



UNIT 7 - THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

ABOUT THIS UNIT

- *The Land*
- *Communist Party Structure and Governance*
- *The People*
 - *The Family Unit*
 - *One child Policy*
 - *Religion*
 - *Social Welfare System*
 - *Education*
 - *Traditional Festivals*

Introduction

During previous units, we have broadly covered those historical and political aspects of China's development throughout the 20th century, including the fall of the last imperial dynasty, the establishment of the first (nationalist) republic, the proclamation of the communist People's Republic of China, Chairman Mao's disastrous efforts at social engineering until his death in 1976, and China's gradual entry into the global community with Deng Xiaoping's open door policy.

To set the scene for the next unit, which covers more contemporary issues that have emerged over the past two decades, it is timely to look at some of the demographic and sociological features of Chinese society – how the ordinary people, both rural and urban, have been affected by their environment and by increasing exposure to external influences. How does the life of the ordinary person in China today differ from our own?

Physical Environment

Mainland China covers 9.6 million square kilometres and is the third largest country in the world, after Russia (22.4 million square kilometres) and Canada (9.9 million square kilometres). By way of comparison, Australia's landmass is 7.7 million square kilometres.

China's topography is diverse, consisting of endless deserts, wastelands, deep gorges and fjords interspersed with fertile grasslands. Massive ice-capped mountain ranges along the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau (known locally as the roof of the world) are the source of many great Asian rivers, including the Yangtze and the Yellow River, that meander down to the coast. These physical and geographical features, combined with severe seasonal monsoon rains, have had a major impact on the everyday life of the people.

China is bordered by Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Myanmar (Burma), Laos and Vietnam. Across the sea, it faces Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines. China's foreign policy therefore is understandably complex, especially when focusing on regional stability.

For administrative purposes, China is divided into 23 provinces, plus four major municipalities (Beijing, Chongqing, Tianjin, and Shanghai). These municipalities represent the most important cities. They have the same status as the provinces and are directly controlled by the central government. In addition, there are five semi-autonomous regions, including Tibet and Inner Mongolia. A map of these administrative divisions is shown below.



Figure 7.1 China's 23 provinces, four municipalities and five semi-autonomous regions and two special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau)

In 1949, the year the People's Republic of China was established, only five cities in China had a population exceeding one million. By 2000, the last time figures were available, that number had risen to forty. By contrast, Japan only has six cities with more than one million inhabitants. It is estimated that a city the size of Perth is currently being established in China every six months.

China has 22% of the world's population but only 7% of its arable land, with a quarter of the country classified as desert. One of the most serious problems at present is the threat of desertification – the encroachment of desert sands onto arable areas. A recent survey indicated that the total area of land lost to the desert is growing rapidly and has surpassed 17% of the country's territory, resulting in the deterioration of the ecological environment and an increase in rural poverty. Nearly 400 million people live in these areas, and the economic loss is estimated at around US\$6.5 billion a year.



Figure 7.2 A village under threat from the ever-expanding desert

With the Gobi desert now creeping to within 250 kilometres of Beijing and subjecting the local population to sandstorms and smog that leave the city shrouded in a gritty haze, there are serious concerns about the social and economic consequences. The effects of these conditions on the competing athletes were reported on during the Olympic Games.

Laws covering desertification control, treatment, and prevention are being progressively enacted. Some remedial measures include planting selective areas with lucerne and other suitable perennial, deep-rooted ground cover, planting more trees, banning the use of forest timber for domestic fuel, and culling goats. The Australian Government has been actively assisting China for several decades with its desertification problems.

The State System

The Constitution proclaims: *"The People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants"*. The Constitution sets the standard for conduct in State life.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the leading political organ, with branches right down to the lowest levels of society where central policy is meticulously followed. President Hu Jintao's directive that *"all local governments, especially their leading officials, should implement the central government's measures to the letter"* reflects the government's serious approach to this hierarchical structure. There are also eight small non-communist parties that have very little, if any, political influence.

