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THE YANGTZE RIVER

From its source in Tibet to its mouth in Shanghai [shahng-hi], the Yangtze River stretches four thousand miles across China and has been the source of life, as well as a cause of lament, for the Chinese throughout their history. The impact of the Yangtze River is reflected in the literature, customs, and traditions of the Chinese people.

Starting Points

1. Can you name the three longest rivers in the world? They are the Nile, the Amazon, and the Yangtze. Identify these three rivers on a map.

2. Why are rivers important? Why do people often live along rivers? Discuss the role of rivers in transportation, trade, and agriculture.

3. How does the weather in the United States differ from state to state? China is just a little smaller than the United States; what do you think the weather is like there?

Information

History

Thirty million years ago, China looked nothing like it does today, because the western regions were completely under the Tethys Sea, which later extended into what we now know as the Mediterranean Sea. The Indian Peninsula pushed into the western edge of China, causing the land to rise and creating the Qinghai-Tibet [ching-hi] Plateau and the Himalayan Mountain Range (which still grows at a rate of 2 cm per year). Both areas are home to glaciers and are the source of many rivers in China and India, including the Yellow River, the Ganges, the Mekong [may-kong] River, and the Yangtze River.

Names of the Yangtze River

The Yangtze River has many names. The Chinese call it Chang Jiang [chahng ge’ahng], which means “Long River.” The name is appropriate because the Yangtze is the world’s third-longest river (although satellite images taken in the 1980s indicate that the Yangtze may be slightly longer than the Amazon); it runs a four-thousand-mile course from the Himalayas to the East China Sea. Along its course, the people who live by its banks have given it other names such as “The River to Heaven,” named because of its nine-thousand-foot drop from the Tibet Plateau to the Sichuan [s-chew’ahn] Basin; “The River of Golden Sand” because it picks up sediment that gives it a golden brown color; “The Human Intestine” because it meanders so much; and “The Floating River” because of the dikes that have been built up along the banks to control the floods. The river keeps rising with the dikes, making the river higher than the land. This inspired one poet to write, “I sit on my porch watching the ships go by overhead.”
Statistics
About four hundred million people live along the banks of the Yangtze River—that’s about 33 percent of China’s total population and 15 percent of the world’s population. The Yangtze River is important to China because its water provides irrigation for the farmlands and it has been the main route of transportation to central China for centuries (see Geography & Climate Visual 1). Along the Yangtze River, wooden sailing vessels, known as junks, are commonly used for transportation, housing, and commerce. The Yangtze River is also the main dividing line of China: the people who live to the north of the river consider themselves “northerners” and the people who live to the south are “southerners.”

Divisions
The Yangtze River is divided into three sections: the upper, middle, and lower reaches. Each section is significantly different. The upper reaches of the river start at 6,000 m above sea level, flow across the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, and descend into the Sichuan Basin. The middle reaches start at the Sichuan Basin and run to the city of Wuhan [oo-hahn] in the Hubei [oo-bay] Province. The lower reaches begin at Wuhan and end at Shanghai, where the river meets the ocean.

Upper Reaches
The upper reaches of the Yangtze lie in a very cold and barren land. The altitude is so high and the weather is so cold that few plants can grow. The people survive on a special kind of barley that they grind up to make a type of gruel, which is the main dish of Tibet. The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau receives about fifteen inches of rain a year. Most of this moisture comes from the same glacial-melt waters that combine to form the Yangtze River.

The Yangtze River makes its way down the mountains very quickly, sometimes flowing at a rate of thirty miles per hour or more. It is a treacherous area and has seldom been explored. Several explorers have died trying to traverse the upper reaches of the Yangtze River.

Middle Reaches
The middle reaches of the Yangtze River are much calmer than the upper reaches. After the river makes its way down from the plateau, it enters the Sichuan Basin. (Sichuan means “Four Rivers” and is named for the four main tributaries of the Yangtze River that merge in this region.) After flowing through the Sichuan Basin, the river makes its way through the Qinling [chin-ling] Mountains, home of the famous Three Gorges.

