

THE CHINESE WORLD
UNITY AND DISUNITY

As far as we can tell, China was always considered by anyone who approached it to be an enormous country.

Even so, this doesn't mean that its boundaries, even its cultural boundaries, were the same as its current ones. Not at all. In fact, China has been, for most of its history about half the size that it is today and its geographical boundaries have been constantly shifting.

This map, that we have already seen when talking about the central states known as Zhongguo, shows a clear outline of China in its embryonic form. The central states cluster around the Yellow River and have a clear geographic frontier to the north: it is a climatic boundary, underlined by the Great Wall, that marks the end of agricultural soil.

North of it are the steppes of central Asia, with their own nomadic pastoral societies, the Xiongnu, Turks and Mongols. South China is warmer and wetter than the north, and most of it stays green all year. Here the boundaries of China have been advancing for centuries towards the Tropics.

China reached its most southerly extension with the foundation of the Chinese Empire in 221 BCE. Just take a look at the territory successively occupied by three of China's most powerful and unifying dynasties, each one lasting for three or four centuries.

The Han, ruled from 200 BCE to 200 CE, contemporaneous with the Roman Empire. The Tang, ruled from the 7th to the 10th centuries, seeing the rise of Islam in Central Asia. The Ming, were in power from the 14th to the 17th centuries, witnessing the arrival of the first Europeans to its coasts.

When you overlap these three maps you can see that they occupy more or less the same territory, the area that is usually labeled as China Proper, and that corresponds to the great river basins of the Yellow River or Huanghe, the Yangzi and the Xijiang.

And all three dynasties, Han, Tang and Ming, have a strip pointing to the west, the Gansu corridor, which corresponds to the prolongation of the loess soil that also covers a great part of northern China.

The yellow soils of Gansu paved the way for the Silk Road. This has been the shape of China for a great part of its history. But China has not always been such a unified territory.

Let's look at three periods characterized by rapid political change and constant, bloody modifications of boundaries. The first period corresponds to the final phase of the Warring States period in the 4th century BCE.

By this point the 148 small states that existed in the 8th century BCE had already been reduced to seven, after centuries of endless wars.

The second period, known as the Disunity period, stretches from the fall of the Han in the 3rd century to the reunification by the Sui in the 6th century. The third belongs to the rather short tenth century period of Disunity that stretches from the fall of the Tang to the establishment of the Song.

These periods of disunity were not at all anomalous: during almost half of its history the whole territory of China has experienced a lack of unity.

Unity and disunity were alternative patterns in Chinese History until the 13th century. As the initial sentence of a famous Chinese novel puts it: The Empire, long divided most unite; long united, must divide.

For a while, China and Europe seemed to be following the same pattern, as both the Han and the Roman empires crumbled under Barbarian pressure and fragmented for centuries into smaller and smaller entities.

The small states of northern China fighting each other in endless wars were a scenario similar in many ways to that characterizing most of European history. But in the end China was reunified while Europe was not.