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How well do you know  
**CHINA?**

Five thousand years in the making, and still a work in progress - Chinese culture is a fascinating, often complicated blend of ancient traditions and modern commercialism, says **Graham Bond** →



## CHINA

Some questions should never be asked. Unfortunately, what those questions are depends on where you are. Information that causes embarrassment or outrage in one part of the world is shouted from the rooftops in another, and there's no finer example than the way the question 'How old are you?' is handled across the East-West divide. Break the ice at an American dinner party by soliciting the age of your host and, chances are, you'll soon be fetching your coat. Pose the same question in China and you may well be hailed for your silky social skills.

For half a century, youth culture has dominated the western world; youth markets pre-occupy marketing executives, and adults are reminded again and again to 'think of the children' in their decision-making. In

set of clichés in less than a generation. This is a land where ancient neighbourhoods are razed to make way for glass and chrome skyscrapers, where gas-guzzling 4x4s have replaced the sea of bicycles, where homegrown technology start-ups achieve world domination in a matter of years. It's sometimes easy to believe that the ancient in China exists only on TV, in propaganda classes or in twee tourist shows. The nation's halcyon past is constantly referenced by teachers, tour guides and the media – witness the sheer number of period dramas which fill the TV schedules – but there seems to be little residue of that swashbuckling golden age in the modern landscape. Contrary to the dragon dancing and kung fu displays staged in Chinatowns across the planet, choreographed ritual is minimal. National festivals are notable more

**44,100** Daily births **25,600** Daily deaths  
**73,484** Total road accident fatalities in 2008  
**28,800** marriages every day  
**4,300** Divorces every day  
**39%** The current divorce rate in Beijing

China, by contrast, white hair is eulogised in poems and epithets, wrinkles confer gravitas on politicians, and the destiny of hundreds of millions of young people is determined, exclusively, by the needs of their parents. These are important cultural clues in understanding China – for this is a society that not only respects its elderly members, it celebrates the very notion of being old.

China is a huge, diverse and sometimes confusing country, but the glue that binds it together is a sense that each of its 1.3 billion denizens carry the torch for the world's oldest surviving civilisation. Five thousand – that's the number that rolls off the tongue of any Chinese person when asked to explain their nation: 5,000 years of unbroken history, of great statesmen and warriors, of architectural genius, of scientific development, of artistic endeavour; 5,000 years of progress, with only a couple of blips along the road. The Chinese are highly conscious of their history, intensely proud of ancient traditions and constantly striving to live up to an immense legacy.

All of which leads to another, perhaps more puzzling contrast. For all its vaunted history and culture, China feels like the most breathlessly modern nation on earth. The 'traditional' clichés of the western imagination – rickshaws, parasols and sampans – have been usurped by a whole new

for shopping ops than ceremonial pomp. Many a traveller has visited at Chinese New Year expecting the time of their lives, only to leave exhausted by the crowds and impoverished by the swinging price hikes.

### THE OLD

Ancient habits are not easily discerned by outsiders, but there are traces. Foremost among them is the Confucian ethic. A teacher of the 6th and 5th centuries BC, Confucius laid out a vision of society in which people knew and understood their place. In the same way a child should obey a parent, an individual should recognise their social station and work effectively within it, Confucius contended. Just as organised religion lost its pre-eminence in the 20th century, so too Confucius' star has faded in China. Modern commercial priorities have promoted the culture of the individual, with modern shoppers invited to increasingly think in terms of personal indulgence. However, even when a Chinese person rejects the basics of the Confucian philosophy, there is no question that their values have been shaped by them.

Confucian ideas find vent in many modern habits. The Chinese pay enormous attention to rank and social status. You will never find a senior political leader inviting journalists or colleagues to address them by their

given name. In most formal or semi-formal situations, even using a polite-but-generic, 'Mr' or 'Mrs' is inadequate. Instead there are scores of respectful titles, specific to one's job and position. Hence Mr Wang, a teacher, will be always addressed by his students as 'Teacher Wang', or Mr Liu, a business executive, will be hailed as 'Manager Liu', even during a chat around the water cooler.

