



The Chinese Communist Revolution in a Global Perspective

The Chinese Communist Revolution drew on earlier world revolutions, but in many ways, it went further. It's an important case in any global history of revolutions.

0:01

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Text defining liberal
revolutions and an image
of the American War of
Independence*

*Text defining social
revolutions and an image
of the Haitian Revolution*

*Image showing the
overlap of both types of
revolutions*

By the time you get to the 1940s in your study of world history, you will have encountered a lot of revolutions.

Some of these were mainly liberal revolutions meant to establish political rights for a middle class under the republic as a form of government. The American War of Independence is a good example of this type of revolution.

You have also seen social revolutions. They're still about liberation, but these revolutionaries took an even deeper dive and sought to overturn the existing class systems and economic structures that oppress them.

An early example is the Haitian Revolution.

Many revolutions fell somewhere in between, with some political and some social and economic change.

0:57

*Image of the Mexican
Revolution followed by a
timeline of revolutions*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

By the early 20th century, transformations like the Mexican Revolution usually split the revolutionaries into two groups, some who just wanted political rights for a middle class of people and others, usually socialists or communists, who are fighting for better lives and livelihoods for poor workers and peasants.

Hello, I'm Francesca Hodges, and today we are going to look at another revolution that saw this split between political liberals and communists and which ended up fundamentally transforming not just one country but the entire world, the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1945-1949.

China, at the beginning of the 20th century, had been racked by civil war, invaded by outside powers, and had almost collapsed under the weight of the Boxer Rebellion.

During this period, nobody suffered more from this chaos than the Chinese peasants, many of whom experienced famine, theft, and exploitation on an enormous scale.

1:50

*Images of suffering in
China*

*Images of rebellion in
Wuchang*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Map of China under the
rule of warlords*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

In October 1911, revolutionaries in the central Chinese city of Wuchang rebelled against the authorities. Their rebellion spread, and in 1912 the Chinese Republic was born.

This group of revolutionaries were mainly army officers and members of the middle class, and their revolution really only aimed to change the political structure of China not to transform the poverty of the peasants, and it wasn't even a successful political revolution.

By 1916, China had broken apart into many regions ruled by local warlords, while the central government had only limited authority.

Meanwhile, outside powers still tried to take bites of this vast country. The worst was Japan, which expanded its territory in China in the 1920s and 1930s. So now, there were two groups trying to reunite China and push back against the Japanese invasion.

2:57

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera, while clips
of Chinese nationalists
play*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Images of Communist
Party leaders*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Images of Allied victory
against the Japanese*

The first was a group of Chinese nationalists who formed a party known as the Guomindang. The Guomindang fought to strengthen the democratic republic, but they didn't want economic change. In 1925, a leader named Chiang Kai-shek took control of this party and became the official leader of the Republic of China.

The second group was the Chinese Communist Party. They didn't just want political change. They wanted a social and economic revolution to help peasants escape from poverty.

This party had many leaders, but the one we will get to know best is Mao Zedong.

At times, the Guomindang nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party work together.

Both fought against the Japanese for example before and during the Second World War. At the end of that war in 1945, Japan was defeated by the Allied Forces, including China alongside the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union.

The Japanese invasion was over, but China still had two competing factions, the Guomindang government under Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong. These two forces now turned on each other in what we know as the Chinese Communist Revolution.

4:15

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Francesca Hodges and
Prasenjit Duara converse,
facing camera*

*Images of the Chinese
Communist Revolution*

It's a lot of plot twists, right. And with the start of the Chinese Communist Revolution, it can be even harder to follow, both in terms of the history of China and as part of a history of global revolutions. That's why I decided I needed the help of an expert, so I reached out to Professor Prasenjit Duara at Duke University.

So starting off with our first question then. What was the Chinese Communist Revolution?

The Chinese Communist Revolution was essentially a massive assault to massively overhaul Chinese society as a first step in their ideology, in the ideology of the communists to overhaul global society so that there would be social justice and that the people at the bottom of the rung in peasant societies, in urban societies in China would have a greater share both in the economic and political dimensions of life and have a better life in general.

5:23

*Francesca Hodges and
Prasenjit Duara converse,
facing camera*

*Images showing the
tradition of peasant
rebellions in China and
new global ideologies*

So why did the Chinese Communist Revolution happen?

