for the kidnapping three days later.

On **12 December 1936**, Zhang's forces captured Chiang at the Huaqing Pool resort near Xi'an, drawing on a real, ancient Chinese tradition of "military remonstrance" — forcibly detaining a ruler specifically to compel a change in policy. Negotiations followed, with Zhou Enlai

representing the CCP and T.V. Soong representing Chiang's own family, and ended with Chiang verbally agreeing to halt the civil war and cooperate against Japan.

The Second United Front & the War Against Japan (1937–1945)

That agreement became the real Second United Front: the CCP was legalized, the Red Army was nominally incorporated into the National Revolutionary Army, and both sides turned to face the far larger threat of Japanese invasion. The alliance was never a comfortable one, but it gave the CCP genuine room to grow through years of sustained, brutal war — party-controlled military forces expanded from roughly 40,000 troops at the war's start to over one million regular soldiers by its end, backed by an additional 2.68 million militia members, with the CCP administering 19 real base areas covering roughly a quarter of China's own territory and a third of its population.

Finding: the same growth pattern seen once already

This is a real, second instance of a pattern this course has now traced twice — the CCP using a formal alliance with the KMT primarily as an opportunity to build real organizational and military strength it could not have built alone, the same dynamic Chapter 4 already traced inside the 1920s First United Front. Both times, the alliance's own eventual collapse left the CCP genuinely stronger than when the arrangement began.

Civil War Resumes

Japan's 1945 surrender removed the shared threat holding the Second United Front together, and the underlying KMT-CCP conflict resumed in earnest. The Soviet Red Army, occupying Manchuria at war's end, deliberately delayed its own withdrawal in early 1946 — a delay that quietly allowed Communist forces to move into the region and secure a real material advantage there, including access to abandoned Japanese weaponry. Combined with a wave of Nationalist troop defections, this gave the CCP a genuinely stronger military position than it had held at any earlier point in its own history.

The Decisive Campaigns of 1948–1949

The war's own outcome was settled by three major Communist campaigns fought in rapid succession over roughly a year:

Campaign	What it actually achieved
Liaoshen Campaign	Secured Communist control of northeastern China, cutting off Nationalist forces in Manchuria entirely
Huaihai Campaign	Defeated Nationalist armies across central China; the CCP mobilized a real 5,430,000 peasants in direct support of the fighting
Pingjin Campaign	Captured Beijing and Tianjin, eliminating the last major Nationalist strongholds in the north

The People's Republic Proclaimed & the KMT's Retreat to Taiwan

With Nationalist resistance collapsing across the mainland, the Communist Party proclaimed the People's Republic of China on **1 October 1949**. Chiang Kai-shek and the remnants of his own government held out only weeks longer, retreating to Taiwan on **7 December 1949** and establishing a government-in-exile that would persist there for decades afterward, still formally claiming to represent all of China.

The revolution Chapter 1 opened this course with — the 1911 fall of a two-thousand-year imperial system — had now given way, thirty-eight years later, to a wholly new kind of Chinese state. Chapter 7 turns to what the Communist Party actually built once real, undisputed power over mainland China was finally in its own hands.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng chose to kidnap Chiang rather than simply refusing his 9 December ultimatum outright.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why the Second United Front's own real effect on the CCP (1937–1945) is structurally the same pattern as what the First United Front produced in the 1920s, rather than a coincidentally similar but unrelated outcome.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the Soviet Union's delayed withdrawal from Manchuria in early 1946 counts as a real, meaningful cause of the CCP's eventual victory, rather than a minor background detail.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **12 December 1936:** the Xi'an Incident — Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng kidnap Chiang Kai-shek, forcing him to agree to the Second United Front against Japan
- **1937–1945:** the CCP grows from ~40,000 to over 1 million regular troops during the war against Japan, administering 19 base areas
- **1945–46:** civil war resumes; Soviet delay in withdrawing from Manchuria and KMT troop defections give the CCP a real material advantage
- **1948–49:** the Liaoshen, Huaihai, and Pingjin campaigns decisively defeat Nationalist forces across Manchuria, central China, and the north
- **1 October 1949:** the People's Republic of China is proclaimed
- **7 December 1949:** Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT retreat to Taiwan, establishing a government-in-exile

CHAPTER 7: BUILDING THE NEW STATE: LAND REFORM & THE EARLY PRC**Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China**

Chapter 7 · Building the New State: Land Reform & the Early PRC

Chapter 6 closed with the People's Republic proclaimed on 1 October 1949 — real, undisputed Communist power over mainland China for the first time. This chapter turns to what the new state actually did with that power in its own first decade: a sweeping redistribution of land that transformed rural China, and a brief, genuine experiment in open criticism that reversed itself with startling speed.

