

An American in China: The Life of Sidney Rittenberg

"I wanted to make history. History ran over me." - Sidney Rittenberg

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about China's modern history through the fascinating story of Sidney Rittenberg, one of the most famous Americans expatriates. Before learning about Rittenberg's life, students will examine major events in China's history since 1949 through a timeline activity. Next, students will participate in a jigsaw activity that revolves around Sidney Rittenberg's life, from his time as a student at UNC-Chapel Hill, to his job with the US Army in China, to his time as a translator for Mao Zedong, to his two lengthy prison sentences, and more. This lesson culminates with an activity where students have to design a movie poster for a documentary about Sidney's life.

Grade

High School

Materials

- China Since 1945 Timeline Handout, attached [p. 7-8]
- China Since 1945 Timeline Internet Sources, attached (optional) [p. 9]
- China Since 1945 Answer Key, attached [p. 10 - 12]
- Drawing paper and art supplies (for creating illustrated timeline entries)
- Life of Sidney Rittenberg Notes, attached [p. 13]
- Life of Sidney Rittenberg Readings [p. 14 – 23]
 - Early Life (1921 – 1949) [p. 14 - 15]
 - First Imprisonment (1949 – 1955) [p. 16 - 17]
 - Redder than Red (1955 – 1966) [p. 18 - 19]
 - Cultural Revolution and Second Imprisonment (1967 – 1977) [p. 20 - 21]
 - Life After China (1977 – Present) [p. 22 - 23]
 - **Teacher Note:** If possible, print each of the five readings on five different colors of paper – this will make the excerpts easier to decipher as well as make the transition to the second group easier.
 - The "Life of Sidney Rittenberg" handouts were created by the NC Civic Education Consortium from the following sources:
 - Sidney Rittenberg and Amanda Bennett, *The Man Who Stayed Behind*
 - Judith Weinraub, "China's Prisoner for 16 Years, Sidney Rittenberg Remains Its True Friend and Believer", *People Magazine*
 - <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20073792,00.html>
 - Alison Carroll Goldman, "Sidney Rittenberg: Reflections on a Lifetime in China", *Danwei: A website and research firm that tracks Chinese Media and Internet*
 - <http://www.danwei.com/sidney-rittenberg-reflections-on-a-lifetime-in-china/>
 - Gary Rivlin, "A Long March from Maoism to Microsoft", *The New York Times*
 - http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/05/business/yourmoney/05mao.html?_r=0
 - Mark McDonald, "The Man Who Stayed Behind in China Comes Into Focus", *IHT Rendezvous: The Global Edition of the New York Times*
 - <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/10/the-man-who-stayed-behind-in-china-comes-forward/>
- *The Revolutionary* Movie Poster handout, attached [p. 24]
- Examples of Movie Posters handout, attached (optional) [p. 25]
- **Note:** All links contained in this lesson were active as of February 2014. For any links that become inactive, teachers should enter the topic into a search engine to find alternate sites.

Essential Questions:

- How has life changed in China since 1949?
- Who is Sidney Rittenberg and why is he an important figure in post-1949 China?
- What are some major events in China's Post-WWII history?

Duration

- 1 – 2 class periods, depending on if the timeline activity is assigned for homework or classwork.

Teacher Note

It is recommended that students have access to the internet for the timeline activity, but if internet access isn't available in the classroom, coordinate with the school's media center about borrowing resources focused on Chinese history.

As an alternative, the timeline activity can be assigned for homework the night before in order to leave more class time to the assignment about Sidney Rittenberg.

Student Preparation

- Students should have a basic understanding of the Cold War and the ideological conflict between the USSR, the People's Republic of China, and the United States.

Procedure

Warm Up: What Would Make You Leave the United States?

1. As a warm up, instruct students to answer the following question on a piece of paper: "What would convince you to live somewhere else other than the United States?" Before asking students to share their responses, inform them that people who live in a different country from the one they were born in are called "expatriates". Discuss the student responses as a class. To foster further discussion, pose the following questions to the class:
 - Would you leave the United States to be with a spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend?
 - Would you leave the United States if you could make more money somewhere else?
 - Would you leave the United States if you felt you could make a difference somewhere else?
 - Can you name any famous Americans that chose to live their lives somewhere besides the United States?
 - *Answers will vary, but may include Madonna (pop singer, England), WEB DuBois (African American intellectual and civil rights activist, Ghana), Johnny Depp (actor, France), Gwen Stefani (pop singer, England), Gwyneth Paltrow (actress, England), Ernest Hemingway (writer, France), Gertrude Stein (writer, France), James Baldwin (writer, France).*
2. Tell students that they will be learning about the most famous American expatriate in China – Sidney Rittenberg - an American journalist, scholar, and linguist who lived through a period of great turmoil, violence, and change in China's history.

Chinese Civil War & China since 1945 – Illustrated Timeline

3. Inform students that before they learn about Sidney Rittenberg's life, they are going to study China's history since 1945 by creating a timeline based upon major events throughout China's post-WWII history. Before starting the timeline activity, share the following information with students about China's pre-World War II history:

By 1930, there was a bitter civil war raging in China between the ruling Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist Party), led by Chiang Kai-shek (aka Jiang Jieshi) and insurgent the Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung).

The government under KMT leadership had promised modernization, democracy and economic opportunity for all, but in practice it was oppressive and corrupt. The majority of the country was populated by peasant farmers and they felt that the KMT was doing little to help them with their problems, so they turned to Mao and his brand of communism.

While the civil war was raging, Japan invaded Manchuria – a resource rich area of China – in 1931. Then, in 1937, Japan launched a full scale invasion of China. This forced the KMT and the Communists to suspend the civil war in order to defend China against Japanese aggression.

In 1945, after Japan’s defeat in World War II the civil war resumed.

4. Provide students with the attached “China Since 1945 Timeline” and review the following instructions before allowing students to work individually:

Using the resources provided by your teacher (textbooks, internet, readings, handouts, etc.) research the events listed on the handout provided. In the parenthesis next to the event, record the year or years the event occurred. Write a short summary of each event or person in the space provided. Choose an event from China’s history not listed below and write a summary of that event in the blank space provided at the end. (If you need additional room, use a separate sheet of paper.)

