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# UNDERSTANDING CHINA

Introduction to China's History,  
Society and Culture

JIN BO

CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

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Society and Culture

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# Preface

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Many people regard China as a distant, ancient and mysterious country simply because the history and culture of their own countries are so different from that of China.

China may be far away from some countries in terms of distance, but this does not mean China is mysterious and difficult to get to.

With an over 5,000-year-old civilization, China has developed a unique culture which has greatly enriched world civilization. This makes China a country worthy of being understood.

China is one of the countries experiencing the fastest economic growth and social change. The development of China, with the largest population in the world, provides opportunities for other countries to develop; and this in turn brings China increasingly closer to the outside world. China's development calls for a peaceful international environment, and the world's prosperity needs China's development. In this environment it is necessary that China be understood.

China is not difficult to understand. Currently the country is going full steam ahead to open its door to the outside world and learn from others. China is dedicated to peaceful endeavors, and is sincere in dealing with others.

For thousands of years people have come to explore China. Some of them gained a good understanding of the country. Of course, impressions of China varied according to the period.

Some 400 years ago, Alvaro Semedo, a Portuguese missionary who came to China, described China in the following way in his book *1645 History of China*:

*It is a big country with a large population, with endless villages and towns, each in close proximity to the next. Houses fill the horizon. China has varied climates according to latitude and region. The country abounds in fruit, giving the impression of being a warehouse of fruit gathered from around the world. It is self-sufficient in food production, and in fact produces a surplus to trade with other countries. Many countries yearn for the chance to visit China. Many countries consume mainly wheat or rice, and China grows both in large amounts.*

When talking about the Chinese society more than 30 years ago, the famous American Sinologist, John King Fairbank said in his book *China: Tradition and Transformation*:

*In viewing China, however, foreign advisors must remember the following: First, the Chinese society has families, instead of individuals, government or churches, as its basic unit. Each family provides its members with major support for their financial needs, education and recreational activities. China's ethic system also has families as its center, instead of God or country. The family system calls for its members to be faithful in social behavior. Law is the indispensable tool for management while individual morality constitutes the foundation of the society. In China, there will never be anarchy due to a lack of importance being attached to the law in mind; Chinese society is closely united under Confucianism.*

Three years ago, William Overholt, Director of the Center for Asia Pacific Policy at the RAND Corporation, made the following comment in his article *China and Globalization* on the changes in China:

*Adoption of the rule of law, of commitment to competition, of widespread use of English, of foreign education, and of many foreign laws and institutions are not just updating Chinese institutions but transforming Chinese civilization... It is hard to overstate the social adjustment Chinese are experiencing. But because China has been willing to accept such adjustments, no large country in human history has ever experienced such rapid improvements in living standards and working conditions.*

With the deepening of the reform and opening-up, and with more efforts made to become deeply involved in economic globalization, China becomes more closely connected with the rest of the world. Under this situation, getting to know more about China has become the order of the day. This book is created with the expectation of being of some help in this regard.

Author

Beijing, January 2008

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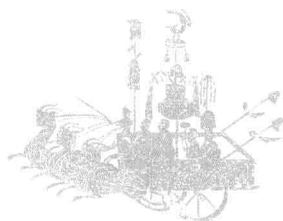
China, being a united multi-ethnic country, is blessed with a special geographical environment. In the process of its formation and evolution, China became a country featuring readily identifiable and cohesive characteristics.

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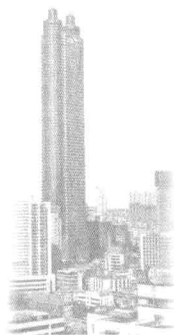
Ancient China represented the agricultural civilization, whose productivity and social development led the world for a fairly long time. For more than 2,000 years the Chinese ancestors worked hard and were creative, hence enriching and developing the civilization of human beings.

