

History Alive Text

Chapter 19 – Geography & the Early Settlement of China

19.1 – Introduction

In this unit, you will explore the civilization of ancient China. This civilization flourished from about 1700 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.

China is a large country in eastern Asia. It's easy to use words like *highest*, *largest*, and *longest* 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 Taklamakan Desert. China also boasts 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 sandstorm of the Taklamakan Desert. During a sandstorm, the sky darkens until it feels like night. Hot, howling winds drive sand and gravel against you. The only way to survive is to wrap yourself in clothes or blankets and lie down until the storm passes. That could be hours or even days.

As you can see, **China is a land of contrasts**. In this chapter, you will compare five geographic regions in China. You'll learn about the climate, physical features and vegetation of each region. You'll also discover how **geography affected where the first Chinese settled, the way they lived and their ability to communicate with other civilizations**.

19.2 – An Overview of China's Geography

Modern China is the third largest country in the world, after Russia and Canada. It covers about 3.7 million square miles. **About 1.2 billion people live in China, more than in any other country.**

China 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. It is an area of great extremes. In the southwest, China is bounded by the Himalaya Mountains. The **major geographical region** in this area is the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau (**Tibetan Plateau**). It is the world's largest plateau. This region is a bitterly cold place to live. There are only about 50 days a year without frost. Snowstorms are common, even in July.

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

In the northeast, the major region is the **Northeastern Plain**. This is 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 eastern part of present-day China. Compared to the west, this part of China is closer to sea level. It is a land of rolling hills, river valleys and plains. Rivers flow through the area from the west. The **rivers often enrich the soil by flooding**. **They also provide water for irrigation**. These physical features made Inner China more attractive to early settlers than Outer China.

Inner China has two main regions. The northern region is the North China Plain. To the south are the lower river plains of the middle and lower Chang Jiang Basins. These regions have very different climates. **The Chang Jiang Basins are warm and wet. The North China Plain is drier and cooler.**

Each of China's major regions has its own climate, physical features and vegetation. Let's take a closer look at each region, starting with those 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 is more than two miles above sea level. It is a very large area, covering almost a quarter of the land in China.

The Tibetan Plateau is a rocky land surrounded by towering mountains. The Himalayas are on the southern edge of the plateau. The tallest mountain in the world, Mount Everest, is part of this mountain range. Its peak is more than five miles high.

Since the Tibetan Plateau is so high, **the 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 (Yellow River) and the Chang Jiang (Yangtze River). In spite of the 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 hunted by wolves and wildcats.

For the people of ancient times, the Tibetan 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 through this area to Inner China very difficult.**

19.4 - The Northwestern Deserts

The **northwestern part of Outer China** is known for its great deserts, including the **Taklamakan and Gobi Deserts**. The deserts are harsh places to live and difficult for travelers to cross. The climate varies from sizzling hot in the summer to below freezing in winter. **The only places to grow crops or raise animals such as sheep are the oases, where water can be found.** In ancient times, shelters made of mud were sometimes built near oases.

The Taklamakan Desert is 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”. The desert’s huge sand dunes shift and change as the wind blows the sand around. 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 is one of the world’s largest deserts, stretching over 500,000 square miles. It covers part of China and present-day Mongolia. Unlike the Taklamakan 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.

19.5 - The Northeastern Plain

The **Northeastern Plain** is located east of present-day Mongolia. Today this area is sometimes called Inner Mongolia and sometimes Manchuria. 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 and Sungari**. The Liao is a shallow river. Only small boats can navigate it. **The Sungari is deeper. It can carry larger boats.** The rivers freeze in the winter, and people use them as roads.

The Northeastern Plain is an area of great contrasts in climate. It has short, warm summers. The northern and eastern parts of the plain are dry and cold in winter. The southern half, especially the valley of the Liao, has milder weather and more water. In general, though, **the plain is too cold and dry to be a good place for growing crops.**

In the south, a narrow coastal plain links this area to the rest of China. This plain was the route several groups of invaders took into Inner China.

19.6 - The North China Plain

The North China Plain is a flat region of grassland in Inner China. The climate in this region is fairly mild. It is warmer than the areas to the north and cooler than the areas to the south.

This region is sometimes called the “Land of the Yellow Earth” because the ground is covered by yellow limestone silt called loess. The loess 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 loess. The Loess 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 river. The mud makes it look more like soup than river water. The river starts in the high western mountains and winds its way down to the eastern plains. The silt (loess) it carries helps fertilize the surrounding lands, making the North China Plain a good place to settle down and grow crops.

While the Huang He helps farmers, it has also been the source of many disasters for the Chinese. 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 Middle and Lower Chang Jiang Basins

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

The Chang Jiang is even longer than the Huang He. In fact, its name 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 starts in the high western mountains. It flows through three plains and then to a rich delta. Its deposits help to make the surrounding lands very fertile. The river floods less often than the Huang He making it much 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 limited space for farming, and the area was not suitable for grazing animals. But the basins were very good for growing rice, which needs lots of 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, known as Peking Man, were found in the 1920’s in the northeastern part of China. They lived by hunting, gathering and fishing. They made tools and probably used fire.

When people in China began farming, they settled mostly on the North China Plain in Inner China. They grew crops and lived in villages near the Huang He. This marked the beginnings 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, the Tibetan Plateau and Northeastern Plain 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 were another barrier.

Later in Chinese history, the same geographic features that kept China isolated also made it difficult to govern China as one unified state.

19.10 – Different Regions, Different Ways of Life

Although most early inhabitants settled on the North China Plain, people did live in the other geographic regions. People in these regions had quite different ways of life.

Life in Outer China: Fewer people settled in Outer China than in Inner China, which was much more suitable for farming. The **Tibetan Plateau** is not suitable for growing crops, **but herders could raise livestock, especially yaks**. The people who lived on the plateau had to **move frequently to find new grazing land**. **Yaks provided meat**, and their **milk** was made into butter and yogurt. **Yak wool** was turned into the heavy clothing people needed in the cold climate. Yak hair was woven into material for tents.

In the **Northwestern Deserts**, **the only settled communities were on the oases**. There, people built **homes out of mud**. They **grew cotton, winter wheat, and maize**. Their main foods were wheat noodles, bread and mutton.

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

Life in Inner China: The fertile land of Inner China supported larger and more settled populations. **Most people settled on the fertile North China Plain**. There they **grew mainly wheat and millet**. They raised cattle, sheep, oxen, pigs and chickens. They herded cattle, water buffalo and horses. People built **permanent homes** out of **rammed earth**.

The **Chang Jiang Basins** had limited areas for farming, and lacked grazing land for raising animals such as cattle. But **rice thrived in this warm, wet area**. Settlers began growing rice in the river valley as early as 10,000 B.C.E. They also **raised pigs and poultry**, and they **ate seafood**. They **built permanent houses** so they could stay in one place and tend their animals and crops.