

MEET CHINA MEET CHINA MEET CHINA MEET CHINA

ETHNIC GROUPS OF CHINA 56 ETHNIC GROUPS OF CHINA



Meet China Book Series (3)

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Zheng Qian

中国有56个民族

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北京语言大学出版社
BEIJING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中国有56个民族:英文/郑茜著;朱文俊译. --
北京:北京语言大学出版社,2013.1(认识中国)
ISBN 978-7-5619-3449-4

I. ①中… II. ①郑… ②朱… III. ①中华民族—青年读物—英文
②中华民族—少年读物—英文 IV. ①K28-49

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2013)第007973号

声 明

本书封面所用地图审图号 GS(2008)1411号
本书图片主要来自CFP汉华易美、全景视觉、fotoc等图片库



书 名: 56 Ethnic Groups of China (*Meet China Book Series III*)
中国有56个民族(认识中国系列丛书之三)
ZHONGGUO YOU 56 GE MINZU

责任印制: 姜正周

出版发行: **北京语言大学出版社**

社 址: 北京市海淀区学院路15号 邮政编码: 100083

网 址: www.blcup.com

电 话: 发行部 86-10-82303650 / 3591 / 3651

编辑部 86-10-82303367/3392

读者服务部 86-10-82303653 / 3908

网上订购电话 86-10-82303668

客户服务信箱 service@blcup.net

印 刷: 北京华联印刷有限公司

经 销: 全国新华书店

版 次: 2013年3月第1版 2013年3月第1次印刷

开 本: 787毫米×1092毫米 1/16 印张: 4.5

字 数: 88千字

书 号: ISBN 978-7-5619-3449-4/K·12239
07800

凡有印装质量问题,本社负责调换。电话: 86-10-82303590

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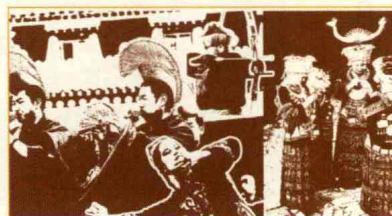
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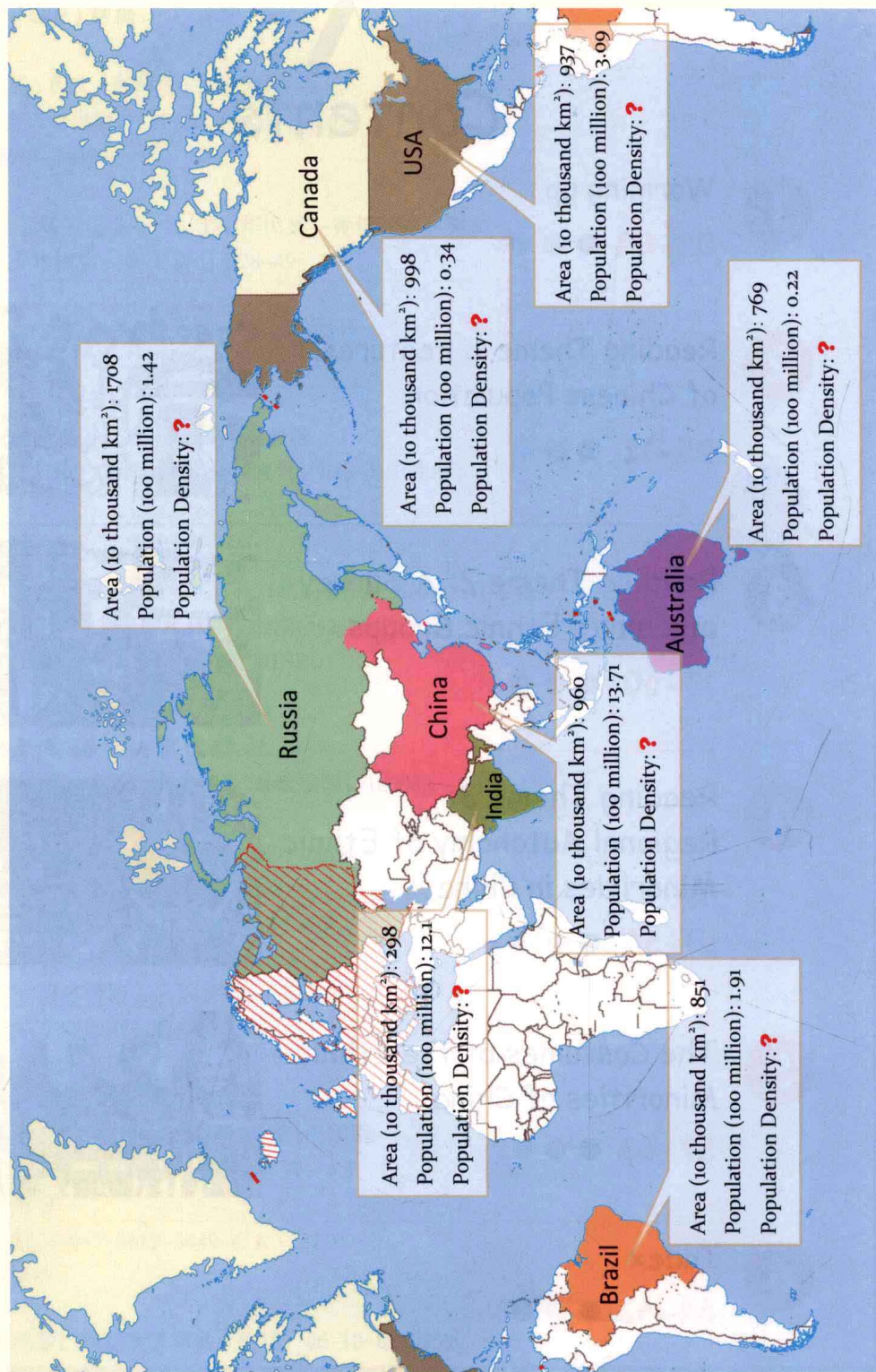
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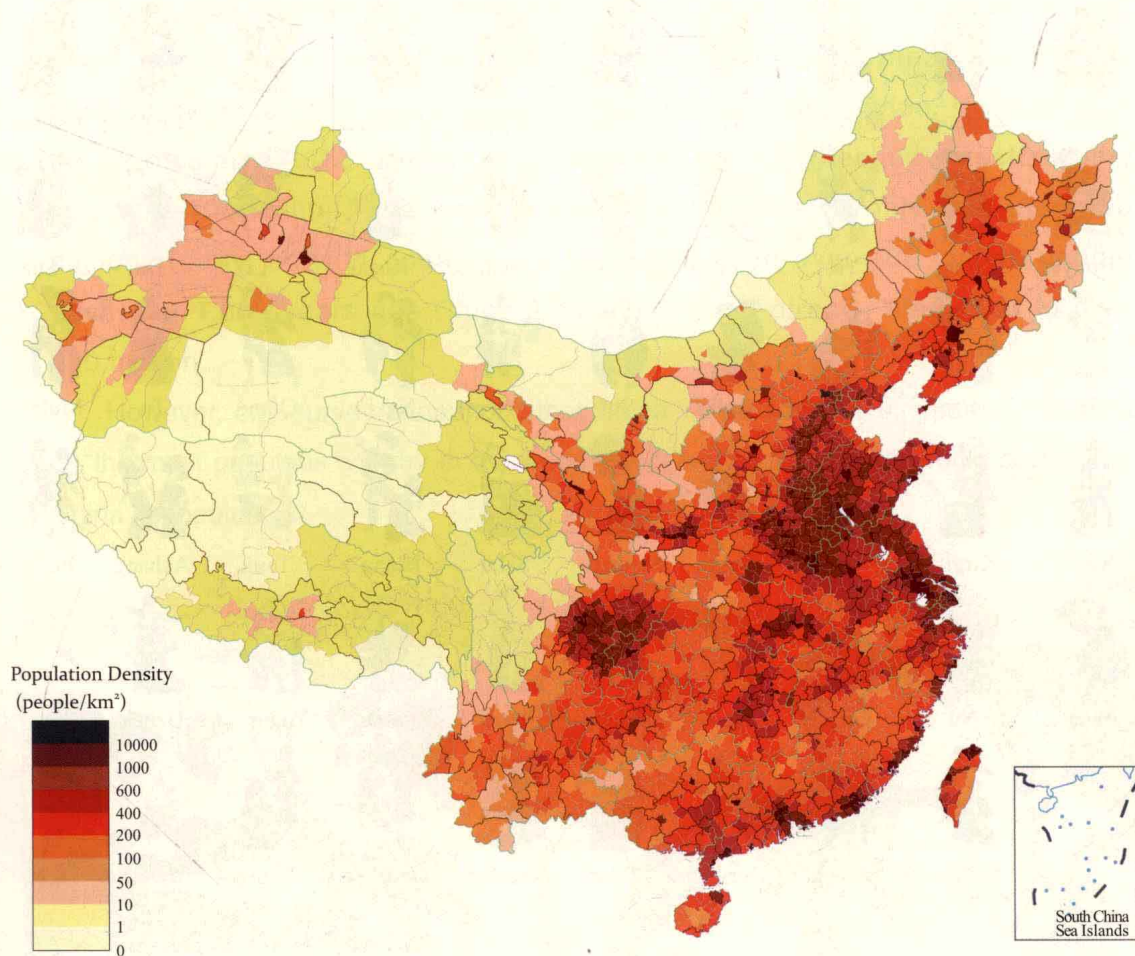
Warming up