The main policy-making body is the National People's Congress, which meets every five years (the last meeting was held in October 2007). It is composed of elected deputies from the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities, along with representatives from the armed forces. Minority nationalities are also entitled to appropriate representation.

A Political Bureau (Politburo, or Cabinet) of 25 members is elected by the Party's Central Committee to oversee CCP operations. The Politburo has supreme legal power and is the highest authority in the land. Within this organisation, a Politburo Standing Committee, or inner cabinet, of seven members (previously nine) is elected to act as the highest decision-making body. The Politburo Standing Committee is comprised of the most influential and powerful people in China. At the recent Communist Party National Congress in November 2012, Vice-President Xi Jinping was elected to take over as the General Secretary of the CCP, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission from Hu Jintao. Deputy Premier Li Keqiang was elected to succeed Premier Wen Jiabao. All remaining Politburo Standing Committee positions became vacant and the new hierarchy will take power in March 2013.

Overview of President-elect - Xi Jinping

- **Pronunciation:** *Shee Jin=ping*
- **Born:** 1953, Beijing. A princeling, son of Xi Zhongxun, a former Vice-Premier and Communist Party hero.
- **Education:** Graduate of Qinghua University in Marxist theory and ideological education. Studied chemical engineering at Qinghua, Post-graduate law degree.
- **Career:** Vice President, Politburo Standing Committee Member (since 2007) where he was ranked 6. In October 2010 was appointed Vice Chair of the Central Military Commission.
- **Foreign Travel:** Lots, high profile.
- **Relevant to Tibet:** Xi's father was close to the 10th Panchen Lama and "treasured" a watch given to him by the Dalai Lama.

The People - Social Environment

China's population, now exceeding 1.3 billion, is made up of many nationalities, which have each contributed through their individual customs, language and dress to the historical development of the country's diverse culture. Of China's 56 different ethnic groups, the Han nationality is the largest with approximately 1.2 billion people – over 92% of the total population.



Figure 7.3 Ethnic minority girl in ceremonial dress

The central government recognises the important contribution of these minority groups. Many live on mountains or in pastoral areas that are rich in timber, livestock and water resources – important in China’s economic modernisation program. Moreover, they often inhabit border regions of strategic importance for the whole country.

The recent riots in Tibet are an example of China’s somewhat strained relationships at times with some ethnic minority groups, and we will look at this issue in more detail in the next unit.

(While on a study trip to China that was arranged by Griffith University, two days were spent visiting the Minorities University in Beijing – a residential institution open to eligible students from all minority groups. The government’s efforts to increase the education standards of minority groups were very evident.)

Family Values – Confucian Ethics

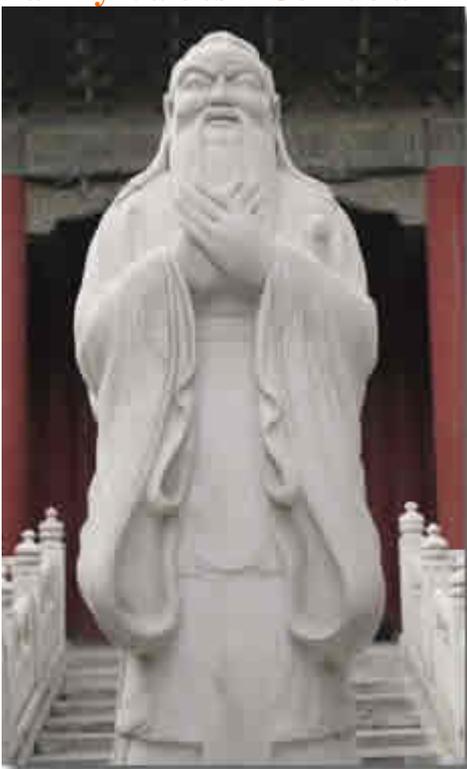


Figure 7.4 Statue of Confucius

For many centuries, the teachings of Confucius (551–479 B.C.) have had tremendous influence on the culture and history of China. Family values and relationships, ancestor worship and filial piety are the major themes of Confucian thought. These concepts were seen as virtues that should be cultivated by society in general. Filial piety was considered the prime virtue, signifying the respect and obedience that a child, usually a son, should show to his parents – in particular to his father. These values were extended by analogy to the following relationships:

- ruler and subject
- husband and wife
- elder and younger brother
- friend and friend

The transition from imperial dynastic rule in China to a communist republic, embracing a form of Marxist ideology, saw the virtual disappearance of Confucianism.

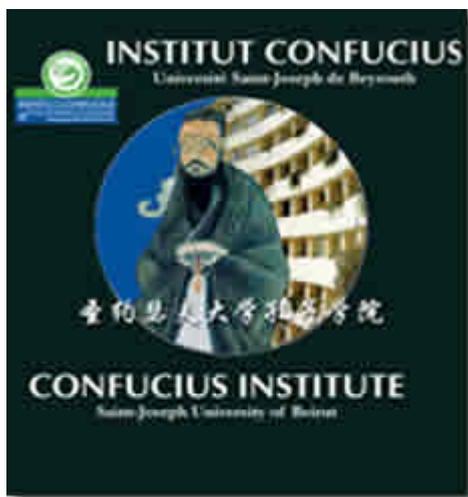


Figure 7.5 Motif of Confucius
Institute, Beirut

In February 2005, Hu Jintao said "*Confucian Harmony is something to be cherished*", and a few months later he instructed party cadres to build a "harmonious society" by promoting the Confucian values of honesty and unity. The curriculum in secondary schools now includes teaching the Confucian classics. Overseas, the government has been promoting Confucianism through the "Confucius Institute", a Chinese language and cultural centre similar to the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institute. At present, over 100 such institutes have been established worldwide, with a further eight recently opened through leading Universities in Australia.

This reintroduction of Confucian ethics into public life has the stated intention of developing a "feel good" society. However, many China watchers have expressed the view that there may be other subtle political reasons for this sudden change in policy during Hu Jintao's presidency, with Government policy promoting Confucian ideals again as a supplement to, and possibly replacement for, dying Marxist and Leninist ideology.

One child policy

In line with Confucian teachings, Chinese families traditionally had large numbers of children, with a preference for sons to carry on the family line and take care of parents and ancestral spirits. The conviction that men were more valuable than women dominated the country for many centuries, leading some villagers, in earlier times, to resort to dumping female infants outside orphanages or even abandoning them "in the wilderness".

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Ministry of Public Health introduced a series of family planning programs, largely unsuccessful, to stem the rapid population growth. These programs were not assisted by Chairman Mao's comment that *"the more people, the stronger we are"*, which he made during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), which ended disastrously in a man-made famine that cost millions of lives. New birth control initiatives were then launched. However, these were soon denounced as a bourgeois concept by the Cultural Revolution cadres.

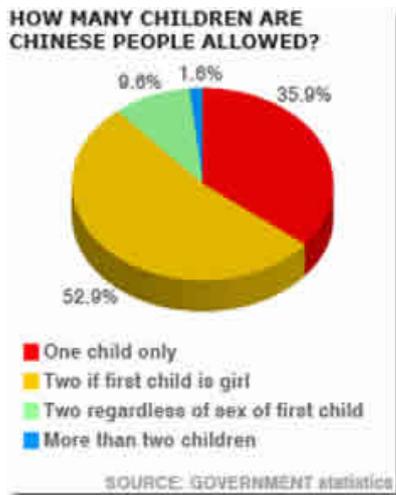


Figure 7.6 One child policy

During the 1970s, a campaign reflecting Premier Zhou Enlai's proclamation that *"one is good, two is okay, and three is too many"* was heavily promoted and encouraged through a combination of education, coercion, fines, sterilisation and enforced abortions – not a happy environment for Chinese mothers.

