



# U.S. FORCES INDOPACIFIC CULTURE GUIDE

China



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on East Asia.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Chinese society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is meant to complement other pre-deployment training.



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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build



relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we

carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories—what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains”—in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems, and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-

based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.



## 12 Domains of Culture



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This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions, and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

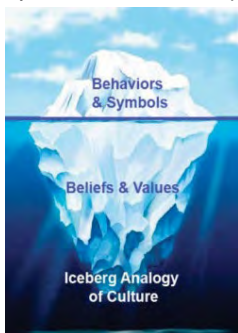
## Cultural Belief System

An important component of any worldview is a belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to support those ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

### Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgement in



order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout East Asia, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

East Asia includes the present-day countries of China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, and South Korea. By the 700s AD, ancient East Asian tribes and peoples had consolidated into unified Chinese, Japanese, and Korean states; Mongolia formed a state in the 13th century.



China has played a central role in East Asian history, influencing the region's culture, philosophy, and politics. Between the 8th and 11th centuries, the people of Japan and Korea adopted several aspects of Chinese culture, including clothing and architecture.

Despite its predominance, China remained vulnerable to nomadic Mongol tribes living along its northern border. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Mongol forces under the command of

Genghis Khan swept through Asia and parts of Europe, conquering China and Korea. Though vast and diverse, the Mongol Empire was ultimately short-lived.

Over the next 500 years, East Asian societies advanced along differing paths. Japan developed largely in isolation, while Korea—a Chinese tributary state—had some limited outside connections. After the Mongol Empire's demise in the 14th century, Mongolia came under Chinese control, which lasted until Mongolia aligned with the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1924. Europeans established interactions with China in the 1500s. Although trade with Europe initially allowed China to thrive, it eventually helped Europeans expand their control in East Asia.

As Japan industrialized in the mid-19th century, it competed with European powers to colonize other parts of Asia. By the mid-1900s, Japan had colonized Korea, northeastern China, and Taiwan. This colonial activity led to power struggles with other powers, angering Japanese colonial subjects.



World War II (WWII) left a lasting mark on East Asia. Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 led to a long struggle between Japan and the US. Similarly, Japan committed atrocities that inspired hatred throughout East Asia. In 1945 Japan surrendered and was forced to give up its colonies.

Following WWII Cold War politics shaped East Asia's destiny. In China, USSR-backed communists seized control of mainland China, forcing US-backed nationalists to retreat to the island of Taiwan off the Chinese coast. Korea was divided into the US-controlled South and USSR-controlled North as part of a postwar transition. In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, sparking the Korean War and separation.

During the second half of the 20th century, Japan and South Korea became wealthy, democratic societies with developed



economies. China liberalized its economy but did not reform politically. Mongolia followed communist economic policies until the 1990s, when it liberalized both politically and economically. North Korea remains communist and isolated.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. Despite the longevity of its societies, East Asia has experienced substantial political change since the mid-1900s.

Following WWII, Japan rebuilt its economy, aligned with the US, and democratized, although retaining its emperor as a symbol of national unity. While the same party has ruled for all but 5 years since 1955, Japan today enjoys economic prosperity and political freedom.

Once it established a communist stronghold in China, the USSR reasserted Chinese sovereignty although at the expense of

several million casualties from political purges and avoidable famines. In 1978 China's government introduced market reforms that lifted millions out of poverty. Nevertheless, the communists have maintained a tight rein on power, denying the Chinese people their



autonomy. Arriving in 1949, Taiwan's Chinese nationalists established an authoritarian rule that has promoted rapid economic growth. Today Taiwan has a thriving economy and a vibrant, multiparty democracy. Although China claims sovereignty over Taiwan, the island functions as an independent country.

The two Koreas have followed vastly different paths since their division. During the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea was ruled

by authoritarians who favored economic growth over political freedom, prompting the country to industrialize rapidly. Having democratized in the late 1980s, South Korea now has an open, democratic political system and one of the world's most developed economies. North Korea, by contrast, remains militaristic, repressive, and economically weak.

Long a communist state, Mongolia transitioned to democracy after a peaceful revolution in 1990. Although the communist Mongolian People's Party continued to win elections in the early 1990s, several new parties have won majorities in the Mongolian Parliament in subsequent elections.

Regional security threats and mutual distrust motivate military posturing in East Asia. Having the largest military in the region, China lays claim to several disputed territories and defends a wide range of commercial interests. A well-equipped force, China's military has advanced technologically in recent years. The Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese militaries are substantially smaller than China's but are professional and well-resourced. Technically still at war with South Korea, North Korea has a massive but poorly trained and equipped military of more than a million troops. Mongolia has no international disputes and only a small military. While nationalism and historical animosity threaten East Asian security, most countries in the region trade or engage diplomatically. All East Asian countries apart from North Korea have US embassies.

Japan and the Koreans are ethnically homogeneous societies. Similarly, 95% of Mongolians are ethnic Mongols, while Turkic people constitute the rest of the population. Although 91% of China's population belongs to the Han ethnic group, the Chinese government also recognizes 55 other ethnic groups. No countries in East Asia have substantial foreign-born or immigrant populations.

Many differences exist among social groups within East Asian countries. Wealth, age, educational attainment, employment,



family background, and marital status factor into a person's social status. In most East Asian countries, city dwellers tend to regard their rural counterparts as backwards, less cultured, and less educated. While some generational differences exist, most East Asians consider social and familial harmony paramount. Thus, young people tend to respect elders' wishes.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals' peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.



Early East Asians were animists, believing that gods or ancestral spirits inhabited various natural objects and expressed their will in daily life. Today East Asians of many different faiths still follow

certain ancient religious practices, such as making offerings to ancestral spirits. Japan's indigenous animist religion, Shintoism, stresses the spiritual connection between Japan's land and its people. Similarly, beliefs about shamans and their connection to a spiritual realm persist among some Chinese, Mongolians, and Koreans.

Multiple belief systems historically have coexisted peacefully in East Asia, many of which originated in China and are not linked to specific gods. East Asians typically observe practices from several belief systems simultaneously. In the 6th and 5th centuries BC, Chinese philosophers Confucius and Laozi developed Confucianism and Daoism, respectively. As these philosophies spread, they shaped regional ideas about social harmony. Whereas Confucianism describes how various types of social relationships should function ideally, Daoism emphasizes balance, simplicity, compliance with the natural order, and reverence for ancestors and Laozi.

Around 150 AD, Buddhism spread from the Indian subcontinent into China, eventually reaching other parts of Asia. East Asian

Buddhism has many variations because its adherents have adapted the faith to their cultures, philosophies, and traditions. Many East Asians practice some form of Buddhism today.

While Islam and Christianity have been present in East Asia for centuries, their influence has been limited to certain places. Arriving in China in the 7th century AD, Islam has a long history in western China and Mongolia and has undergone a modest expansion in recent years. Christianity also was introduced to East Asia in the 7th century AD and eventually gained converts among some Mongol tribes. Beginning in the 1500s, European missionaries expanded Christianity's reach. Today most East Asian Christians live in South Korea, where roughly 30% of the population is Christian.

During the 20th century, communist East Asian governments often curtailed religious practice in favor of atheism. China is still officially atheist, and the Communist Party of China forbids party members from following any religion. The North Korean government takes a different approach by promoting **Juche**, a state-sponsored faith that combines aspects of Eastern and Western belief systems with reverence for Kim Il-sung, the first North Korean President, and his family. Despite these recent examples of religious suppression, East Asians have tended to resume open religious practice as the government permits. For example, Buddhism has thrived in Mongolia since the country abandoned communism in 1990.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Most East Asians highly value family relationships. Individuals are expected to subordinate their desires to those of their families as a means of promoting harmony and the best interests of the family as a whole.



Children are taught to respect and obey their elders from a young age. In return, parents devote themselves to their children and make many sacrifices for their wellbeing. These sacrifices enable children's success, preserve the family legacy, and ensure that parents will have a caretaker in old age.

Traditionally, East Asian families have been large, close-knit, multi-generational kin groups whose members support each other. Members of the same extended family traditionally have lived in close proximity, an arrangement that provided many benefits in the rural, agricultural villages that once were widespread in East Asia. Although family life still revolves around farming or herding in some rural areas, family life has changed as East Asia has industrialized and urbanized. While caring for elderly relatives is still common, some modern East Asian households, especially in urban areas, consist of nuclear



families (2 parents and their offspring) that live far from their ancestral homes.

East Asian dwellings vary widely. In large urban areas like Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, Ulaanbaatar, and Shanghai, people typically live in either older homes or modern, high-

rise apartment buildings. By contrast, rural East Asians typically live with their extended families in freestanding houses. China and Mongolia have especially extensive rural hinterlands. A number of Mongolians continue to live seasonally as nomadic herders in collapsible huts.

Marriage is a key milestone for East Asians, who typically date and select their own spouses with the advice and approval of elders. Since many young East Asians today delay marriage to pursue educational or career opportunities, the average marriage age has increased. Nevertheless, the traditional expectation that young East Asians will marry, bear children, and care for their elderly parents remains deep-seated.

East Asians commemorate major life stages through a range of ceremonies and celebrations. The birth of a healthy child, for example, is a joyous occasion that prompts parties, gift-giving,

and welcoming and naming ceremonies. Conversely, funerals and other death customs are more somber and demonstrate respect for the deceased.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological and reproductive differences between males and females. Gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

While most East Asian countries provide for legal gender equality, women are subordinate to men in practice. Moreover, cultural norms tend to entrench traditional roles, whereby women remain underrepresented in both business and government. Many of East Asia's predominant philosophies and religions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, establish men as family providers and direct women to behave subserviently. Nevertheless, East Asian women still make important contributions to society, having enjoyed expanding rights over the past 50 years.



In states under communist influence, women have been allowed to work outside the home, although also expected to continue performing domestic duties. By contrast, women in Japan and South Korea gained social rights more gradually. Today, most East Asian women, particularly in urban areas, have access to training and education equal to that of their male peers.

While women typically receive less pay than men and rarely reach senior levels of leadership, East Asians generally accept women in the workplace. Many women balance career and family responsibilities, although they are more likely than men to leave the workforce to care for children or elderly relatives.

Due to family planning policies and increased use of contraceptives, among other factors, East Asian countries have low birthrates. China's government introduced a One-Child Policy in 1970, resulting in a decline of birthrates by more than



40%. China's enduring preference for sons compelled many couples to abort female fetuses and adopt out daughters, skewing China's gender ratio. This policy was ended in 2016.

East Asians historically have not regarded homosexuality as an acceptable practice. Consequently, homosexuals in the region typically have assumed heterosexual family roles. Nevertheless, gay rights are beginning to gain traction mostly in China, South Korea, and Japan, while Taiwan is the first country to legalize same-sex marriages.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication refers to the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. In East Asian countries, most



inhabitants speak the official language or a similar dialect. For example, more than 99% of people in Japan and the Koreas speak the official state languages, while more than 90% of Mongolians speak Khalkha Mongolian, the official language.

China is East Asia's most linguistically diverse country having 306 spoken languages. A majority of China's population speaks the official Mandarin (Sino-Tibetan) language, although a number of groups continue to speak ethnic languages as a means of preserving their unique identities.

Speakers of Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages use an ancient, character-based writing system to record sound and meaning. Developed around 1200 BC, the Chinese writing system has tens of thousands of unique characters. Historically, Mongolians, Japanese, and Koreans also transcribed their languages using Chinese characters. While the Japanese and Koreans eventually devised their own writing systems, their languages still use some words and characters borrowed from Chinese. Mongolians have used many scripts to write their language, although they, like Russians, now use Cyrillic.

East Asians typically avoid confrontation, seek consensus, and refrain from displaying emotions in public. In order to maintain social harmony, East Asians often try to “save face” – avoid embarrassment to themselves or others. They tend to begin conversations by discussing neutral topics, such as health, family, and hobbies. While specific greeting customs – such as bows, handshakes, and forms of address – vary by country, all East Asians tend to use both verbal and non-verbal cues to convey respect and reinforce social hierarchy.

East Asians typically are reserved when meeting new people for the first time, particularly foreign nationals. Eventually, they become more comfortable and candid as they get to know a new acquaintance. Being introduced through a well-respected mutual contact alleviates these reservations to some extent.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) or culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems like schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Most East Asian cultures value education.

Historically reserved for young male elites, formal education was an essential qualification for prestigious civil service jobs in ancient China, Japan, and Korea, where students often took personal lessons from



famous scholars. Scholars and teachers historically have been and continue to be highly respected in East Asia, typically receiving high salaries and esteem.

Today East Asian children across social and economic ranks have access to basic education. Primary education is compulsory throughout East Asia, where literacy rates reach 96%. Although East Asian students tend to be among the world's top performers on international achievement tests, some

observers criticize East Asian schools for their emphasis on memorization over critical thinking and creativity.

Urban schools tend to be better resourced and staffed than those in rural areas, particularly in China and Mongolia. Unlike their wealthier urban peers, many rural students cannot afford additional tutoring and tend to lag behind on national examinations.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to building lasting relationships. Most East Asian cultures consider personal relationships and efficient time management equally essential and not mutually exclusive in professional and social settings. East Asians typically adhere to deadlines and schedules and may multitask to maximize efficiency. While they typically refrain from taking time to build relationships during meetings, they often use after-work social events to build and maintain personal relationships with coworkers. Accordingly, socializing over meals or drinks helps foster relationships.



East Asians occupy public and private space in ways that may be unfamiliar to Americans. For example, since East Asian cities tend to be crowded, personal space is at a premium.

Similarly, people tend to stand in close proximity in social contexts. East Asians keep inside spaces clean, removing shoes and wearing slippers after they enter a home, school, or temple.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill, and style. A country's clothing, games, music, theater, literature, and artwork reflect a variety of historic, cultural, and religious influences as well as its geographic features, climate, and global interconnectedness.

East Asia is known for its rich artistic traditions that emphasize principles such as balance, precision, and harmony, although these traditions vary by culture and time period. While the region has a long tradition of classical dance and music using a range of musical instruments, more recently, some musicians have adopted modern Western styles, particularly pop music.

East Asia also has a long, rich, and well-preserved tradition of literature and folklore. East Asian classics, such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, are well-known even in the US. East Asia's historically predominant religions, particularly Buddhism, Daoism, and folk beliefs, have influenced its arts, crafts, and architecture. Today modern secular influences tend to inspire East Asian artists. By contrast, North Korean art, music, and cinema are limited to themes that honor its leaders.

Soccer and table tennis are played widely across East Asia. Baseball is popular in Japan and South Korea, while basketball is common in China. Mongolians excel at archery, wrestling, and horseback riding. Martial arts, such as Japan's **judo** and **karate** or Korea's **taekwondo**, are popular throughout the region. Many East Asian athletes have excelled in worldwide sports competitions. Notably, China, South Korea, and Japan have hosted the Olympics, collectively earning hundreds of medals.

While traditional clothing varies among and within East Asian countries, it is typically colorful and elaborately decorated. Most East Asians reserve traditional clothing for special occasions.

For instance, Koreans wear **hanbok** or **choson-ot**, a 2-piece garment with a short jacket for weddings or funerals. Japanese people often wear the **kimono**, an ankle-length, long-sleeve robe, for special occasions. Across East Asia, Western-style clothing is the most common style for daily wear.



## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence

patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

East Asian cuisine varies widely even within single countries. Rice is East Asia's main staple grain featured at most meals as a complement to meat, seafood, or vegetables. Rice is also an ingredient in many desserts. Many East Asian cuisines also include noodles, dumplings, and soups. Although the Koreans share a culinary heritage, North Koreans' diet has less variety and more corn since it is cheaper than rice. Mongolia's cuisine consists largely of meat and dairy from sheep, cows, camels, yaks (indigenous Asian long-haired ox), and goats, with few vegetables or spices due to a lack of arable land.



East Asians regularly drink teas and also enjoy a number of indigenous alcoholic beverages,

including Japanese **saké**, made by fermenting rice, and Mongolian **airag**, which comes from fermented horse milk.

Although most East Asian countries have experienced gradual increases in life expectancy as they have industrialized, accessibility and affordability of modern medical care vary widely. Preventative care is considered important to maintain health. Many East Asians rely on traditional medicines such as acupuncture and herbal medicines to cure their ailments. Some mainstream medical practitioners have incorporated traditional practices into their clinical healthcare. Of concern is the use of toxic herbal treatments that can harm patients, rare animal species like rhinos and tigers, and the environment.

While most communicable diseases have been eradicated or controlled in East Asia, less healthy lifestyles have contributed to an increase in non-communicable illnesses, such as cancer and cardiovascular diseases. East Asian countries have been more successful than the rest of the world in containing the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to purely medical concerns, China, Japan, and South Korea also face the common problem of financing healthcare for their growing elderly populations.

Meanwhile, Mongolia and North Korea still grapple with malnutrition.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

East Asian economic systems range from communism to free market capitalism. With the exception of North Korea, East Asian countries have benefited from industrialization and global trade and investments. China, Japan, and South Korea, in particular, have some of the world's largest economies, ranking second, fourth, and 14th in the world by nominal gross domestic product (GDP), respectively.

China's shift from planned towards free market economics enabled it to realize dramatic economic gains. Since liberalizing its economy, China has experienced economic growth averaging 9% annually, largely due to its exports. This expansion so far has freed 800 million people from poverty, although wealth remains primarily in the hands of China's elites. While China's economy continues to grow, the pace has slowed and it faces a number of increasing daunting challenges.



Japan and South Korea have industrialized, highly developed economies. Since World War II, both countries have achieved large economic gains. In the 1990s, Mongolia abandoned its planned economy and privatized many industries, leading to substantial economic growth and social change. By contrast, North Korea's economy struggles under international sanctions and relies heavily on China to boost its failing economy.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and



culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. While technological development is often seen as purely positive, governments can also harness technology to monitor their citizens and crackdown on dissent.

Technology has enabled development throughout East Asia, although it has occurred at different rates. For example, while Japan and South Korea have adopted a range of industrial and Internet-enabled technologies, North Korea purposely shuns many of those technologies in order to remain isolated. China, Japan, and South Korea have well-developed physical and telecommunications infrastructures that enable transportation, trade, and connectivity with the entire world.



Transport infrastructure varies widely throughout East Asia. For example, high-speed trains crisscross much of Japan, while only about 10% of Mongolia's roads are paved. Consequently, most Mongolians travel by foot, on animals, or on motorcycles.

While Japan and South Korea have relatively few mineral resources, Mongolia, China, and North Korea have large mineral deposits. While the region still relies primarily on fossil fuels, it (especially China) has invested heavily in renewable resources.

Freedom of the press and Internet vary substantially in East Asia. China and North Korea lack these freedoms, sponsoring state-controlled media outlets. Japan, Mongolia, and South Korea, by contrast, have relatively few restrictions on the press and Internet. While the number of Internet users in China alone exceeds the entire US population, China's government heavily censors online content and monitors its citizens' Internet use. Japanese and South Korean residents are avid Internet users, enjoying some of the world's fastest Internet connections.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize East Asian society at large, we will focus on specific features of Chinese society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

Over its 4,000 years of recorded history, including 2,000 years of imperial rule, China experienced significant political and social upheaval. Following the end of imperialism in the early 20th century, China endured a bloody civil war, which ended with the 1949 proclamation of the communist People's Republic of China (PRC). Amidst ongoing social and political repression, the PRC has seen unprecedented economic growth and technological change over the last few decades.