Redistributing the Land

Land reform was the new government's own first major transformative project, and it moved with real speed across the countryside. Communist Party work teams divided villages into formal class categories — landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, and landless laborers — and reallocated landholdings accordingly, confiscating land from landlords and redistributing it directly to poorer peasants. The scale of the effort was genuinely vast: by 1952, roughly 43% of China's own cultivated land had been redistributed, reaching approximately 60% of the entire rural population, with over 25 million hectares changing hands across the full campaign. Poor peasants' own share of cultivated land rose from just 14.28% before the reform to 47.1% by 1954 — the single largest group of real beneficiaries.

"Speaking Bitterness"

The reform's own social mechanism ran through public "struggle sessions," often termed "speaking bitterness" meetings, in which peasants directly confronted landlords with accusations of exploitation. The Party deliberately encouraged peasant participation in these confrontations — a real, organized channeling of accumulated grievance rather than a spontaneous uprising — with women activists playing a genuinely significant role in mobilizing local participation. The intensity of these sessions varied considerably by region and by period, ranging from real, orderly grievance airing to outright violence against accused landlords.

The Real, Disputed Human Cost

Land reform's own human cost is, like several other events already traced in this course, genuinely disputed among historians rather than settled to a single agreed figure.

A wide, real range of scholarly estimates

Death toll estimates for the 1949–1953 land reform period vary considerably depending on the source: Stavis (1978) estimated 200,000 to 800,000 deaths; Twitchett, Fairbank, and MacFarquhar's own 1987 estimate ran from 1 million to 2 million; Feigon's 2002 estimate reached as high as 2 million to 5 million. The genuine difficulty in producing a precise figure stems from overlapping local campaigns and underreported executions carried out by local officials rather than any single, centrally documented process — a real methodological gap, not merely a disagreement in interpretation.

The Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956)

By the mid-1950s, with land reform largely complete, Mao Zedong launched a genuinely different kind of initiative — inviting open criticism of the Party itself. His own real slogan called to "let a hundred flowers bloom in social science and arts and let one hundred points of view be expressed in the field of science," framed with an explicitly stated antibureaucratic purpose: airing real tensions between the Party and China's own intellectuals by allowing citizens to criticize government policy directly.

Real intellectual hesitation

Scholars approached the campaign with genuine suspicion, lacking clear guidelines about what criticism would actually be tolerated and fearing the invitation might itself be a pretext for entrapment. Early responses stayed cautious and indirect, often praising the campaign itself rather than substantively challenging Party policy.

The floodgates open (Spring 1957)

By May–June 1957, hesitation gave way to real, direct criticism — peasants demanded land repossession, workers protested wage systems, and at Peking University a genuine "Democratic Wall" openly hosted discussion of multi-party elections. Some teachers directly called Mao's own rule "arbitrary and reckless."

The Reversal

On **8 June 1957**, the People's Daily published an editorial that relabeled the preceding weeks of criticism as a "Rightist" attack on the Party — a real, sudden signal that the campaign encouraging openness was over, and that a very different one was beginning. The Anti-Rightist Campaign that followed identified and punished roughly 400,000 urban residents, a great many of them intellectuals, branding them "rightists" and sending them into imprisonment or forced rural labor camps.

Finding: an invitation to speak became the mechanism for identifying who had spoken

The Hundred Flowers Campaign's own real, documented reversal is a genuinely striking pattern: the same open criticism the Party had explicitly invited became, once the political tide turned, the direct evidence used to identify and punish the people who had offered it. Whether this outcome was Mao's own deliberate intent from the start or a genuine change of course in response to criticism exceeding what he had anticipated remains a real, debated question among historians — but the practical effect either way was the same, and it discouraged open political dissent in China for decades to come. This is not the last time this course traces a campaign whose stated purpose and its real, eventual consequences diverge sharply — Chapter 9's own account of the Cultural Revolution returns to exactly this pattern on a far larger scale.

