

FAST FACTS

POPULATION: 1.3 billion, the world's largest (U.S.: 310 million)

PER CAPITA GDP: \$6,600 (U.S.: \$46,000)

ETHNIC GROUPS: Han Chinese, 92%; most other Chinese belong to minorities, including the Manchus, Mongols, and Tibetans

MAJOR RELIGIONS: Daoism (Taoism), Buddhism

LANGUAGES: Chinese is written the same way throughout the country. When spoken, however, the language varies so widely that people from different regions may not understand each other. Mandarin, the official dialect, is most widely understood and is now taught in all schools.

LITERACY: males, 96%; females, 88% (U.S.: 99/99)

*GDP stands for gross domestic product, per capita means per person. The amount is the value of all items produced in a country in a year, divided by the population. It is often used as a measure of a nation's wealth.

SOURCES: The World Factbook 2010 (CIA); 2010 World Population Data Sheet (Population Reference Bureau)

Words to Know

- **Communist** [adj]: related to a highly authoritarian government in which the state controls the economy, and personal freedom is severely limited
- **Intellectual** [n]: an educated person interested in serious study and thought
- **Third-world** [adj]: referring to undeveloped countries that are poor and have few resources
- **Totalitarian** [adj]: related to rule by a dictatorial leader or government

CHINA

WITH ITS ECONOMIC MIGHT, CHINA IS EMERGING AS A GLOBAL SUPERPOWER

BY DAN LEVIN
in Beijing

By the time dawn breaks, Beijing, China's capital, is bustling with activity. Rice peddlers and knife sharpeners roam the streets in wagons, calling out their wares, while thousands of bicycling commuters weave in and out of snarling traffic, their bells jangling.

Soon after, Song Yanbo (YEN-bo), 14, starts his day with an apple and some bread. At 7:15, he heads off to school in his uniform, a teal tracksuit. Before classes begin, everyone gathers in the school yard for a long run and exercises, even in winter.

Yanbo's* schedule is grueling: classes in math, Chinese, English, chemistry, physics, and politics every day. He even spends his weekends in special classes that the Chinese call "cram school," studying material there wasn't time to cover during the week.

Sports teams? Art classes? Piano practice? Forget it. Yanbo is way too busy. If he's lucky, maybe he can find some time for computer games or reading before bed.

But Yanbo gets top grades and

doesn't mind studying—especially physics. "Physics helps us understand the nature of things and the world around us," he tells JS.

Chinese students, drilled from an early age in test-taking and rote learning, are among the best in the world at math and science—far outpacing their American counterparts.

Yanbo and millions of other Chinese middle-schoolers devote their lives to preparing for tests like the Zhongkao (*jong-KOW*), a rigorous high school entrance exam that can take three days to complete. These tests can determine whether a kid will get into a good school—and then land a good job.

"I feel pressure to succeed because I'm the only child," Yanbo says. "I'm my parents' only hope."

The relentless need to excel can place a heavy burden on young people, says Yanbo's classmate Xie Wanzhu (*SHE-EH wahn-JOO*).

"Lots of students used to be friends but now won't talk to each other because of so much competition," the 15-year-old tells JS. "Sometimes I lose my homework only to find it in the garbage."



◀ College students in Pengzhou, China, take a break after classes.



▲ Wanzhu wants to be a singer or a novelist.



▶ Yanbo is drawn to math because, he says, "it makes us more intelligent."

Yet it is this kind of ambition that helps explain why China's economy is booming. The clothes, toys, computers, and countless other goods it manufactures dominate worldwide markets, filling the shelves of Wal-Mart and other stores in the U.S.

A Breathtaking Rise

During the recent recession, while other countries struggled to keep their economies afloat, China's share of global trade increased. Experts predict that the country will soon overtake the U.S. as the world's top economic superpower.

Through most of the 20th century, China suffered under an

economy wrecked by decades of war, followed by mismanagement by its **Communist** government. Then, in 1978, the government began an ambitious program of reform, adopting elements of capitalism and opening its doors to international investment and trade.

The results have been breathtaking. The reforms have lifted millions of people out of poverty, created a growing middle class, and transformed China from a poor, **third-world** nation into a global powerhouse. One World Bank economist called the progress "an achievement unprecedented in human history."

