

## China: Country and Culture

### Introduction

With more than 1.35 billion people, the People’s Republic of China is the world’s most populous country and the second largest country by land area. It has many major cities, with nearly half of its population living in urban areas. China is also home to one of the world’s oldest civilizations, which made important discoveries and inventions including paper, printing, the compass, and fireworks.

Population: 1.35 billion  
 Capital: Beijing  
 Language: Mandarin Chinese  
 Currency: Renminbi (Yuan)

### History

Chinese culture has ancient roots, with a history of people living in the region dating back at least 11,000 years. Until the twentieth century, China was traditionally governed by one family for hundreds of years at a time. These periods of rule by a family line are called dynasties. Each dynasty is characterized by a particular legacy of cultural contributions, economic patterns, religious traditions, and philosophies, many of which remain part of Chinese heritage today. For example, paper money was an invention of the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE). The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) popularized Buddhism which, along with Taoism and Confucianism, remains a major belief system in China.

During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), China began trading with countries along a network of routes stretching 4,000 miles. This “Silk Road” was used by the Chinese and Europeans as a means of transport, trade, and communication. China’s beautiful silk, ceramics, and jade as well as its inventions were carried to central Asia and Europe through what is now Western China. This history of trade continues today: China is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and in 2010, it became the world’s largest exporter.

### Geography and Climate

Spanning from icy Siberia in the north to tropical areas in the south, the country of China has seven distinct climate zones. The province of Inner Mongolia also has a wide variety of climates due to its long shape.

Most of Inner Mongolia is a plateau, with grasslands in the south and east, small mountains and forests in the north, and arid desert in the west.

The winters in Inner Mongolia are very long, cold, and dry. Spring is short and arid and can sometimes bring large sandstorms, summer is short and very warm, and autumn is short with rapid cooling.



Flag of China



Chinese painting and calligraphy created between 1100–1125 CE



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### People and Culture

China is home to 56 distinct ethnic groups, with the largest—Han Chinese—comprising 98% of the country’s population. The official language is Mandarin, but there are several other prominent regional dialects spoken throughout the country, such as Cantonese and Shanghaiese. There are also other languages spoken by ethnic minorities, including Mongolian, Tibetan, and Uygur.

Even with various dialects and minority languages, there are more native speakers of Chinese than any other language in the world—more than one billion people speak Chinese. Spanish is the second most widely spoken language with 400 million speakers, and English is third with 375 million native speakers.

There are five religions recognized by the Chinese government: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Buddhism and Taoism are the most practiced belief systems, although there are also strong followings for Islam and Christianity.

One of the most famous sites in China is the Great Wall. More than 5,500 miles long, the Great Wall stretches across northern China and can be seen from outer space. Though it has been rebuilt many times, the first construction of the wall began as early as the 7th century BCE, and it served as a protection against invasion.

### Food

Chinese cuisine varies greatly by region in terms of primary ingredients, cooking methods, and spices. In Northern China, where wheat is a common crop, traditional dishes often include wheat noodles, dumplings, and steamed buns. In Southern China, where rice is more prominent, dishes often include rice or rice noodles.

One famous Chinese culinary tradition is *dim sum*. *Dim sum* refers to a meal of many small, hearty dishes that are brought to the table in a steamer basket from a cart that travels between tables in a restaurant. Steamed buns and dumplings stuffed with meats are usually on the menu for *dim sum*.

In Inner Mongolia, many dishes include dairy and sheep, also called “mutton.” For special occasions, Mongolians might host a barbecue, where mutton and vegetables get sealed in an empty, metal milk jug and cooked with stones in a fire. The meat and vegetables become tender and delicious.

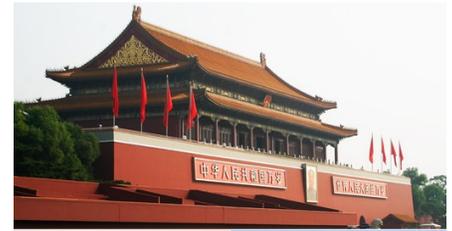
Meals are considered social events in China, and restaurants are typically organized with large tables where a group of diners can share a variety of dishes. Often the food is placed on a rotating tray in the center of the table, and diners will turn the tray to select portions of each dish. An excellent meal will include a pleasing combination of flavors and textures among the many dishes.

### Resources

National Geographic Kids: China  
<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/countries/china.html>



The Great Wall of China. Photo by Marianna (CC BY 2.0)



Old and new buildings in Beijing. Montage by Denniss (CC BY-SA 3.0)



Mongolian barbecue in Hohhot. Photo by Stephen Manuszak



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