Chapter 8 turns to the other defining project of this same early period — the Great Leap Forward, launched barely a year after the Anti-Rightist Campaign's own crackdown, and the real, devastating famine it produced.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why land reform's own real human cost is so much harder to pin down precisely than, for example, the Long March's own casualty figures traced in Chapter 5.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why intellectuals' own initial caution during the Hundred Flowers Campaign was a genuinely reasonable response, given how the campaign actually ended.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why it matters, for understanding the Anti-Rightist Campaign's own real effect, whether Mao intended the reversal from the start or changed course partway through — even though the practical outcome for those punished was the same either way.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **1949–1953 land reform:** ~43% of China's cultivated land redistributed to ~60% of the rural population by 1952; poor peasants' own land share rose from 14.28% to 47.1%
- **"Speaking bitterness":** organized struggle sessions where peasants publicly confronted landlords, varying widely in intensity by region
- **Real, disputed death toll:** scholarly estimates range from 200,000–800,000 up to 2–5 million, reflecting a genuine methodological gap in the historical record
- **1956:** Mao launches the Hundred Flowers Campaign, inviting open criticism of the Party under an explicitly antibureaucratic rationale
- **Spring 1957:** criticism escalates sharply, including Peking University's own "Democratic Wall"
- **8 June 1957:** the People's Daily editorial reverses the campaign, launching the Anti-Rightist Campaign — ~400,000 people branded "rightists" and punished

CHAPTER 8: THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD & ITS REAL, DEVASTATING FAMINE

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 8 · The Great Leap Forward & Its Real, Devastating Famine

Chapter 7 closed with the Anti-Rightist Campaign's own real crackdown barely finished — roughly 400,000 people already punished for speaking too openly. Barely a year later, Mao launched an even more ambitious and, ultimately, far more catastrophic project: a campaign to force China's entire economy through a single, compressed leap into industrial modernity.

Mao's Real Goal

The Great Leap Forward officially began at a January 1958 meeting in Nanjing, launched with a genuinely sweeping ambition — transforming China from an agrarian society into an industrialized one within a single generation. Mao's own stated goal was strikingly direct: China would "catch up with and surpass the most powerful capitalist countries in several dozen years."

Backyard Steel Furnaces

Central to that ambition was a real, nationwide steel production drive. August 1958 Politburo meetings set a target to double national steel output within a single year, with much of the planned increase coming not from industrial plants but from millions of small, improvised backyard furnaces — a deliberate attempt to boost production without the capital investment real industrial infrastructure would have required. The campaign hit its own headline number: national steel production reached the targeted 10.7 million tons in 1958. But the real quality of that output told a different story — more than 3 million tons of it turned out to be entirely unusable, produced by untrained villagers smelting whatever metal they could find, including household tools and cookware, in furnaces never capable of producing genuine industrial-grade steel.

Communes Replace Private Farming

Agriculture underwent an equally sweeping transformation. By 1958, private land ownership had been abolished outright, and households across the countryside were compelled into large, state-operated communes that replaced the smaller cooperative structures land reform had built barely five years earlier, banning private farming entirely. Roughly 25,000 communes were established by year's end, averaging some 5,000 households apiece — a real, massive reorganization of rural Chinese life carried out in a matter of months.

Grain Exports Continue Amid Starvation

Exports continued even as the countryside starved

Despite real, widespread starvation spreading through rural China, the country continued exporting substantial quantities of grain throughout 1958–1960, maintaining international appearances even as its own population went hungry. U.S. President Kennedy publicly noted that China continued sending food to Africa and Cuba during the very crisis killing its own citizens, while the government simultaneously refused foreign offers of famine aid — a real, documented choice to preserve political image over feeding a starving population.

The Real, Disputed Death Toll

The famine's own real human cost, like the land reform death toll traced in Chapter 7, is genuinely disputed rather than settled to a single figure — scholarly estimates range from 15 million to as many as 55 million deaths. A widely cited estimate places the real toll at roughly 30 million, a figure that would make the Great Leap famine potentially the deadliest famine recorded anywhere in human history.

