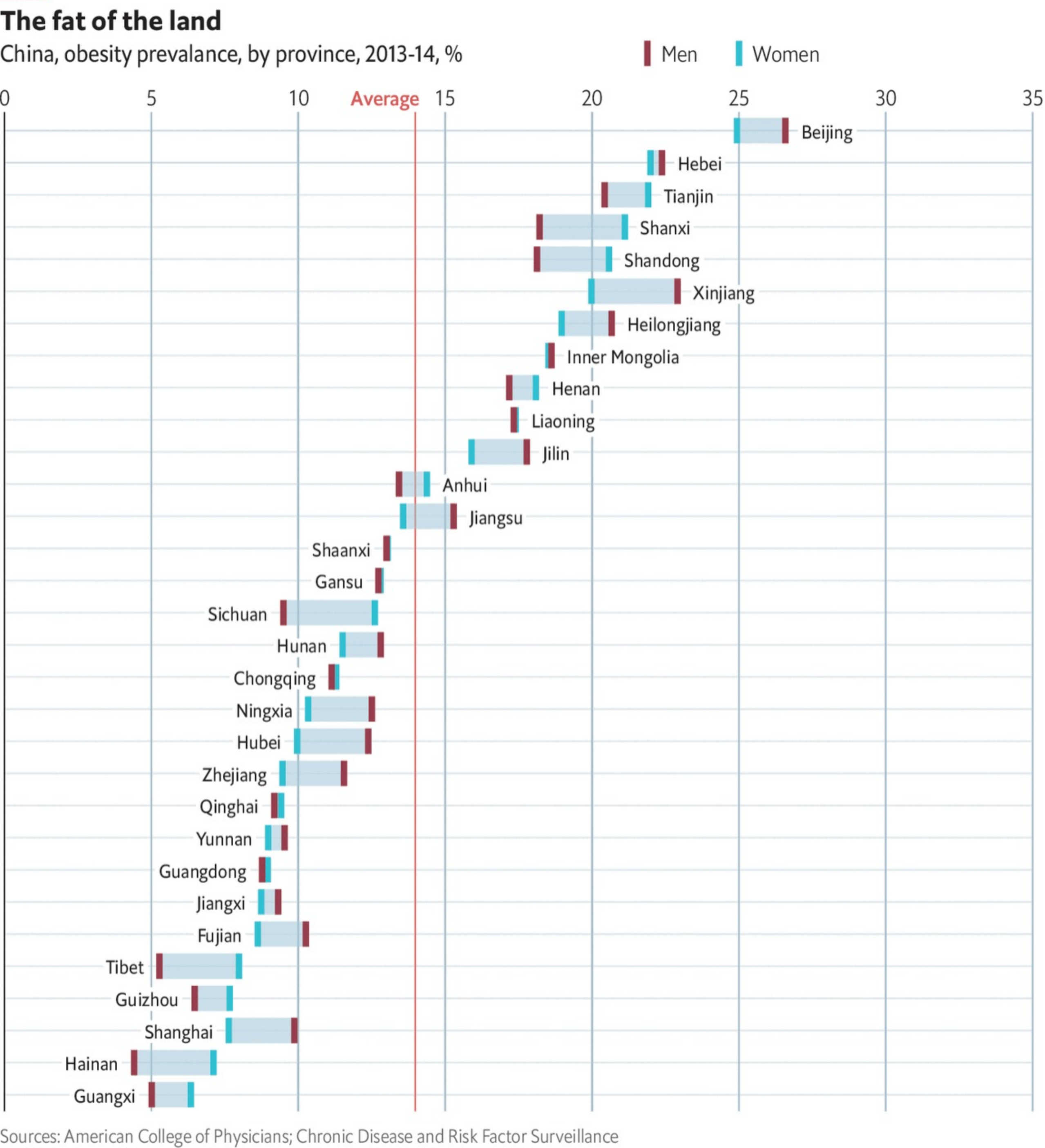


China worries about its bulging waistlines

The country is growing fatter. But plans to tackle obesity remain a little thin



Graphic detail >

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IN 1926 WALTER MALLORY, a foreign-affairs expert who would go on to head the Council on Foreign Relations, dubbed China the “land of famine”. Nearly a century later, the country is grappling with the opposite problem. More than a quarter of Chinese adults, or roughly 350m people, are overweight or obese; among children, the proportion is one in five, up from just one in 20 in 1995.

China’s fat is not spread evenly, however. According to a new paper in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, a journal published by the American College of Physicians, one in seven of the country’s adults is obese, defined by Chinese standards as having a body mass index (BMI) of 28 or more. But obesity rates are even higher in big cities, particularly in the north. A quarter of Beijing’s adults are considered obese; more than a fifth of adults in Tianjin, a nearby port city, similarly have worrying waistlines. Meanwhile in Guangxi, an agricultural province in the south, less than 6% of adults are obese. In Hainan, a tropical island off China’s southern coast, the obesity rate is also under 6%.

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Urban living is partly to blame. City dwellers have greater access to Western foods, including those rich in fats and sugars, and lead more sedentary lifestyles. Northern Chinese are more likely than those in the south to consume cereals, high-fat foods and alcohol, all of which help pack on the pounds.

China’s government is trying to tackle the problem, though it could do more. Most public-health initiatives—such as “Happy Ten Minutes”, a programme which encourages youngsters to exercise for ten minutes a day—emphasise the importance of physical activity but say little about diet. This may not be an accident. Some academics have pointed to the influence in Chinese public-health campaigns of research institutes financed by Western multinational food-and-drink firms such as Nestlé and Coca-Cola. Cutting out junk food would mean slimming down their sales. Instead, ever more Chinese are turning to bootcamps, liposuction and diet pills.