### Prehistoric China

Archaeological evidence suggests that early humans inhabited the region as early as 1.7 million years ago. Around 5000 BC, residents began forming permanent settlements in river valleys, growing crops like rice or millet and producing pottery. Between 3000-2000 BC, residents learned to mine copper and then bronze as larger, stratified urban communities formed. Chinese legends suggest the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia, was established around 2000 BC.

### Early Chinese Dynasties (c. 1600-c. 256 BC)

**The Shang:** The first Chinese dynasty to leave historical records was the Shang, which attained prominence between 1600-1046 BC. While the Shang ruled just a portion of north-central China, their reign brought significant cultural and intellectual developments. Most notable were the creation of a system of writing featured on turtle shells and animal bones, known as oracle bones, the production of complex bronze work, and the development of advanced calendars, among others.



**The Zhou:** As the Shang Dynasty declined, the Zhou arose. Spanning 8 centuries, Zhou Dynasty rule resulted in the birth of a unified China. During the Western Zhou era (1046-771 BC), the Zhou leaders ruled through a network of feudal states. The Eastern Zhou period (770-256 BC) saw the breakdown of this system, as the states increasingly competed. As respect for central Zhou authority declined, the region endured some 250 years of ongoing conflict known as the Warring States period (475-221 BC). Despite this political instability, this era saw important intellectual and cultural development and the emergence of schools of thought, notably Confucianism and Daoism (see *Religion and Spirituality*), that would shape China in subsequent centuries.

### **The First Imperial Dynasty: the Qin (221-207 BC)**

China remained divided until a state in the northwest led by the Qin began to consolidate power. Through military force and diplomacy, the Qin ruler annexed other states and unified China under a central imperial government in 221 BC. Taking the name Qinshi Huangdi ("First Qin Emperor"), the Qin emperor initiated 2 millennia of imperial rule in China.

An autocratic tyrant, he also instituted reforms to strengthen imperial power, improve infrastructure, and formalize the empire's administrative system. Further, the Qin emperor conscripted thousands of residents to begin construction on



what would become China's Great Wall to protect the empire from invasion. He also commissioned a tomb for himself that was guarded by an Army of life-sized terracotta warriors. Rebellion flared following his 210 BC death, and the Qin

era soon ended. Although short, the Qin Dynasty's legacy included standardized legal and writing systems, a complex administrative bureaucracy, and the delineation of China's territorial boundaries.

## The Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD)

In 206 BC, Liu Bang (also known as Gaozu) consolidated control of the Han. After a military victory 4 years later, he assumed the title of emperor and founded the Han Dynasty. Unlike the Qin, the Han were able to construct a stable central authority that would last for some 400 years, with one short interruption.

Han society was heavily influenced by Confucian morals and social expectations (see *Political and Social Relations*). Under the Han Dynasty's fifth ruler, the Wudi Emperor (r. 141-87 BC), the empire experienced significant expansion into Central Asia as well as the colonization of parts of Manchuria, Korea, and Vietnam. The era also saw the opening of the first Confucian schools, the development of the imperial civil service (see *Learning and Knowledge*), and advances in farming. Significant intellectual and artistic activity marked this period, especially in astronomy, mathematics, and technological innovation. During the 2nd century BC, a Han court historian authored the first general history of China, the **Shiji**.

Trade flourished with the development of the "Silk Road," a network of trade routes connecting China with the Middle East and Europe. Initially focused on the sale of silk, the Chinese used these routes in subsequent centuries to export other prized goods such as spices, Chinese-invented paper, and gunpowder. Beyond strengthening the empire's economy, these networks facilitated the spread of new ideas such as Buddhism (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

The Han era saw an unprecedented population boom, the growth of cities, and the migration of Han settlers south and west. Yet, many peasants remain impoverished. Rivalries between powerful families and the activities of rebel gangs soon threatened social stability. Meanwhile, the corrupt ruling family experienced its own violent conflicts that resulted in a financial crisis for the empire. By 220, the Han Dynasty had collapsed.



## A Divided China (220-618)

After the collapse of the Han Dynasty, various factions and warlords struggled for supremacy. While the Eastern and Western Jin dynasties briefly reunited the territory between 265-420, they were unable to gain sufficient influence to maintain a stable and centralized empire. Instead, the region experienced protracted civil wars and unrest. Despite the turmoil, the era also brought significant scientific and technological advancements, notably the invention of the compass.

In the late 6th century, the Sui Dynasty under the Wendi Emperor reunited China after almost 4 centuries of division. A notable achievement was the construction of the Grand Canal, a waterway linking the North and South that functioned to integrate the southern regions into the empire. Beginning in 617, a series of failed military expansions and widespread peasant rebellions marked the end of the short-lived Sui Dynasty.

## The Tang Dynasty (618-907)

After a prolonged conquest, the Tang consolidated their control of a unified empire around 621. The Tang introduced land reform



that benefitted the peasants and established a powerful central government with a standardized administrative system. During this period, trade along the Silk Road connected the empire to cities in Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. This expansion of trade sparked economic growth and a better standard of living. The era also saw important literary advancements, notably the invention of woodblock printing.

In the late 640s, Tang armies defeated the Turks and occupied territories to the north and west, giving the empire a boundary further west than that of present-day China. Over the next few decades, territorial struggles continued against the Turks, Koreans, and Tibetans.

Following a military-led rebellion, the Tang were unable to regain full control of the empire. Between 907-960, China was again

divided, as 5 short-lived dynasties rose and fell in the North, and 10 different kingdoms battled for control of the South.

### **The Song Dynasty (960-1279)**

In 960, the Song Dynasty reunited most of China and its founder, the Taizu Emperor sought to remake society in line with the ideals of Confucianism. A functioning central bureaucracy, increased food production, and flourishing Silk Road and maritime trade led to great population growth and rapidly developing cities. The era also saw the invention and introduction of paper currency, gunpowder, and moveable-type printing.

For centuries, various nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes from the North posed a threat. In 1127, the Jurchens, a Turkic people, attacked the Song and forced the Song court to move south, where the so-called Southern Song thrived for the next 150 years as their eastern port cities became the focus of China's lucrative trade. Meanwhile, the Jurchens established their own Jin Dynasty in the North.



### **Yuan or Mongol Rule (1271-1368)**

In 1206, Mongol leader Genghis Khan united several Mongol tribes, and over the next decade, his Army swept across northern China, destroying some 90 cities. In 1215, it captured the Jin capital of Yanjing (the modern-day capital of Beijing), then attacked and defeated an empire in Persia (present-day Iran), eventually raiding as far west as Eastern Europe and creating a vast Mongol Empire. Upon his 1227 death, the empire was divided among his four sons, creating Mongol kingdoms in Persia, Central Asia, southern Russia, and China.

Genghis' son Ögedei continued the Mongol advances into Chinese territory, eventually defeating the Jin and giving the Mongols control over all of northern China. After Ögedei's 1241 death, succession disputes ended with the election of Genghis' grandson Kublai as the great khan in 1260. He also named himself emperor of China, even though the Song Dynasty still



controlled much of southern China. In 1271, Kublai adopted the Chinese name Yuan for his dynasty and renewed his march south. By 1279, Kublai had defeated the last of the Song rulers.



Ruling from a capital at present-day Beijing, Kublai oversaw an empire that retained many Chinese cultural and institutional structures. Nevertheless, the Mongols rejected assimilation with the Chinese, retaining their own language, customs, and traditions and relegating Song Chinese to the lowest social class. They also

banned all Chinese from government positions, while subjecting them to harsh taxes, forced labor, and punitive laws.

In subsequent decades, unsuccessful military campaigns in Vietnam and Japan weakened the Mongol state. Following Kublai's 1294 death, ineffective leaders were unable to enforce the authority of the central government. Following disastrous flooding and famine in 1351, rebel movements began to form, which, by the 1360s, controlled several regions.

### **Restoration of Chinese Rule under the Ming (1368-1644)**

Around 1352, Zhu Yuanzhang of Anhui Province joined such a rebel group, and in 1368, proclaimed the founding of his own Ming Dynasty. Subsequently known as the Hongwu Emperor, Zhu led military campaigns that overthrew the Mongols and restored Chinese imperial rule, initially only in the North. Zhu's successor, the Yongle Emperor, also sought military expansion, sending troops to battle the Manchu in the North, the Koreans and Japanese in the East, and the Vietnamese in the South.

At the same time, he created a powerful and technologically advanced Navy and funded a series of overseas expeditions, helping to extend Chinese influence across Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. The Yongle Emperor also developed the Ming capital of Beijing, notably constructing the famous Forbidden City, a palace compound with over 900 buildings.

Portuguese ships began visiting Ming China around 1513. Soon,

Europeans were settling in Macau, which European Catholic missionaries transformed into a center for Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Macau would remain a Portuguese territory until 1999.

Ming power weakened in the mid-16th century due to a series of conflicts with rivals, namely the Mongols, the Japanese, and various Chinese rebel groups. By the early 17th century, the Ming government was almost bankrupt because of the high cost of maintaining the imperial family and its various military campaigns. Further, trade between China and Spain stalled, cutting off China's supply of silver, causing the economy to collapse and the spread of discontent and rebellion. Once again, an Army from north of the Great Wall, the Manchu, began to steadily encroach on Ming territory. These Manchu were descendants of the Jurchens, who had defeated the Song in 1127.



### **The Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)**

In 1644, these Manchu horsemen overthrew the Ming Dynasty in Beijing and installed their own Qing Dynasty, though it took them many decades to subdue the entire empire. The Qing maintained most of the Chinese institutions already in place, notably the civil service system based on Confucian philosophy (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Nevertheless, they enacted laws, notably the banning of intermarriage, to prevent assimilation between the Manchu and the Chinese peoples.

Qing leaders significantly expanded their territorial possessions, suppressing threats emerging along the empire's borders and conquering Tibet, Outer Mongolia, Nepal, and China's present-day Xinjiang autonomous region (see *Political and Social Relations*). The Qing also took control of Taiwan, an island that Ming loyalists had seized from the Dutch. Meanwhile, they forced Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and other countries to recognize Chinese supremacy. Beginning in the late 18th century, a series of internal uprisings and conflicts with foreign powers gradually weakened the Manchu Qing.

**The First Opium War:** After Great Britain conquered India, it began investing heavily in opium production and acquired a trade monopoly. Although the Qing emperor had banned opium in 1799, the British began smuggling it into China to use as payment for Chinese silks, porcelain, and tea. The increase in opium availability caused an addiction crisis, which the Chinese government attempted to halt by confiscating and destroying the drug.

These actions ignited skirmishes between the Chinese and British in 1839 that flared into the First Opium War in 1841. The Chinese were no match for Britain's superior naval power and surrendered. The subsequent Treaty of Nanjing gave Hong Kong to the British, while opening five other ports to British trade.



Hong Kong would remain under British control until 1997 (see *Political and Social Relations*).

**The Taiping Rebellion:** The opening of Chinese markets to foreign competition caused widespread unemployment, while burdensome taxes, flooding, and famine caused other hardships. In 1843, a discontented peasant named Hong Xiuquan harnessed anti-

Qing sentiment to build support for his Christianity-inspired vision of heaven on earth, evolving into a violent uprising. His movement gained rapid support and by 1853 had seized control of several large cities.

The Taipings, as his supporters were known, would rule over large tracts of southern China for 10 years, introducing land and tax reform and other radical social changes. By 1864, the Qing Army began to reconquer the Taiping-held territory and defeated the last of the rebels 5 years later. In all, the Taiping Rebellion was devastating, resulting in the death of 20-30 million people through violence or famine.

**The Second Opium War:** Meanwhile, tensions between the Qing and Europeans flared again in the Second Opium War. In 1856, the French joined the British in occupying the port city of

Guangzhou and forced the Chinese to accept a treaty allowing Christian missionaries to proselytize in the country, among other measures. In 1860, a European invasion force reached Beijing and compelled the Qing, who were busy trying to crush the Taiping Rebellion, to cede certain rights to an array of foreign powers including the US. Further, China was forced to pay additional reparations to Britain and France and legalize the opium trade.

### **The First Sino-Japanese War:**

Other events weakened the Qing regime. Territorial spats between China and Japan developed into a full-fledged war in



1894, which Japan won decisively. The subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki granted Taiwan to Japan, required China to recognize Japan's control of Korea, and mandated significant reparations. Despite attempts at transformation and modernization, such as the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898, the Qing leaders were losing their hold over the empire as unrest among the peasantry spread.

**The Boxer Rebellion:** With the increasing Western presence in China, many Chinese began to develop anti-foreign sentiments and formed nationalist groups, notably the Righteous Harmony Society. Known as the Boxers, the movement opposed Western imperialism and Christianity. With support from factions in the Qing regime, some Boxers began murdering foreigners and Chinese Christians. In response, an international expeditionary force dispatched troops (including US Marines), seizing Beijing and forcing the royal family to flee. These troops occupied several northern cities for over a year. The Western powers also forced the Qing to pay substantial financial compensation and took control of Chinese industrial development, railways, and ports. As the economy collapsed, the Qing and local leaders imposed heavy taxation, further alienating the peasantry. Despite an array of modernization reforms in the early 20th century, support for the imperial family continued to erode.

## Imperial China becomes the Republic of China

After several failed uprisings, rebels finally overthrew the Qing regime in the 1911-1912 Xinhai Revolution, ending over 2,000 years of imperial rule and establishing the Republic of China (ROC) with a capital in Beijing. Revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen assumed ROC leadership before stepping down to cofound the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT). In 1912, Army Gen Yuan Shikai became the ROC's provisional President.

Tensions soon developed among the revolutionary factions, especially after the KMT emerged victorious in 1912 elections and began to question Yuan's policies. In mid-1913, Yuan's opponents, including Sun Yat-sen, organized a revolt that was quickly suppressed. As Sun Yat-sen and other rebels fled, Yuan coerced Parliament into formally electing him President before dissolving the lawmaking body. The international community formally recognized the new nation after Yuan agreed to grant

autonomy to both Tibet and Mongolia. Yuan then declared martial law and began a campaign of violent repression.



**World War I (WWI):** When WWI broke out in 1914 between the Allies (the US, Britain, France, Russia, and Japan, among others) and the

Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire), China initially remained neutral. Seeking to establish dominance in East Asia, Japan seized German-controlled Chinese territories and railways, then presented a list of "Twenty-One Demands" to President Yuan. Key demands included Japanese access to all Chinese ports and railroads, control of industry and police, and even a voice in Chinese political affairs. Lacking international support, Yuan was forced to accept many of the demands, giving Japan extensive privileges and concessions in China.

In 1915, Yuan declared himself emperor, prompting open rebellion in the ROC. Yet in mid-1916, Yuan unexpectedly died,

and conflict between political factions emerged. China was again divided among various warlords and military leaders (most notably Sun Yat-sen, who attempted to establish an alternative KMT-led government in the South), with frequent and bloody conflict contributing to general societal instability.

### **The May 4th Movement and Rise of the Communist Party:**

On May 4, 1919, students in Beijing gathered to protest a decision at the Versailles Peace Conference that allowed Japan to retain the former German territories in China after the end of WWI. Inspired by both this May 4th Movement and the 1917 Russian Revolution, a group of intellectuals founded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and began protesting foreign imperialism, among other issues. An early CCP member was Mao Zedong, future leader of communist China.

Both the CCP and Sun Yat-sen's KMT faced difficulties in growing their support, so the two parties forged an alliance in 1923 with the aim of unifying China and ridding it of foreign influence. Meanwhile, foreign control of important sectors of the economy along with the presence of foreign missionaries, industrialists, and troops continued to provoke hostility. By early 1926, the KMT had about 200,000 members, while the CCP counted around 10,000. Upon Sun's 1925 death, General Chiang Kai-shek assumed leadership of the KMT.

### **The Republic in Turmoil**

#### **The Northern Expedition:**

The unity of the KMT and CCP was fragile, with factions splitting on certain policy points. Nevertheless, the two parties agreed in 1926 that a final military push to the north was required to complete the unification of the Chinese territories. During the successful expedition, KMT leader Chiang turned on his CCP allies, criminalizing CCP membership and enabling a purge of communists that left some 300,000 dead. By 1928, Chiang's KMT Army had reached Beijing, formed a government, and reunited most of eastern China. Chiang's KMT (or Nationalist) government then created a new banking system, improved



infrastructure, and encouraged commerce, though the worldwide Great Depression that began in 1929 reduced Chinese exports of silk and tea. Further, China's vast peasant population benefitted little from government programs and suffered under military conscription and heavy taxes.

Meanwhile, the CCP had retreated to central China, where its land confiscation and redistribution program attracted several supporters and volunteers for its Red Army. Conflict between the ruling Nationalists and the rebel Communists continued, causing some one million deaths between 1927-32.

China also faced an external threat from Japan, which invaded and occupied Manchuria in northern China in 1931 in pursuit of its expansionist goals. A year later, the Japanese attacked the Chinese city of Shanghai and withdrew only when Chiang, prioritizing unifying China over confronting Japan's superior firepower, granted the Japanese certain concessions.

**The Long March:** In 1933, Chiang launched a major offensive against the Communists. Faced with defeat in 1934, the



Communists responded with a two-pronged attack that split the Nationalists and allowed some 86,000 Red Army troops and civilian supporters to escape. Over the next year, they marched 6,000 mi to northwest China, suffering

tremendous casualties along the way, a feat memorialized as the Long March. Mao Zedong rose to prominence among the CCP leadership during this event.

### **The Second Sino-Japanese War**

Meanwhile, intermittent violent conflict with the Japanese had continued. Chiang's focus on defeating the Communists over confronting the Japanese threat caused significant discord within the KMT. Bowing to pressure, Chiang signed an armistice with the CCP in 1937 that placed its Red Army under the command of the Nationalist Army so the two could collaborate to confront their common enemy, Japan. The same year, Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China (the Second Sino-

Japanese War). Japanese troops quickly captured many of China's large cities, notably the capital at the time, Nanjing, where they slaughtered up to 300,000 civilians and raped thousands of women. The Japanese eventually gained control of most of eastern China, but by 1940, the war was at a standstill, with neither side able to claim victory.

### **World War II (WWII):**

In December 1941, Japan launched a surprise air attack on US naval installations at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, triggering the Pacific War, a term that refers to WWII events in the Pacific and East Asia. Thus, the Second Sino-Japanese War became part of the greater WWII conflict. The Allies (the US, USSR or Soviet Union, and Great Britain, among others) provided assistance to China in its fight against Japan.



Yet the truce between the KMT and CCP had unraveled by 1941. While appeasing the Japanese, the Nationalists resumed their struggle against the Red Army. The protracted conflicts plus a deteriorating economy significantly weakened Chiang's Nationalist regime. By contrast, the war revitalized the CCP, and the Red Army saw rapid growth. By the time Japan surrendered in mid-1945, more than 14 million Chinese had been killed and over 80 million displaced during what the Chinese call the "War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression."

### **Civil War**

With Japan's defeat, both the ruling Nationalists and rebel Communists raced to acquire former Japanese territories, while strengthening their forces. The US provided significant support to the Nationalists, such as helping them move troops to occupy major cities and landing some 53,000 US Marines to help disarm and repatriate Japanese troops. By the end of 1945, the Communists were entrenched in the North and controlled large sections of important supply lines, while the Nationalists held vast territories of the South and west along with a few northern cities.



