



## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** With an area of 3,705,820 square miles (9,598,032 square kilometers), China is roughly the same size as the United States. Because mountains or deserts cover much of western China, the majority of the population lives in the east, where rivers and plains allow for productive agriculture. China's other major geographic features differ vastly between regions, ranging from the Himalaya Mountains to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau ("the roof of the world") to subtropical islands. The Great Wall of China stretches 4,470 miles (7,200 kilometers). Some of the world's longest rivers are in China; the Yangtze River runs 3,900 miles (6,300 kilometers).

China's climate ranges from sub-arctic in the north to subtropical in the south. Monsoons in the southeast cause frequent summer floods that can kill thousands each year. Sandstorms in the north are increasingly common due to desertification.

China's diverse plant life includes more than 2,800 species of trees, such as metasequoia, bamboo, palm, oak, China fir, evergreen, and China cypress. Deforestation is an increasing problem, especially in the east, as industries and housing developments replace natural forests.

**History.** The Chinese have one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations, spanning some five thousand years. China has long been ruled by dynasties. Some were formed by native Han (such as the Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644), and others were established after nomadic tribes from the north conquered China-proper (as did the Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911). Nomadic tribes were eventually absorbed into Chinese culture. A revolution inspired by Sun Yat-sen overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911. In 1912, with the country fragmented by opposing warlords, Sun Yat-sen established the Kuomintang (KMT) party in an effort to unify China.

After Sun's death in 1925, Chiang Kai-shek took control (1927) and ousted the once-allied Communist Party. The Communists, led by Mao Zedong, struggled with the KMT for control of China while both groups fought Japan in World War II. After the Japanese were defeated (1945), the civil war ended with Mao's forces in control and Chiang's army fleeing to Taiwan to regroup. They never returned. Mao ruled from 1949 to 1976. China still considers Taiwan its 23rd province.

While the Chinese initially welcomed communism, the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) had disastrous effects on the country. More than 40 million people starved or were killed during Mao's rule. After Mao died in 1976, Deng Xiaoping came to power and gradually moved away from Maoism. His more moderate policies led to foreign tourism, a more liberal economy, private enterprise, growth, trade, and educational exchanges with other nations. The Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 and a subsequent government crackdown derailed these measures for a time.

By 1992, China was again focusing on economic reform and it quickly became home to one of the world's fastest-growing economies. However, Deng did not favor political liberalization. Since Deng's death in 1997, his successors have reiterated his policy of a socialist market economy with a strong central government. Hong Kong (a British colony) reverted to Chinese control in 1997, and China was admitted to the World Trade Organization in 2001. The nation also hosted the 2008 Olympic Games. These events helped bolster China's status as a world power, and the nation continues to rank among the world's leaders in gross domestic product, exports, and receipt of foreign investment.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** China's population is the world's largest, with 1.3 billion people. To reduce growth, the government sponsors family-planning programs and offers incentives to families with only one child; penalties are imposed on those with more children. This policy applies mainly to the Han Chinese (92 percent of the population). Rural families may have a second child if the first is a girl. Still, the annual growth rate has fallen to 0.6 percent. Of China's 55 minority groups, 15 include more than one million people. These are the Zhuang, Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan, Uygur, Miao, Yi, Buyi, Korean, Manchu, Dong, Yao, Bai, Tujia, and Hani nationalities. While about 60 percent of all Chinese live in rural areas, urban populations are growing rapidly. About 100 million rural migrant laborers move in and out of cities in search of work. Shanghai (18 million) and Beijing (16 million) are the largest cities.

**Language.** Standard Chinese (*Putonghua*), or Mandarin, is based on the Beijing dialect and is the national language. It is taught in schools, so most Chinese can read, write, and speak Mandarin. Many people also use the dialects or languages of their geographical region. These include Wu, Min, *Yue* (Cantonese), and Kejia. Language variations are found more in the central and southern areas of China. Written Chinese uses characters to express words, thoughts, or principles. A romanized alphabet (*pinyin*) is used to help teach Chinese in school and for international communication. While as many as 50,000 characters exist, only about 8,000 are currently in use. Chinese requires a knowledge of 1,500 to 2,000 characters for basic literacy. While people in different regions might not understand each other's verbal language, they use the same basic set of characters and can communicate in writing.

**Religion.** Government policy allows Chinese to exercise religious beliefs within certain guidelines. Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, and Christians do practice, but some groups are prohibited. As many as 70 million people have some religious faith. Islam claims 20 million adherents. Temples, mosques, and churches are open to the public, but public worship is frowned upon or even discouraged. Unauthorized or underground religious activities have led to imprisonment and other restrictions. Unique local religions can flourish in small towns, especially in the east; they may focus on one god or form of worship, and they often include elements of Taoism, Buddhism, and ancestor veneration.