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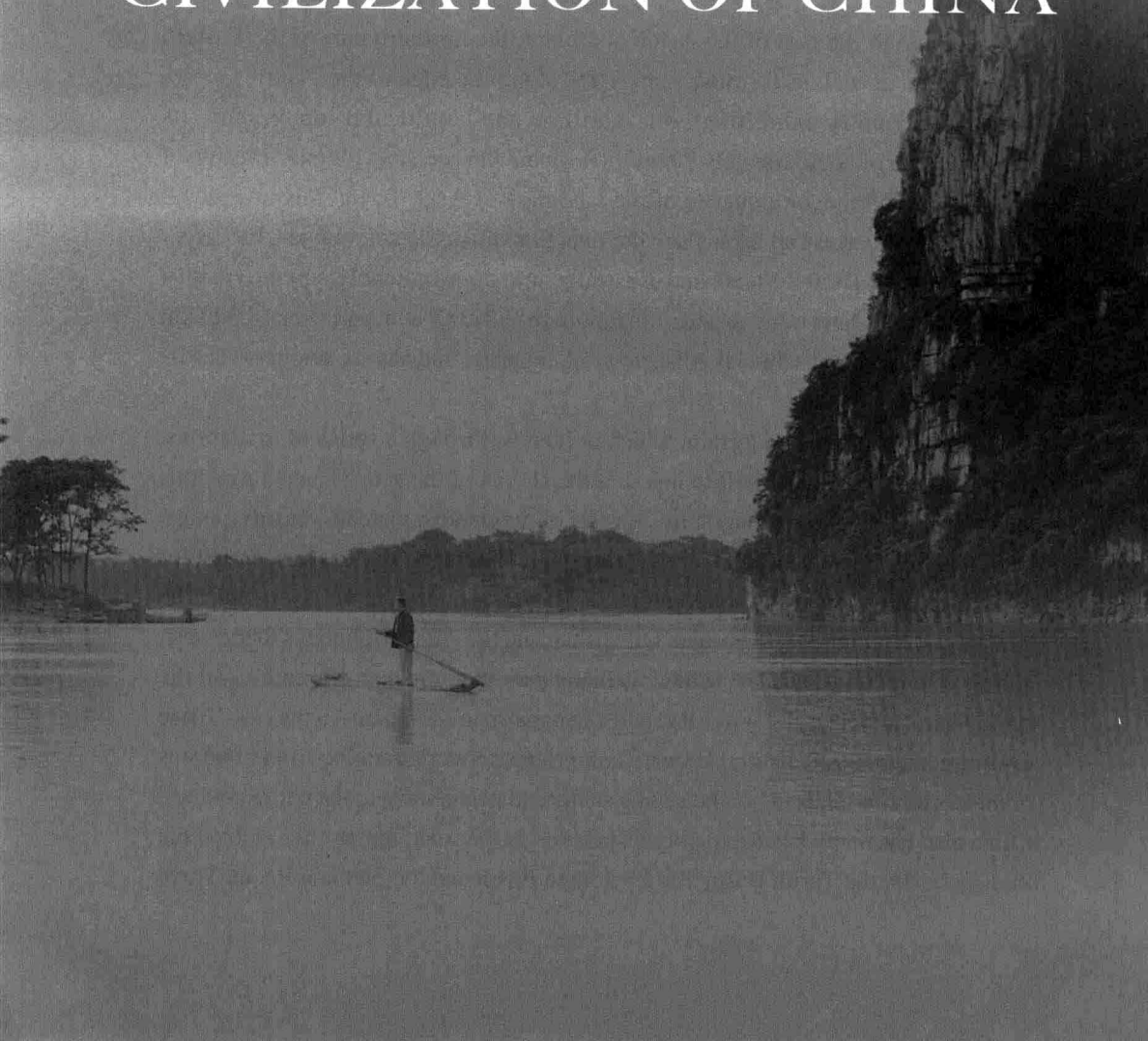
## VIII. China and the World in the Era of Economic Globalization

China has become an important member of the contemporary international system and plays a significant role in international affairs. As a large, responsible, developing country, China has committed itself, along with the other nations of the world, to building a more harmonious global environment with long-lasting peace and common prosperity for all.

