

# Xi'an Incident

## Xī'ān Shìbiàn 西安事变

**The Xi'an Incident of 1936 is often considered a turning point in Chinese history. As a result of the incident, in which two Nationalist generals, Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng, arrested President Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) won breathing room from the Nationalists who wanted to destroy the CCP and at the same time gained popular support for their strong opposition to Japanese aggression.**

The Xi'an Incident (December 1936) occurred when two Chinese Nationalist generals, Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng, arrested President Chiang Kai-shek while he was in Xi'an to assist the Nationalist campaign against the Chinese Communists. Chiang was taken captive on 12 December and released on 25 December, partly at the urging of the Chinese Communists. Chiang might have been assassinated while a prisoner, but he won his freedom with a promise to undertake strong united resistance to the Japanese aggression in China.

Nevertheless, the Xi'an Incident seriously weakened Chiang Kai-shek by undermining his strategy for first suppressing the Communists and then resisting the Japanese. As a result of the Xi'an Incident the Chinese Communists won breathing room from the Nationalists who were determined to destroy the CCP; at the same time they gained heightened popularity for their strong

opposition to Japanese aggression. The Japanese took the apparent Nationalist-Communists rapprochement as evidence that armed conflict was inevitable. The Japanese invasion of China took place a scant seven months after the Xi'an Incident.

Until the Xi'an Incident Chiang Kai-shek's strategy against the Communists appeared to be succeeding. In October 1934 Nationalist armies had driven the Chinese Communists out of their base in Jiangxi, forcing the 100,000 Communists to undertake the fabled Long March. The Long March decimated the Communists and ended a year later in October 1935 in a remote and poor area of Shaanxi Province where a small base existed at Yan'an. From Yan'an Red Army leader Mao Zedong took up the new United Front policy against fascism of the Soviet Comintern (the Communist International established in 1919 and dissolved in 1943) and argued that Chinese should not be fighting one another but rather must resist the Japanese.

In 1936 Chiang Kai-shek had charged Yang Hucheng and Zhang Xueliang to carry out the final extermination of the weakened Communists at Yan'an. Yang Hucheng, a former bandit, led an army of questionable quality; Zhang Xueliang, the young cosmopolitan commander of the warlord army of Manchuria, commanded a stronger force. With Japanese encroachments in north China continuing, officers and men from both armies thought the threat from Japan was greater than from the Chinese Communists. Chiang Kai-shek, hoping to bolster the resolve of his armies, made two trips by airplane in late 1936 to Xi'an. His kidnapping occurred a few days after he began his second visit.



**An actor portraying Chiang Kai-shek in a play about the Xi'an Incident, during which Chiang was kidnapped by overzealous Nationalist Party generals. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**



Initially the Communists urged Generals Yang and Zhang to kill Chiang Kai-shek but quickly altered their policy by sending Zhou Enlai to advocate the sparing Chiang if he agreed to an anti-Japanese united front. Hoping to free Chiang, both his wife, Song Meiling, and his brother-in-law, Song Ziwen, flew to Xi'an to help negotiate a solution. After Chiang agreed with the terms he was

released. The promised cooperation between the Chinese Nationalists and the Chinese Communists never could be realized. Their enmity proved so great that even all-out Japanese invasion in June 1937 could not bring them to a truly united resistance.

The fates of the two kidnapers are a fascinating sidelight to the Xi'an Incident. When released at Xi'an Chiang

**This scene from a play about the 1936 Xi'an Incident shows Mao Zedong in Yan'an, the headquarters of Chinese Communists at that time. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**





**Actors portraying Zhou Enlai and Chiang Kai-shek. Zhou persuaded the Nationalist generals not to kill Chiang in return for Chiang's promise to provide a Nationalist/Communist united front against the Japanese.**

PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

Kai-shek convinced Yang Hucheng and Zhang Xueliang to accompany him on his return to Nanjing. Once in Nanjing, Chiang had them placed under house arrest. Then, as the Nationalists retreated in 1949 to Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek had Yang Hucheng executed. Zhang Xueliang was spared but remained under house arrest until 1991. After the deaths of both Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo (Jiang Jingguo), Zhang Xueliang was released. Zhang, who had become a devout Christian during his long imprisonment, moved to Hawaii and lived there until his death in 2001 at the age of one hundred.

The Xi'an Incident revealed Chiang Kai-shek's questionable control over his supposedly allied Chinese armies while enhancing the Chinese Communists' identification with patriotic national resistance to Japan. It marked a renewed but futile attempt at cooperation between the

Chinese Nationalists and the Chinese Communists. By heightening the anti-Japanese sentiment in China, it set the stage for open but undeclared war between Japan and China in July 1937. The War of Resistance against Japan, 1937–1945, and known outside China as the Second Sino-Japanese War, was later fought in context of World War II in Asia.

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### Further Reading

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