By 1979, with the burgeoning population and a growing awareness of the Malthusian theory that increases in population tend to exceed increases in the means of subsistence, Deng Xiaoping began a more structured and sensitive national one child birth planning initiative. Late marriage and spacing of pregnancies were encouraged, and contraceptive education was widely promoted. Although the policy was not legally enforced, only "encouraged" – with a Birth Planning Commission established in every township – the results were promising. The fertility rate was substantially reduced, and it was estimated that over 300 million births were prevented as a result of these measures.



Figure 7.7 Chinese children

These guidelines shifted from policy into law in 2002 with the enactment of the Law on Population and Family Planning. This had the effect not only of controlling and moderating the overzealous enforcement practices of some local officials, but also of introducing some positive women-friendly features. (The provisions of this statute can be viewed by Googling "Law on Population and Family Planning".) A study of this new law in April 2007 by the

University of California–Irvine found that it had proved to be "remarkably effective".

The current one child policy can be broadly summed up as follows:

- the one child policy remains in large urban centres, such as Beijing and Shanghai, comprising 35.9% of the population,
- most of the rural population (52.9% of the total population) are allowed to have a second child if the first is a girl,
- a further 9.6%, mainly ethnic minorities, are permitted two children regardless of their gender, and
- 1.6%, chiefly in the Tibetans' semi-autonomous region, have no limit.

The overall policy is still unclear and varies considerably throughout the provinces.

According to the national census in 2000, for every 100 girls born in China, about 116 boys came into the world; in other countries, usually only five to seven more boys are born. Although the Chinese Government has banned gender selection by ultrasound and selectively induced abortion, it is reported that many doctors still secretly provide such services for extra fees. This gender imbalance is posing considerable problems for the Party leaders, who are well aware of the future socio-demographic implications.

It is believed that around 40 million men will not find wives in the next 10 years, some of them are already living in "bachelor ghettos" and China has been described as "the world's biggest lonely hearts club".

Religion

Traditionally, China's Confucian elite disparaged religion and religious practitioners, with the State suppressing or strictly controlling organised religious groups. The social status of Buddhist monks and Taoist priests was low, and they were not afforded the same respect that religious leaders enjoy in Western societies.

During the early stages of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1967), Red Guards destroyed temples, statues, and domestic ancestral tablets as part of their violent assault on the "four olds" (old ideas, culture, customs and habits).

After the return to power of the Deng Xiaoping reformers in 1979, the Party and State became more tolerant of the public expression of religion as long as it remained within defined limits.

The various religions exert different influences on different ethnic minority groups. The majority Han nationality incorporates Buddhism, Taoism and, to a lesser extent, Christianity. There are at present five state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations" in China:

Religion	Adherents (millions)	Clergy (thousands)	
Buddhism	100	200	
Islam	20	40	
Taoism	N/A	25	
Protestantism	16	18	
Catholicism	5	4	

Table 7.1 Religions in China (Source: Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2009)

Falun Gong

Falun Gong is a system of beliefs founded in China by Li Hongzhi in 1992. There is on-going debate about Falun Gong's classification as a religion, or a "cult" – the term used by the Chinese government to describe the movement. In April 1999, over ten thousand Falun Gong practitioners gathered at Chinese Communist Party (CCP) headquarters in a silent protest against government policy towards the movement. Two months later the government banned the practice as it considered the apolitical spiritual group to be a threat because its numbers exceeded the membership of the CCP. Since 1999, Falun Gong practitioners in China have been reportedly subject to torture, illegal imprisonment beatings, forced labor, and psychiatric abuses.

The number of Falun Gong practitioners is unknown, and the group has no organised membership system. However, in 1998, the Chinese government published a figure of 70 million practitioners in China. Falun Gong asserts that there are over 100 million practitioners in 114 countries and regions around the world.

