The Rise of China Document-Based Question Project
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Introduction

For the past four decades, China has stunned the world with its rapid socioeconomic development. Prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China stood on the brink of political and economic collapse. The nationalist experiment, ultimately led by Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang, degenerated into a period of conflict among warlords attempting to seize power. Under the Chinese Communist Party, the Cultural Revolution of the mid-twentieth-century stunted China’s progress even further. These trends drastically changed in the 1970s with the reform policies of Deng Xiaoping and his successors. In the past quarter century, China has enjoyed the world’s fastest growing economy with an annual double-digit GDP growth rate. While China promotes itself as a socialist nation, it has many characteristics of a capitalist juggernaut.

This document-based question (DBQ) project is modeled after the DBQ that students encounter on a typical Advanced Placement (AP) exam in AP World History, AP European History, and AP United States History. The directions for responses to the prompt have been taken verbatim from a sample AP history DBQ. The DBQ prompt will challenge students to analyze a variety of evidence in order to evaluate China’s economic rise. The documents will allude to many of China’s successes, including many positive economic statistics as well as an increasing standard of living. At the same time, students will also grapple with the negative aspects of China’s unprecedented growth, such as uneven benefits of capital growth for the workers along with extreme pollution.

Suggested duration for this project will depend upon a variety of factors, such as the length of each class period, the level of experience students have with the DBQ process, and the ability level of students in the class. Some of the documents included here are longer than students will encounter on the actual AP exam, and teachers can feel free to reduce the number and length of the reading passages as needed. The photographs were taken by a Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad participant in July 2014. They are included in a separate PowerPoint file so that teachers will be able to alter the images as needed.

The versatile nature of this DBQ project makes it ideal for a world history, world geography or economics course at the high-school level. Teachers can adapt the documents for their particular circumstances. The classroom context for this particular project will also depend largely on the needs, goals and local assessment standards of the individual educator. Some will find it useful as an introductory project, designed to stimulate prior knowledge and introduce a larger unit of study. Others might employ it as a culmination project in which students will showcase their mastery of Chinese history, social development, and economics.

Document References


1. Compare and contrast views of China’s development over the past forty years. Evaluate whether the Chinese growth model should be emulated by other developing nations around the world.
Since the adoption of reform and opening policies, China has all along been in the front rank of the world in terms of the rate of economic growth. The annual increase of GNP was 6.9 percent during the 1953-90 period and 8.8 percent during the 1979-90 period. China now leads the world in the output of many important products including grain, cotton, pork, beef, mutton, cloth, coal, cement, and television sets; and it has also emerged as one of the world's biggest producers of steel, crude oil, electricity and synthetic fibers.

With the growth of the national economy, the overall living standards of the Chinese people have greatly improved. Statistics show that in 1990 China's national income came to 1,442.9 billion yuan, or 11.9 times the 1952 figure of 58.9 billion yuan calculated according to constant prices. A good part of the national income was spent on consumer goods. In 1990, consumer spending amounted to 944.4 billion yuan, which was 8.4 times the 1952 figure of 47.7 billion yuan according to constant prices. Of the total volume of consumption, 810 billion yuan was spent by individual consumers, which was 7.3 times the 43.4 billion yuan in 1952 according to constant prices. The per-capita volume of consumption for the Chinese residents averaged 714 yuan in 1990, 3.7 times more than in 1952 according to constant prices, despite a 98.9 percent population increase in the intervening years. Now that the Chinese people have solved the basic problems of food and clothing, they are working their way toward a well-to-do life. According to statistics, in 1990 every hundred rural families owned 118.3 bicycles and 44.4 TV sets; and every hundred urban households owned 188.6 bicycles, 111.4 TV sets, 42.3 refrigerators and 78.4 washing machines. In addition, the housing conditions of Chinese residents have improved, with the 1990 average per-capita living space increased to 7.1 square meters from 3.6 square meters in 1978 for urban dwellers and to 17.8 square meters from 8.1 square meters in 1978 for rural inhabitants. The speeds at which the economy grows and the people's living standards improve in New China are not only something inconceivable in old China, but also among the highest in the world community.
Public health is reeling. Pollution has made cancer China’s leading cause of death, the Ministry of Health says. Ambient air pollution alone is blamed for hundreds of thousands of deaths each year. Nearly 500 million people lack access to safe drinking water.

Chinese cities often seem wrapped in a toxic gray shroud. Only 1 percent of the country’s 560 million city dwellers breathe air considered safe by the European Union. Beijing is frantically searching for a magic formula, a meteorological deus ex machina, to clear its skies for the 2008 Olympics.

Environmental woes that might be considered catastrophic in some countries can seem commonplace in China: industrial cities where people rarely see the sun; children killed or sickened by lead poisoning or other types of local pollution; a coastline so swamped by algal red tides that large sections of the ocean no longer sustain marine life.

