

THE GREAT RIVERS OF CHINA – THEIR FUNCTIONING, RESOURCES AND SYMBOLISM

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Summary

Almost all texts written about China mention the context of great Chinese rivers which have been shaping the geographical environment of the country for millennia. They are not just the water used for irrigation or transportation arteries, but above all the origins of the Chinese civilisation. The two largest rivers of China – Yangtze and Huang He – are different in terms of their hydrology. The most important difference is the large fluctuations in water levels of the Huang He and the discharge volume which is only one-tenth of that of the Yangtze. During the year, the Huang He discharges into the sea $1\ 080 \times 10^6$ tons of sediments per year, which is more than twice of the Yangtze (478×10^6 tons). Quick deposition of the material (debris from the Loess Plateau) has resulted in frequent floods and changes in the river course (26 such changes in the Huang He), disastrous for the economy. The total water resources in China are estimated at 2418 km^3 , which ranks the country sixth in the world (after Brazil, Russia, Canada, USA and Indonesia). Per capita, however, this value is small as it amounts to 1812 m^3 , a significant drop from 2253 m^3 in 1997. This means China is on the verge of water stress ($1600\text{--}1000 \text{ m}^3$ of water per person). Hydro investments in China, as nowhere else, strongly affect the geographical environment. A perfect example of this is the highest dam in the world built on the Yangtze - Three Gorges Dam (Chángjiāng Sānxiá Dàbà), opened in 2010. The immediate effect of the reservoir was the need to flood about 160 localities and displace roughly 1.4 million people. One of the biggest problems is also very high contamination level of the reservoir. The word water in Chinese is shui. The importance of rivers in China and the Chinese consciousness can be proved by the fact that the pictogram for water derives its lineage from a graphic image of a meandering river with oxbow lakes. The oldest aspects of Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang (feminine and masculine elements) are reflected in 106 Joanna Fac-Beneda scientific studies of rivers (feminine and masculine

deltas). Like Yin and Yang, feminine and masculine deltas are different, but are complementary and overlap.