Medical service system

Historically, the government provided little health care until the Communists came to power in 1949. Even then, this was generally restricted to employees of State enterprises, many of whom were already financially stressed. The rural communes, since disbanded, also provided a system of collective pooling at village level for such services as health and education.

In rural areas, where over 50% of the population live, including 77% of the elderly, health care provision was even more critical. There was no family doctor network, as found in Australia, although there were plans for "community medical service centres". Some private clinics already existed, but, although relatively cheap, they could only treat minor ailments.

China's public health sector had reached a critical stage, and urgent steps needed to be taken to implement wide-ranging reforms. The Ministry of Health reported that 49% of the urban population could not afford to see a doctor, while 30% could not afford the cost of hospitalisation without subsidised financial assistance. About half of China's population said they did not visit hospitals.

A study in 2004 found that high health care costs had become one of the main reasons for rural poverty. Chinese rural workers were in the habit of setting aside up to 40% of their disposable income for medical emergencies, and a common saying was "*the peasant class is one serious sickness away from poverty*".

In August 2007, the Social Security Minister announced a new government initiative aimed at alleviating the situation. This involved a three-way pilot scheme to cover the rural population, the urban workforce, children, the elderly, and the unemployed in the cities. Provision would be made through the Health Budget, supported by the employers of China's 200 million migrant workers, who had moved from rural to urban areas and were forced to live in cramped and unhygienic conditions. At a recent Sino-American medical forum in Shanghai, Health Minister Chen Zhu vowed to establish these medical service reforms by 2010. These reforms were indeed implemented as promised and, by the end of 2010, the basic medical care system benefits 430 million urban residents; the new rural cooperative medical care system covers 700 million rural residents.

"The country has established a basic medical care system that nearly covers the whole nation in only five years. It took Germany 100 years and the Republic of Korea 12 years to achieve the goal," said Yao Lan, professor of the School of Medicine at Huazhong University.

Social welfare system

Ageing population

A 2005 sample survey of the Chinese population indicated that around 11% was over the age of 60, but by 2050 that number would increase to 30%, exceeding the entire population of the United States. This could develop into one of the greatest demographic changes in China's history and, without an effective solution, could trigger dire socio-economic consequences over coming years.

