

## FAST FACTS

**POPULATION:** 1.3 billion, the world's largest (U.S.: 310 million)

**PER CAPITA GDP\*:** \$6,600 (U.S.: \$46,000)

**ETHNIC GROUPS:** Han Chinese, 92%; most other Chinese belong to minorities, including the Manchus, Mongols, and Tibetans

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Daoism (Taoism), Buddhism

**LANGUAGES:** Chinese is written the same way throughout the country. When spoken, however, the language varies so widely that people from different regions may not understand each other. Mandarin, the official dialect, is most widely understood and is now taught in all schools.

**LITERACY:** males, 96%; females, 88% (U.S.: 99/99)

\*GDP stands for gross domestic product; per capita means per person. The amount is the value of all items produced in a country in a year, divided by the population. It is often used as a measure of a nation's wealth.

SOURCES: The World Factbook 2010 (CIA); 2010 World Population Data Sheet (Population Reference Bureau)

## Words to Know

- **Communist** [adj]: related to a highly authoritarian government in which the state controls the economy, and personal freedom is severely limited
- **intellectual** [n]: an educated person interested in serious study and thought
- **third-world** [adj]: referring to undeveloped countries that are poor and have few resources
- **totalitarian** [adj]: related to rule by a dictatorial leader or government

# The China Challenge

## WITH ITS ECONOMIC MIGHT, CHINA IS EMERGING AS A GLOBAL SUPERPOWER

BY DAN LEVIN  
in Beijing

**B**y the time dawn breaks, Beijing, China's capital, is bustling with activity. Rice peddlers and knife sharpeners roam the streets in wagons, calling out their wares, while thousands of bicycling commuters weave in and out of snarling traffic, their bells jangling.

Soon after, Song Yanbo (YEN-bo), 14, starts his day with an apple and some bread. At 7:15, he heads off to school in his uniform, a teal tracksuit. Before classes begin, everyone gathers in the school yard for a long run and exercises, even in winter.

Yanbo's\* schedule is grueling: classes in math, Chinese, English, chemistry, physics, and politics every day. He even spends his weekends in special classes that the Chinese call "cram school," studying material there wasn't time to cover during the week.

Sports teams? Art classes? Piano practice? Forget it. Yanbo is way too busy. If he's lucky, maybe he can find some time for computer games or reading before bed.

But Yanbo gets top grades and

doesn't mind studying—especially physics. "Physics helps us understand the nature of things and the world around us," he tells *JS*.

Chinese students, drilled from an early age in test-taking and rote learning, are among the best in the world at math and science—far outpacing their American counterparts.

Yanbo and millions of other Chinese middle-schoolers devote their lives to preparing for tests like the Zhongkao (*jong-KOW*), a rigorous high school entrance exam that can take three days to complete. These tests can determine whether a kid will get into a good school—and then land a good job.

"I feel pressure to succeed because I'm the only child," Yanbo says. "I'm my parents' only hope."

The relentless need to excel can place a heavy burden on young people, says Yanbo's classmate Xie Wanzhu (*SHE-EH wahn-JOO*).

"Lots of students used to be friends but now won't talk to each other because of so much competition," the 15-year-old tells *JS*. "Sometimes I lose my homework only to find it in the garbage."