

The long march essay sample

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The Long March is embedded deep in the psychology of the Chinese communist party. Of the men who took power when the Communists finally won in 1949, almost all of them had been on the Long March in 1934.

In fact, the Long March was a long retreat from Chinese Communism's first experiment. The party, founded in the early 1920s, had siezed power in 1927 Jianxi province in the south east of the country, encouraging peasants to drive out feudal landlords and sharing out the land. Soon they controlled an area of 50 million people and represented a major threat to the Nationalist regime of the Guomindang of Chiang Kai Shek.

Nationalist forces surrounded Jianxi, which the Chinese communists had declared ' a Soviet'. In the subsequent siege, perhaps a million people died in the fighting and of starvation and disease brought on by the blockade.

After seven years, in 1934, the Communists realised the noose was tightening and they had to move or they would be crushed. In October 1934, 86, 000 communist fighters set out from Jianxi. By the time they reached Zunyi about four months later, they had already lost half their number. By the time they finally reached Shanxi province in the north, in the autumn of 1935 little more than a tenth of those who had set out were still alive. But they had reached the sanctuary of the north, remote mountains and difficult terrain where they could regroup and launch new offensives.

The Long March was the making of Mao Ze Dong. In Jianxi he had not even been among the leaders of the party but by the end he had been elected Chairman of the party. Others made their names at this time – Lin Biao, who

was to be prominent during the Cultural Revolution, Zhou En Lai and Deng Xiao Ping.

It was also the point at which Chinese communism started to forge its own path away from the Soviets. The Jianxi Soviet, from 1927-34, had been filled with Soviet advisers who had preached the orthodoxy of proletarian revolution. But Mao and his contemporaries had become fully aware that revolution in China could only happen if the peasantry – 90 percent of the population – were engaged. But as the Nationalists closed in, China's communists ignored advice from their Russian colleagues and forged their own tactics.

At the other end of the march, Mao spent time developing his own version of the theory of Communism in writings and pamphlets, leading to a further split with Moscow.

Around 7 percent of China's inhabitants are not ethnically Han Chinese. It's not a great proportion when you compare them to the minorities of other countries but nearly 80 million people in absolute terms – enough to form several states of their own.

Officially, China's constitution affords them national rights and privileges. But in practise, China's ethnic Han decision makers have usually regarded China as the only source of real civilisation and culture – the smaller nations and tribes within the state of China have in effect been offered little more than folklore rights, to sing their songs and dance their dances.

Most of the nationalities are relatively small groups that live in remote areas. They have traditionally faced a choice between the life of their ancestors back home or migration to the towns and cities – and integration into the Chinese culture and way of life. For most, that has not been a problem.

But there are two groups with their own developed sense of civilisation and nation – the Tibetans and the Uighurs.

China invaded Tibet in the 1950s and has annexed the formerly independent country as a province – sending the Dalai Lama into exile. There are about four million Tibetans.

The Uighurs are larger. They are Muslim and Turkic in culture, speaking a language that is derived from Turkish. Numbering some 40 million, their sense of nationhood is bound to have been fostered in recent years by the new independence of their Turkic cousins in the former Soviet Union. Uighur tribes extend over China's western border into the Central Asian countries of Kirghizistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

As population pressures have grown, more Han Chinese from the south-eastern corner of the country have been moved – often against their will – into the emptier parts of the country to the west and north. Many non-Han nations see this as colonialism by the back door.

The living standards and quality of life of the nations on the western fringes of the Chinese state are much lower than in the industrial hubs to the east.

Britain began to export opium to China from India at the end of the eighteenth century, where use of the drug quickly became a widespread social problem.

In the 1830s Chinese officers in the army wrote to Britain's Queen Victoria asking her to end the trade. When there was no reply, they confiscated and destroyed 20, 000 large chests of opium which amounted to a whole year's supply.