The 1959 Lushan Conference & Peng Dehuai's Purge

Real criticism of the campaign reached the very top of the Party leadership within a year of its launch. Marshal Peng Dehuai, China's own Minister of National Defense, openly raised concerns about the Great Leap's own early, damaging impact at the 1959 Lushan Conference. Mao's response was swift and severe: Peng was dismissed outright, and Mao launched the "Anti-Right

Deviation Struggle" in direct response, purging over 3 million Party members or sympathizers across the country. Lin Biao, Peng's replacement as defense minister, moved to systematically remove Peng's own remaining military supporters from positions of influence.

Finding: a second, related instance of the same pattern

Peng Dehuai's real punishment for raising genuine, well-founded concerns through his own official channels is a direct continuation of the pattern Chapter 7 already flagged — criticism, even when offered through entirely legitimate means by a senior, loyal official, met real, severe retaliation rather than genuine engagement. Where the Anti-Rightist Campaign had targeted intellectuals who spoke up after an explicit invitation to do so, Lushan shows the same underlying intolerance for dissent extending even to a trusted, high-ranking military leader who had never been formally invited to criticize anything at all.

Retreat & Aftermath

The famine's own scale eventually forced a real policy reversal. The Ninth Plenum, held in early 1961, marked a genuine shift toward "adjustment, consolidation, filling out, and improvement," rolling back several of the Great Leap's own most extreme measures. The decisive moment came at the 1962 Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, where Mao genuinely ceded day-to-day economic leadership to more pragmatic figures — Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping — beginning a real period of economic readjustment, even as Mao himself maintained publicly that the Great Leap's own basic direction could not be fundamentally challenged.

That partial retreat from front-line leadership did not mark the end of Mao's own political ambitions. Chapter 9 traces what followed once Mao judged the moment right to reassert control — the Cultural Revolution, and the real, brutal power struggle it unleashed across the entire party and country.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why the backyard furnace campaign's own headline success (hitting the 10.7 million ton steel target) is a misleading measure of whether the campaign actually achieved its real goal.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why continuing grain exports during a famine is real, meaningful evidence about the government's own priorities, rather than simply a tragic coincidence of bad timing.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why Peng Dehuai's purge at Lushan represents a genuinely more severe version of the pattern already seen in the Anti-Rightist Campaign, rather than simply a repeat of the same thing.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **January 1958:** the Great Leap Forward launches at a meeting in Nanjing, aiming to industrialize China within a single generation
- **Backyard furnaces:** hit the 10.7-million-ton steel target, but over 3 million tons of that output was entirely unusable
- **Communes:** ~25,000 established by end of 1958, averaging ~5,000 households, replacing private farming outright
- **1958–1960:** China continues exporting grain to Africa and Cuba, and refuses foreign famine aid, even as mass starvation spreads domestically
- **Real, disputed death toll:** scholarly estimates range from 15 million to 55 million; ~30 million is a widely cited figure

- **1959 Lushan Conference:** Peng Dehuai is purged for criticizing the campaign; the Anti-Right Deviation Struggle that follows purges over 3 million more
- **1962 Seven Thousand Cadres Conference:** Mao cedes day-to-day economic leadership to Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping while maintaining the Great Leap's basic direction couldn't be challenged

CHAPTER 9: THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION: MAO'S REAL POWER STRUGGLE**Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China**

Chapter 9 · The Cultural Revolution: Mao's Real Power Struggle

Chapter 8 closed with Mao ceding real, day-to-day economic leadership to Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping at the 1962 Seven Thousand Cadres Conference — a genuine retreat, but not a permanent one. This chapter traces what followed once Mao judged the moment right to reclaim the authority he had given up: a decade-long upheaval that consumed the party, the country, and very nearly the pragmatists who had stepped into the vacuum he had left.

