

Chapter 19

Geography and the Early Settlements of China

EQ: How did geography affect life in ancient China?

19.1 Section 1 - Introduction

In this chapter, you will explore the geography of the vast land of China. You will read about the physical features, climate, and vegetation that greatly influenced the way of life of the early people of China.

China is a large country in eastern Asia. Words like *highest*, *largest*, and *longest* come to mind when talking about China's geography. The world's highest mountains, the Himalayas, are in China. So is one of the world's largest deserts, the Taklimakan (tah-kluh-muh-KAHN) Desert. China also has some of the longest rivers in the world.

China's climate is just as extreme as its physical features. The weather can vary from ice storms in the high mountains to the dreaded sandstorms of the Taklimakan Desert. The sandstorms darken the skies as if it were nighttime. Hot, howling winds fill the air with sand and gravel. For people caught in a sandstorm, survival may mean wrapping themselves in clothing or blankets and lying down until the storm passes. That could be hours, perhaps even days.

As you can see, China is a land of contrasts. In this chapter, you will compare five geographic regions in China. You will learn about the climate, physical features, and vegetation of each region. You will also discover how geography affected the history of the early Chinese people: where they settled, the way they lived, and how they communicated with other civilizations.



19.2 - An Overview of China's Geography



Present-day China is the third largest country in the world, after Russia and Canada. China includes about 3.7 million square miles (9.6 million square kilometers). With a population of about 1.2 billion, more people live in China than in any other country.

China's land area was much smaller in ancient times. To understand Chinese history, it's helpful to divide China into two main areas: Outer China and Inner China. Most of ancient Chinese history involves only Inner China. The two areas did not become one country until the 1600s C.E. But the geography of both areas affected the early settlement and history of China.

The Geography of Outer China Outer China includes the western and northern parts of present-day China. This is an area of great extremes in climate and physical features.

In the southwest, China is bounded by the Himalayas. The key geographical **region** in this area is the Tibet- Qinghai (tih-BET ching-HIE) Plateau. It is the world's largest plateau. This region is a bitterly cold place to live. There are only about fifty days a year without frost. Snowstorms are common, even in July.

In the northwest, the major region is the Northwestern Deserts. This area includes the Turfan Depression, the second-lowest place in China. It is 505 feet below sea level. It can grow so hot here that raindrops **evaporate** before reaching the ground.



In the northeast, the key region is the Northeastern Plain, a land of low hills and plains. It has short, hot summers. Winters are long and dry, with five months of freezing temperatures.

The Geography of Inner China Inner China includes the southeastern part of present-day China. This part of China is closer to sea level than the western areas. It is a land of rolling hills, river valleys, and plains. Rivers flow through this area from the west. They provide water for irrigation. Floods from these rivers also **enrich** the soil. To early settlers, these physical features made Inner China more attractive than Outer China. Inner China has two main regions. The northern region is the North China Plain. To the south are the low river plains of the middle and lower Chang Jiang (chahng jyahng) Basins. These regions have very different **climates**. The Chang Jiang Basins are warm and wet. The North China Plain is drier and often cooler.

Each of China's five major regions has its own climate, physical features, and vegetation. Let's take a closer look at each area, starting with the three major regions in Outer China.

19.3 - The Tibet-Qinghai Plateau



The southwestern part of Outer China is dominated by the high Tibet-Qinghai Plateau. Also known as the Tibetan Plateau, this area is often called the “Roof of the World.” Its average elevation of 13,500 feet is more than two miles above sea level. It is a very large area, covering almost a quarter of the land in China.

The Tibet-Qinghai Plateau is a rocky land surrounded by towering mountains. The Himalayas lie on the southern edge of the plateau. The tallest mountain in the world, Mount Everest, is part of this mountain range. Its peak is 29,000 feet in altitude, or more than five miles high.

Because the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau is so high, its climate is very cold. The air is thin and dry. Snow falls even in the summer.