Peace negotiations were unsuccessful and fighting soon transformed into full-fledged civil war. At the end of 1946, the Nationalists made significant gains, adopted a new Constitution, and prepared for elections in 1947. Yet grave economic problems soon blocked their progress, and by mid-1947, the tide had turned for the Communists. At year's end, the Nationalists had more than twice as many troops as the Communists, but the Nationalists were thinly spread and on the defensive. In 1948, the Communists took major towns and won several important battles. Meanwhile, the Nationalists lost hundreds of thousands of troops as casualties, captives, and defectors.

### **The People's Republic of China (PRC)**

In early 1949, the Communists won a decisive 65-day battle for control of Suzhou near Shanghai. Since the Nationalists still controlled more than half of China and retained a large Army, they were able to resist surrender, continually retreating until they occupied only the islands of Hainan and Taiwan (which China once again controlled following Japan's defeat in WWII)



and a few pockets of the mainland. On October 1, 1949, Communist leader Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the PRC.

**Nationalist Retreat to Taiwan:** Facing defeat on the mainland, Chiang retreated to Taiwan in December 1949, arriving

with most of the ROC's gold reserves and the Nationalist Air Force and Navy. Some 1.5 million mainlanders followed Chiang to Taiwan, where he would rule as President of the ROC for the next 26 years. Neither the United Nations (UN) nor the US recognized the PRC, granting official recognition only to the ROC.

### **The Mao Zedong Era**

To implement their communist ideology, Mao Zedong and other PRC leaders initiated reforms to empower workers and peasants through collective agricultural production and industrialization. Within the first year, the new regime redistributed some 40% of

land to peasants while persecuting, imprisoning, or killing some 4.5 million landowners.

Mao initially looked to the USSR as a model for the PRC, notably creating a system of labor camps to punish “counter-revolutionaries” and other enemies of the CCP. Further, the PRC and the USSR cooperated during the Korean War (see below) and assisted communist rebels fighting the French colonizers in Vietnam.



Nevertheless, the relationship eventually soured, and in 1959-60, the Soviet Union withdrew all its financial support and technical assistance from the PRC.

**The Korean War:** Meanwhile, tensions in the Korean Peninsula were increasing. Following WWII, the US and USSR agreed to occupy separate zones divided by the 38th parallel (38° N latitude), with the Soviet zone in the North and the American zone in the South. Under a UN agreement, both the US and the USSR withdrew their troops in 1949. However, border clashes between North and South Korean forces intermittently broke out across the 38th parallel. In mid-1950, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung launched a surprise attack against the South.

By September, the North Korean military had taken control of almost the entire peninsula. Alarmed, the US pressed the UN Security Council to intervene on the side of South Korea. In the absence of the USSR, which was boycotting the UN to protest its refusal to recognize the PRC, the UN Security Council adopted the measure and dispatched a US-led force to Korea.

When the forces approached the Chinese border, the PRC declared war, sending in some 2.5 million troops in support of North Korea. With the help of the USSR, Chinese and North Korean troops forced UN and South Korean troops to retreat. By mid-1951, a stalemate had developed near the 38th parallel, although violent conflict continued. In mid-1953, an armistice ended hostilities but did not technically establish peace.

As a consequence of the PRC's participation in the war, the US imposed a trade embargo on the PRC and began to actively protect Chiang's Nationalist regime in Taiwan. US-PRC relations remained strained for the next 2 decades.

**PRC annexes Tibet:** Though China continued to claim Tibet during the tumultuous years after 1912, Tibet enjoyed de facto independence for several decades. Following the PRC's 1949 founding, Mao reasserted China's control over Tibet, formally incorporating it into the PRC in 1951 as an autonomous region and instituting a policy of Sinicization (imposition of Chinese culture and language). Unrest soon flared into open revolt, culminating in full-scale resistance by 1959. Harsh reprisals by Chinese troops prompted the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists (see *Religion and Spirituality*), to flee to India. Today, the Dalai Lama continues to advocate Tibetan autonomy

and denounce human rights abuses in Tibet from his residence in India (see *Political and Social Relations*).



**The Great Leap Forward:** To increase agricultural and industrial output, Mao implemented

a plan called the “Great Leap Forward” in 1958. Based on the construction of huge agricultural communes and the mass mobilization of the labor force, the plan ended in disaster, with serious food and material shortages and the starvation deaths of up to 40 million people. This failure weakened Mao politically and promoted the rise of certain critics, such as Deng Xiaoping, future leader of the PRC.

**The Cultural Revolution:** Though justified as a movement to restore the CCP's ideological purity, Mao sought to reassert his authority, and in 1966, launched a new program – the Cultural Revolution – that would have devastating impacts over the next decade. Distributing millions of “Little Red Books” outlining his ideology, Mao organized millions of students into a “Red Guard” whose mission was to destroy anything deemed “counterrevolutionary.” In their zeal, they burned books,

desecrated art and cultural and religious sites, attacked academics and intellectuals, and destroyed foreign wares.

The Red Guard pressured the public to denounce “offenders”, who were then paraded through the streets wearing humiliating slogans, killed, tortured, or driven to suicide. The Red Guard also targeted many of Mao’s political enemies, with some, such as Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping’s (China’s current President) father, purged from the CCP. Fearing civil war, and with many Red Guards refusing his orders to stand down, Mao ordered the military to disband the Red Guard, sending youth members to rural areas for “reeducation”. In all, the movement caused the deaths of some 500,000-2 million people.

**Ping-Pong Diplomacy:** Meanwhile, the US and the ROC (Taiwan) had maintained good relations, even signing a mutual defense treaty in 1954. Yet by the late 1960s, the US began considering opening relations with the PRC as a way to end its own involvement in the Vietnam War and further remove China from Soviet influence. Some PRC elements also sought better relations with the West for their own ends, and to buttress the PRC’s growing rift with the Soviet Union. In 1970, the US and the PRC initiated contact, then supported cultural and sporting exchanges that became known as “ping-pong diplomacy.” The outreach culminated in US President Nixon’s visit to the PRC and the lifting of the US’ trade embargo on the PRC in 1972.



In a subsequent communiqué, the US acknowledged its understanding that there is just “One China” and that Taiwan is a part of China, prompting other countries to also seek better relations with the PRC over Taiwan. A year earlier, the UN had revoked recognition of the ROC authorities in Taiwan and recognized the PRC as the “only legitimate representative of China,” significantly increasing the PRC’s influence on the world stage.

**Mao's Death:** The PRC openly mourned Mao's mid-1976 death. His designated successor, Hua Guofeng, officially ended the Cultural Revolution and ordered the arrest and trial of the "Gang of Four," a group of Mao's most loyal supporters (notably including his wife) for anti-CCP activities. In subsequent years, CCP leaders acknowledged Mao's failures, yet they also praised him for his dedication to communism. Today, Mao remains a national hero, with "Mao Zedong Thought" enshrined in the PRC's Constitution and his portrait prominently displayed in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

### Deng Xiaoping and "One Party" Capitalism

Meanwhile, Deng Xiaoping reemerged onto the political scene, and within 2 years, had outmaneuvered Mao's successor to become the PRC's leader. Recognizing that the upheaval of the Mao era had badly damaged the PRC, Deng pursued the country's rehabilitation and modernization, ushering in a period of "Reform and Opening Up."



For example, Deng successfully improved China's ties with the international community. In 1979, US President Carter announced that the US would end its formal diplomatic ties

with the ROC so that it could normalize relations with the PRC. In the 1980s, the PRC concluded negotiations that would return Hong Kong from the British in 1997 and Macau from the Portuguese in 1999. Deng also initiated economic changes, implementing free-market reforms that dismantled collective farms and decentralized production, while opening China to foreign trade (see *Economics and Resources*). As a result of these reforms, China experienced an economic boom that lifted millions from poverty.

**Protest at Tiananmen Square:** Nevertheless, political freedom did not accompany the new economic freedoms. In spring 1989, public dissatisfaction with this lack of freedom, corruption, rising inflation, and low wages emerged following the death of a pro-

reform CCP leader. Over subsequent weeks, up to a million students and workers filled Beijing's Tiananmen Square, with similar gatherings across the country.

A declaration of martial law failed to dispel the Beijing protestors, so the government deployed tanks and armed troops, who fired into the crowds. Although exact numbers are unknown, it is likely that hundreds died and thousands were arrested, while many other protestors fled to the West. Although foreign media reports of the event were broadcast around the world, the authorities quickly and completely suppressed the movement. To this day, the Chinese government bans any mention of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, continued Deng's economic plans, transitioning China to a government-regulated capitalist market economy (see *Economics and Resources*), while maintaining its communist political structure. Although the PRC's reputation suffered due to the incidents at Tiananmen Square, the country continued its explosive economic growth as Jiang strengthened its integration into the international community.



### Contemporary China

In the 21st century, the PRC has emerged as a modern economic and technological powerhouse. Jiang Zemin's successor, Hu Jintao, continued to prioritize economic growth, with a focus on decreasing economic inequalities and reducing rural poverty.

**The PRC under Xi Jinping:** Vice President since 2008, Xi Jinping assumed the Presidency in 2013, was reappointed for a second term in 2018, and began an unprecedented third term in 2022. In addition to serving as President, Xi is the General Secretary of the CCP and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission.

Since becoming President, Xi has pursued an aggressive foreign policy strategy. For example, the PRC has expanded its military forces and asserted control of extensive portions of the South China Sea historically claimed by several other countries (see *Political and Social Relations*). Further, through his Belt and Road Initiative, Xi aims to create strategic partnerships with well over 100 countries and strengthen the PRC's global influence (see *Economics and Resources*).

Domestically, Xi has exhibited authoritarian tendencies, exerting more power over Chinese society and the economy than his immediate predecessors. In an effort to maintain tight control, Xi has restricted the media environment (see *Technology and Material*), suppressed religious groups (see *Religion and Spirituality*), and embarked on an extensive anti-corruption campaign. In areas with significant minority populations (see *Political and Social Relations*), Xi has promoted Sinicization programs, notably detaining up to two million Muslim Uyghurs since 2017 (see *Political and Social Relations*).



In 2018, Xi oversaw constitutional revisions that removed the two-term limit on the Presidency, allowing him to remain in office indefinitely. Another change added “Xi Jinping

Thought” to the Constitution, elevating his political philosophy to that of Mao Zedong and underscoring the message that only Xi can achieve the goal of a powerful, unified China. Since 2019, pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong have protested the CCP violating its “one country, two systems” policy by replacing Hong Kong's democratic processes with its authoritarian ones. In 2020, the pro-CCP authorities violently suppressed protesters and adopted legislation to further curb Hong Kong's autonomy (see *Political and Social Relations*). After the 2019 coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged much of the world, compelling China to seal its borders and adopt a zero-COVID policy (see *Sustenance and Health*). In late 2022, the CCP began to lift COVID-19 restrictions, seeking to normalize its place in the post-COVID world.

## Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths provide a sense of unique heritage and identity.

China is a rich source of myths, legends, and folktales that typically explore themes such as nature, morality, the origin of the universe, and its ancestors. While myths were transmitted orally for centuries, many of China's ancient myths are documented in the ***Shan Hai Jing*** (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*), a collection compiled by numerous authors around the 3rd century BC. In later dynasties, editors refined and annotated the stories which describe mythical creatures and geography, rituals, medicine, and natural history.



**Pangu and the Creation of the World:** Originally, the universe was formless chaos. Then, two types of energy clashed to form the original egg-like world. One type was clear and light (**qingqi** or yang) and the other was murky and heavy (**zhuoqi** or yin). Within the egg, a giant called Pangu slept for 18,000 years, and upon awaking, he saw only swirling darkness. In his anger and frustration, he pulled out a tooth, which transformed into an ax. Pangu swung the ax into the darkness and smashed the egg-like world. The yang immediately rose to form the sky, while the yin sank to become the earth.

To prevent the new world from collapsing, Pangu lifted the sky with all his strength and held it for another 18,000 years until it was firmly attached to the heavens. Exhausted, Pangu fell down and died. His breath became the wind and clouds, his voice thunder, his left eye the sun, his right eye the moon, his beard the stars, his blood the rivers and seas, his skin and hair the flowers and trees, his muscles the soil, his teeth and bones jade and other minerals, and his tears the rain. The rest of his body then became mountains.



## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

People's Republic of China (PRC or China)

**Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó**

中华人民共和国  
(Chinese)



### Political Borders

Mongolia: 2,877 mi  
Russia: 2,597 mi  
North Korea: 840 mi  
Vietnam: 806 mi  
Laos: 295 mi  
Burma: 1,323 mi  
India: 1,652 mi  
Bhutan: 296 mi

Nepal: 863 mi  
Pakistan: 272 mi  
Afghanistan: 57 mi  
Tajikistan: 296 mi  
Kyrgyzstan: 661 mi  
Kazakhstan: 1,097 mi  
Coastline: 9,010 mi

### Capital

Beijing

### Demographics

With a population of about 1.4 billion, the PRC is the world's second-most populous nation behind India as of 2024. Growing at a rate of just 0.23% annually, the population is aging rapidly due to low birth rates (see *Family and Kinship* and *Sex and Gender*) and long-life expectancies. The 2016 abolition of China's "one-child policy" and other measures were intended to bolster population growth but have yet seen little effect.

About 65% of Chinese live in urban areas, primarily in Shanghai, Beijing, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Tianjin, and Shenzhen. The population concentrates in the PRC's eastern half, with the highest densities found in the Yangtze, Yellow, and Xi Jiang river valleys, the central basin, and the Northeast. Macau and Hong Kong are the world's first and fourth most densely populated regions, with some 48,000 people and 16,500 people per sq mi, respectively. By contrast, the West's mountainous and desert areas remain sparsely populated.

## Flag

The PRC's flag has a red backdrop with a large yellow five-point star in the upper left corner along with four smaller yellow stars arranged in a vertical arc around it. The red background symbolizes revolution, while the stars represent the social classes united under the Communist Party of China (see "Political Climate").



## Geography

Situated in East Asia, the PRC borders Mongolia and Russia to the north, North Korea to the northeast, the Yellow and East China Seas to the east, the South China Sea to the southeast, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Nepal to the south, India to the south and southwest, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan to the west, and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to the northwest. The PRC also includes over 5,400 offshore islands, many of which are small, uninhabited rocky outcroppings. In total, the PRC's land area is 5,795,163 sq mi, making it the world's fourth largest nation, after Russia, Canada, and the US.

Encompassing about two-thirds of the PRC's territory, rugged mountains interspersed by swaths of desert and arid basins dominate the terrain in the West. The towering Himalayan Mountains run along the PRC's southwestern border. The world's highest peak, Mount Everest, reaches 29,029 ft on the PRC's border with Nepal and India, while some other 40 peaks rise over 22,900 ft. By contrast, the Northwest is home to one of the world's lowest points, a deep basin known as the Turfan Depression that descends 508 ft below sea level.

In stark contrast to the West, the PRC's eastern third is characterized by much gentler terrain, including rolling hills, lush river deltas fed by thousands of rivers, and low-lying plains that follow the coastline. The longest waterways include the Yellow (3,395 mi) and Yangtze (3,915 mi) rivers, the latter of which is Asia's longest river and the world's third longest after the Nile and Amazon rivers. The world's third largest desert, the Gobi Desert, stretches across the PRC's North, along the Mongolian border.

## Climate

Due to its vast size and varied terrain, the PRC experiences an extremely diverse climate. Temperatures vary dramatically in northern and western regions, where hot summers contrast starkly with cold, dry winters. Higher elevations and mountainous regions regularly experience freezing temperatures and heavy snowfall. By contrast, a tropical climate prevails in southeastern regions, dividing into a humid, hot season from April-October and a dry, cooler season from November-March.



## Natural Hazards

The PRC experiences an array of natural hazards, notably typhoons (powerful tropical storms), floods, and earthquakes. The country's densely populated coasts are particularly vulnerable to typhoons, which bring strong, destructive winds and heavy rainfall that cause devastating flash floods and landslides. Besides causing loss of life, typhoons damage vital infrastructure and destroy crops and livestock, severely disrupting the economy. The East's low-lying river plains regularly suffer damaging seasonal flooding.

In 2012, Beijing experienced its heaviest rainfall in 60 years, flooding the city and killing 77 people and forcing the evacuation of 65,000 others. The PRC's location at the intersection of the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates makes it particularly vulnerable to earthquakes. The worst to hit the PRC in the last several years, the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province killed over 69,000 people, caused \$128 billion in economic losses, and left millions with inadequate food, water, or shelter for months. In all, natural disasters between 2000-15 caused some \$300 billion in damages and economic loss.

## Environmental Issues

Decades of rapid population growth and industrialization coupled with a lack of environmental protection laws have

resulted in the widespread degradation of the PRC's natural environment. Air pollution is particularly widespread and stems largely from the PRC's dependence on fossil fuels, most notably coal, for energy production (see *Economics and Resources*). Most severe in the Northeast and densely populated urban areas like Beijing, industrial discharge and vehicle emissions combine to cloud cities in thick, hazy smog, which in turn forces residents to limit time spent outdoors and contributes to high rates of respiratory disease, lung cancer, and other illnesses.



Moreover, acid rain caused by air pollution strips forests, degrades natural water supplies, and damages infrastructure. The PRC is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, releasing about 35% of the world's carbon dioxide in 2023.

Deforestation from the clearing of land for farming, urban and industrial development, and other uses contributes to soil erosion, impedes water retention, and worsens the severity of flooding and landslides. Agricultural and industrial runoff from fertilizers and pesticides, industrial operations, and leaking landfills pollutes soil and already scarce water supplies.

Over the last decade, the government has set ambitious goals to reduce the PRC's reliance on fossil fuels and improve energy efficiency. For example, the PRC has invested heavily in renewable technologies, notably installing the world's largest solar panel field in the Gobi Desert. Numerous other regulations seek to reduce pollution and the severity of its impact on PRC residents and its marine and land ecosystems. In 2016, for example, 16 cities, dubbed "sponge" cities, piloted an ecologically friendly program to absorb and reuse rain water.

## Government

The PRC is a socialist republic led by a single, uncontested political party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (see *History and Myth* and "Political Climate" below). The PRC is comprised

of 34 administrative units that divide into 23 provinces (**sheng**), notably including Taiwan, an island democracy which the PRC claims ownership but has never governed (see “Foreign Relations” below); the 5 autonomous regions (**zizhiqu**), of Guangxi, Nei Mongol (Inner Mongolia), Ningxia, Xinjiang Uygur (Xinjiang), and Xizang (Tibet); the Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of Hong Kong and Macau, both of which the PRC reincorporated in the 1990s following their return from British and Portuguese control, respectively (see *History and Myth*); and 4 municipalities (**shi**) of Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Tianjin, all directly administered by the central government.



Adopted in 1982 and revised in 2018 (see “Political Climate” below), the Constitution guides state-level policy, frames the roles and responsibilities of the PRC’s central government, and outlines the fundamental rights of Chinese citizens. While they cannot appoint their own leaders, provincial governments enjoy relatively high levels of autonomy.

For example, provinces retain the ability to control their revenue streams, adopt unique policies to stimulate economic growth, and determine levels of public spending in areas such as health, education, and social welfare, among others. Moreover, provinces retain the right to pass their own laws and regulations, which may extend but not conflict with national legislation.

