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MANDARIN - INFORMATION SHEET

LANGUAGE

The official language of both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan is Mandarin. In China it is based on the northern dialect and is commonly known as *putonghua*. In Taiwan it is one of several languages spoken, including Taiwanese, Hokkeinese, Hakka and Aboriginal languages.

It is estimated that in excess of 53% of the Chinese population can communicate in Mandarin. Many families use the dialect native to their community, when they communicate with their own family, but in the public sphere they use Mandarin. The prevalence of Mandarin is considerably higher in urban areas and is more common amongst the young. The more literate Chinese speak Mandarin and it is consequentially perceived to be a sign of good breeding.

RELIGION

There is no identifiable 'official' religion in China, however, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism are all observed. The majority of the population does not formally practise any religion. It is estimated that 8 % of the population is Buddhist, 1.5 % Muslim, 0.4 % observe Catholicism, and a further 1.5 % are Protestants.

More than 200 years ago Buddhism spread from India to China. Mandarin Buddhist believers are Han Chinese. Buddhism is the largest observed religion in China. Taosim, a polytheistic religion, is also practised and is still popular in rural areas. For well over 1000 years Islam has also been present in China and is practised amongst many of the minority ethnic groups including the Hui, Uygur, Kazal, Ozbek, Tajik, Tatar, Kirgiz, Dongxiang Sala and Banan.

FESTIVALS

The main festivals celebrated are not of religious significance.

NEW YEAR - Chinese New Year is the most important festival of the year. Each year is named after one of the 12 animals in the Chinese horoscope. Families buy new clothes to wear, clean the house, visit family members and pay respect to ancestors through acts of remembrance. In most Australian cities, the Chinese communities organise activities to celebrate the New Year. Lion and dragon dances are commonplace.

清明節 QING MING FESTIVAL - The Qing Ming Festival (*Qingmingjie*), meaning Clear and Bright Festival, begins on the 104th day after the winter solstice, usually around April 5th. During the Qing Ming Festival people participate in outdoor activities and enjoy springtime. People visit the graves of departed ones, spring clean and tidy the site with the whole family. It is also called 'Tomb Sweeping Day'. Since 2008 it has been an official holiday in China. Food is offered to the deceased along with fruits and wine. Joss sticks are burnt.

中秋节 MOON FESTIVAL - Moon Festival (*zhong qiu jie*) is the second-most important festival in China. Falling on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month it is also known as the Mid-Autumn Festival. In the western calendar it falls between mid September and mid October. The Moon Festival is an occasion to wish each other a good harvest and also a time for family reunions. When the full moon rises, families gather together to watch it, eat moon cakes and fruit and sing moon poems. Moon cakes are made with sweet fillings of nuts, mashed red beans, lotus-seed paste or Chinese dates, and then wrapped in a pastry. A cooked egg yolk is sometimes found in the middle of the rich tasting dessert.

端午节 DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL - During the Dragon Boat Festival boats compete. Prior to being accepted into the competition the boats must have their eyes 'awakened'. This involves officials performing prayers and painting eyes upon the boats. Common customs practised during the Dragon Boat Festival include hanging calamus (a plant commonly called *sweet flag*) and moxa (a herb believed to have curative powers and the power to improve health) on the front door, and pasting up pictures of Chung Kuei (a nemesis of evil spirits). Adults drink hsiung huang wine and children are given fragrant sachets, both of which are said to possess qualities for preventing evil and bringing peace. The most popular dish during Dragon Boat Festival is tzung tzu (rice wrapped in bamboo leaves).

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: Physical contact between males is socially acceptable. It is common for men to show friendship by putting their arms around each other's shoulders. It is appropriate when greeting Chinese people, to shake hands with both men and women. As with some other Asian cultures, Chinese view it as impolite to say 'no' directly. Hence they may provide hints to convey the idea that what is being asked of them is not possible.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: Traditionally male children were valued over female children. It was believed that the family line and family property were continued through the male line. Changing roles of women have altered the former valuing of males over females and it is less prevalent in modern times. A Chinese child is seen to be one year old at the time of birth although many Chinese families migrating to Australia adopt the Western calendar as their birth date. Traditionally the role of child care fell to the extended family; in particular the grandmother. **COINING:** Many different Asian countries believe that internal bad winds cause illness. They believe that if you bring the wind to the surface, the illness will be cured. The practice for curing the illness is to 'scratch the wind' or 'coin'. This involves rubbing a coin rigorously against the back, neck, or forehead. Many Asian immigrants first dip the coin into an oil or mentholatum before they rub very hard with the coin until the skin turns red. Unfortunately, the resulting red marks have frequently been misinterpreted by child care providers and reported to officials.

CUISINE

Rice and noodles are staple foods of China. A diverse range of vegetables is eaten with the rice, hot or cold, steamed, boiled or fried. The style of cooking varies according to the province in China. There are generally no taboos on foods; however, children coming from strict Buddhist families may be vegetarian. Tea is usually served with every meal.

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