

# Uneasy Superpower: China in a multipolar world

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Photo: Honour guards at the military parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Tiananmen Square, Beijing,, Oct. 1, 2019.  
Xinhua News



Above right: October 1<sup>st</sup> A display of the AJX002 unmanned underwater vehicles during a military parade to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII.

Beijing, PRC, September 3<sup>rd</sup> , 2025

REUTERS/Go Nakamura



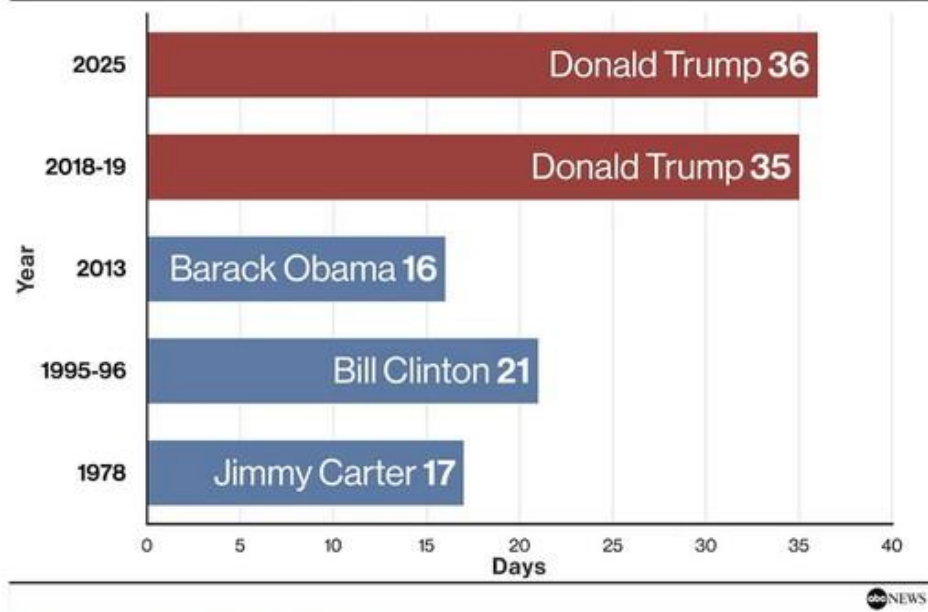
A flag-raising ceremony marking the 76th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China is held at Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, capital of China, Oct. 1, 2025. (Xinhua/Ju Huanzong)

Meanwhile same time, very different place

Left: courtesy ABC news

Right: courtesy Yahoo news

Five longest U.S. government shutdowns since 1977



Five longest U.S. government shutdowns since 1977

ABC News



From August 31 to September 1, China hosted 20 foreign leaders in Tianjin for a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit, the biggest meeting since the formation of the security group in 2002.

*The Economic Times* (Mumbai) September 1 2025

Meetings between Xi, Putin and Modi

‘were not accidental but deliberate diplomatic theatre, a spectacle that will make Trump squirm’

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*In this combination photograph, Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, centre, and Chinese President Xi Jinping talk ahead of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit at the Meijiang Convention and Exhibition Center in Tianjin, China, Monday, Sept. 1, 2025. (Indian Prime Minister's Office/Video Pool via AP)*

September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2025, Putin, Kim Jong-un, and leaders from 24 other countries, mostly Asian, join Xi Jinping to watch the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary Victory Day parade commemorating the end of WW II.

Officially known in the PRC as “the Victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War.”



Source: Reuters

BBC



Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un at a military parade in Beijing. (Sergey Bobylev/Pool/AFP via Getty Images)

**Above** The Republic of China (founded 1912) on Taiwan (hereafter just Taiwan). 1/3 a Qing/Manchu province, 1684-1895. Part of the Japanese empire 1895-1945. Given to Chinese control 1945, home of the ROC government 1949 onwards.

Democratic since 1990. Population 23.78 million  
Source over 60% of the world's semiconductors and more than 90% of the most advanced chips

According to the PRC a rogue Chinese province that must be incorporated into the motherland.

2024 twelve countries recognize Taiwan as 'China'

**Below** the PRC aircraft carrier *Fujian* launched in 2022 and officially commissioned in November 2025. Third of five to be completed by 2030



Chinese coast guard officers on Tiexianjiao (Philippine name Sandy Cay) in the South China Sea this April displaying the PRC flag.  
Courtesy of Global Times

Map Courtesy IAS Study Circle

Bottom right PRC coast guard using water cannon against Filipino fishing boats May 2025

2024 Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey of South Asian states.

They would align with the PRC over the United States if forced to choose, despite low trust in China to "do the right thing" and concerns over the South China Sea.



Chinese Coast Guard vessels fire water cannons towards a Philippine resupply vessel Unalzah May 4 on its way to a resupply mission at Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, March 5, 2024. REUTERS/Adrian Portugal/File Photo [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)

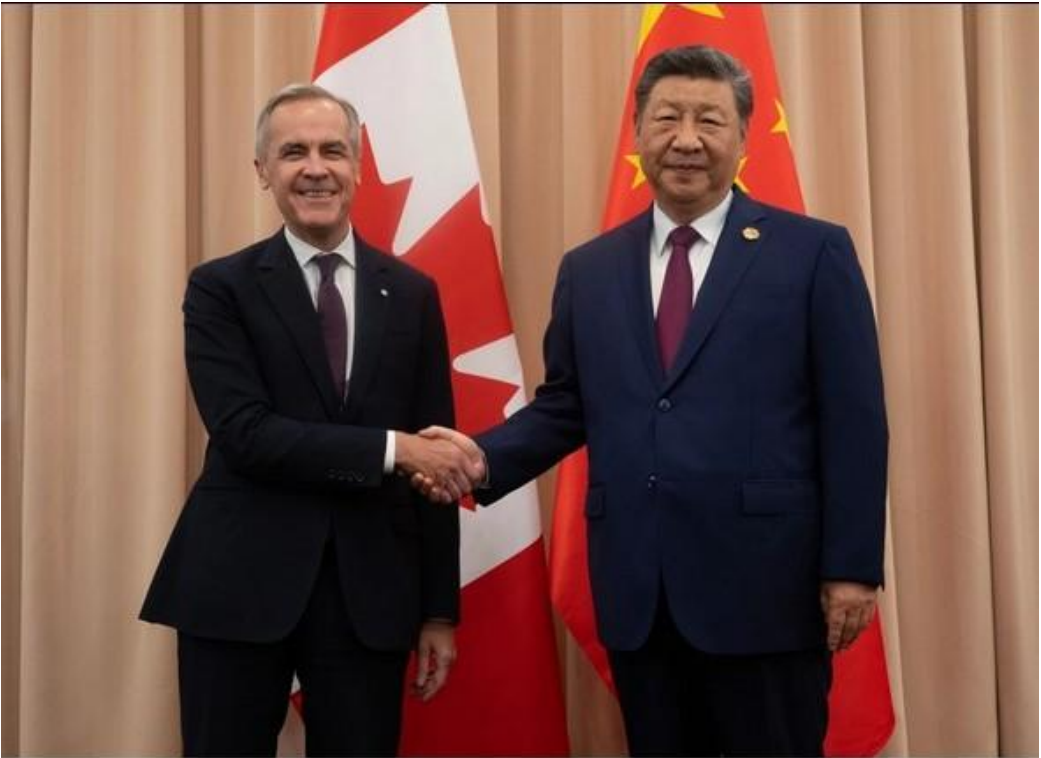
Japanese PM Sanae Takaichi on a possible attack. 'a Chinese attack on Taiwan could constitute "a survival-threatening situation" for Japan requiring the use of force'

PRC Consul General to Japan Xue Jian  
"We have no choice but cut off that dirty neck that has been lunged at us without hesitation. Are you ready?"

