



DILEMMAS OF VICTORY

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC
OF CHINA



EDITED BY

JEREMY BROWN AND PAUL G. PICKOWICZ

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Acknowledgments

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In addition to the authors contributing to this volume, several other outstanding scholars participated in the conference. We wish to thank Robert Cliver of Humboldt State University and Xu Lanjun of Princeton University for sharing their research findings with us and for serving as effective and insightful discussants. Several doctoral students in the Department of History at the University of California, San Diego, played important supporting roles during the conference. Jeremy Murray served as conference rapporteur, while Brent Haas, Ellen Huang, Dahpon David Ho, Matthew Johnson, Elya J. Zhang, and Xiaowei Zheng provided crucial logistical support. Betty Gunderson and Julia Kwan, staff members of the Program in Chinese Studies at the University of California, San Diego, did much to facilitate conference scheduling, communications, and manuscript preparation.

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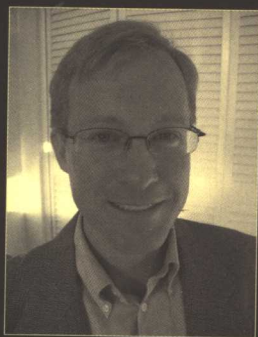
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Our late colleague Fred Wakeman inspired many people. Generous and supportive, he was one of the guiding lights of the conference. Fred's marvelous chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book. For these reasons, and much more, we dedicate *Dilemmas of Victory* to this great scholar and respected friend.

THIS ILLUMINATING WORK examines the social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of the Communist takeover of China. Instead of dwelling on elite politics and policy-making processes, *Dilemmas of Victory* seeks to understand how the 1949–1953 period was experienced by various groups, including industrialists, filmmakers, ethnic minorities, educators, rural midwives, philanthropists, stand-up comics, and scientists.

A stellar group of authors that includes Frederic Wakeman, Elizabeth Perry, Sherman Cochran, Perry Link, Joseph Esherick, and Chen Jian shows that the Communists sometimes achieved a remarkably smooth takeover, yet at other times appeared shockingly incompetent. Shanghai and Beijing experienced it in ways that differed dramatically from Xinjiang, Tibet, and Dalian. Out of necessity, the new regime often showed restraint and flexibility, courting the influential and educated. Furthermore, many policies of the old Nationalist regime were quietly embraced by the new Communist rulers.

Based on previously unseen archival documents as well as oral histories, these lively, readable essays provide the fullest picture to date of the early years of the People's Republic, which were far more pluralistic, diverse, and hopeful than the Maoist decades that followed.



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Contents

Acknowledgments	<i>xi</i>
1 The Early Years of the People's Republic of China: An Introduction <i>Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz</i>	<i>1</i>
I URBAN TAKEOVER	<i>19</i>
2 "Cleanup": The New Order in Shanghai <i>Frederic Wakeman Jr.</i>	<i>21</i>
3 Masters of the Country? Shanghai Workers in the Early People's Republic <i>Elizabeth J. Perry</i>	<i>59</i>
4 New Democracy and the Demise of Private Charity in Shanghai <i>Nara Dillon</i>	<i>80</i>
II OCCUPYING THE PERIPHERY	<i>103</i>
5 From Resisting Communists to Resisting America: Civil War and Korean War in Southwest China, 1950–51 <i>Jeremy Brown</i>	<i>105</i>

6	The Chinese Communist "Liberation" of Tibet, 1949–51 <i>Chen Jian</i>	130
7	Big Brother Is Watching: Local Sino-Soviet Relations and the Building of New Dalian, 1945–55 <i>Christian A. Hess</i>	160
8	The Call of the Oases: The "Peaceful Liberation" of Xinjiang, 1949–53 <i>James Z. Gao</i>	184
III	THE CULTURE OF ACCOMMODATION	205
9	The Crocodile Bird: <i>Xiangsheng</i> in the Early 1950s <i>Perry Link</i>	207
10	"The Very First Lesson": Teaching about Human Evolution in Early 1950s China <i>Sigrid Schmalzer</i>	232
11	Acting Like Revolutionaries: Shi Hui, the Wenhua Studio, and Private-Sector Filmmaking, 1949–52 <i>Paul G. Pickowicz</i>	256
12	Creating "New China's First New-Style Regular University," 1949–50 <i>Douglas A. Stiffler</i>	288
IV	FAMILY STRATEGIES	309
13	The Ye Family in New China <i>Joseph W. Esherick</i>	311
14	Birthing Stories: Rural Midwives in 1950s China <i>Gail Hersbatter</i>	337