According to law, the five autonomous regions, which are home to significant ethnic minority populations (see “Ethnic Groups” below), and the SARs retain even more legislative rights than provinces, including regulating most of their own internal affairs. In practice, the central government retains significant control.

## Executive Branch

Almost all executive power is vested in the President, who is indirectly elected by the National People's Congress (NPC) (see "Legislative Branch" below) to serve unlimited 5-year terms. A Vice President (VP), also elected by the NPC, supports the President in overseeing day-to-day affairs. In addition to serving as head-of-state, the current President holds a number of powerful positions including General Secretary of the CCP, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Chairman of multiple CCP policy committees.



These include those overseeing foreign affairs, rule of law, financial and economic affairs, and cyberspace, among others. Current President Xi Jinping first took office in 2013 and was reelected in 2018 and 2023. Current VP Han Zeng took office in 2023.

A Premier, nominated by the President and confirmed by the NPC, is the head-of-government and leads the State Council, an executive cabinet comprised of members appointed by the NPC. Current Premier Li Qiang took office in March 2023.

## Legislative Branch

The PRC's legislature is the single-chamber National People's Congress (***Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui*** or NPC) comprised of a maximum of 3,000 members serving 5-year terms. All members are indirectly elected by municipal, regional, and provincial people's congresses and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). While not explicitly stated in the Constitution, in practice only members of the CCP, the CCP's eight allied independent parties, and CCP-approved independent candidates are elected to the NPC. The NPC controls all legislative powers, which include electing government officials, drafting new laws, approving treaties, passing the budget, and making declarations of war, among others. The NPC is not an independent body but instead fulfills the directives of CCP leadership.

## Judicial Branch

The judiciary consists of a Supreme People's Court, Higher People's Courts, Intermediate People's Courts, District and County People's Courts, Autonomous Region People's Courts, International Commerce Courts, and Special People's Courts that oversee military, maritime, forestry, and transportation issues. As the highest court, the 340-member Supreme People's Court is organized into a civil committee and tribunals for civil, economic, administrative, complaint and appeal, and communication and transportation cases. The Supreme People's Court's chief justice is appointed by the NPC and serves up to two consecutive 5-year terms. Other justices are nominated by the chief justice and appointed by the Standing Committee (see "Political Climate" below) to serve terms of varying lengths.



## Political Climate

In power since 1949, the CCP controls all the PRC's political institutions, while prohibiting dissent and political rivalry. With more than 82 million members (or about 6% of the PRC's population), it is the world's second-largest political party. While the PRC also has eight nominally independent small parties, the CCP significantly influences their ideologies and controls their activities.

Characterized by relatively opaque inner workings, the CCP consists of a massive pyramid structure comprised of millions of local organizations. At its top, the CCP is controlled by a 7-person Standing Committee, the members of which are drawn from a 25-member Politburo. The Standing Committee's members lead the PRC's major political institutions, which include the State Council, the NPC, and an advisory institution, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Generally, CCP members' prominence and influence within the party rests on relations with superiors and other colleagues. Retired leaders and powerful party members often retain significant control over CCP's daily affairs well after stepping down from official positions.

Holding top positions in most of the nation's political institutions, current President Xi Jinping is by far the PRC's most powerful public figure. Since assuming office in 2013, Xi has increasingly exhibited authoritarian and politically conservative tendencies, while seeking to expand the CCP's control over Chinese society. Since 2015, for example, his government has enacted new national laws that strengthen the state's control over a wide range of social activities; significantly tighten Internet access and content; and attempt to instill ideological conformity among the PRC's ethnic minority groups. These measures include harsh "Sinicization" policies that require minorities to subscribe to "traditional Chinese values" and Han Chinese culture and language (see "Security Issues" below).



Xi has also launched an aggressive anti-corruption campaign, which has resulted in the arrests or execution of numerous high-profile political figures. Moreover, in 2018, Xi amended the PRC's Constitution to remove presidential term limits and add his sociopolitical ideology, known as "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," to the Constitution. Such moves significantly tighten Xi's grasp over the political arena and underscore his growing authoritarianism.

## Defense

The PLA is a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, air, missile, and space branches with a joint strength of 2,035,000 active-duty troops, 510,000 reserve personnel, and 500,000 paramilitary troops, making it the world's largest standing military force. Currently, a sweeping modernization program aims to transform the PLA into a technologically advanced, robust, and networked force by 2035 and a global "top tier" military by 2050. Specific objectives include the expansion of the PLA's maritime capabilities, offensive air operations, power projection, joint operations, and cyber and space operations. The PLA is also investing heavily in advanced



technologies such as autonomous and unmanned systems, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic missiles, among other equipment.

The PLA is charged with defending against foreign and domestic threats and supporting disaster relief and humanitarian efforts. The PLA also engages in cooperative counterpiracy and security patrols in the Gulf of Aden, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean, among other regions, and participates in multinational peacekeeping operations. Significantly, the PLA established its first overseas military base in 2017 in Djibouti.



The PLA serves the CCP, not the PRC. While there is no PLA representative on the CCP's Standing Committee, the PLA retains significant

influence over the formulation of the PRC's foreign policy and issues pertaining to national security and defense, including relations with Taiwan and the US (see "Security Issues" and "Foreign Relations" below).

**Ground Forces:** As the largest branch, the PRC's Ground Forces are a well-equipped, well-trained force of 965,000 active-duty troops. The Ground Forces have 13 headquarter commands, 15 special forces brigades, 121 maneuver brigades, divisions, regiments, and groups (including armored, mechanized, light, air maneuver, amphibious, and others), 89 combat support brigades and regiments, and 13 combat service support brigades, 19 coastal defense brigades, an aviation brigade, 12 helicopter brigades, 4 training regiments, and 15 air defense brigades.

**Air Force:** The PRC's Air Force consists of 395,000 active-duty personnel who divide into 8 bomber regiments, 26 fighter regiments and brigades, 20 fighter/ground attack regiments and brigades, 10 ground attack regiments and brigades, 2 electronic warfare regiments, 3 Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) regiments and brigades, an airborne

early warning and control regiment, 5 combat search and rescue brigades, a tanker regiment, 12 transport regiments, 15 training regiments and brigades, a transport helicopter regiment, 2 ISR Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) brigades, and 32 air defense divisions, brigades, regiments, and battalions. They are equipped with 2,475 combat capable aircraft, 73 helicopters, 26 UAVs, and other air defense equipment.

**Navy:** The PRC's Navy is a well-trained force of 260,000 active-duty personnel, including 26,000 naval aviation troops, 35,000 marines, and various other specialized units, such as surface, coastal defense, and submarine, among others. The Navy is organized into three fleets: Behai Fleet in the Yellow Sea, Donghai Fleet in the East China Sea, and the Nanhai Fleet in the South China Sea. The Navy is equipped with 58 strategic and tactical submarines, 102 principal surface combatants, 43 frigates, 110 patrol and coastal combatants, 40 mine warfare and mine countermeasures vessels, 11 principal amphibious ships, 50 landing ships, 82 landing craft, 175 logistics and support vessels, and 110 coastal defense vessels.

**Strategic Missile Forces:** Formerly known as the Second Artillery Corps, the PRC's Strategic Missile Forces consist of 120,000 members, who divide into a PLA Rocket Force and Navy and Defensive units equipped with 8 submarines, phase array and detections and tracking radars, and surface-to-surface missiles to counter nuclear attacks.

**Strategic Support Force:** Established in 2015 and believed to



be responsible for the PRC's space and cyber capabilities, the PRC's Strategic Support Forces are composed of 145,000 active-duty troops.

**Paramilitary:** The PRC's Paramilitary force consists of 500,000 People's Armed Police members, who divide into internal security forces, border-defence, firefighting, forest services, and hydropower services.

## People's Republic of China Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Senior  
Colonel



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



First  
Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Officer  
Cadet



Chief  
Master  
Sergeant



First  
Sergeant



Senior  
Master  
Sergeant



Master  
Sergeant



Technical  
Sergeant



Staff  
Sergeant



Senior  
Airman



Airman  
First  
Class



Airman

## Security Issues

**Volatility in the South China Sea:** Under Xi's leadership, the PRC has expanded its claims over vast portions of the South China Sea, including islets, coral reefs, and sand cays scattered as far as Malaysia and the Philippines. On maps, the PRC has enclosed these territories, which cover some 90% of the sea's area, in a "nine-dash line" (a vague demarcation boundary). The disputed areas include territories historically claimed by Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, and Taiwan, with the most fractious territorial disagreements occurring between the PRC and Vietnam and the PRC and the Philippines.

Since 2013, the PRC has bolstered its claims by constructing several artificial islands in the southern Spratly Island chain to house anti-ship cruise missiles, long-range surface-to-air missiles, and other equipment to augment the PLA's military capacity in the region.



The mounting militarization of the South China Sea – which is home to rich fisheries, extensive oil and gas reserves, and shipping routes of immense economic and strategic value – creates significant tension between the PRC and the international community. Relations with nations involved in the various disputes are likely to further destabilize as the PRC increasingly stifles other nations' economic and military movements in the region.

**Forced “Sinicization” and other Internal Tensions:** Seeking to instill ideological conformity across the PRC, the government launched a “Sinicization” initiative in 2016 to forcefully impose Han Chinese culture and language on the nation's religiously and ethnically diverse minority populations (see “Ethnic Groups and Social Relations” below). To do so, authorities have detained primarily minority residents in ideological reeducation centers, where they undergo training to conform to Han Chinese culture, CCP tenets, and the socialist system. Authorities

describe the camps as “vocational education and training centers” that offer a curriculum of written and spoken Mandarin (see *Language and Communication*), various vocational skills, understanding of Chinese law, and “deradicalization” though some observers classify the camps as prisons.

While the government asserts Sinicization policies protect the PRC from religious extremism and terrorism, international observers criticize the mass internments as a gross abuse of human rights and genocide. According to accounts of former detainees, detainees are forced to renounce their religious beliefs and customs, while suffering crowded and unsanitary conditions, food deprivation, and beatings. Often held without formal charges, detainees typically include human rights advocates, lawyers, and prominent intellectuals. The most extreme case of the Sinicization effort has occurred in the northwest autonomous region of Xinjiang, where authorities detained up to 2 million Muslim Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minorities in reeducation camps between 2017-19.



Other serious human rights abuses occur in Tibet, where the government harshly controls religious

life. These abuses include violently suppressing protests; requiring monks to denounce their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama (see *Religion and Spirituality*); enacting policies to weaken Tibetan-language education (see *Language and Communication*); preventing students from engaging in religious activities; and tightening media controls. Human rights watch groups have also reported arbitrary incarcerations and disappearances of the region's residents.

**Unrest in Hong Kong:** Although Hong Kong reverted to PRC control in 1997, the Joint Declaration, an international treaty negotiated by the PRC and the United Kingdom in 1984 (see *History and Myth*), gave the territory autonomy in managing its social, economic, and political systems for at least 50 years. Under this “one country, two systems” model, Hong Kong is a

presidential democracy with legislative and judicial branches largely independent of PRC control. Nevertheless, over the last decades, the PRC has maintained considerable influence over Hong Kong's internal affairs through PRC loyalists, who have historically dominated its political arena.

In spring 2019, proposed legal amendments that would infringe on Hong Kong's autonomy sparked widespread protests. Over time, activists expanded their demands to include democratic reform, investigations into police misconduct, and release of arrested protesters. Continuing unrest and increasingly violent interactions between protesters and police drew sharp international criticism. Amid the turmoil, the US enacted legislation in late 2019 that authorizes sanctions on PRC and Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights abuses and outlines measures intended to safeguard Hong Kong's democracy.



Accusing the US of meddling in its internal affairs, the PRC has in turn threatened economic sanctions against the US, heightening bilateral US-PRC tensions. Then, in a sharp and vivid rebuke of PRC policies, pro-democracy candidates captured some 86% of elected seats in a sweeping victory of Hong Kong's late-2019 local elections, which drew a record number of voters.

Quarantine measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily halted demonstrations in early 2020. At that time, the PRC again moved to tighten its hold on the territory, passing new security laws giving the central government wide powers to repress what it considers are subversive, secessionist, and terrorist acts. The move was denounced by the international community as infringing on the territory's autonomy as outlined in the "one country, two systems" model. Consequently, the future of Hong Kong's autonomy remains unclear, as does a bilateral US-Hong Kong agreement that affords Hong Kong unique treatment by the US in economic and political spheres.

## Foreign Relations

In the 1980s, the PRC emerged from international isolation, when the government revised foreign and economic policies to open the nation to the West (see *History and Myth*). Since then, the PRC has transformed into a global economic powerhouse (see *Economics and Resources*). While the PRC's increased regional dominance and growing military presence, particularly in the South China Sea, contribute to regional and global tensions, the nation's export-oriented economy and significant economic power tend to help balance often tense political relations.

Under Xi's leadership, the PRC has attempted to exploit its position as an economic powerhouse to gain global influence and achieve its strategic goals, aggressively pursuing partnerships with hundreds of nations. For example, the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious plan to fund large-scale infrastructure projects across the world and stimulate commerce with dozens of nations in energy, communication, and other sectors (see *Economics and Resources*). In late 2019, the PRC also signed a free trade agreement – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – that closely integrates the PRC into the markets of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and the 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The PRC is notably one of five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, along with the



US, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom. The PRC also participates in numerous regional and global organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Asian Development Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, among others. The PRC is the only Communist Party-led nation in the G-20 grouping of the world's largest economies.

**Relations with Taiwan:** A long-running dispute over Taiwanese sovereignty dominates PRC-Taiwan relations. Specifically, the PRC claims control over Taiwan, while Taiwan considers itself a sovereign, democratic state. The PRC insists that nations should not cultivate diplomatic ties with either the PRC or Taiwan unilaterally. By contrast, Taiwan seeks to maintain diplomatic relations outside of the PRC's influence.

Leveraging its formidable economic and political global influence, the PRC tries to isolate Taiwan in the international arena by pressuring its few allies to sever diplomatic ties. Since 2016, nine countries have severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan and exclusively aligning with the PRC, reducing Taiwan's diplomatic partners to 12 nations and the Vatican. The PRC also actively hinders Taiwan's participation in numerous global forums and asserts an aggressive stance in its territorial claims in the waters surrounding Taiwan, notably increasing its military deployments in the area in recent years. While close economic ties have historically mitigated bilateral friction, renewed and increasing political tensions under a liberal

Taiwanese President threaten to overshadow the Taiwan-PRC economic relationship.



**Relations with Japan:** Although the PRC and Japan share strong economic ties, a territorial dispute over a group of uninhabited islands in the

East China Sea known as the Diaoyu Islands in the PRC and Senkaku Islands in Japan strains relations. Currently controlled by Japan, the islands lay close to important shipping lanes, rich fishing grounds, and significant oil and gas reserves. Since 2012, the PRC has increased PLA patrols in the region, seemingly to assert its jurisdiction over the area. Moreover, in 2013, the PRC announced the creation of an air-defense zone over the islands that overlaps with existing Japanese, Taiwanese, and South Korean zones. Since then, unintended interactions between Chinese and Japanese military aircraft have occurred and intermittently escalate tension.



**Relations with the US:** Despite sharing a history punctuated by bouts of aggression and heightened bilateral friction, mutual geopolitical and economic interests prompted the US and China to formally establish a diplomatic dialogue in 1979 (see *History and Myth*) and cooperate on a range of global issues in subsequent decades. For example, the US and PRC have engaged in joint efforts to combat terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and climate change.

Experts credit US-PRC cooperation for precipitating Iran's denuclearization deal and the UN Paris Agreement on Climate change, an international treaty to stabilize human-induced climate change. Today, the US and PRC continue to seek ways to cooperate in maintaining pressure on North Korea to curb its nuclear programs, managing global health crises, and maintaining peacekeeping efforts in Afghanistan, among other initiatives.

Still, tensions flare over numerous issues, particularly the PRC's cyber espionage into US institutions and theft of intellectual property; its increasingly aggressive posture in the South China



Sea; and various human rights issues, especially in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. Of particular sensitivity is the US' relationship with Taiwan, which the PRC views as an intrusive and direct interference in the PRC's internal affairs.

Notable sources of friction include US legislation that prioritizes Taiwan over the PRC, US arms sales to Taiwan, other support to the Taiwanese military, and US Navy transits in the Taiwan Strait.

Nevertheless, the US and PRC engage in limited military-to-military exchanges, occasionally participating in multinational military exercises and some joint US-PRC operations such as counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. However, the US did

not invite the PRC to participate in the PRC from participating in a multinational US-led maritime exercise in mid-2018 due to the PRC's continued militarization of the South China Sea. Further, the PRC's efforts to modernize and grow its military also strains bilateral ties, as the US views the PLA's advancements as competition to the US' historic dominance in air, space, and cyberspace. In 2019-20, a trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*) heightened tensions and caused a significant contraction in US-PRC trade.

## Ethnic Groups

The PRC is a multiethnic country, though the majority Han Chinese predominate in all regions but Tibet and Xinjiang.

**Han Chinese:** According to a 2020 census, approximately 91% of the PRC's citizens are Han Chinese, an East Asian ethnic group found primarily in mainland China and Taiwan. The Han divide into several sub-groups based on geographic origin and language (see *Language and Communication*). Han Chinese are found throughout the country but concentrate along the Yellow, Yangzi, and Pearl river basins.

### National Minorities:

The PRC government recognizes some 56 national minority groups that comprise the remaining 9% of the population. Minority populations predominate in the northern, western, and southern border regions and in Tibet, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Guizhou, Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, and the three northeast provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. Southwestern Yunnan Province is the country's most diverse, with some 50 minority groups accounting for more than one-third of its population.



According to 2023 estimates, the largest groups were the Zhuang (18 million), Hui (11 million), Manchu (11 million), Uyghur (10.1 million), Miao (10 million), Yi (8.8 million), Tujia (8.4 million), Tibetan (6 million), and Mongol (6 million). The following

groups (from largest to smallest) had 1-3 million members: Dong, Bouyei, Yao, Bai, Korean, Hani, Li, Kazakh, and Dai. While some minorities have intermingled with the majority Han Chinese, others maintain distinctive lifestyles, cultures, languages (see *Language and Communication*), and religions (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The PRC is also home to hundreds of unrecognized minority groups.

## Social Relations

Traditionally, Chinese society was hierarchical in accordance with the teachings of Confucius, a 6th-5th century BC Chinese philosopher. According to Confucian philosophy, social relations should promote social harmony rather than individual happiness.

To promote this ideal, Confucian philosophy describes the nature of five basic social relationships: between friends, there should be trust; between father and son, affection; between husband and wife, attention to proper roles; between old and young, order; and between leader and subject, righteousness.



While the PRC officially abandoned Confucianism upon its 1949 founding (see *History and Myth*), aspects of Confucianism persist, especially emphasis on respecting family, serving society, and ancestor veneration.

As the PRC has advanced economically since its founding (see *Economics and Resources*), social relations have also changed. Further, certain policies, notably the “one-child policy” in effect from 1979-2016 (see *Family and Kinship*) combined with enhanced educational opportunities and increased participation by women in the labor force, altered family structures and gender roles (see *Sex and Gender*).