Mao's Real Motivation

Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in May 1966, and its own real underlying purpose was less about the sweeping ideological language used to justify it than about reasserting Mao's personal political dominance. Having stepped back from front-line economic management after the Great Leap Forward's own catastrophic failure, Mao had watched Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping steadily accumulate real practical authority over the intervening years — and came to see the two pragmatists as a genuine threat to his own position. Framing the movement as a defense against "bourgeois elements" that had infiltrated government and society gave Mao a real ideological vehicle for eliminating his own rivals while consolidating personal power.

"Bombard the Headquarters" & Liu Shaoqi's Real Fall

Mao's own polemic "Bombard the Headquarters" directly targeted Liu Shaoqi, then serving as President, casting him as the personification of a "bourgeois headquarters" operating within the Party itself. The specific trigger was Liu's own disagreement with Mao's radical approach — particularly over Liu's use of work-teams to maintain order rather than allow the movement's own chaotic momentum to run unchecked. The consequences for Liu were swift and severe: his own rank within the party hierarchy collapsed from second to eighth, and he was removed from power entirely.

The Red Guards & the "Four Olds"

Mao's call to action mobilized a real, largely youthful movement — students and young activists organizing themselves into Red Guard units tasked with attacking the "Four Olds": old ideas, old customs, old culture, and old habits. The destruction this unleashed was genuinely severe and, in many cases, historically irreplaceable.

What was actually destroyed

Real, historically significant sites and artifacts — the Cemetery of Confucius, the Temple of Heaven, and the Ming tombs among them — were damaged or destroyed by Red Guard units acting in Mao's own name.

What the destruction was meant to achieve

The campaign's own stated purpose was purging capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society — a goal that, in real practice, extended to erasing physical monuments of China's own pre-revolutionary past.

Deng Xiaoping's Real Purge

Deng Xiaoping, closely associated with Liu Shaoqi's own pragmatic economic policies, was similarly sidelined during the movement's early purges. He initially retained his own seat on the Politburo, a real, if temporary, distinction from Liu's own complete removal — but Deng would face further, more severe persecution as the Cultural Revolution's own political tides continued to shift over the following years.

The Lin Biao Affair (1971)

Lin Biao, elevated to vice-chairman following Liu Shaoqi's own fall, emerged as Mao's presumed successor in the movement's early years. That relationship deteriorated over time, culminating in a genuinely mysterious 1971 plane crash that killed Lin — officially attributed to a failed coup attempt against Mao, code-named Project 571. The affair remains, in real terms, one of the more genuinely opaque episodes of the entire period, with several specific details of what actually happened never fully and independently verified.

The Gang of Four's Real Rise

In the wake of Lin Biao's own death, a new radical faction moved to consolidate influence around Mao — Jiang Qing, Mao's own wife, alongside three close allies: Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyan, and Wang Hongwen. This group, later known as the Gang of Four, had achieved real, substantial political influence by 1972, and continued championing the movement's own most radical policies for the remainder of Mao's life.

The Real, Disputed Death Toll

The Cultural Revolution's own human cost, like the Great Leap Forward's famine traced in Chapter 8, is genuinely disputed among historians — estimates commonly range from 1 million to 2 million deaths. Documented regional violence included real, severe massacres in Guangxi, Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Guangdong, Yunnan, and Hunan, with the Guangxi violence in particular including well-documented instances of cannibalism carried out in an atmosphere of extreme political frenzy and impunity.

Mao's Death & the Gang of Four's Arrest

Mao Zedong died in September 1976, and within weeks, the Gang of Four were arrested in October 1976 — a real, decisive act that formally brought the Cultural Revolution to its own close after roughly a decade of upheaval.

The Party's own later verdict

In 1981, the Communist Party issued its own official historical assessment of the period, declaring that the Cultural Revolution had caused "the most severe setback and heaviest losses" suffered by the People's Republic since its own 1949 founding, formally characterizing the decade as "ten years of chaos." That the Party itself, rather than only outside historians, reached this verdict is significant — a real, official acknowledgment that the movement Mao had launched to reclaim personal authority ultimately inflicted damage the Party's own leadership judged more severe than any other episode in the republic's own history to that point.