15	Capitalists Choosing Communist China: The Liu Family of Shanghai, 1948–56 <i>Sberman Cochran</i>	359
	Notes	387
	Contributors	445
	Index	449

1

The Early Years of the People's Republic of China: An Introduction

Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz

EVER SINCE 1953, when the First Five-Year Plan signaled the close of Mao Zedong's experiment with New Democracy and ushered in the beginning of a transition to socialism, China's early 1950s period has disappeared from the radar screens of successive waves of observers. This is not surprising. As attention turned to explaining dramatic new developments in China, including the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and post-Mao reforms, who was interested in dwelling on the period immediately following the Communist takeover of the mainland in 1949? After all, the first years of the People's Republic of China were transitional, and their direct relevance to the upheavals that followed remained unclear.

Officials and academics in China, many of them personally shaken by the traumas of the period after 1953, have been quicker than their counterparts in the West to assess the early People's Republic. In official histories, the early 1950s appear as a "golden age" of relative stability, economic recovery, and social harmony.¹ Indeed, fostering unity was official party policy during the early 1950s. Mao's principles of New Democracy promised a "national united front" that would make room for capitalists and many other Chinese who did not fit neatly into the revolutionary "worker-peasant alliance."

It is no coincidence that post-Mao reform-era publications promote positive memories of the early 1950s: the two periods share striking

similarities. After the founding of the People's Republic in October 1949—and again in the late 1970s after Mao died—a massive wave of rural migrants entered cities, private factories coexisted alongside large state enterprises, nongovernmental and church groups operated next to Communist Party–led organizations, and capitalists and other nonparty figures supported the regime and played a role in shaping its policies.

Yet as anyone who lived through both periods knows, 2001 was not 1951. In the early 1950s, China was recovering from a century of imperialist invasion, civil war, and natural disaster. Governing a country as huge, diverse, fragmented, and poverty-stricken as China was an overwhelming task, especially for a party that had spent the previous two decades in the hinterland. Immediately after taking power, the Communists faced immense challenges. By late 1950, the People's Republic was fighting a war against the United States in Korea, while at the same time vast regions of China, roiled by armed insurrections, were only nominally under Communist control. But this period in the early People's Republic was also a time of hope and enthusiasm. Inclusive new institutions were established. In cities, members of the bourgeoisie were expected to reform themselves and to sacrifice their interests for the greater good; but they were also invited to contribute to building a new society. In villages, landlords had less room to maneuver, especially after late 1950, when moderate land reform policies gave way to more violent class struggle.²

The first generation of Western scholarship on China in the early 1950s hinted at the challenges, uncertainties, hopes, and fears of the time. By 1953 most Western journalists, students, and clergy had left China, but just four years earlier many witnessed the Communist takeover of large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Their accounts ranged from sympathetic to virulently anti-Communist. All were concerned with the question of whether the Communists had rightfully won the civil war or whether the victors of 1949 had simply filled a political vacuum left by the utter collapse of the Nationalists.

Firsthand accounts confirmed that the Nationalist government had lost popular support and that people from all sectors of society were ready for change. Intellectuals, students, and others not necessarily predisposed to support communism warmly welcomed the disciplined rural troops who marched into China's eastern cities in 1948 and 1949.³ Yet an undercurrent of fear was also evident in these initial reports, especially

those that covered the new regime's efforts to clean up and remake society through reforming intellectuals and suppressing "counterrevolutionaries" in 1950 and 1951.⁴

Scholars also debated whether the Chinese Communist Party was a pawn in a vast international conspiracy masterminded by the Soviet Union. The party had been governing areas of north-central and north-east China for more than ten years, but the outside world knew little about the movement. The growing Red Scare in the United States made it easier to argue that the Chinese Communist movement was dutifully following Moscow's orders. China was certainly cooperating with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, but it was also following its own nationalist path. To Mao, Soviet support may have contributed to the victory of the revolution, but the Chinese people had "stood up" on their own. However, the details of the relationship and the nature of interactions between Chinese citizens and Soviet technicians remained obscure.

