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# China's Ethnic Minorities



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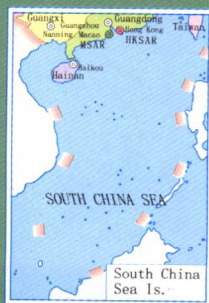
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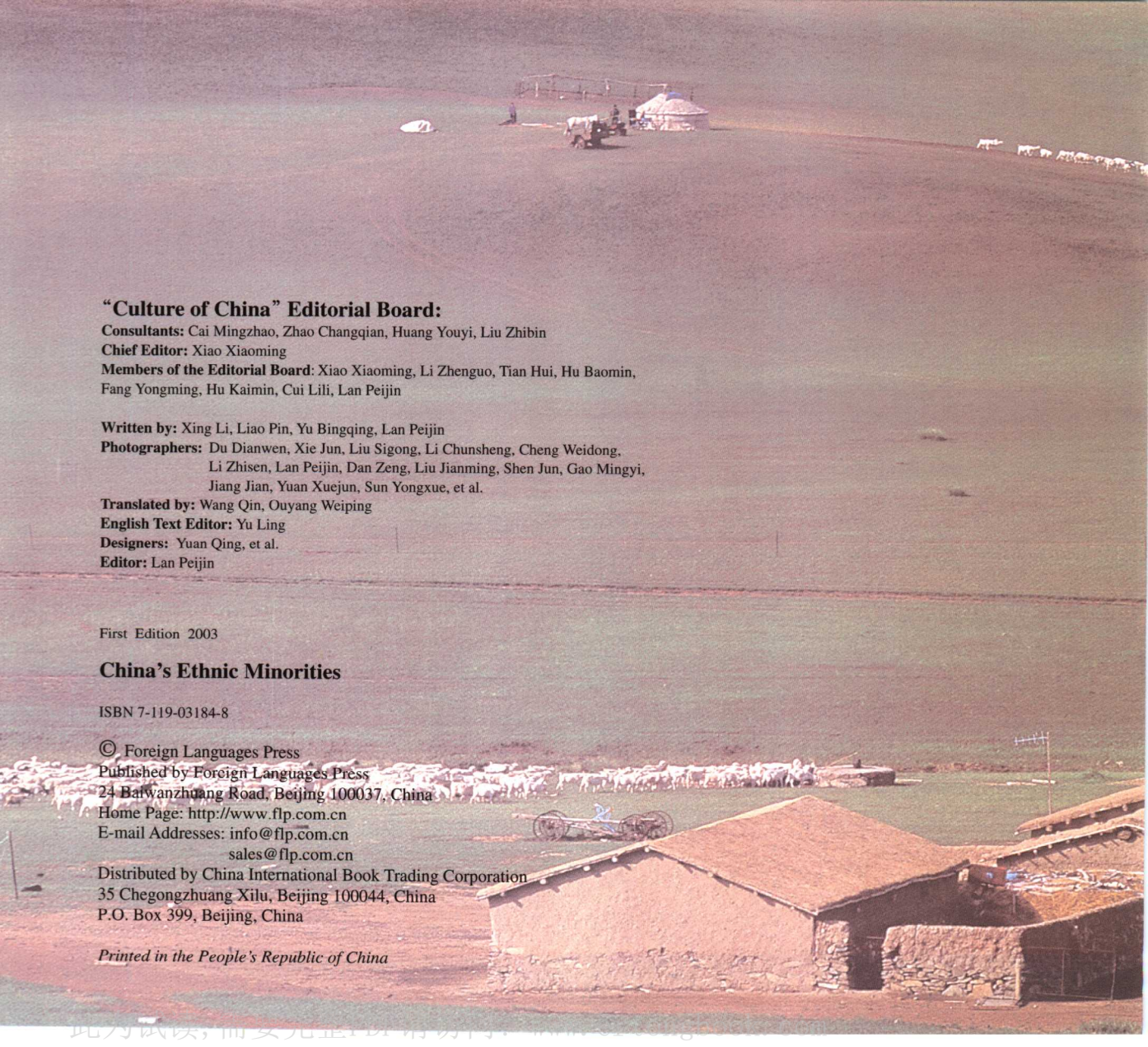
# Administrative Map of China