Generally, society tends to divide along rural-urban lines. Rural populations tend to be significantly poorer than urban ones and lack of access to equivalent public services. Despite reform promises by President Xi, the PRC’s ***hukou*** household

registration system (see *Family and Kinship*) continues to institutionalize these inequalities by restricting rural residents' ability to migrate to other regions for economic and educational opportunities. Nevertheless, many rural residents migrate illegally to cities, where they encounter stigmatization and discrimination in addition to limited employment opportunities and restricted access to education and healthcare due to their illegal status.

Further, Chinese society has been marked by historical tensions both within the Han Chinese population and between the Han and national minority groups. Upon its founding (see *History and Myth*), the PRC granted autonomy and self-government to some regions with significant minority populations.



Further, the government gave recognized ethnic groups political representation, exempted them from the “one-child policy” (see *Family and Kinship*), and granted them preferential treatment in some circumstances, such as university admissions.

However, the PRC has subjected some national minorities, notably Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, to repression and institutionalized discrimination, (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Historically, the CCP has responded to minorities' discontent and protests by increasing economic development in the affected areas while instituting harsh measures intended to promote Sinicization (see “Security Issues” above). Combined with efforts to suppress the Uyghur and Tibetan languages (see *Language and Communication*) and destroy or restrict access to Muslim and Tibetan Buddhist places of worship (see *Religion and Spirituality*), these measures demonstrate President Xi's intent to suppress dissent among national minorities.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

According to US government estimates, about 22% of Chinese are followers of folk religion, 18% Buddhists, 5% Christians, and 2% Muslims.

China's Constitution grants citizens freedom of religious belief but limits protections for religious practice to "normal" religious activities without defining "normal." Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, who comprise the majority of public office holders, and members of the armed forces are required to be atheist and forbidden from engaging in religious activities.



Since 1992, the government officially recognizes five state-sanctioned and state-supervised "patriotic religious associations" representing Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Only registered member organizations of these five associations are allowed to hold worship services legally. Chinese authorities monitor both registered and unregistered religious organizations to prevent activities they deem disruptive of the social order.

#### Early Spiritual Landscape

Many early inhabitants of East Asia practiced animism, the belief that a spiritual presence resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate, such as animals, trees, rivers, and rocks. Animism promotes the notion that all natural objects are sacred, and this conviction establishes a close connection between animists and their environment.

Like Taoism (see below), these indigenous religious traditions also recognized guardian spirits that inhabit and protect the natural world. Others acknowledged ancestor spirits, who can both protect and harm the living by causing sickness, family

discord, and other forms of misfortune. Today, many Chinese continue to incorporate elements of these traditional beliefs into devotional practices, often blending them with Taoist, Buddhist, and other religious tenets forming a complex, syncretic “folk religion.”

### Confucianism

Based on the teachings of Confucius, a 6th-5th century BC Chinese philosopher, Confucianism teaches that social relations should promote social harmony rather than individual happiness (see *Political and Social Relations*). Since it does not involve deity worship, Confucianism usually is not considered a religion. Instead, it is described as a social philosophy and system of ethics, having specific rules of conduct and responsibilities that govern relationships. Though abandoned by the communist authorities in China after 1949 (see *History and Myth*), the Confucian emphasis on benevolence, harmony, and ancestor veneration remain fundamental values in Chinese society.

### Taoism

Originating in China around the 6th century BC and based on the teachings of Lao-



Tze, a Chinese philosopher and contemporary of Confucius, Taoism acknowledges a singular great force behind all things in the universe, the **tao**. Adherents of Taoism believe harmony with the natural world is achieved by minimizing the desire for material gain and living a compassionate, frugal, and humble life that is balanced within the *tao*. Taoism also recognizes a vast pantheon of hundreds of gods and goddesses, who control or exert influence over various aspects of human life.

### Buddhism

The origins of Buddhism date back to around 500 BC, when Siddhartha Gautama, a South Asian prince, attained spiritual insight through meditation. Buddhists believe that humans are fated to suffer, that suffering is caused by greed or desire, and can be stopped by following a spiritual path that includes

unselfish living and meditation. Buddhists' ultimate goal is to achieve nirvana, a state of peace and unity with the universe.

Several centuries after Gautama's death, Buddhism divided into two schools of thought – Theravada and Mahayana. Most prevalent in East Asia today, Mahayana Buddhism differs from Theravada Buddhism in its view of Gautama: while adherents of Theravada believe Gautama is the only enlightened being, the Mahayana school teaches that Gautama was one of many. Mahayana further teaches that all followers may attempt to

reach nirvana, while the Theravada school stipulates only ordained monks may do so.



Mahayana Buddhism spread from southern to central Asia, flourishing in China, where it mixed with Taoist and Confucian thought. By the 6th century,

Buddhism rivaled Taoism in popularity and political influence. Over the next 3 centuries, the two major schools of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism formed: Pure Land Buddhism and meditative Chan (also known as Zen) Buddhism.

Within Tibet, Mahayana Buddhism combined with an ancient Tibetan religion called Bon to form several new schools of thought that together comprise Tibetan Buddhism. Unique features of Tibetan Buddhism include the status of the teacher or **lama**, a focus on the relationship between life and death, the importance of meditation, and special rituals and initiations.

## Islam

Islam dates to the 6th century AD, when Muhammad, whom Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe the Archangel Gabriel visited Muhammad over a 23-year period revealing to him the Qur'an, or "Holy Book."

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. Muslims consider Christians and Jews "people of the Book," referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in one

God. Islam is divided into two sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (**caliph**) of the Muslim community (**ummah**) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

Arab and Persian traders brought Islam to China via the Silk Road (see *History and Myth*) in the 7th century. Over subsequent centuries, these Muslim traders constructed mosques and intermarried with the local Han Chinese population, forming Chinese-speaking Muslim communities such as the Hui (see *Political and Social Relations*). By contrast, Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Turkic peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*) adopted Islam around the early 15th century.

### Christianity

Christianity likely first arrived in China around the 7th century, though imperial repression in the 8th century caused a decline in followers. Christianity reemerged in the 13th century, when Mongol Yuan rulers (see *History and Myth*) allowed Franciscan (a Roman Catholic order) missionaries to settle in the empire. Beginning in 1368, Ming Dynasty rulers expelled all Christians.



Some 200 years later, Jesuit (another Roman Catholic order) scholars gained access to the imperial court by offering their scientific knowledge and adapting their Christian teachings to Chinese culture. In the late 16th-17th centuries, Catholic missionaries were particularly active in Macau, building many churches and converting significant numbers of local residents (see *History and Myth*).

The first Protestant missionary to China arrived in 1807, and the denomination counted some 500,000 followers by 1925. Through the 19th and early 20th centuries, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries actively sought converts, while supporting China's modernization by founding schools and hospitals and translating Western scientific and literary works into Chinese. The Taiping Rebellion (see *History and Myth*) was partly inspired



by Christian teachings, while the Boxer Rebellion (see *History and Myth*) was somewhat a backlash to Christianity and the presence of Christian missionaries in the country.

### Religion in the People's Republic of China (PRC)

Following the 1949 proclamation of the PRC (see *History and Myth*), the Communists' atheistic worldview, or the disbelief in deities and the rejection of religion, brought significant changes. All foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country by 1952, and all religious activities were discouraged.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) (see *History and Myth*), all religious expressions or devotion were banned. Christian churches, Buddhist temples, and Islamic mosques were looted, sacred books destroyed, and believers subjected to public humiliation. Many believers were driven underground, resulting in the formation, especially among Christians, of underground houses of worship. In the late 1970s, restrictions on religious activity were loosened, though the government continued to maintain tight control of all religious organizations.



The last decades have seen a growing number of religious believers. In 2018, the government introduced new regulations allowing state-registered religious

organizations to own property, publish literature, and train and approve clergy. However, the regulations also included restrictions on religious schooling and the timing of religious celebrations. Generally, the government restricts and controls the activities and freedoms of followers by arresting, detaining, incarcerating, harassing, physically abusing, and torturing adherents simply for activities related to their religious beliefs and practices.

While authorities have removed crosses from Christian churches and closed unregistered churches in some provinces, repression of and discrimination against Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists have been particularly harsh. Authorities in Muslim-majority Xinjiang have destroyed or repurposed mosques, while

detaining about two million Muslims in reeducation camps (see *Political and Social Relations*). Elsewhere, the government has demolished some mosques, while altering others to make them more “Chinese-looking”.

In Tibet, authorities regularly interfere in the activities of Buddhist monasteries and restrict travel to sites of religious rituals and pilgrimage. The government also has evicted thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns, sometimes destroying their residences and subjecting them to detention and “reeducation.” To protest and draw international attention to their plight, some 155 Tibetan Buddhist monks have set themselves on fire since 2009. Authorities justify the repression by claiming Tibetan Buddhists and Muslims are involved in terrorist, separatist, or pro-independence movements.

In 2017, President Xi announced that all religions must instill communist values and be “Chinese-oriented.” This move aligns with his broader program of assuring CCP influence across all parts of society and supporting “Sinicization” or the imposition of



Han Chinese culture and language (see *Political and Social Relations*). Relatedly, the state has encouraged certain religious practices viewed as particularly “Chinese,” such as the veneration of local folk gods, practices which the authorities

tend to view as folk belief and not a formal religion. Followers of such folk beliefs comprise the largest religious group in China today, numbering some 300 million.

**Buddhism:** According to a 2017 international estimate, China is home to 185-250 million Mahayana Buddhists. Some 6-8 million others, primarily Tibetans and Mongolians, follow Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is the spiritual head of a prominent school of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Islam:** According to the PRC, China is home to some 20 million Muslims, almost all of whom are Sunni. The largest Muslim ethnic minorities are the Hui and the Uyghur (see *Political and Social Relations*). Other Muslim groups include the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

**Christianity:** International studies estimate China's Christian population at 60-80 million Protestants and 12 million Catholics. Many of these Christians practice in unrecognized or so-called "house" churches. By contrast, PRC authorities count just 26 million Christians, including some 20 million Protestants affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the state-sanctioned umbrella organization for all officially recognized Protestant churches. There are almost 6 million Catholics, who attend churches belonging to the state-sponsored Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.



The PRC and the Holy See (the governing body of the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican in Rome) do not have diplomatic relations. Further, the PRC does not recognize the Vatican's authority over Catholics in China. However, in 2018, the Vatican unexpectedly agreed to accept the legitimacy of seven Catholic bishops appointed by the Chinese government.

**Other Religions:** Some ethnic minorities, notably the Dong and Zhuang, retain their traditional religions. Although labeled a cult and banned in 1999, Falun Gong, a spiritual movement that blends Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional *qigong* practices (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), retains some 7-20 million followers, though they are subject to significant persecution. Other banned religious groups, such as the Guanyin Method, Zhong Gong, Church of the Almighty God (also known as Eastern Lightning), and Society of Disciples, among others, also retain some followers. Judaism has maintained a small but favorable presence in China for hundreds of years with historic synagogues in cities like Shanghai and contemporary communities such as the 2,700 Jews in Henan province.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

While traditional values like harmony, honor, and duty still infuse Chinese family life, rapid urbanization and changing attitudes about marriage have altered the family's structure and function in recent decades. Further, a declining birth rate and strict government regulation of population growth have shifted societal composition. Nevertheless, Chinese still value their relationships with and responsibilities toward their extended family members.

### Residence

As of 2023, some 65% of Chinese lived in urban areas, up from about 25% in 1975, and a trend that is likely to continue. Chinese citizens cannot freely decide where to live. Instead, the PRC's ***hukou*** residency registration program defines a person's residence at birth, and changing residence can be extremely difficult, especially from rural to urban areas. While recent reforms to the system have allowed some rural dwellers to settle in urban areas, many others migrate illegally to already crowded cities, where they face challenges in attaining employment and government services (see *Political and Social Relations*).



Homeownership is a status symbol in China, and despite recent skyrocketing housing prices, some 90% of Chinese families own their homes. Chinese property law stipulates that owners possess only the physical housing structure, not the land itself, which belongs to the state.

**Traditional:** Residential neighborhoods, particularly in Beijing, feature one-story courtyard houses (***siheyuans***), often aligned along narrow alleys called ***hutongs***. Many traditional homes have overhanging, slanted, tiled roofs as protection against severe weather. Various rules guide the design of these homes, notably the principles of ***fengshui*** ("wind-water"). This Chinese

concept seeks to harmonize the universe, earth, and humanity by orienting buildings and living spaces in certain ways and using natural materials. Other forms of traditional homes include **yaodong** or cave dwellings; **tulou**, large, round buildings that historically housed up to 800 people; and various forms of yurts (portable, round tents covered with skins or felt) and bamboo structures.



**Modern:** High-rise apartment buildings have largely replaced single-story courtyard houses and other traditional structures in and around urban areas. City living conditions are often cramped, with many urban dwellers sharing one- or two-bedroom apartments with several family members. More wealthy Chinese inhabit larger, luxury, serviced apartments. In the 1950s-60s, most new housing consisted of Soviet-style concrete block apartments. Since the late 1970s, housing construction has included modern, Western-style apartment buildings and single-family homes, primarily in the suburbs.

### Family Structure

Chinese traditionally view the family as a single unit rather than a group of individuals. Family members are expected to help each other and value the good of the family over their own needs. Traditionally, extended families consisting of parents, children, and grandparents lived together in a single residence.

Today, most families consist of small nuclear families (parents and their children). Some households include aging grandparents, who typically assist with childrearing, allowing the parents to earn income, supporting the family. China also has a growing number of single-parent and childless households. While some ethnic groups have matriarchal (maternal) structures, Chinese traditionally regard the father as the head of the household. The mother traditionally holds responsibility for most household chores and childcare (see *Sex and Gender*).

In accordance with the Confucian concept of filial piety (respect for one's parents, elders, and ancestors) (see *Political and Social Relations*), Chinese typically are expected to demonstrate great reverence toward older family members. Children often defer to their parents regarding major life decisions and provide physical and financial care as they age. China has a rapidly aging population, and by some estimates, almost 39% of the population will be aged 60 and above by 2050.

### China's "One-Child Policy"

In an attempt to regulate population growth, the Chinese government introduced a "one-child policy" in 1979, which restricted most urban couples to having only one child. Exceptions were granted to some couples, notably if both parents were only children, if the firstborn was disabled, or if the couple were members of a national minority (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Some families went to great lengths to ensure that their firstborn was male, often having sex-selective abortions or killing or abandoning infant females (see *Sex and Gender*). As a result, an unbalanced population has emerged in China, with currently some 33 million more males than females.

Facing an aging population and a declining labor force, the government introduced a new "two-child policy" for urban families in 2016. In 2021, declining birth rates and labor force requirements compelled the government to loosen restrictive family policies, permitting families to have multiple children without penalty.

### Children

Due to rising living costs and past government policy, most Chinese families today have just one child (see *Sex and Gender*). Although Chinese parents tend to refrain from displaying public affection for their offspring, they treasure their

children and strive to secure their future for them. Chinese typically teach their children obedience, cooperation and respectfulness. They also value education and encourage their children to spend more time studying than children in other countries (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

**Birth:** Chinese treat an expectant woman with great care, encouraging rest and minimal exertion. This treatment continues after childbirth, when new mothers receive a month-long constant care, while adhering to a strict diet and following certain rules regarding bathing, dress, and exercise. This period of healing known as **zuo yuezi** (“sitting out a month”) is intended to restore the mother’s wellbeing and spiritual balance as understood in Traditional Chinese Medicine (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Services are offered in the home and specialty “birth recovery centers”.

### Milestones

Following the month of confinement after a birth, the family celebrates the new baby with a banquet



called **man yue** (“fulfilling a month”). Chinese consider a baby already a year old at birth and count another year’s completion at Chinese New Year (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Historically, few Chinese celebrated their birthdays. Nevertheless, because the lunar calendar (see *Time and Space*) follows a 60-year cycle, older people generally mark their 60th birthdays as special occasions. Today, many young people celebrate their birthdays with parties and special foods, such as birthday “longevity noodles” that must be slurped whole to ensure a long life.

### Dating and Marriage

Traditionally, Chinese marriages were arranged as a union of two families, who sought suitable spouses for their children based on education, social status, and wealth. Arranged marriages have been banned since the 1950s. While Chinese

today often meet prospective partners through friends or coworkers, families continue to be involved in the marriage process. For example, many urban areas host weekly “marriage

markets” in parks and other public spaces, where parents gather to advertise their single child’s attributes and find potential mates.



While the legal marriage age is 20 for women and 22 for men, many couples now wait

until their late 20s or early 30s, preferring to delay marriage until they have finished their education or secured steady employment. Others opt out altogether. For example, China’s marriage rate dropped from 9.9 per 1,000 people in 2013 to 4.8 in 2023. While women who remain unmarried by age 27 are stigmatized as **sheng nu** or “leftover women,” many men have difficulties finding a bride due to China’s severe gender imbalance.

**Weddings:** Chinese wedding ceremonies typically include a mix of modern and traditional practices. For example, many couples change between Western-style and traditional attire, usually red for good luck. The couple selects a favorable date as indicated by the lunar calendar (see *Time and Space*) for their ceremony.

Chinese may marry in a civil ceremony held at a local government registry or opt for a religious ceremony held in a place of worship. On the wedding day, the groom traditionally pays respects to his ancestors before departing to meet his bride at her home, an event celebrated by lighting firecrackers. Together, the bride and groom host a tea ceremony for their parents, and in





exchange, receive red envelopes filled with money. Following the ceremony, friends and extended family gather at a large banquet hall to enjoy elaborate meals with traditional foods, toasts, and speeches. Throughout the wedding festivities, friends and family play pranks on the couple as a gesture of good luck.

**Divorce:** Chinese divorce rates have steadily increased in recent decades, rising from 0.55 per 1,000 people in 1987 to 2.06 in 2023, lower than the US rate (2.9) that year. Reasons cited for increased divorce rates include incompatibility, infidelity, domestic abuse, and women's economic empowerment.

## Death

Funeral customs across China differ by religious affiliation and by the deceased's age and status. Regardless of religious affiliation, Chinese traditionally memorialize the death of a loved one with a series of rituals and burial in a cemetery. Upon death, the deceased is typically dressed in white, a color associated with death, and placed in a casket. The funeral service is scheduled for a favorable day as indicated by the lunar calendar, and the location of the burial in a cemetery is dictated by the principles of *fengshui*. Following the funeral, family members observe a period of mourning lasting between 49-100 days. While Chinese traditionally prefer burial in a cemetery, due to

limited space in large cities and government regulation, many Chinese increasingly choose cremation.

During the annual Qing Ming Festival (Tomb Sweeping Holiday), observed each spring, families visit the graves

of family members to clean them and leave offerings of flowers, food, and incense. They also burn ceremonial joss paper (coarse bamboo paper printed with seals, stamps, or other designs also known as "ghost money") as a symbol of their enduring support and care for their ancestors.



## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Traditional Chinese gender roles were shaped by Confucian values (see *Political and Social Relations*), which grant men higher status than women. Following the 1949 declaration of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (see *History and Myth*), Mao Zedong famously proclaimed that “women hold up half the sky” and called for equal treatment of men and women. Since then, women have experienced significant opportunities for education and healthcare. Nevertheless, they continue to face discrimination and gender-based violence.

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Labor:** Traditional Confucian values dictated a strict division of domestic labor, and Chinese women today continue to hold primary responsibility for their children's care and education, the housework, and the care of elderly parents, even if they work outside the home. Women do an average of three times more housework than men.

