Chinese Society

- Ethnic boundaries
- Han diversity and unity
- Traditional society and culture
- Society change

- Differentiation
- Common patterns
- Religion
- Trends
Overview

- The People’s Republic of China is the world’s largest society
- There are 56 “nationalities” in China
- It is united by a set of values and institutions that cut across extensive linguistic, environmental, and subcultural differences
- Chinese society has been the object of a revolution intended to change it in fundamental ways since the 1920s, such as Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)
- In 1980s, China’s leaders and intellectuals intended further social change to make China a fully modernized country
Ethnic Boundaries

- Official policy recognized the multiethnic nature of the Chinese state, within which all “nationalities” are formally equal.
- Since 1949, policies toward minorities have fluctuated between tolerance and coercive attempts to impose Han standards.
- Minority nationalities are guaranteed special representation in the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.

National People’s Congress
Ethnic Boundaries

- Most Han Chinese have no contact with members of minority groups; there is clearly some tension.
- In the autonomous areas the ethnic groups appear to lead largely separate lives, and most Han in those areas either work as urban-based administrators and professionals or serve in military installations or on state farms.
Han Diversity and Unity

- Han Chinese speak seven or eight mutually unintelligible dialects, each of which has many local subdialects.
- Such diversities have not generated exclusive loyalties, and distinctions in religion or political affiliation have not reinforced regional differences.
- There has been a consistent tendency in Chinese thought and practice to downplay intra-Han distinctions, which are regarded as minor and superficial.
- The boundary between Han and non-Han is absolute and shape, while boundaries between subsets of Han are subject to continual shifts, are dictated by local conditions, and do not produce the isolation inherent in relation between Han and minority groups.
The leaders who directed the efforts to change Chinese society after establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 were raised in the old society and had been marked with its values.

China’s traditional values were contained in the orthodox version of Confucianism, which was taught in the academies and tested in the imperial civil service examinations.

Imperial-era Confucianists concentrated on this world and had an agnostic attitude toward the supernatural.

Traditional Chinese thought combined an ideally rigid and hierarchical social order with an appreciation for education, individual achievement, and mobility within the rigid structure.
The Confucianists claimed authority based on their knowledge, which came from direct mastery of a set of books.

These books, the Confucian Classics, were thought to contain the distilled wisdom of the past and to apply to all human beings everywhere at all times.

Ideally everyone would benefit from direct study for the Classics, this was not a realistic goal in a society composed largely of illiterate peasants.

Many scholars put a great deal of effort into popularizing Confucian values by lecturing on morality, publicly praising local examples of proper conduct and reforming local customs.

The values of Confucianism were diffused across China and into scattered peasant villages and rural culture.
Traditional Society and Culture  
- The Confucian Legacy

- Traditional values have clearly shaped much of contemporary Chinese life
- The belief in rule by an educated and functionally unspecialized elite, the value placed on learning and propagating an orthodox ideology that focuses on society and government, and the stress on hierarchy and the preeminent role of the state were all carried over from traditional society
- In the mid-1980s, a number of Chinese writers and political leaders identified the lingering hold of “feudal” attitudes, even within the Chinese Communist Party, as a major obstacle to modernization,
- The phenomena is identified as authoritarianism, unthinking obedience to leaders, deprecation of expert knowledge, lack of appreciation for law
Traditional Society and Culture

- Throughout the centuries, some 80-90% of the Chinese population have been farmers.
- The national elite, who comprised perhaps 1% of China’s population, had a number of distinctive features.
- They achieved their highest and most prestigious titles by their performance on the central government’s triennial civil service examinations.
- The combination of partible inheritance and the competition for success in the examinations meant that rates of mobility into and out of the elite were relatively high for a traditional agrarian society.
- The imperial state was staffed by a small civil bureaucracy.
- Although the salary of central officials was low, the positions offered great opportunities for personal enrichment, which was one reason that families competed fiercely to pass the examinations and then obtain an appointment.
Traditional Society and Culture
- The Examination System

- In late imperial China, the status of local-level elites was ratified by contact with the central government, which maintained a monopoly on society’s most prestigious titles.
- The examination system and associated methods of recruitment to the central bureaucracy were major mechanisms by which the central government captured and held the loyalty of local-level elites.
- The examination system also served to maintain cultural unity and consensus on basic values.
- In late traditional China, education was valued in part because of its possible payoff in the examination system.
- The overall result of the examination system and its associated study was cultural uniformity.
Traditional thought accepted social stratification as natural and considered most social groups to be organized on hierarchical principles.

The highest and most prestigious positions were those of political generalists; experts, such as tax specialists or physicians, ranked below the ruling political generalists.

In Chinese communities the factors generating prestige were education, abstention from manual labor, wealth expended on the arts and education.

Another asset was an extensive personal network that permitted one to grant favors and make introductions and recommendations.
Before 1950, the basic units of social stratification and social mobility were families.

