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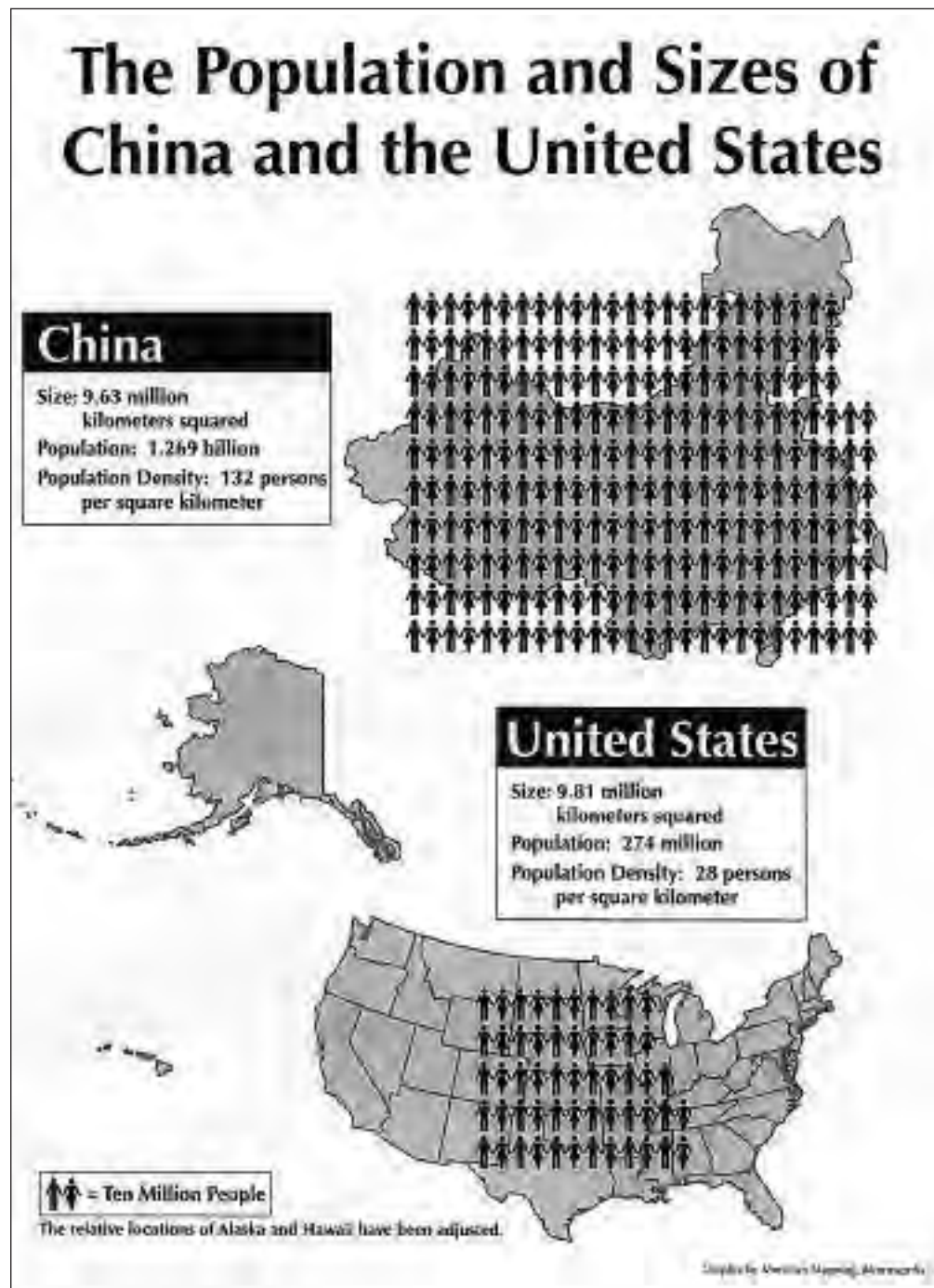
Comparing China to the United States

By Peter Frost

While this China-U.S. map and population chart is a perfect example of why one picture is worth a thousand words, we should all be aware of a few additional points that can perhaps best be made in prose.

First of all, we have to recognize that the question of what constitutes “China” is hotly disputed. During the twentieth century—and most vividly since the Communist Party’s victory in 1949, the status of Taiwan and other offshore islands has been a major political issue between Communists and Nationalists. Chinese rule in Tibet has led to major charges of religious and cultural persecution. Various small islands (important particularly for oil and fishing rights) are the subject of disputes between China and Vietnam, and China and Japan. China’s sovereignty is by no means settled.

This concern (or perhaps we should say insecurity) is reinforced by the fact that the high mountains of the Southwest and the broad plains of Sinkiang, Mongolia and Manchuria have traditionally been sparsely populated. Roughly 6 percent of the population, much of it nomadic and not “Han” Chinese, has traditionally lived on 50 to 60 percent of China’s total land area. These relatively underpopulated areas have long created security prob-



lems for the Chinese.

The difference between settled and unsettled areas also encouraged notions of China as the “central kingdom,” a cultured place surrounded by more warlike but inferior peoples. Time and again, “bar-

barians” found that once they moved off the steppes or broke through the Great Wall into the more densely settled parts of China, they had to adopt traditional forms of Confucian-inspired government and the social values of a more sophis-

ticated civilization. “You can conquer China on horseback,” states a traditional Chinese proverb, “but you cannot rule it that way.”

Yet this “central kingdom” has itself been divided. While both areas had irrigation