We will use this research to create a master illustrated timeline for the classroom wall. I will assign each of you one of the events below and using the paper provided, write the event, date, and then create an illustration that represents the event. Upon completion, we will hang all of the timeline entries around the room in chronological order.

- **Teacher Note:** Since there will likely be more students than the 19 topics printed on the handout, assign some students to illustrate the event they chose to describe for #20.)

5. Provide students with 30 – 45 minutes to complete their timelines and illustrations. (Teachers can alternatively allow students to work in partners or small groups to lessen the amount of time required for completion.) After the allotted time, review the answers (see the attached answer key) to ensure that students are familiar with some of the major events from China’s post-World War II history. Afterwards, highlight and discuss particular events to ensure student understanding:

- Who was Mao Zedong and why is he a significant figure in Chinese history?
 - *Mao Zedong was one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party and the leader of the People’s Republic of China from 1949 until his death in 1976. He is responsible for many of China’s disastrous policies – the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution – but he is also regarded as one of the great political thinkers of the 20th century.*
- Why was President Richard Nixon’s visit to China significant?
- How would you describe the relationship between the People’s Republic of China and the United States from the 1950s to the 1970s?
- How would you describe the relationship between the PRC and the United States today?
- **Optional:** Who is the current leader of China?
 - *As of February 2014, Xi Jinping.*

Life of Sidney Rittenberg

6. Inform students that they are going to learn about the extraordinary story of Sidney Rittenberg, an American who lived in China after World War II. While in China, he befriended many of the top Communist Party officials, including Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, and reached great heights as a respected member of the party; but, he also fell out of favor and was imprisoned for 16 of his 34 years in China.

- **Teacher Option:** Show the trailer for *The Revolutionary*, a documentary about the life of Sidney Rittenberg, before dividing the students into groups. The documentary is available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vH9w34onSC8>
7. Place students into one of five “expert” groups by counting off – assigning a student a number from one to five and then instructing students with the same number to sit together. Once students have grouped up, distribute the attached reading and question handouts to each student in the group:
- Group 1: Early Life
 - Group 2: First Imprisonment
 - Group 3: Redder than Red
 - Group 4: Cultural Revolution and Second Imprisonment
 - Group 5: Life After China
- **Teacher Note:** If possible, print each of the five readings on five different colors of paper – this will make the excerpts easier to decipher as well as make the transition to the second group easier.
8. Before allowing groups to work on their assigned tasks, inform them that in a few of the readings, there’s a reference to “Wood Fairy”. “Wood Fairy” was the nickname for a young girl that was killed in a car accident and her family’s story encouraged Rittenberg to stay in China to help improve the lives of Chinese people.
9. Give students 15 – 20 minutes to read over their assigned excerpts and answer the attached questions as a group. After the allotted time, ask the students to “jigsaw,” so that new groups are re-formed with one person representing each excerpt in every group. (If the five excerpts were copied on different colors of paper, each new group will have at least one person with each color of paper.) Once students are settled in their new groups, give each group 20 minutes (4-5 minutes per topic) to teach their group members what they have learned. Students should take notes on their “Life of Sidney Rittenberg Notes” handout.
10. Once all groups have completed their task, select a few students to summarize what they learned about the life of Sidney Rittenberg to ensure understanding before allowing students to work on their movie posters.

***The Revolutionary* Movie Poster**

11. Instruct students to return to their seats and then distribute the attached “*The Revolutionary* Movie Poster” handout. Review the instructions with the class and provide students with a due date. Depending on the amount of available class time, the movie poster project can be completed entirely in class or be finished for homework.
12. On the date the movie posters are due, allow students to share their work by instructing them to first post their movie posters around the room. Allow the class to spend approximately 10+ minutes of class doing a “gallery walk,” during which they rotate among all of the movie posters to view them. Teachers may want to number each sketch and instruct students to carry paper and pencil with them, writing down “What they liked and learned” from each poster, or for a pre-determined number of posters (i.e., instruct students to review 5 posters of their choosing.) This can be followed with a class debrief in which students offer feedback to one another. Optionally, the class could also vote on which poster they feel best represents the Life of Sidney Rittenberg.

Additional Activities

- Have students write interview questions for Sidney Rittenberg asking him about his life in China and his life in the United States.

Resources

- Ordinary life in Extraordinary Times: Online Exhibit of the Cultural Revolution
 - http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/ordinarylife/intro_new.html
- “The Revolutionary”, a documentary about the life of Sidney Rittenberg:
 - <http://revolutionarymovie.com/>

Name: _____

China Since 1945 Timeline



Directions: Using the resources provided by your teacher (textbooks, internet, readings, handouts, etc.) research the events listed below. In the parenthesis next to the event, record the year or years the event occurred then write a short 2-3 sentence summary of each event underneath. For #20, choose an event from China's history not listed below and write a summary of that event.

After all research is completed, the class will create a master illustrated timeline for the classroom wall. You will be assigned one of the events below by your teacher. Using the provided paper, write the event and date then create an illustration that represents the event.

1. **China becomes the World's Second Largest Economy:** ()

2. **China Enacts a One-Child Policy:** ()

3. **China's First Manned Space Flight:** ()

4. **China Successfully Detonates Atomic Bomb:** ()

5. **The Cultural Revolution:** ()

6. **First Five Year Plan:** ()

7. **Four Modernizations:** ()

8. **The Great Leap Forward:** ()

9. **Hundred Flowers Campaign:** ()

10. **Japan Defeated in World War II:** ()

11. **Korean War:** ()

12. **Kuomintang Retreats to Taiwan:** ()

13. **Mao Zedong Dies:** ()

14. **18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China** ()

15. **President Nixon's Visit to China:** ()

16. **People's Republic of China founded:** ()

17. **Sino-Soviet Split:** ()

18. **Tiananmen Square Massacre:** ()

19. **Gang of Four** ()

20. _____ ()

China Since 1945 Timeline Internet Sources (optional)

Although your search isn't limited to the sites listed below, begin your online research at one of the following sites.

