



## C H I N A



### CHINA FACTS

**Location** Eastern Asia, between North Korea and Vietnam. Borders the East China Sea, Korea Bay, Yellow Sea, and South China Sea.

**Area** 9,596,960 sq. km. The world's fourth largest country, just slightly smaller than the U.S.

**Capital** Beijing

**Languages** Standard Chinese or Mandarin, and many more, including Cantonese and Shanghaiese.

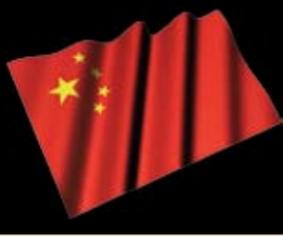
**Monetary Unit** Yuan/Renminbi

**Population** 1,298,847,624

**Terrain** Mostly mountainous, with high plateaus and deserts in the west and plains, deltas and hills in the east.

**Climate** Ranges from tropical southern areas to sub-arctic northern areas.

**Agricultural Exports** Rice, wheat, potatoes, sorghum, peanuts, tea, cotton, sugar cane, silk.



### The Coffee

Chinese coffee is something of an enigma, even to those in the coffee industry. Saddled with a reputation for poor quality and sold most often as instant coffee by Nestlé and other large companies, China's coffee is difficult to categorize and even more difficult to understand.

Part of this is due to the Chinese culture, which traditionally makes it challenging for outsiders to access information. This is compounded by the fact that there are no local coffee organizations to foster a better understanding of the coffee and to set industry standards. In addition, there was a time when China's coffee deserved its less-than-stellar reputation; but like all bad raps, this one has been difficult for the country to shake, even as the coffee has begun to improve.



"Chinese coffee is often considered to be a low-quality product and, in many cases, it is confused with Vietnamese coffee, but this is a very large misconception," says Stuart Eunson, managing director of Arabica Coffee Roasters in Beijing, China. "Over the last 10 years, Chinese coffee growers have made great progress in increasing the quality and consistency of the product they produce. While still in the developmental stages, Chinese coffee has become a good-quality product, and with some selective purchasing habits, a buyer can purchase very high-quality Chinese coffee now."

### Cultivation

Over 80 percent of China's coffee is grown in the southernmost inland province of Yunnan, which boasts four or five growing regions, including Ruili and Baoshan. Robusta is also grown in Fujian and on Hainan Island, located along the southern coastline near Vietnam.

"Fujian and Hainan now produce very little coffee," says Eunson. "Yunnan is easily

the largest producer in China, and is capable of producing a high-quality product. The climate, weather and terrain are ideal for coffee growing, and as with any coffee, those three conditions do affect the coffee flavor in a positive way.

Traditionally, China was home to large quantities of quality bourbon and typica plants brought from Burma (Myanmar) in the 1950s. But that has all changed. Today, most of China's coffee, almost as much as 70 percent, comes from the new catimor plants, a sturdy but poor-quality hybrid varietal designed to combat the country's problem with rust. Much of this changeover has been due to the large companies like Nestlé, which are providing the catimor plants to growers, along with training and incentives.

"The old varieties are still there," says David Roche, who visited China's coffee region a few years ago and who is chief technical director for the Coffee Quality Institute. "When I was there, from what I could glean, about 30 percent is probably the older varieties. But maybe half of those I saw were abandoned because of rust. I did see a couple of farms who were farming the old varieties, but they weren't taking the time to separate it out."

Although no national statistics on farm size were available, farms can range from very small to up to 5,000 acres. Many of the larger privately owned farms have contracts with large companies. There are also a large number of state-run farms.

The majority of the coffee is wet-processed, and at this point, very little is organically grown. "There are several farms trying to grow in an organic fashion, but only one is certified-organic so far," says Eunson.

### Hurdles

While China's mountains and conditions are ideal for producing quality coffee, that isn't what happened. Instead, the biggest hurdle for China's growth in the specialty industry is probably the fact that the country has so little



coffee that would qualify as specialty. And this doesn't seem likely to change soon. While the rust-resistant catimor varieties offer a solution to the country's struggles with disease, they often cup poorly, making it hard for the coffee to pass into the specialty realm.

Another hurdle is that very few people in the country drink quality coffee—or could even tell the difference between good and bad coffee. "There is no culture at all for coffee," says Roche. He recalls a cupping that he helped set up while he was in the growing region of Baoshan. "I got them to boil some water and showed them how to cup," he says. "The looks on their faces were, 'Oh my god, what are we doing?'"

According to Charffee Huang, vice-general manager of YL Coffee & Tea Ltd., one of the main and oldest exporters of Yunnan Coffee, both coffee production and consumption are increasing in the country but, he adds, "Tea will remain the main beverage form for many years, as it has been traditional for thousands of years."

### Future

The encouraging news is that when Chinese coffee is good, it's good. When properly grown and processed, Chinese coffees have a light to medium body and a light to medium acidity, similar to a wet-processed South American coffee. "Under ideal conditions, it can be a nice, medium-bodied coffee with a light acidity," says Eunson. "It's generally a good clean coffee that is priced well."

And more of this good coffee can be expected in the future, thanks to advances by both growers and consumers. "Growers have seen that

producing a high-quality coffee product will earn them more money, so they are working hard to produce a better product from year to year," says Eunson.

In addition, companies like Starbucks, which has 44 stores in Beijing alone, are starting to create a coffee culture inside this traditionally tea-oriented country. "More and more people are beginning to drink coffee, and in the major cities, people are learning about higher-quality fresh coffee from café chains like Starbucks," Eunson says.

As the demand for specialty coffee continues to grow around the world, China may become one of the countries that steps up to meet that demand, eradicating its reputation for poor quality by offering top-quality coffees to specialty consumers inside and outside its borders.



### CHINA COFFEE AT A GLANCE

**Coffee** Arabica (mainly catimor) and some robusta

**Flavor** Difficult to categorize, as it varies from region to region and much of it is sold as instant coffee. Under ideal conditions, has a nice, medium body with light acidity.

**Main Growing Regions** The western part of the Yunnan province

**Elevation** 1,000–2,000 meters

**Flowering** May–October

**Harvest** November–April

**Processing** Picked by hand; wet and dry processed; sun-dried.

**Shipping** Year-round

**Main Buyers** Hong Kong, North Korea, Singapore and Russia, who often buy instant coffee. Other buyers include the UK, Japan, the US and Belgium.

