Sichuan Province, renowned worldwide for its cuisine, is one of China’s agricultural heartlands, thanks in part to the 2,300-year-old irrigation system still in use. The province, one of China’s most populous, played a key role in the early years of Deng Xiaoping’s reform program to decentralize the economy. The 12 May 2008 earthquake killed more than seventy thousand people in Sichuan.

Sichuan (Szechwan) Province is located on the upper reaches of the Yangzi (Chang) River. With a land area of 485,000 square kilometers (slightly smaller than Spain) and an estimated population of 81.27 million, it is one of China’s most populous provinces. It borders Qinghai, Gansu, and Shaanxi provinces to the north; Hubei and Hunan provinces to the east; Guizhou and Yunnan provinces to the south; and Tibet (Xizang) Autonomous Region (TAR) to the west. For centuries it has played a key role in China’s economy and in relations with Tibet and other western regions. Sichuan also plays an important role in China’s plans to develop the interior of the country.

Archaeological evidence at Sanxingdui just north of the provincial capital of Chengdu (with an estimated 2007 population of 11.12 million) suggests that Sichuan was inhabited as early as the eleventh century BCE by a technologically advanced people whose culture was distinct from that of the north China heartland. By 311 BCE the kingdoms of Ba (in eastern Sichuan) and Shu (in western Sichuan) had fully developed. In that year the armies of the Qin state from northern China incorporated the territories of Ba and Shu into the Qin empire, although the names of the two kingdoms are still used to refer to the Chongqing area (part of Sichuan until 1997 administrative reorganization) and the Chengdu area, respectively.

Governors of Qin established a regional capital at Chengdu, and Qin engineers built the Dujiangyan waterworks on the Min River west of the city, making the Chengdu Plain a productive agricultural center. However, Sichuan’s geography—surrounded by mountain ranges and the Yangzi (Chang) River gorges—kept it relatively isolated from the rest of China. The Qin constructed a highway from their capital near the Huang (Yellow) River southwest into Sichuan, carving ledges into the steep mountain slopes. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) Buddhism flourished, and many monasteries were established in Sichuan. The Great Buddha at Leshan, the world’s largest stone statue of Buddha, was carved into a cliff along the Min River south of Chengdu. During the last thousand years Sichuan has been a center of the horse and tea trade with Tibet. Sichuan also supplies rice, silk, sugar, and medicinal products to eastern China. Salt wells drilled as deep as 1,460 meters produce brine, which is boiled down using local deposits of natural gas.

Resettlement and Reassignment

The word Sichuan (four rivers) was applied to the area during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). At the end of the
Ming dynasty (1368–1644) the Sichuan population was devastated by a rebellion. The Qing dynasty (1644–1912) promoted resettlement of the area by emigrants from eastern China. Many settlers from Hunan and Hubei brought their spicy culinary culture which, combined with influences from other parts of China and local innovation, produced the world-famous Sichuan cuisine. After the Qing dynasty fell in 1912 Sichuan remained isolated from national politics until 1937, when it became the base of anti-Japanese resistance. In 1939 the Chinese Nationalist Party government created a new province, Xikang, out of parts of western Sichuan and eastern Tibet. In 1955 the People’s Republic of China government dismantled Xikang and reassigned its territory to Sichuan, with the result that the population of western Sichuan today includes many Tibetans and other national minority groups. Although they only represent about 5 percent of Sichuan’s population, the Tibetans (Zang), Qiang, Yi, Moso, and other
minority peoples are spread widely over the vast mountainous regions of western Sichuan.

Deng Xiaoping, who became China’s leader after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, was a native of Guang’an in eastern Sichuan. The province played a key role in the early years of Deng’s reform program to decentralize the economy. Deng’s close ally Zhao Ziyang, as provincial Chinese Communist Party secretary in Sichuan during the late 1970s, launched what came to be called the “household responsibility system,” dismantling communes and giving farmers more freedom to manage their fields and to market their surplus crops as they chose. Policies first adopted in Sichuan Province soon spread across the country, leading to dramatic increases in agricultural output.

Sichuan Province is home to the Xichang satellite-launching center and many scientific research institutes. Large government investments in transportation and energy networks have been made to promote the economic development of Sichuan. The new dam in the Yangzi River’s Three Gorges area, for example, is being built to provide electricity for much of western China. It is hoped that the dam will meet 10 percent of China’s energy needs, but the environmental and societal costs are great; an estimated 1.3 million people have been displaced by the dam’s construction. The dam is projected to be completed in 2009.

Sichuan Province and Chongqing (a province-level municipal area with a population of over 28 million) are the focal regions of the central government’s “Develop the West” campaign. The campaign, begun in 2000, is designed both to tap the resources of western China and to reduce the cultural and economic disparities between interior and coastal China. Many of eastern China’s migrant laborers are Sichuan natives. By developing infrastructure and luring foreign capital to Sichuan and other western provinces, the government hopes to stem the flow of migrants, thus alleviating social problems caused by the division of families and political problems caused by disadvantaged migrant communities in the coastal cities. Provincial and local governments have promoted tourism around many cultural and scenic sites, including the hot springs at Jiuzhaigou in the northwest and the National Nature Reserve at Wolong, home of the largest population of giant pandas in captivity. China’s largest private museum, the Jianchuan Museum Cluster, opened west of Chengdu in 2005. The museum has the world’s most extensive collection of artifacts from the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945, known outside China as the Second Sino-Japanese War) as well as from the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976.

2008 Earthquake

On 12 May 2008 an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale and centered at Wenchuan in the Himalayan foothills west of Chengdu destroyed many Sichuan communities and killed more than seventy thousand people. Although aid from the government and private donors quickly reached the stricken areas, the earthquake may have long-term effects on Sichuan’s economy. Many cultural sites, including the temple next to the ancient Dujiangyan waterworks, were damaged. The collapse of many school buildings, even as nearby government offices

Wooden salt derricks in Zigong, “the Salt City” of Sichuan Province. The technology used to build salt derricks was developed in ancient China. Photo by Paul and Bernice Noll.
and residential complexes withstood the earthquake, has laid Sichuan officials open to charges of corruption. Many parents lost children in school buildings that may not have been constructed to comply with building codes. It is uncertain whether the earthquake will stimulate reform in Chinese administration and construction practices. The Chinese government’s three-year redevelopment plan is estimated to cost $150 billion and will include the complete relocation of Beichuan, one of the hardest hit Sichuan towns. In October 2008, the World Bank announced that loans amounting to $510 million would be allocated to Sichuan to support earthquake recovery efforts.

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Further Reading