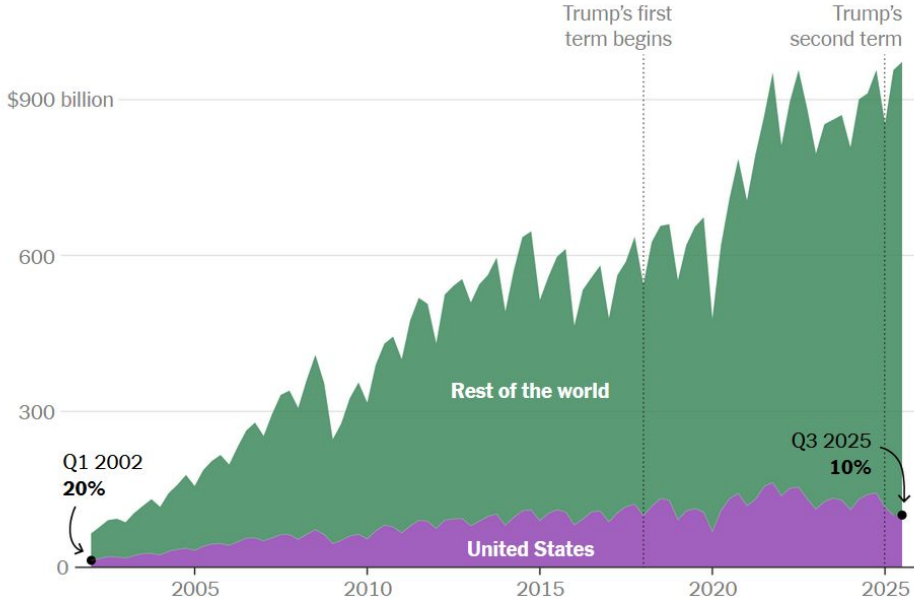
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# Prime Minister Carney shakes hands with PRC President Xi Jinping at the start of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO summit in Gyeongju, South Korea Oct. 31, 2025



China's global exports continue to grow despite Trump's efforts



Note: Chart shows China's quarterly export amount.

**Meng Wanzhou CFO of  
Huawei  
Detained Vancouver  
2018-2021 in her two  
homes**

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- **Michael Spavor & Michael Kovrig, detained 1,019 days**
- **Released September 24 2021**



## Today's Talk

### **Uneasy Superpower: China in a multipolar world**

**Arguments: 1. The last 50 years of high growth, amazing development that lifted 500 million out of poverty and created the preeminent global economic superpower is not due to the CCP or its planners.**

**It was done by the Chinese people, despite the roadblocks placed in their way.**

**2. Although the PRC has become an economic and military superpower, it is insecure because, fundamentally, its people are insecure, unhappy and restless. The same insecurity can be found in the economy and military.**



Qin Gang, the 'Wolf diplomat' former PRC Ambassador to the US  
12<sup>th</sup> PRC Foreign Minister, disappeared 2024



A still from the patriotic Chinese film "Wolf Warrior 2," which was released to huge box office success in 2017. Well Go USA Entertainment

## Topics

Rapid economic and social change

Who's responsible?

The results: economic, military, social

Conclusion: “wài qiáng zhōng gān,” 外强中干 “outwardly strong, inwardly brittle.”

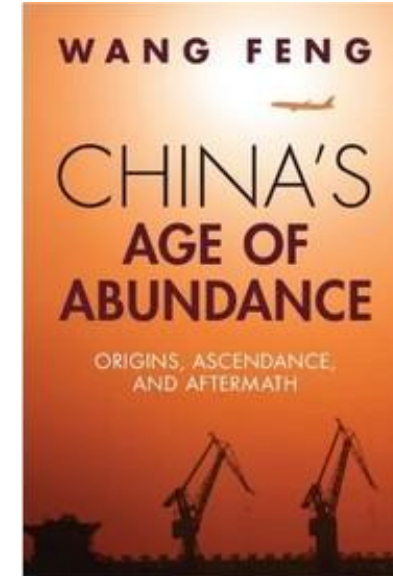
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# Rapid Change

Wang Feng *China's  
Age of Abundance:  
Origins, Ascendance,  
Aftermath*

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Before 1980, when Deng Xiaoping began permitting economic change, the PRC and its people were poor. Most people before on a subsistence diet, late 1970s food consumption not much better than 1930s.

1965 to 1975 little increase in per capita food intake: pork, grain or vegetable oil.

Clothes- 1978 rural China 1 pair shoes for 3 people, most people made their shoes.

Height-Chinese people were short- a little taller in the north but not much.

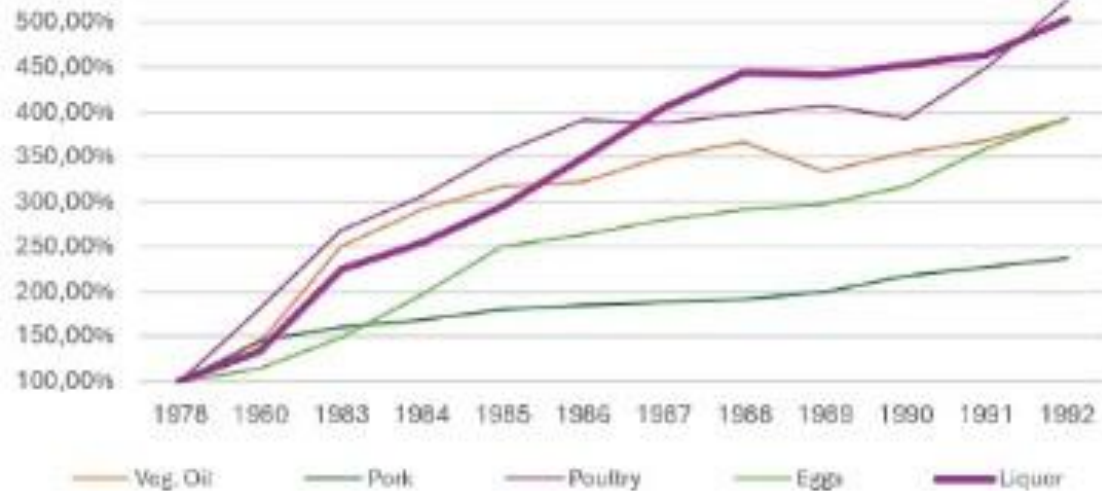
Life span topped out around 70 something, many people died of communicable diseases.

Housing in the countryside was poor, in the cities it was assigned, small and crowded

The *hukou*- household registration system- kept people in their birthplaces- very hard to go from rural to urban.

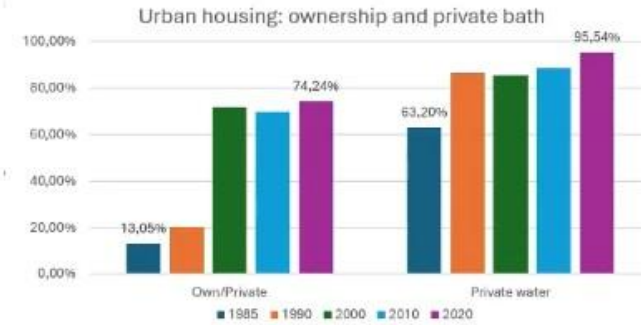
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# Food & Consumption



Changes in Per Capita Food Consumption, Selected Items, 1978-1992, (1978=100)

- 1981: shoes purchased per capita: 1, socks : 1.3, underwear:1; 2015: shoes exported: 3.5 billion
- 2018: Chinese spending on luxury personal goods made up 33% of the global share, far greater than its population share (18.34 percent), or its global ranking in per capita income (78<sup>th</sup>).