If you use a website not listed below or a book, cite the website/book in the blank spaces below with an explanation of why you chose to use this particular source.

- University of Maryland: <http://www.chaos.umd.edu/history/toc.html>
- How Stuff Works: <http://history.howstuffworks.com/asian-history/history-of-china6.htm>
- Lonely Planet Travel: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/china/history>
- *New York Times*: "Times Topics":
<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/index.html?8qa>
- History Channel: <http://www.history.com/topics/mao-zedong>
 - Note: Can also search History.com for more resources.
- PBS: "China From the Inside": <http://www.pbs.org/kqed/chinainside/>
- Wilson Center: "Cold War International History Project"
- BBC, "History": <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/>
- "Condensed China": <http://condensedchina.com/china4.html>
- BBC, "Special Report: The People's Republic at 50":
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1999/09/99/china_50_years_of_communism/456465.stm
- New York Times, "Ending Congress, China Presents New Leadership Headed by Xi Jinping":
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/15/world/asia/communists-conclude-party-congress-in-china.html>

China Since 1945 Timeline Answer Key

Note: Unlike the timeline instructions handout, the events below are listed in chronological order. Answers are, but not limited to, the information below.

1. **Chinese Civil War Resumes: (1946 - 1949):** After a 10 year suspension due to the Japanese invasion of China, the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communists resumed. The USSR supported Mao and the Communists, while the United States supported the KMT. The KMT's army was poorly trained and much of the military aid was wasted, while the Communist army was better trained and had the support of a majority of the Chinese people. As a result, the Communists won the civil war.
2. **People's Republic of China founded: (1949):** After the Communist victory, the PRC was founded with Mao as the leader. They forged close ties with the USSR. Many Americans viewed this as an escalation in the Cold War and another step in a worldwide Communist campaign to dominate the world.
3. **Kuomintang Retreats to Taiwan: (1949):** After their defeat, the KMT fled to the island of Taiwan and established an independent republic. Since its founding, there has been a dispute between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan over who controls the island. China does not recognize Taiwan as an independent nation, while many nations around the world have recognized Taiwan's independence. This is a source of ongoing conflict between the PRC & Taiwan.
4. **Korean War: (1950 - 1953):** In 1950, Soviet backed North Korea invaded South Korea. With help from US/UN forces, the South Koreans were able to repel the invasion and push the North Koreans back to the Chinese border. China intervened and pushed the US forces back to the 38th parallel. A ceasefire was negotiated and Korea remains divided to this day. This was the first "hot" action of the Cold War and it further strained relations between the US and China.
5. **First Five Year Plan: (1953 – 1957):** An economic plan to increase agricultural and industrial output by central government control of resources. With Soviet help, the Chinese were able to increase industrial production, but agricultural production did not grow as quickly as expected.
6. **Hundred Flowers Campaign: (1956):** A movement within the communist government of China to lift the restrictions imposed upon Chinese intellectuals. The campaign comes from a classical Chinese phrase, "Let a hundred flowers bloom, and let a hundred schools of thought contend." People were encouraged to criticize the government and offer their own solutions to China's problems. After receiving an enormous amount of criticism, the government abruptly reversed the policy and began cracking down on any criticism.
7. **The Great Leap Forward: (1958 - 1961):** An extension of the First Five Year Plan, designed to increase agricultural output. Farms were further collectivized and farmers were forced to live in large communes where they shared meals, sleeping quarters, and nurseries. Backyard industries (including steel production) were encouraged. It was a huge failure because the backyard industries produced unusable materials and agricultural production did not increase because there was no incentive for

people to work if the government kept all the profits. Close to 20 - 30 million people died as a result of famine.

8. **China Successfully Detonates Atomic Bomb (1964):** Made China the planet's fifth nuclear power and signaled their growing presence in international affairs.
9. **The Cultural Revolution: (1966 - 1969 or 1971):** "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a ten-year political campaign - a social experiment aimed at rekindling revolutionary fervour and purifying the party. Mao Zedong and his wife, Jiang Qing, directed popular anger against other members of the party leadership. While others were removed from office, Mao was named supreme commander of the nation and army. Ideological cleansing began with attacks by young Red Guards on so-called "intellectuals" to remove "bourgeois" influences. Millions were forced into manual labour, and tens of thousands were executed. The result was massive civil unrest, and the army was sent in to control student disorder." (Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/special_report/1999/09/99/china_50/cult.htm)
10. **President Nixon's Visit to China: (1972):** An important step in formally normalizing relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). It marked the first time a U.S. president had visited the PRC, which at that time considered the U.S. one of its foes, and the visit ended 25 years of separation between the two sides. Signaled a relaxing of Cold War tensions between the US & China, aligned the two nations against the USSR, and it allowed for a limited cultural exchange and trade between the two nations. Formal diplomatic relations wouldn't be established until 1979.
11. **Mao Zedong Dies (1976):** As the undisputed leader of the Communist Party (and China's government) his death left a power vacuum. There was no designated heir and a power struggle emerged after his death between the Gang of Four (Mao's wife and other radicals) and more moderate elements of the Party. After the Gang of Four was imprisoned, there was a bloodless power struggle for control of the country with Deng Xiaoping emerging as the new leader.
12. **Gang of Four (1966 - 1976):** The name given to a political faction composed of four Chinese Communist Party officials. They came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution and were responsible for much of the chaos and oppression during the Cultural Revolution. The members consisted of Mao Zedong's last wife Jiang Qing, the leading figure of the group, and her close associates. They attempted to take full control of the Party and government after Mao's death, but they were quickly arrested and put on trial – ending their influence.
13. **Four Modernizations (1978):** a set of goals adopted by Chinese leader, Deng Xioping, to strengthen the fields of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. The Four Modernizations were adopted as a means of rejuvenating China's economy in 1978 following the death of Mao Zedong, and were among the defining features of Deng Xiaoping's tenure as head of the party.