China is choking on its own success. The economy is on a historic run, posting a succession of double-digit growth rates. But the growth derives, now more than at any time in the recent past, from a staggering expansion of heavy industry and urbanization that requires colossal inputs of energy, almost all from coal, the most readily available, and dirtiest, source.

China’s problem has become the world’s problem. Sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides spewed by China’s coal-fired power plants fall as acid rain on Seoul, South Korea, and Tokyo. Much of the particulate pollution over Los Angeles originates in China, according to the Journal of Geophysical Research.

But pollution poses its own threat. Officials blame fetid air and water for thousands of episodes of social unrest. Health care costs have climbed sharply. Severe water shortages could turn more farmland into desert. And the unconstrained expansion of energy-intensive industries creates greater dependence on imported oil and dirty coal, meaning that environmental problems get harder and more expensive to address the longer they are unresolved.

Chinese leaders argue that the outside world is a partner in degrading the country’s environment. Chinese manufacturers that dump waste into rivers or pump smoke into the sky make the cheap products that fill stores in the United States and Europe. Often, these manufacturers subcontract for foreign companies — or are owned by them. In fact, foreign investment continues to rise as multinational corporations build more factories in China. Beijing also insists that it will accept no mandatory limits on its carbon dioxide emissions, which would almost certainly reduce its industrial growth. It argues that rich countries caused global warming and should find a way to solve it without impinging on China’s development.

Indeed, Britain, the United States and Japan polluted their way to prosperity and worried about environmental damage only after their economies matured and their urban middle classes demanded blue skies and safe drinking water.

But China is more like a teenage smoker with emphysema. The costs of pollution have mounted well before it is ready to curtail economic development. But the price of business as usual — including the predicted effects of global warming on China itself — strikes many of its own experts and some senior officials as intolerably high.

“Typically, industrial countries deal with green problems when they are rich,” said Ren Yong, a climate expert at the Center for Environment and Economy in Beijing. “We have to deal with them while we are still poor. There is no model for us to follow.”
Perhaps most noteworthy is that the country’s rapid export-led growth has failed to generate adequate employment opportunities. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), total urban (regular) manufacturing employment actually declined over the period 1990-2002, from 53.9 million to 37.3 million. Thus, Chinese manufacturing workers, like their U.S. counterparts, have suffered from declining employment opportunities.

Although there was a small increase in total urban employment over this period, almost all the growth was in irregular employment, meaning casual-wage or self-employment—typically in construction, cleaning and maintenance of premises, retail trade, street vending, repair services, or domestic services. More specifically, while total urban employment over this thirteen-year period grew by 81.7 million, 80 million of that growth was in irregular employment. As a result, irregular workers in China now comprise the largest single urban employment category.

While the reform process has taken an especially heavy toll on state workers, private-sector employment—especially at firms producing for export—has grown. Unfortunately, most of the new jobs are low paid with poor working conditions. “Even after doubling between 2002-2005, the average manufacturing wage in China was only 60 U.S. cents an hour, compared with $2.46 an hour in Mexico.” A report on labor practices in China by Verite Inc., a U.S. company that advises transnational corporations on responsible business practices, found that “systemic problems in payment practices in Chinese export factories consistently rob workers of at least 15 percent of their pay.” Workplace safety is an even greater problem.

Above all, Chinese labor policies have been designed to attract foreign investment and boost the export competitiveness of firms operating in China. Their success is illustrated by wage and consumption trends. Chinese wages as a share of GDP have fallen from approximately 53 percent of GDP in 1992 to less than 40 percent in 2006. Private consumption as a percent of GDP has also declined, falling from approximately 47 percent to 36 percent over the same period. By comparison, private consumption, as a share of GDP, is over 50 percent in Britain, Australia, Italy, Germany, India, Japan, France, and South Korea; it is over 70 percent in the United States. As The Economist magazine explains, although the share of income going to working people has fallen in many countries over the past decades, “nowhere has the drop been as huge as in China.”

One of the keys to this “success” has been Chinese state policies towards internal migrants, who comprise approximately 70 percent of the manufacturing workforce and 80 percent of the construction workforce. Over the last twenty-five years, some 150-200 million Chinese have moved from the countryside to urban areas in search of employment. Although the great majority moved legally, they suffer enormous discrimination. For example, because they remain classified as rural residents under the Chinese registration system, they must not only pay steep fees to register as temporary urban residents, but they also have no rights to the public services available to urban-born residents (including free or subsidized education, health care, housing, and pensions). The same is true for their children, even if they are born in an urban area.

