

## China COUNTRY & CULTURE

### Introduction

With more than 1.37 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:** 1.37 billion

**Language:** Mandarin Chinese

**Capital:** Beijing

**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, China has seven distinct climate zones. The province of Yunnan is in mountainous, southwestern China, bordering Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Classified as a humid subtropical zone, Yunnan’s climate is influenced by both the Pacific and Indian Oceans and is known for being mild and pleasant.

Members of Manhu come from The Stone Forest (or Shilin) area of Yunnan Province. The area is called the Stone Forest because of its limestone formations. The tall rocks seem to sprout from the ground in the manner of stalagmites, looking like petrified trees in a forest made of stone.

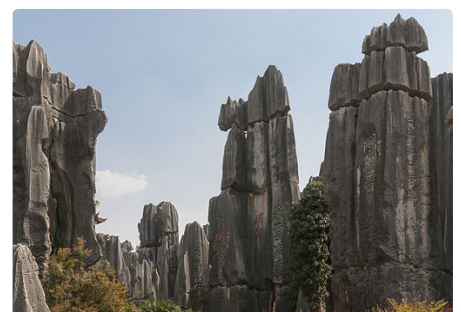
The Stone Forest was a shallow sea some 270 million years ago. Extensive deposits of sandstone overlain by limestone accumulated in this basin during the Permian period of geologic time. Uplift of this region occurred subsequent to deposition and exposure to wind and running water shaped these limestone ridges. According to legend, the forest is the birthplace of Ashima (阿诗玛), a beautiful girl of the Yi people. After falling in love she was forbidden to marry her chosen suitor and instead turned into a stone in the forest that still bears her name. Each year on the 24th day of the sixth lunar month, many Yi people celebrate the Torch Festival (火把节 Huǒbǎ Jié), which features folk dances and wrestling competitions.



Flag of China



The Shilin Stone Forest.  
Photos by Paul Arps (above) and  
CEphoto, Uwe Aranas (below). (CC-BY-SA 2.0)



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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 Shanghainese. 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 Mandarin. 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, to serve 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 Yunnan province, one of the most well-known dishes is “Crossing-the-Bridge Noodles,” which is a special rice noodle soup. The dish is served in two parts: a large bowl of boiling broth next to separate ingredients that can include vegetables, meats, and rice noodles. The ingredients are added to the broth to cook just before eating, which some people say is like “crossing the bridge” into the bowl.

#### Additional Resources

##### National Geographic Kids: China

<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/countries/china.html>

##### Encyclopedia Britannica: China

<https://www.britannica.com/place/China>

##### Science Kids: China Facts for Kids

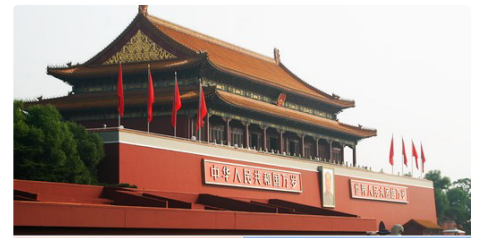
<http://www.sciencekids.co.nz/sciencefacts/countries/china.html>

##### Easy Science for Kids: China

<http://easyscienceforkids.com/all-about-china/>



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



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



Dim sum dishes.  
Photo by Dana Robinson (CC BY-SA 2.0)



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