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Comparing China to the United States

By Peter Frost

While this China-U.S. map and population chart is a perfect example of why one picture is worth a thousand words, we should all be aware of a few additional points that can perhaps best be made in prose.

First of all, we have to recognize that the question of what constitutes "China" is hotly disputed. During the twentieth century-and most vividly since the Communist Party's victory in 1949, the status of Taiwan and other offshore islands has been a major political issue between Communists and Nationalists. Chinese rule in Tibet has led to major charges of religious and cultural persecution. Various small islands (important particularly for oil and fishing rights) are the subject of disputes between China and Vietnam, and China and Japan. China's sovereignty is by no means settled.

This concern (or perhaps we should say insecurity) is reinforced by the fact that the high mountains of the Southwest and the broad plains of Sinkiang, Mongolia and Manchuria have traditionally been sparsely populated. Roughly 6 percent of the population, much of it nomadic and not "Han" Chinese, has traditionally lived on 50 to 60 percent of China's total land area. These relatively underpopulated areas have long created security prob-

The Population and Sizes of China and the United States

Size: 9,63 million kilometers squared Population: 1.269 billion Population Density: 132 persons per square kilometer





lems for the Chinese.

The difference between settled and unsettled areas also encouraged notions of China as the "central kingdom," a cultured place surrounded by more warlike but inferior peoples. Time and again, "barbarians" found that once they moved off the steppes or broke through the Great Wall into the more densely settled parts of China, they had to adopt traditional forms of Confucianinspired government and the social values of a more sophisticated civilization. "You can conquer China on horseback," states a traditional Chinese proverb, "but you cannot rule it that way."

Yet this "central kingdom" has itself been divided. While both areas had irrigation

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Graphic from the Web site of Ronald Knapp: www.newpaltz.edu/~knappr/EACP/geographytoc.htm

systems that required strong government supervision, the principal crops in the colder Northwest have historically been wheat and grains, while in the South, it was at least one, and often two or three. annual crops of rice. Thanks in part to the need to preserve foods in a hot climate. the cuisine of the South has always been spicier than that of the North. Language and social customs differed markedly by region, and even today, provincial loyalties remain strong. Indeed, though Americans find it difficult to learn Chinese characters, the fact that these characters are not primarily phonetic helped to bind together an educated elite in areas that were, in fact, linguistically and culturally quite diverse.

Philip Schwartzberg's fascinating map and chart can thus first be used as a selfsufficient start to an interesting conversation about the ratio of people to land. If time and resources permit, this could serve as the start of a broader comparison of national sovereignty, ecological diversity, relative population density, ethnic distinctions and regional variations. Illustrated here is a stark reminder of how geography affects our sense of nation, our definition of proper political authority, and our concern for our proper roles as individuals. May this work help start your class on these discussions!

For further information, please check the Web site on China's geography by Ronald Knapp, Department of Geography Chair at the State University of New York at New Paltz. The Web site address is:

www.newpaltz.edu/~knappr/ EACP/geographytoc.htm.

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