Step 1: Please calculate and compare the population density of the following countries according to their geographic areas and populations (2010).

2



Step 2: Here is a map of the population density of China. Try to figure out the characteristics of the population distribution of China.



It is easy to find out that the population of China is highly concentrated in the eastern part, while the western part is sparsely populated. In the book *Hello, China*, it is pointed out that topographically the west is higher than the east in China. Do you think there is any relationship between its population density and its topography?

Step 3: Please figure out the number of groups of people on the map of China.



On the map each group of people stands for one ethnic group. If you get it right, there should be 56 groups of people representing the 56 ethnic groups of China.

If you take a closer look, you would find that their costumes vary in style and color. Then, think further. Are their cultures as distinct from each other as their costumes? How are these 56 ethnic groups getting along with each other? Let's work out the answers together.

Reading Theme 1: Features of Chinese Population

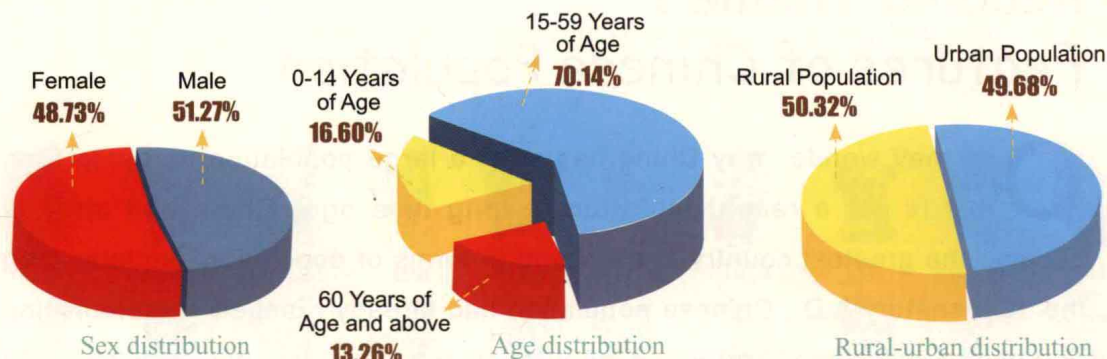
One may wonder why China has such a large population today. In fact, this is not a recent situation. A long time ago, China had already become the greatest country in the world in terms of population. No later than the 12th century A.D., Chinese population had already reached an astonishing number—100 million. The world population then totaled only less than 400 million. Today, only 11 countries in the world have over 100 million people each, but 1,000 years ago China's population had already amounted to over 100 million.

However, one survey announced that China would soon be stripped of the label of "the most populous country in the world", because by 2025 India would outnumber China in population.

