

The People's Republic of China

The People's Republic of China is the world's largest society.

There are 56 "nationalities" in China. It is united by a set of values and institutions that cut across extensive linguistic, environmental, and subcultural differences. Chinese society has been the object of a revolution intended to change it in fundamental ways since the 1920s, such as Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Official policy recognized the multi-ethnic nature of the Chinese state, within which all "nationalities" are formally equal. Since 1949, policies toward minorities have fluctuated between tolerance and coercive attempts to impose Han standards. Minority nationalities are guaranteed special representation in the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. In 1980s, China's leaders and intellectuals intended further social change to make China a fully modernized country. Most Han Chinese have no contact with members of minority groups; there is clearly some tension. In the autonomous areas the ethnic groups appear to lead largely separate lives, and most Han in those areas either work as urban-based administrators and professionals or serve in military installations or on state farms.

Traditionally, China's Confucian elite disparaged religion and religious practitioners, and the state suppressed or controlled organized religious groups. In the past, religion was diffused throughout the society and had a weak institutional structure

The same pattern continues in contemporary society except that the ruling elite is even less religious and there are even fewer religious practitioners. The attitude of the party has been that religion is a relic of the past, evidence of pre-scientific thinking, and something that will fade away as people become educated and acquire a scientific view of the world. On the whole, religion has not been a major issue. In the 1950s, many Buddhist monks were returned to secular life, and monasteries and temples lost their lands in the land reform. Confucian and Buddhist doctrines are not seen as a threat, and the motive is primarily one of nationalistic identification with China's past civilization. Chinese Christian organizations were established, one for Protestants and one for Roman Catholics. The most important result of state toleration of religion has been improved relations with China's Islamic and Tibetan Buddhist minority populations. State patronage of Islam and Buddhism also plays a part in China's foreign relations. In rural areas, funerals were the ritual having the least change, although observances were carried out only by family members and kin, with no professional clergy in attendance.

China has eight major dialect groups: Putonghua (Mandarin), Yue (Cantonese), Wu (Shanghaiese), Minbei (Fuzhou), Minnan (Taiwanese), Xiang, Gan and Hakka and many sub-dialects. The language spoken in Beijing is often referred to as Mandarin or Putonghua. Putonghua, which means "common language" is the country's predominant language and is widely used by more than 70 percent of the population. Putonghua is variously referred to as the "Han language" (hanyu), "Mandarin", or simply Chinese. About two-thirds of the Han people are native speakers of Putonghua, while Han people who come from the southwestern and southeastern sections of China often speak Putonghua as well as their own dialects, such as Shanghaiese and Cantonese.

Various groups such as the Mongolian, Tibetan, Naxi, Yi, Uygur, as well as many other ethnic groups have their own "native" languages. Because of the increased economic and cultural flow across China during the past twenty years, the use of Putonghua has also increased.

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