

## PROFILE OF CHINA

**SIZE:** Fourth largest country on earth, after Russia, Canada, and the US

**POPULATION:** 1.3 billion (2005 estimate)

**RELIGION:** Less than 6% of the population belong to state-sanctioned religious groups (Buddhist, Daoist, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant)

**LANGUAGES:** Chinese with numerous dialects categorized into six major groups, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghaiese

**LITERACY:** 90% of total population

**UNEMPLOYMENT RATE:** Estimated at 10% in urban areas, but as high as 23% when taking into account rural and underemployed workers.

(Source:

<http://www.rand.org/commentary/070704AWSJ.html> )



Courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

**CLIMATE:** Ranges from sub-arctic in the north to tropical in the south. As many as five typhoons (regional name for strong tropical cyclones; similar storms in Western hemisphere are called hurricanes) per year along southern and eastern coastlines; flooding, tidal waves, earthquakes.

**INDUSTRIES:** Heavy industries include iron and steel, petroleum refineries, machine building, weapons, automobiles and cement; textiles and clothing manufacture; consumer electronics and telecommunications; food processing

**CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:** Air pollution and acid rain caused by increasing use of fossil fuels; water pollution and shortages aggravated by government efforts to manage the flow of the great rivers; deforestation and soil erosion caused by centuries of poor management of resources and frequent flooding of major rivers.

## **BACKGROUND: THE PRICE OF ECONOMIC REFORM IN CHINA**

The culture of China extends to more than 10,000 years ago, when the climate of China was warmer and wetter than it is now, and much of the center of the country was under water. Farming was widespread, with millet as the major crop; silk production was already important. The earliest dynasty dates to about 2000 BC, and by the Qin Dynasty in 200 BC the culture of China was well-established. Despite ongoing power struggles among feudal princes, the Qin Dynasty produced written laws and great schools of philosophy, including Confucianism and Daoism.

**Development of Agriculture** Under the T'ang Dynasty, China experienced a golden age for nearly three hundred years, from early in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Farmland was distributed to the peasantry with the intent of providing a means for families to support themselves, and also as a basis for taxation. Canals were used to transport food supplies in time of famine. Rice growing became prominent during the centuries of T'ang rule, especially as farmers learned how to plant the seedlings, thereby increasing the yield. Populations shifted southward, and new tools were developed to increase the production of rice.

**Centuries of Trade and Foreign Rule** For two long periods during the second millennium AD, China was ruled by foreigners – first, the Mongols, in the Yuan Dynasty, from the late-13<sup>th</sup> to the mid-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was during this era that Marco Polo set out on his 24-year journey along the Silk Road, reaching China and befriending the great Mongol ruler, Kublai Khan.

From the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century to 1911, China was ruled by the Manchu, in the Qing Dynasty. The Manchu ruled successfully by maintaining parallel structures, one Manchu and one Chinese, throughout their government and in the military. They strengthened the country's infrastructure and the arts flourished. Trade with the West increased, both in silk and tea – but in return, the British introduced opium to China, causing widespread addiction and a drain of cash. Further complicating the situation, many Chinese converted land formerly cultivated for food to opium. The Chinese government banned the opium trade in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, causing the Opium Wars with Great Britain. In successive treaties meant to resolve the dispute, Great Britain received Hong Kong and then substantial concessions from the Chinese that gave Great Britain considerable authority over China. Combined with a series of internal uprisings, as well as threats from Japan to the east and Russia to the north and west, these setbacks left China in a seriously weakened condition at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**The 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Destruction and War** The Qing Dynasty fell in 1911 to a nationalist uprising, which was soon overthrown as the country fell into factions led by warlords. The young Communist Party of China began its struggle for power in the mid-1920s and, led by Mao Zedong, was crucial to the defeat of the Japanese in World War II. The seeds of the Communist revolution grew fastest among the rural poor, whose massive support ensured victory for Mao's Communist Party. Under his leadership, the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, and by redistributing land in rural areas he reinforced the loyalty of China's huge rural population. The Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek, were forced to flee to Taiwan.

**The “Great Leap Forward”: Social Control in the “People's Commune”** As he demonstrated with the redistribution of land in rural areas, Mao's concept was that people could be regulated by enforcing loyalty and social structures at the local level. Rural villages held collective ownership of surrounding farmland, with each

family working a set plot of land under a long-term lease. From the early 1950s, Chinese people were classified as “rural” or “urban” – mostly to discourage rural workers from moving to other regions or to the cities. The idea was to create a vast “rural industrial” nation, with individuals mobilized across China to increase production of steel and agricultural products.

The “Great Leap Forward” program of the late 1950s attempted large-scale collective farming, the “people’s commune.” People already prevented from relocation by their “rural” classification now found themselves at the mercy of local government functionaries who ran the collectives. Farmers whose families had for centuries been “self-employed” now faced public discipline for any behavior not deemed “socialist”. At the same time, people with only a basic level of education and training could become “barefoot” teachers or doctors, employed by the state to teach young children, and to provide first aid medical care. Such programs formed the basis of the social framework upon which Mao’s government depended, helping to maintain a standard of wellbeing the rural poor could not otherwise afford, as the demand for returns to the government systematically lowered the standard of living in rural areas.