**General Attitudes.** The Chinese are noted for hospitality and reserve. Confucianism, the ancient philosophy of social order, influences attitudes and encourages a group consciousness—especially in rural areas. The Chinese are very proud of their nation's long history and of past Chinese achievements. They do not appreciate external criticism. The attitudes of people in larger eastern cities tend to be more cosmopolitan than those in the more traditional rural areas.

The central government emphasizes respect for and obedience to authority. Over time, people have lost respect for some local and national leaders. The change is slowly forcing local officials to be more accountable.

The principle of *guanxi* commits friends and associates to do what they can for each other when called upon. To violate *guanxi* is to lose reputation or honor. Children are expected to uphold the family's social standing. This has had different meanings in different eras. For today's urban children, it means being well educated and well dressed, earning money, and practicing traditional values such as loyalty and kindness. For rural Chinese, it means putting the needs of the group

(family, community) above oneself. An admired person is one who brings the greatest honor to the family while being the most humble about personal accomplishments.

As more urban Chinese are becoming wealthy in an expanding economy, the gap between rich and poor is growing. Some areas are experiencing unrest because people are losing their jobs and the traditional cradle-to-grave benefits of the *danwei* (work group) system. For the average person, having food, shelter, and clothing is more desirable and understandable than the relatively abstract concept of political freedom.

**Personal Appearance.** Chinese attire traditionally is conservative and simple. However, Western styles are very popular in urban areas. Women tend to wear dresses more than pants. People like to dress up in public. Rural styles are not always so modern, and some rural Chinese continue to wear the drab pantsuits of Mao's era. Ethnic minorities wear clothing reflective of their cultural past and the climate in which they live.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** The Chinese nod politely or bow slightly when greeting. A handshake is also acceptable, especially in formal situations or to show respect. Greetings vary, as they are given in the local dialect. *Ni hao ma* (How do you do?) is somewhat formal. Informally, people might greet with *Zao* (Morning), *Wanan* (Evening), or *Zenmoyang?* (How's it going?). Two acquaintances who have not seen each other for some time might say *Hao jiu bu jian le* (Long time no see) or *Zui jin mang ma* (Have you been busy lately?). Shopkeepers might greet passersby with *Huan ying* (Welcome). Many people start a conversation with a considerate *Ni chi fan le ma* (Have you eaten yet?), to which it is proper to respond affirmatively, even if the respondent has not eaten.

The Chinese prefer formal introductions; they use full titles for their guests but are less precise in identifying themselves. Chinese names usually consist of a one-character family name, followed by a one- or two-character given name. A person is addressed either by full name or by title and family name. In lieu of professional titles, the Chinese equivalents of "Mr." and "Mrs." are used. Thus, Wang Jian-Jun can also be called *Mr. Wang*, but never simply *Wang* and rarely ever *Jian-Jun*. To show special respect, friends might use the terms *Lao* (old) and *Xiao* (young) with or instead of titles.

**Gestures.** Except in crowds when physical contact is unavoidable, Chinese do not like to be touched by people they do not know. However, close friends of the same gender may sit or stand close or walk arm in arm. Respectful distance is best when dealing with older people or those in important positions. Chinese do not punctuate conversations with gestures nearly as much as Westerners do. To beckon, they wave all fingers with the palm of the hand facing down. Chinese point with an open hand rather than one finger. In some regions of rural China, it is common for people to spit in public after clearing their throat. Since poor health conditions make this necessary, government fines have failed to curb the behavior.

**Visiting.** Invitations usually are extended for formal events; otherwise people often drop by unannounced. When invited, Chinese are generally prompt; being more than a few minutes late is impolite. Guests conduct themselves with restraint and refrain from loud, boisterous speech and actions. Invited friends often bring gifts such as tea, cigarettes, fruit, chocolates, cakes, or wine when they visit. One also might take a small gift when visiting an older person. Hosts rarely open wrapped gifts before visitors leave. They usually offer such

refreshments as fruit, nuts, or seeds. If guests decline the offer, hosts probably will insist several times before accepting the refusal. People enjoy gathering for conversation or playing card and table games.

**Eating.** Among family, friends, and business associates, eating is an important way of socializing and building relationships in China. The Chinese use chopsticks for all meals. Food is placed at the center of the table and may include more than one type of main dish to be eaten with rice. Diners place some food in their individual rice bowls, which they hold close to the mouth while eating. They place bones and seeds on the table or a dish but never back in the rice bowl. When finished, a person places the chopsticks neatly on the table, not in the rice bowl. Spoons are used for soup, typically eaten at the end of a meal. In some areas, slurping is not considered impolite; in informal situations, it is a compliment to the host.

