



## 1 The country

China is situated in the eastern part of the Asian continent and is the third largest country in the world. It covers a total area of approximately 9.6 million square kilometres and is a land of contrasts with deserts in the north, mountains in the south and cultivated areas in the east.

This vast land supports almost a quarter of the world's population: over one billion people of different races, traditions and cultures. Although the majority (about 94% of the population) are the Han people, there are fifty-five minority peoples, the largest among them being the Mongolians [Ménggǔzú 蒙古族], the Tibetans [Zàngzú 藏族] and the Zhuang [Zhuàngzú 壮族].

Chinese culture was the cradle of Japanese, Korean and some South East Asian cultures. The ancient Chinese considered their country to be the centre of the world and called it Zhōngguó [中国], literally meaning 'the Central Kingdom'.