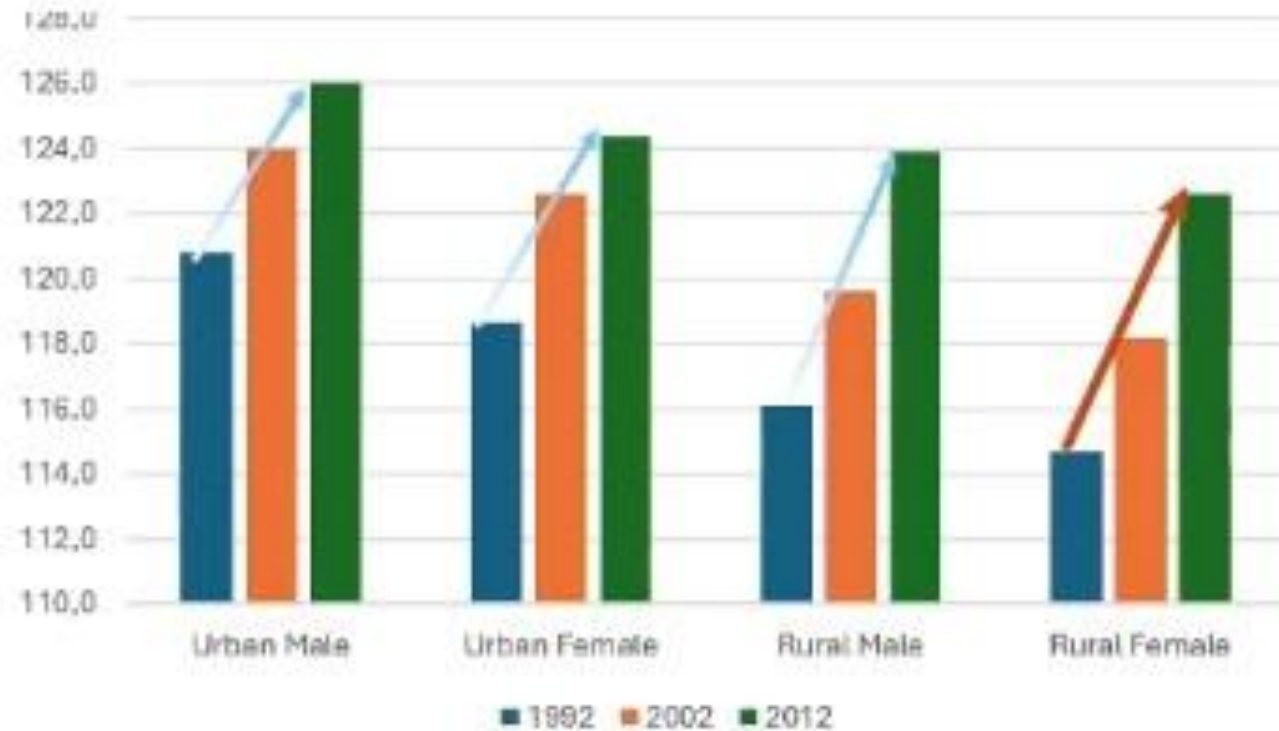
In 1985, only 13% of urban households owned their residence; 42% had no access to a private or public toilet facility; 35% no private piped water access

Today among the highest housing ownership countries in the world, modern facilities saturated

- Per capita grain supply hardly changed between the late 1950 and the late 1970s, even not much improvement from the 1930s, at 2,200 kcal/day.
- In 1970, over 80 percent of the estimated daily energy came from carbohydrates, and only 9.6 percent from protein and 7.4 percent from fat.
- In **five years** between 1978 and 1983: grain consumption increased by about **30%**, pork **60%**, veg. oil **150%**. Per capita nutritional intake rose by 24.5 percent, from 2,311 to 2,877 kcal.

7 yrs 1978 to 1985 35% increase in grain consumption, Chinese eating more, eat new foods.

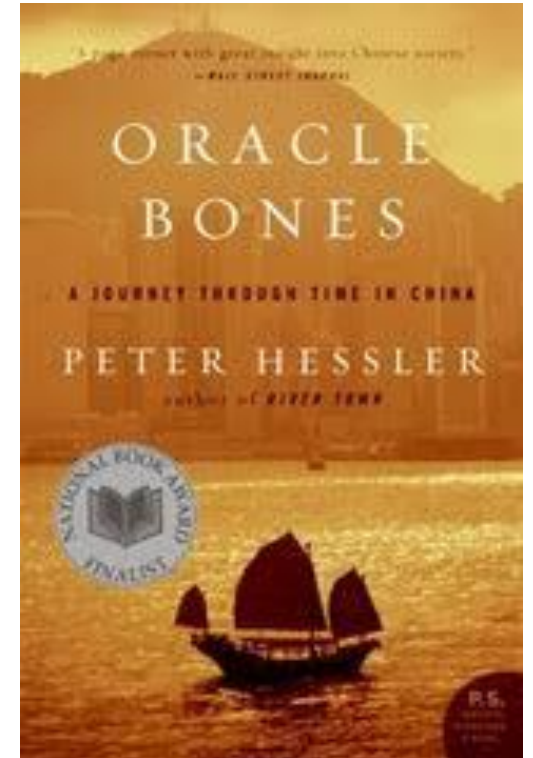
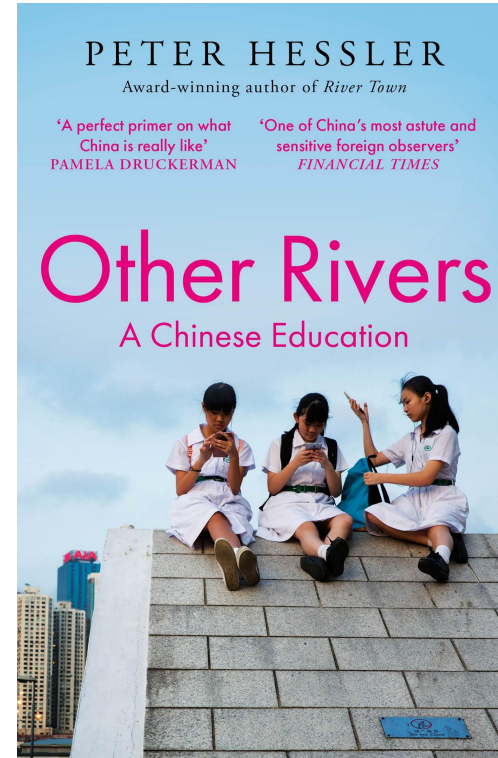
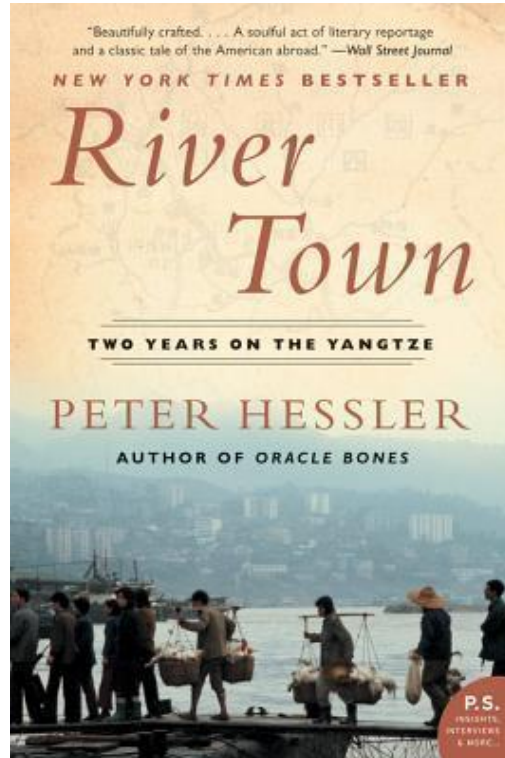
Dairy: 90% population were lactose intolerant, now PRC is 1/5 global milk/cheese consumption



Average Height at 7 Years of Age (cm.), Urban and Rural China, 1992-2012

- Height increases among rural children: a boy at 7 years old gained 7.8 cm between 1992 and 2012, and a girl 7.9 cm. Nearly twice as fast as Europe and faster than in Japan historically (around 2 cm per decade for adult height increase).