At restaurants, diners choose from several dishes on a revolving tray at the center of the table. Individuals offer toasts to the whole table and sometimes even to a neighboring table. At formal banquets, rice is served last—if at all—because it is considered a filler. Hosts, not guests, turn the revolving tray, and people leave soon after the meal ends. Guests prepare a short speech to respond to a host's remarks. Tipping in restaurants traditionally has been an insult—something a superior does for an inferior—but with economic change, it is now popular in Guangdong and Fujian provinces and is spreading to other parts of the country.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** In China's group-oriented society, the family is considered more important than the individual. Family ties survived the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, and loyalty to family is still a hallmark of society. The elderly are highly respected, and children expect to care for aging parents. Most families have only one child, who receives considerable attention from parents and grandparents. Boys are prized as heirs to the family name.

**Housing.** Urban housing was once supplied by a person's work unit. Now, the government encourages people to buy their own homes or apartments. City dwellers typically live in apartment buildings of six or seven storeys. Most apartments are small, some as small as 480 square feet (45 square meters). To save space, the kitchen is often located on an enclosed balcony. New high-rise apartment buildings (sometimes 20 to 30 storeys high) are appearing in many cities, offering more spacious and luxurious apartments for those who can afford them. A new trend in urban housing is community facilities. Companies build several apartment buildings close to each other and provide green spaces, security services, medical facilities, supermarkets, and schools. These buildings are colorful on the outside, and their apartments are relatively big. However, only the well-off can afford them. Central heating is typically available only in cold climates (north of the Yangtze River); in the south, people more often rely on electric heaters and coal stoves. Rural homes are larger than urban apartments, though they may lack running water and other amenities. Farmers lease their land from the government for fifty or one hundred years.

**Dating and Marriage.** Young people like to go to parks, dances, or parties at friends' houses. Intimate relations and public displays of affection are discouraged throughout the country but are increasingly common in cities. Dating indicates a serious commitment between two people and is uncom-

mon before one of the partners is over age 20 or has graduated from college. The minimum sanctioned age for marriage is 22 for men and 20 for women. Those who marry before that age are not eligible for certain benefits. Until recently, college students were forbidden to marry until after graduation. Most urban people do not marry until their late twenties anyway.

To wed, a couple first applies for permission from the local governing unit. If permission is granted, a legal contract is signed and recorded at a government office. The bride retains her maiden name but children receive the father's surname. Many do not consider themselves truly married until they celebrate their union with family and friends. Urban couples save for months to host a proper wedding dinner party or Western-style reception. Rural festivities may last two days. Wedding rings traditionally are not part of a marriage but are becoming more common. According to one popular tradition, a bride wears red in the morning when the groom arrives to pick her up. The wedding day continues with festivities, photos, three changes of the bride's outfit, and a main banquet where the bride wears white. Later, guests play tricks on the new couple until they retire.

**Life Cycle.** Chinese celebrate the arrival of a newborn one month after its birth. Family and friends usually visit, bringing money in red envelopes for the baby's parents. People are considered adults when they get married, which usually takes place in a person's twenties. When a person dies, family members wear black bands around their upper arms for a month or two. At the funeral, an enlarged picture (usually drawn) of the deceased is displayed. Family members burn incense and yellow paper. The yellow paper is considered money for the dead. Family members burn yellow paper on every anniversary of the person's death.

**Diet.** Except in larger cities, a wide variety of food is unavailable to the average person. What people eat largely depends on what is produced in the region where they live. Dishes with rice, potatoes, cornmeal, tofu, and other grains are staples. Noodles are very common. Dishes made with pork, beef, chicken, or fish (a symbol of abundance) are popular but expensive. Specialties vary from region to region, from duck in Beijing to spicy dishes in the Sichuan province. Fruits (peeled) and vegetables (cooked) are eaten in season; few dairy products are available. Sauces are mixed with vegetables and meats and eaten with rice or noodles. *Man tou* (steamed bread) is a staple in northern China. Chinese dumplings (*jiaozi*) are popular in many parts of the country. Seeds (sunflower, pumpkin, watermelon, etc.) and nuts are favorite snacks, and fruit is a preferred dessert. People may eat frequently at local restaurants.

**Recreation.** Favorite pastimes include eating, karaoke, and imported movies; the average Chinese attends more than 10 movies each year. As incomes have increased in recent years, traveling to other parts of China has become popular. Most cities have sports facilities. The country's favorite sports include soccer, table tennis, swimming, and badminton. Chinese play table and board games in homes and parks. *Majiang* is the most popular table game; most people know how to play it. *Wei qi* is a strategy game played in more educated circles. Chinese chess is another favorite. Parks and courtyards are often filled in the morning by those practicing *taijiquan*, a traditional form of shadowboxing that provides exercise and therapy.

