

The Human geography background of the evolution of Chinese history and culture

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Abstract. The interaction between the natural geographical environment and human activities gave rise to distinctive regional cultures throughout Chinese history. However, these cultural regions were by no means isolated from one another; rather, they maintained continuous exchanges through various natural and human-mediated channels. It was precisely this interregional interaction that gradually transformed the Yangtze and Yellow River basins into an integrated center of Chinese civilization, while also facilitating cultural exchanges on a broader international scale. Ultimately, these processes contributed to the emergence of China as a cultural entity extending beyond East Asia and becoming an integral part of world civilization. An examination of the human-geographical context underlying this process is therefore of great significance for understanding the fundamental logic of the evolution of Chinese history and culture.

Keywords: Chinese history and culture, historical human geography of China, interregional interaction

1. Introduction

The concept of pluralistic unity is widely recognized as a defining characteristic of Chinese civilization. However, the formation of this pattern of pluralistic unity was by no means accomplished overnight. Rather, it was the result of a long and complex process of historical evolution, in which interaction and eventual integration among regional cultures constituted one of the fundamental driving forces. This paper therefore examines the human-geographical divisions of eastern Eurasia and their influence on the formation and development of Chinese civilization, primarily from the perspective of cross-regional cultural interaction [1].

The human-geographical regions of eastern Eurasia can be broadly divided into seven major areas: Northeast China, Mongolia, the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, the southeastern coastal region, Northwest China, and Southwest China [2]. These divisions are closely associated, to a considerable extent, with natural environmental factors such as topography, climate, and hydrology. This is because the modes of production and ways of life of local populations have been significantly shaped by these geographical conditions, on the basis of which distinctive regional cultural systems subsequently developed [3]. At the same time, however, cultural interaction among human communities was by no means confined to these geographical spaces. Exchanges, conflicts, and eventual integration among regional cultures constituted a major theme in the history of civilization. The following sections will therefore examine the basic natural geographical environments of each of these regions

and the distinctive cultural characteristics that emerged from them, before further exploring the significance of interregional interaction for the history of Chinese civilization.

2. Northeast China and Mongolia: the convergence of farming, pastoralism, and hunting

Let us first turn our attention to the northeast. The regions of Northeast China and Mongolia encompass the vast area north of the 400-mm annual precipitation isohyet and south of Lake Baikal, extending eastward to the northern Korean Peninsula and westward to the eastern section of the Tianshan Mountains, with the Greater Khingan Range dividing the area into its central and eastern parts.

The predominant landscapes of the Mongolian Plateau are expansive deserts and grasslands, which gave rise to pastoral communities that moved in search of water and pasture. Northeast China, by contrast, is characterized primarily by mountains and forests. Large-scale agricultural development of the Northeast China Plain did not begin until the late Qing period. Consequently, the inhabitants of the region traditionally relied on fishing and hunting for their livelihoods, enjoying a greater degree of stability than their pastoral neighbors on the grasslands. What the two groups shared, however, was a close association with pastoralism: both were skilled horsemen capable of fighting on horseback and undertaking large-scale, rapid movements. Throughout history, a recurring pattern was that pastoralists on the Mongolian grasslands would frequently move southward to attack agricultural regions in response to climatic fluctuations, while at other times they would establish political regimes under pressure from dynasties in the Central Plains. Once such equestrian states collapsed for various reasons, the resulting political vacuum was often filled by hunters from the Northeast, giving rise to a recurring pattern of alternation and competition for power. From ancient times to the present, several major regimes established in the Central Plains by non-Han peoples—the Liao, Jin, Yuan, and Qing—originated in this broader region [4]. The triangular relationship among farmers, pastoralists, and hunter-gatherers around the 400-mm precipitation isohyet was therefore one of the central dynamics of Northeast Asia and exerted a profound influence on the overall evolution of Chinese history and culture.

3. North and south: Confucianism and poetic sensibility

The northern region, centered on the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, and the southern region, centered on the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, have long constituted the core geographical space in which Huaxia civilization developed. One of the most important reasons was that their extensive alluvial plains, nourished by abundant water resources, were highly suitable for agricultural cultivation and capable of supporting large populations and powerful political regimes. Moreover, the convenient transportation provided by the major rivers and their tributaries enabled interaction among the populations of the region to take place with relatively few geographical barriers.

The Qinling–Huaihe line broadly demarcates the north from the south. It is both a transitional zone between the warm temperate and subtropical climatic regions and roughly coincides with the 800-mm annual precipitation isohyet. Accordingly, the major crops of the Yangtze and Yellow River basins exhibit a distinctive north–south distribution: rice in the south and wheat in the north. Their cultural landscapes likewise display markedly different characteristics. The imagery of the dark sky and yellow earth forms the underlying tone of northern culture. Farmers living on the Loess Plateau and the loess plains had to labor arduously to secure harvests, whether two crops or even only one crop per year. Their conservative outlook, characterized by attachment to the land and a preference for stability, nurtured Confucianism, which emphasized acceptance

of one's circumstances and a strong concern for people's livelihoods. The South, by contrast, was characterized by a dense network of rivers and lakes. From the Sichuan Basin to the Yangtze River Delta, the terrain and landscape changed in complex and varied ways, while abundant resources capable of supporting two or even three harvests a year fostered an atmosphere of leisure and ease. Daoism emerged in this environment, advocating harmony with nature and excelling in philosophical speculation, thereby providing an inexhaustible source of inspiration for literature and art in later generations. The representative work of northern literature was the *Book of Songs*, with its weight, simplicity, and concern for worldly affairs; that of the South was the *Songs of Chu*, characterized by vitality and freedom and imbued with a profound concern for the relationship between humanity and Heaven. Nevertheless, the Huaihe and Han River valleys served as vital corridors connecting the north and south. They continually facilitated the transformation of opposition into complementarity and conflict into integration, ultimately laying the cultural foundations of Huaxia civilization.