Late traditional China was composed of a large number of small enterprises.

For the 80% peasant farmers, land was the fundamental form of property.

Most non-farm enterprises, commercial or craft, were similarly small businesses run by families.

The long-term goal of the head of the family was to ensure the survival and prosperity of the family and to pass the estate along to the next generation.

All well-to-do families invested in the education of sons, with the hope of getting at least one son into a government job.
Formal education provided the best and most respected avenue of upward mobility, and by the 1800s, literacy rates in China were high for a traditional peasant society.

Chances of receiving a good education were highest for the upper classes in and around coastal cities and lowest for the farmers of the interior.

If schooling was not available, there were other avenues of mobility.

Rural people could move to cities to seek their fortunes.

People could go into business, gamble on the market for perishable cash crops, try money-lending, join the army or a bandit group.

Late traditional society offered alternate routes to worldly success and a number of ways to change one’s position in society.

The combination of population pressure, the low rate of economic growth, natural disasters, and endemic war that afflicted the Chinese population in the first half of the 20th century meant that many families lost their property, some starved, and almost all faced the probability of misfortune.
Social Change

- After the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, the uncertainty and risks facing small-scale socioeconomic units were replaced by an increase in the scale of organization and bureaucratization, with a consequent increase in predictability and personal security.
- Mobility in most cases consisted of gaining administrative promotions within such work units.
- Formal education continued to be the primary avenue of upward mobility.
- In villages, the army offered the only reasonable alternative to lifetime spent in the fields, and demobilized soldiers staffed much of the local administrative structure in rural areas.
A series of reforms increased the scale of organization by the early 1960s, an estimated 90 million family farms had been replaced by about 74,000 communes; meanwhile, local governments took over commerce, and private traders, shops, and markets were replaced by supply and marketing cooperatives and the commercial bureaus of local government.

In both city and countryside, there was a major expansion of the party and state bureaucracies and many young people with relatively scarce secondary or college educations found secure white-collar jobs in new organizations.

The basic pattern of contemporary society was established by 1960. The pattern is cellular, most people belong to one large, all-embracing unit that is run by party branch operating under common administrative rules and procedures, and reflects the current policies of the party.
Differentiation

- Although much of the social structure of modern China has been interpreted as reflecting basic drives for security and equality, qualities in short supply before 1950, not all organizations and units were alike or equal.

- There have been four major axes of social differentiations in modern China:
  - The work place
  - Communist Party membership
  - Urban-rural distinctions
  - Regional distinctions
Differentiation
- The Work Place

- Work units belonged to the state or to collectives. State-owned units, typically administrative offices, research institutes, and large factories, offered lifetime security, stable salaries, and benefits that included pensions and free health care.

- "Security and equality" had been high priorities in modern China and have usually been offered within single work units.

- In the mid-1980s many people on the lower fringes of administration were not on the state payroll, and it was at this broad, lower level that the distinction between government employees and nongovernment workers assumed the greatest importance.

- The distinction between state and collective-sector employment was one of the first things considered when people tried to find jobs for their children or a suitable marriage partner.
Differentiation
- Communist Party Membership

- Every unit in China, from the villages through the armed forces, is run by the party, which has a monopoly on political power.
- Party members were supposed to be revolutionaries, be devoted to changing society rather than restoring it, come from and represent the peasants and workers, and be willing to submit themselves totally and unreservedly to the party.
- Party members were distinctly less bookish and more military-oriented and outwardly egalitarian than traditional elites.
- Relatively speaking, there are more party members than there were traditional gentry.
- Party members directed most enterprises and institutions and dominated public life and discussion.
- Party membership was virtually a requirement for upward mobility or for opportunities to leave one's original work unit.
Differentiation
- Urban-Rural Distinctions

- In modern China, legal distinction was made between urban and rural dwellers, and movement from rural to urban status was difficult.
- China's cities grew rapidly in the early and mid-1950s as rural people moved in to take advantage of the employment opportunities generated by economic growth and the expansion of heavy industry.
- In the 1980s the distinction between urban and rural status grew mainly out of the food distribution and rationing system.
- Incomes and living standards in China's cities are two to three times higher than in the countryside.
- More urban dwellers have secure state jobs with their associated benefits.
- The ironic consequence of a rural and peasant-based revolution has been a system that has acted to increase the social and economic gap between country and city.
Differentiation
- Regional distinctions

- Regional distinctions in ways of life and standards of living were marked in traditional China and continue to have a strong influence on contemporary Chinese society.

- Incomes and educational standards in the 1980s were highest in the productive lower Yangtze River Valley and central Guangdong Province regions and lowest in the semi-arid highlands of the northwest and the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, as they had been since the late nineteenth century.

- The lowest incomes and living standards were in the peripheral areas inhabited by minority nationalities.

- Within all regions, there were distinctions between urban cores, intermediate areas, and peripheries.

