

II. China and the World We Live In

A. “Made in China”

1. In the average American household today one finds products from around the world, but more products built in one country than in any other: China.
2. The “Made in China” label is on smartphones, computers, coffee cups, plush toys, pens, eyeglasses, and just about everything else.
3. It is the kind of thing one could easily take for granted, but it actually represents a revolutionary transformation that one needs to understand in order to make sense of the world.
4. Just two generations ago, China was such a poor and isolated country that almost *nothing* was made there beyond what was needed to serve the barest needs of the Chinese people themselves. A country of a billion people, it had less collective wealth than Canada, a country of only 20 million at the time. Then a radical shift occurred. China became the second largest economy in the world. What happened?

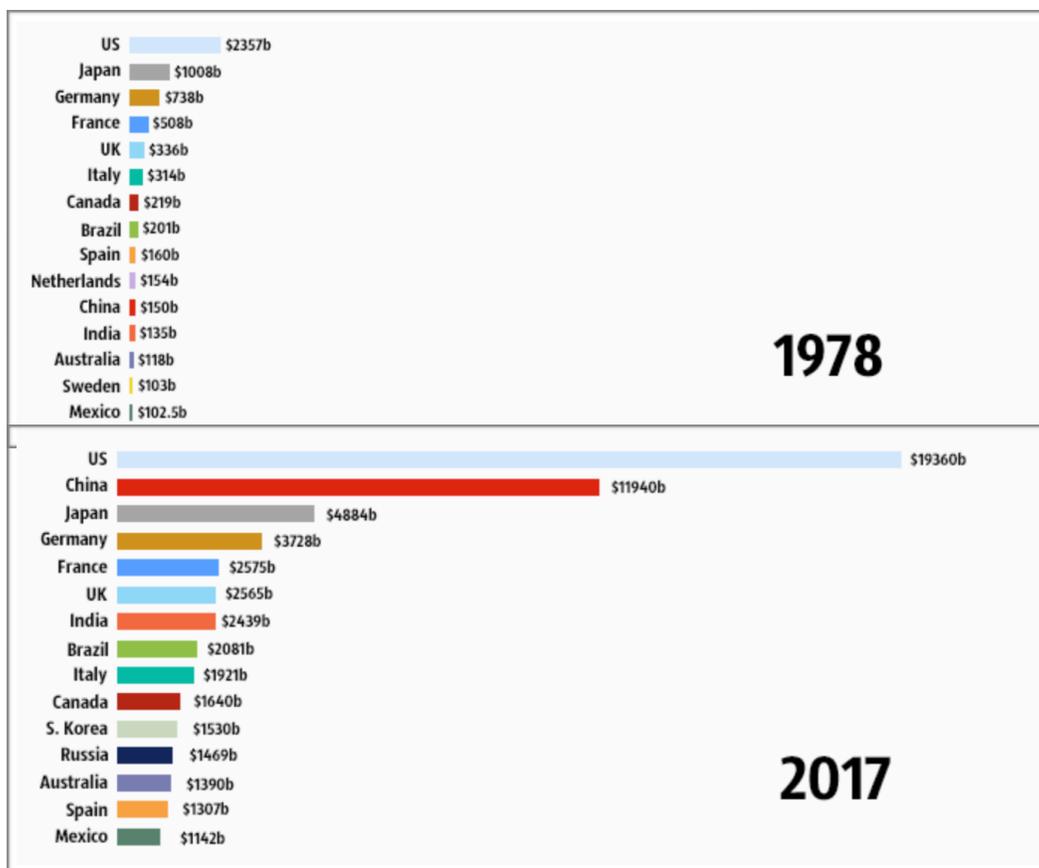
B. 1978: *The Cardinal Anchor Fact of Chinese History Today*

1. The reason why China, previously a poor and isolated country, became a world economic leader is that in **1978** a radical change occurred in its government.
2. The leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, announced “*To get rich is glorious!*”
3. This was a declaration of intent for his country. The poverty of China up to that point had perversely been imposed by its own government, which controlled the use of property and prevented trade through the form of dictatorial government broadly known as “communism.”
4. Communism is a form of government that originated in European culture a little over a hundred years ago. It was imposed on Russia (thereafter known as the Soviet Union) and a host of other countries through violent revolutions and military occupations during the twentieth century, and it remains controversial to this day. Why China in particular was a communist country, what kind of communism it employed, and in what regards it is still a communist country, will all be part of our studies.
5. For now, it will suffice to highlight one key



This “before and “after” picture of Shanghai, an important city in China, shows how much has changed since 1978.

