

Country profile

China

World Vision

GEOGRAPHY

The People's Republic of China is the third largest country in the world and has the world's largest population. The land ranges from high plateaux in the north-west and vast plains in the north, with bitterly cold winters, to the mountainous south-west and the eastern plains with a hot humid climate ideal for rice-growing. Typhoons are a frequent hazard along the coast. The Yellow (Huang-He), Yangtze (Changjiang) and the Pearl River (Zhujiang) are important rivers.

PEOPLE

China has 56 ethnic groups with the Han Chinese forming over 90% of the population. Mandarin (Putonghua) is the official language but most people prefer to speak their own local dialect. There are over 100 million followers of various faiths, including Buddhism, Islam, Taoism and Christianity. In 2009, China had a population of 1.329 billion people, in which 44% live in the cities and 56% in rural areas. A total of 147 million people are migrant workers.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries
The University of Texas at Austin.



Children from mountainous Guangxi province study in the warm sun.

HISTORY

Throughout its history, China has been ruled by a series of dynasties. The name China probably comes from the Qin (Ch'in) dynasty which first unified the region around 221 BC. Major Chinese inventions included paper, printing, and the magnetic compass. European trade with China increased in the 19th century. This contact and military defeats by Western nations and Japan hastened the growth of groups seeking reform.

After years of civil war interrupted by brutal invasions by the Japanese, the Communists, led by Mao Zedong, gained control in 1949. They inherited a country in which millions of people lived in desperate poverty. They introduced sweeping reforms, taking over the ownership of land and the means of production. Their aim was to create a fairer society under the leadership of the Communist Party.

From the 1980s, China's leaders have introduced major economic reforms, resulting in significant economic development. People's livelihood has improved, but poverty still strikes the disadvantaged populations.

China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, and of the Portuguese territory of Macao in 1999. In 2010, while economic reforms continue to be made, political control remains tight.

ECONOMY

The Chinese economy has undergone significant changes from the large-scale state-owned farms and factories introduced by the Communists in the 1950s. The open door policy adopted in the 1980s facilitated economic growth in China. Since gaining access to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China has become an increasingly market-oriented economy. It has been the world's fastest growing economy over the past two decades.

Farmers are now largely responsible for their own plots of land, giving them an incentive to diversify crops and increase productivity. Food production has increased, but so has rural unemployment. Only about 13 per cent of the land in China is suitable for cultivation, and the amount of farmland per person is falling. Besides population pressures, there is growing awareness of environmental problems, including soil erosion, deforestation and water shortages. The flooding of the major rivers has caused massive destruction of lives and property. In the industrial sector, the government has tried to make state enterprises more profitable and since the 1980s small private businesses have reappeared, as well as large corporations and several stock exchanges. China relies heavily on energy from coal, resulting in very high carbon emissions.

LIVING CONDITIONS

While China has achieved considerable improvements in average living standards, millions still live on less than US\$1 per day. Minority groups, unwanted female children and disabled people are among the most disadvantaged groups.



Sponsorship programs in Yunnan province are helping communities like Fufen's to improve water supplies and schools.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	CHINA	AUSTRALIA
Population in millions	1,329	20.9
Internet users (per 1,000 people)	73	646
Urban population (as % of total)	45%	89%
GDP per capita (PPP US\$)	\$5,383	\$34,923
Population with an improved water source	88%	100%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	93%	99%
Population living on less than \$2 a day (PPP US\$)	36%	0%
Under-five mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	31	6
Life expectancy	72.9 years	81.4 years
Physicians (per 100,000 people)	106	247

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2009

The family is very important. Grandparents continue to be valued members of Chinese families, and often are responsible for looking after young children while both their parents are working. China's family planning policy has slowed the rate of population growth, with pressure placed on people to have only one or two children.

General public health has improved greatly since 1949, when life expectancy was only about 30 years. However, remote rural areas continue to receive inadequate health services. The gap between rich and poor provinces appears to be widening.

EDUCATION

Just as writing has been highly respected throughout Chinese history, education is a high priority. Millions of children are enrolled at primary schools, but not all 12-16 year-olds can continue on to study in secondary school. Again, rural areas suffer lower standards and poorer resources. In some remote villages, parents may show less support for their daughters to continue their schooling. Providing employment and opportunity for such a large population is a significant challenge.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN CHINA

- works in Yunnan province to assist sponsored children, their families and communities with better nutrition, health care, agricultural methods, water supply and literacy.
- in conjunction with a pig-raising project, assists families to build methane digesters to provide power for cooking and lighting.

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