

## THE CHINESE WORLD

### NORTH AND SOUTH CHINA

In this lecture we are going to talk about the geography of China, especially to single out those elements that will play a significant part in contacts between China and the west.

From both a morphological and a climatic point of view, today's China can be divided in two parts with a line that stretches from Yunnan in the Southwest, to Heilongjiang in the north-east.

East China is quite different from west China. It lies under the influence of the monsoons and its mountains, although quite high, never reach the extremely high altitudes of west China. The geographical distribution of extremely high mountains in the west and the sea in the east accounts for the fact that all great Chinese rivers flow from west to east.

North south waterways are often man made, as is the case, on a very large scale, of the sixth century Grand Canal, that links the Yangzi basin and the north China plain. East China is the part that corresponds basically with China Proper that we have talked about in previous lectures.

East China can be divided in turn between north and south China by a line that stretches along the river Huai. North and south China are quite different from each other. North China is the China of the Yellow River. This is an immense river, more than 5,000 km. long that winds its way from west to east, as all Chinese rivers do.

It is called the Yellow River because it carries enormous quantities of yellow silt coming from the hilly area of the loess plateau, a very fertile terrain of yellow soil that slides down to the river with any heavy rain.

Flooding is so frequent that the Yellow River **has been called China's Sorrow**. Floods become especially dangerous when the Yellow River enters the North China Plain, a region densely populated since ancient times, and meanders on for almost a thousand kilometers.

This is the zone that produces dry cereals, like millet, barley and wheat, and where pasta is eaten: maybe Marco Polo brought it from here to Italy.

North China has also been the seat of many Chinese capitals; **Chang'an**, that was on many occasions capital of Imperial China, and Beijing.

South China, on the other hand, is the land of the Yangzi river, a huge span of water that flows for more than 6,000 km and provides a major transportation artery through the center of the country.

The Yangzi and its many tributaries flow through the Yangzi basin, which is much warmer and moister than the Yellow River basin. The Yangzi basin is an extremely wet and fertile region more than five times the size of Germany, it is possible to harvest twice a year.

This is the land of rice and of a large variety of fruits and vegetables. Rivers and canals link the whole region which is one of the most urbanized areas in the world. Seeing it, prompted Matteo Ricci to say, in the sixteenth century, that the whole of China was like a huge city.

To the west of the Yangzi basin lies Sichuan, an extremely rich region, the size of the Iberian Peninsula, which has been an independent state many times throughout Chinese History.

South of Sichuan is Yunnan, home of many non-Chinese dynasties.

It was incorporated into the Chinese world only a thousand years ago by armed forces of both Mongols and Ming. This is why Marco Polo went there as an envoy from the Mongol Khan. In the south, there is the Xijiang River, which, as we have seen in previous lectures, has been connected by canals to the Yangzi southern tributaries since the beginning of the Chinese empire in the 3rd century BCE.

At its mouth lies Canton a city connected since ancient times to the worlds of South East Asia. Alongside, the Portuguese established their first stronghold in China, Macao. In the south east is Fujian, a mountainous territory that was not fully incorporated into China until the Tang, in the seventh century.

The territory combines a quite difficult terrain for agriculture with the fantastic natural harbors that have sealed its destiny. Here lie the ports from which Chinese seafarers set sail. South China too has, on many occasions, been the seat of the Chinese capital, the most famous of them being Hangzhou and Nanjing.

The differences between north and south China are also evident in the coastline. North China's coastline stretches along the shores of the North China Plain, where the Yellow River reaches the sea heavily loaded with sediments.

Endless beaches and sandy waters made navigation difficult and kept classical China away from the sea. The classical texts of Chinese central tradition are notably devoid of references to the sea: there is no Chinese equivalent of the Odyssey.

By contrast, the southern seas offer some of the best harbors in the world. Its ports have always been so full of traffic that they made Martin de Rada say in 1575 that they could house an infinite quantity of ships, because there were so many of them that it was frightening being unable to count them.

It is from these ports, south of the Yangzi, that contact with the maritime outside world was initiated. From Fujian, boats set sail for the Ryukyu, a string of islands stretching from Japan to Taiwan that acted as free ports when China, or Japan or both banned maritime relations.

From Fujian too, came the Fujianese migrants who established themselves in the Philippines as soon as the Spanish landed there. Canton had since the Han dynasty active relations with Southeast Asia.

With the Tang it had already become a thriving merchant city with a huge population of traders. 120,000 foreign merchants were killed there in the great rebellion of Huang Chao in 879.

With trade came also the establishment of Chinese migrants in South East Asia. Zheng He, the great Chinese fifteenth century navigator, about whom **we'll speak in later lectures**, found a colony of Cantonese migrants settled in Sumatra.

By then the Chinese had been active for centuries in the waters of the East China Sea and of the South China Sea, both of them on the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

But the Chinese will never ply the waters of the Pacific Ocean itself. Before any sailor could confront the massive span of the Pacific, millennia would be spent mastering shipbuilding technology and the accurate knowledge of winds and maritime currents.

Only then could the Pacific Ocean be crossed **and this didn't happen** until the sixteenth century. The first vessels that ventured to cross this ocean were not Chinese but Spanish.

Even so, the Pacific Ocean will play a definitive role in Chinese history, **as we'll see in later lectures** when we talk about the Manila Galleon, which at the end of the sixteenth century linked Mexico, Manila and Ming China.

A very different case was that of the Indian Ocean that had been for millennia the richest and most traveled ocean in the world, where the greatest civilizations of Asia came together.

Indian, Persian, Arabian, Chinese and Southeast Asian ships crossed its waters blown by the monsoon, the regular winds that ensured the annual traffic.

Spices, silks, metals, pigments, horses, perfumes and exotic goods crossed its shores and provided continuous contact between Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Even the Romans used the monsoons to sail to India.

It is towards the Indian Ocean, through the Malacca straits, that the Chinese will turn. In 1511, the Portuguese found many Chinese vessels that had crossed the Malacca Straits **to go and trade in Malacca's busy port.**

By this point, the Chinese had already been very active in the Indian Ocean for five centuries.