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Global politics

The UK's changing relationship with China

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The British government describes its relationship with China as follows:

We promote UK interests through a strong, effective relationship with China. We work to promote international security, increase mutual prosperity, and support China's process of modernisation and reform.

On 20 October 2015 the Chinese President Xi Jinping made his first state visit to the UK and was greeted with the usual fanfare of a state visit, including staying at Buckingham Palace, a state banquet in his honour and making an address to Parliament. This was accompanied by the more unexpected sight of the Chinese flag draped from flagpoles in Whitehall, and trade and economic announcements suggesting that the two historic enemies are now the best of friends.

Timeline of British/Chinese relations

1839–42 and 1856–60

Opium Wars: Britain fought to maintain the trade in opium and to be able to trade freely within China, despite the wishes of the Chinese.

1997

The British colony of Hong Kong was returned to the Chinese. Hong Kong had been part of the British Empire since 1842 (apart from the Japanese occupation of 1942–45) and was colonised to the extent that ethnic Chinese residents were forbidden from going to certain public places.

2008

Prince Charles refused to attend the Olympic Games in Beijing due to his concerns over China's occupation of Tibet and the country's human rights record.

2012

David Cameron met the Dalai Lama in London and was banned from China for a year as a result.

2013

Cameron, with six ministers, led a 120-strong trade delegation to China to request more Chinese investment in Britain. The visit clearly paid off, with increased investments of over £5 billion in 2014.

2015

President Xi Jinping's state visit results in the announcement of investments of over £30 billion, including funding a nuclear power plant. This has caused controversy as the government has

appeared to ignore China's human rights record, and critics argue that Britain should not be relying on foreign-backed nuclear power at the expense of UK-backed renewables industries.

Topics to investigate

Human rights

China's human rights record has long been criticised, and human rights campaigners are regularly harassed or even tortured. China is a single-party state which places restrictions on meetings and religion. Certain religious groups and ethnic minorities are discriminated against. The death penalty continues to be used, and those imprisoned are at risk of torture. Censorship is also a key feature of Chinese society, with restrictions on using the internet. Homosexuality was considered a mental illness until 2001 and even today same-sex relationships are not recognised. Find out more here:

www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/china/

www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/china-and-tibet

China's one-child policy

Concerns about the impact of a growing population on resources (both economic and social) led to the introduction in 1979 of China's one-child policy. The intended benefits of the policy were improved education and access to childcare and healthcare. Fines and the removal of benefits were imposed on those who resisted this policy. Some women were forced to have abortions or were sterilised if they fell pregnant again and many female fetuses were aborted, as boys were seen as more valuable to society. The policy was relaxed in the first decade of the twenty-first century to allow parents to have a second child if they had a girl first or if they were both only children themselves. Since 2015 couples have been allowed to have two children. Find out more here:

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/11197594/What-is-chinas-one-child-policy.html

www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-34665539

China's occupation of Tibet

Tibet is located northeast of the Himalayas. Its highest mountain is Mount Everest. The country was occupied by China in 1950 and the Dalai Lama (the traditional head of the Tibetan government) has been exiled since 1959. China considers all attempts to discuss the position and status of Tibet as separatist in nature, and the government suppresses all protest, including non-violent demonstrations. Millions of Tibetans have been rehoused in 'new Socialist villages' in an attempt by the government to eradicate traditional ways of life, particularly for nomadic herders. Find out more here:

www.freetibet.org

www.studentsforafreetibet.org

Who was Mao?

Mao Zedong (1893–1976) is often described as being the founding father of the People's Republic of China. He became interested in Marxism at university and became a founder member of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. The Communists were victorious in the Second World War and the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. Mao's fundamental aim was to remould Chinese society on Communist principles by bringing industry into state ownership and organising farms into collectives.

A key event was the Great Leap Forward (1958), which intended to give Communism a more Chinese focus through the mass mobilisation of labour to improve both industrial and agricultural output.

However, poor harvests and a decline in agricultural output meant that famines caused the deaths of millions. The Cultural Revolution of 1966 onwards intended to purge China of all 'impure' and dissenting elements. Over 1.5 million people died and tens of thousands of cultural artefacts and buildings were destroyed. Find out more here:

www.biography.com/people/mao-tse-tung-9398142#the-chairmans-return-to-power-and-the-cultural-revolution

www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/china-1900-to-1976/mao-zedong/

Mao's Little Red Book

In his response to George Osborne's autumn spending review of 2015, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell waved a copy of the Little Red Book across the dispatch box. This is made up of a collection of Mao's speeches and writings from 1927 to 1964 and was widely distributed throughout China during the Cultural Revolution. Every household had a copy, and it was mainly printed in pocket size with the distinctive red cover.

Quotations include:

- 'Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed'.
- 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun'.
- 'Women hold up half the sky'.

Find out more here:

www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/

www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34932800

www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/05/how-west-embraced-chairman-mao-s-little-red-book

Questions to consider

Look at the timeline above and consider the following questions:

- 1 Is it surprising that China and Britain are now working together?
- 2 Should the trade deals made between Britain and China and their potential positive impact on the British economy outweigh human rights concerns?
- 3 What are the implications of British nuclear power being outsourced to a foreign country?
- 4 If Charles becomes king, what may be the impact of his views on Tibet on the UK's relationship with China? Could this raise constitutional issues?

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