14. **China Enacts a One-Child Policy: (1980):** a policy adopted to control population growth in China. Although the policy is commonly referred to as the “One-Child Policy”, it allows rural families to have a second child if the first child is a girl or disabled and some ethnic minorities are exempt. The punishment for violating the law is a fine.
15. **Sino-Soviet Split: (1960 - 1989):** An ideological disagreement about the philosophy of communism led to many public disagreements and a political split between the nations until 1989. This split allowed the US to pursue friendlier relations with the Chinese government.
16. **Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989):** A series of protests, many led by students, calling for democratic reforms of the government swept through China. The government responded by brutally cracking down on the protests and their response triggered a wave of international outrage at the treatment of the protesters. The US responded with economic sanctions on China.
17. **China’s First Manned Space Flight (2003):** Signaled China’s further importance on the world stage and rise as an up and coming superpower.
18. **China becomes the World’s Second Largest Economy: (2010):** In 2010, China surpassed Japan as the world’s second largest economy (the US is first). More evidence of China’s rise as an economic superpower.
19. **18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (2012):** Represents the second time since 1949, that an orderly transition of power has occurred. China’s new leader, Xi Jinping, is head of the party and the military – the first time since 1976. He has called “for a renewed campaign against corruption, continued market economic reforms, an open approach to governance, and a comprehensive national renewal under the name “Chinese Dream”.

Sources for answer key:

<http://www.chaos.umd.edu/history/toc.html>; <http://history.howstuffworks.com/asian-history/history-of-china6.htm>; <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/china/history>;
<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/index.html?8qa>
<http://www.history.com/topics/mao-zedong> ; <http://www.pbs.org/kqed/chinainside/>;
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/>; <http://condensedchina.com/china4.html>;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1999/09/99/china_50_years_of_communism/456465.stm;
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/15/world/asia/communists-conclude-party-congress-in-china.html>

Name _____

**An American in China:
The Life of Sidney Rittenberg Notes**

Directions: Use this handout to record what you learned about Sidney Rittenberg and China from your readings and group work. Use an additional sheet of paper or the back of this sheet if you need more room

Group 1: Early Life

Group 2: First Imprisonment

Group 3: Redder than Red

Group 4: Cultural Revolution and Second Imprisonment

Group 5: Life After China

An American in China: The Life of Sidney Rittenberg

Early Life (1921 – 1949)

Born to one of the leading families of Charleston, S.C. (a grandfather served in the state legislature; his father was city council president), Sidney Rittenberg grew up steeped in the philosophy of the New Deal. Acutely conscious of the plight of the poor, classmates remember that he spent half his lunch money every day in grammar school to feed orphans in his class. Later, as a teenager, he witnessed an incident that haunted him for years afterward. Walking home from a date, he saw a drunken white man attack a black man on the street. Innocently, Rittenberg ran to a police cruiser. "I waited there, supremely confident," he says, "but when the police came out of the alley they were beating the black man until he could hardly walk. I was dumbfounded." His father had the black man released, but Rittenberg couldn't stop thinking about what he had seen. "I asked my aunt about it," he remembers. "I told her, 'It's so unjust!' She said, 'There isn't any justice. You get what you pay for.'"

At military school, Rittenberg was a superior student but a rebellious cadet. Moving on to the University of North Carolina, he became a voracious reader and gave free reign to his social activist's instincts. He joined the left-wing American Student Union, taught cotton mill workers off-campus and eventually became a union organizer. In 1940 he joined the American Communist Party because "with their strong posture on free speech and ethnic equality in America, and their roots in the American labor movement, who seemed to offer a hope of righting the injustices I saw all around me."

He graduated from Chapel Hill in 1940 and was married the following year. Though he tried to join the Army the day after Pearl Harbor, he was rejected because of poor eyesight. Then in 1942 he was drafted – after giving up his Communist Party membership -- and sent to Stanford, where he studied Chinese. "I loved it," he says. "I drank it in. I couldn't get enough." In 1945 he was flown into Kunming, where he was assigned to the Judge Advocate General's office.

From the beginning, China fascinated Rittenberg. World War II was over, and the Nationalists and Communists were bracing for their own showdown. Traveling through the countryside, investigating Chinese damage claims against U.S. troops, Rittenberg made important contacts and formed his own sympathies.

One such turning point in his life came shortly after he arrived in China. He was sent to bring a \$26 check to the family of a girl who was killed in an auto accident by a drunken US soldier. Despite the family's devastation, they gave Rittenberg \$6 for his help. As Rittenberg remembers, "I think that I chose the road I did and stuck to it as long as I did because, like so many others I can't know, I genuinely believed it was the only way I could help change the miserable lives of people like Li Ruchia and his daughter, Wood Fairy."

He was appalled by the corruption of [Kuomintang leader] Chiang Kai-shek's regime and saw in the Communist armies an inspiring example of a working democracy. "For me," he says, "seeing an army where you could criticize officers was fantastic."

Discharged from the service in 1946, Rittenberg stayed on in China to work with the U.N. relief agency. His wife [in the United States] had divorced him, and he wanted to see how China's political struggle [Chinese Civil War] would be resolved—perhaps even write a book about it. When asked why he traveled to Yan'an [headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party] Rittenberg says, "I had learned something about the Chinese Communist movement at the US Army Language School at Stanford University, and later made contact with underground CCP members [...]. I believed that the New China under the CCP would be a great democracy, a land of peace and plenty which would be a blessing for America and the world."

It was at Yan'an that he met the CCP's most famous and influential leaders including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. They told him that they needed a native English speaker to explain their policies to the United States. Mao wanted to maintain friendly relations with the United States because he knew that they could provide the financial aid necessary to rebuild China after the war and he did not want to become solely dependent on the

USSR for aid. The start of the Cold War had heightened the United States' sensitivities towards communism and many in the US viewed China's fall to communism as proof of a worldwide communist conspiracy to take over the globe. As a result, Washington repeatedly ignored Mao's requests for friendship.

One evening, over dinner with a Communist commander, Rittenberg was asked if he would be willing to work for the new Communist radio system. "They were starting an English-language broadcast beamed at the U.S.," he explains. "They had no one who wrote fluent English, and I was very happy to do it. That put me in the New China News Agency." He translated Communist leaders' speeches and other information from Chinese to English, which was then broadcast across various parts of the country.

