

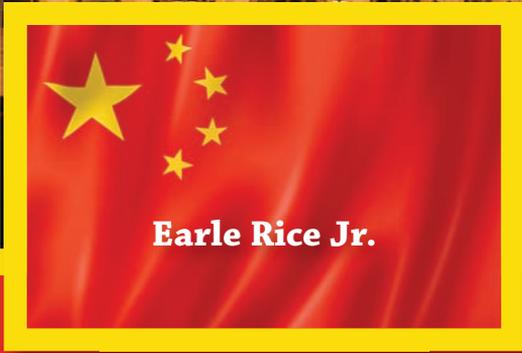
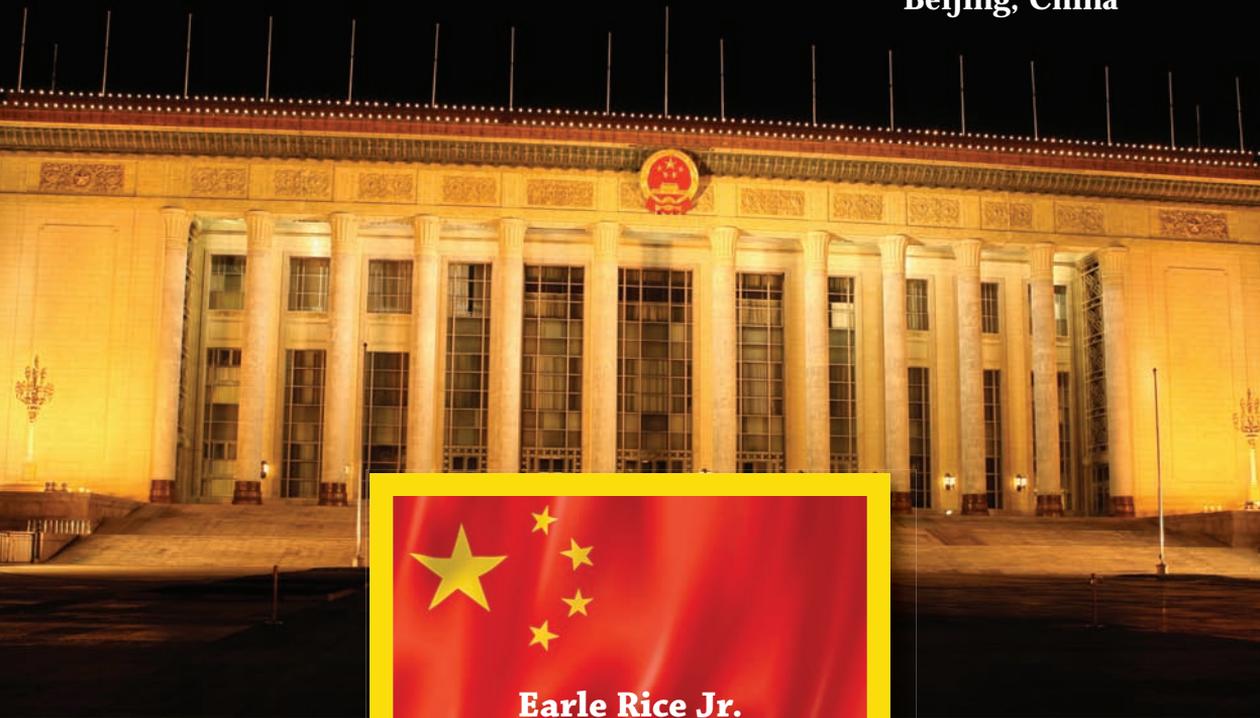


The Evolution of Government and Politics in

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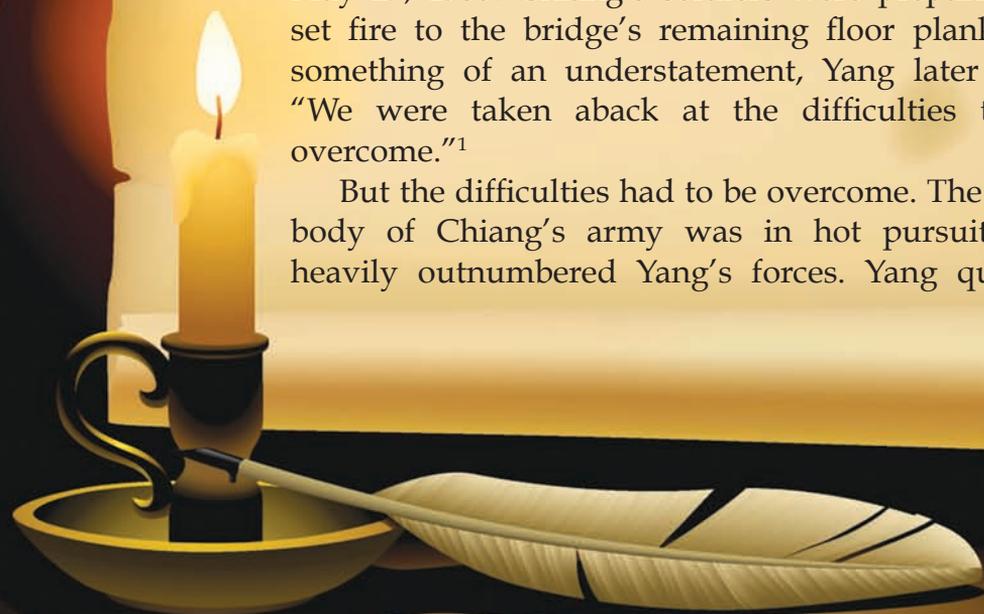
CHAPTER 1

