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# SOUTH & EAST ASIA

## PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

From the frozen reaches of northern Siberia, through the mountainous central regions, to the tropical heat and seasonal rains nearer the Equator, the countries of South and East Asia experience a broad range of climates and distinct topography.

Just north of Kazakhstan, the **Ural Mountains**, which run north-south through central Russia, are the traditional dividing line between the continents of Europe and Asia. The mountains have relatively low elevation, and are easily crossed. They are rich with mineral deposits of platinum, quartz, copper, amethyst, diamonds, emeralds, and more. The part of Russia east of the Urals is known as **Siberia**, consisting mainly of a vast taiga, which often experiences subarctic temperatures, and transitions into arctic tundra in the far north.

The **Tian Shan Mountains**, or "Celestial Mountains," in western China run along the border with and into Kyrgyzstan, abutting the **Hindu Kush Mountains** in Afghanistan, which separate East Asia from South Asia. The world's largest and most infamous mountain range runs along the northern border of India, effectively separating the Indian subcontinent from the rest of Asia. The **Himalayas** form a natural border of snow-capped peaks, including the world's highest, **Mt. Everest**, whose summit sits 29,029 feet above sea level in eastern Nepal. These mountain ranges are some of

the only habitats of the elusive snow leopard, an endangered cat found in rocky and snowy terrain.

Just north of the Himalayas, the **Tibetan Plateau**—often called the "Roof of the World"—is the world's highest and largest plateau. It is 970,000 sq. miles of inhospitable steppe covered by large swaths of permafrost. Groups of nomads live and raise herds of livestock on the plateau, but it is the least populated region of Asia. It ends in a steep escarpment on its northern edge.



Snow Leopard

Northeast of the Tibetan Plateau, the **Gobi Desert** straddles the border between southern Mongolia and northern China, located in the rain shadow of the Himalayas. The Gobi, or "waterless place," is a cold desert; it experiences extreme cold as well as extreme heat. Instead of sand, the Gobi is mostly rock and gravel, and is often covered by frost and snow. The edges of the Gobi are extremely prone to desertification.

There are two main rivers that sustain life and foster transportation in China. The **Yellow River** (or *Huang He*, as it is known in China) flows through the Northern China Plain. The Yellow River has been called "the cradle of Chinese civilization"; it provides a livelihood for millions of people. As the river flows down from the Tibetan Plateau, it brings deposits of silt, which have caused many devastating floods throughout history, causing millions of deaths. In



Summit of Mount Everest in the Himalayas



under this dynasty that the Silk Road was officially established and developed. Though there are many ethnic groups included in the term "Chinese," the largest today call themselves the "Han."

Over the next couple thousand years China was ruled by a succession of dynasties and kingdoms that had varying degrees of success at maintaining a unified and prosperous China. The short-lived Sui Dynasty (581-618 A.D.) unified the divided North and South kingdoms, and did the majority of the construction on the thousand-mile Grand Canal, a feat of engineering and manpower that facilitated trade throughout the kingdom. The Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) was a period of cultural development that produced some of China's most famous writers, painters, and poets. Music, fashion, goods, and religious beliefs were exchanged with the Middle East and western Asia via the Silk Road during this period, but there was still very little Western influence from Europe. In 1279, the Yuan Dynasty was established by Kublai Khan (grandson of Genghis Khan) as one of the smaller states that made up the Mongolian Empire after the death of Genghis. The Yuan Dynasty was the first dynasty not of Han descent to rule a unified China. When the Mongolian Empire collapsed, the Ming Dynasty took control of China. This ushered in a period of economic and political stability, and increased trade with Europe and the Americas. The scattered parts of the Great Wall were connected, extended, and strengthened during the Ming. A tribe from Manchuria in northern China conquered the Ming in 1644, establishing the last Imperial Dynasty of China, the Qing Dynasty. The Qing was beset with problems; corruption, rebellion, political instability, financial difficulties, and troubled relations with Western nations plagued the dynasty.