He spent time surrounded by the top echelons of the Communist Party's leadership – playing gin rummy, discussing politics, and watching Hollywood films. It was also in Yan'an that he met his second wife, Wei Lin.

After reading your excerpt, discuss and answer the questions as a group in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper:

- What events helped inspire Rittenberg to fight for social justice?
- Why did Rittenberg become interested in communism?
- Why did the Chinese Communists want to work with Rittenberg?
- Why did Mao try to reach out to the United States? How did the United States respond?
- How might the Cold War have been different if the US and Chinese Communists maintained friendly relations?

An American in China: The Life of Sidney Rittenberg

First Imprisonment (1949 – 1955)

Rittenberg's first arrest came during the waning months of the Chinese Civil War. He was ordered to report to Beijing for a special mission, which he believed was an assignment to help establish diplomatic relations between the United States and the new communist government. Much to his dismay he was arrested and accused of being a spy. Rittenberg believes that as a result of his association with Anna Louise Strong, a renowned leftist American writer whose loyalty to Mao made her suspect in the Soviet Union. When Moscow denounced her as a "spy queen" in 1949, it branded Rittenberg her agent. At the time, Beijing followed Moscow in lockstep, and Rittenberg was placed in detention at the request of Joseph Stalin. Rittenberg was shocked, "I felt not angry, but hurt. How could they not understand me? How could they not see I was with them and worked hard and supported them?"

Although Rittenberg wasn't physically abused by his guards, the first year of his detention was a terrible affair. His jailers drugged him to keep him edgy, awake, and sleep-deprived. "You're supposed to break down and confess. I broke down, but I had nothing to confess. So it's kind of awkward."

He endured long stretches of solitary confinement in a dark room, "sitting there with your own potential madness sitting across from you, watching you, knowing it's either you or him." In order to discipline his mind and avoid madness and nightmares, he developed a daily cleaning routine.

In 1950, after it became clear to his captors that he was telling the truth, he was transferred to "Prison Number Two" where his "cell was unusually large, about five paces by eight paces. A door laid across low sawhorses served for a bed, and there were two windows, open only at the top with heavy wire netting on both sides. I had a chamber pot and an earthen urn for clean water. I was also given a large thermos for hot drinking water." Although conditions had improved, he still spent most of his time in solitary confinement.

Rittenberg was offered the chance to go back to the United States if he gave up any connection with China, but he "didn't give this option a moment's thought." He "had made up [his] mind to work on building bridges between the Chinese and Americans, and [he] saw no reason why [he] should give up on that"

No stranger to being an outsider – "Ever since I was little, I had struggled to find acceptance. Growing up a Jew in South Carolina, I had never felt completely accepted [...] I remember being shut out of places." – the CCP was the place where he "had felt most loved and accepted."

To help him get past the terrible pain and anger of being betrayed and jailed by people he considered friends, Sidney drew strength from a poem from his childhood:

He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

"That's what I had to do. The Chinese Communists had cruelly thrust me out. Somehow, I had to draw a larger circle and take them back in with me again." At his new prison, he was allowed to read anything he wanted, though all the books and newspapers were in Chinese. Stoical as always, Rittenberg seized the opportunity to become fluent in the language. "I became obsessed with studying."

His daily routine involved an elaborate cleaning routine followed by hours of reading and writing. "Day after day, night after night, my life went on like this with scarcely any variation in routine.[...] I marked the passage of time by events described in the newspaper."

The only excitement came from snatching a quick peek out of a peephole on his door, "I often was able to get brief glimpses of the guards and other prisoners."

“Such was life in the early days of the People’s Republic that many of the things I read about in the newspaper were immediately reflected in my prison. Once I read of a crackdown on superstition and cultism. There was a cult, [whose] real crime was organizing a band of fanatics to oppose the Communists. Shortly after I read that article, a large group of the priests of this cult appeared in the prison.”

Finally, in 1955 two years after the death of Joseph Stalin, the Soviets exonerated Anna Louise Strong. "A month or two later I was released—just like that," Rittenberg says, snapping his fingers. He found that his wife, Wei Lin, had divorced him and gotten re-married because she never knew what had happened to him.

Profuse apologies followed, and eventually both Premier Zhou and Chairman Mao extended their personal regrets. Comparing the two men, Rittenberg describes Zhou as "an extremely democratic man, unaffected and natural. He didn't think of himself as a superior person with superior rights." Mao was more reserved. "I saw him stoop down on the ground to talk to peasants, but he had to make a thing of it," Rittenberg says. "He wasn't as approachable as Chou. He was the theorist who spoke slowly and liked to think between sentences."

After reading your excerpt, discuss and answer the questions as a group in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper:

- Why was Rittenberg jailed in 1949?
- When given the opportunity why did he refuse to return to the United States?
- How did Rittenberg occupy himself while in prison?
- Why was he released? How had his life changed while he was in prison?
- Describe his time in prison in three words.

An American in China: The Life of Sidney Rittenberg

Redder than Red (1955 – 1966)

Upon his release from prison, Rittenberg was given the option to leave China again. The Chinese leadership even offered to finance whatever endeavor he would have wanted to start up in America. "I didn't give this option a moment's thought – I had made up my mind to work on building bridges between the Chinese and Americans, and I saw no reason why I should give that up."

"From the time I was released from prison, everything I did was colored by one furious urge: to prove myself a loyal communist." This conviction strengthened when he saw how things had changed under the communists during his 6 years in prison. "I saw a better world around me than the one I had left behind. I wanted to help make it better still. And I wanted to belong."

His Chinese Communist Party membership was reinstated and he was given a translator's job at Radio Peking, where he "was being taken into the inner circle of the party, [...]". It was here that he met a 23-year-old secretary named Wang Yulin. With ill-advised directness, he wrote her a love letter. "Dear Comrade," she wrote back, "I am far too young to get married, and I hope you will never bother me again with this kind of talk." Happily for Rittenberg, she added a P.S.: "Since I've already agreed to go with you to Sun Yatsen Park tonight, I will keep my promise." They were married six months later.

