

briefly, a rudimentary history



All history is subjective. There is no such thing as "truth". Bearing this in mind, here is a rough outline of the essentially uncontroversial factual background to the region.

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With a population of over 1.3 billion people, China accounts for one-fifth of the world population. About 92% of the population is Han Chinese. The remaining 8%, representing 70 million people, belong to 55 ethnic minorities.

The country has lived under 24 dynasties and about 400 emperors, emperesses, kings and queens. Successive periods of civilisation, feudalism, war and amalgamation took place over the 3,300 years of China's history. China's major contributions to the world include the invention of paper-making, printing, the compass, and gunpowder – one we could have done without.

Its vast territory – spreading out over 9,600,000 km² – has also been the place for impressive public works, the most famous project being the Great Wall. China's Wall stretches 6,500 km from Shan-haiguan Pass on the east coast to Jiayuguan Pass in the Gobi Desert. Its construction started 2200 years ago when Emperor Qin Shi Huang decided to join independent walls that used to defend separate kingdoms after unifying China.

China and Hong Kong

By the 19th century, Chinese silks, teas and manufactured goods were in great demand. The British traded opium in exchange for the goods, although the drug was made illegal in 1836. This resulted in the Opium War, which broke out in 1841. China

was defeated by British military superiority and, under the terms of the peace treaty signed in 1898, Hong Kong was leased to the British for a period of 99 years.

A few years later China lost another part of its territory when Outer Mongolia declared its independence from the Imperial power in 1911. Nowadays it is still an independent country (Just called Mongolia); while Inner Mongolia is part of China; the Buryatya Republic (the third part of Greater Mongolia) is part of Russia.

China was under imperial rule until 1912 when Emperor Henry P'uYi was obliged to abdicate at the age of five. The Republic of China was then proclaimed and subsisted until 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung, set up the People's Republic of China.

Taiwan

The ousted leader of the Republic of China, Chiang Kai-shek, fled to Taiwan, where he established power with the remainder of his regime. The Chinese mainlanders who came over with Chiang Kai-shek represented 15% of the population of the island, but they maintained themselves in a position of power over the 85% native Taiwanese through tight control of the political system, police, military, educational system and media. They ruled the island under martial law for the next forty years following their arrival, living in a fantasy hope that they would some day recover the mainland.

Only four years earlier, at the end of World War II, the Taiwanese had warmly welcomed Chiang's troops because it ended 50 years of Japanese occupation. Throughout the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, Taiwan had been occupied by the Dutch, the Spanish, the French and the Chinese. It was not until 1887 that China declared it a "province" of the empire. However, following defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895, Imperial China ceded Taiwan to Japan in perpetuity.

The new occupant undertook the "Japanesation" of the Taiwanese society, forcing native people to adopt Japanese names, wear Japanese-style clothing, and eat Japanese food. The defeat of Japan in the Second World War put an end to the colonisation and Taiwan was returned to China. The Taiwanese's

initial joy of having got rid of the Japanese soon turned sour as the Chinese imposed a repressive regime that lasted until 1987. In the nineties, Taiwan took the road of democracy but the political status of the island is still pending. When Chen Shui-Bian of the Democratic Progressive Party won the presidential election in 2000, he pledged he would only declare independence if Beijing used military force against Taiwan.

Japan and Korea

The Sino-Japanese war, which resulted in a change of political domination over Taiwan from China to Japan in 1895, did not have its origins in a conflict over Taiwan itself, but rather the dominance over Korea. With a more modern military arsenal, Japan defeated China. Under the terms of the peace treaty Japan agreed to grant Korea's independence in exchange for control of Taiwan.

However, Korea did not enjoy its independence for long as Japan invaded the peninsula in 1910.

Japan remained in control of Korea until 1945 when it was defeated by the US. At the end of World War II, Soviets and Americans occupied the peninsula for supposedly a temporary period. But neither of the great powers wanted to withdraw because neither wanted to see the country fall into the other's hands. This resulted in the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The three-year conflict was particularly bloody and costly in terms of human lives with the estimated death of three million Koreans. One million Chinese soldiers, who had come to help the Communists, also lost their lives. Many Western countries, led by the US, had also sent troops. The war ended in 1953 with the separation of North and South Korea along the latitude line of the 38th parallel, a situation which continues today.

While neither the west nor the Communists managed to remove the other from Korea, the big winner of the Korean War seems to be Japan. By co-operating with the west and serving as a military base for western forces, Japan was able to regain its independence from US occupation and somewhat rehabilitate itself in the Western international community.