

MACMILLAN CULTURAL READERS

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

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China



MACMILLAN

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1 The Land, the People and the Language



Longji terrace

China covers a large geographical area so it is a country with many different landscapes. There are high mountains and plateaus¹⁰ in the south-west, dry sandy deserts in the north and north-west, large areas of grasslands and forests in the north-east and forests, and huge river deltas and fertile lowlands near the coast in the east and the south. Its size and the big differences in the height of the land mean that the climate from north to south and east to west changes a lot, too.

In the north, summers are very hot and dry but winters are very cold and temperatures can go as low as -41°C in some places. Strong winds in winter and spring blow large clouds of sand from the deserts towards the north-east coast. In cities like the capital Beijing, the sand clouds are often so thick that it is difficult for people to see. In central China summers are long, hot and humid¹¹ and winters are short, wet and cold. The high plateaus in the south-west have very cold winters but little rain but the lowlands in the south-east are wet and warm all of the year.

The name 'China' probably comes from the name of the Qin Emperors (221–206 BC), who were the first emperors to rule over all of China. The Chinese people call their country *Zhōngguó*, which means 'Middle Country'.



The Land, the People and the Language

Geography

The Tibetan Plateau in the south-west is over 4,000 metres above the sea and is often called the 'roof of the world'. There are high mountains all around it. The highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest (8,850 metres), is in the Himalayas on the China–Nepal border¹².

Mount Everest was named after Sir George Everest, who was the first person to describe exactly where it was and how high it was. The Chinese call it *Mount Zhumulangma*.



A yak

It is too cold and dry to grow anything on the plateau so the local people keep animals like yaks and sheep. Yaks are very important for the Tibetan people. They use their hair to make clothes and tents and their skin to make boots and boats. They eat yak meat and drink yak milk. Tibetans are nomads – people who travel from place to place, and live in tents. In the lower valleys of the plateau farmers can grow crops and vegetables.

The Taklamakan Desert in the north-west of China is the largest sandy desert in the world. There is almost no water and very little plant and animal life, so people do not live there. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, tigers¹³ could still be found in the desert. There are still some wild camels¹⁴ but they are disappearing fast.

Another desert in the north, **the Gobi Desert**, is famous in history because the old trade¹⁵ routes known as the Silk Road cross the southern part of it.

In north-central China, **the Loess Plateau** is home to more than fifty million people. It is called the Loess Plateau because of the yellow soil (*loess*) which is found all over the plateau. It was once a rich and fertile place, covered in forests and grasslands, but over thousands of years the land became dry because of bad farming methods. Today, however, thanks to a large development project¹⁶, farmers are again growing enough food to feed themselves and their families.

The old *Silk Road* joined Asia, Europe and parts of Africa. It gets its name from the Chinese silk trade that began in the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 220). Marco Polo described it in his book *Travels of Marco Polo* about his journey across northern China.



The two great rivers of China, the Yangtze (6,418 kilometres) and the Yellow River (5,464 kilometres) start on the Tibetan Plateau in the west and flow down to the East China Sea.

Several times in the history of China, the Yangtze was a dividing line between the north and the south. People have lived on the land along it for thousands of years and much of the country's food comes from the river valley. As well as being politically and economically important, the Yangtze has great cultural meaning too. It flows through one of China's most beautiful natural landscapes – the Three Gorges in Chongqing Municipality and Hubei province. For centuries its deep valleys and high mountains have inspired¹⁷ Chinese poets and artists.



The Three Gorges valley is a popular place to visit by boat.

The Yellow River gets its name and colour from the yellow soil it picks up as it flows through the Loess Plateau. The Chinese people call it 'the Mother River' because its basin was the birthplace¹⁸ of ancient Chinese culture. It is also called 'the river of sorrow'¹⁹ because millions of people have died in the terrible floods that happen when there is too much loess in it. The worst flood was in 1931 when more than one million people died.

The Land, the People and the Language

The third longest river in China is the Pearl River (2,400 kilometers). Its delta on the South China Sea is a very densely populated area – around forty-six million people live there. It is often called the workshop²⁰ of China because of all the factories that are there. It is the fastest-growing and richest area in the country.

- In 2011 work began on the 30 kilometre Hong Kong – Zhuhai – Macau Bridge (HZMB) across the Pearl River. It will be the longest man-made sea-crossing in the world.

Government

China, or the People's Republic of China (PRC), became a communist country in 1949. With over eighty million members, the Chinese Communist Party is the largest political party in the world.

The country is divided into twenty-two provinces, four municipalities or cities with their own government, five Autonomous Regions and two Special Administrative Regions. You can see these areas on the map on page 5.