His new position as a foreign expert at Radio Beijing, Rittenberg was increasingly utilized as a bridge between China and the English-speaking world, translating news copy, propaganda, and even Mao's collected works. "We weren't reporting news. We were propagating party policy."

The Hundred Flowers Campaign began in 1956 after a speech given by Mao where he told writers and artists to "Let a hundred flowers bloom" and he encouraged scholars to "let a hundred schools of thought contend." According to Rittenberg, "years and years of frustrations suddenly burst forth. Newspapers, periodicals and intellectual journals swelled with criticism of the party. [...] aimed not just at party policies, but at specific individuals. [...] The strange thing was, however, that the party and its members were silent in the face of these daily attacks. In fact, I had read a directive issued to party members of my rank and higher that ordered us to remain quiet and not debate our critics."

Eventually, many of the people who attacked the government and Communist Party were branded "rightists" and traitors. "The criteria for naming rightists had been clearly laid out. They had to be people who had challenged the monopoly of the Communist Party leadership, attacked the party's foreign policy, advocated Western-style democracy, or who were against the party's farm policies or the movement against hidden counterrevolutionaries. [...] We weren't going to be settling contradictions among the people the way Mao had specified, because Mao had decided that the party critics weren't people at all, but enemies." Some of Rittenberg's close friends were accused and despite his doubts, he did not help them. "My doubts were twisted with my zeal to do right by the party."

Just as soon as the anti-rightist campaign began, it ended, leaving no time for people to stoke their doubts and speak out against the terrible treatment of their friends and countrymen. "But as Mao had intended, none of us was left alone with our thoughts. None of us had time to reflect. For as quickly as the anti-rightist campaign had begun, it ended. [...] Mao's active, restless, driving mind gave us no reprieve. [...] It had been over nine years since I had seen Mao Zedong, but even from that distance, he reached down and shook me. He grabbed all of us with a vision more beautiful and dramatic, and more exciting than we could have hoped for."

That great vision was what came to be called the "Great Leap Forward" – a period from 1958 to 1961 of rapid industrialization, designed to transform China from an agrarian society made up of mostly farmers, to a modern industrial powerhouse. Farms were collectivized and private property was abolished. The slogan "Overtake Great Britain in steel output within fifteen years!" encapsulated the goals of this ambitious program.

To accomplish this, people all across the country were forced to set up backyard steel furnaces. Many of the farmworkers were diverted from working the fields to help with this major industrial project. Despite this, the government reported record harvests and other various bits of good news.

The Great Leap Forward turned out to be a disaster. Millions of people died due to famine because there wasn't enough food. It turned out that most of the metal created in these backyard furnaces was completely useless. Although the recent withdrawal of aid from the USSR was the official explanation, much, if not all, of the fault lay with Mao's policies, but "no one asked what had happened to the bumper harvests of the Great Leap Forward, or how the conditions that had produced those record crops could have also produced such famine."

Rittenberg had noticed a change in Mao from his days in Yan'an, before he became the leader of China and while he was still fighting in the Chinese Civil War. "His hubris started coming to the fore and he tried to do more class miracles and things went from bad to worse. [...] Apart from a great mind, he was the best listener I had ever seen. [...] But later on when I was translating his works in the early 1960s he was quite different. When you sat down and talked with him he did not pay much attention to other people's views. That was a fundamental change. It's the old adage about corruption and power."

The full damage of the Great Leap Forward wasn't known until years later, but it is believed that at least 18 million, and possibly as high as 45 million, people were died as a result of the famine. "If we were hungry, they told us again and again, it was the Soviets who were to blame. Few in China knew the truth until decades later. The Chinese were not just hungry, they were starving, starving to death in the countryside by the tens of millions. Fewer still knew the main cause: not bad harvests, not Soviet debt – although both probably played a role – but the Great Leap Forward itself."

Despite the widespread suffering taking place in China, the Rittenbergs, due to their important positions within Communist Party, lived a relatively comfortable life in a home furnished with priceless antiques from some of China's ancient dynasties. "Through my translation network, I had become not only a celebrity in Beijing, but a bit of a gourmet and theater buff as well."

Regardless, Rittenberg began to feel restless and his work at Radio Beijing didn't satisfy him. He yearned for that revolutionary spirit he felt when he first met the CCP during the civil war. "I had been a world-changer, a mover of hearts and stirrer of souls, an activist, and organizer, a proselytizer, an educator. What was I here? A pencil pushing bureaucrat."

Little did Rittenberg know, the winds of change would soon sweep across China.

After reading your excerpt, discuss and answer the questions as a group in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper:

- Why didn't Rittenberg leave China after his release from prison?
- What was Rittenberg's job upon his release from prison?
- What was the 100 Flowers Campaign? What were its effects on China?
- What was the Great Leap Forward? What were its effects on China?
- Why do you think Rittenberg failed to criticize Mao's policies?

An American in China: The Life of Sidney Rittenberg

Cultural Revolution and Second Imprisonment (1967 – 1977)

The spirit of revolution was racing across China and in 1967 Sidney Rittenberg found himself caught up in the Cultural Revolution.

Rittenberg describes his actions during the Cultural Revolution:

At the time that I was doing radical pamphleteering during the Cultural Revolution, I fervently believed in what I was saying. I thought that the Cultural Revolution was a great movement to democratize Socialism, to make the collective serve the individual more than vice versa – that, literally, in the words of the Internationale [unofficial song of socialist and communist movements worldwide], a better world was in birth. Only the purest Marxists, wholeheartedly dedicated to the people's cause, could provide leadership in this new era.

For this reason, for example, even though Zhou Enlai was a dearly beloved friend and supporter, when I received opposite instructions from him and from Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, I foolishly listened to Jiang Qing, thinking that she represented a purer form of "Mao Zedong Thought." As a result, I attended the Red Guard struggle meeting against Wang Guangmei (Madame Liu Shaoqi), which I have deeply regretted ever since. I was shocked at the violence in the Cultural Revolution, but I thought that this was the unavoidable accompaniment of convulsive social change such as I saw going on. All of this was, of course, quite mistaken. Anarchistic democracy swiftly turned into worse despotism than anything in the pre-Cultural Revolution bureaucracy, and I ended up sitting in a little cell with my ideals for another ten years.