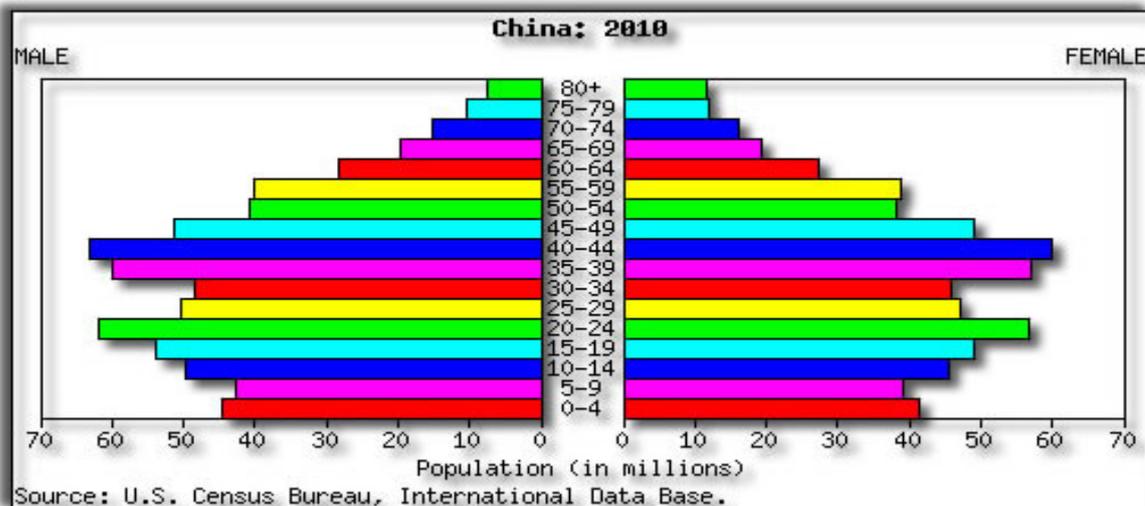


Table 7.2 China Population Pyramid for 2010

Predicted age and sex distribution for the year 2010

Currently, only 25% of the working-age population is covered by any kind of old-age pension plan, and a new social security system is yet to be established to ensure a foundation for sound economic growth. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security announced recently that the country's pension fund had a huge deficit – well in excess of US\$100 billion. Moreover, this pension fund only includes employees in State or collectively owned enterprises, already financially stressed and well behind in contributions.

"The pressure on the working age population will be much bigger than before," said Professor Peng, a population expert at Shanghai's Fudan University, "and with a population that is living longer and a workforce that is getting smaller, the pressure is on China to get rich before it gets old; as China's population ages, it will become less economically productive, with parts of the labour force shifting from producing goods into social services like medical care for the elderly".

Education



Figure 7.8 Chinese Students

During the early 1980s, Chinese children averaged about six years of schooling. Recognising this deficiency, Deng Xiaoping included in his wide-ranging reforms the aim of introducing nine years of compulsory education by 2000. This has been achieved. Moreover, the overall literacy rate in

China, based on 2002 estimates, reached 90.8% (male 95.1%; female 86.5%).

The Ministry of Education is responsible for the nationwide system that oversees a program of six years of free primary schooling starting at the age of six or seven, followed by six years of secondary education for ages 12 to 18 (three years of middle school and three years of high school). During 2006 and 2007, rural students were progressively exempted from fees covering the three years of middle school; this exemption was extended to urban students in 2008. However, after completing the compulsory nine years of education, students who wished to continue in High Schools were required to pay a small tuition fee.

Interestingly, the Compulsory Education Law states: *"Schools shall promote the use of putonghua (common speech based on Beijing pronunciation), which is in common use throughout the nation. Schools in which the majority of students are of minority nationalities may use the spoken and written languages of those nationalities in instruction"*.

A United Nations Development Program study in 2003 reported that China had over 116,000 kindergartens and 426,000 primary schools catering for 20 million and 117 million students respectively, as well as thousands of agricultural, vocational and specialised educational institutions. Currently, the government is intensifying its approach to national education by supporting around 2,000 institutions of higher learning (colleges and universities), where the competition for places is high. It also encourages student study in accredited countries, as well as post-graduate exchange programs with prestigious universities. In Australia alone, there were around 130,000 Chinese students in 2009, up from 9,000 in 1999.

The expansion of China's university system in recent years has been dramatic. At the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, enrolments were virtually zero; and 20 years later, they had barely reached 5%. In 1998, the government targeted ten universities to become "world-class", including the universities of Peking and Tsinghua (of which President Hu Jintao is a graduate). To achieve this goal, the government committed to an increase in educational allocation in the national budget by 1% a year for each of the following five years. Meanwhile, China has also received educational aid from UNESCO and many other institutions, including the World Bank, which recently loaned China US\$14.7 million for educational development.

Only 30% of faculty teachers held postgraduate degrees – a consequence of the lack of an academic degree system in China until the 1980s. However, since 1999, the number of Chinese postgraduate students has jumped ten-fold to 230,000 and many of these internationally trained scholars have returned with the goals of both improving local quality and strengthening ties to other institutions around the world. Interestingly, half of all Chinese university places are in science and technology, compared with fewer than 10% in Australia.

From a position of only eight Universities in the top 500, five years ago, China now has reached 23. Interestingly, half of all Chinese university places are in science and technology, compared with fewer than 10% in Australia.