The Autonomous Regions each have large numbers of a particular ethnic minority:

- Xinjiang (Uyghur people)
- Ningxia (Hui people)
- Inner Mongolia (Mongols)
- Guangxi (Zhuang people)
- Tibet (Tibetans)

The Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong was given to Britain by China in 1842 after a war. On 1st July 1997, Britain gave it back and it became part of the PRC. After that, large numbers of people from other parts of the PRC went there to look for work. They found jobs in factories and Hong Kong developed into an important financial centre. There are about 260 islands in Hong Kong. The largest is Lantau Island. The second largest is Hong Kong Island.

Macau was governed by Portugal for 442 years until 20th December 1999. It was the first place in East Asia where Europeans made their homes.

The people of China

There are fifty-six different ethnic groups in China. Most of them have their own beliefs²¹ and customs, and sometimes their own language. Many still wear traditional clothes, some of which are very beautiful. Tourists from China as well as from other countries like to visit the areas where ethnic groups live to see these traditional clothes and the way the people there live.

The largest ethnic group is **the Han**. About ninety-two percent of the population of China are Han. They are also the largest ethnic group in the world – about twenty percent (1.3 billion) of all the people in the world are Han. In the English-speaking world they are often known as simply ‘Chinese’. The name Han comes from the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 220), the longest-ruling dynasty in Chinese history.

The largest ethnic minority group is **the Zhuang** (over sixteen million people) who live mainly in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the south. The Zhuang language belongs to the Chinese-Tibetan language family but they use Roman letters and not Chinese characters for their writing system²². In China the Zhuang are known for their love of singing and their beautiful silk brocade.

The Uyghur (about eight million people) is another large ethnic minority group. They live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the north-west of the country. Their language is like Turkish and most of them are Muslim (of Islamic religion). They, too, love music and play many different kinds of instruments. They are famous for the *muqam*, a show with traditional folk songs, dances and poetry that everybody in the village joins in with during local festivals.

Brocade on Zhuang clothes



The Land, the People and the Language

The Manchus are from the Manchurian region of North East Asia. They have their own language but out of the nearly ten million ethnic Manchus in China today, fewer than one hundred, maybe only twenty people, speak it. The last emperor of China – Pu Yi (1906–1967) of the Qing dynasty – was Manchu.

Most of **the Hui** people (nearly ten million) live in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in north-west China. Like the Uyghur, they are Muslim.

The large areas of grassland of the northern Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia are home to **the Mongols** (about seven million people). They are mainly farmers now but in the past they were nomadic. They followed their camels, cows, horses and sheep across the grasslands on horseback and lived in yurts, Mongolian tents. Yurts are made of strong cotton cloth and felt. Felt is a material made from wool or the fur of animals. Inside the yurt it is warm and comfortable. There is a stove for cooking in the centre and a place at the back of the yurt for older people and guests to sit in.

i The great Mongol leader, Ghenghis Khan (AD 1162? – 1227), ruled over an empire that covered most of Asia. His grandson, Kublai Khan (AD 1215–1294), became the ruler of China and started the Yuan dynasty (AD 1279–1368).

The Miao (about nine million people) are one of the largest ethnic minorities in south-west China. They live mainly in the hilly regions of the Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan and Sichuan provinces and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Their language belongs to the Chinese–Tibetan family of languages and there are many different varieties. However, it is disappearing fast because the Miao are using Mandarin Chinese instead.

The Chinese language

Chinese written words look very different to those of other languages. They are based on simple drawings for important words and ideas, such as ‘man’, ‘horse’ or ‘water’. The earliest drawings, or characters, are very old and were first seen in 1400 BC. Over the years, more lines were added to make new words and most Chinese characters are made up of^p different meanings and sounds. Chinese dictionaries may contain more than forty thousand of these characters and each character usually has several meanings. This makes Chinese very difficult to learn and before the 1950s around eighty percent of Chinese people could not read or write. Since then, the number



has fallen to less than ten percent thanks to education, the introduction of easier forms of Chinese characters and *pinyin*, a way of writing Chinese in Roman script. There are about 6,500 easier characters. However, you only need to know about 3,000 of them to read a newspaper in China.

- Mandarin – spoken in Beijing and the official²³ spoken language in the PRC.
- Cantonese – spoken in Hong Kong, Macau, Guangdong Province and south-east Guangxi Province
- Wu – spoken in Shanghai, Zhenjiang Province and southern Jiangsu Province



There are many different forms of spoken Chinese. The most common ones are Mandarin, Cantonese and Wu. Chinese is a tonal language, which means the pitch (the high or low quality of a sound) can change the meaning. For example, the word for ‘soup’ and ‘sugar’ is the same – *tang*. But if you say it with a high tone, it means ‘soup’ and with a rising tone, it means ‘sugar’.

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