**The Arts.** Traditional Chinese arts include calligraphy, painting, pottery, and jade carving. Calligraphy is thought to enrich a person's life by teaching self-mastery. Like calligraphers,

## China

painters strive for beautiful lines. Many contemporary painters incorporate this tradition with other styles.

Chinese music is distinct in tone and rhythm and is based on a five-tone scale; traditional instruments include cymbals, drums, and gongs. Chinese opera is popular and depicts folktales or significant events. Theaters, ballets, and films are well attended in urban areas. Traveling cultural groups perform in rural areas.

**Holidays.** Official public holidays are New Year's Day (1 Jan.), Labor Day (1 May), and National Day (1–2 Oct.). Other public holidays, set according to the lunar calendar, include Tomb-sweeping Day, the Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-autumn Festival (also called Moon Festival), and Chinese New Year (also called Spring Festival). Students have extended vacations at these times. As the most important holiday, the Spring Festival is marked by banquets, family gatherings, carnivals, dragon dances, and fireworks. Festivals are held throughout the year but are not public holidays. The Lantern Festival is one of the most popular festivals.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** In the People's Republic of China, national policy is determined by a 20-member Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, more importantly, its 7-member Standing Committee. The president (currently Hu Jintao) is chief of state, chosen by the 2,985 members of the National People's Congress. Hu is also the general secretary of the CCP, considered the government's most powerful position. The premier (currently Wen Jiabao) is head of government and is nominated by the president and confirmed by Congress. Members of Congress are indirectly elected at local levels. In about half of all villages, local leaders are elected rather than appointed.

**Economy.** China's large economy is offset by its population, meaning the real gross domestic product per capita is at the level of a developing country. While overall income is rising, wealth is not equally distributed. In a state accustomed to equal wages for all, this has been a source of contention between average people. Still, successful and honest entrepreneurs are well respected, even in rural areas. The government applauds the vibrant and growing private sector, even as it struggles to control it. Leaders contend that communism is not synonymous with poverty. Urban areas have a growing middle class. For villagers, the growing economy means better diets, but it also draws labor away from the fields and into the cities.

About half of the population is employed in agriculture. Future agricultural production may require greater mechanization and better seed and fertilizer. Although only one-tenth of its land is arable, China is a world leader in producing rice, tobacco, corn, barley, soybeans, and peanuts. Wheat, eggs, pork, fish, and potatoes are also important products. China produces manufactured goods, oil, minerals, coal, and steel.

The economy grew rapidly in the 1990s, and growth is expected to remain strong. To help maintain growth, the government is investing heavily in public infrastructure. Pollution, corruption, crime, and rising unemployment are serious problems. A large budget deficit threatens the social security network and other institutions. The currency is called *renminbi*; the standard unit is the *yuan* (CNY).

**Transportation and Communications.** Individuals travel by foot, bicycle, motor scooter, train, bus, pedicab, or private

### POPULATION & AREA

Population .....	1,321,851,888 (rank=1)
Area, sq. mi. ....	3,705,820 (rank=3)
Area, sq. km. ....	9,598,032

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank .....	81 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women .....	72 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita .....	\$6,757
Adult literacy rate .....	95% (male); 87% (female)
Infant mortality rate .....	23 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy .....	71 (male); 74 (female)

minibus. Few people have cars. Domestic air travel is expensive. In some areas, people travel by river barge or ferry. The government has undertaken a massive road construction project to create a north-south and an east-west freeway to link with intercity highways.

China's government television station (CCTV) has 16 channels. All local channels and radio stations must have official approval; there is no independent press. Most people have televisions. The telephone system is expanding, and the internet reaches into most cities and a growing number of rural areas. Cell phone use is common and growing.

**Education.** China seeks to provide an elementary education to every citizen. Nearly 100 percent of first-grade-age children are enrolled, and most finish elementary school. Rural girls are least likely to be enrolled because they are needed at home. Students attend five days a week for several hours. The government hopes to extend mandatory schooling to nine years in all areas. To increase adult literacy, a university offers instruction over radio and television. Less than 10 percent of all people attend college. Students pay tuition themselves or sign a contract with a state company that will sponsor them in return for a few years of work after graduation. Top students study abroad or work for multinational corporations.

**Health.** While malaria and cholera are problematic in China, people are generally healthy. However, the system of guaranteed care is being replaced by an insurance-based system where patients are required to pay for part of their care. Since rural Chinese often lack money, health conditions are declining and disease is spreading. Unlike many developing countries, Chinese health care concentrates on prevention. An extensive network of programs emphasizes immunizations, prenatal care, pediatrics, and sanitation. Facilities are simple, but the system has greatly improved basic health—especially in urban areas. Still, water is usually not potable and open sewers are common. Traditional Chinese medicine (use of medicinal herbs and acupuncture, among other things) is combined with Western medical techniques in treating illness and injury.

## AT A GLANCE

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