**Labor Force:** While almost three-fourths of Chinese women worked outside the home in the 1990s, the rate dropped to 60% by 2024. This rate is lower than in neighboring Vietnam (69%) but higher than the US rate (57%). Women comprise more than half of China's college and university students, yet only 18% of the country's senior managers, officials, and legislators are female. Over 50% of Chinese women work in secretarial, sales, and accounting positions.

Chinese women face significant barriers to their equal participation in the workforce. In 2024, Chinese women earned



about 82% of men with similar qualifications. Further, they frequently experience discrimination in hiring and promotion. For example, many jobs are advertised as “men only” or “men preferred.” Employers often ask female job applicants about their marital and childbearing status and fire pregnant employees, even though both practices are outlawed.

### Gender and the Law

Legal reforms in the 1950s banned arranged marriages, outlawed concubinage, and allowed women to divorce their husbands. While China's Constitution today guarantees women and men equal rights and certain laws prohibit gender discrimination, legal wording is often vague, and the authorities often fail to enforce laws. Further, some laws discriminate against women.



For example, following a divorce, property ownership reverts to the original owner, typically the husband, as husbands often refuse to add their wives' names to property deeds. Other laws prevent women from reaching their full career potential. For example, China's retirement

laws require women in some fields, such as civil service, to retire up to 10 years earlier than their male counterparts.

### Gender and Politics

Despite some government measures to increase women's participation, their involvement in politics remains low. As of 2023, no women sit on the 25-person Politburo, the executive committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and a woman has never been appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee, comprising the top leaders of the CCP (see *Political and Social Relations*). From 2017-22, Hong Kong had a woman chief executive, but none of the 31 provincial-level governments are led by women, who rarely receive high-level political appointments. Nevertheless, women held 27% of seats in the National People's Congress as of 2023, compared to almost 29% in the US Congress.

## Gender Based Violence (GBV) and Sexual Harassment

Experts estimate that at least one in four Chinese women has experienced domestic violence. After significant public debate, China passed a national domestic violence law in 2016. While the law provides a legal definition of domestic violence as a civil offense and covers both married and cohabiting couples, it does not apply to same-sex couples nor criminalizes marital rape. Women are also vulnerable to GBV from other sources. For example, girls and women in Xinjiang's "reeducation camps" (see *Political and Social Relations*) experience notable rates of sexual violence.

Women often fail to report GBV due to social stigma, lack of access to support services, or fear of further harassment from perpetrators or the authorities. In alignment with traditional beliefs regarding the importance of family unity, many women are pressured to remain married to their abusers.

Judges also prefer to keep couples together and frequently reject victims' requests to divorce their abusive husbands. Even if

GBV crimes are reported, authorities often fail to take them seriously, tending to view them as private matters.

Sexual harassment is illegal in China, though legal definitions of the term remain vague. Workplace harassment is widespread and, according to a 2017 survey, almost 70% of university students have experienced some form of sexual harassment, though only 4% reported it.

**Trafficking:** China is a source, transit point, and destination for the forced labor and sex-trafficking of men, women, and children. Some trafficked women and girls from neighboring countries are sold to Chinese men, who are unable to find brides due to the country's gender imbalance (see *Family and Kinship*).



## Sex and Procreation

Chinese generally consider sexual intimacy a private matter, though traditional standards of premarital virginity and marital fidelity are changing. At 1.2 births per woman, China's birthrate in 2024 was well below the 2.1 rate required to sustain the population. Rates in some urban areas have dropped as low as 0.7 births per woman. Recent attempts to encourage child-bearing by ending the "one-child policy" (see *Family and Kinship*), extending maternity leave, and other incentives have had little effect. In early 2023, China unexpectedly announced its first annual population decline in 6 decades.



The government actively promoted abortion and contraception during the "one-child policy" era. By some reports, it prevented up to 400 million births between 1979-

2016 by coercing or even forcing women to undergo abortions and sterilizations. Observers report authorities continued efforts to curb some women's rights to reproduce. Specifically, Muslim women detained in Xinjiang (see *Political and Social Relations*) have reported undergoing forced abortions and the implantation of reproductive devices.

A traditional preference for male over female children continues to result in some cases of sex-selective abortions. While the law forbids prenatal sex selection (methods to control the sex of babies before birth), it is difficult to enforce. Consequently, China's male-female sex ratio at birth remains skewed, with 110 boys born for every 100 girls in 2021.

## Homosexuality in China

While China decriminalized homosexuality in 1997 and Shanghai hosted its first gay pride parade in 2008, same-sex couples cannot legally marry and do not receive the same legal protections as heterosexual couples. The government censors media content that depicts homosexual relationships.

At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for China. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Mandarin Chinese, or *pǔtōnghuà* (“common language”), is the official language of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Though Mandarin dominates government, education, and the media; there are also other Chinese varieties and 130 minority languages, some of which are widely used in their respective regions.

### Chinese Varieties

Chinese is a subgroup of the Sino-Tibetan language family, which includes more than 300 languages spoken across Asia. Though popularly called dialects, linguists identify seven distinct Chinese languages spoken across the mainland: Gan, Hakka, Mandarin, Min, Wu, Xiang, and Yue (Cantonese). Each of these has several dialects or variants.



Chinese languages are tonal, meaning they use tone or pitch to convey meaning. While the different Chinese varieties are mutually unintelligible, they historically have used the same writing system. In contrast to an alphabet, characters in this system represent a thing or idea without indicating the sounds used to pronounce it. Consequently, the characters can be read in any Chinese variety. Although Chinese counts more than 50,000 characters, most people learn around 8,000, while only about 2,000 are commonly used. Most writing in the PRC today uses a set of simplified characters adopted by the government in the 1950s. By contrast, Taiwan uses traditional characters.

All Chinese varieties use romanization systems to write the languages in the Latin alphabet. In 1956, the PRC designated *Hànyǔ Pīnyīn* as its official romanization system. Designed to help students learn thousands of characters quickly, today most Chinese use *pinyin* to input Chinese characters in computers and other electronic devices.

While Mandarin remains the PRC's primary language, the government acknowledges China's linguistic diversity, and in 2015, launched a 5-year project to record and protect non-Mandarin Chinese varieties and other minority languages. The government demonstrates a distinct preference for the Chinese varieties over other minority languages. Nevertheless, its support for non-Mandarin Chinese varieties is tempered by its belief that strong nationalistic unity has resulted in Mandarin being established as the common language.

**Mandarin:** There are three main Mandarin dialects. Standard Mandarin is based on a simplified and standardized version of the Beijing dialect. Since coming to power in 1949 (see *History and Myth*), the communist government has conducted large-



scale Mandarin language campaigns. These efforts have been successful, with fluency in Mandarin rising from around 50% of the population in 2000 to over 70% today. With over a billion speakers across the mainland alone,

Mandarin has the most native speakers of any language in the world. Further, it has the world's second highest number of total speakers after English.

Some aspects of Mandarin grammar – notably its lack of conjugated verbs, cases, genders, and articles – make the language straightforward to learn. However, Mandarin's use of tones to indicate meaning can make it difficult to speak correctly. When written in the Latin alphabet, each of the five Mandarin tones is marked by a symbol (see chart below). The sentence “*Mā mà mǎ ma?*” demonstrates how a change in tone alters the meaning of the basic sound “ma” and translates as “Did mother scold the horse?”

**Cantonese:** Cantonese, or Yue, is a Chinese variety spoken by some 73.8 million residents, primarily in the southern Guangxi and Guangdong, provinces but notably also in Hong Kong and

Macau (see *Political and Social Relations*). With its additional tones and distinct sound patterns, Cantonese more closely resembles ancient Chinese than other Chinese varieties.

Cantonese is widely spoken in southern cities such as Guangzhou, where radio and television often broadcast in the language. Though the PRC mandated Mandarin instruction in Hong Kong and Macau schools after the transfers of sovereignty in the late 1990s (see *History and Myth*), Cantonese remains widely spoken and used for administrative purposes. With the spread of digital communication, younger generations have created an unofficial Cantonese writing system using Arabic numerals, symbols, Chinese characters, and the Latin alphabet to convey the distinct sounds of modern Cantonese slang.

### Other Languages

While China is home to over 306 languages, the government

recognizes over 50 as national minority languages (see *Political and Social Relations*). The languages demonstrate significant diversity and represent several language families, notably Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Indo-European, Mongolic, Tai-Kadai, Tungusic, Turkic, and Sino-Tibetan. As of 2023, nearly 12 languages were considered “institutional”, approximately 129 were “stable”, and over 170 were “endangered”. Some 90% of China’s minority population speak 15 languages: Zhuang (ca. 20 million speakers), Uyghur (12 million), Tibetan (7 million), Miao or Hmong (11 million), Mongolian (6 million), Buyei (4 million), Yi or Nuosu (10 million), Korean (2 million), Dong, Hani, Bai, Kazakh, Dai, Li, and Yao.

Several languages – namely Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazakh, and Korean – have their own traditional scripts, which are commonly used in their respective regions. Further, the PRC government has supported the creation of writing systems for several previously-unwritten minority languages. Nevertheless, the United Nations estimates that up to 100 of China’s minority languages face extinction.

Example: 巴打 你食咗飯未呀？

Cantonese Internet Slang: baa1 daa2,  
nei5 sik6 zo2 faan6 mei6 aa3

Translation: Brother, have you had  
lunch yet?



While the Constitution grants all nationalities the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, the PRC increasingly infringes upon this right, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang. For example, in 2018, China jailed a Tibetan activist for advocating increased Tibetan language education in schools. In Xinjiang, the government has recently detained up to two million Turkic Muslim minorities (see *Political and Social Relations*) under the pretext of providing job training and Mandarin instruction.

Further, the authorities have discouraged or forbid the use of Turkic languages in certain contexts, even destroying signs in the Arabic script (used for the Uyghur and Kyrgyz languages). This effort is part of President Xi's overall push for the Sinicization of society (the imposition of Han Chinese language and culture) (see *Political and Social Relations*). Nevertheless, several minority languages – namely Zhuang, Mongolian, Kyrgyz, Uyghur, and Tibetan – are the official languages of government within their respective regions.



## English

English is popular in China due to its widespread use in international business. Some parents opt to send their children to English preschools to begin their language education as early as possible, though most Chinese children begin learning English in the third grade. Because English is a subject tested on the rigorous **gaokao** college entrance exam, (see *Learning and Knowledge*), families often hire tutors and send children to extracurricular English classes. Once at university, students must pass English courses to graduate.

## Communication Overview

Communicating effectively in China requires not only knowledge of Mandarin, but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal

communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.



### Communication Style

While communication patterns can vary due to China's ethnic diversity (see *Political and Social Relations*), they generally reflect Confucian ideals (see *Political and Social Relations*). For

example, Chinese tend to treat people of different ages, genders, and backgrounds with varying levels of respect and are typically deferential toward elders and people of high status. Generally friendly and polite, Chinese believe communications should be respectful.

Due to their emphasis on courtesy and a desire to save “face” or **miànzi** (avoid embarrassment to themselves or others), Chinese prefer indirect communication, especially in public. Consequently, they often talk around contentious issues or avoid them entirely. Further, they may avoid conveying bad news or keep negative opinions to themselves. Chinese may hesitate to offer frank opinions, providing more sincere replies to open-ended questions (not requiring a definitive answer) or to those asked within the context of a trust-based relationship. Typically, they refrain from using specific responses such as “yes” and “no,” preferring more ambiguous language, such as “maybe.”

### Greetings

Chinese do not traditionally shake hands; preferring to nod, lower their eyes, or perform a slight bow. Some of them have adopted the handshake for use in business settings or with foreign nationals, typically favoring gentle handshakes to firm. Chinese also use a variety of informal verbal greetings, such as **chī bǎo le ma?** (“have you eaten?”), though most greetings refer to the time of day, such as **zǎo!** (“morning!”). Foreign nationals

should use the more formal greeting *nǐ hǎo* (“you good”). When Chinese meet in professional contexts, they typically exchange business cards or *míngpiàn*. Foreign nationals should exchange *míngpiàn* the Chinese way by using both hands, bowing slightly, and looking at the received card briefly to demonstrate interest and respect.

### Names

Chinese names typically comprise a one-syllable family name (surname/last name) followed by a given or personal name, often consisting of two syllables. When romanized, the two-syllable personal name can be written as two hyphenated syllables, two separate words, or one word. For example, PRC President Xi Jinping’s personal name could also be written as Jin Ping or Jin-ping. Some Chinese follow the naming practice of using the first part of the personal name as a generational marker: this first syllable is the same for all family members of a given generation.



Though most children assume their father’s last name, few married women take their husband’s last name. Unrelated adults typically address each other by full name, or they combine the last name with a title (see below). Among friends and family, Chinese frequently use nicknames.

### Forms of Address

Because Chinese value courtesy and are mindful of status, most use formal forms of address. In business contexts, Chinese often use the family name followed by Mr. (*xiānshēng*), Mrs. (*tàitai*), or Miss (*nǚshì*) or occupational title such as *lǎoshī* (teacher). Within the family, Chinese use labels that specify the relationship such as “maternal grandmother” (*wàipó*) or “paternal grandmother” (*zǔmǔ*).

### Conversational Topics

After initial greetings, Chinese typically engage in conversation about work and the wellbeing of family members. They often discuss money, other financial topics, marriage, and

family planning and do not consider questions about these subjects rude. Foreign nationals should feel free to discuss these and other topics such as travel, food, and positive observations about China. They should avoid discussing sensitive subjects; particularly politics or religion, current events in Xinjiang and Tibet, and sensitive historical topics like Taiwan and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (see *History and Myth*).



## Gestures

Chinese often use gestures to emphasize or replace spoken words, such as using a finger to write out a Chinese character in the air as a way of complementing their speech. To beckon, Chinese wave towards

the ground with their palms facing down. To summon a colleague or superior, Chinese typically use eye contact and a slight bow. To indicate “no”, they shake a hand from side-to-side with a forward-facing palm. To refer to himself, a Chinese points at his nose. Foreign nationals should avoid beckoning with their palms facing up and showing the soles of their feet while sitting, as Chinese consider both gestures rude. They should also avoid pointing with the index finger and instead use an open hand.

## Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

## The Five Mandarin Tones

Tone	Description	Hànyǔ Pīnyīn Example
1st	“high”	ā
2nd	“rising”	á
3rd	“falling-rising”	ǎ
4th	“falling”	à
5th	neutral (no accent)	a

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Mandarin (Hànyǔ Pīnyīn)	Mandarin (Simplified Characters)
Hello	Nǐ hǎo	你好
How are you?	Nǐ hǎo ma?	你好吗?
I'm fine	Wǒ hěn hǎo	我很好
Yes	Shì	是
No	Bùshì	不是
Please	Qǐng	请
Thank you	Xiè Xiè	谢谢
You are welcome	Bùkèqì	不客气
Sorry/ Excuse me	Duìbùqǐ	对不起
I understand	Wǒ tīngdédong	我听得懂
I don't understand	Wǒ tīngbùdong	我听不懂
Please say that again	Qǐng zàishuō yíci	请再说一次
Goodbye	Zài jiàn	再见
What does this mean ...?	Zhè shì shénme yìsi?	这是什么意思?
Can you speak English?	Nǐ huì shuō yīngyǔ ma?	你会说英语吗?
Where is (the) ...?	...zài nǎlǐ?	...在哪里?
How?	Zěnmeyàng?	怎么?
Who?	Shéi?	谁?
When?	Shénme shíhòu?	什么时候?
Which?	Nǎge?	那个?
What is your name?	Nǐ jiào shénme míngzì?	你叫什么名字?
How much does it cost?	Duō shao qián?	多少钱?
Call a doctor!	Qǐng jiào yīshēng!	话叫医生!
I'm lost	Wǒ mílùle	我迷路了

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 98.1%
- Male: 99.6%
- Female: 96.6% (2024 est.)

### Early History of Education

Across 1,000 years of imperial rule, the **keju** or civil service examination served as the foundation of the Chinese educational system. Formally established during the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD) (see *History and Myth*), the exam standardized merit-based recruitment into an advanced civil bureaucracy, originating in the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC) (see *History and Myth*). Seeking social prestige and appointment to government positions, male students studied Confucian classics for years to prepare for the examination.

Depending on scores, students qualified for three increasingly competitive degrees: **xiuca** (“cultivated talent”), **mingjing** (“understanding the classics”) or **juren** (“recommended



man”), and **jinsi** (“advanced scholar”). Degree levels corresponded to appointment as a local, provincial, or imperial official, with **jinsi** the most prestigious title. Because most men, regardless of class, could take the civil service exam, some scholars consider it an early example of merit-based social mobility, though women were denied these educational opportunities. While many men failed the rigorous exam, the years of preparatory study led to a small literate population.

To help students prepare for the test, officials during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) (see *History and Myth*) established a network of public village schools. Other options included semi-private schools or **shuyuan**, where famous scholars taught students

from across East Asia. The Tang also established universities specializing in law, traditional medicine, and calligraphy. Officials in the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) (see *History and Myth*) suspended but later restored the civil service exam and encouraged the study of the Mongolian language. Private schools became increasingly popular during this period and into the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) (see *History and Myth*). Though the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) (see *History and Myth*) maintained the civil service exam, the empire established separate schools for the ruling Manchu elite. After the Taiping Rebellion's failed attempt to topple the Qing (see *History and Myth*), a series of imperial reforms restructured the education system, notably also permitting more Christian missionaries to establish schools (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

### Early 20th Century Education

At the turn of the century, the Qing prioritized the modernization of China's education system, adding new subjects such as science, technology, and politics into curricula alongside



classical Chinese. Seen as a relic of the past, the civil service exam was abolished in 1905. By 1911, the Chinese system mirrored that of contemporary US, with 8 years of primary education, 4 years of secondary education, and 4 years of university

study for an undergraduate degree. Schools for female students also became increasingly common.

**Education under the Nationalists:** After assuming power in 1928 (see *History and Myth*), the Nationalist government further centralized the education system. Under the Nationalists, both public and private schools became accountable to new standardized achievement benchmarks and teaching procedures. Additionally, the Nationalist government strongly encouraged students to pursue vocational education or other “practical studies” such as agriculture, engineering, medicine, and technology.

## Education in the People's Republic of China (PRC)

Following the 1949 establishment of the PRC (see *History and Myth*), Mao Zedong instituted nationwide Mandarin language campaigns (see *Language and Communication*) to reduce high illiteracy rates, particularly among rural residents. Modeling schools on the Soviet system, educational officials also integrated Chinese Communist Party ideology and Russian language studies into curricula. The PRC also established “spare-time” schools for workers to focus on communist teachings.

During the violence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) (see *History and Myth*), Mao Zedong sent millions of students and intellectuals to rural “reeducation” camps to perform hard labor. Other students joined the Red Guard, a militant group responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Chinese – notably teachers, professors, and academics deemed enemies of the revolution (see *History and Myth*).



After Mao Zedong's 1976 death, the PRC's leadership sought to heal society from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Authorities reemphasized respect for teachers and the value of diligent study, while establishing strong control over the educational system. All-in-all, the PRC's efforts were successful, with literacy increasing from 20% in 1950 to 96% by 2015.