In the ensuing anarchy, he was denounced by Mao's wife, the ambitious Jiang Qing (Chiang Ching). "In films she had been a failure," says Rittenberg, "but as a demagogue she was terrific. She was making a grab for power and in the process abandoned all scruples. She became a degenerate." He was put under house arrest and finally imprisoned.

Rittenberg's ordeal began on the night of Feb. 21, 1968. Chinese army security personnel came to his home in Peking and took him away. He was accused of being an American spy, then held without trial. "The first two years were really quite harsh," he says placidly. "It was a sort of reign of terror, and for many prisoners there was a lot of physical violence, though I experienced very little. I found out later that some prisoners were classified as having big stories to tell, and they were to be kept in good enough shape to tell them. I was one of those." But even Rittenberg was harassed constantly. At first, for example, prison rules required inmates to sleep with their heads turned toward a peephole in the cell door, so guards could keep watch on them easily. "By nature I'm a fidgety person," says Rittenberg (who was nicknamed "Worm" by a teacher in grammar school). "If I turned over, the guards would bang on the door and curse."

His wife, Yulin, also lost her job and, for a time, was sent to a labor camp in Henan Province, taking only her small son with her. The Rittenbergs' children, left in the care of their grandmother, were ostracized until Yulin returned in 1972 and wrote a letter of protest to Zhou. The premier earlier had approved Rittenberg's request for a daily newspaper in his cell. "I tried to squeeze every drop of information out of it," Rittenberg recalls. "It was a positive thing to apply myself to." He learned something about Vietnam through extensive Chinese coverage of the antiwar movement in the U.S. But the term "Watergate" – a scandal that led to the resignation of US President Richard Nixon – puzzled him. He assumed it was a scandal involving a hydroelectric project.

During his first years in prison the American was questioned morning, afternoon and night. When official interest in him flagged, he would see no one—not even his jailers—for as much as a month at a time. He was forbidden to send or receive letters, and his Chinese wife and four children were told little of his fate.

Rittenberg used his imprisonment to reflect upon his time in China:

How well had I done? I had stayed in China to help keep children like Wood Fairy from dying, to save her father and all those like him from starvation and oppression. I had joined with others in the Communist Party to achieve those goals. Had we succeeded?

[...] I thought of the neighborhood medical clinic where our little daughter Xiaodong was rescued when her breathing stopped. Those clinics were there for everyone now. I remembered Mama's [his mother-in-law] confident cry – she who had lost eight of her twelve children to disease, hunger, and rape by Japanese soldiers [during WWII]. 'Children don't die under socialism,' she said. Her four children who survived to see the New China had all married and prospered, and not one of them or their children or grandchildren or their great-grandchildren had ever died from lack of care.

[...] I knew by this time that people had starved during the Great Leap Forward, although I still had no idea they had died in great numbers. [...] The 'people's state' owned the property, but the people didn't own the state, and exploitation existed under this so-called socialism.

Here in prison I realized for the first time that many in power in the party didn't think the way I was thinking. When they set out to get the party cadres in line during the [Cultural Revolution] I had supported, they weren't just thinking about the future Promised Land of Communism, where all would be equal and live together in peace and abundance. Nor were they intent on finding and defending what was true. They were thinking about destroying their political opposition.

[...] My conclusions were obvious. I had been right to help those who were working for a new China and for the betterment of all human beings, and to bring word of what was going on in China to the outside world. I had been dead wrong, however, in accepting the party as the embodiment of truth and in giving to the party uncritical and unquestioning loyalty. Only someone who thinks independently and who uses critical analysis can make the maximum individual contribution to the freedom and happiness of other people.

On September 9, 1976, Mao Zedong passed away. "I couldn't understand my reaction [to Mao's death]. In my mind, Mao was the most important man in the world, wise, gifted, philosophically sound, strategically masterful. He was the leader of the Chinese Revolution, and of the world revolution. [...] And yet, I could not produce a single tear when news came of Mao's death. Not one."

As anticipated after Mao's death, there was a power struggle for control of China between the revolutionary Gang of Four (one of whom was Mao's wife – Jiang Qing) and, the more moderate reformers, led by Deng Xiaoping. Eventually, Deng Xiaoping and his faction won out and the Gang of Four was imprisoned. "As soon as their names vanished from the newspaper, I realized that Jiang Qing and her cronies were out of power. And now that she was sharing my prison, I was sure the changes were real." She ended up sharing a cell in the same prison as Rittenberg.

Then on the morning of Nov. 18, 1977, he was given a razor and told to shave off his beard. Soon his wife appeared with a new Western suit, a pair of shoes, a silk shirt and a tie. As suddenly as it had begun, his imprisonment was over.

After reading your excerpt, discuss and answer the questions as a group in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper:

- How did Rittenberg view the Cultural Revolution at the outset? Why did he hold this view? Why was he wrong?
- Why was he imprisoned for a second time? What happened to his family as a result of his imprisonment?
- According to Rittenberg, what were some of the positives of Mao's rule in China? What were some of the negatives?
- What effect did Mao's death have on Rittenberg's imprisonment?

An American in China: The Life of Sidney Rittenberg

Life After China (1977 – Present)

Sidney Rittenberg was released from his second imprisonment in 1977 and reunited with his family, who hadn't seen in over 10 years:

It was almost too good to be true. I had returned, not just alive, but alive to a wonderful, warm family – a family that had not rejected me [for being accused as an anti-revolutionary], but had stood by me and still loved me. I could only guess what it had cost Yulin [his wife] to keep those bonds intact.

That night, she poured out a decades' old grievance. Before I had been sent to prison, she said, I had been so wrapped up in my work and my political struggles that I had sorely neglected the family. I knew she was right.

'From now on,' I said, 'my job is to make you happy.'

As he had done while he was in prison, Rittenberg began to reevaluate his political and philosophical beliefs during a period of rapid change in the wake of Mao Zedong's death and Deng Xiaoping's rise.

