

## COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Conti, L., Easton, M., Saldais, M., Dumovic, V., & Kosteci, R. (2016). *Oxford big ideas: humanities and social sciences 7*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

# 12.2 Landscape and climate

Modern China is the world's third largest country after Russia and Canada. It covers an area of 9.6 million square kilometres. Despite its size, China began as a small settled area in the Yellow River valley. From small beginnings, it grew to just over half its current size by 220 BCE. Much of ancient China's history was shaped by its geographical features. These features acted as natural barriers that kept China isolated from the rest of the world for many thousands of years.

## China's river systems

China has two major river systems – the Yellow River and the Yangtze River. The early people in China settled mostly along these two rivers. Different settlements were ruled by individual kings. These rivers were essential to the development of ancient Chinese society.

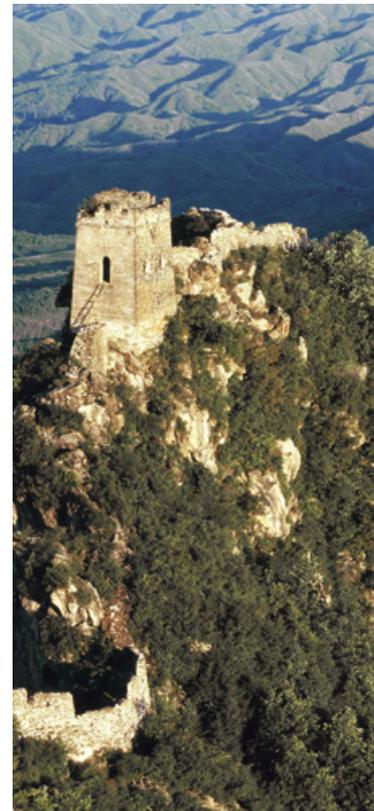
The Yangtze is 6380 kilometres long, making it the third longest river in the world. It floods each year and leaves fertile soil along its banks. The Yangtze was not an easy river to cross, and for this reason there were many times in the history of ancient China where it operated as a political boundary between northern and southern China. The riverbanks were the sites of several battles during the history of ancient China.

The region of the Yangtze became very important to ancient China's economy, especially during the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The development of irrigation systems along the Yangtze made agriculture very stable and productive. Eventually, this region became one of the wealthiest and most developed parts of the country.

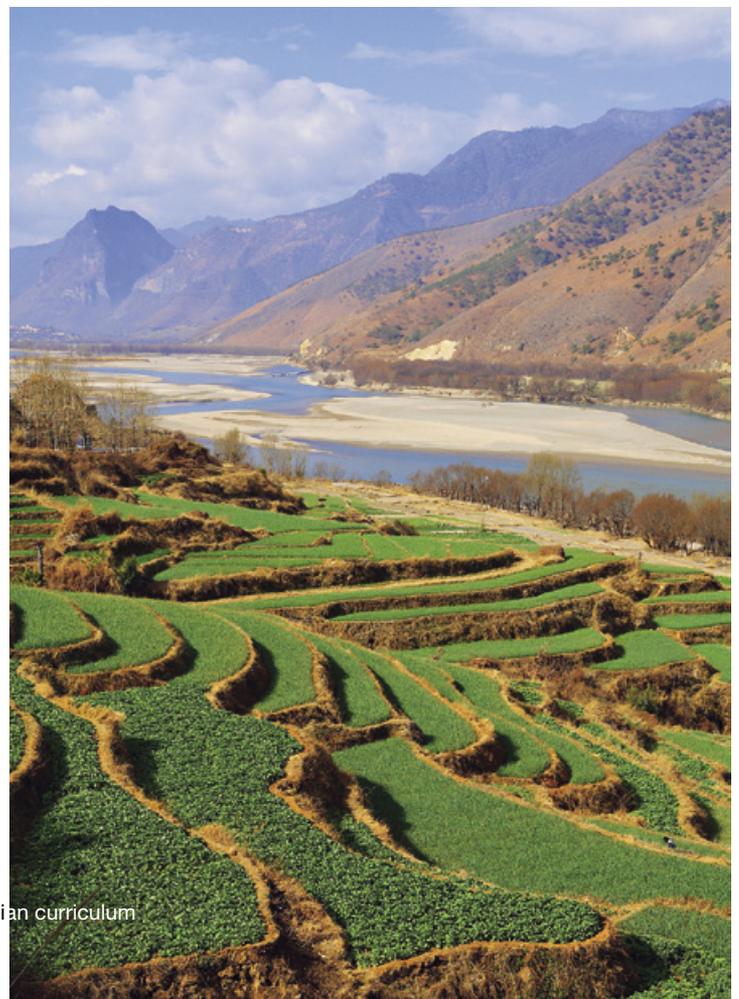
The Yellow River is 5464 kilometres long, making it the sixth longest river in the world. The banks along the Yellow River are low. Because of this, settlers in ancient China often saw their homes destroyed year after year during flood season. For this reason, the early people of ancient China called the Yellow River 'the Great Sorrow'. Eventually, however, the people learnt techniques to control flooding.

The Yellow River basin is mostly flat, which makes it ideal for growing crops such as millet (a type of grain). Much of the Yangtze basin and surrounds, on the other hand, are better suited to growing rice and tea.

**Source 2** A section of the Yangtze riverbank used to grow rice crops



**Source 1** A section of China's Great Wall showing some of the steep mountain terrain





## Natural barriers and geographical features

China's natural barriers to the west, south and east helped to protect the ancient Chinese people from invasion and kept them very isolated. The largest ocean on Earth, the Pacific, is to its east. To the south are dense tropical forests of modern-day Burma, Laos and Vietnam. To the west and north-west are huge deserts.

To the south-west is one of ancient China's most impressive physical barriers – the towering Himalayas, which are home to several of the highest mountain peaks in the world. The Himalayas are extremely cold in winter and extremely hot in summer, which in the past made it almost impossible for invaders to cross them and reach China.

Only China's northern border is less protected by geographical features. Over 2000 years ago, work began (and was later continued) to protect much of this frontier with a huge defensive structure – the Great Wall of China (see Source 1).

### Check your learning 12.2

#### Remember and understand

- 1 Why did the ancient Chinese call the Yellow River 'the Great Sorrow'?
- 2 How did the development of irrigation systems affect the people living by the Yangtze?
- 3 Explain how geographical features helped to isolate China from the rest of the world for a long time.

#### Apply and analyse

- 4 What impact do you think ancient China's isolation would have had in shaping the society of the people who lived there?

#### Evaluate and create

- 5 Which of China's surrounding barriers (natural and built) do you think would have posed the greatest challenge for an invading force? Justify your opinion. Suggest what an invading force might have had to do to overcome this obstacle.