4. The southeastern coast: the cradle of maritime culture

The southeastern coastal region encompasses what are today the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, extending eastward to the islands of Taiwan and Penghu, as well as Japan and the southern Korean Peninsula, and southward to northern Southeast Asia.

Unlike the inland regions centered on major river basins, this area was a realm of maritime culture. Fishermen and merchants traveled back and forth with the monsoon winds and ocean currents, moving among the islands and ports along the coast. In early periods, the region gave rise to the jade culture, represented by the Liangzhu Culture, and to the civilizations of Wu and Yue, both of which became important components of Huaxia civilization. Following sustained development during the Han dynasties and the Southern Dynasties, and especially the southward shift of China's economic and cultural center from the late Tang and Five Dynasties onward, the region became the most important hub of overseas trade in the East. The prosperity of the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta attracted countless merchants traveling between the north and south, while also bringing information and cultures from distant lands, making the region an important window for exchanges between China and the outside world. Since the modern period, it has stood at the forefront of interactions between Chinese civilization and the Asia-Pacific region and, eventually, the West. This role continues today, as the region has also become an important source of the reform and opening-up that has shaped contemporary Chinese history. It has therefore played an indispensable role in the historical development of modern and contemporary China [5].

5. The northwest and southwest: a melting pot of diverse cultures

China's northwestern region includes the Western Regions east of Lake Balkhash and most of the Tibetan Plateau. Its most prominent geographical features are deserts, oases, and high plateaus and mountains. The southwestern region mainly encompasses the Yunnan–Guizhou Plateau and the northwestern part of the Indochinese Peninsula, which is likewise characterized by a landscape of densely distributed mountains, valleys, and streams.

The Hexi Corridor in the Northwest served as a crucial transportation hub connecting the Yellow River basin, the Mongolian region, the Tibetan Plateau, and the Western Regions. The Western Regions themselves constituted a central link between East and Central Asia. Although the inhabitants of the region could establish permanent settlements only in the narrow oases at the foot of the Tianshan and Kunlun Mountains, which depended on meltwater from the surrounding high mountains, these settlements flourished as a result of traffic

along the Silk Road. Different ethnic groups constantly moved through the region, bringing ideas and cultures from all directions and turning it into a great melting pot where Eastern and Western civilizations converged. Mahayana Buddhism, which exerted a profound influence on Chinese modes of thought, entered the Central Plains primarily from this direction. On the other side, the development of Qiang and Tibetan civilizations on the Tibetan Plateau may appear to have taken place in isolation, but in reality these civilizations were constantly engaged in interactions with the Western Regions, Yunnan–Guizhou, and Longxi. Some rivers flowing southward also connected the northern and southern sides of the Himalayas. Agriculture in this region was concentrated primarily in the Hehuang Valley of Qinghai and the valley of the Yarlung Tsangpo River in Tibet, giving rise to a distinctive culture combining agriculture and pastoralism. The southwestern region is characterized by an intricate network of high mountains and deep valleys and an exceptionally complex ethnic composition. Even today, it remains the most ethnically diverse region in China. Under such geographical and demographic conditions, it was naturally difficult for unified and powerful political regimes to emerge. Different ethnic groups often inhabited river valleys, mountain slopes, and mountain summits. Although communities on opposite banks of a major river might be separated by nothing more than a stretch of water and could hear one another's calls, actually reaching the opposite bank often required lengthy journeys through the surrounding mountains and deep valleys. Everyday communication and commercial exchange consequently depended largely on traveling horse caravans and salt merchants. The famous Tea Horse Road is a representative example of this form of interaction. Despite these geographical obstacles, the region also gave birth to and preserved a rich variety of folk customs that had long disappeared elsewhere. From the Song and Ming dynasties onward, the arrival of the Hakka people initiated the integration of the region with northern Han Chinese culture. In addition, the Nu and Lancang rivers and other waterways connected the region with Southeast Asia, making it an important area of multidirectional interaction among civilizations. In its own distinctive manner, the Southwest thus participated in the formation and development of Chinese civilization.

6. Conclusion

When we reconsider the geographical context in which Chinese culture emerged, took shape, and developed, we can clearly recognize the significance of the natural environment to the course of history: human activities cannot unfold without the stage provided by the natural geographical environment, just as the formation of collective modes of thought among different communities cannot be separated from their human-geographical context [6].

From the perspective of human geography, eastern Eurasia may appear geographically complex and characterized by seemingly isolated regions, yet the various regional blocs were often connected by channels of communication. On the one hand, these geographical conditions shaped the distinctive regional cultures of China; on the other, they also facilitated frequent interaction among different regions. Through mutual learning and intellectual and cultural stimulation among people from different geographical areas, these interactions ultimately gave rise to several major regional cultural systems recognizable today. The trajectories of their development and the relationships among them constitute a fundamental theme in the history of China to come. This is a dimension that cannot be overlooked when studying Chinese civilization as an integrated whole.

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