Evidence that China's Communist government used violent and coercive methods provided fodder for those predisposed to condemn new China as a "totalitarian" society like the Soviet Union. The first academic books on China in the early 1950s, based mostly on intelligence reports and translations of Chinese newspapers, depicted an all-powerful state whipping citizens into meek obedience. Such works concluded that most Chinese people were living "a life of fearful apathy" and that state terror had "cripple[d] any will which the Chinese people might have to resist."⁵

Close studies of decision making at the top levels of Communist leadership continued in this "know the enemy" vein but differed on whether Chinese leaders were blindly following the orders of the Soviet Union. For example, Allen Whiting argued that China entered the Korean War in response to a genuine threat to its national security, not as a part of a Soviet plot.⁶ Even in the context of the cold war, some scholars attempted to analyze China on its own terms. However, source limitations and a top-down approach meant that the important domestic repercussions of the Korean War remained unexplored.

Other works based on personal experience or interviews with exiles in Hong Kong suggested that China's new leaders were interested in more than national security, political control, and economic modernization. The revolution seemed to be unfolding on a personal, psychological, even spiritual level. Robert Jay Lifton's *Thought Reform and the*

Psychology of Totalism and Allyn Rickett and Adele Rickett's *Prisoners of Liberation*, a memoir by two Americans who experienced thought reform in a Chinese prison and came to support the Communist regime, showed a system that instead of indiscriminately killing potential enemies offered them salvation in exchange for complete allegiance.⁷

Taken together, memoirs and academic works written in the 1950s indicated that China's rulers had consolidated power through a mixture of popular enthusiasm for change plus terror and indoctrination. But reliance on refugee interviews and newspaper reports left many questions unanswered. By necessity, these studies mostly focused on large cities where the new regime had concentrated its forces, perhaps overestimating the party's control over society and obscuring events in the more than 80 percent of China that was still rural in 1950.⁸ Were all of China's diverse regions undergoing the same process at the same time? Did the changes of the early 1950s affect villagers and city residents, men and women, and Han people and ethnic minorities in similar ways? Had people's allegiances to family, native place, and professional success completely disappeared?

A new generation of graduate students and young professors in the social sciences began to shed light on these questions in the 1960s and 1970s. New works focused on state-society relations and the balance between old (traditional Chinese culture) and new (communist revolution) in the early People's Republic. Several trends emerged during this second wave of scholarship on China in the early 1950s. First, source constraints meant that scholars still paid more attention to the organization and functions of the party-state than to local society. Second, political scientists and sociologists sought to explain how policies were implemented but not how they were experienced. Third, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 led to a heightened awareness of conflict and divisions within China that had been present throughout the 1950s.⁹

Before the Cultural Revolution shattered images of a cohesive society guided by a united party leadership, Franz Schurmann's *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* detailed the Leninist institutions through which the party managed Chinese society.¹⁰ Schurmann held that in the 1950s the party-state had demolished and replaced traditional networks of authority. But as other social scientists continued to look more closely at individual provinces or cities, it became clear that

preexisting patterns and divisions had not disappeared. Even for Communist officials, ties to family and native place coexisted with loyalty to nation and party during the early 1950s. Ezra Vogel's *Canton under Communism* exposed friction between locals and outsiders in Guangdong province. Local cadres who had been active in the Communist underground for years chafed at taking orders from the northerners who entered the province en masse in 1949. Tensions worsened when outsiders criticized and overruled Guangdong natives' mild approach to land reform.¹¹ Vogel's attention to the wide differences in language and outlook among cadres in a single province provided a more complex picture of the party in the early 1950s.

The Cultural Revolution provided striking evidence of divisions within the party and Chinese society as a whole. Scholars traced disagreements on basic policy back to the 1950s. In his study of Tianjin, political scientist Kenneth Lieberthal distinguished between Mao Zedong's mass mobilization model of governance and the party's top-down organization, championed by second-in-command Liu Shaoqi.¹² Liu had visited Tianjin in spring 1949 and spoke out against radical revolution and confrontational demands directed at the upper strata of urban society. During the three years following Liu's visit, urban cadres pursued a policy of relative moderation and accommodation. Many city residents remained untouched by Communist policy and propaganda. Only individuals in targeted groups, such as "counterrevolutionaries" and members of religious secret societies, felt the strong hand of party rule. For Lieberthal, it was the Korean War and the Three-Anti (*sanfan*) and Five-Anti (*wufan*) campaigns of 1952 and 1953 that finally tightened Communist control over the city and ushered in a "second revolution." Readers learned that these turning points were even more pivotal than the 1949 takeover but still knew little about how individuals experienced the campaigns of the early 1950s.