Life Under Mao

The history of modern China began in 1949, when rebel leader Mao Zedong led a Communist revolution, seizing control of the country and renaming it the People's Republic of China. As Chairman of the Communist Party and supreme leader, Mao ruled China for nearly three decades.

But his **totalitarian** regime and its stranglehold on the economy had disastrous effects. A program called the Great Leap Forward, begun in 1958, was designed to quickly convert China into an industrial power by sending farmers to work in factories. Instead, the policy destroyed the country's agricultural system. A series of famines claimed the lives of an estimated 35 million to 50 million Chinese.

In recent decades, China has made an effort to control and provide for its huge population through

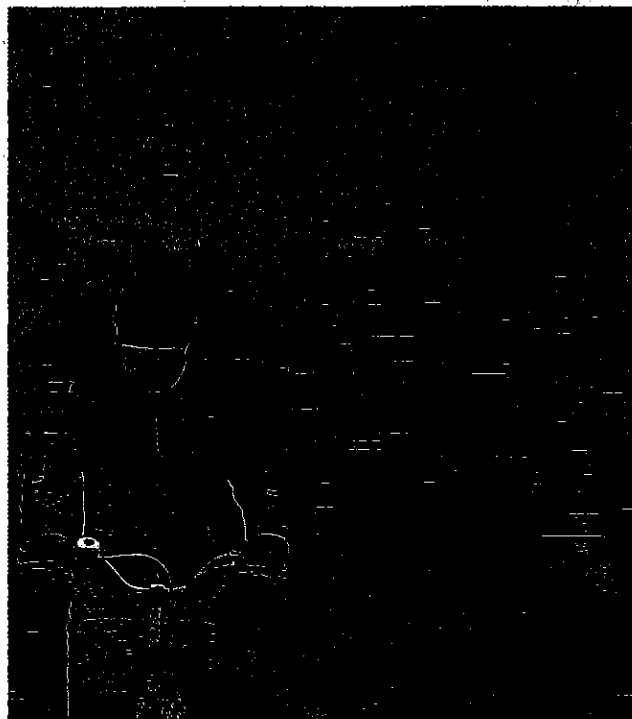
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COVER STORY



▲ Workers on an assembly line in a toy factory make dolls—largely for the U.S. and other overseas markets.

▶ Factory smoke and car exhaust make the air in China's cities among the most polluted in the world.



its one-child policy. Yanbo is a product of that policy, which, in the 1980s, sought to prevent most Chinese from having a second child.

Wanzhu's parents grew up during another dark period, the Cultural Revolution. Beginning in the late 1960s, Chairman Mao sought to eliminate challenges to his Communist philosophy by closing schools and persecuting intellectuals, among other measures. During this reign of terror, Chinese were encouraged to betray each other to the authorities, families were torn apart, and the economy again failed.

After Mao died in 1976, the government recognized that changes were needed. China's new leaders instituted a "second revolution" of reforms, which, over time, improved life dramatically. As a result, millions of young Chinese today enjoy many of the same things as American kids, including iPods, computer games, and basketball, which is hugely popular.

Wanzhu's family embodies these changes in the country. Her parents were some of the first students to attend the country's newly reopened universities in the 1970s. They are proud of their daughter's grades and happy that she was chosen to lead her class's Communist Youth League group.

But China's spectacular eco-

people have crowded into cities, working in factories to make the shirts and sneakers that the rest of the world buys. Many of them work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, earning as little as \$150 a month. Critics say that this massive supply of cheap labor has made it impossible for U.S. factories to compete, and has cost many American jobs.

“I feel pressure to succeed because I'm the only child. I'm my parents' only hope.”

nomical progress has not come without costs, including deep scars on the country itself. As factories pop up and 2,000 new cars drive onto the roads of Beijing each day, China's environment has suffered. Pollution in Chinese cities is among the world's worst, with air so contaminated that children are often warned not to play outside.