## China's Ethnic Minorities



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## China's Ethnic Minorities



# China's Ethnic Minorities

China was a unitary multi-ethnic state as early as in the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC). But at that time, Qin rule embraced only the agricultural areas along the Yangtze River, the Yellow River and the middle and lower reaches of the Pearl River, while in the vast area of northern China lived a vigorous nomadic people — the Hun ethnic group. The territory of the Hun tribes ranged from the Greater and Lesser Xing'an Mountains in the east to the Qilian Mountains, and even as far as the Tianshan Mountains in the west. The Great Wall, the construction of which had started as far back as the Warring States Period (475-221BC), divided China basically into agricultural and pastoral areas. However, the Great Wall could not separate the two areas completely. Their thriving animal husbandry, including the breeding of horses, brought the Hun people into close commercial contact with the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220). Together with other nationalities they had a frequent presence in the Central Plains (comprising the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River), promoting communication and integration between the southern agricultural area and northern pastoral area. This indicates that all the nationalities in China at that time developed the territory of the Chinese nation and at the same time together constructed Chinese culture. When the Huaxia, Youmiao and Baiyue peoples were building their civilizations in the Yellow and Yangtze River valleys, the ancestors of many other ethnic groups were creating their own civilizations in China's border areas.

With a history of more than 5,000 years, today China has 56 ethnic groups. In addition to the Han people, who form the majority of the population, there are 55 minority nationalities. Because they maintain an equal, harmonious and fraternal relationship with the Han people, they are called "fraternal nationalities." They are also called "minority" nationalities because their populations are relatively small in comparison to the Han population.

Although the 55 minority nationalities make up only 6.7% of China's population, they live in areas constituting 50%-60% of the total land area of the country. For historical reasons, most of the minority people live in the frontier provinces and regions. In the course of history, the different nationalities have made uneven progress in social, economic and cultural aspects. Thus, even in the mid-20th century, some minority nationalities still lived in conditions similar to those of the late stage of primitive society or slave society, while others were in the transitional phase from slave to feudal society or were at the stage of feudal society. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Central Government adopted steps to reform and develop production in the minority-nationality areas, enabling the local people to leap over several stages of social development and enter socialist society.

The 55 ethnic minorities use more than 80 languages, classified as members of the Han-Tibetan, Altaic, Austronesian, Indo-European and other language families. Many of the ethnic minorities developed indigenous scripts with which to write their own languages, but only 30 of the traditional ones are still in existence. Tibetan writing dates from the seventh century; the Bai and Zhuang scripts first appeared during the Tang (681-907) and Song dynasties (960-1279), respectively; the Mongol, Dai, Uyghur, Kazak, and Kirgiz scripts were formed in the 13th century; the Yi and Yao forms of writing date from a very early period in the history; and in the 17th century,



Manchu and Xibo scripts appeared. The Dongba characters of the Naxi nationality and Shui characters of the Shui nationality are particularly interesting as they are pictographic ones, and are still in use today. Following Liberation in 1949, scientific scripts were invented for over 20 minority nationalities whose languages had previously had no written form, such as those of the Miao, Dong, Va, Li, Tujia, Buyi and Hani.

From ancient times, these ethnic minorities have been living scattered across the vast territory of China in compact communities. Located in different geographical environments, they promoted economic development in the light of local circumstances, creating Chinese civilization as a whole. Experts have affirmed that the Gaomiao site inhabited by the Dong people at Qianyang on the middle reaches of the Yuanjiang River is a relic of the paddy rice cultivation culture of more than 7,000 years ago. A great number of pottery pieces bearing patterns of the sun, birds, flowers and trees, etc. have been unearthed there. According to legend, it was birds that brought the Dong people corn seeds. The 9,000-year-old Pengtoushan Mountain Culture of the Tujia people of Hunan Province is also thought to belong to the paddy rice culture phase. Pottery shards discovered there display patterns of the sun, the moon and flowers, which are characteristic of the paddy rice culture. In the low mountains and river valleys in the west and southwest of Yunnan Province, the Jingpo, Achang, Yi, Blang and Jino ethnic groups developed paddy rice cultivation on terraced fields in the distant past. Textual research shows that perhaps it was the ancestors of the Dai nationality that first grew paddy rice in China. The Hani nationality is famed for cultivating tea bushes, some of which produce Pu'er tea, which is called "green gold." There are plenty of tea bushes over 100 years old still flourishing there. The She nationality also has a centuries-long history of cultivating tea bushes. The Huiming tea of Zhejiang Province, Oolong tea of Guangdong Province and Beiling tea of Fujian Province, all produced by members of the She nationality, enjoy great popularity. Huiming tea was an item of tribute during the Ming and Qing dynasties and was awarded a gold medal at the 1915 Panama International Exhibition. Chinese ethnic groups have made numerous other inventions and contributions in the economic field.