★ Features of Chinese Population



Country with a Super Large Population



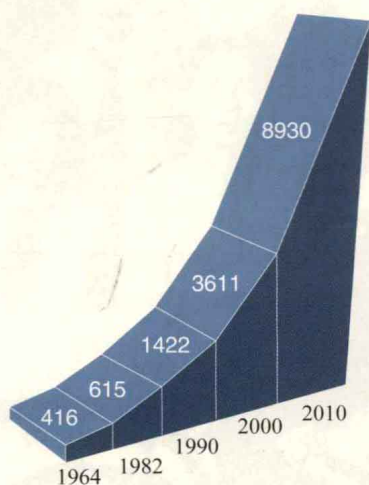
Figures of the 2010 National Population Census of China

First, let's look at the composition of the 1.37 billion people of today's China.

The diagram shows that 70% of the population in China is between 15 and 59 years of age, which is a proof that China has rich resource of labor power. However, over 13% of its population is above 60 years of age, while the world standard for an aging society is only 10%. It shows that China has already become an aging society.

Since the 1980s, the urban population of China has risen by 500 million. What do you think is the reason for such a rapid growth?

Basically China's population can thus be characterized by its large number, uneven distribution and overall aging. To these features, the low quality of the population can also be added. As a matter of fact, less than 10% of the population have received tertiary education, while about 65% of it have been educated only in primary and junior middle schools. The Chinese people are now trying to change the situation, but owing to their large number, it may take China a longer time than other countries to make such a change.



People with University Education of Every 100,000 Chinese People



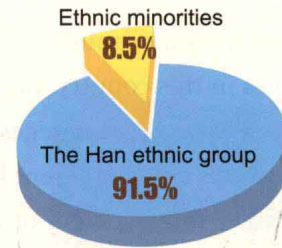
In early 1950s, women flocked to literacy classes. The illiteracy rate was as high as 80% then in China, and the figure had been reduced to 4.08% by 2010.

56 Ethnic Groups

Another important item of statistics concerning China's population is the composition of its ethnic groups. We have already been aware that there are 56 ethnic groups in China. The most populous of them is the Han ethnic group, which has 1.23 billion people, accounting for 91.5% of the total population.

Because the majority of the Chinese people are the Hans, the other 55 ethnic groups are thus called "ethnic minorities". In spite of such a designation, these 55 ethnic groups can add up to 113 million people, outnumbering the population of any of the European countries except Russia.

There are some interesting demographic figures relative to these ethnic minorities. The most populous one is the Zhuang ethnic group, whose population exceeds 16 million, which equals that of a medium European country. The least populous one is the Lhoba ethnic group with less than 4,000 people. The population of the former group is over 4,000 times that of the latter.



The Zhuang ethnic group

more than **16 million** people



The Lhoba ethnic group

less than **4000** people

over
4000
times



Language and Writing System

If every ethnic group in China has a language of its own, then there will be as many as 56 languages in this country. But in fact, some ethnic groups even have two or more languages. Therefore, over 80 languages are generally thought to exist in China. Then how do these ethnic groups using different languages communicate with each other?

To solve this problem of linguistic communication, China decided to adopt a popular language of the nation, i.e., *Putonghua* or Mandarin, common speech of the Chinese language. The Chinese language is the language used by the Han people, the most populous ethnic group. But it is only a general term for a variety of its dialects, which are usually divided into 7 major regions, though the actual case of dialects is much more complicated. In view of this dialectal complexity, in the 1950s, the Chinese government designated the standard modern Chinese speech, *Putonghua*, on the basis of the northern dialect with Beijing pronunciation as the standard.

Writing is in a similar case. Right now, over 50 writing systems are prevalent among various ethnic groups in China. Chinese characters used by the Hans are applied nationwide.

Even though the language and the writing system are officially designated, it doesn't mean that the ethnic minorities would forsake their own languages or writing systems. On the contrary, in many cases students of ethnic minorities avail themselves of the course books written in their own languages. Teachers also speak the languages of their own ethnic groups in classroom instruction. Of course they need to learn the popularly used *Putonghua* and Chinese characters to facilitate their communication with other ethnic groups.