# Peter Hessler



How did China industrialize? Cheap labour? China did not have cheap labor but good labor made cheap by Chinese social institutions (health care, food, housing, education).

Where did industrialization take place? The countryside.

The TVE (Township and Village Enterprise)- factories in the countryside

2010 30% of Chinese GDP came from export and 50% of that output was from rural industries

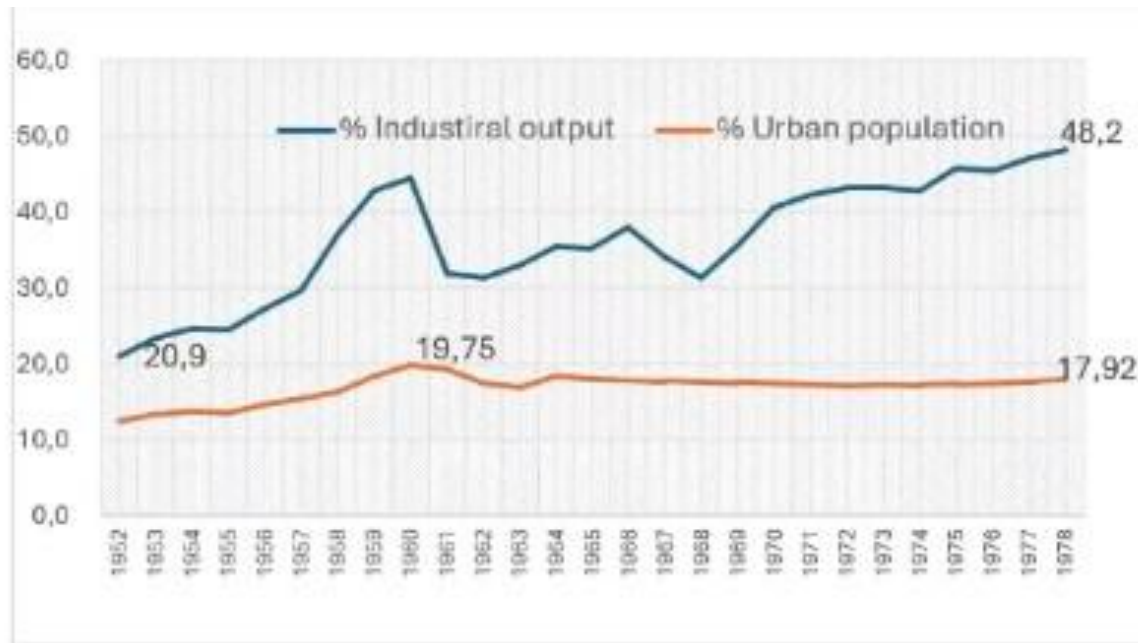


Figure 2.7 Industrialization without Urbanization: China, 1952-1978

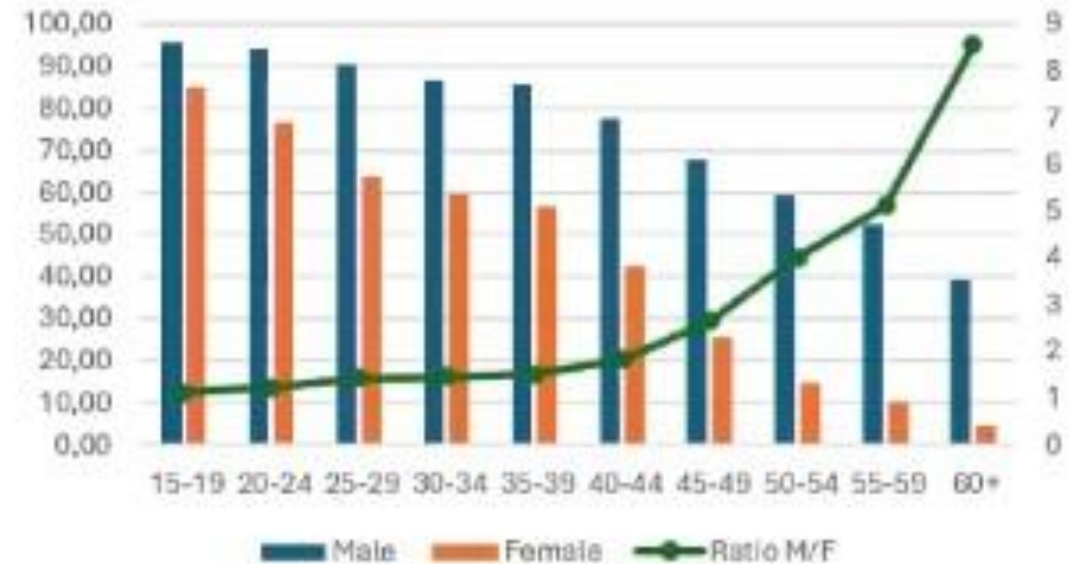
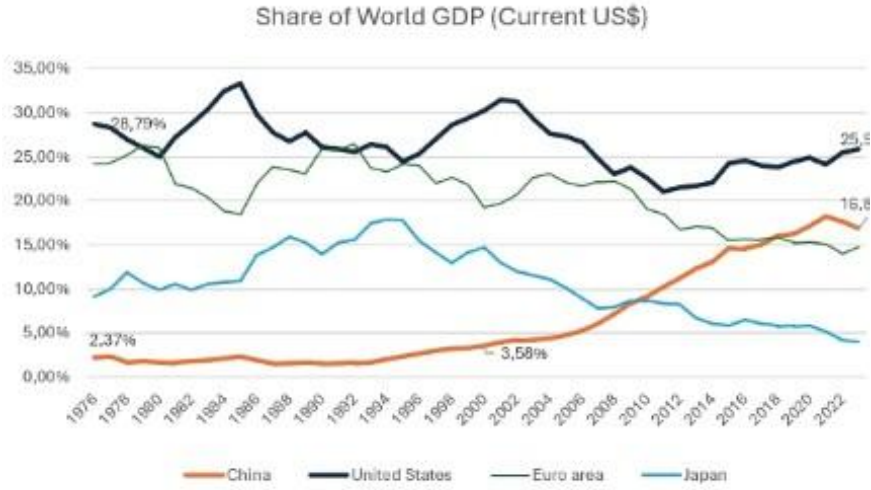
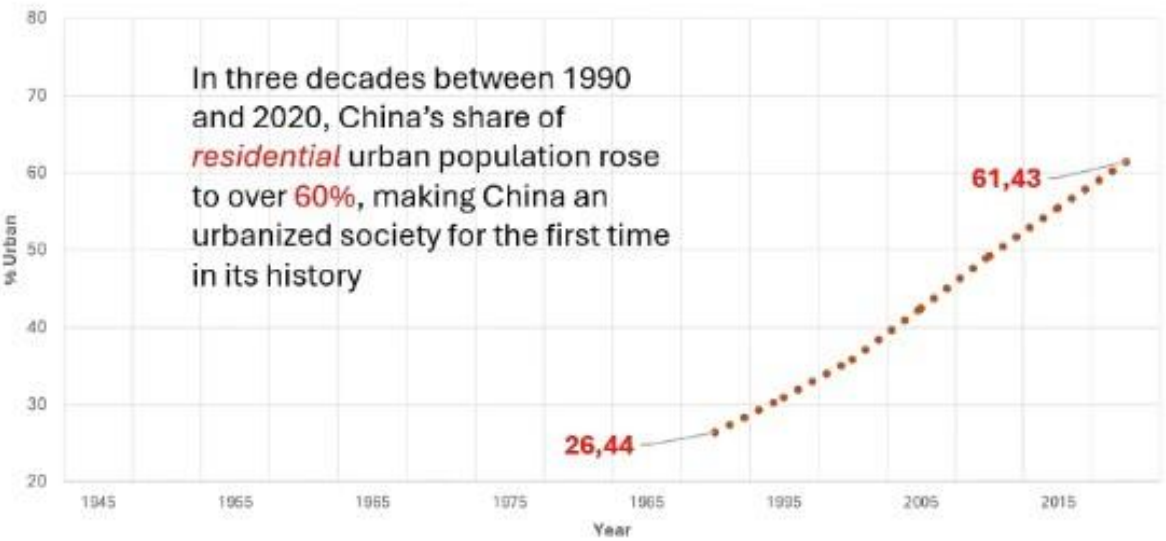


