

## **WINDOW TO CHINA: Ethnic Groups in China**

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China is not only a nation with the largest population of 1.3 billion people, it is also a nation with wonderful ethnic diversities. Altogether, there are 56 ethnic groups of different cultural backgrounds and religious practices.

The largest ethnic group in China is the Han or the Xia, which is associated with the name of the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia Dynasty, dating back to 1750 B.C. Four other ancient ethnic groups surrounded the Han during that time: Yi to the east, Di to the north, Rong to the west, and Man to the south. This is where the name China, the Middle Kingdom, comes from.

Ninety-three percent of Chinese today are Han. They live in mainly in northeastern, eastern, mid-western, and southeastern China. Since the Xia Dynasty, the Han has had political control of China, except for about 500 years when China was ruled by the Mongolians of the Yuan Dynasty (1206 – 1368) and the Manchus of the Qing Dynasty (1616 – 1911).

Hanzi, the written language of Han, is the most developed language in China and has been the official language of every dynasty. When the Manchus came to power, Hanzi became an elite language and was given a new name, Mandarin, which is recognizable by Westerners today.

The other 55 ethnic groups, with a total population of 91 million, are referred to as minority groups. They are the Zhuang, Hui, Uygur, Yi, Miao, Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian, Tujia, Bouyei, Korean, Dong, Yao, Bai, Hani, Kazak, Li, Dai, Lisu, She, Lahu, Va, Sui, Dongxiang, Naxi, Tu, Kirgiz, Qiang, Daur, Jingpo, Mulam, Xibe, Salar, Blang, Gelao, Maonan, Tajik, Primi, Nu, Achang, Ewenki, Gin, De'ang, Uzbek, Jino, Yugur, Bonan, Derung, Tatar, Oroqen, Russian, Gaoshan, Hezhen, Manba, and Lhoba.

The second largest ethnic group in China is the Zhuang, consisting of more than 14 million people. Most of the Zhuang live in Guangxi Province (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region) and some in Guangdong, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces. The Zhuang are closely related to the Vietnamese, with resembling physical features and sharing similar language, cultural, and religious practices. Other ethnic groups with populations of more than 4 million are the Hui, Uygur, Manchu, Miao, Mongolia, Yi, Tujia, and Tibetan

The Hezhe in Heilongjiang Province and the Lhoba in Tibet are the two smallest groups with about 2,000 people each. Yunnan Province has the most ethnic groups: 27.

All of the 55 ethnic minorities have their own oral languages. About 28 of them have their own written scripts; however, only 11 of them are commonly used today.

Five major religions are practiced among the 56 ethnic groups in China. The Hui and nine other groups adhere to Islam. The Tibetan and three other groups follow variations of Buddhism. A few other groups, such as the Oroqen and the Ewenkis, believe in Shamanism. The Han Chinese primarily practice Taoism and Christianity.

In an attempt to minimize instability and protect the national unity, the Chinese government instituted the policy of regional autonomy to its minority citizens living along the northern, western, and southern regions of the international borders. There are five provincial level, autonomous regions in China: Tibetan Autonomous Region, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Mongolian Autonomous Region.

Most children adopted from China are from mid-central, eastern, and southeastern China. A child adopted from Shanxi, Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Hunan, and Hubei provinces is most likely Han Chinese. If she is from Yunnan, Guangxi or Guizhou provinces, she has a greater possibility of ethnic Chinese origin.