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# I. GEOGRAPHY AND CIVILIZATION OF CHINA



As an old Chinese saying goes, "Man is conditioned by the natural environment he lives in". It emphasizes the significance of the environment for the development and survival of a country.

China, being a united multi-ethnic country, is blessed with a special geographical environment. In the process of its formation and evolution, China became a country featuring readily identifiable and cohesive characteristics.

## (I) The Geography and Climate Features

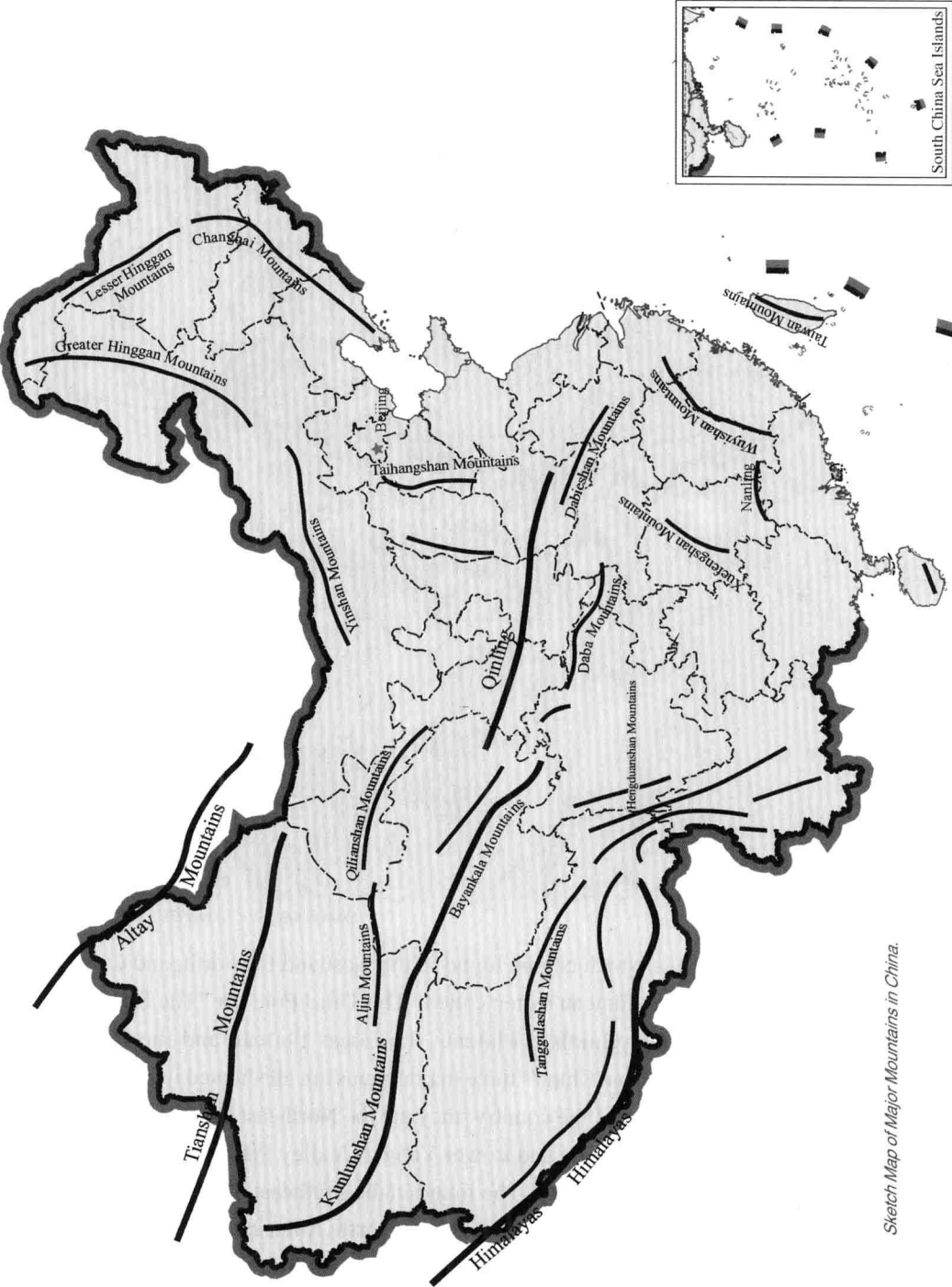
Situated to the east of the Asian continent, the northern part of the Eastern Hemisphere, as well as forming a shoreline along the edge of the Pacific Ocean, China is a country exhibiting both maritime and continental topography. Its territorial area of approximately 9.6 million square km accounts for one-fifteenth of the terrestrial globe, or a quarter of the landmass of Asia. To put this in a global perspective, its terrestrial area is smaller than that of Russia and Canada, but larger than that of the United States and Australia, and approximately equal to that of Europe. With its land borders extending more than 22,000 km, and over 18,000 km of mainland coastline, China is adjacent to 14 countries and has six neighbors across the sea.

