China Information Sheet

Some important characteristics of China’s geography and climate

Mainland China stretches roughly 5000 kilometres from west to east and 3500 kilometres from north to south. It is much larger than Australia – China’s area is 9,596,960 sq km compared to Australia’s 7, 686,850 sq km.

China is separated from other countries by **natural barriers**:

* the **Gobi Desert** (marked your map) stretches far into the north. Behind the desert are mountains where the nomadic Mongols lived. This is the weakest barrier to external invasion
* the **Yellow Sea**, which is part of the huge Pacific Ocean, is the barrier to the east
* to the west and south are the Kunlun and Tibetan mountains. The **Tibetan Plateau** rises in the south to the Himalayas, the highest mountain range in the world
* **rainforests** and mountains dominate the south.

These natural barriers have also influenced the way the Chinese have thought of themselves. Their development has taken place in comparative isolation from other cultures. The Chinese word for China, **Zhongguo**, means ‘**Middle Kingdom’**, and with it came the idea that Chinese culture was superior. There was also a view of those outside China as **barbarians**, inferior to the Chinese.

The two largest rivers are the **Yellow (Huanghe)** and the **Yangtze (Changjiang)**. The Yellow River was the centre of the oldest Chinese civilisation for which there is archaeological evidence, the Xia. In later times, the Yangtze became more important because it was easily navigated along much of its great length. The rivers often brought disaster in the form of huge floods that destroyed villages and towns and took the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. The last major flooding of the Yellow river in 1951 caused almost 4 million deaths. It was therefore a major task of governments to try and ensure that flood control was properly maintained. Only recently (in July–August 2003) China experienced serious flooding in the southern and central regions causing thousands of deaths and leaving millions of people homeless.

Due to the vastness of the country, there are **great variations in climate** across China. From September through to March/April each year, freezing winds sweep across China from Mongolia and Siberia causing dry, cold winters in northern and central China. In these parts, the winter temperatures average –15C.

The temperature variation between northern and southern China at this time of the year is very large, sometimes more than 30C. However, from April to September, due to the influence of the warm, wet monsoon winds that blow inland from the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the temperature variation between north and south may be as little as 4C.

The **rainfall** over much of China is unpredictable. In the humid south-east, yearly precipitation averages 1500 millimetres, while in the arid north-west, the annual figure is as low as 50 millimetres. In places like Beijing, and other northern Chinese cities, much of the precipitation comes in the form of snow.

These **climatic variations** have helped to influence the growing of crops and eating habits. In the south, the heavy rainfall has enabled the widespread cultivation of rice, and this crop forms the dominant cereal in southern Chinese cuisine. In the north, wheat is more appropriate to the climate, and noodles and dumplings made from wheat flour are more staple parts of everyday meals.