As long as mainland China remained closed to foreign researchers, reliance on newspapers and exile testimony would limit the scope of works on the early 1950s. This situation changed after Mao died. Access to new sources radically reshaped views of the Mao era. Beginning in the late 1970s, foreign scholars could conduct interviews, though government supervisors were often present. More recently, it became possible, even common, to talk to individuals about the past without any official involvement. And although access and holdings vary widely

from place to place, in general Chinese archives have been more forthcoming with documents and reports dating from the early 1950s than from later periods. For instance, county-level archives have allowed scholars to explore how rural women took advantage of the 1950 Marriage Law for their own purposes.¹³ Documents from municipal archives have led to much more detailed accounts of the Communist takeover of city institutions and the reordering of urban society.¹⁴

Recent official publications have also provided a wealth of detail on early 1950s politics, especially at the elite level. While many such works are dedicated to celebrating the “golden age” following “liberation,” they often provide specific details about eradicating “counterrevolutionaries” and anti-Communist “bandits.”¹⁵ These new sources have led to breakthroughs in understanding the revolutionary and nationalist character of Mao’s foreign policy, including his decision to enter the Korean War.¹⁶

As the source base has changed, so have scholarly perspectives. After class struggle was repudiated following Mao’s death, many scholars stopped analyzing the People’s Republic through the lens of revolution. Putting revolution on the back burner and thinking about twentieth-century China in terms of a steady process of state-building and modernization led scholars to explore continuities between Nationalist and Communist rule. From this perspective, 1949 no longer seemed like a stark dividing line. William Kirby’s pathbreaking studies of technocrats inspired new books that analyzed pre- and post-1949 similarities in family structure and the workplace.¹⁷ When the Communists began governing the mainland, it was argued, necessity and strategy ensured that the institutions, individuals, and social patterns of the pre-1949 period would continue to play a major role in the new society.

The chapters in this volume build upon and complicate this scholarly project of bridging the 1949 divide. In such areas as urban policy, public security, industrial development, education, labor relations, ethnic minorities, and rural health care, the Communists behaved in the early 1950s much like the Nationalists had in the 1930s and 1940s. Like the Nationalists, the Communists were committed to the formation of a strong state, even if accelerated state-building weakened the ability of social groups to express their own will. Hence, even though the Communists were the self-proclaimed party of the urban proletariat, they moved quickly after spring 1949 to impose tight state control of the

labor movement, just as the Nationalists had done in the past. However, there were significant differences between the Communists and Nationalists in terms of style, methods, and results. As Frederic Wakeman Jr. writes in Chapter 2, “When it came to mobilization, the Nationalists exhorted, passed down decrees, and herded. The Communists’ instinct was to go to the primary or grassroot level and commence organizing there, calling on the ‘masses’ to participate actively.”

In the pages that follow, we ask what happened when the Communists went to the grassroots in the early 1950s. Who were the “masses” targeted by mobilization, and how did they respond to the dilemmas posed by Communist victory? For that matter, who were the “Communists”? Not surprisingly, the answers are complex. This is not a study of elite politics; rather, it is an exploration of what happened when people from a variety of backgrounds interacted with mid- to lower-level representatives of the revolutionary party-state. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping are, of course, crucial figures and occasionally appear in the next fourteen chapters. Yet more often, readers will become acquainted with deputy mayors, university deans, battalion commanders, and women’s league representatives—in other words, with the non-household names who were charged with carrying out Mao’s orders at the local level. During the early 1950s, these officials were far more important than Mao was in the daily lives of the rural midwives, rich industrialists, movie stars, scientists, household heads, comedians, and prisoners of war whose stories are told in this book.

The main aim of this volume is to depict the extraordinary diversity and complexity of how individuals, families, and social groups experienced the 1949–53 years. We argue that it is unwise to generalize about China during the early 1950s. Previous scholarship has provided a useful outline of the era: a relatively swift military takeover in 1949, the party’s initially inclusive approach to urban social groups, tightening and repression after the outbreak of the Korean War, movements such as land reform and the Three- and Five-Anti campaigns that consolidated party control in villages and cities, and finally the move toward socialist transformation in 1953. Our reassessment of the period reveals an astonishing degree of variations and exceptions to this general pattern. How one experienced the early 1950s depended on geography, social standing, timing, and chance. For example, the military takeover