A vital thread in the fabric of Chinese society is the notion of 'guanxi'. Translated literally as 'relationship', *guanxi* is essential for anyone with any hopes of social climbing or business success in China. The word refers to the access a person has to people in power, and, perhaps more importantly, how well trusted they are by those people. To that extent, it can be seen as an outgrowth of the Confucian ethic, as it moulds a system where a person works his way onwards and upwards by paying respect to the established power structure, rather than challenging or innovating. *Guanxi* is acquired gradually; you earn *guanxi* by doing favours, and you cash your *guanxi* in when you ask for something back. There is virtually no law that cannot be circumvented, and no misdeed that →



Dance troupe in Kunming city. GRAHAM BOND

## 3 WAYS TO GET TO GRIPS WITH CHINA'S DIVERSITY

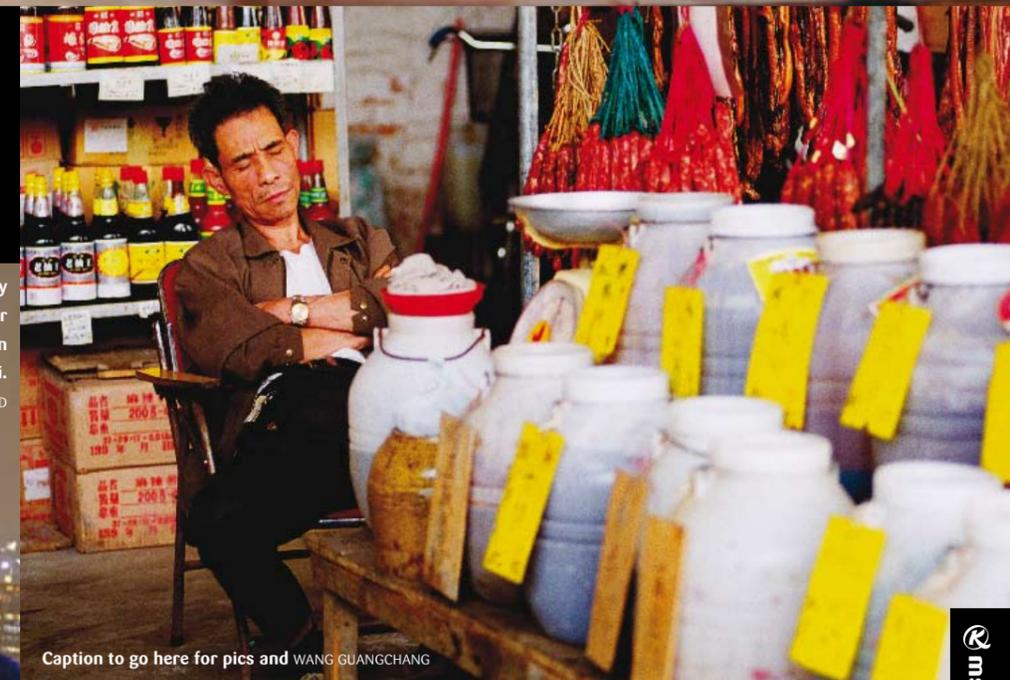
**1 PEOPLE**  
 56 ethnic groups, each with their own language, and, in the case of the most distinct groups (Tibetan, Mongolian and Uighur), a quite separate written script.

**2 GEOGRAPHY**  
 China's landscapes range from the Himalayas in the far southwest, the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts in the north-west and the rolling grasslands of Inner Mongolia to the frigid wastelands of the northeast (where the Northern Lights are sometimes visible), the quartzite canyons and limestone karst forests of central areas, the powdery beaches of Hainan Island and the tropical rainforests of Yunnan in the deep southwest.

**3 FOOD**  
 Four great schools of cuisine flourish across China, including the exotic Cantonese (crocodile, dog, snake), the sweet-toothed, seafood-loving Huaiyang, the chilli-drenched Sichuanese, and the dumpling-doting Shandong.

# 33%

Estimated proportion of world's total number of cranes that were in Shanghai during the construction boom of the 1990s



Migrant factory workers pose for a photograph in Shanghai. GRAHAM BOND

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# 1.34 billion

Estimated population of China. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and the democratization of Eastern Europe, there are now more people living under communism than there were at the height of the Cold War in the early 1980s.



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GRAHAM BOND

cannot be swept under the carpet, by a person with sufficient *guanxi* to temporarily bend the statutes in your favour. However, what is routinely dismissed by overseas observers as simple corruption can be seen as a nuanced system which provides a solid framework upon which all of society operates, top to bottom.

