

Understand China

CHINA TODAY934

With a mix of optimism and deep-rooted social and economic problems, China continues to position itself at the centre of world trade – but will it last?

HISTORY936

China has, for much of its history, been in conflict either internally or with outsiders.

PEOPLE OF CHINA954

China is a huge cluster of different ethnicities, a consequence of sharing borders with more than a dozen nations.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY958

Although each faith is distinct, some fascinating cross-pollination goes on between Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and even Christianity in China.

CHINESE CUISINE965

Some people visit China for the food alone. We can't blame them.

ARTS & ARCHITECTURE973

China is the custodian of one of the world's richest cultural and artistic legacies.

CHINA'S LANDSCAPES985

China is home to the world's highest mountain range, one of the planet's hottest deserts and a colossal web of waterways.

MARTIAL ARTS OF CHINA992

Chinese martial arts are deeply impregnated with religious and philosophical values – and perhaps a morsel of magic.

China Today

A highly idiosyncratic mix of can-do entrepreneurs, inward-looking Buddhists, textbook Marxists, overnight millionaires, the out-of-pocket, leather-faced farmers, unflagging migrant workers and round-the-clock McJobbers, China today is as multifaceted as its challenges are diverse. From the outside, China's autocratic decision-making may suggest national uniformity, but things are actually more in a state of controlled, and not so controlled, chaos.

Best on Film

Still Life (Jia Zhangke; 2005) Bleak and hauntingly beautiful portrayal of a family devastated by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

Raise the Red Lantern (Zhang Yimou; 1991) Exquisitely fashioned tragedy from the sumptuous palette of the Fifth Generation.

In the Mood for Love (Wong Kar-Wai; 2000) Seductive, stylishly costumed and slow-burning Hong Kong romance.

Best in Print

Country Driving: A Chinese Road Trip (Peter Hessler) Hessler's amusing and insightful journey at the wheel around the highways and byways of China.

Tiger Head, Snake Tails (Jonathan Fenby) Compelling account of contemporary China's myriad challenges and contradictions.

Diary of a Madman & Other Stories (Lu Xun) Astonishing tales from the father of modern Chinese fiction.

The Economy: Speed-bump or Cul-de-sac?

China's eye-watering growth appears to be nearing the end of its blinding three-decade run, although experts remain divided over long-term implications for its US\$11 trillion economy. Confrontingly high levels of debt, chronic overcapacity in manufacturing, a constellation of real-estate bubbles dotted around the land and a stock market prone to sudden dives, mean the days of easy, double-digit growth have given way to more sober forecasts. The economy may not be coming off the rails, but China's ambitious proposals in its current five-year plan could take a bruising, including its commitment to hugely expand social security and feed the country's large and demanding military budget. The latter expenditure is perhaps most crucial, to satisfy a growing domestic appetite for a strong nation when rivalries within the region and with the US are at their keenest. While a bust is perhaps unlikely, China may need to prepare for a period of middle-income blues with fewer jobs, reduced expectations and the days of double-digit growth a thing of the past.

China goes Travelling

China's crashing stock market seems to have done little to stop the Chinese from joining the top league of travelling nations for the first time in their tumultuous and predominantly inward-looking recent history. So while the world goes to China, China is increasingly going to the world. In 2015 a record 120 million (a bit less than the population of Mexico) outbound visitors left China. In the same year, Chinese arrivals to the UK were up by 40% in the first nine months of 2015. Chinese travellers spent a staggering US\$215 billion abroad in 2015