- What is most impressive about social differentiation in modern China is the extent to which key variables such as region and rural or urban status were ascribed, and not easily changed by individual effort.
Common Patterns

- The cellular structure of contemporary Chinese society and the Chinese Communist Party's single-party rule meant that almost all social organizations shared common characteristics.
- The same general description applied to villages, schools, administrative offices, factories, or army units. All of these were work units.
- In some ways, Chinese work units resembled the large-scale bureaucratic organizations that employed most people in economically developed societies.
- The unit was functionally specialized, producing a single product or service, and was internally organized into functional departments, with employees classified and rewarded according to their work skills.
Common Patterns
- Work Units

- Chinese work units, however, had many distinctive qualities. Workers usually belonged to the same unit for their entire working life.
- Units supplied their members with much more than a wage, housing in the cities was usually controlled and assigned by work units.
- If goods were in short supply, they would have been rationed through work units.
- Since the 1950s the individual's political life too had been centered in the work unit.
- The work-unit system, with its lifetime membership and lack of job mobility, was unique to contemporary China.
- The special characteristics of the Chinese work unit made the unit an insular, closed entity.
Common Patterns
- Wages and Benefits

- Much of any worker's total compensation was determined by membership in a particular work unit.
- There was considerable variation in the benefits associated with different work units.
- High-level administrative cadres and military officers may have earned three or four times more than ordinary workers.
- Retirees who have put in twenty-five or thirty years in a state-run factory or a central government office could have expected a steady pension, most often at about 70 percent of their salary, and often continue to live in unit housing, especially if they had no grown children with whom they could live with.
- Peasants and those employed in collective enterprises generally receive no pensions and had to depend on family members for support.
Common Patterns
- Informal Mechanisms of Change

- In China formal exchanges of everything from goods and services to information were expected to go through official channels, under the supervision of bureaucrats.
- Personal relations were morally and legally ambiguous, existing in a gray and ill-defined zone. In some cases, personal connections involved corruption and favoritism.
- As the economic reforms of the early 1980s have expanded the scope of market exchanges and the ability of enterprises to make their own decisions on what to produce, the role of brokers and agents of all sorts had expanded.
- In modern China, those with the most extensive networks of personal connections has been cadres and party members, who have both the opportunity to meet people outside their work units and the power to do favors.
Traditionally, China’s Confucian elite disparaged religion and religious practitioners, and the state suppressed or controlled organized religious groups.

In the past, religion was diffused throughout the society and had a weak institutional structure.

The same pattern continues in contemporary society except that the ruling elite is even less religious and there are even fewer religious practitioners.

The attitude of the party has been that religion is a relic of the past, evidence of pre-scientific thinking, and something that will fade away as people become educated and acquire a scientific view of the world.

On the whole, religion has not been a major issue.

In the 1950s, many Buddhist monks were returned to secular life, and monasteries and temples lost their lands in the land reform.
Religion

- Confucian and Buddhist doctrines are not seen as a threat, and the motive is primarily one of nationalistic identification with China’s past civilization.
- Chinese Christian organizations were established, one for Protestants and one for Roman Catholics.
- The most important result of state toleration of religion has been improved relations with China’s Islamic and Tibetan Buddhist minority populations.
- State patronage of Islam and Buddhism also plays a part in China’s foreign relations.
- In rural areas, funerals were the ritual having the least change, although observances were carried out only by family members and kin, with no professional clergy in attendance.
By the mid-1980s the pace of social change in China was increasing, and, more than in any decade since the 1950s, fundamental changes in the structure of society seemed possible.

The trends were toward greater specialization and division of labor and toward new, more open and loosely structured forms of association.

The uniform pattern of organization of work units in agriculture, industry, public administration, and the military was beginning to shift to an organization structured to reflect its purpose.

The primary tension in Chinese society resulted from the value political leaders and ordinary citizens placed on both the social values of security and equality and the goals of economic growth and modernization.

Crowding was normal and pervasive.
The rise in living standards in the 1980s may have contributed to rising expectations that could not be met without considerably more economic growth.

The tension between security and economic growth was reflected in the people's attitudes toward the work unit and the degree of control it exercised over their lives.

Rural reforms had essentially abolished the work unit in the countryside, along with its close control over people's activities.

By the mid-1980s the Chinese press and academic journals were discussing recruitment and movement of employees among work units.

Foreign-funded joint ventures, on which China's government placed its hopes for technology transfer, found it impossible to hire the engineers and technicians they needed for high-technology work.
Trends

- The fundamental issues of scarcity, equity, and opportunity lay behind problems of balance and exchange among work units, among the larger systems of units such as those under one industry ministry, or between city and country.
- Economic reforms in rural areas generated a great income spread among households, and some geographically favored areas experienced more rapid economic growth than the interior or mountainous areas.
- The outcome depended on both political forces and economic pressures.
- Balancing individual security with opportunity had remained as the fundamental task of those who had directed Chinese society.