Figure 2.6 Improving Literacy: Share of Literate Population by Age and Gender, China, 1982. Source: China's 1982 Population Census, Vol. 5.

The PRC has become an urbanized country but 300 million of those urbanites do not have an urban hukou- residential permit.

They cannot buy property, send their children to public schools or use public health care. They are paid lower wages than urbanites. They are subject to removal to their hometowns.



Source: World Bank: World Bank Development Indicators

## Who built the Chinese 'miracle' ?

1. it was well educated, rural industrial labour that kicked off economic reform and boom. But urban Chinese benefited more.

Wang Feng estimates that the PRC saved 25% of the cost of modernization, 75 to 100 billion US dollars due to the structural inequality (hukou, lower wages for rural people) built into the labour system.

2. It was relatively unplanned. Deng Xiaoping simply got out of the way of the Chinese people.

BUT it created inequalities. 300 million Chinese are still tied to their rural hukou. They cannot buy in urban China or invest in the same manner.

Property boom 2003-2013 in Shanghai & Beijing . Every SH urbanite (babies included) made 75, 000 USD, Every BJ, 100,000 USD.

**Problems:** the government is not increasing the social safety net- so people save because they need to pay for education, health care, elder care.

China has 2nd largest GDP in world, but its own consumption is only around 39 % of GDP, much lower than many major economies, US (68%), India (60%), Japan (56%), Germany (50%), and South Korea (49%).

The property bubble burst in 2021.

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## Chinese Housing Market: Boom & Bust

Monthly year-over-year price increase for new residential buildings in China's 70 major cities (in percent)



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China via Tradingeconomics.com



## The Big Change: Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping



Increased prosperity, relative economic freedom, a fair amount of corruption, a robust and relatively unsupervised personal life, the ability for individuals to retreat from politics in exchange for loyalty to the party and the state.

Less emphasis on politics, private life permitted.

Retirements, no one-man rule

Reasserted the CCP's dominant role but also returned Marxist/Maoist ideology to the center of the CCP.

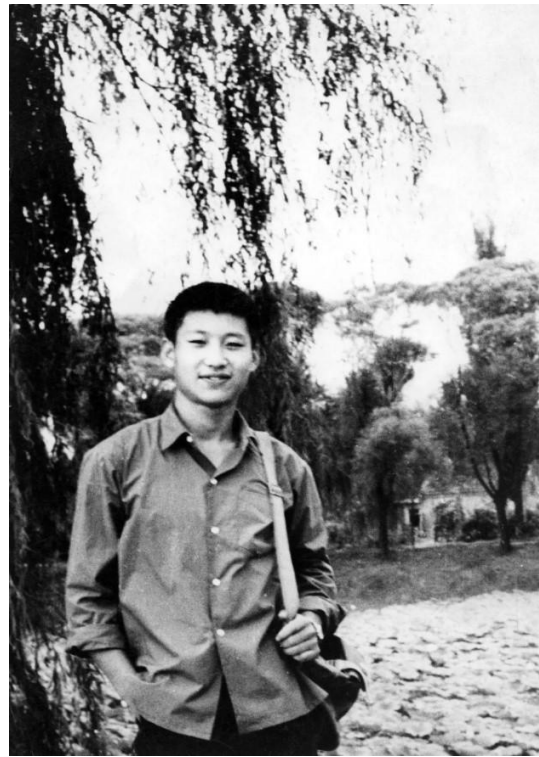
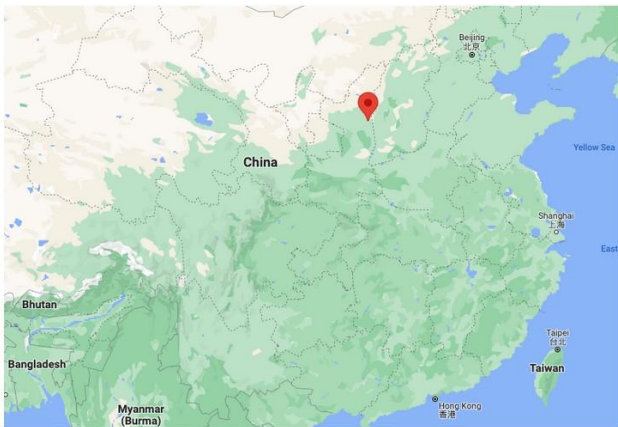
One man rule. Tore up the retirement rule (2022). Runs all three branches (Party, State, Military)

At its most basic a return to deep authoritarianism, political monitoring of culture and life not seen since Mao.

Ultranationalism, cultural purity. Politics above all

Politics: Xi Jinping, son of Xi Zhongxun 1913-2002, Secretary General of the State Council 1954-65 , Vice Chair of the Standing Committee of the CCP 1980-1995  
At 15 Xi was exiled to Liangjiahe, Shaanxi Province for seven years

“The knife is sharpened on a stone, people are strengthened in adversity,”



Xi Jinping in  
Beijing, 1972



Xi Heping (right) Xi Jinping's elder  
half sister. Committed suicide during  
the Cultural Revolution



Xi Zhongxun

**Tsinghua  
University  
1998-2002  
Law & Ideology**

**Named Hu Jintao's  
(SG CCP 2002-12)  
successor in 2007**

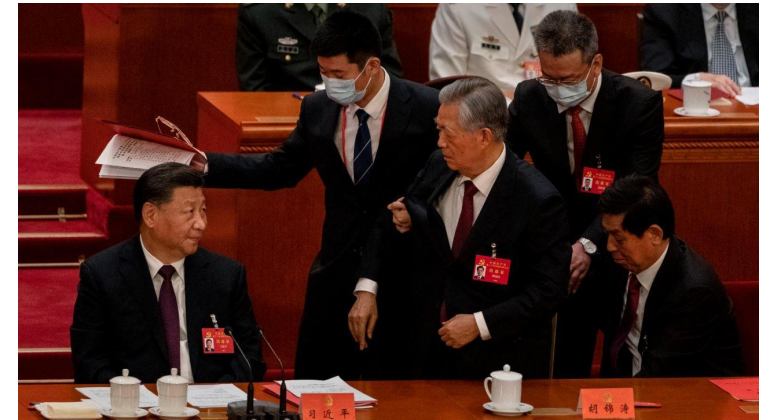


**“Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate?”  
In the end nobody was a real man,  
nobody came out to resist.” *NYT* Sept 24,  
2015**

**Right, His nemesis, Bo Xilai  
(1949) CCP Secretary  
Chongqing, 2007-2012  
2012 tried and jailed for life**



**Hu Jintao being  
shown the door  
during the closing  
of the National  
Congress, October  
28 2022**



## It's in the book!

*Made in China 2025 (2005)*

*Made in China 2025* highlights high-tech industries, automotive, aviation, machinery, robotics, high-tech maritime and railway equipment, energy-saving vehicles, medical devices, and information technology among others, in order to the achieve future PRC market dominance in these areas.

