



# Power, Change and Continuity

## The Case for Teaching Modern China in British Boarding Schools

### **Power, Change and Continuity: The Case for Teaching Modern China in British Boarding Schools**

According to recent research conducted by the Boarding Schools' Association, the UK remains the top choice of destination for international boarding school education amongst Chinese parents. Estimates suggest that some 11,000 Chinese pupils currently study at British boarding schools.

[The UK] "has a long and proud tradition of welcoming international students, from China and across the globe" (Fletcher, 2023).

Our school, like many others, is home to a number of pupils either from China or with Chinese heritage, enriching classroom discussions and school life, and adding to the school's international character. With this in mind, the topic of China between 1895

and 1976 has been introduced to Year 7 children. Aside from providing our international pupils with opportunities to understand their own past, Chinese history is fundamentally useful as an insight into our own British history.

This article explores the merits of this topic from a number of angles – not least as a vehicle for highlighting often marginalised voices, and as a topic which is rich in key historical concepts and themes.

### **Alignment with the KS3 National Curriculum and Scholarship Exam Requirements**

At Bilton Grange, our curriculum is centred around a central 'discovery question',

### **Did change in this period improve the lives of most Chinese people, or create more suffering?**

Introduced at the beginning of the topic, the aim for pupils is to problem-solve and detect over the course of the term, to determine a response to this conundrum.

Tied in with the overarching concept of change and continuity (social, cultural, economic, political and religious), this topic is particularly effective in meeting a multitude of KS3 National Curriculum requirements including coverage of:



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Beijing, China at the historic Temple of Heaven in the afternoon.

“Within a mere 80 years, children encounter imperial decline, revolution, nationalism and the rise of communism—making this period a goldmine for scholarship preparation.”

- The characteristic features of past non-European societies
  - The achievements and follies of mankind
  - Abstract terms such as ‘empire’, ‘civilisation’, ‘parliament’ and ‘peasantry’
  - Historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence, similarity, difference and significance
  - The connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales.
  - At least one study of a significant society or issue in world history and its interconnections with other world developments
- Additionally, over the past few years, I have discovered that this period of Chinese History is a goldmine in terms of material for 13+ academic scholarship exam preparation because it encompasses the key elements and

- themes that top Senior School examiners consistently value including:
- **Rich Chronology:** within a mere 80 years, children learn about a series of dramatic events including imperial decline, republican revolution, nationalist government and the rise of communism.
  - **Clear Themes:** Leadership, democracy, totalitarianism, collectivisation and nationalism, capitalism and communism to name but a few.
  - **Oodles of Drama:** Wars, uprisings, purge, disasters – take your pick of memorable examples for essays!
  - **Opportunities for Interpretation and Critical Thinking:** debates galore including controversial leaders such as Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek & Mao Zedong, the legacy of Chairman Mao, the role of radical policies such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and the role of foreign influence including that of Britain. Recently, pupils also undertook a debate

examining competing interpretations of when the Second World War began, analysing evidence supporting arguments that it originated with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 or the wider invasion of China in 1937, rather than the traditional Eurocentric date of 1939.

From an academic scholarship essay point of view, this topic allows pupils to easily reflect on cause, consequence, significance, continuity, and change using rich examples within a non-European context.

#### **Linking British and Chinese History: A Shared Global Story**

This period of Chinese History also acts to shine a light on Britain's own past. Although largely outside of the date parameters for my Year 7 topic, it is crucial that pupils are taught the legacy of events such as the Opium Wars and Britain's territorial expansion into areas such as Hong Kong – events which culminated in the “Century of Humiliation” (c. 1839–1949). Without an understanding of the influence of foreign intervention on the Chinese economy, society and politics, it is impossible for children to appreciate later events between 1895-1976, and indeed, the China we see today. Drawing attention to British imperial ambition in Asia, global trading networks and diplomacy, allows pupils to appreciate the (not always obvious) shared history between countries a world apart. Again, the opportunities for studying themes such as cause and consequence, as well as comparative history are abundant.