Chinese civilization has both an agricultural and a stockbreeding tradition: The former was the common fruit of the Han and other nationalities, while the latter was engaged in mainly by minority nationalities. There are vast grasslands in northeast China, ranging from the Xing'an Mountains westwards to Central Asia, via the Yinshan and Tianshan mountain ranges in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. From the Tianshan Mountains to the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau a crescent-shaped pastoral area extends to the Zhongdian area in Yunnan. This crescent is today home to some modern nomadic peoples, such as the Mongol, Ewenki, Kazak, Kirgiz and Tibet. In the Yinshan and Tianshan Mountains, ancient rock paintings record the history of the domestication of the horse, cow, yak, goat, sheep, donkey, mule and camel by ethnic-minority nomads. The latter paid particular attention to horse breeding, and for centuries would barter fine horses for tea produced in the agricultural areas of south China.

In the field of textiles, indispensable for clothing and furnishings, since ancient times the Han people of the Central Plains have enjoyed a universal reputation for their accomplishments in silkworm breeding, silk reeling and silk weaving, while cotton textiles were developed by ethnic minorities. The Li people of Hainan Province are especially skilled at weaving. In the 13th century, the famous Han weaver Huang Daopo traveled to remote Yazhou [today's Sanya City on Hainan Island] and learned the technique of making fine cotton cloth from Li women. She then spread it to Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, promoting the development of the cotton textile industry in the Central Plains. Beautiful brocades made by the Zhuang, Li, Dong and Dai minorities were first produced more than 1,000 years ago.

The Li, Miao and Yao peoples in the south also made many kinds of textiles such as Boluo cloth, Mao (hawkbill) cloth, Zhu cloth [light blue or white fine cotton cloth], Yaoban cloth [blue batik with white speckles], ramie cloth and kapok cloth. The bright and colorful patterns of these types of cloth demonstrate the diverse characteristics of the different nationalities. Wax printing is a unique technique invented by certain of China's ethnic minorities for printing and dyeing hand-made cloth. The patterns emerge natural and pretty, with a clear distinction between blue and white. As wax shows natural cracks after cooling off, after dyeing wax printing produces an unusual decorative effect with distinctive ethnic features. In addition, China's embroidery enjoys a high reputation throughout the world, especially that of the country's Miao, Li, Dong and Bai nationalities.

The minority people's great accomplishments in the crafts of weaving and embroidery are fully demonstrated in their local costumes. Their clothes are of high-quality materials, excellent workmanship and dazzling splendor. Since these ethnic groups live in different regions and engage in various kinds of productive labor, their clothes are of diverse designs. For instance, the northern nationalities inhabiting the Mongolian Plateau, Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and Xinjiang Basin pasture land usually wear long garments, which are quite different in design for each nationality. The Mongols wear a loose garment with long sleeves, colorful edging and the lower hem covering the feet. The Tibetan robe is looser than that of the Mongols, with the left lapel bigger than the right one. The Uygur usually wear a kind of Chinese-style cotton coat, with a stiff collar, no buttons, and the lower hem extending to the knee. This kind of garment is called *qipapan*. The Kazak people wear a light and warm overcoat made of camel's hair, called *kupu*. The Hezhen group, living along the downstream of the Heilongjiang River, lived by fishing in the past, so their traditional garments are made of fish skin. The Manchu men's traditional clothes is a long gown and mandarin jacket, while the women's is a loose cheongsam reaching to the ankle. In the early 20th century, the cheongsam evolved into a close-fitting dress extending below the knee with high neck, narrow sleeves, slender waist and two slits on the left and right, buttoning down the right side. The unique design is graceful and elegant, displaying the beautiful figures of eastern women.