At this stage, the British East India Company called in the help of the British army, which declared war on China and defeated them decisively in the war which lasted from 1839-1842.

As a result of the war, China had to agree to open up more to trade from European countries and ceded Hong Kong to Britain on 150 year lease – it was the expiry of this lease which led to the return of Hong Kong to Chinese hands in June 1997.

The Opium Wars were the first of many armed interventions by the European colonial powers in Chinese affairs. In collective Chinese memory, it has gone down as a bitter humiliation and many argue even today that China's foreign policy still contains in it a large measure of proving that the country is once again free to take its own decisions and resist any unwelcome interference from abroad.

China's first census was held in AD 4, just a few years after a Jewish family in Palestine were hauled to Bethlehem from Nazareth to take part in the Roman equivalent. Whereas historians estimate the population of the whole of the

Roman empire at the time as perhaps 25 million, China recorded 57 million at that time.

Groaning population growth is nothing new in China.

China probably reached the 100 million mark just before the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century. By 1850 there were an estimated 400 million people in China, but there then followed decades of destruction and mayhem and the figure was not matched until the 1930s.

In 1953, the first full counting after the Communist Revolution of 1949, there were 582 million people.

If you look at population density China does not seem to have as great a problem as, say, Bangladesh, where one look at the map will make you imagine peasants cultivating pocket handkerchief fields and a family to a room in the slums of the cities.

But appearances are misleading. Over 90 percent of the population live in just a fifth of the land to the east and south of the country. Most of the rest is hard or impossible to live in without massive development – there is certainly no surplus land suitable for large scale influxes of peasants. China has 20 percent of the world's population but only seven percent of its agrarian areas.

China's official goal with the one-child family is to keep the total population down to 1.2 billion by the year 2050. But many think they stand no chance,

despite the draconian measures that have sometimes been taken to enforce the policy.

The current population stands at 1.1 billion, there's a baby boom from the Cultural Revolution now reaching adulthood and fertility, and the process of economic reform has meant that some peasant communities have now reverted to the traditional view that children - above all sons - increase the worth of the family, which is once again a key economic unit in the countryside.

By Po Chu-Yi, translated by Arthur Malet. A very modern reflection for the eighth century AD!

At dawn I sighed to see my hairs fall;

At dusk I sighed to see my hairs fall.

For I dreaded the time when the last lock should go...

They are all gone and I do not mind at all!

I have done with that cumbrous washing and getting dry;

My tiresome comb is forever laid aside.

Best of all, when the weather is hot and wet,

To have no top-knot weighing down on one's head!

I put aside my messy clothly wrap;

I have got rid of my dusty tasselled fringe.

In a silver jar I have stored a cold stream,

On my bald pate I trickle a ladle full.

Like on baptized with the Water of Buddha's Law,

I sit and receive this cool, cleansing joy.

Now I know why the priest who seeks Repose

Freehs his heart by first shaving his head.

When the Communists won China's civil war in 1949, sending Chang Kai Shek and two million Nationalist refugees scurrying over the water to Taiwan, the United States went into shock. It may have been Richard Nixon who popularised the domino theory, but it was around before him – the world's most populous nation had fallen to the Red scourge and the whole of east Asia was under threat.

China's new rulers, in the heat of revolution, immediately attacked American troops militarily as the two countries lined up on opposite sides of the 1950-53 Korean War.

It was to be another 20 years before President Richard Milhouse Nixon – shortly before he became famous for something else I can't quite remember – opened diplomatic ties in 1972.

Here's a very potted history of ties since then.

February 1972 – Nixon visits China and signs the Shanghai Joint Communiqué declaring that there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of China.

December 1975 – President Gerald Ford visits China.

January 1979 – China and the United States establish diplomatic relations after President Jimmy Carter switches recognition to Beijing from Taipei.

Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping visits the United States and wins American hearts by donning a cowboy hat at a Texas rodeo.