Two of China's major rivers begin in this area: the Huang He (HWAHNG heh), also known as the Yellow River, and the Chang Jiang, also called the Yangtze River. Despite these rivers, the plateau is rather dry. The natural vegetation consists of sparse scrubs and grasses. Antelopes and yaks, a type of ox, roam the area. Sometimes they are prey for wolves and wildcats.

For the people of ancient times, the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau was a challenging place to live. It was too cold and dry to grow crops. But the grasses did provide food for yaks and other livestock. The cold, rocky plateau and the high mountains made travel to Inner China very difficult through this area.

19.4 - The Northwestern Deserts

The northwestern part of Outer China is known for its vast deserts, including the Taklimakan and the Gobi (GOH-bee). These deserts are harsh places to live and difficult to cross. The climate varies from sizzling hot in the summer to below freezing in the winter. The [oases](#) are the only places to grow crops or raise animals such as sheep. Evidence shows that in ancient times, shelters made of mud were sometimes built near oases.

The Taklimakan Desert The Taklimakan Desert covers an area of about 105,000 square miles. It is considered one of the most dangerous deserts in the world. In fact, its name means “once you go in, you will not come out.” Desert winds cause huge sand dunes to shift



and change. Sandstorms arise with stunning speed. Legend says that two armies and 300 cities are buried 600 feet beneath the sand dunes.

As you might expect, the desert is too dry to have much vegetation. Bushes, weeds, and trees grow only near oases and along rivers.

The Gobi Desert Stretching over 500,000 square miles, the Gobi Desert is one of the world's largest deserts. It covers part of China and present-day Mongolia. Unlike the Taklimakan Desert, the Gobi has very few sand dunes. Most of the desert is stony. Its surface is made up of small pebbles and tiny bits of sand. Vegetation is sparse. Plants tend to be small and widely spaced apart.

19.5 - The Northeastern Plain

The Northeastern Plain is located east of present-day Mongolia. Today, this area is sometimes called either Inner Mongolia or the Manchurian Plain. It is a land of low hills and plains. The natural vegetation is mostly prairie grass. In ancient times, the grass provided food for horses, sheep, and other animals raised by herders.

The major rivers running through the Northeastern Plain are the Liao (lyow) and the Sungari (SOONG-guh-ree). The Liao is a shallow river, only navigable by small boats. The Sungari is deeper. It can carry larger boats. In the winter, when the waters freeze, people use these rivers as roads.



The Northeastern Plain is an area of great contrasts in its climate. It has short, warm summers. In winter, the northern and eastern parts of the plain are dry and cold. But the southern half, especially the valley of the Liao, has milder weather and more water because of the river. In general, though, the plain is too cold and dry to be suitable for growing crops. In the south, a narrow coastal plain links this area to the rest of China. This plain was used in ancient times by several groups of invaders as a route to Inner China.

19.6 - The North China Plain

One of the two major regions in Inner China is the [North China Plain](#), a flat at region of grassland. Temperatures range from very warm in the summer to quite cold in the winter.

This region is sometimes called the “Land of the Yellow Earth” because the ground is covered by yellow limestone silt. The silt comes from the Gobi Desert. It is carried by the wind to the North China Plain. The river that runs through the plain is also full of yellow silt. The silt gives the river its name, Huang He (Yellow River).

The Huang He is one of the longest rivers in the world. It may also be the world's muddiest. The mud makes the river water look like soup. The river begins in the high western mountains and winds its way

down to the eastern plains. The silt it carries helps fertilize the surrounding lands, making the North China Plain a good place in which to settle and grow crops.

While the Huang He does help farmers, it has also been the source of many disasters for the Chinese people. In the past 3,000 years, the river is said to have flooded more than 1,500 times, causing much damage and loss of life.



19.7 - The Chang Jiang Basins



The Chang Jiang Basins are areas of low, wet coastal plains. The basins are located along the river called the Chang Jiang.