Both men and women of the minority nationalities living in southern China and engaging in farming usually wear skirts. They vary greatly in design and pattern. Generally speaking, the Yi, Dong, Miao, Lisu, Bouyei, Primi and De'ang nationalities wear long skirts, while the Dai, Zhuang, Gaoshan, Blang, Lahu, Gelao and Li nationalities, straight ones, and the Hani, Li, Jino and Va nationalities, short ones. The long and short skirts also show differences in the placing of pleats in different regions. The upper three parts of the long skirt of the Yi nationality are made of cloth of different colors. The fourth part is pleated. The long Dai and Primi skirts drag along the ground, with the former folded in the upper part and close-fitting in the waist, while the latter is spread out and flowing in the lower part. The Gelao straight skirt of modern times is made of a whole piece of blue cloth, retaining its ancient simplicity. The Li women of tropical Hainan Island wear skirts which extend only to the knee, making them convenient for work in paddy fields. Of those wearing short skirts, the Hani women wear pleated black short skirts, the pleated skirts of the Miao in southeastern Guizhou are only 30 cm long, and the Shui women wear short trousers underneath their skirts.

The architecture of ethnic minorities shows distinct national and local features. The nomads among the Mongolians and Tibetans, roaming the frigid 3,000-m-high Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, live in white or black felt tents. The Tibetan and Qiang nationalities are expert at constructing watchtower-like buildings. The buildings of the Zhuang, Bouyei, Dong and Shui communities in southern Yunnan, southern

Guizhou and southern Hunan are all of wooden structure and have railings. The Li live in boat-shaped houses with railings, ingeniously constructed and unique in design. The villages of the Dong nationality are noted for their drum towers and covered bridges.

As far as art is concerned, China's minority nationalities have a tradition as long and splendid as that of the Han. Rock paintings executed by ancient tribespeople, discovered in the Yinshan Mountains of Inner Mongolia, the Huashan Mountains in Guangxi and Hutubi County in Xinjiang, are masterpieces of primitive expression. Throughout China's history, there was no lack of minority painters enjoying equal fame with their Han counterparts. Murals in temples of the Lamaist faith built in large numbers since the 15th century, mostly found in Tibetan- and Mongolian-nationality areas of western China, are unique and outstanding works of painting. Those in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, in particular, are famed for their grand composition, bright colors and diverse forms of expression. Tangkha (scroll pictures) are another genre related to Lamaism. The picture is outlined on cloth or silk, and then filled in with colors made of special plant and mineral materials produced in Tibet. Tangkha can be classified into four categories: embroidered Tangkha, jacquard Tangkha, applique Tangkha and precious-bead Tangkha. The latter are decorated with pearls, coral, turquoise, gold and silver, and are rare treasures.

Chinese minority people are expert singers and dancers. Many of their songs, dances and musical pieces enjoy high reputations both at home and abroad. Northern songs are resounding and powerful; in particular, the Mongolian pastoral songs are slow, melodious and deep. Southern music and songs are cheerful and unrestrained, for instance, epitomized by the Dong people's Dage and the Zhuang people's Paige songs. The *Twelve Mukam* and *Thirteen Melodies for Stringed Instruments* of the Uygur are rare and precious relics of Chinese folk music. Among dances, the most famous are the Peacock Dance of the Dai, the Hair-tossing Dance of the Gaoshan, the Hand-in-Hand Group Circle Dance of the Dong, the Wooden Drum Dance of the Va, the Reed-pipe Dance of the Miao, and the Horse Dance, Eagle Dance and Milking Dance of the Mongolians. The literature of ethnic minorities is rich in form and vitality. The thrilling love songs, earth-shaking epics and countless folk tales passed down from generation to generation contain the essence of the culture, spirit and wisdom of China's ethnic minorities. The three great epics – *The Epic of King Gesar*, *Manas* and *Janger*, have enjoyed continuous popularity for centuries, and can take their rightful place among other epic masterpieces of international literature.