"Hello!" in Languages of Different Ethnic Groups



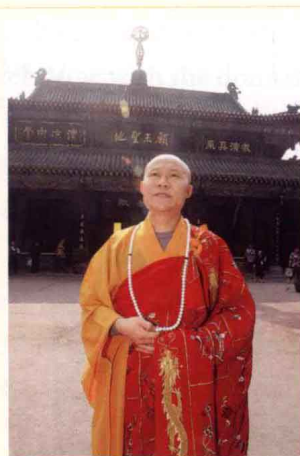
Religious Beliefs

The existence of a great variety of ethnic groups has gradually given rise to the plurality of religions in China.

Some people have alleged that Chinese people have no religious beliefs. This allegation is, of course, unjustified. As a matter of fact, adherents of various religions in China amount to more than 100 million. They mainly follow five religions, of which Taoism originated on Chinese soil, while Buddhism, Islamism, Catholicism and Christianity were successively introduced to China in different historical periods.

The people of the ethnic minorities are more religious than the Hans in China. In many cases, the whole ethnic group is devoted to one religion or another. For example, at least 5 ethnic groups are devotees of Lamaism; about 20 million people of 10 ethnic groups are followers of Islamism. In addition, a certain percentage of the population of at least 14 ethnic minorities are pious disciples of Catholicism and Christianity.

The Constitution of China guarantees the right and freedom of its citizens in choosing their religious beliefs. Meanwhile, it stipulates that all religions enjoy equality in politics and law irrespective of the number of their followers.



Buddhism



Taoism



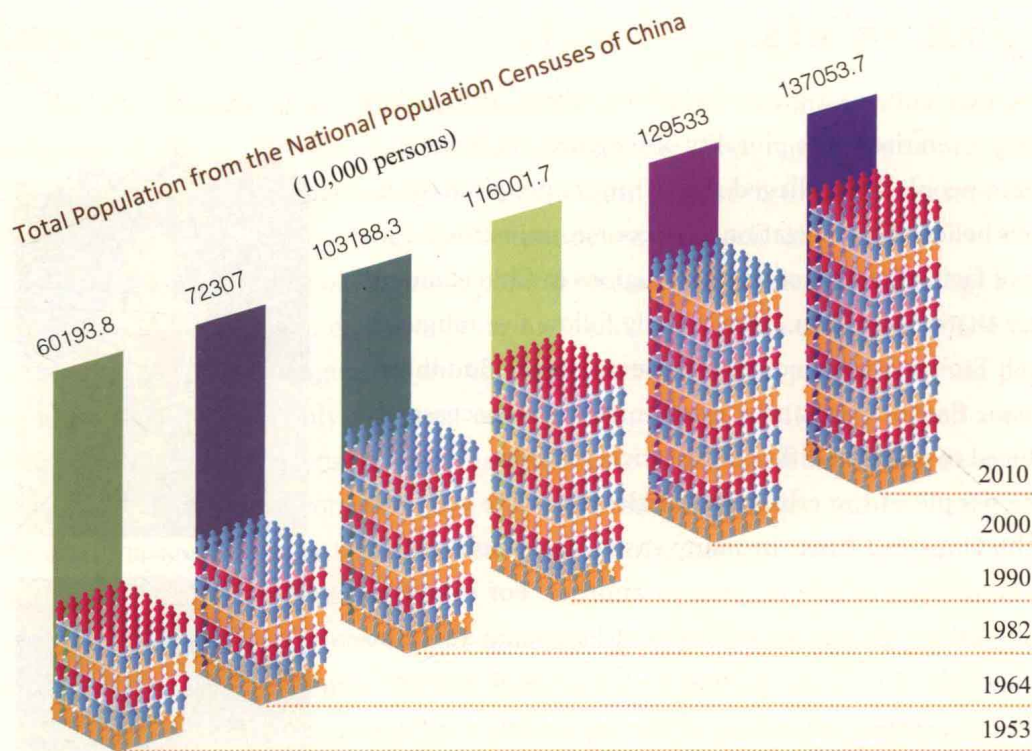
Islamism



Catholicism



Christianity



Family Planning

The data of the previous population censuses in this diagram show that since the 1950s, the population of China has more than doubled. In over 10 years between 1964 and 1982, the period of the most rapid population growth, its population increased by nearly 300 million.

