

# Continuity and Change in

# ASIA

*This is our last look at Continuity and Change in Asia, a social studies-based program exploring political and social issues shaping Asia today and designed to encourage students to better understand the various issues shaping the countries and regions of East, South and Southeast Asia. This Newspapers In Education program was in partnership with the Asia Outreach Centers at the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies.*

## Activities

- 1: Think about the youth culture that you are a part of – what are some of its characteristics? Do you feel that today's youth are valued in our society? Why or why not? Write a persuasive essay expressing some of your opinions on this topic.
- 2: In The Seattle Times, find various representations of youth and create a collage that expresses something about youth culture to the viewer.
- 3: Compare and contrast the culture of youth in the United States with that of China. Create a graphic organizer highlighting the similarities and differences.

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## ARTICLE 8

### Emerging Voices

## China's Youth: A Generation Like No Other

*By Mary Cingcade, Associate Director, East Asia Resource Center, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington*

With a population of 1.3 billion people, China is home to 20 percent of the world's population, including half a billion Chinese youth under the age of 25; that's over one and a half times the entire U.S. population. Who are China's youth? Why is it important to know something about them?

China's young people, like youth everywhere, reflect the diversity within the population at large. Chinese youth come from 56 different nationalities, speak over 90 dialects and live in each of the 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, and four municipalities. Some attend school only for the compulsory nine years – some less – while others study fiercely for college entrance exams, hoping to join China's rapidly rising numbers of university students which totaled 14 million in 2005. Urban young

people, born and raised in the city, spend time with friends in internet cafes, eat at fast food restaurants and do homework. Young people from China's vast rural areas also study, play and help with family responsibilities for farming and business. Some rural youth set out for jobs in the city, becoming part of China's "floating population" of migrant workers, estimated at 150 million.

The lives of youth in China today may sound rather ordinary, but compared to their parents' generation, they are extraordinary. These young people are a product of the Reform Era, characterized by China's opening to the outside, rapid modernization and raging consumerism. Though still a Communist country, the China of today looks very different from the one previous generations experienced during the Mao Era. The Mao Era was a time when political ideology commanded the life of every individual, foreign contact was limited, consumer goods were scarce and a university education was difficult to come by. In private life, traditional family values of filial piety prevailed.

In contrast, today's young people are a generation of plenty, with more choices and more pressures. Families invest much of their resources and all of their hopes in today's youth, born under the One Child Policy that has limited urban families to one child since 1980. A family's stake in the child's success is

high – these only children will one day care for parents and grandparents without help. And with only 86 girls born to every 100 boys, many boys will grow up to be bachelors, like it or not. Within their lifetimes, young people will witness the deterioration of the traditional family structure that has anchored Chinese society for thousands of years.

Many adults, from parents to the premier, have expressed concern over the impact of a new Chinese society that seems to cultivate individualism and materialism more readily than it does social responsibility. Those from older generations question whether or not young people can face the difficulties that life has to offer. With high unemployment rates, even among new college graduates, challenges will come early in their adult lives. Where is this generation headed? How will young people react to the challenges that await them?

The values and fortitude of youth are important not only to the growing aging population that will depend on this generation, but also to China's political leaders. On the one hand, communist leaders view the so-called aloofness of today's young people with apprehension, and on the other, they seem to fear the potential for political leanings that could threaten their leadership. After all, some of the most charged political uprisings

have been led by youth, such as *The May Fourth Movement of 1919*, *the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s* and *the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989*.

For the most part, this generation has displayed nationalistic sentiments that parallel official positions. However, youth offer no guarantees of continuing loyalty, a fact leaders seem to acknowledge. Last April, when 20 thousand Chinese – mostly youth – staged violent protests against Japan and its bid for a seat in the U.N. Security Council, the state was quick to curb the event as the May Fourth anniversary approached, perhaps heading off the possibility that the protest against China's neighbor might erupt into demonstrations over problems closer to home.

What expectations will this generation hold of society and of China's leaders? How will this generation of youth define itself? One thing is certain; today's youth offer no easy answers.

### Questions for discussion:

- How do the lives of China's youth differ in urban and rural areas?
- What are some of the challenges facing this generation of youth?
- Why are older generations and the government particularly interested in this group of young people?



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