Traditional festivals

Over many centuries of Chinese civilisation, a number of unique festivals have evolved as an indispensable part of society. Although most of the feudal trappings have now disappeared through the government's modernisation initiatives, several long-standing celebrations are still widely celebrated. Indeed, recognising the importance of the diversity of customs among the

ethnic minorities, the Constitution grants each nationality the freedom to retain and celebrate its own individual festivals.

The government requires all employers, from the largest corporations down to individuals who hire domestic staff, to give their workers paid leave during the main festival periods, with the week-long Chinese New Year Spring festival and National Day festival being regarded as "golden weeks", as they allow sufficient time for people to visit distant relatives or tourist attractions, such as The Great Wall, The Forbidden City, the limestone landscape of Guilin, or ancient towns such as Liyang. With over 150 million people on the move by train, plane or bus, these golden weeks often create large and frustrating traffic jams nationwide. Those stuck in lengthy queues during golden weeks often disparagingly refer to them as "golden porridge" – hot and sticky.

Let us look at some of the most popular festivals:

Spring Festival



Figure 7.9 Spring Festival

The Spring festival began as a measure to drive off the "hundred demons" still lingering in the home so that the family could enjoy a happy and peaceful New Year. As time passed, the superstitious connotations faded and the practice became a tradition. Celebrated on the first day of the first lunar month, it is by far the most important and liveliest holiday of the year. As winter fades and spring approaches, people all over the country start shopping for and preparing feasts to be consumed at family gatherings. These celebrations are enhanced by spectacular firecracker displays.

Dragon Boat Festival



Figure 7.10 Dragon Boat Festival

Falling on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, the Dragon Boat festival was established in commemoration of Qu Yuan, a patriotic statesman and poet of the 3rd century B.C., who drowned himself in the Miluo River after failing to save his country from the conquering State of Qin. The crew of the winning boat is ceremoniously served glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves.

Lantern Festival



Figure 7.11 Lanterns and their reflection on the lakeside

The name of this festival, held on the 15th day of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar, is derived from a Tang dynasty (618–907) custom of hanging out bright lanterns on the night of the festival. It is celebrated with round dumplings of glutinous rice flour, which are served with a variety of sweet fillings known as Yuan Xiao (literally "the night of the first full moon").

National Day



Figure 7.12 Tiananmen Tower

The People's Republic of China was proclaimed on 1 October 1949; and in keeping with its historical significance, China's National Day is celebrated with the same patriotic fervour as Australia Day is celebrated in our own country. In the early morning, crowds flock to Tiananmen Square in Beijing to see the national flag-raising ceremony, followed by an impressive review of troops by the president and other dignitaries. In the evening, spectacular fireworks illuminate the night sky and festivities continue well into the night.

Festival of the Hungry Ghosts



Figure 7.13 A wayang or opera show to "entertain" the wandering ghosts

Just as the Americans have Halloween, the Chinese have their version of a ghost festival. It is believed that, during the seventh month of the Lunar New Year, the gates of hell are opened to free the ghosts, who wander the earth seeking food.

In the belief that the dead return to visit their living relatives, each family prepares a lavish meal for the "hungry ghosts". Prayers are offered to the deceased relatives, joss sticks are burnt, with food and entertainment set up on outdoor stages – always at night.

The venue might be filled with spectators, but the front row seats are always left empty for...the unseen ghosts! In pleasing the ghosts, the family ensures good luck for the coming year. Fifteen days after the feast, the festival is over, as the Chinese believe that the ghosts have returned "home".

Activity 7

1. *Why is Premier Wen Jiabao considered to be "a political survivor"?*
2. *What social problems do you see arising from China's one child policy?*
3. *Do you consider there are more subtle political reasons for the sudden reintroduction of Confucianism by the Chinese leadership?*

*Join the discussion on the **Course Discussion Forum**.*

Next - The New Millennium

In Unit 8, we will look at economic and industrial expansion, emerging domestic and external issues, local regional tensions and the impact of the Global Financial Crisis. We will also touch on the influence of China's rapid economic growth on Australia.

◀ back

next ▶