Looking Back to See the Future

The suspension bridge at Luding, China, stretched 360 feet (110 meters) across the Dadu River's swirling current. Irregularly laid planking formed crude flooring for the open-sided, single span of 13 iron chains. Soldiers loyal to Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek had removed most of the wooden floor planks. The bare chains swung free and swayed precariously. A gatehouse, set in a 20-foot-high (6 meters) stone wall on the east bank of the river, commanded the approaches. The wall bristled with machine guns.

Yang Chenwu's Red Army regiment arrived at Luding on the west bank of the river at daybreak on May 29, 1935. Chiang's soldiers were preparing to set fire to the bridge's remaining floor planks. In something of an understatement, Yang later said, "We were taken aback at the difficulties to be overcome."¹

But the difficulties had to be overcome. The main body of Chiang's army was in hot pursuit and heavily outnumbered Yang's forces. Yang quickly





Pedestrians stroll across the Luding Bridge. It is constructed of iron chains and wooden planking lashed over the chains to form a roadway. The bridge was the site of an important incident during the Long March in 1935.

surveyed the situation and called for volunteers. Twenty-two men stepped forward. Strapping hand grenades and German-made Mauser rifles to their backs, they inched out onto the bridge and crawled crablike along the chains on each side. Yang's machine gunners laid down supporting fire. Chiang's gunners returned fire, and snipers began picking off the Reds working their way toward them on the swaying bridge. The lead volunteer was hit and dropped into the roiling waters below. Then a second man fell. And a third. But on they crawled, those volunteers.



CHAPTER 1

These men were warriors, the likes of whom which the peasants of Sichuan province had likely never seen before. Amid the whiz and clatter of machine-gun bullets, one man finally reached the bridge's remaining planking and crawled up onto it. Ignoring the heavy fire, he uncapped a grenade, raised up, and threw a perfect strike into the enemy position. Chiang's soldiers responded, tossing kerosene onto the planking and setting it aflame.

Other Reds reached the planking. They doused the fire and replaced the boards. Eighteen of the 22 volunteers reached the east bank of the Dadu, while Chiang's aircraft buzzed angrily overhead but were powerless to stop their advance. Within two hours, Yang Chenwu's forces had overrun the Nationalist garrison and captured the town of Luding.

A few days later, the entire army of communist leader Mao Zedong reached the bridge and crossed the Dadu safely. Because of the heroics of 22 volunteers, Mao and his ragtag forces would live to fight another day.

Or so the story was reported for about a half-century. Recently, however, a biography of Mao by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday casts doubt on this legendary saga.

Chang and Halliday contend that the whole tale is fiction, and that "there was no battle at the Dadu Bridge."² They go on to portray a more likely scenario in which there was a skirmish but not a battle. Nor were there any crab-crawling heroics. When the main body of the Red Army reached the river, Chang and Halliday further assert, the garrison commander at the bridge telephoned his superiors for instructions. He indicated it would be difficult to hold out against Mao's superior forces. When the phone line went dead, he panicked and ordered a retreat.

This updated version of the Dadu Bridge incident lacks the drama and raw courage of the tale's original telling. In both accounts, however, the endings coincide: Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army failed to contain—and destroy—Mao Zedong's Red Army. What came to be known as the Long March continued. And China moved farther down its long path toward communism.



A young Mao Zedong delivers an inspiring speech to a crowd of his followers during the Long March of 1934–35. Many historians cite the Long March as perhaps the greatest military march of all time.

Long ago, the venerated Chinese philosopher Confucius said, “Study the past if you would divine the future.”³ With respect to his homeland, it means that one must study China’s long history to understand modern China and how it became what it is today.

For most of this history, hereditary monarchies known as dynasties ruled China. They began with the legendary—or mythical—Xia (Hsia) dynasty (c.2205–c.1766 BCE). The Shang dynasty (c.1600–1046 BCE) followed the Xia. It introduced a writing system and began recording Chinese history for the first time. China’s longest-lasting dynasty, the Zhou (1046–256 BCE), defeated the Shangs at the Battle of Muye and assumed control.

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