China has a terraced terrain, which descends, through a series of gradations, from the west to the east before meeting the shores of the sea. Thanks to various landforms, the Chinese topography consists of mountains, plateaus, basins, plains, lakes and hills. China has many mountains, with mountainous areas accounting for two-thirds of the country's total landmass. Its major mountain ranges include the Himalayas, Kunlunshan, Tianshan, Qilianshan and the Altay Mountains in the west, and the Hengduanshan, Dabashan, Taihangshan and Yinshan Mountains in the central part, as well as the Wuyishan and Changbaishan Mountains in the east. These towering and majestic natural features comprise a network, ranging from hundreds of meters to thousands in height, giving shape and perspective to the entire country. China also has many basins, mainly distributed in the west; major ones include the Zungar Basin, the Tarim Basin, the Chaidamu Basin and the Sichuan Basin. There



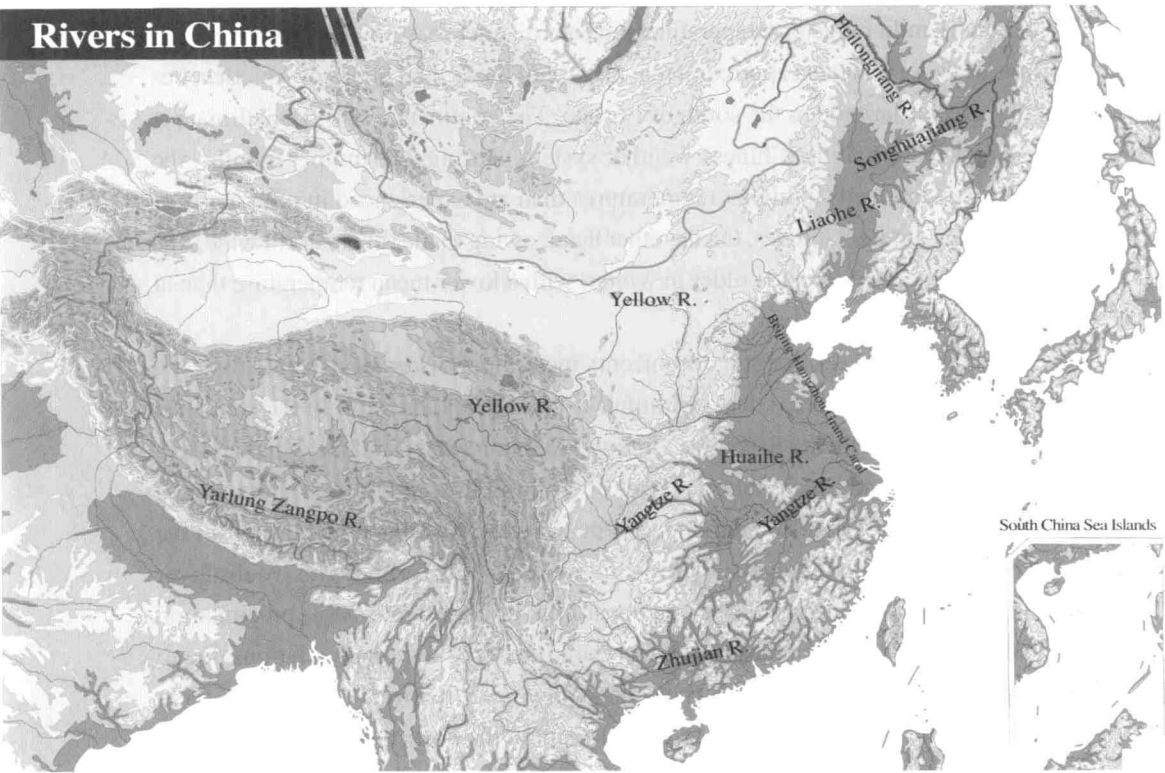
*Sketch Map of China's Geography.*

are also famous plateaus which can be found in the west and the north, and these include the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (often called "The Third Pole" or "The Roof of the World"), the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, the Loess Plateau and the Inner Mongolia Plateau. In addition, China's three major plains are all situated in the low-lying area in the eastern part of the country; they are the Northeast China Plain, the North China Plain and the Middle and Lower Yangtze Valley Plains. So far as the hills are concerned, these are mostly to be found in the southeast. After comparing the topography of China with that of Europe, North America and India, Fei Zhengqing (John King Fairbank), the famous American Sinologist, concluded:



Sketch Map of Major Mountains in China.

## Rivers in China



*Sketch Map of Major River Systems of China.*

China has a disunited topography, with a subsequent lack of good transport access. On the other hand, its North China Plain, although certainly very large, is in fact significantly smaller than the north plains in India, let alone the large plains in Northern Europe and middle-west plains of North America.

China has numerous rivers. Principle among these are the Yangtze River, ranking first in terms of length and water volume, the Yellow River, Pearl River and Heilongjiang River. Whereas rivers in the rest of Central Asia and North Americas tend to flow either north to south or south to north, Chinese rivers, due to the terraced topography mentioned earlier, mainly flow from the west to the east or southeast. There is also a significant drop in elevation during a river's course, resulting in tremendous water resources.

China's territory extends south of the Tropic of Cancer from 50 degrees of northern latitude. As a consequence of this vast size, its climate is wonderfully diverse, although the majority exhibits temperate, warm and subtropical zones with

a generally mild range of temperature and four distinct seasons. The greater part of China's territory, an area approximately the size of the United States of America, lies at a degree of latitude to the south of Europe. The continental monsoon climate is the major feature of the Chinese weather system. During the summer months, the southeast wind leads to higher temperatures than are experienced in other parts of the world at similar latitudes. On the other hand, owing to the severe north wind, this same area is both drier and colder in winter, with a lower mean temperature than at the same latitude elsewhere.

