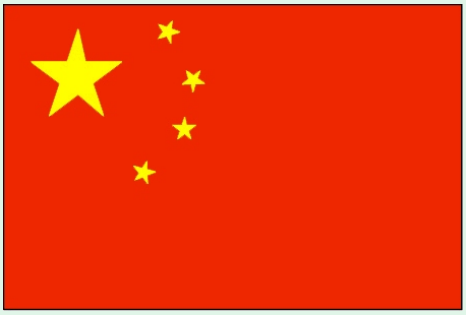
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with Reading Museum Service

CHINA: CHILDHOOD G37

China is a huge country. It is about 40 times bigger than Britain and is home to over 1.3 billion people - a fifth of the entire world's population.





Most people live in the east of the country in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (pictured on the right). In contrast, there are some rural areas where people still live in a more traditional way and villages often have just a few hundred inhabitants (pictured below on the right).



This box includes objects relating to childhood in China. You might find some similarities with life in Britain and also some things that are quite different.









Above:Learning road safety at school.
Right: In the playground.
Far right: In the classroom.

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Mother with baby doll



When you imagine Chinese clothing, you probably think of silky tunics and trousers with Chinese patterns and symbols, like the clothes on the doll.
There is a bamboo pattern and Chinese symbols on her trousers.
She is carrying her baby on her back.

In 1979 the Chinese government introduced a one child per family policy to try to control the rapidly increasing population. The policy was designed to ease demands on food, jobs and health care. Despite the policy, some parents do have more than one child, but they have to pay a Social Compensation Fee, which can be extremely expensive. This unfortunately means that more women have abortions and more children are abandoned at orphanages to avoid paying the fee. Some organisations have said that the policy goes against human rights.

In 2002 the policy was relaxed slightly to allow ethnic minorities and parents in rural areas to have more than one child. Parents in urban areas who have no siblings can also have more than one child. It is thought that the policy will stay in place until at least 2020.

Girl doll





The smaller doll is also wearing traditional clothing. Can you see what the patterns are?

Clothes like this are usually only worn for special occasions, in fact, since the 1980s it is more common to see people wearing everyday clothes similar to those in Britain. Look at the people in the photograph on the right.



The traditional clothes of China vary between regions and have changed throughout the centuries with each ruling dynasty. The Hanfu, or silk robe, was worn in various different forms up until the Qing Dynasty came to power in 1644. The picture on the right shows a group of people wearing the Hanfu. Continued over the page.....

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The Qing Dynasty lasted until 1911 and during this time Tangzhuang clothing became popular. This was the qípáo dress for women and the changshan (long shirt) for men.

After 1911, China became a republic and clothing went through a transformation. The qípáo was modernised, becoming fitted with a slit up the sides. Look at the 1930s advert on the right for an example of this.

In 1949 the Communist Party of China came to power, with Chairman Mao Zedong as the leader. Plain, functional clothes were worn and anything traditional or western was not acceptable. The children's clothing in the box are good examples of this. Since Mao's death in 1976 this rule has disppeared.

Child's clothing



The dungarees and shirt in the box date from the mid-twentieth century. They are made from sensible, hard-wearing material and plain colours. The lovely embroidered animal pictures add a bit of fun for the child.

The dungarees are known as kaidangku, which translates as spilt bottom pants. No nappy is needed, as they allow the child to crouch anywhere to relieve itself. Kaidangku have always been seen as convenient and less wasteful than using several throwaway nappies everyday. It also means no nappy rash of course! You can still see kaidangku in use in China, although some mothers now prefer to use nappies. See the picture on the right.



The little blue sun hat has a five-pointed red star sewn onto it. This star is a symbol of communism and is thought to represent the five fingers on the worker's hand.

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Pair of child's suedette shoes



A comfortable pair of shoes is very important for a child's growing feet. These shoes are very soft and flexible and must have been very comfortable for the child who owned them. This style of shoe, with a soft upper part and a rubber sole, is also very popular with adults in China and has become popular in western countries in the last few years.



Western fashions have become popular with Chinese children and teenagers too - they probably have very similar tastes to you.

But China is probably better known in history for having an extremely uncomfortable footwear fashion. The Chinese custom of binding women's feet started in the tenth century and wasn't banned until 1911. 1,000 years of pain in order to keep the feet as small and dainty as possible.

The process began when the girl was about five or six years old. Her mother first soaked the feet in warm liquid and herbs and then broke all her toes except the biggest. The broken toes were pulled under the foot and bound to the heel using cotton or silk bandages. The bandages were changed every few days and pulled tighter. Just try to imagine how painful this must have been. As well as the pain, many girls developed infections and even died from blood poisoning or gangrene.

Bound feet were a mark of class and attractiveness. If the feet were unbound, then the women would not find a husband. Beautiful shoes covered the lower part of the foot but the illusion was lost once the shoes were removed, as you can see from the pictures below.







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Toys

There are two toys in the box - a crab shaped mouth organ and a rattle. The rattle is decorated with a picture of some fish - much like those you might find in a pond in a Chinese garden or park. The example on the right is from the beautiful Yi Yuan gardens in Shanghai.



Many of the toys sold here in Britain have been made in China. It is much cheaper for huge toy companies such as Mattel and Hornby to import toys made in China than run factories in Europe or the US.

Weiqi, or Go, is an ancient Chinese board game that has become popular again recently. The picture on the right shows some children playing the game. It is very difficult and challenging and involves strategic moves.







Brown exercise book



The first thing to notice about this exercise book is that it starts from the back page and works forward.

Chinese is the world's oldest continuously used written language. It is made up of characters called hànzi, which started out as pictures of animals, people and other things. Over the centuries these pictures have altered and now look less like the things they represent. For example, the word for people is written like this:

人

It is a simplified version of a person. The two strokes look like legs. Can you find this symbol in the exercise book?

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10 reading books

The selection of colourful books are beautifully illustrated. Inside the front covers there are short descriptions in English, which tell you what the stories are about.