These and other legal distinctions make it easy for companies to exploit their workers. Conditions at Foxconn, a large Taiwanese-owned subcontractor for firms such as Apple and Dell, are representative. Foxconn’s assembly line workers in Shenzhen (a major manufacturing center in south China) earn approximately $32 for a 60-hour workweek (along with company-provided dormitory housing and meals). Apple-hired investigators of a Foxconn plant that builds iPods found that mangers routinely used corporal punishment to discipline workers, “and that workers labored more than six consecutive days 25 percent of the time,” despite the fact that Chinese law “requires at least one day off each week.”

Angered by steadily deteriorating living and working conditions (including the market reform-driven dismantling of national health, housing, and retirement protections), growing numbers of people (in both urban and rural areas) have demonstrated a willingness to confront their employers and governing officials in defense of their rights. The number of large-scale “public order disturbances” has increased from 58,000 in 2003 to 74,000 in 2004, 94,000 in 2006, 120,000 in 2008, and to 58,000 in the first quarter of 2009 (on pace for a record of 230,000 by the end of 2009). Particularly worrisome to the Communist Party leadership is the changing nature of labor actions: workers are increasingly taking direct action, engaging in regional and industry-wide protests, and broadening their demands.

With repression alone unable to stem the rising tide of protest, the Communist Party has tried introducing a number of reform policies designed to ameliorate the worst excesses generated by China’s growth strategy, without radically changing its orientation. Among the most important was the implementation of a new Labor Contract Law in January 2008. The law requires, among other things, that businesses provide their workers with a written contract (something a majority of workers do not have or have never seen) and premium pay for overtime and weekend work.

While the law has generated a sharp increase in arbitration cases, its impact on employment conditions has been limited. Regardless, the Party’s determination to sustain the country’s export-oriented growth strategy means that it can do little to respond positively to popular discontent. The state began rescinding many of the law’s worker protections even before the end of 2008. It did so to protect corporate profits hard hit by the downturn in exports caused by the growing world economic crisis. It also ordered local governments to freeze locally established minimum wages.
The right of education is an important prerequisite for the overall, free development of human beings. In old China, the majority of the working people did not have such a right. With only less than 20 percent of school-age children going to school, more than 80 percent of the total population were illiterate. After the founding of New China, the government took various measures to guarantee the citizens' right of education by devoting great efforts to the development of education. By 1989, China had set up 1.045 million schools at various levels in urban and rural areas. Among them, 1,075 were regular institutions of higher learning. In 1990, about 99.77 percent of school-age children in the cities and 97.29 percent of school-age children in the countryside were attending school. The numbers of college, middle school and primary school students were respectively 17.6 times, 40.3 times, and 5 times the 1949 figures. During the 1949-90 period, a total of 7.608 million graduate and undergraduate students completed their college education, almost 40 times the total between 1912 and 1948 in old China.

Since China adopted the policy of reform and opening to the outside world, the number of students studying abroad has been rapidly increasing. Since 1978, China has sent 150,000 students in various disciplines of learning to study in 86 countries and regions. So far almost 50,000 of them have returned after finishing their studies, and over 100,000 of them are staying abroad. After the political incident of 1989, the number of Chinese going abroad to study has not decreased but has increased to some extent. In 1990, China completed its plan of sending 3,000 government-sponsored students abroad for academic pursuits. Meanwhile, about 6,000 students were sent to foreign countries by various units, and 20,000 (not including those enrolled in Australian and Japanese language schools) paid their own way to study abroad.

According to statistics of departments concerned in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, more than 3,000 students have returned from overseas and have started work at their new posts during the past two years. In the meantime, more than 5,700 students have returned to countries where they study after coming home to visit relatives, take vacation or do short-term jobs. According to international norm, Chinese students who are sponsored by the government to study abroad have the duty to return to serve their home country. The Chinese government, always valuing returned students and creating favorable working conditions for them upon return to China, has set up special organizations to take direct responsibility in receiving and arranging suitable jobs for returned students. More than 70 post-doctoral mobile research centers and short-term working stations have been set up by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and various universities, offering fine research and living conditions for those who have returned. Moreover, the Chinese government and related departments have set up a number of foundations to raise funds for scientific research and to aid returned students in research and teaching activities.