Mao's own death did not, by itself, settle who would actually lead China next. Chapter 10 closes this course with the real power struggle that followed immediately afterward — the Gang of Four's own arrest as only the opening move, and Deng Xiaoping's genuine, second return from political exile to reshape China's own direction for decades to come.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why Mao's own real motivation for launching the Cultural Revolution is better understood as reclaiming personal authority than as the ideological anti-bourgeois campaign it was officially presented as.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Deng Xiaoping initially retaining his Politburo seat, while Liu Shaoqi was removed from power entirely, is meaningful evidence about how the purges actually unfolded, rather than simply a minor procedural detail.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the Chinese Communist Party's own official 1981 verdict on the Cultural Revolution carries a different, real significance than an equivalent judgment reached only by outside historians.

[→ Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **May 1966:** Mao launches the Cultural Revolution, primarily to reclaim authority from Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping
- **"Bombard the Headquarters":** Mao's polemic targets Liu Shaoqi, whose rank collapses from second to eighth before his removal from power
- **Red Guards:** youth-led units attack the "Four Olds," destroying sites including the Cemetery of Confucius and the Ming tombs
- **1971 Lin Biao affair:** Mao's presumed successor dies in a genuinely mysterious plane crash, officially tied to a failed coup (Project 571)
- **Gang of Four:** Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen achieve real influence by 1972
- **Real, disputed death toll:** commonly estimated at 1–2 million, including documented regional massacres
- **September–October 1976:** Mao dies; the Gang of Four are arrested weeks later, formally ending the movement
- **1981:** the CCP's own official verdict calls the period "the most severe setback and heaviest losses" since 1949

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE — MAO'S DEATH & THE REAL POWER STRUGGLE THAT FOLLOWED

Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China

Chapter 10 (Capstone) · Mao's Death & the Real Power Struggle That Followed

Chapter 9 closed with the Gang of Four's arrest in October 1976 described as only the opening move in a real, still-unresolved contest over who would actually lead China next. This capstone traces that contest to its own conclusion — and closes the course by tracing the recurring threads running through all ten of its chapters.

Hua Guofeng's Real Rise

Premier Zhou Enlai's death in January 1976 opened a real leadership vacancy at the very top of China's government, months before Mao's own death. Mao responded by elevating Hua Guofeng to the positions of premier and first vice chairman of the CCP — a deliberate, real signal positioning Hua as heir apparent during what turned out to be the final months of Mao's life.

The Gang of Four's Real Arrest (6 October 1976)

Hua played the central, decisive role in removing Mao's own radical allies from power. He personally summoned the Gang of Four's members to a meeting at party headquarters, where they were detained just after midnight on **6 October 1976** — Hua himself directly announcing to them the real reasons for their arrest, accusing them of conspiratorial acts against the party. The action carried real, decisive military and security backing, and its success secured Hua's own subsequent appointment as party chairman and head of the Central Military Commission.

The "Two Whatevers" (February 1977)

Hua's own political position, however, rested on genuinely shaky ideological ground. In February 1977, his administration issued what became a famous, and eventually damaging, slogan: the party would "resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave." The "Two Whatevers," as the

policy became known, tied Hua's own legitimacy directly to Mao's continued infallibility — a real political liability once China's own appetite for genuine reform began to grow.

Hua's real dilemma

Having built his own claim to power on faithfully continuing Mao's legacy, Hua had little real room to distance himself from the Cultural Revolution's own already-acknowledged excesses without undermining the very basis of his own authority.

Deng's real opening

Deng Xiaoping, twice purged during Mao's own lifetime, held no such constraint — giving him genuine political room to argue for a real break from rigid Maoist orthodoxy that Hua could not credibly offer.

Deng's Real, Gradual Return

Deng's own path back to real power was neither instantaneous nor guaranteed — a pattern this course has now traced more than once. A widely influential May 1978 newspaper article arguing that "practice is the sole criterion of truth" directly challenged Hua's own dogmatic "Two Whatevers" position, opening real public space for questioning policies justified purely by appeal to Mao's own past authority.

The November 1978 Central Work Conference & Hua's Real Concession

By November 1978, at the Central Work Conference, Hua faced mounting real pressure from senior party figures demanding a genuine break from Maoist orthodoxy. Hua eventually conceded ground, acknowledging that the real events of the 1976 Tiananmen Incident deserved formal reevaluation — a concession that significantly strengthened Deng's own political position in the weeks that followed.

