

INTERNATIONAL

# MOVE OR ELSE

**Why is China's government forcing millions of farmers to move into cities?** BY IAN JOHNSON IN BEIJING

**WATCH VIDEOS** A Staggering Migration & Relocating Traditions

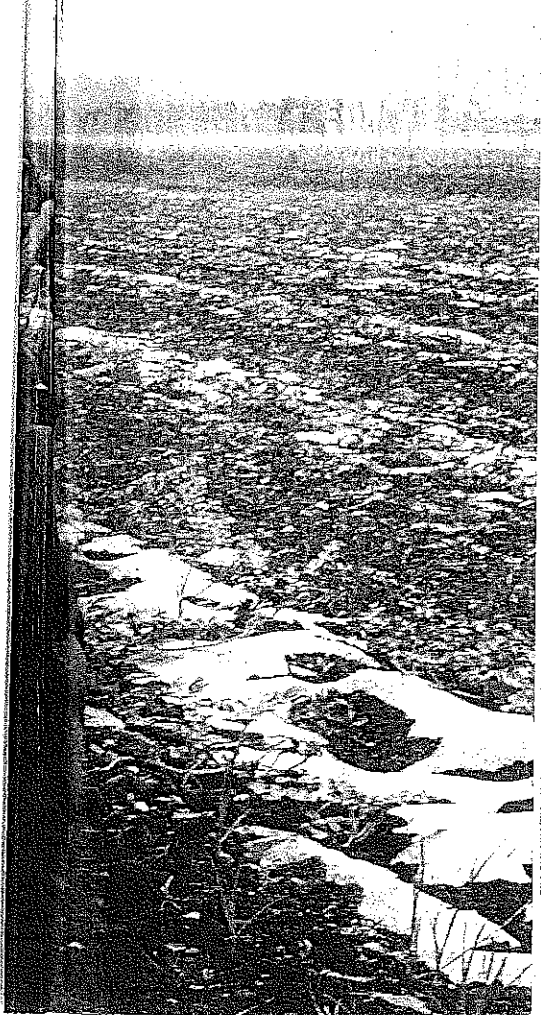
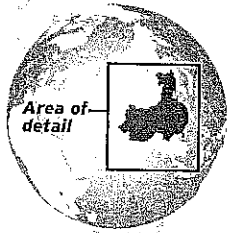
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In Huaming, a farmer plows land in the shadow of new high-rise apartments.



# Forced Urbanization

China is moving 250 million people into cities and towns.



SIM CHI YIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDOUX

Imagine government officials showing up at your house and ordering your family to move. You don't get any say about where you're going. Your parents have to give up their jobs, and you have to switch schools. Then they bulldoze your house.

That's exactly what's happening to millions of people in China. The country's Communist government is going ahead with a plan to move 250 million rural residents into towns and cities over the next dozen years. That's nearly 10 times the population of Texas.

The government hopes that the move—one of the largest human relocations in history—will boost the country's massive economy, which has recently started to slow down. But many worry that the forced migration will create even bigger problems for China for generations to come. Either way, it will change the country forever.

Over the years, urbanization has taken place in China naturally, as farmers with big-city dreams have ditched their plows and headed for Beijing,

Shanghai, and other rapidly growing cities. In the 1980s, about 80 percent of China's population lived in the countryside, compared with 47 percent today.

But China's government says the country needs to urbanize faster. Officials want at least 70 percent of the nation's 1.4 billion people—the largest population in the world—living in cities by 2025. The idea is that more city-dwellers will mean more people spending money, making China's economy less dependent on exports for growth.

Today, almost every Chinese province has large-scale programs to move farmers into towns and cities. As farmers trade in their huts for high-rise apartments, their plots are leveled and built over or given to agricultural companies to manage.

### Losing 300 Villages a Day

In Communist China, all land belongs to the state, even if a family has lived there and farmed it for centuries. That means families have no way to fight the forced relocations. In recent years, dozens of people have set themselves on

fire rather than move. Families rarely get sympathy from local officials, who often profit from the evictions by selling long-term leases to developers.

Rural residents who do move are given free apartments and compensation payments. But for many of them, that isn't enough to start a new life in the city.

"We know how to farm but not how to work in an office," says Wei Dushen, a former farmer who now lives in Huaming, a newly created town in northeast China. "Those are for educated people."

This rapid urbanization means that villages are disappearing at a rate of about 300 a day. In 2000, China had 3.7 million villages, according to research by Tianjin University. By 2010, that figure had dropped to 2.6 million.

The widespread destruction of villages reveals a deep cultural bias against rural life: A common insult in China is to call someone a farmer, a word equated with backwardness and ignorance.

One city taking in the rural population is Chongqing, in central China. There, former farmers live in skyscrapers dozens of stories high. China's government is even building entirely new towns for many of the people being moved.