First you obtain and create tech, then eliminate foreign competition in the PRC through “indigenous innovation” and “self-sufficiency”.

2025 deadline for increasing the proportion of PRC domestically produced components to 70% , enabled by large subsidies and low-cost government backed finance to favoured Chinese enterprises.

Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) Berlin 2018

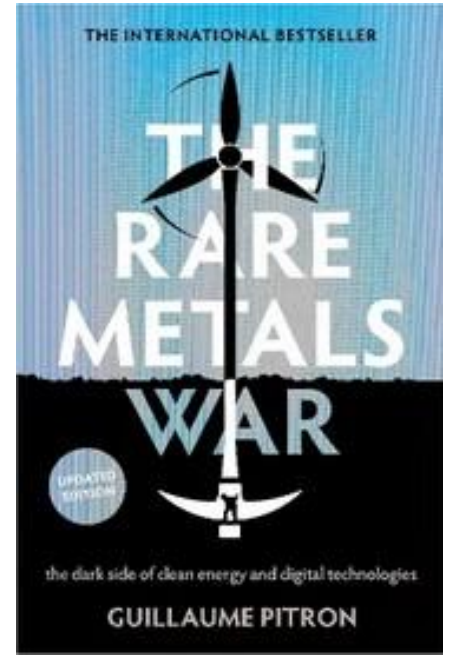
“As China’s own smart manufacturing capabilities mature, it is likely that the Chinese state will further step up its discriminatory practices and restrictions of market access in the field of smart manufacturing.”



After acquiring processing technologies from France in the 1980s, China began to work on becoming a processing superpower.

Almost 90% of global rare earths processing is now done in China, with the country producing 70 kilotons of refined rare earths in 2023.

According to CSIS, China extracts around 60% of the world's rare earths, and although that is down from around 90% in 2008.



Above: The Saskatchewan Research Council (SRC) Rare Earth Processing Facility located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, opened 2025

Below: The Mountain Pass Mine in Clark Mountain range, California

Pitron “What we’ve seen so far is that every time a non-Chinese firm starts to build rare earth mining capacity, China will increase its exports rendering the new mine uncommercial”

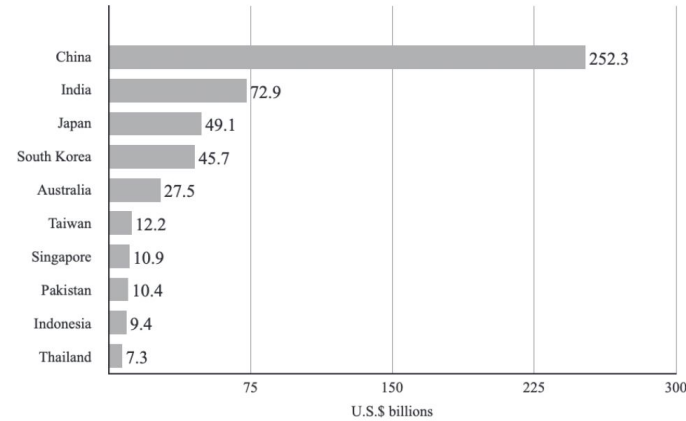


# Mao Zedong

‘Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun’

## 枪杆子里面出政权

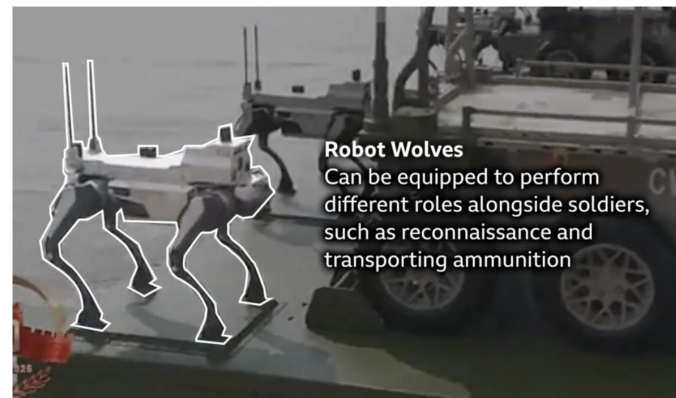
Figure 1: Top 10 Military Spenders in Asia, 2020



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database. Note: Figures expressed in current U.S. dollars for 2020.



A member of the People's Liberation Army stands as YJ-17 hypersonic anti-ship missiles. REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov



**Robot Wolves**  
Can be equipped to perform different roles alongside soldiers, such as reconnaissance and transporting ammunition

Source: CCTV



**AJX-002 drone**  
A giant, 60-foot (18m) underwater nuclear-capable unmanned vehicle

Source: Reuters



**Under Deng Xiaoping** 2-fold, military modernization + depoliticization.

The forces were to be professionalized, streamlined, better but fewer enlisted men and women. Better education of the forces and the officer class. Learn from other militaries.

Mandatory retirements and job mobility to decrease faction formation. Keep PRC's head down- no threats to the powers you were relying on for economic modernization and market access, and with whom you were increasingly intertwined.

Be a good global military.

**Under Xi Jinping:** largest military expansion in the PRC's history.

China's ship building capacity is 200 times that of the US and its navy now surpasses the US in ships but not in tonnage.

It builds not only ships but is investing in so called carrier killer anti-ship missiles, some capable of 7000 miles an hour + invasive maneuvers that make destruction almost impossible. Its nuclear force grows by about 100 warheads every year.

**Move along, Nothing to see here: military purges.**

October 2025 nine senior officers dismissed and prosecuted on charges of corruption and abuses of power.

Around two dozen, if not more, senior Peoples Liberation Army (PLA). officers and executives in the armaments industry have been investigated since 2023.

General He Weidong (bottom), third in China's military hierarchy. Senior military leader also a Politburo member.

Admiral Miao Hua (top) who oversaw political work in the military, was placed under investigation in 2024 for unspecified "serious violations of discipline," a phrase that often refers to corruption or disloyalty

