Part 2: China

The Murphy Collection, gathered by veteran State Department official Raymond E. Murphy, includes documents spanning the four decades between 1917 and 1958. Murphy was charged in the 1920s with studying the international Communist movement, its activities in the United States, and connection to the Soviet Union. The collection consists of documents from the State Department and other executive agencies, as well as a small number of CIA documents. There are reports, memoranda, correspondence, news clippings, and analyses. Part 2 covers the rise of communism in China.

Drastic changes defined China in the period between 1917 and 1958. The wars and social upheaval that occurred are defining moments in China's long history, not the least of these being the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power. Reel 1 of the collection begins with the ruling nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party's laws against Communists, and Reel 15 ends with the CCP firmly in power over the Chinese mainland. No smooth transition of power, the period marking the rise of the CCP and the fall of the KMT included external and internal wars and increased international involvement in a formerly isolationist country.

The decades-long power struggle between the KMT and the CCP is the dominant theme of this collection. The KMT was a predominantly bourgeois party and government, while the CCP represented the peasantry and the proletariat. Both parties claimed to be the true interpreter of Sun Yat-sen’s three theses of socialism, democracy, and nationalism, but M. B. Depass Jr. noted that “The differences are more personal than doctrinal” (Reels 3 and 4).

Personal or not, the KMT-CCP problem manifested itself in armed conflict. The Canton Commune is the first of many KMT-CCP clashes documented in this collection. U.S. foreign officers and representatives detail the Communist uprising and the rapid KMT response December 11–13, 1927. Other papers contain the personal experiences of citizens during this three-day battle. Further conflicts arose over the roles of the Communist 8th Route Army (later called the 18th Army Corps) and the New Fourth Army in the national armed forces.

The lack of a unified and powerful Chinese government during World War II allowed the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan to enter China in various areas. The Japanese were the most obvious aggressors and, in addition to invading the majority of the country, set up a Manchurian puppet government known as Manchukuo. The Soviet Union also laid claim to Manchuria, while the United Kingdom occupied Hong Kong.

The war against Japan initially spurred both parties and their armies to collaborate. For a couple of years, the KMT and CCP maintained a tenuous united front.

The end of the war left the question of government power unanswered in China, and both parties sought foreign support. The United States aided the KMT with money and troops, while the Soviet Union supported the CCP (Reel 6). The Communists called for withdrawal of U.S. troops, and the American public questioned the need for U.S. intervention in what could be interpreted as a civil war. Chinese citizens called on the United Nations to intervene and prevent U.S. intervention. Documents in Reel 8 reveal over $4 billion in U.S. loans went to Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT.
Chiang Kai-shek led the Nationalist Government of the KMT, also known as the Central Government, and in this role was a highly divisive figure. The CCP wanted Chiang Kai-shek jailed, and the KMT Revolutionary Committee denounced him for placing China under U.S. power. Chiang, in turn, blamed the CCP for stalled unity talks and wanted Mao Tse-tung to be jailed.

Mao Tse-tung and other CCP leaders, Chou En-lai and Chu The, figure heavily in this collection. Their writings, pamphlets, and speeches defined the CCP's formation and can be found in partial or complete form throughout the reels. The CCP's initial goals included literacy, equal civil rights, and a multiparty government, displaying a similarity with U.S. values and offering clues as to how the CCP amassed its immense popularity (Reel 7).

The eventual rise of the CCP to power came mostly from war and an iron grip on power once obtained. As of 1949, the CCP functioned without a central government over its four regional regimes—Manchuria, North China, East China, and Central China (Reel 10). By 1956, a more centralized CCP ruled over the People's Republic of China through propaganda, political purges, and social reform. Reel 11 features an example of a village's experience with Communist rule. The CCP killed landlords, rich peasants, and “men of influence” and redistributed land as an agrarian reform policy. A new campaign against rightist conservatives in 1956 wiped out many dissidents regardless of whether they were rightist conservatives (Reel 15). Still solidifying power and quelling internal dissension, the CCP saw many of its attempts to activate reform produce uneven results. Famine and hardship resulted from the first Five Year Plan to increase crop production, and the party scrapped its second Five Year Plan in 1957.

For every major change, this set of papers offers information on the U.S. opinion or role in Chinese affairs. Early in the collection, papers on ambassadors Patrick Hurley and George C. Marshall record efforts to negotiate with both the KMT and CCP. Congressional records reveal the ongoing debate in the U.S. government over which party to support, whether to intervene, and what policy to assume. The U.S. government believed that if China fell to Communism, the rest of Asia could fall as well (a stance later taken in the Vietnam War). China and the Soviet Union signed multiple pacts, including the thirty-year treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Aid signed on February 15, 1950 (Reel 11). Some officials saw Mao Tse-tung following Marshall Tito’s path in Yugoslavia, where Tito broke from Soviet power while still maintaining Communist ideals. Few, however, could say whether this would be a positive development, and the motivations for U.S. support of Chiang Kai-shek and Taiwan in later years seem to come from a lack of a better option.

Beyond these major themes, The Raymond E. Murphy Collection on Communism, 1917–1958, Part 2: China offers substantial information on Communist armies and antireligious efforts, China’s role in the Korean War, Hong Kong, Mongolia, Manchuria, Tibet, and Taiwan. The collection also holds a wealth of information about the CCP, ranging from its constitution and party structure to biographies of its leaders and members.

The Raymond E. Murphy Collection on Communism, 1917–1958, Part 2: China
PIN 101189  15 reels
Source Note: Record Group 263, Records of the Central Intelligence Agency, Raymond E. Murphy Collection on International Communism, 1917–1958, at the National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Text adapted from user guide scope and content note.