An Overview of China’s Geography

Present-day China is the third largest country in the world, after Russia and Canada. China includes about 3.7 million square miles (9.6 million square kilometers). With a population of about 1.2 billion, more people live in China than in any other country.

China’s land area was much smaller in ancient times. To understand Chinese history, it’s helpful to divide China into two main areas: Outer China and Inner China. Most of ancient Chinese history involves only Inner China. The two areas did not become one country until the 1600s C.E. But the geography of both areas affected the early settlement and history of China.

The Geography of Outer China

Outer China includes the western and northern parts of present-day China. This is an area of great extremes in climate and physical features.

In the southwest, China is bounded by the Himalayas. The key geographical region in this area is the Tibet-Qinghai (tih-BET ching-HIE) Plateau. It is the world’s largest plateau. This region is a bitterly cold place to live. There are only about fifty days a year without frost. Snowstorms are common, even in July.

In the northwest, the major region is the Northwestern Deserts. This area includes the Turfan Depression, the second-lowest place in China. It is 505 feet below sea level. It can grow so hot here that raindrops evaporate before reaching the ground.

In ancient times, areas near water were the only livable places in the Taklamakan Desert, one of China’s Northwestern Deserts.
The Geography of Inner China

Inner China includes the southeastern part of present-day China. This part of China is closer to sea level than the western areas. It is a land of rolling hills, river valleys, and plains. Rivers flow through this area from the west. They provide water for irrigation. Floods from these rivers also enrich the soil. To early settlers, these physical features made Inner China more attractive than Outer China.

Inner China has two main regions. The northern region is the North China Plain. To the south are the low river plains of the middle and lower Chang Jiang (chahng jyahng) Basins. These regions have very different climates. The Chang Jiang Basins are warm and wet. The North China Plain is drier and often cooler.

Each of China’s five major regions has its own climate, physical features, and vegetation. Let’s take a closer look at each area, starting with the three major regions in Outer China.