- concept in communism: the government controls all property.
6. In **1978**, despite being the leader of the communist party of China, Deng Xiaoping did something completely anti-communist. He encouraged private property, private enterprise, and private trade for profit. To be more precise, he ended the government’s policy of outlawing these things, and allowed the Chinese people to resume commercial ties with the world.
 7. It can hardly be surprising that the Chinese people made enormous material progress since **1978**.
 8. It is the policy of economic freedom started by Deng Xiaoping that explains China’s amazing success over the past forty years and the spread of all things “Made in China” around the world.



This bar chart compares the size of largest economies (b = billions of dollars per year) in the world almost forty years apart. Since 2017, China has continued to close the gap with the United States.

C. Reconnecting with China's Past

1. One of the many harms done to the Chinese people by their communist leaders was the denial of their history. China's communists took over the country when it was especially weak. They attacked China's culture as the reason for its weakness, and tried to disconnect China from its ancient past to make the Chinese people live in a new way.
2. As we will see, the Chinese people generally feel uncomfortable, even humiliated, by the modern history of China that we will study this year. This is because they were completely overpowered by Europeans, and they would rather forget this story than study it closely to learn the lessons it has to offer.
3. Another factor that causes modern Chinese people (just like Americans) to be disconnected from their past is modern materialism. The modern obsession with upgrading to the latest gadget and consumer technology does tend to distract people from more profound values.
4. Although modern Chinese have been more disconnected from their past than ever, the Chinese government decided more recently to try to revive the people's sense of pride in China's ancient past. The government created the *Xia Shang Zhou Chronology Project* to study the three most ancient periods of China's history: the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties.
5. The project resulted in the creation of an official Chinese history stretching back to **c.2200 BC**.

D. The Legendary Emperors

1. Before even the oldest Chinese dynasty, the Xia dynasty, Chinese legends tell of the “Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors.”
2. This group of demi-gods, or god-like rulers, including the famous “Yellow Emperor,” is credited with the invention or achievement of all of the crucial necessities of life, such as the taming of fire, the invention of homebuilding, and the invention of agriculture.
3. Historians find such myths in every culture, and this helps them to understand that such stories are myths and not history. (In ancient Greece, for instance, the taming of fire by man is presented as a myth, whereby the rebellious titan Prometheus steals the power of fire from the gods and gives it to man.)
4. The exaggerated character of these stories and their “divine” characters who are responsible for everything good in life is another clue that these are not real history.
5. The stories of the legendary emperors are also not supported by enough evidence to create a “chronology”—a logical story over time. (“Chronos” is a greek word for “time.” “Logos” is the Greek root word of the English word “logic.” A *chronological* story is a story that makes sense in time.)

E. c.2200 BC: The Founding of the Xia Dynasty

1. Although supported by little evidence, the beginning of the Xia dynasty is a story that reveals some important Chinese beliefs about government that have continued to be upheld as a tradition until this very day. This allows it to serve as an anchor fact of Chinese culture.
2. The Xia dynasty is said to have begun when the ruler of China at the time, King Shun, passed on power *not* to his son but to one of his ministers named Yu (who was *not* a member of Shun's family).
3. Yu was chosen by Shun because he had proven his desire and ability to serve the needs of China's farmers by building dams and irrigation canals as a way to cope with the flooding of the Yellow river.
4. The story of King Yu “taming the waters” has always been considered important to the Chinese. It shows how they believe in *benevolent despotism*. (A “despot” is a person who has absolute power. A “benevolent” ruler is one who wishes his people well, and strives to serve them.)
5. In **1978**, when Deng Xiaoping granted permission to his people to trade with the world, he was acting as a *benevolent despot*. The amazing thing about Chinese history and culture is that he could do something like that *because of a tradition stretching back to c.2200 BC*. In no other culture is that possible.