In the fields of science and technology, minority ethnic groups have produced many outstanding and talented people. Emperor Xianzong (reigned 1251-1260) of the Yuan Dynasty, of the Mongolian nationality, was the first person in China to study Euclid's treatise on geometry. Another Mongolian, Ming Antu, in the 18th century was the first person in China to devise a method of calculating  $\pi$  and wrote a four-volume book on it. Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty (reigned 1662-1722), of the Manchu nationality, was also an accomplished mathematician. In addition, he was the chief compiler of *The Origins of the Calendric System, Music and Mathematics*, in 100 volumes. Ethnic groups were not behind the Han in astronomical observations and produced accurate calendars centuries ago. The Dai Calendar, the Tibetan Calendar, the Ordos Calendar of the Mongols and the Yi Calendar are all crystallizations of the wisdom of these nationalities. The famous Hui astronomer Jamal al-Din in the 13th century made an armillary sphere, azimuth compass and celestial globe, and supervised the compilation of *The Illustrated Geological Annals*. Another outstanding Mongolian scholar, Li Siguang (1889-1971), was the founder of geomechanics, exploring a new approach for probing the structure and movements of the earth's crust.

In the field of medicine, too, minority-nationality people have accumulated rich knowledge. The Tibetan, Mongolian, Uygur, Kazak

and Korean nationalities have all produced systematic bodies of medical knowledge, and the Zhuang, Yi, Dai and Li have made important contributions to medical science. Yuthok Yonten Gonpo compiled the achievements of Tibetan medicine in the *Four Medical Classics*. On the basis of this work, 79 colored wall charts were made to assist in the diagnosis of ailments and the identification of drugs.

There is a long history of friendly contacts and cultural exchanges between the nomadic lifestyle of the minority nationalities and the farming lifestyle of the Central Plains. Advanced techniques practiced in the Central Plains, such as silkworm breeding and silk reeling, and artificial irrigation, were spread into the areas inhabited by the nomadic ethnic minorities. An example of the latter technique is Xinjiang's "karez," which is an irrigation and drinking water well system involving a series of underground channels. In the seventh century, when the Tang Dynasty (618-907) Princess Wencheng went to Tibet to marry King Songtsen Gampo, she took with her many advanced techniques from the Central Plains, such as vegetable planting, pottery making, wine making and metallurgy. At the same time, some breeds of livestock developed in pastoral areas were carried into agricultural areas, which consequently improved the local farming techniques. Horses, musk, livestock, lacquerware and fine swords were brought into the Central Plains from the ethnic-minority areas of southwestern China, in exchange for porcelain, medicinal herbs, brocade and silks, and handicrafts. From ancient times to the present, ethnic minorities and the Han people have always supplied each other's needs, and integrated and developed mutually in the course of interchanges and communication.

The homelands of the minority peoples are mostly border areas of China, and therefore these regions serve as a link between China and other countries. The Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, inhabited by more than 20 nationalities at present, was called the Western Regions in ancient times, and was a bridge facilitating communication between the eastern and western civilizations. The "Silk Road" from Xi'an in Shaanxi Province at the eastern end to Central Asia, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and as far as Rome at the farthest western end, ran through the Gansu Corridor along two roads lying to the south and north, respectively, of the Tarim Basin, south of the Tianshan Mountains, and then cut across Congling Ridge. In fact, there was a much older "Silk Road" running from Sichuan Province to Myanmar and India via Yunnan Province, largely inhabited by ethnic minorities. In ancient times, this ancient road was not only one linking southern China with other parts of the world, but also a corridor for ethnic groups to travel south or north. These two channels allowed the scientific knowledge, music, art, western Christianity, Islam from Western Asia and Buddhism from India to gradually spread into the Central Plains. At the same time, China's traditional culture and science and technology, and even some handicrafts such as silk, porcelain, tea and jade ware, were carried to countries in Southeast Asia and the West.