## Modern Education System

Today, the PRC's Ministry of Education (MOE) oversees schools in mainland China and collaborates with educational authorities in the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau. All students are entitled to 9 years of free, compulsory education, with Mandarin the official language of instruction. Chinese students tend to demonstrate excellent scholastic achievement: while testing in mainland China for a 2018 assessment of 79 countries, they performed well, ranking first in reading, math, and science compared to 11th, 16th, and 29th for the US. Hong Kong and Macau were tested separately and also placed above



the US. Nevertheless, some observers criticize the system's focus on memorization over critical-thinking and creativity and the unhealthy competitive environment created by its emphasis on exam results. Critics also point to the notable differences in urban versus rural educational opportunities.



The government announced a ban on all foreign teaching materials in public primary and secondary schools in 2020, emphasizing that all content must reflect communist principles and “Chinese style.”

This move aligns with President Xi's program of assuring Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence across all parts of society (see *Political and Social Relations* and *Religion and Spirituality*).

**Pre-Primary:** The MOE is striving to provide universal non-compulsory pre-primary education for children aged 3-5. As of 2021, some 93% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled, compared to 50% in 2009.

**Primary:** Primary education is compulsory and consists of 6 years starting at age 6. The standard curriculum includes math, Mandarin, morality, physical education, and art. Upper grades also offer foreign language and technology, community service, or social research. The MOE ordered primary schools to add “fun and games” to curricula in 2018 to offset the seriousness of preparing for secondary and post-secondary entrance exams. As of 2024, primary education enrollment was near universal.

**Secondary:** Secondary education comprises 3-4 years of compulsory junior secondary school (ages 12-15) and 3 years of optional senior secondary school (ages 15-18). Junior secondary subjects include Mandarin, mathematics, morality, science, history, physical education, art, foreign language, and a comprehensive practical activity. In 2023, some 92% of junior secondary students advanced to senior secondary school.

Senior secondary offerings comprise academic and vocational options at five types of schools – general, technical or specialized, adult, vocational, and “crafts” – with admission determined by entrance exam scores. Because senior secondary schools charge tuition, attendance rates are significantly lower in China’s poorer rural regions.

**Post-Secondary:** This educational system is extensive and comprises hundreds of public universities and technical colleges, all overseen by the CCP. Since the early 2000s, the number of students pursuing post-secondary education has increased significantly. Further, more women than men now pursue higher education. Some students attend public universities tuition-free, under the condition that they accept a government-selected job upon graduation. Since 2012, Chinese universities also offer scholarships to students from developing nations. China also remains the largest supplier of international students to foreign institutions, with nearly 1 million Chinese students studying abroad in 2023.



As part of his broader efforts to eliminate dissent, President Xi (see *History and Myth* and *Political and Social Relations*) has initiated a program to cement the CCP’s control of higher education. Accordingly, some institutions have fired dissident professors, banned certain Western textbooks, and opened research centers devoted to “Xi Jinping Thought” (see *Political and Social Relations*). Some universities have installed cameras in classrooms or appointed student informers to monitor professors’ activities and report any “incorrect” political views to the communist authorities.

**Gaokao:** China’s rigorous 3-day college entrance exam, the *gaokao*, tests Chinese, mathematics, and English and determines placement at all public universities. During the testing period, police divert traffic from testing centers and enforce strict noise restrictions.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Most Chinese devote long hours to work and school, valuing punctuality and efficient time management. They typically prioritize cultivating and maintaining relationships as the foundation of society.

### Time and Work

China's work week runs from Monday-Friday, with hours varying by establishment type. Most banks, government offices, other workplaces, and bureaus open from 9am-5pm, though some may close for 2 hours in the afternoon. Some government offices and banks also open for limited hours on weekends.



Most post offices open from 9-5pm, 7 days weekly. Most shops open from 10am-10pm, 7 days weekly except on major holidays. Some shops close earlier during the winter months. Restaurants are usually open for lunch and dinner from 10am-11pm, though some may close for a few hours in the late afternoon before dinner service.

**Working Environment:** While China's 1994 labor law



mandates a 44-hour work week with paid overtime, most employers ignore such restrictions without consequence. Further, China's white-collar firms tend to view an employee's ability to work flexible hours and put in

substantial overtime as proof of loyalty, often resulting in cases of work overload and a general lack of work-life balance.

For example, many Chinese professionals work the “9-9-6” schedule or 9am-9pm, 6 days a week. Perhaps for this reason, midday naps among Chinese professionals are common, and some employers provide a designated napping room for employees.

China’s “floating population,” the hundreds of millions of rural residents, who migrate to take low-wage urban manufacturing jobs, sometimes experience dangerous working conditions and 18-hour days. Many also earn below the legal minimum wage. While conditions in many factories have improved recently, international organizations continue to condemn these and other labor violations.

### **National Holidays**

- January 1: New Year’s Day
- April 4: Tomb Sweeping Day
- May 1: Labor Day
- October 1-7: Golden Week (a week-long holiday that incorporates National Day)

### **Lunar Holidays (dates vary from year to year)**

- Chinese Lunar New Year
- Dragon Boat Festival
- Mid-Autumn (Moon) Festival

Any holiday falling on a weekend is observed on the following Monday. If a holiday falls on a Tuesday or Thursday, it is typically adjusted to provide an extended weekend.

**Time Zone:** China adheres to China Standard Time (CST), which is 8 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time and 13 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. China does not observe daylight savings time. Some Uyghur communities in Xinjiang observe an unofficial time zone called “Xinjiang Time” that lags 2 hours behind CST.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, most businesses, schools, and government offices follow the Western (Gregorian) calendar, typically recording the year first, followed by the month and day. By contrast, Chinese use the lunar calendar to mark important holidays. Lunar cycles determine each month, which results in 11 fewer days per year than the Western calendar. Leap months are added approximately every third year to keep the lunar calendar synchronized with the seasons. Life events such as weddings and funerals are often timed to coincide with favorable times on the lunar calendar.

### Time and Business

The Chinese approach to forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships known as **guanxi** (“connections/relationships”) governs much of business culture. Accordingly, Chinese prefer



to establish personal relationships before doing business, typically through restaurant meals, afternoon teas, gift exchanges, and conversations about non-business topics (see *Language and Communication*).

Chinese value punctuality, hard work, and efficiency in the workplace. Businesses are typically hierarchical in structure, with formal titles and dress expected. Many businesspeople prefer to be addressed by their formal position title and name, for example, “Deputy Director Wang” or “Manager Liu.” To save face, or **mianzi**, (see *Language and Communication*) Chinese generally avoid public demonstrations of anger or criticism. As a result, colleagues resolve workplace disputes and disagreements sensitively in private.

### Personal Space

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the nature of the relationship. In social settings, Chinese tend to stand closer than Americans when interacting, although they tend to maintain slightly more distance with strangers or

colleagues. Space while waiting in line and passengers on public transportation is much closer. In congested public spaces, pedestrians may push and elbow, behavior which is socially acceptable and does not require an apology.

**Touch:** Although social touching and displays of affection between family and close friends are common, foreign nationals should allow Chinese to initiate contact. Close friends of the same gender may hold hands or link arms to demonstrate their deep platonic bond.

**Eye Contact:** Chinese typically maintain some eye contact during conversations, although staring could be interpreted as aggressive. Traditionally, Chinese avert their gaze when conversing with people senior in age or status as a sign of respect, though the custom is less common today.

### Photographs

While Chinese are typically open to picture-taking, foreign nationals should ask permission before doing so. Military installations, temples, and mosques may prohibit photography. Additionally, photography is often discouraged at archaeological sites, museums, bridges, and airports.

### Driving

As in the US, mainland Chinese drive on the right side of the road. By contrast, left-hand driving is the norm in the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau. Some drivers have aggressive habits

of disregarding red lights and traffic laws. Some buses and cars lack functional seatbelts. Traffic is usually heavy in China's densely populated cities, and pedestrians should exercise caution when crossing busy streets. In 2021, China's rate of traffic-related deaths was 17 per 100,000 people, significantly higher than in the US (14).



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

China's traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the nation's imperial history, communist revolution, and modern global influences.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Most of the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) national minorities (see *Political and Social Relations*) have their own traditional clothing styles. Designs exhibit significant diversity.

While Chinese clothing styles varied across centuries and dynasties, the dress of the late Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) (see *History and*



*Myth*) is often considered characteristic of traditional clothing. During this period, both women and men wore loose fitting tunics and trousers. Over these, gender-specific garments were layered, such as the women's long skirt and **ao** (loose robe) and men's **pao** or "scholar's gown," a long shift with flowing sleeves. The **magua** or "riding jacket" buttoned in the front and rested at the waist.

Because fashion dictated small feet for women, girls' feet were bound tightly to stunt growth and mold them into a desirable shape. The practice severely limited women's mobility but remained widespread until the early 20th century. Cotton and silk were the most common materials for both shoes and clothing, and colorful, intricate embroidery often added flair.

Today, traditional clothing is usually reserved for performances and other special occasions. An exception includes members of the **Hanfu** or "Han clothing" movement. These were mostly

young members of the Han Chinese majority (see *Political and Social Relations*), who rejected Qing Dynasty traditional clothing because of its foreign, Manchu origins (see *History and Myth*).



Instead, they prefer clothing from the Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties, when Han Chinese ruled the region.

Most participants view the practice as a hobby but also as a way to signify their pride in their Han Chinese identity.

This movement receives some governmental support because it aligns with President Xi's call for the promotion of traditional Han Chinese values.

**The Mao Suit:** During the rule of Mao Zedong after the 1949 PRC's founding (see *History and Myth*), the **Zhongshanzhuang** or "Mao Suit" became popular. Initially introduced by Sun Yat-Sen (see *History and Myth*), the Chinese Communist Party later adopted the baggy, high-collared suit as a symbol of uniformity, rejecting both Western fashion and the ostentatious dress of the Qing Dynasty.

Often in drab neutral colors with five buttons and four front pockets, the suit was popular among both men and women during the Cultural



Revolution (see *History and Myth*) as an outward statement against Western habits and capitalism and for communism. The Mao Suit became less popular after the 1976 death of its namesake, though it has recently experienced a revival and is sometimes worn by government officials at ceremonial occasions.



**Modern:** Today, Chinese commonly wear Western-style clothing. Young people's preferences for modern styles and the recent rise of China's middle-class support a vibrant fashion industry. In warmer climates, attire is often quite casual, with some men reclining outside in their undergarments. At work, most Chinese dress formally. Men typically wear suits and ties, and women wear high heels and dresses, skirts, or pantsuits.

### Recreation and Leisure

Popular leisure activities include watching TV, going to the cinema, shopping, singing karaoke, and sharing meals with friends and family. Since the early 2000s, increasing numbers of Chinese also travel abroad. Popular destinations include Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, the US, and Europe.

**Holidays and Festivals:** Chinese celebrate several holidays and regional and national festivals that mark the change of seasons, honor deceased ancestors, or celebrate important historical events or cultural figures. The most important holiday is Chinese Lunar New Year, which involves several days of family gatherings, gift-giving, and feasting. Celebrating the PRC's founding, National Day occurs during "Golden Week," a week-long holiday with parades and fireworks.

Other noteworthy festivals include the Dragon Boat Festival, which commemorates the death of poet Qu Yuan, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Tomb Sweeping Holiday (see *Family and Kinship*).



### Sports and Games

Chinese observe or participate in an array of sports, notably soccer, basketball, and tennis. Other racquet-based sports such as table tennis and badminton, are also common. **Tai chi** and **qigong** are both meditative martial arts known for slow movements and often performed by the elderly in parks.

**Prominent Chinese Athletes:** Li Na became Asia's first grand slam singles tennis champion in 2011, while former Houston Rockets forward and Chinese national player Yao Ming entered the NBA Hall of Fame in 2016.

**Olympics:** After withdrawing from the 1956 Games after the Olympic Committee recognized Taiwan over the PRC, China resumed its Olympics participation in 1980 and currently holds second place for total medals won after the US. China also holds the record for total gold medals earned in table tennis and badminton, but athletes also excel in diving and gymnastics. Beijing held the Summer and Winter Olympic Games in 2008 and 2022.



**Games:** Many Chinese enjoy **mahjong**, a tile-based strategy game similar to dominos. Another popular game is **wéiqí**, more commonly known in the West by the Japanese name **Go**. This game involves placing black and white chips onto a grid board, while trying to capture an opponent's pieces.



### Music

Traditionally, music was an integral part of daily living and still accompanies theatrical performances, festivals, and rituals such as weddings and funerals (see *Family and Kinship*). Historically, Chinese believed the failure to maintain “absolute pitch” could lead to natural disasters and the collapse of society.

Accordingly, China has a rich musical tradition with unique elements such as a five-tone scale (in contrast to the seven-tone Western scale) and lack of harmony. The varying timbres of traditional music (distinctive tones of particular musical instruments) of an ensemble create a uniquely Chinese sound.

**Traditional:** Historically, musicians transmitted songs and techniques from generation-to-generation, conveying stories and histories to the illiterate population. Common traditional instruments include gongs, the *dizi* (horizontal flute), *qin* (seven-stringed zither), *sheng* (bamboo mouth organ), *suona* (a trumpet-like bamboo horn), *erhu* (two-stringed fiddle), and *pipa* (four-stringed lute).

**Modern:** Under Mao Zedong (see *History and Myth*), traditional folk song lyrics were rewritten to glorify communist ideals, which government-funded musical troupes performed across the country. Today, Chinese audiences generally prefer pop and rock music, and international musicians attract a widespread following. Cui Jian, considered the father of Chinese rock music, recorded popular rock hits incorporating traditional Chinese instruments starting in the 1980-90s. Despite never actually performing a show in China, Taiwanese pop star Teresa Teng became popular during the 1970-80s and remains beloved by Chinese audiences today.

## Theater and Dance

**China Opera:** *Xiqǔ* or traditional Chinese opera is a form of musical drama featuring actors in elaborate costumes and makeup. Both makeup and costumes typically have symbolic meanings. For example, a dishonest character may wear white, while a courageous character often wears red. Sets are usually basic, and actors use a few props and stylized gestures and movements to convey information about action and setting. A drummer-conductor leads musicians seated on both sides of the stage to support the performers and provide percussion and musical accents that emphasize their movement and reveal emotions and plot developments.



For centuries, opera served as popular entertainment for China's historically large illiterate population. Because the primarily oral opera tradition allowed scripts and storylines to evolve over time,

the themes and language of centuries-old operas remain accessible to modern Chinese audiences. Today, China is home to many different regional troupes with their own histories and traditions.

**Dance:** Traditional dances are often performed in temples or streets during national and regional holidays. Some dances are performed in large papier-mâché animal costumes. For example, during the lion dance, commonly seen in southeastern China, two dancers share a lion costume and move to a fast drum beat. The dragon dance requires 7-25 dancers twirling and spinning to bring a dragon to life. Military dance troupes also perform **yangge**, a genre of folk dance popular in China's North, among other dances.



### Cinema

Despite a thriving film scene in the decades before World War II, subsequent conflict and the 1949 establishment of the

PRC hindered further growth of the film industry. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) (see *History and Myth*), just eight films were produced. Yet by the late 1980s, Chinese films began to garner international attention, and directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige received international awards for their films *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Farewell my Concubine* (1993), respectively.

Hong Kong film studios are known for popular martial arts films that launched the careers of action stars like Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li. Despite the popularity of US films, the government maintains a strict quota on the number of foreign films screened each year, while censoring them for content deemed objectionable. Recently, some US film studios have partnered with Chinese counterparts to produce films to circumvent these quotas.

### Literature

Until the early 20th century, **wenyan** (written classical Chinese), dominated literature production. Because **wenyan** significantly

differed from spoken Chinese forms, only scholars could read the classical Confucian works that formed the basis of formal education for centuries (see *Learning and Knowledge*). During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) (see *History and Myth*), entertaining novels written in the semi-vernacular like *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Mansions* gained popularity, but not until Lu Xun's pioneering short story "Diary of a Madman" in 1918 did literature written in **baihu** (vernacular or everyday speech) become widespread.

Two Chinese writers have won the Nobel Prize for Literature: Gao Xingjian from exile in France in 2000 and Mo Yan in 2012. The communist authorities censor literature, banning some authors entirely (like Nobel-winner Gao Xingjian), removing social media references to certain works or altering a book's content before allowing its sale. The government also forbids the sale of any work by 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner and PRC critic/pro-democracy activist Liu Xiaobo, who died while in Chinese custody in 2017.

### Arts and Crafts

China has a rich history of arts and crafts. The term "Chinaware" or "China" originated from the country's international reputation for fine porcelain. Jingdezhen, the ancient ceramics capital, remains a popular destination for art collectors. Painting and calligraphy (the artistic rendering of written language with brushes and ink) also have deep roots in traditional Chinese art. Artists use watercolors to depict landscapes or stylized Chinese characters on paper or silk. Other traditional art forms include woodblock prints, jade or lacquer figurines, and traditional clothing and masks.



Governmental authorities occasionally censor artists. For example, a prominent arts center in Beijing was forced to cancel an exhibition of art with social and historical themes in 2019, an example of the government's overall effort to control all aspects of Chinese society (see *History and Myth*).

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Chinese often gather for meals to celebrate holidays and other special occasions. While the traditional Chinese diet centers on meat and rice, cuisine varies by region – from bold, spicy dishes in southern and central China to sweet, lighter fare in the East and simple, salty meals in the North.

### Dining Customs

Most Chinese eat three daily meals, and the family usually dines together. Dinner is typically the largest meal, while breakfast and lunch are often simpler. Informal meals typically consist of several dishes served simultaneously, while formal meals celebrating special occasions may feature up to 20 separate courses. Diners are traditionally seated according to age or seniority and may share numerous toasts.



Chinese typically eat by using chopsticks (*kuàizi*) to pick up small morsels of food from communal bowls, placing the portion directly in their mouths or in small, individual rice bowls held close to their faces. When eating noodles, Chinese consider slurping an acceptable practice. While Chinese use wide, flat-bottomed spoons to consume soup, they rarely use forks and knives. Chinese never use chopsticks to point or leave them lodged vertically in food. Instead, during pauses to speak or drink, Chinese rest their chopsticks horizontally on their bowls or on a designated chopstick rest.

### Diet

While cuisine varies by region, grains feature at almost every meal and are cooked plain, formed into noodles, or used to make dumpling wrappers or buns. Rice is the most common staple grain in the South while wheat is more common in the North. Pork is the most popular protein throughout the country,

although poultry and seafood are also common. In some areas, residents consume dog, cat, snake, or other wildlife. Tofu (bean curd), bok choy (a type of cabbage) spinach, broccoli, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, celery, and carrots feature in many dishes.



Observant Muslims (see *Religion and Spirituality*) consume neither pork nor alcohol and observe particular rules of animal

slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law. Governmental authorities in some predominantly Muslim regions have stopped distributing *halal* certificates for restaurants and food suppliers, part of a broader campaign of repression of China's Muslim population (see *Religion and Spirituality, Language and Communication, and Political and Social Relations*).

### Meals and Popular Dishes

Chinese breakfast traditionally includes noodles, steamed buns, **báizhōu** (rice porridge served plain or with vegetables and meat), and **youtiao** (fried dough sticks) alongside soy milk. In Guangdong and Hong Kong, residents prefer **yīn chá**, a more substantial breakfast of a variety of sweet and savory dishes such as **shāomài** (steamed dumplings filled with pork and shrimp) and **chāshāo bāo** (steamed buns filled with barbecued pork), alongside tea.