The middle reaches are in one of the hottest areas of China—even hotter than some of the tropical southern provinces. The area between Wuhan and Chongqing [chong-ching] is sometimes called “the great furnace.” Because water retains heat well and the area is so humid (thanks to the Yangtze River), the summers can be unbearably hot, even if the sun is not shining. In fact, the sun rarely shines in the summer months; instead, heavy mists and fog prevail and only begin clearing up in early October. The Chinese say they like the mist because it gives the mountains an ominous and mysterious look, especially in the Three Gorges area (see Geography & Climate Visuals 2–4).
Even though the river is navigable in the middle reaches, it is still quite dangerous. The river can rise and fall sixty feet within twenty-four hours. It is not uncommon to see large ships stranded on the riverbanks because after they docked for the night, the river fell and left the ships on dry ground.

One of the most dangerous areas was known as “Come to Me” rock. The rock was given this name because if you steered your boat directly toward the rock, the current would push you away. But if you tried to steer around the rock, the current would pull you into it, smashing your boat. There were so many accidents on this rock that the locals made a fleet of rescue vessels and the government rewarded them for saving people. At first they received four hundred yuan (a unit of Chinese currency) for saving a dead body and eight hundred for saving a live person. However, since the rescuers had to pay for the funerals, the government switched the reward to eight hundred yuan for a dead body and four hundred for a live person. Fortunately, during the 1950s, the government destroyed the rock so there would be no more accidents.

**Lower Reaches**

The lower reaches of the Yangtze River flow through the “rice basket” of China. This area between Wuhan and Shanghai produces 30–40 percent of China’s total grain (especially rice and corn; wheat is grown farther north). Because this area is flat and there are no mountains to control the river, the river has cut a haphazard path through the plains. Without mountains, the humidity is able to dissipate, creating a more tolerable summer climate than that of the middle reaches region. But the winter months are especially cold, and the winds can be very strong.

Flooding in the lower reaches has always been a problem for inhabitants and results from China’s monsoon season. During this season, or the rainy months of the summer, the heavy rains collect in over seven hundred of the Yangtze River’s tributaries, swelling the river to three or four times its normal volume. About once every decade this causes a disastrous flood, engulfing thousands of acres of farmland, and sometimes drowning the inhabitants (see Geography & Climate Visual 5). About once every century, the flooding is even worse and can affect the lives of over 300 million people (whether by drowning the inhabitants, destroying their homes, or affecting their livelihoods). The most disastrous flood on record occurred in the 1880s and saw a flow rate of 120 m$^3$ of water per second (normal flow rate during summer is 20 m$^3$ per second). Many attempts have been made to control the flooding. The people have built pagodas [puh-go-duhz] to provide shelter for the dragons which are believed to make the river flood when they are grumpy; constructed giant bronze statues of oxen (the ox is a symbol of the earth, which is able to control the water); and erected dikes on the river banks in order to contain the water. The most recent attempt has been the construction of a dam—the largest in the world—that will span the Yangtze River.

**The Three Gorges Dam**

In 1917, the government proposed building a dam to generate electricity and to stop the flooding of the Yangtze River. But because of severe political problems, no action was taken to build the dam until recently. In 1994, the Chinese Congress voted to build the dam, and it has been under construction ever since. The dam
will span the Yangtze River for one and a half miles and create a reservoir that will extend four hundred miles back through the mountains (see Geography & Climate Visuals 6–9).

The Chinese hope the dam will not only control flooding and save hundreds of lives every year, but also produce electricity, provide safer transportation routes to the interior of China, allow irrigation to the deserts in northern China, and help the country continue to develop economically. However, many people are afraid that it will damage the environment and adversely affect the climate. Also, almost two million people will have to move because their towns and villages will be covered by the reservoir. These people must tear down their houses and move everything before the dam is finished in 2012. Many of China’s elderly do not want to move from their homes, which have been in their families for hundreds of years; however, they know that by moving to a city, their children and grandchildren will have better opportunities.

The Three Gorges

The Three Gorges is one of the most famous areas in China. The entrance to the first gorge is printed on the five-yuan bill (see Geography & Climate Visual 10 and Additional Resources). The Three Gorges contains an immense amount of historical and cultural artifacts. During the Three Kingdoms period, the Three Gorges was the site of many conflicts because the three kingdoms converged at the entrance to the gorges. During one battle, the forces of the Shu [shoe] Kingdom (led by Zhuge Liang [jew-geh le’ahng]) were trapped between the river and the mountains. Their only way out was to fight through the enemy, but their archers had run out of arrows, making victory seem impossible. Zhuge Liang decided to use the heavy mists, which the gorges are famous for, to his advantage. He had his soldiers tie several rafts together, and then sent the empty rafts downstream toward the enemy. Because of the mists, the enemy could not see clearly and thought they were under attack so they fired their arrows at the rafts. After a while, Zhuge Liang had his troops pull the rafts back and shout “thank you.” He then collected all of the arrows from the rafts and started to battle against the enemy with their own arrows. Zhuge Liang’s army won because of his trick.