Another Confucian priority still alive and kicking is the enduring strength of the family unit. Internal economic migration and the one-child policy have both placed huge strains on the traditional primacy of the family but, for the most part, filial bonds are as strong as ever. For many millions of people in their 40s, 50s and 60s, all hopes of a better life are staked on the success of their children, who are able to receive a modern education and cope with the massive changes that have taken place in Chinese society. The elderly still routinely live with their offspring (and in-laws), and it's quite common for young people in good jobs to buy houses, cars and expensive holidays for their parents, even before they treat themselves to such luxuries.

Broadly speaking, the Chinese are a conservative people, a position that has perhaps evolved from Confucianism's natural preference for stability over freedom. There's a fundamental acceptance of constraint that is in marked contrast to the 'follow your dreams' ethos of the western world. Young people can often be heard remarking on the 'open' character of western people, a euphemism that refers (slightly pejoratively) to perceived sexual

- 30** Number of Chinese US Dollar billionaires
- 150 million** Stock marker investors in China
- 338 million** Chinese internet users
- 74 million** Communist Party members
- 70 million approx** Chinese Christians

mores. And then there's the stoicism that many Chinese are capable of displaying when faced with difficulties. The Chinese are not a demonstrative race, especially in public where shouting and screaming is guaranteed to result in the loss of 'face' – another traditional Chinese notion which remains strong.

Away from Confucianism's influence, language is one of the strongest ancient binds in modern China. With a documented history of more than 3,200 years, Chinese is the world's oldest surviving written language. The earliest examples of Chinese were found on bone fragments used in divination rites during the Shang dynasty (around 1500–1066 BC). Like ancient Egyptian, the Chinese of this era comprised a series of relatively simple picture signs, but evolved into today's more abstract and complex formations.

China's most traditional characteristics demand special attention, but there are still ways a visitor can taste China's traditional culture without spending an eternity in cultural contemplation. Tea-drinking, a habit favoured by emperors of old, is still as precious as ever to the average Chinese.

Ironically, coffee shops are more ubiquitous than tea-houses in commercial areas, but that's only because coffee is still largely regarded as a curious, and lucrative, Western novelty. Visit any restaurant, or family home, and it's tea that will be offered as a staple.

Perhaps the most celebrated and enduring facet of 'traditional' China is food itself. It is difficult to overstate just how important food is to all tiers of Chinese society, acting as social lubricant, tool of business and rhythm of life. It is medicinal, sacrificial and ceremonial. Where in the West one might greet a friend with an enquiry after their health, in China the stock opening gambit is 'Chi fan le mei you?' (Have you eaten yet?). The restaurant is the stage for the vast majority of all social interaction in China. Round tables are usually built for at least eight people, and lunch breaks for schools and state-run businesses are up to three hours long. Slow dining is an almost holy principle. You will rarely, if ever, be encouraged to hurry along, no matter how late.

At every sunrise and every sunset, somewhere inside every Chinese city there is a square where couples shuffle and twirl →

## CHINA

-52.3°C Lowest ever recorded temperature  
49.6°C Highest ever recorded temperature

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WANG YUANCHANG

without care. Frail septuagenarians, single mothers, curious kids – everybody, it seems, does it. China's outdoor dancing habit never fails to charm first-time visitors, with its impossibly quaint and old-fashioned feel. But the appeal is not only in the wondrous lack of self-consciousness of participants – it's in the detail. The steps, for example, are ballroom dancing steps. The backing music, boomed out from huge speakers, is swing, hip-hop, and rock-and-roll. Most of the constituent parts of this cultural phenomenon are imported, and yet there is a profound sense of the 'Chineseness' of the experience. In this regard, dancing serves as a wonderful metaphor for China's peculiar brand of modernity.

### THE NEW

As we are told *ad nauseum* by the mass media, China is a rising superpower and the transformation appears to be confirmed when arriving in the country. Land at the new Sir Norman Foster-designed terminal of Beijing Capital International Airport, or arrive at Guangzhou East Railway Station, and everything that draws the eye – the highrises, the flyovers, the modern architecture – feels new. Bland, Soviet-styled tenements can still be found, but they go almost unnoticed now. They are the past, slowly being bulldozed for swish new present.

