

China's Geography

Course Introduction

Welcome to Asia Society online. I'm John Major on location at Asia Society in New York. I will be your host for a series of interviews with prominent China experts. Together we will explore the cultural, historical, political, economic, and environmental landscapes of China, past and present. I hope that you will enjoy it.

Overview

The map of China that you see here--and the map of China that you would find in any textbook on modern China--includes a very much larger area than would historically have been included in what is known as the Chinese heartland, sometimes called China proper. I want to first take a look at this map and go around the periphery of China and look at some of the areas that were added only relatively late in Chinese history. Then we will focus in on China proper and talk about terrain, talk about history, and talk about some of the interactions between landscape and humanity that have shaped Chinese history and society.

Manchuria

First, in the northeast, we have this very large territory that has historically been known as Manchuria after the Manchu tribespeople who lived there. The Manchus were the founders and proprietors of the Qing Dynasty¹, China's last imperial dynasty. They conquered China from their base in Manchuria and kept Manchuria ethnically pure as a refuge for ethnic Manchus. That changed, of course, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the Manchu dynasty, in 1911 and, today, Manchuria is overwhelmingly populated by Han Chinese, the ethnic Chinese. The Manchu language is nearly extinct today. The area is still widely known as Manchuria and it is a late addition to the Chinese empire.

Mongolia

Just west of there is Inner Mongolia and the Mongolian Republic. During the Qing dynasty, both Inner Mongolia and the Mongolian Republic were added to China as conquered territory, or added to the Chinese empire but governed separately. They were not part of the Chinese civil administration, but were under separate rule governed through the tribal confederations of Mongolia itself. The Mongolian Republic, then known as the Mongolian People's Republic, broke away as an independent state under Soviet sponsorship in the early 1920s. But China retained Inner Mongolia, which now has an overwhelmingly large majority of ethnic Han Chinese and a minority population of Mongols.

Gansu Corridor

The next area to the west is called the Gansu Corridor, the province of Gansu, with a long extension to the west, and the territory called Xinjiang or "new borderlands" (today also a province.) China has been involved in that part of the world for a very long time because the Silk Road goes from the capital of China up through the Gansu Corridor from oasis to oasis across Xinjiang, and then on to points west of Asia, to the Mediterranean world. The Chinese have tried (and sometimes succeeded) to guard the Silk Road, to fortify it, to build a wall along the northern boundary of the network of trails that we call the Silk Road, and to establish forts to conduct diplomacy and to arrange treaties with the rulers of some of the further western oasis societies. China has been involved in that part of the world for a long time, but, again, as territory integral to China itself, it has only been firmly incorporated into China since the 18th century. And until relatively recent times, there has been a majority of non-Chinese people in Xinjiang Province - of people that

¹ The Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1911) was the last imperial dynasty to rule China, the Manchus were a non-Chinese semi-nomadic people from the area northeast of China proper.

speaking Uighur, of people that speak Kazakh, and other languages related to Persian and to Turkish.² With recent Chinese immigration into that area, the balance is beginning to tip. It's about 50/50 now and soon the minority people of Xinjiang will be a minority within their own territory.

Tibet

Finally, south and west of there is Tibet - not only the Tibet marked in these borders as the Tibet Autonomous Region, but historically also Qinghai and part of western Sichuan. So this enormous area of highlands here was part of the traditional Tibetan homeland, where most of the people spoke some variant of the Tibetan language, lived in tents, herded yaks, believed in Lamaist³ Buddhism, and basically carried on a Tibetan culture and lifestyle.

Historical Heartland of China

So if you look at these very large peripheral territories, you find the historical heartland of China is very much smaller. This area here west to about the line that I am indicating, bounded by Vietnam and Myanmar to the south, by the ocean to the east, and by the Great Wall to the north—this is China proper. And it is within that territory that most of what we think of as Chinese history has been enacted. Now, China proper is not at all a homogenous place. It is very varied in terrain and climate and the lifestyle that terrain and climate can support. Nor is China the product of a single point of origin spreading out and encompassing all of China proper. Rather, there were Neolithic societies up here in Liaoning. There were others here in the north China plain. There were others in Shandong Province, others further down the coast, even Bronze Age societies here, in Sichuan in the southwest. And gradually those cultures influenced one another, interpenetrated one another, absorbed one another, and turned into the culture that we call ancient China. And in so doing they enriched one another very much, for example, with bronze here in the northwest competing with very finely worked jade in the east central coast. Different strands of Chinese history and different strands of Chinese culture came together from these scattered focal areas of origin of Chinese culture in the archaic world.

North/South Regional Differences

As I said, the terrain is very different and has very different effects. I want to give you a north-south line which is bounded by two rivers. One is the Han River, which is a tributary of the Yangtze River and goes more or less west to east and then takes a dip to the south and meets the Yangtze River at Wuhan. If you take the part before it dips south, go overland a little bit, you will pick up another river called the Huai River. And that line of the Han and the Huai River is the conventional boundary between north and south China. And between north and south you can enumerate a number of pairs of contrasts. For example, in north China, you tend to have very rich soil, but not enough water. In south China you tend to have lots of water, but depleted and impoverished soil. In northern China, you have open field grains like wheat, sorghum, and soy beans. In south China you have paddy field rice. So the diet of northern China is a diet of wheat-based products, such as noodles or steamed bread. The diet of southern China is a diet of rice. In both cases, though, it is a Chinese diet based on cooked grain accompanied by other things. And, historically, the Chinese defined themselves as eaters of civilized food and that is what they meant by that. No roots and shoots and tubers from the jungles of the southeast, no meat and yogurt and cheese from the steppe lands of the north, but a proper diet of grain such as is grown in an agricultural society.

Northern China is the territory of Mandarin. Southern China is the territory of a variety of dialects from Wu and Min along the coast to Cantonese and Hakka in the southeast. Again, China is diverse in a great number of ways: at least 55 languages are spoken in China, again with greater diversity in the south. Some include Zhuang spoken here in the hills,

² Both Kazakh and Uighur are in the Turkic family of languages. An example of a Persian language would be Tadjik.

³ Lamaist is the Western term referring to the sect of Buddhism related to the teachings of spiritual leaders, generally interchangeable with "Tibetan Buddhism".

and Min and Yao in the south. Various Malayo-Polynesian languages in the southeast are remnants of people who survived with their ethnicity and their sense of cultural identity intact while they were being surrounded by the spread of Chinese history.

There are real cultural differences between south and north, even among Chinese people. Southerners tend to look at northerners as being stiff and straight-laced and un-humorous and unimaginative; northerners tend to look at southerners as being excitable and powered by all the spicy food that they eat, and irrational and given to flights of fancy. So, while from the outside, while we may think of China as one single place, the Chinese think of it as a place, quite properly, of very great geographic, cultural, and ethnic variety.