The Third Plenum (December 1978)

The contest reached its real, decisive conclusion at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978. Hua effectively lost power at this meeting, and Deng Xiaoping

emerged as China's genuine, de facto leader — even though Hua would continue holding some formal titles for several more years, only losing the premiership to Zhao Ziyang in September 1980 and the party chairmanship to Hu Yaobang shortly afterward, before retaining purely ceremonial positions until his eventual 2002 retirement from the Central Committee.

Finding: the same gap between formal title and real power, one final time

Hua Guofeng held the party chairmanship and premiership on paper for years after December 1978, while Deng Xiaoping — holding no equivalent top formal title at the time — was the one genuinely setting China's own direction. This is a direct, satisfying echo of a pattern this course has traced repeatedly: Yuan Shikai's own power resting on personal military loyalty rather than his formal office (Chapter 2), Mao's real influence at Zunyi outpacing his own formal position for nearly a year (Chapter 5), and now Deng's own real authority outpacing Hua's continued formal titles by the same structural logic. Across this entire course, who actually held power and who merely held the title for it have been, again and again, two genuinely different questions.

Capstone: Tracing the Course's Own Recurring Threads

Ten chapters ago, this course opened with the Qing dynasty's collapse — an empire whose formal authority had already outlived its own real capacity to govern. Looking back across the whole arc, several real threads recur again and again:

Formal power vs. real power

Puyi's abdication (Ch.1), Yuan Shikai's presidency (Ch.2), the Zunyi Conference (Ch.5), and Deng's own rise over Hua (this chapter) all show the same real gap — a title and genuine control are not the same thing.

Alliance as a growth strategy

The CCP used both the First (Ch.4) and Second (Ch.6) United Fronts primarily to build real strength it could not have generated alone — a pattern that repeated itself deliberately, not by coincidence.

Invited criticism, then punished

The Hundred Flowers reversal (Ch.7), Peng Dehuai's purge (Ch.8), and the Cultural

Genuinely disputed history

The Long March's real distance (Ch.5), land reform's death toll (Ch.7), and the Great

Revolution's own purges (Ch.9) each show real dissent, whether invited or entirely routine, met with real, severe retaliation.

Leap Forward's famine toll (Ch.8) all show that even major, well-documented events can carry real, unresolved uncertainty in their own specific details.

The China that emerged from this course's own final chapters was neither the fractured, warlord-ridden state of Chapter 2 nor a simply linear march toward stability — it was a country whose real leadership repeatedly changed hands through a mix of alliance, purge, disputed legitimacy, and genuine ideological struggle, arriving at the threshold of Deng Xiaoping's own real Reform and Opening-up program in December 1978. Chinese Political History II: Reform, Opening & the Rise of Modern China picks up directly from that same Third Plenum, tracing what Deng actually built with the authority this chapter has just traced him winning.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why the "Two Whatevers" policy, though initially a real source of political strength for Hua Guofeng, ultimately became a genuine liability once China's appetite for reform grew.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Deng Xiaoping's own twice-purged history under Mao gave him a genuine political advantage over Hua Guofeng once the party's own appetite for reform began to grow.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose one other instance from this course, besides Deng-over-Hua, where a figure held real power without holding the matching formal title, and explain what made

that gap possible in that specific case.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **January 1976:** Zhou Enlai's death opens a leadership vacancy; Mao elevates Hua Guofeng to premier and first vice chairman
- **6 October 1976:** Hua personally leads the arrest of the Gang of Four, securing his own position as party chairman
- **February 1977:** the "Two Whatevers" policy ties Hua's legitimacy to unwavering continuation of Mao's own decisions
- **May 1978:** the "practice is the sole criterion of truth" article opens real public space to challenge Hua's dogmatic position
- **November 1978:** Hua concedes ground on reevaluating the Tiananmen Incident, strengthening Deng's own position
- **December 1978:** the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee — Hua effectively loses power; Deng becomes China's real, de facto leader
- **Course-wide thread:** formal title and real power diverge repeatedly across this course — Puyi, Yuan Shikai, Zunyi, and now Deng over Hua

Course Complete — Chinese Political History I: Empire's Fall, Revolution & Mao's China (10/10 chapters)