It happened because firstly China has had a long tradition of peasant rebellions. This is one that has happened before the Christian era.

You've had enormous Chinese peasant rebellions where they rose up, and the Chinese communists themselves believe that they drew on this tradition, but of course they gave it a modern twist. They gave it a modern ideology to look for more modern institutions and ideas of equality and justice and the removal of exploiters of these people, and so they drew on that and for that of course they

6:30

Francesca Hodges and Prasenjit Duara converse, facing camera, followed by clips of the Guomindang

Prasenjit Duara speaks, facing camera, while clips of the CCP play

7:45

Map of China showing the area under the CCP and Guomindang

Francesca Hodges speaks, facing camera

Francesca Hodges and Prasenjit Duara converse, facing camera

Prasenjit Duara speaks, facing camera, while clips of CCP and Vietnamese leaders meeting plays

8:55

Francesca Hodges and Prasenjit Duara converse, facing camera

Prasenjit Duara speaks, facing camera, with an image representing decolonization movements

Francesca Hodges speaks, facing camera

drew upon what were globally circulating ideas of a revolution that came from the Soviet Revolution and other areas of the world.

Speaking to the revolution itself, why did the communists win?

The Japanese occupation helped the Chinese Communist Party to a great extent because the Guomindang, while it was also opposed to Japanese occupation, was not able to persuade or convince the people to support them against the Japanese because they were not able to penetrate into society and show that they could bring about a better society than either was there before or under Japanese occupation.

Whereas, the Chinese communists had the mobilizing power. They had the organization to be able to penetrate deep into rural society and even appeal to the nationalism of the people against the Japanese occupiers who were very violent in many cases in China, in occupied China, and they also engaged in various kinds of reforms like giving land and giving dignity to the poor, the rural poor in particular.

In 1949, the Chinese communists were able to seize power from the Guomindang who fled to the island of Taiwan. Mao Zedong ruled a unified communist state, the People's Republic of China on the mainland.

Not only was China an independent country, it now had a role to play in two episodes of global significance, in the post-war era, decolonization and the Cold War.

I wanted to ask Professor Duara more about this role.

What role did the People's Republic of China play in decolonization after the revolution?

China did provide support for socialist, anti-colonial movements, and it provided material support in terms of arms, in terms of expert advice, in terms of money to anti-colonial, socialist movements.

And one of the best examples of that is perhaps Vietnam where it turned out, by the end of the Vietnam War, to have been the greatest supporter.

Can we then see the Chinese Communist Revolution as part of the Cold War struggle?

Yes, I think we can if we also recognize that the Chinese Communist Revolution generally supported decolonization movements but actively supported decolonization movements that were socialistically oriented.

I ended my conversation with Dr. Duara by asking about the successes and failures of the revolution.

Francesca Hodges and Prasenjit Duara converse, facing camera

What did the revolution achieve?

The Chinese Communist Revolution I think achieved a great deal. Once it was able to get through to the rural populace and implement their policies, they were able to achieve what we now consider human development indicators.

Prasenjit Duara speaks, facing camera, with images of China's achievements

So that they were able to improve the health of the people by bringing sort of basic health services, by providing basic education to vast numbers of illiterate people. They were able to create job skills, and they also created ideas of equality.

10:09

Francesca Hodges and Prasenjit Duara converse, facing camera

So women for instance were given very important roles in society that they did not have before, and this gave also a tremendous amount, and they were able to give some property to the poor who did not have, so this was also able to give some kind of measure of self-respect to people in society, to the lower classes of society.

To counter that question then, what were some of the failures of the revolution?

Well, I think that the principal failure is the cost of revolution.

Prasenjit Duara speaks, facing camera, with an image of an execution on the right

The cost of revolution in terms of human lives, which you know over a million people were probably killed during the land reforms which took away land from a lot of people and also killed a lot of people who were considered traitors or who had other religious beliefs and so on.

11:10

Francesca Hodges speaks, facing camera

Within the long history of revolutions in the modern age, few were as transformative as the Chinese Revolution. Building on a tradition of peasant uprisings within China and inspired by revolutions elsewhere, the Chinese Communist Party took power and overturned the lives of the wealthy and the poor alike.

Seventy years later, the Communist Party still governs China. In another video, we will explore its policies and their effects on the Chinese people in the era of intense globalization.