This river is even longer than the Huang He. In fact, Chang Jiang means “Long River.” It has hundreds of [tributaries](#). People use the river to move goods between eastern and western areas of the region.

Like the Huang He, the Chang Jiang begins in the high western mountains. It flows through three plains and then to a rich

delta. Its deposits help make the surrounding lands very fertile. The river floods less often than the Huang He, making the Chang Jiang less dangerous.

The climate in the Chang Jiang Basins is warm and wet. In ancient times, the vegetation may have been thick rainforest. There was little space for farming, and the area was not suitable for grazing animals. But the basins were very good for growing rice, which needs abundant warmth and moisture.

19.8 - Early Settlement in Ancient China

Archaeologists believe that the first inhabitants of China lived in caves more than 500,000 years ago. Remains of these people were found in the 1920s in the northeastern part of China. These cave dwellers are known today as either Peking (pay-king) man or Beijing (bay-jing) man. It is likely that they were nomads who lived by hunting, gathering, and fishing. They made tools and may have used fire.

As people in China turned to farming, they began to settle mostly on the North China Plain in Inner China. They grew crops and lived in villages near the Huang He. This marked the start of settled Chinese society.

It's not surprising that early farmers chose this area to live in. The North China Plain had plenty of water, fertile soil, and a moderate climate. In contrast, both the Tibetan Plateau and the Northeastern Plain in Outer China were too cold and dry to grow crops. The Northwestern Deserts were also too dry. The Chang Jiang Basins were wet and fertile, but heavy rains may have made farming difficult.

19.9 - Ancient China's Isolation

China's geography kept the early settlements in Inner China isolated. Only a narrow coastal plain linked the Northeastern Plain to Inner China. In the southwest, the towering mountains, rocky plateau, and cold climate formed a natural barrier. In the northwest, the large deserts created another barrier.

Later in Chinese history, the same geographic features that kept ancient China isolated also made it difficult to govern a developing China as a unified state. The harsh geography and huge distances made communication and transportation difficult, and interfered with the movement of military forces.

19.10 - Different Regions, Different Ways of Life

Although most early inhabitants settled on the North China Plain, some people did live in the other geographic regions. Ways of life for settlers in these regions developed quite differently.

Life in Outer China Mainly because Outer China did not have good farmland, fewer people settled there than in Inner China. The Tibetan Plateau was not suitable for growing crops, but herders could raise livestock, especially yaks.

The people who lived on the plateau were nomads who had to move frequently to find new grazing land. The animals they-herded supplied many of the nomads' needs. They ate meat from the yak, and made butter and yogurt from yak milk. People used yak wool to make the heavy clothing that they needed to survive the cold climate. They also wove yak hair into material for tents.

In the Northwestern Deserts, the only permanent communities were on the oases. There, residents built homes out of mud. People grew cotton and wheat. Their main foods were wheat noodles, bread, and mutton.

The Northeastern Plain was too cold and dry for much farming, but its prairie grass supported livestock. Early inhabitants of this region were also nomads. They raised sheep, goats, cattle, and horses. Because they were constantly moving to find grass for their animals, they lived mostly in tents. Their main food was meat. They often invaded the North China Plain to get needed supplies. Eventually, the people of Inner China built the Great Wall to keep these invaders out.

Life in Inner China The fertile land of Inner China supported larger, more settled populations on the North China Plain. Farmers grew mainly wheat and millet. They raised cattle, sheep, oxen, pigs, and chickens. They herded cattle, water buffalo, and horses. Settlers built permanent homes out of rammed earth (soil tightly packed to make solid walls).

The Chang Jiang Basins had limited farmland and lacked grazing land for animals such as cattle. But rice thrived in this warm, wet area. As early as 10,000 B.C.E., settlers were able to grow rice in the river valley. They also raised pigs and poultry. Nearby seas provided plentiful seafood. People built permanent houses so they could stay in one place and tend their animals and crops.