“This is a priceless collection on changes and developments of China since 1919. Professors, researchers, and students of China and Chinese foreign relations will find this collection fascinating and tremendously useful. It is wise to produce a digitised version of the materials; this greatly facilitates research and studies of contemporary China.”

Professor Cindy Yik-yi Chu, Associate Director, David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University
Available in six sections, this digital collection makes available all British Foreign Office files dealing with China, Hong Kong and Taiwan between 1919 and 1980.

In 1919, despite the recent revolution, the bulk of the Chinese population had not been touched by industrialisation or modernisation. Through the inter-war turmoil of competing governments – encapsulated in the rivalry between the Nationalist Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist Mao Zedong – warlordism, civil wars and Japanese invasion, China emerged reunified under communism in 1949, and by the 1980s – only seventy years after revolution – had transformed itself into a growing economic superpower.

Due to the unique nature of the relationship between Britain and China, these formerly restricted first-hand accounts provide unprecedented levels of detail into a turbulent period in Chinese history.

The collection includes diplomatic despatches, letters, newspaper cuttings, political pamphlets, reports of court cases and other materials, representing a constant exchange of information between London and the British embassies and consulates that were located in various Chinese cities throughout these decades.

In addition, a continual dialogue on East Asian issues between Britain, its Commonwealth partners and the USA provides fascinating research material for students and researchers studying the Cold War or Sino-Soviet relations.

After 1949 Britain was one of the first countries to recognise the new People’s Republic and maintained special interests in the region, not least its possession of Hong Kong, leading to its often taking a different policy approach to the United States, as demonstrated in this material.

Sourced from The National Archives, UK, these documents allow students and researchers intimate access to eye-witness accounts, weekly and monthly summaries, annual reviews, reports and analyses, economic assessments, synopses on Chinese personalities, and much more.
1919 – 1929

KUOMINTANG, CCP AND THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was officially founded in 1921, and from small beginnings developed an uneasy “United Front” with the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Third International. As these files show, this gave rise to a wave of Chinese nationalism and heralded a new era of populism and political mobilisation.

Key developments highlighted by the files for this period include:

• The anti-imperialist May 4th Movement, which grew out of student demonstrations against the Treaty of Versailles.
• The establishment by Sun Yat-sen of a revolutionary base in southern China and his attempts to forge an alliance to unite a very fragmented nation.
• Leadership of the Kuomintang by Chiang Kai-shek after Sun Yat-sen’s death in 1925, culminating in the military campaign known as the Northern Expedition, 1926-1928.

1930 – 1937

THE LONG MARCH, CIVIL WAR IN CHINA AND THE MANCHURIAN CRISIS

Key features of this period are:

• The unofficial formation of the Jiangxi Soviet by Mao Zedong and Zhu De in 1930, formalised a year later.
• The Long March, beginning in Jiangxi province in October 1934 and continuing to 1937, when the Second Sino-Japanese War forced a temporary cessation of hostilities between the CCP and KMT.
• The KMT encirclement campaigns and the escape of the Red Army.
• The problems of land reform and redistribution.
• Mao Zedong’s assumption of the leadership of the CCP in January 1935.
• Japanese control of the South Manchurian Railway and the two major seaports of Dalian and Port Arthur (Lüshunkou).

1930 – 1937

THE LONG MARCH, CIVIL WAR IN CHINA AND THE MANCHURIAN CRISIS

Key features of this period are:

• Chinese reunification in 1928, nominally uniting all of China under the Kuomintang government.
• Increasing conflict between Communists and KMT.
• The influence of Soviet advisors to the CCP.
• Threats to the foreign ownership of many large enterprises in China.
• Major crop failures and the starvation of millions of peasants.
• Chiang Kai-shek’s condemnation and outlawing of the CCP in April 1927.
• Failure of Communist uprisings in four provinces in 1927.
• Japanese clashes with Kuomintang forces in 1927 and 1928.

Domination of Japanese policy in China by militaristic factions.
• Mukden Incident in Manchuria (September 1931), engineered by Japanese military personnel as a pretext for the invasion of Manchuria.
• Japanese forces pushing southwards from Manchuria from 1936 onwards, leading to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War.
1949 – 1956

THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION

These files cover events from the seizure of power by the Communist forces, with dramatic accounts of the civil war years, the fall of Nanjing, the fate of HMS Amethyst on the Yangtze River and the repercussions for international companies with a strong presence in China, through to Mao Zedong’s first attempts to implement a Soviet-style command economy, with the emphasis on heavy industry.

• General Joseph Stilwell’s mission to coordinate US aid to the KMT after December 1941.
• Attempts by the US ‘Dixie’ mission to forge links with the CCP and exploit Mao’s wariness of Stalin.
• Soviet seizure of Manchuria from the Japanese in 1945.
• CCP approach to land reform 1945-1949, involving radical attacks on the traditional landed elites.
• The feeble nature of the League of Nations and its pronouncements on China.
• Redistribution, agriculture and land reform.
• American military support and financial aid for Taiwan.
• Quemoy, the Matsu islands and the First Taiwan Straits Crisis.
• The US embargo on exports to China.

There is excellent material on:
• The Communist revolution and all the major figures involved.
• China and the Korean War.
• Industrialisation and the Five-Year Plan, 1953-1957.
• Differences between British and American policy on China.
• Hong Kong, Nanjing and Shanghai.
• The US embargo on exports to China.

“This is an immensely powerful resource for our understanding of the early Cold War era in China. British diplomats were present in China and able to witness the country’s massive social transformation under Mao. These documents are crucial in helping us to answer many key questions on both domestic and international policy in the early years of the People’s Republic of China.”

Professor Rana Mitter, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford
**1957 – 1966**

**THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD**

Many files focus on industrial and economic development, the Great Leap Forward campaign and the Socialist Education Movement. The material in this section provides evidence for researchers to analyse the impact, successes and failures of these policies. It also allows an in-depth examination of the social, political, economic and cultural changes that transformed twentieth-century China.

After 1957, Shell was the only British company left in Shanghai and its office was run by Chinese managers. All other firms had retreated to Hong Kong. Shell closed its Shanghai office in 1966. With the failure of the “Great Leap Forward” and the repudiation of orthodox Soviet-style economic measures, the 1960s also witnessed important changes in China’s foreign policy and increasing tensions in Sino-Soviet relations. These developments are scrutinised in detail by British officials in China and at the Foreign Office in London. They form the subject of regular discussions with the United States and Commonwealth partners.

**1967 – 1980**

**THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION**

This material focuses on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976, with factional power struggles and student demonstrations:

- Increased conflict between Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, causing political instability after 1966.
- The emergence of Lin Biao as Mao Zedong’s second in command, followed by Lin Biao’s attempted coup.
- The Red Guard factions, nationwide chaos and economic disarray.
- Hua Guofeng’s policies as the Communist Party’s new chairman, followed by the re-emergence of Deng Xiaoping and his brand of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

Mao Zedong portrait, late 1960s, attributed to Zhang Zhenshi (1914–1992) and a committee of artists. [RIGHT] Deng Xiaoping, January 1979
Archives Direct

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