The “Great Leap Forward” was finally abandoned, in the wake of widespread famine, drought, earthquake, flooding and sandstorms, as well as local mismanagement that laid waste to farm land and rivers. Steel production was to be managed through industrial collectives, but instead of a coordinated effort, China saw a vast diversion of resources toward “backyard” steel furnaces. By the mid 1960s, Mao faced significant rivals for leadership of the government and the Communist Party. He devised a new program to consolidate his power: the “Cultural Revolution,” to be enforced by a mass young people’s militia called the Red Guard.

**The Cultural Revolution and The “Gang of Four”** Members of the Red Guard were sent from cities into rural areas to “re-educate” the peasants in Mao’s principles. There was widespread persecution of individuals, families, educators and other intellectuals as enemies of the government. Temples and great works of art were vandalized and destroyed, books were burned; for nearly ten years China suffered chaos and oppression.

In 1976, when Mao died, the notorious “Gang of Four” – which included Mao’s wife – were arrested as the ringleaders of the destruction and devastation of China. During their trial it was determined that Mao was not implicated in the purges and persecution for which the “Gang of Four” were convicted. In 1981, the Cultural Revolution was declared to be a mistake, caused mostly by the actions of Mao’s subordinates.

**The Permanent Revolution** Since 1980, Chinese leaders have struggled to shape their vast country into a modern industrial power by dismantling traditional Chinese institutions in favor of new models of production, thinking, and social organization. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, there were early signs of success, especially in the eastern and coastal provinces. However, in the heavily-agricultural central and western provinces, the disbanding of collectives led to a rise in taxation by local authorities, with the result that the standard of living in rural areas continued to drop.

A state of “permanent revolution” is evident in the willingness to overthrow not just particular technologies, but the way factories are run; in the redefinition of relationships between individuals and the workplace, as well as between workplaces and the state. The social framework at the core of the collective, whether in rural areas or in urban factories, has been dismantled, with the shift of ownership of land and business enterprises from the state to private interests. The social framework once provided healthcare, housing and a steady income for life, all of which could be handed down from parent to child; since the 1980s, both rural and factory workers have found themselves out of work and without resources, in an economy that was creating few new jobs.

Whole families are forced to improvise in order to survive. Rural workers have migrated to urban areas in huge numbers, only to find that their “rural” status makes it impossible for them to find work, housing or medical care. Unemployed factory workers, whose skills are too limited for the available jobs, are reduced to competing

for menial day labor. As frustration has given way to rage, workers have staged strikes and other forms of protest. These workers as well as their children face the prospect of a hostile economic environment for which they are ill-prepared.

**The Widening Gap Between Rich and Poor** As ownership of property and the means of production has increasingly shifted into the hands of the wealthy few, millions of Chinese find themselves deprived of their livelihood, in rural areas as well as cities. Families that have cultivated their farms for generations suddenly find their land confiscated by private developers, and transformed into private estates, golf courses, and other municipally-sponsored projects that benefit a few at the expense of many.

**Sichuan Province:** A region of southwestern China, the Sichuan (sometimes spelled Szechuan) Province, where the events of *Dam Street* take place, is called “province of abundance” because of its fertile farmland and wealth of mineral resources. Situated in a “basin” surrounded by mountain ranges, Sichuan Province is fed by the great Yangtze River, which originates in the Himalayan mountains on the region’s western border. The province has led China in production of grain; other crops include citrus fruits, sugar cane and sweet potatoes. Sichuan is an important producer of silkworm cocoons, and leading mineral resources include titanium and iron. The region is known for beautiful nature reserves, and for the “bamboo sea” which is one of the last preserves for the giant panda.

In a country where 70% of the population is engaged in agriculture, Sichuan is a mostly rural area, whose villages have lagged far behind the industrial boom of the eastern and coastal provinces. The setting for *Dam Street* is a riverside Sichuan village in the 1980s, as the rigid Maoist social structure was only beginning to ease. A growing problem in rural areas is suicides, and attempted suicides, among young women, in despair amid grinding poverty and domestic abuse arising from the failure of arranged marriages.

**Sichuan Opera:** A highly-developed art form with stylized singing, acting, dancing, acrobatics and comedy. Dressed in stunning, elaborate costumes, Sichuan Opera performers enact one of as many as 2,000 plays, based on Chinese legends, folk tales, myths and classical novels. Performers must train for years in special schools to prepare for success in Sichuan Opera. Some performers specialize in “face-changing” – rapidly changing the facial appearance, right on stage, by removing as many as a dozen masks in a matter of seconds. The technique was a closely guarded state secret until recently, when a famous performer very publicly began to train a pop artist from Hong Kong, having already displayed his talent before the taboo video camera, and having taught the technique to several young women.

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