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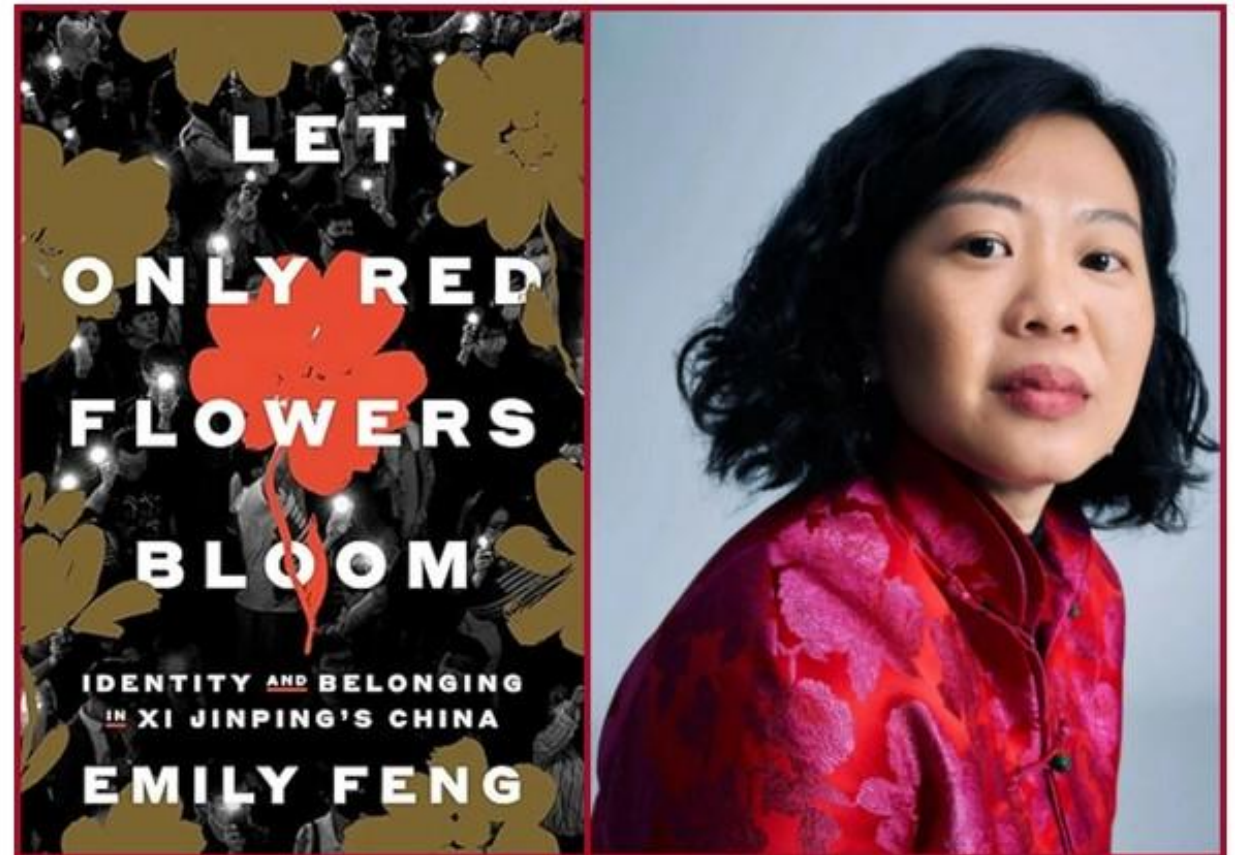
# A restless population

There is only one way to be Chinese in Xi Jinping's China



Filmmaker Zhu Rikun looking at the IndieChina film festival poster in New York November 2025.

The festival was cancelled after family members of the participants living in the PRC were threatened.



## The population debacle

PRC's fertility rate is 1.18. The replacement rate necessary to maintain a stable population is 2.1.

Last year

9.56 million births  
10.41 million deaths

1978 PRC median age was 20.1 years

2018 an estimated 34 million more males in the PRC than females

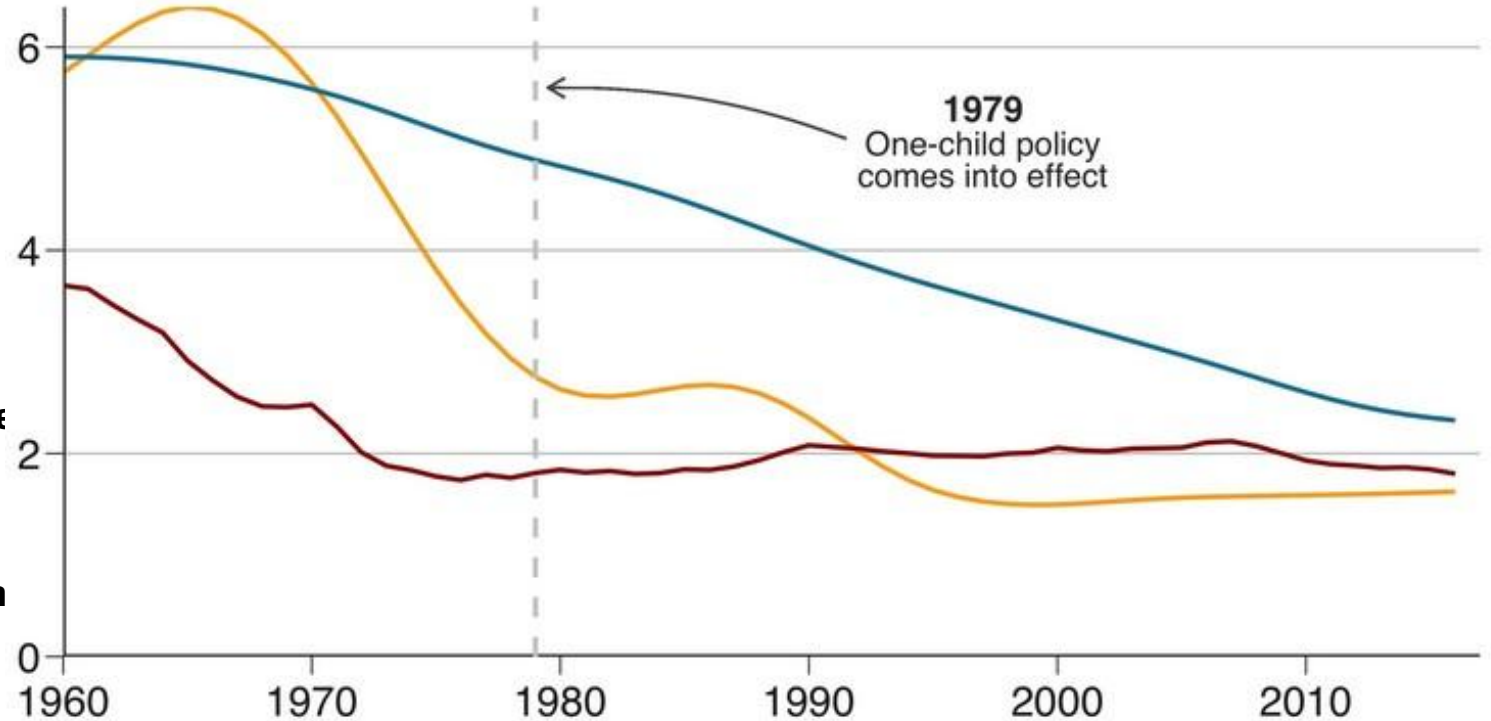
By 2055, 400 million people in the PRC are expected to be over 60, accounting for nearly a third of its population

It is getting older before it is getting richer

BTW economic growth is slowing. 4.8 % last year, its slowest rate in nearly four decades. The official stats due in January 2025 were not released.

Total number of births per woman (1960-2016)

— China — India — US



Source: The World Bank

BBC

## The Last Generation

Young Chinese are increasing choosing not to have children.

Beijing-based YuWa Population Research Institute found the average cost of raising a child in China until the age of 18 is 538,000 yuan/ 109,496 CDN.

Second highest in world

In Chinese cities, the average cost rises to 667,000 yuan/ 135,737 CDN.



"This will affect you for three generations."

"We are the last generation."

T- shirt Shanghai  
2024

Printed 'This is what a  
feminist looks like'

Handwritten 'We are  
the last generation'

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September 2014 Xu Lizhi 许立志 Shenzhen resident, poet and Foxconn employee commits suicide



A SCREW FELL TO THE GROUND (2014)

A screw fell to the ground  
In this dark night of overtime  
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking  
It won't attract anyone's attention

Just like last time  
On a night like this

When someone plunged to the ground

## China's 'slackers'

lifestyle protest against the '996 system'. A work schedule that derives its name from its requirement that workers clock in from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm, 6 days per week.