The Three Gorges is home to some of the earliest civilizations in China, such as the Tujia [too-ge’ah] people (see Geography & Climate Visual 11). The Tujia people, who have lived at the Three Gorges for centuries, fish for a living. They are particularly fond of one type of fish called the “foolish fish.” They say you can catch a foolish fish by merely putting your finger in the shape of a hook and dipping it in the water.

The ancient Ba [bah] people are famous for having built walkways to connect cliffs. To do this, they drilled holes in the face of the cliffs, placed long poles in each hole, and then connected the poles with planks. These holes are still visible, and in some places, the walkways have been reconstructed. The Ba people left many coffins on the cliff faces, which today are called “hanging coffins” (see Geography & Climate Visual 12). For a long time, no one knew what these coffins were because no one could reach them on the cliff faces. Therefore, the people invented stories to explain the coffins. One story told that the coffins were wooden planks with military...
strategies inscribed on them left by Zhuge Liang (the man who won the battle with the borrowed arrows). Once a sailor climbed up and brought a coffin down. Before he looked inside, he tried to sell it in town, but the police ordered him to return it. Later some archeologists took one down and discovered it was a coffin. It revealed that the Ba people believed that the higher their ancestors were buried on the cliff, the closer their ancestors were to reaching the realm of the immortals. They also believed that once their ancestors made it to the immortal realm, their ancestors could help them get there.

Before there was steam power in China, the only way for boats to get upstream was for people to pull them. People who pulled boats upstream were called “trackers.” When a ship needed to travel upstream, the captain would hire a group of anywhere between thirty to three hundred trackers to pull the boat. Each tracker had a sling attached to the boat by a bamboo rope that he would put around his shoulder. This enabled him to pull the ship as he walked along the shore. It was a difficult job, because the Yangtze River runs fast through the Three Gorges area, and a lot of the riverbank is sheer cliff. In the late 1800s, people carved a pathway through the cliff for the trackers to walk on. The trackers used this path until the 1970s. Now the path is used by local people to get to and from their towns, schools, and farms. There are still trackers today, but they only pull boats to entertain tourists.

The Future

Throughout Chinese civilization, a large portion of the Chinese population has lived on the banks of the Yangtze River and has relied on the river for sustenance. Over the centuries, the river has been both destructive and beneficial. The recent construction of the Three Gorges Dam has forced many people to move from their ancestral homes, but the dam promises to help control flooding, provide safer transportation, irrigate arid areas, and produce electricity for China’s ever-growing cities.

Activities

1. Make a Chinese junk (see Geography & Climate Visual 13).
2. Draw a picture of the Three Gorges.
3. Pretend you are a soldier in the Shu army. Write letters home about the war and about your leaders.
4. Have a congressional debate about the Three Gorges Dam. Divide into two teams. One team will support the construction of the dam and the other team will oppose it. Discuss why you support or oppose the dam.
5. Pretend that you have been on a week-long voyage on the Yangtze River. Write journal entries about your voyages and include pictures (either drawings or pictures from magazines).
**Discussion Questions**

1. What kind of qualities would you need to be a tracker? What would some of the benefits of the job be?

2. What would you do to stop the flooding of the Yangtze River?

3. Why do people build dams?

4. How might the dam affect the wildlife around the Yangtze River?

5. Which part of the river would you like to live along? Why?

6. What is the biggest river you have ever seen? How wide is that river? How long is it? Compare this river’s measurements to those of the Yangtze River.
HOW TO MAKE A CHINESE JUNK

You will need:
A square piece of paper

Procedure:
1. Fold paper in half, diagonally (it should make a triangle).
2. Hold the triangle so that the ninety-degree angle is at the top.
3. Fold the two corners of the triangle toward the ninety-degree angle so that you have a diamond. The ninety-degree angle should still be at the top, even though it is not a triangle anymore.
4. Separate the two pieces of paper of the top ninety-degree angle by folding one down in the front and the other down in the back. This makes another triangle.
5. Hold the opening at the top, fold the bottom point halfway up, and tape it. This creates the bottom of the boat and is the part that goes in the water.