

CHINESE CULTURE

LOCATION

China is the largest of all Asian countries and has the largest population of any country in the world. It occupies the vast majority of East Asia. After Russia and Canada, China is the third largest country of the world (geographically) and it is almost as large as all of Europe.

HISTORY

The earliest human settlements in what is today called China date back to about 5000 BC. From 1500 BC onwards, China was ruled by a number of different dynasties. During the first and the second dynasties, the Shang Dynasty (1500–1000 BC) and the Chou Dynasty (1122-249 BC), a number of feudal states developed and Chinese society became an advanced civilization. In this period Chinese writing was also invented. The feudal states, often at war with one another, were first united under Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti. During his reign (246–210 BC) the construction of the Great Wall of China took place. It was meant to protect China from external invaders.

Under the Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220), China started to trade with the West. Shortly thereafter China experienced rapid cultural development. Buddhism, which had entered earlier from India, and Taoism, a local religion, grew and seriously threatened the dominant belief in Confucianism, the traditional Chinese religion.

Despite trade with the west, China remained largely isolated from the rest of the world. By the end of the 18th century only Canton (the location of modern-day Hong Kong) and the port of Macao were open to European merchants.

With the first Anglo-Chinese War in 1839 – 42, a long period of instability and concessions to Western colonial powers began. Following the war, several ports were opened up for trading, and Britain took over control of Hong Kong. Later treaties (after further wars) (1856 – 60) weakened Chinese power. In addition, the disastrous war with Japan between 1894 – 95 made China even more vulnerable. In the 1930s, Japan occupied Manchuria and started an invasion to seize China's northern provinces. Within two years, Japan had seized most of the nation's eastern ports and railways. Japan's surrender in 1945 was the beginning of a civil war; Communist forces led by Mao Zedong, who had been battling since the 1930s for control of China. The Mao regime proclaimed the People's Republic of China on Oct. 1, 1949, with Beijing as the new capital.

After Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping became China's leader. Under him China's communist ideology went through a great transformation. By the early 1980s the Chinese economy also went through great transformations. China imported Western technology and underwent a period of rapid modernization. Deng also signed an agreement for the return of Hong Kong to China, which took place on July 1, 1997.

RELIGION

The main traditional religions in China date from the Imperial period. They are Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism is the oldest Chinese religion. It was founded by a philosopher, Confucius, in the 5th century BC and stressed love for humanity, ancestor worship, reverence for parents and older people, and harmony in thought and behavior.

Taoism also emphasized a life of complete simplicity and non-interference in the course of natural events. This would lead to a happy existence, according to believers. Taoism developed a pantheon that included many local gods that already existed in the ancient traditions of China. The chief of the gods is the Jade Emperor. Directly under him, ruling from Mount Tai, was the Emperor of the Eastern Mountain, who was believed to be a high judge, giving out rewards and punishment to those on earth.

Buddhism, originally an Indian religion, arrived in China in the 1st century. Its principles—meditation, wisdom and observance of moral principles—were not very different from the other Chinese religions. Therefore they were easily included in the Chinese religious tradition. Despite attacks from other religions, Buddhist religion has remained very lively, especially in isolated mountain areas far from the centers of political power. Here Buddhist monks devote their life to meditation. Traditionally, Chinese people often followed a combination of religious beliefs and practices, such as ancestor worship and meditation, together with the worship of gods and magical rituals. After the Communist regime came into power, Taoism and the practice of all other religions were strongly discouraged and even forbidden. However, Taoism is still practiced to some degree in modern China.

Popular religious traditions can still be found in Chinese festivities. At Chinese New Year celebrations people wear red clothes (red symbolizes fire). According to legend, this can drive away bad luck. The fireworks that one sees at the festivities go back to a similar ancient custom. Long ago, people in China lit bamboo stalks, believing that the crackling flames would frighten away evil spirits.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

China, with its population of 1 billion people, is quite crowded in many places. In the plains, agricultural villages merge into one another, while the big cities are growing at a fast rate. However, China is not the same everywhere and there are many regional differences in people, language and landscape. Indeed, some areas of China are not populated by the Chinese at all, but by minority peoples. There are more than two hundred of these groups, ranging from the hill tribes of the south to the Muslims of the northwest. Where these minority groups are found in large numbers, they have been given a certain amount of self-government. Some of these minorities, however, Tibetans in particular, have been treated very badly.

There are seven major Chinese dialects and thousands of sub-dialects. Mandarin is the dominant dialect, and is spoken by more than 70% of the population. It is taught in all schools and is the official language. Non-Chinese languages spoken widely by ethnic minorities include Mongolian, Tibetan, and Korean (in the Northeast). Agriculture is by far the leading occupation in China (about 60% of the Chinese work in this way). China is one of the world's largest producers of rice and wheat, cotton and tobacco. Pork and fish are important foods for the Chinese. Because of improved technology, the fishing industry grew a lot from the late 1970s through the late 1980s.

China is a country with a very long past and many ancient traditions. It is now undergoing major economic and political changes. Changes in economic policy in the late 1970s led to major industrial growth, especially in industries that produce consumer goods. Major industrial products are textiles, chemicals, agricultural goods, iron and steel, building materials, and electronics.

China is a one-party state: the Chinese communist party runs the country. Other political parties are not allowed. The current constitution of the People's Republic of China protects religious freedom, but religious practice is discouraged.

CULTURE

Chinese culture is known for its duration and diversity. The written language has always played a central role in China's culture. This language is called Ideographic because it consists of complex symbols (ideograms). Writing is the way in which culture is preserved and China's word for culture (wen-hua) means "to become literate". Knowing the writing system distinguishes the Chinese from non-Chinese peoples. Since the invention of writing, knowing how to write has been a requirement to hold any position of power. Thus, from the Imperial time to the time of the modern printing press, culture in the form of written texts has been a key instrument in the development of political thought and a tool of governance.

The oldest art forms in China are music and dance. Music played an important role in early China, and a large number of musical instruments have been found by archeologists. Music and complex rituals that went with it accompanied activities in the courts of rulers at all levels in the feudal world.

Theatre is the most important popular art in China. In the far past religious dances were performed at festivals to get rid of demons, to remember important historical events, or to prepare for daily activities such as the harvest, hunting, or warfare. China also has an ancient tradition of storytelling that has been preserved. Dramas, or operas, consisting of song and dance that deal with historical or contemporary themes have been performed in special theatres since 1200. Such performances involve beautiful costumes and decorated stages. Present day Cantonese and Peking operas contain song and dance, elaborate costumes and displays of martial arts and acrobatics.

For many years in the 20th century the practice of many arts and crafts was prohibited. Since the early 1980s, all this has changed and there have been many efforts to renew China's remarkable cultural traditions. In this way, China's culture remains highly complex, including both ancient traditions and modern developments.