As a result, by the end of the 1970s, China could no longer sustain such drastic growth of population. Problems kept cropping up: serious shortage of daily necessities; several generations of a family crowded in a small house; almost all buses and trains jammed with passengers... Under such pressures, the Chinese government found no way out but to adopt a policy to control the fast growing population, i.e., family planning.



A Chinese city in the 1980s

The core of the policy is “late marriage and late birth; fewer but healthier babies.” Admittedly, this is indeed not an ideal policy for parents who hope to have more children. But due to the execution of family planning, China has avoided the birth of 400 million people, a number equaling the total population of the United States. Now with the dramatic increase of population in the world, the planet we dwell on has fallen into severe crises of various kinds. Under such compelling circumstances, the initiative taken by China to restrict the size of its population has been, in a sense, a contribution to the world.

In the mind of some people, the family planning in China is nothing but allowing only one child to every family. This is not accurate in fact. A Han couple is generally encouraged to have only one child because of the large population of the Han ethnic group. But a different policy is applied to the people of the ethnic minorities, who can have more children due to their small percentages in the total population of the nation.



Here are two photographs of the whole family, one of which was taken in 1966 and the other in 2007. Will you compare them and give your comments?



Can You Remember?

Decide whether the following statements are true or false.



Only in the last century did China has become the most populous country in the world.



China will, in the long time to come, remain the most populous country in the world in view of the fact that 1/5 of the world population is Chinese.



China is suffering from severe shortage of labor power because it has already become an aging society.



Owing to the fast speed of urbanization in the last 30 years or so in China, a large number of rural people have been incorporated into urban population.



The Han ethnic group is the largest in population in China, and the other ethnic groups are called “ethnic minorities” due to their very small populations.



The least populous ethnic group in China has no more than 5,000 people.



All the ethnic groups in China use the same language and writing system.



Of the religions believed in by the Chinese, some originated on their native land and others came from outside China.



Due to the execution of family planning, a Chinese family can only have one child.



The ethnic minorities can have more children than the Hans can.

Reading Theme 2: A Survey of China's Ethnic Groups

With 56 ethnic groups living there, China is truly a multi-ethnic country. It may not seem to be unique, in view of similar countries such as the United States. Well then, is China really in the same case as the United States?

The answer is “no”. In regard to the United States, with the exception of the aboriginal Indian people, the other ethnic groups have migrated to the American Continent from other lands since it was discovered by Christopher Columbus. In distinction from the later “immigrants”, the original settlers, the Indians, were thus named “aboriginal ethnic group”. But the ethnic groups in China, without any exception, have lived on this land from generation to generation. So there isn't such a term as “aboriginal ethnic group” in China.

However, China's ethnic composition wasn't born this way. Today's pattern of distribution of various ethnic groups has resulted from the evolution of Chinese history and their expansion and integration over thousands of years. It may well be said that every ethnic group has a rich and colorful history.

★ A Survey of China's Ethnic Groups



Snowballing Fusion—The Emergence of the Han Ethnic Group

The Han ethnic group has a population of 1.23 billion, distributed in various parts of China. Well, how has this most populous ethnic group in the world come into being? We may understand its evolution by way of a metaphor “snowballing”.



The Spring Festival, the New Year of the Han ethnic group, is their most important traditional holiday. It normally takes place in January or February in the Gregorian calendar. The Han people observe many traditional customs during this holiday, such as pasting Spring Festival couplets, letting off firecrackers, strolling around the temple fairs and etc. Some ethnic minorities also celebrate the Spring Festival under the influence of the Han culture.

This “snowball”, at first, evolved from its kernel, the Huaxia people (Cathayans), who inhabited the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River over 3,000 years ago. A colony of people then equipped with advanced farming methods and bronze culture began to settle there, not as an organized whole, but as a mixture of groups emanating from all directions.

The kernel of the “snowball” was adept in accommodating various cultures of its neighborhood and never repulsive to any visiting groups. By and by it turned into a powerful aligning force for its adjacent ethnic groups. The alignment sometimes took the form of peace and sometimes of war. Whatever happened there and then, this “snowball” began to roll along the river of history and grew bigger and bigger. Finally it “rolled up” people of