## Population and Areas of Distribution of the Ethnic Minorities in China

(Based on the Fourth National Census, July 1, 1990)

Name	Population	Areas of Distribution	Name	Population	Areas of Distribution
Mongolian	4,802,400	Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Gansu, Hebei, Henan, Qinghai	Shui	347,100	Guizhou, Guangxi
Hui	8,612,000	Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Hebei, Qinghai, Shandong, Yunnan, Xinjiang, Anhui, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Shaanxi, Beijing, Tianjin	Dongxiang	373,700	Gansu, Xinjiang
Tibetan	4,593,100	Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan	Naxi	277,800	Yunnan, Sichuan
Uygur	7,207,000	Xinjiang	Jingpo	119,300	Yunnan
Miao	7,383,600	Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangxi, Sichuan, Hainan, Hubei	Kirgiz	143,500	Xinjiang, Heilongjiang
Yi	6,578,500	Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi	Tu	192,600	Qinghai, Gansu
Zhuang	15,555,800	Guangxi, Yunnan, Guangdong, Guizhou	Daur	121,500	Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Xinjiang
Bouyei	2,548,300	Guizhou	Mulam	160,600	Guangxi
Korean	1,923,400	Jilin, Liaoning, Heilongjiang	Qiang	198,300	Sichuan
Manchu	9,846,800	Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Hebei, Beijing, Inner Mongolia	Blang	82,400	Yunnan
Dong	2,508,600	Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi	Salar	87,500	Qinghai, Gansu
Yao	2,137,000	Guangxi, Hunan, Yunnan, Guangdong, Guizhou	Maonan	72,400	Guangxi
Bai	1,598,100	Yunnan, Guizhou	Gelao	438,200	Guizhou, Guangxi
Tujia	5,725,000	Hunan, Hubei	Achang	172,900	Xinjiang, Liaoning, Jilin
Hani	1,254,800	Yunnan	Primi	29,700	Yunnan
Kazak	1,110,800	Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai	Tajik	33,200	Xinjiang
Dai	1,025,400	Yunnan	Nu	27,200	Yunnan
Li	1,112,500	Hainan	Uzbek	14,800	Xinjiang
Lisu	574,600	Yunnan, Sichuan	Russians	13,500	Xinjiang
Va	352,000	Yunnan	Ewenki	26,400	Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang
She	634,700	Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Guangdong	De'ang	15,500	Yunnan
Gaoshan	2,900	*Taiwan, Fujian	Bonan	11,700	Gansu
Lahu	411,500	Yunnan	Yugur	12,300	Gansu
			Jing	18,700	Guangxi
			Tatar	5,100	Xinjiang
			Drung	5,800	Yunnan
			Oroqen	7,000	Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang
			Hezhen	4,300	Heilongjiang
			Moinba	7,500	Tibet
			Lhoba	2,300	Tibet
			Jino	18,000	Yunnan

\* The population figure for the Gaoshan does not include the Gaoshan in Taiwan Province.

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## 蒙古族 *The Mongolians*

Half of the Mongolian population of China lives in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the border area of northern China. The others are mostly found in every province and region in the northwest of China. The autonomous region is adorned with large stretches of beautiful grassland and several ranges of mountains on the border between the eastern and central parts. Traditionally, the Mongolians led a nomadic life, taking their herds of cattle and sheep to pasture according to the patterns of the seasons. Some still follow this traditional lifestyle. The Mongolian aristocrat Timujin (1167-1227) united all the Mongolian tribes and founded the Mongol Khanate. After several military campaigns launched westwards and southwards, the Mongolians founded the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), reuniting China and putting an end to a chaotic situation that had lasted for more than 200 years. They made Dadu (today's Beijing) the capital of the dynasty.



Look! A bride!

A Mongolian bride.



The *aobao* (heap of sand, stone or earth laid out as a road marker or boundary sign by Mongolians, formerly also worshipped as a habitation of spirits) on Aobao Mountain in Dong Ujimqin Banner is the most famous one on the Mongolian grassland. A sacrifice is held here on the third day of the sixth month by the lunar calendar every year.



Buryat Mongolian women at the Nadam Fair.



Wrestling is a favorite Mongolian sport.



A Mongolian family on the Xilin Gol Grassland.