[...] As a free man, I continued the painful process I had begun in prison: a deep reexamination of my belief in Communism.

I reread my old books and saw that the major problems were in Communist doctrine itself, not simply the way it was carried out. It wasn't just Stalin, it was Lenin who had been at fault. And for all his brilliance, Marx's social and economic theories were limited like everyone else's and contained major errors.

[...] I had been completely wrong to accept the policy decisions and interpretations of a small group of leaders as if they somehow held a monopoly over the truth. But at the core of all my political errors was accepting what Lenin held was the central point in Marxist politics: the necessity of having a tight "people's dictatorship" to prepare the ground for attaining a future perfect democracy. And I also realized that as dedicated as I was to changing the world into a better place to live, it took me such a long time to see the errors of Communist doctrine because of the stake I had acquired in the system and the life I had lived in China, a life of perks, privilege, and deluded complicity.

The final blow to my belief came when Deng Xiaoping shut down Democracy Wall [a place where citizens could openly criticize the government] and arrested some of the main post writers. [...] No longer was I willing to see the party's actions on its own terms, to put the best face on everything to accept every repression as a necessary evil on the road to freedom. Now I was willing and able to see it for what it was. Like politicians elsewhere, China's leaders were playing a cynical game, using the democracy card to encourage attacks against their own enemies. Once those enemies had been toppled, however, they had no further need of democratic public opinion, and showed no qualms about crushing the movement they had encouraged and protected.

[...] As for Mao Zedong, I now see him as a brilliant, talented tyrant, responsible for the misery and deaths of millions, or possibly tens of millions. Never a true friend, he twice threw me into wrongful and fearful isolation in prison when it suited some political purpose.

[...] Having preached and warned for years against the corruption that usually follows power, having inveighed against arrogance and exaggeration of the role, prowess, and wisdom of a single individual, he became their victim and victimized the Chinese people.

Seeing that life under Deng Xiaoping would remain the same with the continuing of oppression of free expression and the protection of corruption by party officials, Rittenberg realized there was nothing he could do to help change China. On March, 17, 1980, Rittenberg and his wife boarded a plane to the United States.

Upon returning to the United States, the Rittenbergs lived in Queens, NY and survived by working various jobs such as teaching and leading tours back to China. Their big break came a few years after their return, when the founder of the company ComputerLand, asked Sidney and Yulin to help his company negotiate a deal to sell computers in China. The deal was ultimately successful and it helped the Rittenbergs launch a consulting company for American businesses that want to do business in China.

Although he still opposed the Deng Xiaoping regime in China (Deng Xiaoping died in 1997), he believes that things are better in China than when he got there in 1946.

Despite my initial distaste for the corruption of the Deng Xiaoping era – a distaste that persists in the face of continuing repression and corruption – a distaste that persists in the face of continuing repression and corruption – I must admit that he has led the Chinese people to the highest standard of living in their history. And despite the atrocious treatment of dissidents, compared to the old days the Chinese people today probably enjoy their greatest degree of individual freedom in history. It did not come as a gift from on high. The people have won it.

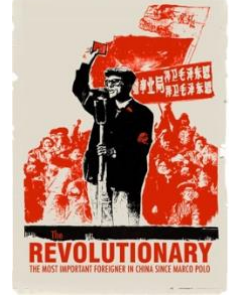
In 1993, he published an autobiography of his life titled, *The Man Who Stayed Behind*. His company is still in operation today and it consults with some of the biggest companies in the world from Intel to Microsoft. In 2012, a documentary about his life, titled *the Revolutionary*, was produced. Rittenberg, who is now 91 and lives in the Pacific Northwest, still makes frequent trips to China.

If there is one thing that life has taught me, it is that one can change, one can learn, one can grow. And that the surest way to happiness for yourself is to fight for the happiness of others. I find myself readier than ever to pursue this same task that led me to stay in China. For event today, ten thousand miles, five decades, half a world, and a lifetime away, Wood Fairy and her brothers and sisters everywhere are much on my mind.

After reading your excerpt, discuss and answer the questions as a group in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper:

- How did Rittenberg's attitude towards his family change upon his release from prison?
- How did Rittenberg's beliefs change upon his release from prison? What event(s) led to these changes?
- Why did Sidney Rittenberg leave China?
- How did he view China under Deng Xiaoping's leadership? What were the positives and negatives?
- Why do you think businesses pay Rittenberg to consult?
- Do you agree with Sidney Rittenberg's quote about life? Why or why not?

Name _____



***The Revolutionary* Movie Poster**

Directions: Congratulations! You have been selected by *Stourwater Pictures* to create a movie poster for their new documentary, *the Revolutionary*, about the life of Sidney Rittenberg. After learning about Sidney Rittenberg, you must create a poster that reflects what you have learned and what you think is important for people to know about his life.

1. Brainstorm ideas for your poster and consider:

- What is most important for people to know about Sidney Rittenberg’s life?
- How will your poster illustrate some of the themes (freedom, justice, equal rights, activism, courage, self-determination, naiveté, personal growth, etc.) present throughout Rittenberg’s life?

2. Your poster can be:

- literal or abstract
- simple or complex
- use words or pictures

3. Your poster must contain the following:

- A slogan or movie catchphrase. For example, the slogan for the film *The Revolutionary* is “Mao’s call for a cultural revolution was answered by tens of millions of Chinese.. and one American.”
- At least one event from each of the assigned time periods:
 - Early Life (1921 – 1949)
 - First Imprisonment (1949 – 1955)
 - Redder than Red (1955 – 1966)
 - Cultural Revolution and Second Imprisonment (1967 – 1977)
 - Life After China (1977 – Present)
- One event from your timeline that was not mentioned in the readings. For example, China becoming the world’s second largest economy.
- It must be colorful and eye-catching.

If it is provided by your teacher, use the “Examples of Movie Posters” handout as a starting point.

4. You must also turn in a paragraph in which you provide an overview of your poster, describe what it represents, as well as explain if you think it is important to study Sidney Rittenberg’s life.

Examples of Movie Posters