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Students in Beijing taking photos lying face down, to reflect their tiredness and the hardship they have gone through in order to graduate. Credit...Andrea Verdelli for The New York Times



SINA WEIBO

The term "tang ping" (lying flat) spawned numerous memes on the social media site Sina Weibo

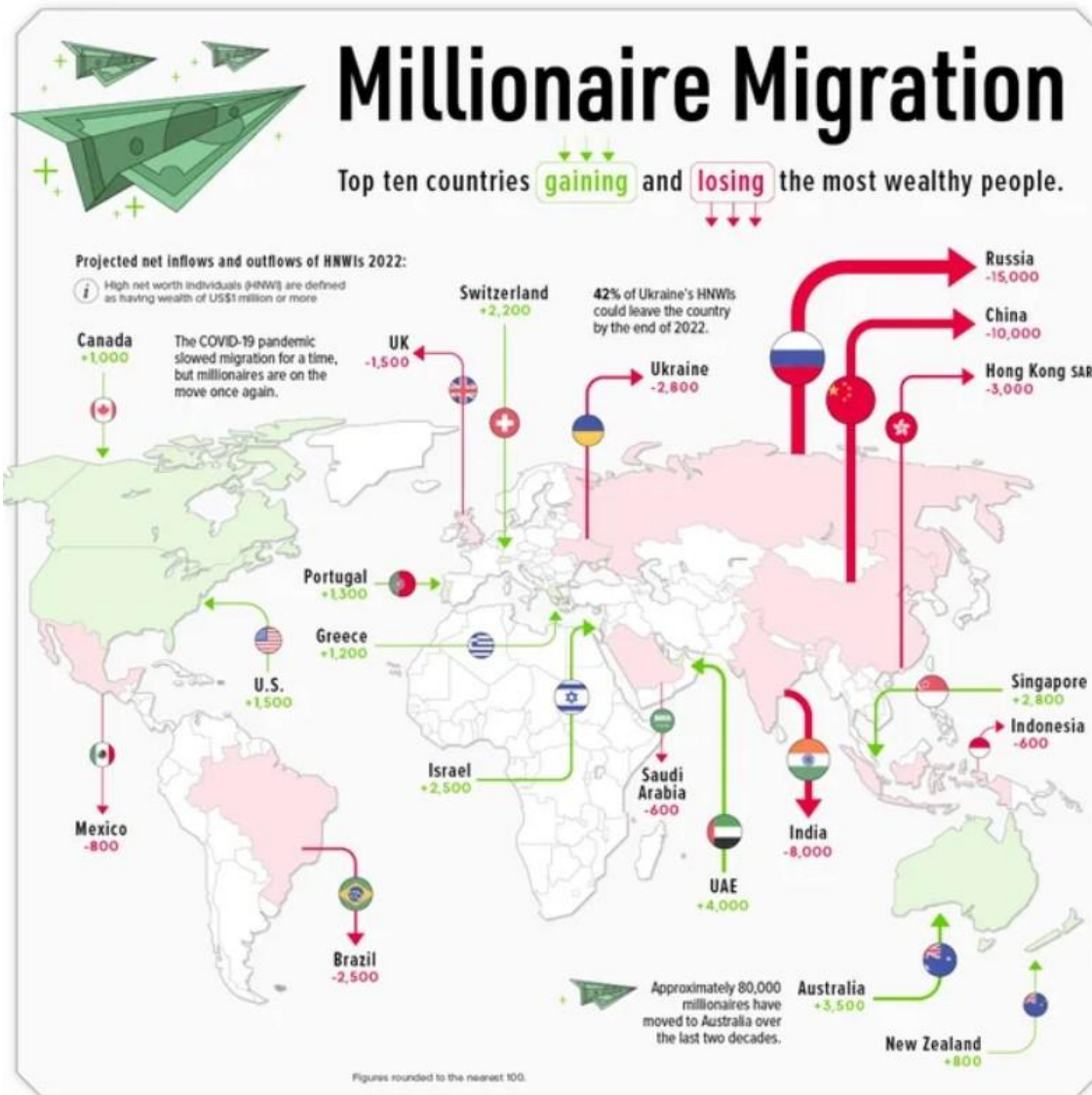
Tune in, tune out, drop out

Luo Huazhong, left his factory work, biked 1,300 miles to Tibet.

His blog was scrubbed/harmonized for spreading 'false information or malicious misinterpretation that fuels cynicism about society'

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For the last three years Xi Jinping and the CCP have cracking down on entrepreneurs, the wealthy and the innovative.

The unemployment rate for young people (16-24) in 2022 averaged between 15% to 20% .

They are voting with their feet and leaving the PRC.

The PRC's loss will be the world's gain.



Citizenship ceremony  
Edmonton Alberta,  
2017

## Voting with your feet- less wealthy edition

2012-2022

14,000 illegal Chinese migrants detained on US/Mexico border

2023: 24,000

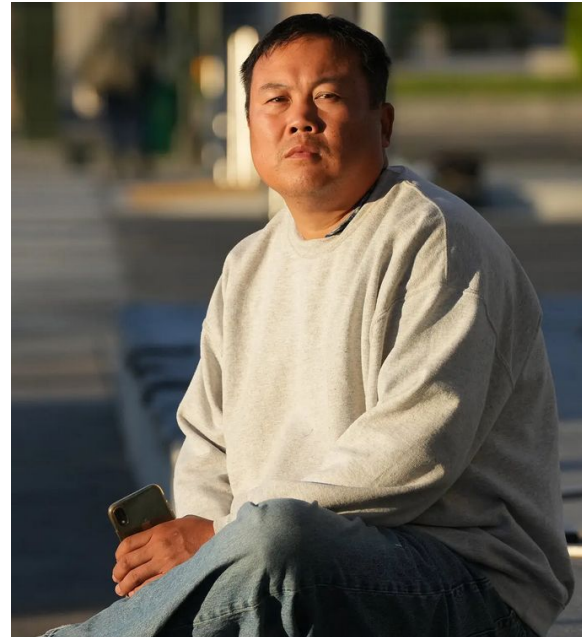
Gao Zhibin and his daughter  
(aged 13)

Left Beijing Feb 24 2023  
Turkey to Ecuador to Mexico

Crossed to US in March 2023

Cost- 10-15,000 each

Now living in San Francisco



Joke making the rounds of the  
Chinese web

**Chinese Official**

“Why do you want go to the United  
States? Aren’t you satisfied with  
your pay, your benefits and your  
life?”

**Chinese Immigrant**

“Yes, I’m satisfied. But in the U.S., I  
will be allowed to say that I’m not  
satisfied.”

OK Boomer- the generation gap

(Some) Elders: All for the Revolution:

Xi Jinping at the Red Flag Canal, northern Henan built by manual laborers during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962)

The younger generation must “abandon the finicky lifestyle and complacent attitude,” adding:

“We need to educate people, especially the youths, with the Hongqi canal spirit that China’s socialism is won by hard work, struggles and even sacrifice of lives. This was not only true in the past but also true in the new era.”



Chinese President Xi Jinping, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, views the Hongqi Canal in Linzhou City, central China's Henan Province, October 28, 2022. /Xinhua

**Just when we thought the Chinese people were content to take it all lying down...**

**'Bridge Man' October 12 2022  
Beijing Sitong bridge**

**In the Great Hall of the People the National Congress was  
passing the constitutional changes allowing Xi to remain in  
power  
indefinitely**



**1<sup>st</sup> banner**

*Say no to Covid test, yes to food.*

*No to lockdown, yes to freedom.*

*No to lies, yes to dignity.*

*No to cultural revolution, yes to reform.*

*No to great leader, yes to vote.*

*Don't be a slave, be a citizen*

**2<sup>nd</sup> banner**

*Go on strike, remove the dictator and national traitor Xi  
Jinping*

## Anti-Zero COVID regulations and anti-censorship protests November-December 2022



Many Chinese now describe their country “wài qiáng zhōng  
gān,”  
外强中干  
outwardly strong, inwardly brittle.