The China Challenge

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

BY DAN LEVIN
in Beijing

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 economic growth and development.

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 Walmart 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.”

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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 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 economic 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. Billions of farmers and poor, uneducated people have crowded into cities, working in factories to make the shirts and sneakers that 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.

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. The U.S. 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 answers in order to graduate.

The government controls the media and blocks many 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 (see-naw-shoe-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.

“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.”

China Is 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.

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.

**I feel pressure to succeed because I’m the only child. I’m my parents’ only hope.**
Two centuries ago, Napoleon called China a “sleeping giant, warning, ‘Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world.’”

Today, China is clearly awake, and clearly a giant. The question is, how will it shake the world? Will China’s ability to produce goods so efficiently help the economies of the U.S. and other countries or hurt them? Will China’s military be used to keep the peace in Asia, or to force its neighbors to do as China wishes? Also, what kind of challenge will the U.S. face from China? The U.S. is still the world’s biggest economic and military superpower, but will that last?

Study the map, then answer the questions below.

Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What is China’s capital?
2. What geographic feature lies along part of the border with Mongolia?
3. Which countries with names ending in “stan” border China?
4. Which city is located at 29°N, 106°E?
5. Which river connects that city to Shanghai?
6. Which body of water separates China and the Philippines?
7. About how far is it, in miles, from Guangzhou (in the south) to Beijing?
8. Which area on the map is governed by China but claimed by India?
9. Which river forms part of China’s border with North Korea?
10. What is China’s population density? What problems do you think a large number of people per square mile might cause?