### Free-Market Reforms

Modern China was born 65 years ago, when Mao Zedong's Communist forces



Slums in Chongqing will be destroyed to make room for more highrises and relocated villagers.

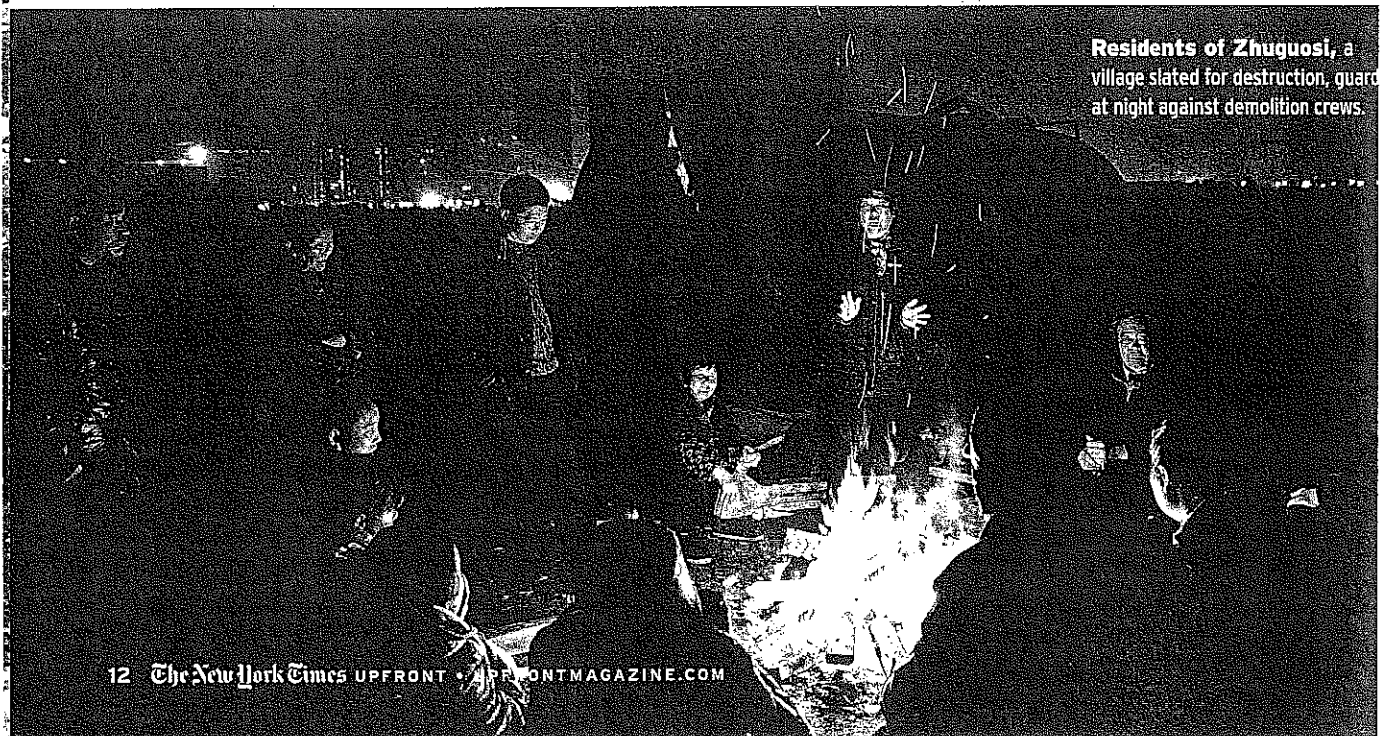
won a civil war and founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. Over the next three decades, the country endured great turmoil as Mao's Communist economic and social policies were implemented.

By the time Mao died in 1976, China's economy was in ruins. In 1978, his successor, Deng Xiaoping, introduced free-market reforms that opened up the economy and led to three decades of explosive growth. But political control remained in the hands of the Communist Party.

With China's economy generating new wealth, many Chinese longed for greater freedoms as well. But in 1989, when tens of thousands of students gathered in Tiananmen Square in Beijing to demand political reforms, the government

sent in army troops who killed hundreds and injured and imprisoned thousands more. In the last two decades, the government has kept a tight lid on dissent (Though China has more Internet users than any other country, tens of thousands of government censors monitor chat rooms and block websites critical of the government in what is known as the "great firewall.")

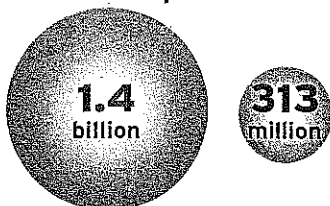
Economically, today's China is a global powerhouse, driven by a manufacturing boom. It sometimes seems like everything Americans buy is made in China—from clothing and cellphones to refrigerators. About 70 percent of the goods Walmart sells are made in China. In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second-biggest economy after the United



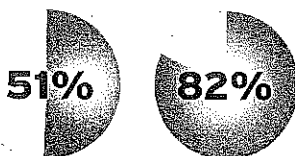
Residents of Zhuguosi, a village slated for destruction, guard at night against demolition crews.