Then there are the conditions for Chinese workers. Millions of farmers and poor, uneducated

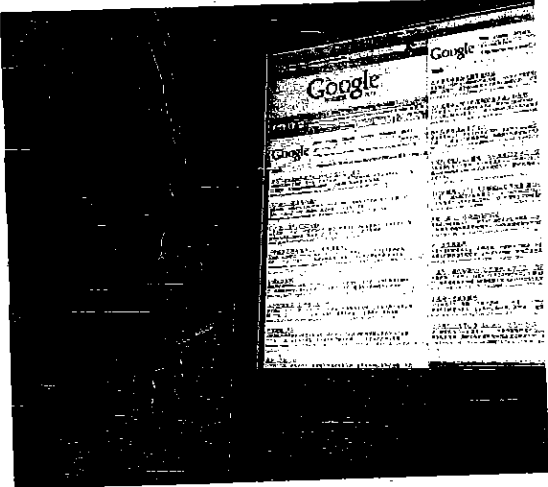
The U.S. is also concerned that China will use its new wealth to build up its military and challenge the U.S. and its allies.

While greater economic freedom has improved the day-to-day lives of millions of Chinese, the government has not allowed them any more political freedom. Unlike the U.S., China is not a democracy. Its citizens cannot vote for their leaders (*see sidebar*). The government controls the media and blocks many



◀ A guard in Beijing's Forbidden City stands at attention below a portrait of Mao Zedong, China's longtime Communist dictator.

▽ A student in Beijing looks at the Google China site. Many Web sites are blocked, but young Chinese often find a way around that.

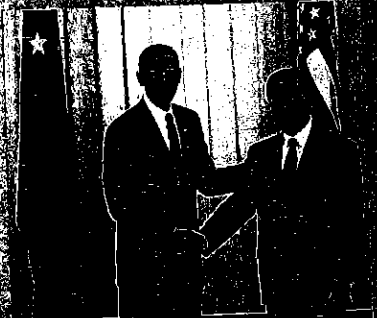


China's a One-Party Dictatorship.



Since the 1949 Revolution, the government has been controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Every key government official also has a leadership role in the Party. The Party's top body is called the Politburo (political bureau). Most important decisions, including choosing the country's leaders, are made by that organization's Standing Committee, an elite group that today has nine members.

EXECUTIVE BRANCH: The President, Hu Jintao, is China's chief of state as well as General Secretary of the Communist Party. He serves a five-year term. The Premier, Wen Jiabao, is the head of the State Council, a body of 50 officials who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the country.



President Barack Obama meets with Chinese President Hu Jintao.

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH: In theory, the National People's Congress is charged with passing the country's laws. In reality, the Congress—whose members are appointed by regional governmental bodies—mostly ratifies decisions made by the State Council and the Party.

JUDICIAL BRANCH: China doesn't have an independent judicial branch. The Supreme People's Court is the nation's highest. Like all lower courts, it bases its rulings on Communist Party policies.

foreign Web sites, such as YouTube. Asked if she had a Facebook page, Wanzhu asked, "What's that?"

Those Chinese who reveal corruption, demand human rights, or promote democracy can face severe punishment from the government. One of the country's most prominent human rights activists, Liu Xiaobo (*lee-oo shao-BOH*), was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last December. He could not attend the ceremony in Oslo, Norway, because the government had put him in prison for speaking out.

Police Listen In

Xiao* (*SHAO*), a 16-year-old from Beijing, has grown up knowing this risk personally. His father, a lawyer, has defended people who the government considers enemies. The police listen in on his father's phone conversations and sometimes won't let him leave his apartment. Once, while trying to meet with a foreign journalist, he was detained and forced to spend the night in jail.

"I know a lot more about this society than my classmates," Xiao says. "What I'm being taught in class is not always true."

In his history class, the lessons strictly follow the Communist Party's version of events. "We learn a lot about how the United States is a terrible country that has done bad things," Xiao says. "All this anti-American stuff is forced down our throats. And even though I don't believe it, I have to give those answers in order to graduate."

To escape from the endless studying, Xiao watches Japanese anime cartoons and hopes to one day translate them into Chinese. He relates to the weird characters because he too feels like he doesn't fit in, especially at school. There he has to wear the same uniform and have the same opinions as everyone else.

"In China you're not supposed to think for yourself," he says. "The government controls so much of what we do and who we are. But at least I know the truth."

*To protect his family, Xiao's real name is not used.

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: ALYSON/GETTY IMAGES; MARTIN PUDOVASE/FOTOSTOCK; PIERRE BRESSARD/REA/REXUS; FAR RIGHT: SIDIBEAR; FENG LU/GETTY IMAGES