

The Role of Geography of Dynastic China

The Premodern History of China — HT24

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Throughout Chinese history, there have been two great divides. First, that of the east-west, and later the north-south. These two dynamics have been instrumental in how Chinese society looks today and of how the history of imperial and premodern China played out. While China has had contacts with the outside world since time immemorial, it has been isolated from the outside world due to its geographic boundaries. To the north, large steppes and desert that makes settled agriculture largely impossible, as well as major mountain ranges. The west has large deserts and the major obstacle of the Tibetan plateau in the south-west, and further to the south tropical forests and a dense network of mountains. Finally, to the east lies the world's largest ocean, the Pacific, with only the islands of Japan and Formosa, as well as the Korean peninsula before a reaching expanse. These borders have shaped the Chinese frontier, but a multitude of geographic features have also impacted the Chinese interior.

The concept of the Chinese state originated in middle Huang He, where it merges with the *wei* river. The city of Chang'an served as the capital for numerous early Chinese dynasties such as the Zhou, Qin, Han and Sui dynasties due to its location in the easily defensible and fertile wei river valley. The north's intermittent rainfall allowed for early irrigation systems that required more advanced social organisations¹ and a more centralised form of rule. When engineering techniques improved, this allowed the fledgling northern states to expand beyond the narrow valleys of Shanxi out into the north China plain, probably the most well known geographic area of China. It, as well as the areas around it such as the Shangdong peninsula, form the basis of northern China, where the major food crop is historically wheat or millet and whose geography is dominated by the large alluvial plain created by the sediment-heavy Huang He². This region was the agriculturally productive heartland of China for a long time due to its fertile Loess soil that could easily be exploited using relatively primitive techniques³, and the region conquered by the Emperor Qin Shi Huang when he first unified all of China. The later capital city of Luoyang is more exposed, laying east of Hanguguan, but was also closer to the economic center of the country. The balance between the strategic positioning of the capital in times of war and the needs to supply it in times of peace are significant forces that shaped the location, as well as the fate, of different dynasties' power bases.

¹Ch'ao-ting Chi, "Key Economic Areas in Chinese History, as Revealed in the Development of Public Works for Water-Control". (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), xxiv + 168.

²George B. Cressey. "The Geographic Regions of China". Worcester: Clark University.

³Owen Lattimore, "An Inner Asian Approach to the Historical Geography of China". Walter Hines School of International Relations: Johns Hopkins University. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1789948>

In contrast to the north, the south is mountainous and wet; the primary food crop is rice and the population is concentrated along narrow river valleys⁴. The main river is the Yangtze, the longest river in Asia, and the border between north and south runs along the Qinling mountains and Huai river. The Huai river has had a large strategic importance for any northern power wishing to conquer the south, and for any southern power wishing to protect itself against the north, as the many tributaries of the Huai flowing from the north mean that the north can easily amass a navy and sail it down the Huai into the Yangtze, threatening the power bases in places such as Nanjing. This is one of the major passes from north to south, the other being taking the *Han* river into the Yangtze, passing the city of Xiangyang, from the west. When the Song dynasty retreated south, becoming the southern Song, they did so behind this Qinling-Huai line and created a powerful standing fleet that managed to protect them against the numerically superior Jin-dynasty fleets in 1161 AD. The western approach was taken by Cao Cao — the general and prime minister whose deeds are described in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*⁵, after he had unified northern China, but he was defeated at the battle of the red cliffs, partly due to the narrow valleys and long supply lines of the Han.

The difficulty of travelling north-south compared to travelling along the Huang He or Yangtze and their tributaries in the east-west axis means that there was developed a distinct cultural boundary between the two. As early as the *Romance*, Sun Quan quipped “So the southerners can’t ride, eh?”⁶. Extensive attempts to connect these two regions, and to unite them under the banner of the Emperor were made to fit under the idea of *Tiānxià* — all under heaven. Chief of all was the construction of the grand canal, connecting the economically productive regions of the Yangtze to the capitals protecting the northern frontier at Luoyang and Beijing. This enormous project was especially useful to the Yuan and Qing dynasties as they could supply the enormous needs of their capital at Beijing while still remaining close to their power bases in Mongolia and Manchuria respectively. The grand canal served to connect what Wittfogel called “economic-political kernel-districts”⁷ that shaped Chinese statebuilding.

The interplay between geography and the historical trajectory of dynastic China highlights the significant role that physical landscapes play in shaping societal development. The unique agricultural practices, cultural identities, and political frameworks arising from geographic divisions have impacted the form and path of ancient China. An understanding of these geographical impacts is essential for a comprehensive appreciation of China’s multifaceted history and ongoing narrative, as they illuminate the lasting legacy of the land in influencing the lives and identities of its populace. This geographic perspective is a key way to look into how historical legacies inform challenges and aspirations throughout the vast scope of premodern China.

⁴G.B. Roorbach. “China: Geography and Resources”. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 39, China: Social and Economic Conditions. 1912. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1012079>

⁵Luo Guanzhong, “The Romance of the Three Kingdoms”. Translated by C.H. Brewitt-Taylor. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library. 2013. <https://archive.org/details/romance-of-the-three-kingdoms-ebook>

⁶Guanzhong, “The Romance of the Three Kingdoms”. 1074.

⁷Chi, “Key Economic Areas in Chinese History, as Revealed in the Development of Public Works for Water-Control”. 1.

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