# China | U.S.

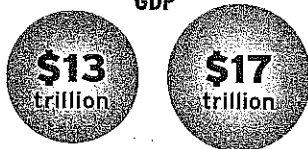
## Population



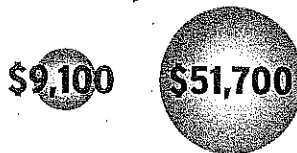
## Percentage of Population Living in Urban Areas



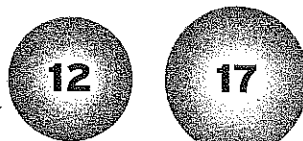
## GDP



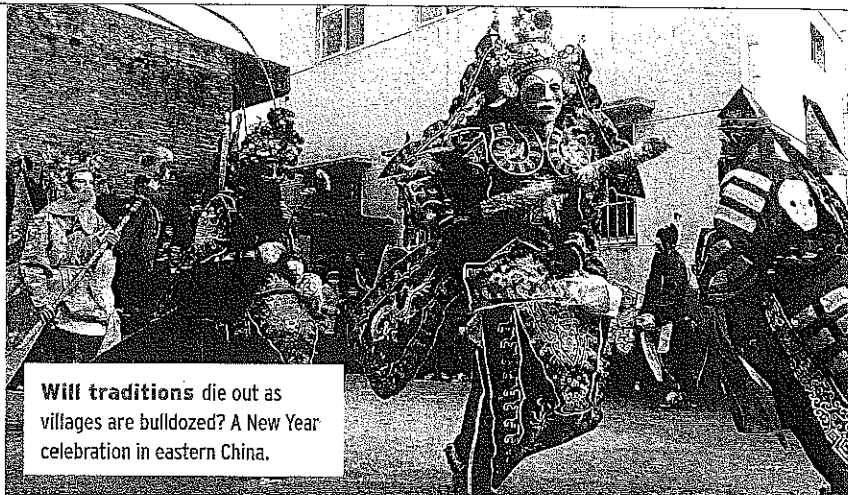
## Per Capita GDP



## Number of Years Spent in School



SOURCE: THE WORLD FACTBOOK 2013 (C.I.A.)



Will traditions die out as villages are bulldozed? A New Year celebration in eastern China.

those items themselves—along with TVs, cars, and cellphones that they couldn't possibly have purchased before.

"If half of China's population starts consuming, growth is inevitable," says one government official. "Right now they are living in rural areas, where they do not consume."

Some of the relocated residents like their new lives. Yang Huashuai, 25, appreciates the opportunity he's been given to make his fortune in Huaming. He works as an electrician and a cab driver. "It's survival of the fittest," he says. "If you don't work hard, you don't deserve to make it."

But Yang is one of the lucky ones. Many people are being sent to towns—particularly the newly constructed ones—that don't have enough jobs for all the new residents. Some of those areas are nothing more than clusters of high-rise apartments with a school or two and a handful of shops.

### 'Nothing to Do'

Even in Huaming, most people are unemployed or can find only low-paying jobs, such as street sweeper. Huaming used to be a farming village known for its local handicrafts and fresh vegetables. Its 41,000 residents were spread across 60 square miles. The government recently consolidated the village into one square mile, with residents living in gated 10-story buildings.

It's a similar story in the province of Shaanxi, where the government is moving 2.4 million farmers into cities. Some of those people have been moved to the newly created town of Qiyan.

Formerly a village of about 200 households, its simple houses and farms were recently leveled and rebuilt into apartments that now house 6,000 people. In nearby Ankang, scores of unemployed people pass the days sitting in the small courtyards outside their new buildings.

"There's nothing to do anymore," says He Shifang, 45, who was moved to

**'Up in the mountains, we worked all the time. . . . Here we just sit around.'**

Ankang from her family's farm. "Up in the mountains, we worked all the time. We had pigs and chickens. Here we just sit around."

Officials say that helping relocated residents get back on their feet is a priority. But there's an issue that may be beyond the government's power to fix: the loss of Chinese culture. A government project has catalogued roughly 9,700 examples of "intangible cultural heritage"—traditional songs, dances, rituals, martial arts, and theater. About 80 percent of them are rural. As villages are torn down to make room for new cities, many of China's social traditions are disappearing along with them. There may be no way to get them back.

"Chinese culture has traditionally been rural-based," says Feng Jicai, an author and Chinese scholar. "Once the villages are gone, the culture is gone." •

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