Urbanisation in China is rampant. The clichéd image of the rice farmer, working in the lee of some misty mountain, no more represents modern China than the rootin'-tootin' cowboy does modern America. After

**492m** Height of China's tallest building, the 101-storey Shanghai World Financial Center  
**2.36m** Height of the tallest man, Bao Xishun  
**431kph** Speed of the world's fastest commercial train, the Shanghai Maglev

years of economic migration, there are now more people living in the cities than the countryside. As a result, China's so-called 'megalopolises' are teeming. The travel writer Paul Theroux once noted that the 'Chinese are comforted by crowds.' To this may be added 'noise'. And 'bright lights'. And 'cigarette smoke'. The hustle and bustle of the Chinese city is one of its greatest marvels. Chinese street life has a raw energy. Walk out at night and your senses will be assailed: pungent smells from whirring extractor fans, loud music from shops that never seem to close, bright lights from overhanging street signs. Neon may have been discovered in France but the Chinese have adopted it as if it were their own. Even the countryside itself resembles the urban in places: trees, mountains and caves are decorated with bright lights, chimneys protrude from otherwise agricultural fields and – even less appealingly – streams are full of litter. The peasants of China are still eulogised in communist literature, but the word has become a pejorative term to a new class of urbanite who see only backwardness and poverty beyond the city limits.

With urbanisation has come commercialization. Communist China is – to

borrow a phrase from Chinese émigré author Xinran – a land of 'extreme capitalism'. As is often the case in fictional sci-fi dystopias, advertising is splashed over almost every available surface. Even in the countryside, walls once daubed with communist propaganda now advertise repair services, or phone dealers. Competition is fierce, but – as nearly all multinationals have decided – it's worth the fight for the enormous potential rewards that a market of 1.3 billion necessarily brings. Shopping is sport in China. Malls have sprouted like green vegetables, with big foreign brands like Walmart competing with domestic equivalents on a fairly even playing field. The Chinese are a brand-obsessed nation, and luxury retailers have benefited from the willingness among rich Chinese to pay huge premiums for high-quality goods, in spite of the ubiquity of high-quality, ultra-cheap fakes.

China is famously the source of many of the world's great inventions – paper, gunpowder, the steam engine, the spinning wheel, the printing press, mechanical clocks, compasses, the list goes on and on. These days, its love affair with new technology is perhaps most evident in the popularity of the internet. China has →



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38  
Chinese UNESCO  
Heritage Sites (only Italy  
and Spain have more)

more internet users than any other nation on earth. Even in rural Tibet, Buddhist monks can sometimes be caught sitting before flickering screens in smoky 'net' bars.

### THE BLEND

What makes China feel so modern is its knack for rapaciously absorbing foreign influences and ideas and yet, somehow, making them part of the Chinese way. Whether life here is old or new, progressive or reactionary, there is one point of common agreement for nearly all first-time visitors: things appear to be done just that little bit differently in this part of the world. Many things are mostly the same, but there can seem to be a paradigm shift whereby even simple things – dining etiquette, musical scales, driving habits – become disorientating in their subtle differences. On the one hand, Chinese are naturally proud of their uniqueness: population, higher; history, longer; culture, deeper than all others. On the other hand, there is festering resentment of the misunderstandings that so frequently crop up because of these differences. Those Chinese who have had the opportunity to travel, often complain their homeland is too frequently caricatured by people who have struggled, or not even tried, to understand its subtleties and complexities. What is true is that, for a variety of cultural, historic and political reasons, China has taken its own long, meandering path to the curious position it's in today: part superpower, part developing nation; half modern, half ancient. But this idiosyncrasy, and these blends and contradictions, are what make China so fascinating. ©

## 3 GOOD REASONS FOR DOING BUSINESS IN CHINA

### 1 OPTIMISM

In a nation where a great proportion of people spend their days negotiating, bargaining and doing deals, China has an effervescent, entrepreneurial spirit.

### 2 OPENNESS

In a single century, China has gone from being overtly hostile to outsiders, to embracing foreign influences with an almost-religious zeal. Expect to be made welcome.

### 3 REVOLUTION

Knowing you're playing a part in one of history's greatest social and economic upheavals comes with its own excitements.