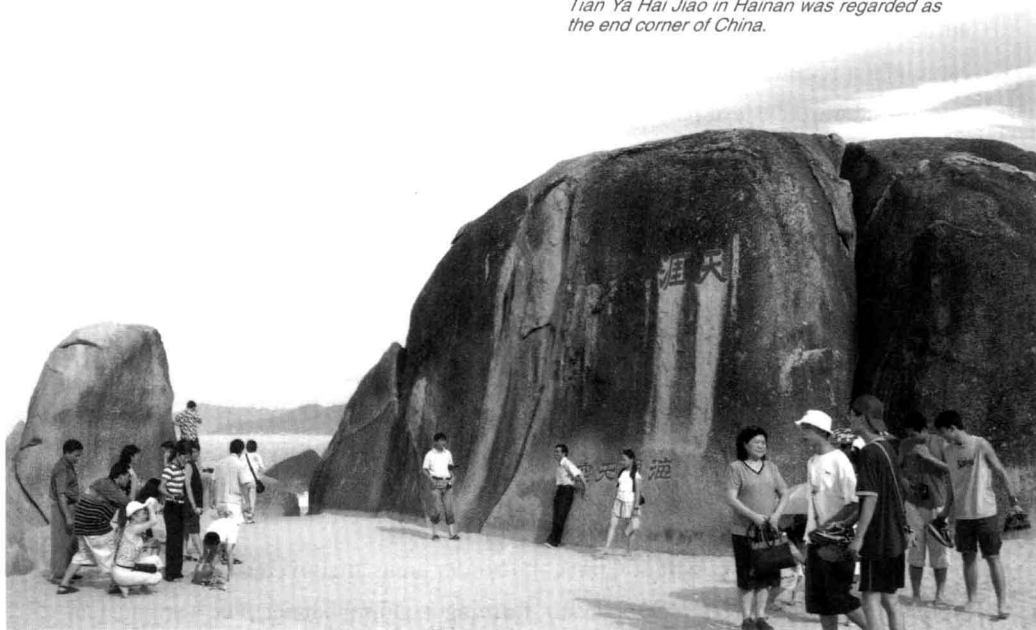
As the cooler continental air currents meet the moister air currents over the Chinese landmass, a great deal of rainfall is the inevitable result. In the southeast area covering the Huaihe River, the Qinling Mountain Range and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the annual precipitation is over 800 mm in its east and south; the annual precipitation is less than 800 mm in its north and west. And this figure decreases the further north-west one travels: by the time we reach the Tarim Basin we discover that the annual rainfall has reached an upper limit of just 50 mm. Most precipitation occurs during the summer, although there are important regional variations due to the topographical features to which we have previously referred. In the south, there is a long rainy season from May to October, but in the north a shorter season from July to August.

## (II) Geographical Environment and Inward Movement

China faces the Bohai Sea, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the South China Sea in the east and southeast. These vast seas were taken as the end of the land by the ancient Chinese.

In the northern part of China lies the vast Mongolia Plateau which is bisected into Inner Mongolia (south of the desert) and Outer Mongolia (north of the desert) by the vast sweep of desert, the Gobi Desert and the Yinshan Mountains. To the north of the Mongolia Plateau are mountains stretching thousands of km from east to west. Further north of these mountains is chilly Siberia. The special geographical environment forced various ethnic groups on the grasslands to turn to the area south of the plateau, namely the Central Plains in the valleys of the Yellow River and the

*Tian Ya Hai Jiao in Hainan was regarded as  
the end corner of China.*







*Sky-scraping Himalayas in Tibet.*

Yangtze River, to seek opportunities for development. In ancient times, the ethnic groups living on the Mongolian Plateau were mostly nomadic tribes. They, being attracted by the culture of the Central Plains, kept moving southward. Some of them established regimes in the Central Plains.

In the northeastern part of China, the Greater Hinggan Mountains screen the Mongolian Plateau off in the west; the Lesser Hinggan Mountains lay in the north; the Changbaishan Mountains extend in the east; further east is the vast Pacific Ocean; and the vast Northeast China Plain covers the area between these mountains and the ocean. A long narrow corridor winds its way from the south of northeast China along the coastline of the Bohai Sea, serving as an extremely important route connecting northeast China with the Central Plains. Historically, it was the corridor used by most of the ethnic groups in northeast China to move westward or southward to the affluent Central Plains. Also, it is the same corridor used by the Han people of the Central Plains to spread into the Northeast China Plain for a new life, bringing advanced civilization there with them.

In the northwestern part of China, the border areas are covered with steep high mountains and the desolate Gobi desert, forming a natural barrier. The Tangnushan