

Explainer

# China's decade under Xi Jinping explained in seven charts

Friday 21 October 2022, by [DAVIDSON Helen](#) (Date first published: 20 October 2022).

**Xi has overseen rapid economic growth and rising wealth, while spending big on the military, but inequality has widened and a demographic crisis looms**

A decade under the rule of Xi Jinping has seen extraordinary change in China. Over his 10 years as leader Xi has tightened his personal grip on the Communist party, and the party's grip on the country. He has weeded out rivals and enemies through anti-corruption purges, and cracked down on grassroots dissent by tightening censorship and surveillance. He has also overseen massive economic growth. Xi has sought to reduce China's reliance on exports and increase domestic consumption, ordered a military overhaul and modernisation, and claimed the eradication of absolute poverty among all 1.4 billion people. [As he looks set to secure an unprecedented third term](#) in power, Xi will be battling a slowing economy and an ageing population.

## GDP

China's gross domestic product (GDP) was \$17.73tn in 2021, an increase of more than 100% since 2012. The rapid growth, however, is slowing - exacerbated by Covid-zero policies and ongoing housing market crisis. Earlier this year the World Bank joined other international monetary bodies in [downgrading forecasts of the world's second biggest economy](#). For the first time in 30 years, China's growth was behind that of the Asia-Pacific region, to which China contributes 86% of the output.

*Graph China's GDP was \$17.73tn in 2021 - up more than 100% since 2012 not reproduced here*

## Income

Average income in China has doubled during Xi's two terms. According to World Bank figures, the gross national income (GNI) per capita was US\$5,910 (£5,214) in 2012 when Xi came to power, and rose steadily to \$11,890 by 2021. Average disposable income has also risen in that time, from 16,241RMB (\$2,599) in 2012 to 33,172RMB in 2021. Last year the Chinese Communist party (CCP) declared it had achieved its goal of eradicating absolute poverty, as part of its goal to bring about common prosperity for all Chinese. However the impact of [Covid has complicated issues for Chinese workers](#), particularly those who migrate to cities away from their home villages, and income inequality remains high. Analysts have said the CCP needs to set specific targets in lowering China's Gini coefficient - a measurement of income disparity - if it wants to broaden the middle class and achieve common prosperity.

*Graph Average individual income in China has doubled in less than a decade, reaching \$11,890 in 2021 not reproduced here*

## Unemployment

As China's economic growth has slowed, [unemployment rates](#) have stayed above 5% since 2019. Among young people it's far worse. The unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds reached a record 19.9%, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, the highest rate since figures began being published in 2018.

[In his speech to the twice-a-decade Congress meeting](#) in Beijing on Sunday, Xi pledged to "tackle structural unemployment [and] improve the system for creating jobs by encouraging business startups and support and regulate the development of new forms of employment."

*Graph China's unemployment rate has been above 5% since 2019 not reproduced here*

## Population

Like much of east Asia, China is staring down a looming demographic crisis. Successive policy changes have [failed to reverse a decline in birthrates](#), leading to an ageing population which threatens major economic damage for China's future. Fewer people are getting married every year.

*Graph China's birthrate is declining not reproduced here*

In 2021 [the birthrate fell to a 61-year low](#), with [young people pointing](#) to high costs of living, entrenched unequal gender roles, stalled mobility in career prospects and a lack of maternity support services. Demographers now think China's population could peak far earlier than expected. An ageing population means a larger share of older people that need caring for, but a smaller cohort of working age people. It can also put pressure on labour supply and slow economic growth.

*Graph The population of China was recorded as 1.41bn people in 2021 not reproduced here*

## Media

In the last three years China has been [the world's worst offender](#) for jailing journalists, with at least 50 behind bars in 2021, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Reporters Without Borders estimates the number is more than 100. Press freedom advocates have decried the worsening reporting environment for journalists in China, with restrictions on media in Hong Kong also growing under the national security law. On the mainland, Xi Jinping's rule has also seen diminished access for foreign media with growing reports of harassment and intimidation.

*Graph The number of journalists imprisoned in China rose to 50 in 2021 not reproduced here*

## Military

Under Xi's rule, China has attracted concern and opposition from the west for its increasing regional expansionism and aggression. Xi has overseen a major restructure and modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) - the military wing of the CCP - with an apparent focus on the South China Sea and Taiwan. The CCP's defence budget has more than doubled between 2012 and 2021, to 1.35tn yuan (\$208bn). It is still less than a third of that of the US, but is the largest in the [Asia Pacific](#) region, and the US and other western governments fear the PLA is nearing capability to invade and annex Taiwan - a democracy over which China holds a disputed claim of sovereignty. Analysts note, however, that while the PLA is growing in terms of assets and strength, it has had no combat experience since the 1970s.

*Graph China's defence budget has more than doubled in a decade to \$209bn not reproduced here*

**Helen Davidson** in Taipei

@heldavidson

---

---

**P.S.**

• The Guardian. Thu 20 Oct 2022 00.48 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/20/chinas-decade-under-xi-jinping-explained-in-seven-charts>

• *Helen Davidson's articles in the Guardian.*

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/helen-davidson>

• Support the Guardian

Available for everyone, funded by readers

[Contribute](#)

[Subscribe](#)