Lunch and dinner typically feature similar dishes, which may include steamed white rice mixed with vegetables and meat; soups featuring delicate, clear broths made from chicken, pork, or fish stock; or noodle dishes sautéed with meat or seafood, fresh herbs, and seasonal vegetables. Chinese commonly eat snacks (**xiǎochī**) throughout the day, often purchased at street markets. Typical snacks include **jiǎozi** (steamed dumplings) and **cōngyóubǐng** (pan-fried scallion pancakes).

Popular dishes include **xiǎolóngbāo** (savory soup dumplings popular in Shanghai); **Běijīng kǎo yā** or Peking Duck (roasted duck served with various vegetables and sauces); **tángcùyú** (crispy, fried fish served with a sweet and sour sauce); and **chǎomiàn** (stir-fried noodles with meat, onions, and celery). Chinese complement their dishes with many different fragrant sauces such as soy sauce, oyster sauce, and sesame oil. For dessert, Chinese prefer **dàntǎ** (egg tarts) and a variety of fruits such as bananas, pineapples, oranges, and lychees. They reserve many sweet treats, such as mooncakes (round pastries filled with a sweet paste), for special occasions and certain holidays.

### Beverages

Chinese drink tea throughout the day. It may be served hot or cold but typically without milk or sugar. Common varieties include oolong (a partially fermented black tea), green, and jasmine (a combination of green tea and flowers), among others. A particularly popular tea-based beverage is Taiwanese “bubble milk tea” (**bōbà nǎichá**) or “pearl milk tea,” made from blending cold black tea with milk, sugar, and various flavorings and adding small, chewy balls of tapioca. Fresh juices from fruits such as lychee (a small rounded fruit with sweet white scented flesh), plum, apple, pear, and pineapple are also popular. Alcoholic beverages include **báijiǔ** (a popular liquor distilled from sorghum and rice), beer, and wine.

### Eating Out

Chinese eat out regularly, with restaurant visits frequently lasting hours, particularly on special occasions when diners often enjoy communal dishes from a large turntable. Restaurants range from upscale establishments offering international cuisines to inexpensive, casual eateries specializing in regional dishes. In urban areas, street vendors sell a range of food items from full meals to simple snacks and are often open late into the night. While tipping is relatively uncommon in China, some upscale restaurants may add a small service charge to the bill.





## Health Overview

The Chinese population's overall health has improved significantly in recent decades. Between 1970-2023, Chinese life expectancy at birth jumped from 59 to 78 years, on par with the regional average and near that of the US (80). In 2023, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) was 5 deaths per 1,000 live births, lower than the regional average (11) and lower than the US rate (6). Despite these gains, Chinese continue to suffer from high rates of non-communicable diseases, and an inadequate healthcare infrastructure significantly hinders access to preventative care and medical treatment.

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of knowledge, practices, and skills used to protect or restore health derived from the beliefs, experiences, and theories of the native population. Traditional medicine has a rich history in China and centers on using non-surgical methods to identify and treat the basic causes of illness.



For over 2,000 years, Chinese have used Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to treat both minor ailments like

toothaches, digestive problems, and colds and major illnesses such as cancer, respiratory diseases, and diabetes. Common treatments include acupuncture (a process in which a practitioner inserts very thin needles into a patient's skin); massage; herbal remedies; ingestion of mixtures of plant and animal products; dietary therapy; meditative exercises; cupping (the process of applying suction cups to draw blood and pathogens to the skin's surface); and moxibustion (a process in which a practitioner burns or massages herbs into acupuncture points). Many Chinese integrate traditional therapies into modern treatments, while others rely primarily on TCM.

Today, China is home to almost 4,000 TCM hospitals and 43,000 clinics. The government actively promotes TCM, passing legislation in 2017 to regulate licensing of TCM doctors and

encourage healthcare facilities to develop TCM centers. Further, the government supports the spread of traditional medicine internationally, establishing TCM centers in countries participating in its Belt and Road Initiative (see *Economics and Resources*).

### Modern Healthcare System

Since 2009, the Chinese government has prioritized healthcare reform, quadrupling health expenditures between 2008-17. By 2015, China had almost universal healthcare coverage, with some 95% of Chinese participating in one of three basic public healthcare plans. In 2016, the government announced the “Healthy China 2030” initiative to improve innovations in health and ensure equal access to medical services. Nevertheless, health crises have exposed flaws in the country’s healthcare system. For example, in 2018, hundreds of thousands of Chinese children were injected with faulty vaccines, exposing corruption within China’s booming pharmaceutical industry.



China’s healthcare system depends on high-level hospitals, which accounted for less than 4% of medical institutions but handled 45% of all outpatient visits in 2023. Consequently, both general and specialty departments in large urban hospitals tend to be overcrowded, forcing patients to wait for extended periods before receiving care. Moreover, a shortage of trained and qualified medical personnel and a high volume of patients prompt many doctors to shorten patient visits, limiting their effectiveness. Experts predict China’s rapidly aging population (see *Family and Kinship*) and the associated need for specialty services, treatment of chronic diseases, and nursing care will further strain the healthcare system.

The medical infrastructure is less robust in rural areas, where clinics are often small, ill-equipped, and operate above capacity. Consequently, residents of remote regions are often forced to travel long distances and incur significant costs to receive proper

care. While private hospitals and “VIP” wards in public hospitals address gaps in healthcare service and generally offer exceptional care, they are too expensive for many residents.

### Health Challenges

As is common in most developed countries, the leading causes of death and illness in China are chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases, which accounted for some 89% of all deaths in 2020. The primary causes of death in 2020 were cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and respiratory diseases. By contrast, rates of communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis and hepatitis, have fallen in recent years, comprising 4% of all deaths in 2020. Meanwhile, preventable “external causes” such

as accidents, suicides, and drug overdoses, accounted for 7% of all deaths that year.



Various factors have contributed to the rise of non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases. An increasingly sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy eating habits have

led to an increase in obesity over the last few decades, with 1 of every 10 Chinese children overweight or obese in 2023, up from 1 in 20 in 1995. Further, China is the world’s largest consumer of tobacco, with over 26% of the adult population smoking regularly. Smoking and widespread air pollution (see *Political and Social Relations*) have resulted in an increased prevalence of respiratory diseases.

In late 2019, Wuhan was the site of an outbreak of COVID-19, an acute respiratory disease caused by a coronavirus. Although China largely contained the internal spread of the disease, it rapidly spread across the world in 2020. Thereafter, China maintained a strict zero-COVID policy with strict reporting and quarantine procedures in effect until late 2022, when the government began lifting the policy after widespread protests. As of April 2025, the World Health Organization has confirmed nearly 99.3 million cases and over 122,398 deaths, though experts expect these figures to rise due to the lifting of the zero-COVID restrictions.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, most Chinese subsisted in a rural agrarian economy, growing rice and other agricultural products primarily for domestic consumption. Trade networks expanded beginning in the Han Dynasty era, when silk, spices, and other goods were exchanged along the Silk Road (see *History and Myth*). By some reports, the Chinese economy was the world's largest by the 17th century. Nevertheless, decades of turmoil (see *History and Myth*) subsequently slowed the country's economic growth, and imperial governments struggled to meet the needs of the growing population.

The introduction of communist rule in 1949 (see *History and Myth*) brought significant economic changes, primarily through a series of 5-year plans. During the first plan, the PRC adopted the Soviet (USSR) economic model, prioritizing state ownership of industry, agricultural collectivization, and centralized economic planning. By 1956, no privately-owned firms remained,

industrial production was increasing by almost 20% annually, and the services sector was practically nonexistent.



Facing a growing imbalance between the agricultural and industrial sectors and unsatisfied with the economy's

performance, PRC leadership initiated the Great Leap Forward in 1958 (see *History and Myth*). Besides abolishing private property and organizing Chinese workers into large-scale communes, the plan set unrealistic goals for both farm and industrial production. By 1962, the country was experiencing huge declines in industrial and agricultural output, primarily due to overburdened resources and ineffectively managed natural disasters. Consequently, millions of Chinese died of starvation, and standards of living decreased significantly.

In 1978, the PRC began to transition away from a centrally-planned economy as part of Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up" policies (see *History and Myth*). For example, the government abolished the commune system and introduced capitalist market reforms. With legalized foreign investment, an export-oriented growth strategy, and a large, cheap labor force, China's economy prospered and began to integrate into global trade networks.



The formation of Special Economic Zones (see below) and the country's involvement in the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and later the World Trade Organization furthered economic liberalization and strengthened trade ties with other nations. Despite the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 and the global financial crisis of 2008-09, the PRC's yearly GDP growth rates averaged 10% between 1978-2010.

Today, the PRC has the world's second largest economy in terms of GDP, trailing only the US. While the government retains a dominant role in the economy, even owning 31% of the manufacturing industry, the private sector accounts for two-thirds of the country's growth. Standards of living have increased significantly, and hundreds of millions of Chinese have been lifted out of poverty.

The PRC's 13th 5-Year plan (2016-2020) aimed to eradicate rural poverty, equalize access to public services, and increase domestic consumption. Other goals included improving productivity by prioritizing automation and creating an educated labor force, since less than 20% of the workforce had completed post-secondary education in 2020. Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to expand the economy by building infrastructure abroad in order to link other countries to the Chinese market. As of 2023, the PRC had allocated some \$1 trillion for BRI projects and signed BRI agreements with over 150 countries.

In the decade preceding the pandemic, the PRC's economy experienced an average growth rate of nearly 8% annually. However, the government's strict "zero COVID" strategy hindered the economy with recurrent quarantines, regional lockdowns, and immense spending to pay for widespread testing. In 2024, the PRC reported a growth in GDP of 4.8%, an increase from 2.9% in 2022 slightly under the targeted rate of 5%. The real estate sector, which contributes significantly to the country's GDP, is ailing. Property sales fell by 8.5% in 2023 and investment in the sector fell by 9.6%.

Moreover, China's extremely low birth rate (see *Family and Kinship* and p. 4 of *Sex and Gender*), coupled with a rapidly aging and under-vaccinated population, is expected to result in a labor shortage in the future in addition to the associated healthcare challenges (see *Sustenance and Health*). Other economic challenges include corruption and environmental degradation.

## Services

Accounting for 54% of GDP and 46% of employment in 2023, the services sector is the largest component of China's economy. Notable subsectors include retail and commercial sales, transport, tourism, and financial services.



**Tourism:** Closed to most visitors between 1949-74, the PRC is the world's fourth most popular tourist destination today. In 2022, travel and tourism accounted for 3% of GDP and 8% of employment. Over 80% of tourists arriving in mainland

China came from Hong Kong, Macau, and Burma with much of the remainder from South Korea and Vietnam. Major attractions include the Great Wall, Beijing's Forbidden City (see *History and Myth*), and the Terracotta Army in Xi'an (see *History and Myth*).

**Special Economic Zones (SEZ):** Originally created as part of Deng Xiaoping's reforms (see *History and Myth*), SEZs operate with more flexibility under free market-oriented economic policies and offer tax and other incentives to attract foreign

investment. They have been notably successful in expanding industries, creating boomtowns in many areas. As of 2022, half the world's SEZs were located in the PRC.

## Industry

The industrial sector consists of manufacturing, mining, and construction and is the economy's second largest component, comprising about 38% of GDP and 32% of employment in 2024.

**Manufacturing:** Manufacturing accounted for 28% of GDP in 2023. The PRC has the world's largest manufacturing economy and produces a variety of goods such as electronics, textiles, and transportation equipment. The government's "Made in China 2025" plan seeks to shift the subsector away from low-cost, labor-intensive processes toward high-productivity work by focusing on innovation in advanced technologies.

**Mining:** Mining accounted for about 7% of GDP in 2024. With over 3,092 operating coal-fired power plant units as of 2024, China produces and consumes almost as much coal as the rest of the world combined. Further, China is the world's largest producer of gold and most rare earth minerals, which are key components in the production of smartphones and semiconductors. Other large reserves include oil, natural gas, methane, shale gas, iron ore, and chromite.

**Construction:** A key component of the industrial sector, construction comprised about 7% of GDP in 2024. Home to over 300,000 construction companies, China is the world's largest construction market. Projects include housing, domestic infrastructure, and foreign infrastructure through the BRI.



## Agriculture

This sector includes farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry and accounted for 7% of GDP and 22% of employment in 2024. Though the sector's share of GDP has dropped significantly in

recent decades, China remains the world's largest agricultural producer and comprises some 24% of global agricultural production. Most agricultural activity occurs on small, family-run farms.

**Farming and Livestock:** About 10% of Chinese territory is suitable for cultivation, with permanent crops covering 2% of land. China is the world leader in the production of rice, wheat, potatoes, corn, tobacco, peanuts, tea, apples, and cotton. Other primary crops include barley, millet, rapeseed, sorghum, and soybean. China is also the world's leading producer of chickens, mutton, pigs, and eggs. An outbreak of African Swine Fever since 2018 has killed up to 350 million pigs, about 25% of the world's pork supply.



**Fishing:** China is the world's largest producer of fish products, harvesting over 71 million tons in

2023 and employing more than 14 million people. Further, the Chinese population accounts for over one-third of global fish consumption. With the world's largest fleet of deep-sea fishing vessels, China increasingly relies on its "distant-water" fleet to fish in foreign waters often illegally, since its own resources have almost been depleted.

**Forestry:** China has a robust forestry industry and is the world's largest importer and exporter of wood. To preserve its resources, the PRC has regulated domestic logging for decades, instead purchasing the rights to harvest trees in other countries.

### Currency

The PRC's currency is officially called the *rénmínbì*. The basic unit of the *rénmínbì* is the **yuan** (¥), which is also a term used to refer more generally to the currency. Colloquially, residents may also refer to currency as **kuài**. The *yuan* subdivides into 10 **jiǎo** (also called **máo**), which further subdivides into 10 **fēn**, though these are rarely in circulation today. Banknotes come in six values (1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 ¥), while coins are issued in three



(0.1, 0.5, 1¥). Although exchange rates vary, US\$1 has fluctuated between about ¥6.27 and ¥7.29 over the past 5 years.

### Foreign Trade

Totalling \$3.76 trillion in 2023, China's exports primarily consisted of electrical machinery including computers and telecommunications equipment, nuclear reactors and equipment, and vehicles to the US (15%), Hong Kong (8%), Japan (5%), and South Korea (4%). In the same year, imports totaled \$3.10 trillion and comprised electrical machinery, including computer components, oil, metal ores, nuclear equipment, and medical equipment purchased from the US (7%), South Korea (6%), Japan (6%), and Australia (6%), Brazil (5%).



In 2019, the US and China engaged in a trade war launched by then-US President Donald Trump in response to alleged unfair trade practices and theft of intellectual property by China, prompting both countries to impose significant tariffs on each other's goods, inserting some instability in global commerce. Despite signing of an initial trade deal in early 2020, recent relations have hardly improved.

### Foreign Aid

China was historically the benefactor of large sums of foreign aid. However, with its recent economic growth, the PRC has become an important aid donor. From 2000-14, China provided over \$354 billion of foreign assistance, primarily to Cuba (\$7 billion), Cote d'Ivoire (\$4 billion), Ethiopia (\$4 billion), and Cameroon (\$4 billion). However, more than 75% of foreign assistance over that period went towards private sector investments and loan agreements, primarily in Angola, Pakistan, and Russia.

In 2018, the PRC established its first independent foreign aid agency, the China International Development Cooperation Agency, and plans to provide more aid through the BRI, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the New Development Bank, a multilateral institution established by China, Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

China has modern public transit systems and an extensive highway network. The Chinese people have access to high-quality, modern communications, though the government restricts Internet access and censors content.

### Transportation

Common modes of transportation include walking, cycling, driving, and a modern, efficient public transit. In and around Beijing, travelers can use a “**Yikatong**” card to access the city’s extensive network of buses, metro lines, taxis, trains, and even public bicycles. Taxis and Chinese ride-share company “Didi” offer service in mainland towns and cities, and American rideshare company “Uber” operates in the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau. For travel between and beyond urban areas, China has a comprehensive network of rail and bus lines. Ferries operate across Hong Kong’s island chain and link Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese ports to mainland China.

**Roadways:** As of 2020, China has some 3,231,130 mi of roadways, of which 92% were paved. A network of highways and expressways – typically high-speed, multiple lane toll roads – connects major cities and towns.

**Railways:** China has the world’s most extensive network of high-speed rails, serving some 3.2 billion passengers in 2024 with over 162,000 mi of track. Managed by the state-owned China Railway, rail lines traverse all mainland provinces and autonomous regions (see *Political and Social Relations*). The famed Trans-Mongolian and Trans-Manchurian railways connect Beijing to Moscow (capital of Russia), and high-speed rails connect Hong Kong to most major mainland cities.



**Ports and Waterways:** China has 7 of the world's 10 largest container seaports – namely Shanghai, Shenzhen, Ningbo-Zhoushan, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Qingdao, and Tianjin. Other major ports include Dalian and Qinhuangdao. China also has some 75,000 mi of navigable inland waterways, more than any other country in the world. Transport by inland waterways, primarily in central and southern China, remains a vital part of domestic commerce. The Yangtze and its tributaries account for



almost half of waterway mileage and a third of cargo volume.

**Airways:** China has 552 airports, of which 529 have paved runways.

Beijing's Daxing Airport is the world's largest international airport. China Southern Airlines (Asia's largest carrier), China Eastern Airlines, and Air China are all state-owned.

## Energy

China leads the world in energy consumption, generating most of its energy from coal (see *Economics and Resources*). Although it is the world's largest coal producer, China must import additional coal to meet its energy needs. In 2023, China generated 65% of its electricity from fossil fuels, with the remainder primarily from hydroelectric and nuclear sources. China aims to increase its use of alternative sources like solar and wind, so that renewables supply 40% of its needs by 2030.

## Media

The government maintains strict control over media and information access, giving China one of the world's most restrictive media environments. The government's Central Propaganda Department and National Radio and Television Administration strictly oversee all media outlets and monitor online content. For example, Chinese authorities have established the so-called "Great Firewall" to filter all Internet content, blocking many Western websites and censoring content critical of the government or otherwise deemed inappropriate or unlawful (see *Sex and Gender* and *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

The state-run press agency **Xinhua** has some 140 foreign offices and is the government's official channel for news distribution. It also publishes dozens of newspapers and magazines, while maintaining an online presence. Journalists and bloggers tend to self-censor to avoid the government detention, arrest, and imprisonment.



**Print Media:** China has the world's largest newspaper market, with some 2,000 newspapers published primarily in Mandarin or other Chinese varieties like Cantonese, though some papers are also available in minority languages (see *Language and Communication*). The official newspaper of the

CCP's Central Committee, the *People's Daily*, is also printed in several other languages, English among them. Another English-language CCP publication is *China Daily*, while Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* is a privately-held English-language paper.

**Radio and TV:** Some 2,000 television channels offer programming in Mandarin, Cantonese, and other languages, though authorities increasingly discourage the use of minority languages in the media. State-run Chinese Central TV dominates broadcasting, though cable and satellite TV service are widespread. The government censors television broadcasts and limits the distribution of foreign programs. All of China's 2,600 radio stations are state-owned.

### Telecommunications

China has an advanced telecommunications infrastructure, and more than nine times as many Chinese subscribe to mobile cellular service as fixed lines as of 2023. China has the world's largest population of Internet users. Since most Western social media apps are blocked, China has its own versions. For example, the Chinese messaging app WeChat had over 1.37 billion monthly users in mid-2025.



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