The Chinese citizens enjoy freedom of scientific research and literary and artistic creation. In order to promote the development of scientific research and to bring about cultural and artistic prosperity, the Chinese government upholds the guideline of "serving the people and socialism" and the principle of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred of schools of thought contend." Since the founding of New China, the contingent of scientists and technicians has steadily expanded. In 1990, state-run units employed a total of 10.808 million natural scientists and technical workers, 24.4 times more than the 1952 figure of 425,000. The State Commission of Natural Science Foundation has since its establishment in February 1986 accepted 34,847 applications for scientific research projects which call for a total allotment of 2.31 billion yuan. Large numbers of outstanding achievements have been registered in the field of science and technology. In biological science, Chinese scientists succeeded in making synthetic bovine insulin and in converting yeast alanine into synthetic ribonucleic acid (RNA); in agricultural science, experiments in hybrid paddy rice have been successful; in high-energy physics, an electron-positron collider was constructed; other achievements in high technology are represented by the successful explosion of atomic and hydrogen bombs, the making of super-computers capable of 100 million calculations per second, the launching of the Long March III carrier rocket and the research in satellite telecommunications and superconductivity. In all these fields, China has either reached or approached advanced world levels.
College graduates' employment is fully guaranteed in China. The situation is a far cry from old China, when graduation was synonymous to unemployment for college students. Since the founding of New China, the government has followed the policy of unified job assignment for all college graduates and thus ensured that every one of them has the opportunity to work. In the past 10 years, the government has reformed the job assignment system by combining the students' own choices with the state's guarantee of jobs. The state sees to it that, in light of the needs of various areas in economic development, every college graduate is provided with a suitable job on a voluntary basis. This is why unemployment is out of the question for college graduates in China.

In socialist China, the government guarantees the basic necessities of every worker and his family and sees to it that their life gradually improves with economic growth. Although Chinese workers have relatively low monetary wages, they enjoy a large amount of subsidies, including financial subsidies for housing, children's attendance at nursery and school and staple and non-staple foods, as well as social insurance such as medical treatment, industrial injury and retirement pension and many other welfare items, which are not counted in the wages. Statistics indicate that urban residents in China pay only 3-5 percent of their living expenses for housing, communication and medical treatment. Since China carried out reforms in 1979, past payment measures have been modified. On the basis of economic growth and labor-productivity increase, workers' wage levels have been raised proportionally. Therefore, the wage levels of workers have increased rapidly, and there has been an obvious improvement in the consumption level of all Chinese residents. Statistics in 1990 showed that the average consumption level per capita of urban residents had increased from 149 yuan in 1952 to 1,442 yuan, an inflation-adjusted increase of 3.8 times.

China pays close attention to labor protection and has issued 1,682 laws, rules and regulations in 29 categories in this regard, while 28 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government have their own local laws and regulations for labor protection. In addition, 452 articles of state technical standards regarding occupational safety and hygiene have been enacted throughout the country. China has established a state supervision system insuring labor safety, hygiene, protection for female workers and a work-hour and vacation schedule. So far more than 2,700 labor supervision institutions have been set up throughout China with some 30,000 supervisory personnel. The duty of the supervision institutions is to monitor the work of enterprises and their management with regard to labor safety and hygiene so as to stimulate the enterprises to improve working conditions constantly.

China adopts the policy of "safety first and prevention first" in labor protection, and combines state inspection with enterprise management and worker supervision. The government requires that 10 to 20 percent of the enterprise's annual renovation fund be used for labor safety and hygiene. Labor protection is regarded by the state as an important factor in appraising the management skill of an enterprise. In cases of casualties, an investigation will be conducted to look into the responsibility of the leaders and personnel concerned.

China provides free medical service in the urban state institutions and undertakings and co-operative medical service in most rural areas. Thus both urban and rural workers are assured of medical care. Those wounded or disabled on the job are provided living expenses from the state or the collective. In order to raise the level of labor protection, China has set up many testing centers for occupational safety and hygiene and labor-safety education offices. Dozens of universities have established safety-engineering departments. Labor and industry departments have set up scores of scientific research institutes which attempt to strengthen labor safety and improve working conditions for workers through scientific research, designing, production, usage and management. Compared with the Sixth Five-Year Plan period (1981-85), these efforts resulted in a 9.53 percent decrease in on-duty deaths and a 37.95 percent decrease in serious injury in state-owned and large collective enterprises during the Seventh Five-Year Plan period (1986-90).

The Chinese government pays special attention to the protection of female workers. In July 1988, the State Council promulgated Regulations on Labor Protection of Female Workers, laying down specific guidelines. For example, it is forbidden to make female workers engage in particularly strenuous work or work harmful to their physiological well-being. Also stipulated are concrete protections for female workers during the menstrual period, and also during pregnancy, maternity leave and breast-feeding, at which periods, their basic wages must remain the same and their work-contracts cannot be terminated. In recent years, a special fund has been established in many places to offer living subsidies to women during breast-feeding and leave.
Traffic and Air Quality in Beijing. Photo from July 2014.

Housing complexes in Beijing

Fast Food in Beijing

Technology Class at the Children’s Palace in Shanghai

Shopping Mall in Beijing

One of Many Food Vendors on the Street in Beijing

One of Several Rollercoasters at Jinjiang Park in Shanghai

A Movie Theatre in Shanghai

A Hutong Kitchen in Beijing

Kids’ Area at Foreigner Street in Chongqing