European countries, experiencing high demand for Chinese luxury goods like silk, tea, and porcelain, wanted to increase trade with China, which had become increasingly isolationist and largely economically self-sufficient, and had no desire or need for increased trade with Europe. In the mid-17th century, the Chinese government allowed one port to be open to European merchant ships; all trade between Europe and China was legally restricted to



Mao Zedong

the port of Canton. The British East India Company began smuggling enormous quantities of *opium* into the country, a highly addictive drug to which large portions of the population became addicted. The Chinese government tried to make opium illegal, and seized all opium on British ships in Chinese ports. The **First** (1839-1842) and **Second** (1856-1860) **Opium Wars** between China and Britain were fought over the opium trade in China, and over trade relations between China and Europe. The Chinese army, outdated and technologically inferior, was soundly defeated in both wars and forced to sign a series of "unequal treaties" in which China was forced to legalize opium and open several more ports to European trade. During the Second Opium War China also faced internal unrest, and the **Taiping Rebellion** (1850-1864) erupted into full-scale civil war in the southern part of the country. After some attempts at reform and recovery, the Qing Dynasty came to an end in 1912 when the child-emperor was forced to abdicate and the Republic of China was established by the Chinese Nationalist Party.

The Republic of China was unstable and short-lived. The Chinese Communist Party repeatedly tried to take control of the government, and the civil war between the two parties eventually ended with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 by the Communist Party, which is still in power today.

Like the other countries swept up in Communist revolutions in the early 20th century, the current economy and culture of China has been shaped in large part by the events that followed the establishment of the Communist government. In the early days of the PRC, the leader, Chairman **Mao Zedong**, tightened government control around every aspect of the lives of China's citizens. People were forced to relinquish personal property and relocate to communal farms to live and work. Two programs in particular were instituted in the 1950s and 60s that had a very negative impact on the economic, cultural, and social development of China. The **Great Leap Forward** in 1958 was meant to create self-sustaining collectivist farms and factories where citizens would all work for the communal economic good, but which resulted in poor harvests and widespread famine for the three years of the program. Millions of people





**Yak, Tibet**

In the Himalayan regions of South Asia, and as far north as Mongolia, domesticated yaks have been used for thousands of years as beasts of burden and as sources of food, milk, and fuel (dung).



**Itsukushima Shrine**

This *torii* gate at a Shinto shrine near Hiroshima, Japan, was originally built around the 6th century, but has been destroyed and rebuilt several times. The gate is a popular tourist attraction, and one of the most recognizable symbols of Japan.



**Terracotta Army**

Emperor Qin Shi Huang, first (and only) emperor of the Qin Dynasty of China, was buried with an army of over 8,000 terracotta warriors, horses, and chariots, which were meant to guard him in the afterlife.



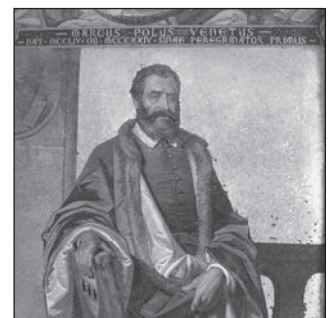
**Kabuki Woodblock Prints, 17th and 18th century**

Kabuki is a type of drama developed in Japan in the 17th century. Kabuki plays incorporate elaborate costumes and makeup, dance, and the use of shocking reveals or reversals as plot conventions. Woodblock prints of popular plays or famous actors were a common type of art in Japan during the height of Kabuki popularity in the 17th to 19th centuries.



**Himeji Castle, Japan**

Every year in Japan, during March and April, thousands of Cherry Blossom trees bloom throughout the country. People gather in parks for *hanami* (flower viewing), and hold large feasts under the flowering trees.



**Marco Polo**

The Italian traveler Marco Polo served Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan (first Yuan Emperor), for almost twenty years. His book of travel stories piqued European interest in the exotic treasures of the Orient.