#### **Teaching Core Historical Themes Through the Lens of Chinese History**

Given the transient nature of China during the period, the scope for

introducing the more abstract and, potentially more challenging, terms is significant. Politically-speaking, this era provides stunning opportunities to expose pupils to the intangible concepts such as nationalism, democracy, autocracy, imperialism, republicanism in action. Economically-speaking, the overarching concepts of communism and capitalism are obvious, but there are also opportunities to discuss other important economic terms such as collectivisation, taxation, planned, agrarian & industrial economies. Crucially, it exposes children to the notion that there are different ways of doing things – that the democratic capitalism that we take for granted in Britain is by no means ubiquitous throughout the world.

Here, we had some particularly lively debates recently, around the merits and shortfalls of communism. Pupils showed that they were able to distinguish between theory and practice, with one pupil from Hong Kong using the term ‘unrealistic utopia’ to describe socialism and collectivisation! The role of the History teacher is not in discrediting one political economic model over another, but rather to foster an environment for reasoned debate amongst children who can appreciate that the Eurocentric modus operandi is not the only way to run a country.

Furthermore, this topic provides pupils with a pertinent case study against which to compare and contrast the events of other times and places. Key threads such as republicanism can be drawn out and juxtaposed; for example, China’s 1911 Revolution provides an interesting comparison opportunity with both the French Revolution (1789) and the American

War of Independence (1775-83). Likewise, ‘Mao’s Cult of Personality’, use of propaganda, Cultural Revolution and its associated purges provide a fascinating parallels with the Stalin’s Great Purge held within 1930s USSR.

### **China Today: Interpreting Current Events Through History and Preparing Pupils for the Future**

“China’s ascendance represents the most significant shift in global power since the end of the Cold War. Centuries of American and European hegemony are being challenged by advancements in technology, economic growth, and diplomatic relations that are all led by China” (Spillane, 2023, LSE).

Our children will undoubtedly live and work in a global economy dominated, at least in part, by China. In order to engage with the China of the present and future, one must seek to understand the China of the past. Through an appreciation of events such as European colonialism in Asia, the ‘One Hundred Years of Humiliation’, the often-testing relationship with Japan, the battle between Nationalism and Communism, and policies such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, pupils can begin to understand the China of today. Why are there different opinions over the sovereignty of Taiwan? Why have there been protests in Hong Kong? How has the one-child policy helped to produce the aging population experienced by China today? These are all questions with history at their heart. Through an understanding of Chinese History between 1895-1976, our students are at least in a place to appreciate the China we see and interact with today. Global mindedness in practice!

“In order to engage with the China of the present and future, one must seek to understand the China of the past.”



### **Key Takeaways**

- Teaching modern China strengthens historical thinking and curriculum goals
- Chinese history deepens understanding of Britain and global interconnections
- It introduces complex political and economic ideas in a tangible way



### **Further recommendations:**

#### **Sun Yat-sen:**

- ‘History Extra’ videos found on YouTube provide comprehensive overviews of complex events in cartoon format.

#### **Foot Binding:**

- ‘ITV News: Banned practice of foot binding blighting China’s oldest women | ITV News [watch on YouTube](#)

#### **The Rise of Mao:**

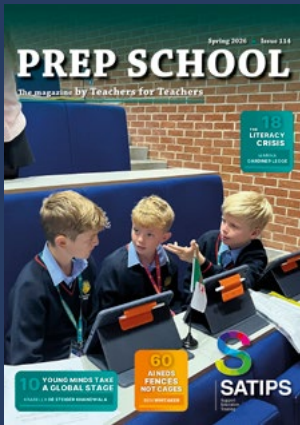
- [Watch on YouTube](#)

#### **The Great Leap Forward:**

- [Watch on YouTube](#) (only share up to 13:42).

#### **The Cultural Revolution:**

- [Watch on YouTube](#)
- [Watch on YouTube](#)
- [Watch on YouTube](#)



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