January 1984 – Premier Zhao Ziyang visits the United States. President Ronald Reagan visits China and in the following year Chinese President Li Xiannian makes visits the United States.

February 1989 – President George Bush visits China. He invited to a banquet several intellectuals identified with China's dissident movement.

June 1989 – Relations nosedive after China's army crushes pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds.

1992 – Bill Clinton attacks incumbent president George Bush during the election campaign for not taking a harder line over China. Later as president,

Clinton says trading rights for China will be linked to improvements in human rights.

1993 - China's President Jiang Zemin meets Bill Clinton at a multilateral summit.

1994 - Clinton reverses the policy of linking trade and human rights in China.

1995 - China recalls its ambassador to Washington for consultations after the Clinton administration allowed Taiwan's President to visit the United States.

1996 - China tests missiles near Taiwan to intimidate voters in elections there. The U. S. sends ships to the area to support Taiwan.

March 1997 - U. S. Vice President Al Gore visits Beijing.

October 1997 - Jiang visits the United States, the first such visit in 12 years.

A propaganda campaign at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution, in the early 1970s. Mao took on the spiritual heritage of the Chinese nation by encouraging the Red Guards and other zealous followers to denounce Confucius, a monk who had lived in the fifth century BC, for creating a philosophy where society was ruled by rigid hierarchies.

It was another full frontal attack on one of the traditional cornerstones of Chinese society - if Confucius became the villain, a group known as the Legalists were taken to be heroes, who struggled to set up a modern state in the fourth century BC with a system of laws and regulations.

Lost in obscure history it may have been but the campaign touched a genuine raw nerve among the Chinese. Ordinary people read the mountains of literature which spewed out of government presses and printing houses with an enthusiasm they never gave to more mind-numbing propaganda. One American analyst, Robert Oxnam, has compared its popular impact to Alex Haley's series 'Roots' a couple of years later which dramatised the history of slavery in the United States.

Possibly because China has the oldest continuous civilisation in the world, history has always been an immensely powerful tool in politics and it is by no means unusual – nor confined to the Communist era – to

find leaders developing elaborate visions of the past to explain their view of the present.

The Confucius campaign became linked to the downfall of one of Mao's closest colleagues, Lin Biao. As the guiding force of the People's Liberation Army in the 1960s, he had been a linchpin of the Cultural Revolution and was officially described as Mao's 'close comrade in arms'.

Lin Biao died in 1971 in what was officially described as a helicopter crash when he was trying to flee to Mongolia after an assassination attempt on Mao. Lin came to stand for the arrogant Party official who abuses his power. As there were enough officials like this, again the campaign took on some force.

It was expressed through pamphlets, comic books for children, morality plays and even musicals.

The effect of this campaign and others was to relieve the modern Chinese nation of the burden of their own history. For thousands of years, almost since Confucius had died, the Chinese have been presented with an idealised picture of their past, a classical China – of brave warriors and women with faces as beautiful as jade, of looming blue mountains and wise elders – that they could never live up to.

The “criticise Confucius” campaign attacked this reverence for tradition at its root and freed the Chinese from the sense of living in the Fall, giving them the sense that the present and the future could be as good as or even better than the past.

Mao Ze Dong launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966, in what appeared to be a massive cleansing policy to ensure the final victory of Mao and his clique over the rest of the Chinese Communist party.

Over the next decade, literally millions of people were sacked, imprisoned and otherwise reviled for hitherto hidden ‘bourgeois tendencies’ while tens of thousands were executed.

Mao encouraged students to rebel against authority, inform on their politically incorrect seniors, and join the Red Guard, the ideological militia that pushed the Cultural Revolution forward.

China collapsed into a state of near anarchy. Schools shut down, offices closed, transport was disrupted — it was so bad that even today, the full history is still far from known.

At one point, Red Guards were fighting pitched battles with Government troops outside of the Foreign Ministry building. Later on, Red Guard units ended up fighting each other for supremacy.

For all the turmoil, the Cultural Revolution seemed to accomplish little in terms of lasting economic or political achievement.

A key element in Mao's campaign was the support of the People's Liberation Army, led by General Lin Bao. Lin was initially very close to Mao but afterwards became estranged and conveniently died in a helicopter crash in Mongolia in 1971.

While the Cultural Revolution 'officially' ended in 1969, and the worst abuses stopped then, the politically charged atmosphere was maintained until Mao's death in 1976.

Qin Dynasty 221 BC to 206 BC

Established China as a united empire. Standardised weights, measures, coins, and the Chinese writing script.

Han Dynasty 202 BC to 220 AD

The growth of the Chinese civil service and contact with other cultures along what became the Silk Road into central Asia. The emergence of eunuchs as key figures in the imperial palace.

Anarchy 202 to 581

Sui Dynasty 581 to 618

Tang Dynasty 618 - 907

Song Dynasty 907 - 1279

Often considered to be the peak of Chinese civilisation, civil servants replaced landowners as society's elite, Confucianism became clearly established as a religion and a system of paper money was pioneered.

Mongols 1279 to 1368

It was Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, who invaded China and made Beijing the centre of his empire. It was the first time the Chinese empire had been ruled by non-Chinese.

Ming Dynasty 1368 - 1644

This was a period of restoration after the Mongols. Ignoring the growing European incursions into Asia, Ming emperors focused on keeping out nomads from the north and the Japanese to the east. The Great Wall was reinforced during this period.

Qing Dynasty 1644 - 1911

The Qing came out of the north - they were originally invited to clean up rebels who had pushed over the Ming Dynasty in Beijing. They continued the trend of turning China inward, barring European missionaries and blocking imports. This position gradually came under strain as the European powers grew in the nineteenth century.

Republic 1911 - 1949

The Qing dynasty abdicated under the persuasion of Dr Sun Yat Sen. But there was no clear successor and China once again disintegrated into rival warlords and social friction. The communist movement, beginning in the 1920s, slowly grew and became a powerful force in the 1930s. Then Japan, its imperial ambitions fired by an alliance with Nazi Germany, occupied Manchuria from 1941 to 1945.

Communism 1949 – ???

‘ There is no communism without China and no China without communism,’ is the famous saying of Mao Ze Dong, who finally led the communists to outright victory in 1949. Since then, the movement has undergone several massive upheavals: the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and economic reform beginning in the late 1970s. What next?

Mao Ze Dong gave an interview to the American journalist Edgar Snow in 1964, shortly before he launched his Cultural Revolution. Snow, a fluent Chinese speaker, wasn’t allowed to take notes but was allowed to use this official transcript. In it, what he says appears as direct quotes while what Mao says is a paraphrase. This extract comes from the Penguin Book of Interviews, published in 1994.

“‘ You have fundamentally changed the environment in China. Many wonder what the younger generation bred under easier conditions will do. What do you think about it?’

He also could not know, he said. He doubted that anyone could be sure. There were two possibilities. There could be continued development of the revolution towards Communism, the other possibility was that youth could negate the revolution, and give a poor performance: make peace with imperialism, bring the remains of the Chang Kai Shek clique back to the mainland, and take a stand beside the small percentage of counter-revolutionaries still in the country. Of course he did not hope for counter-revolution. But future events would be decided by future generations, and in accordance with conditions we could not foresee. From the long-range view, future generations ought to be more knowledgeable than we are, just as men of the bourgeois-democratic era were more knowledgeable than those of the feudal ages. Their judgement would prevail, not ours. The youth of today, and those to come after them would assess the work of the revolution in accordance with values of their own. Mao's voice dropped away and he half closed his eyes. Man's condition on this earth was changing with ever increasing rapidity. A thousand years from now all of them, he said, even Marx, Engels and Lenin, would possibly appear rather ridiculous."