

Huai River

Huái Hé 淮河

The Huai River is one of China's largest rivers. It has served as a vital source of irrigation, an important route for river transportation, and at times a political boundary between northern and southern regimes. Prone to flooding, it has posed perennial problems for river management, including major drainage projects in the twentieth century.

The Huai is a river in central China, 1,100 kilometers in length and draining a basin of 190,000 square kilometers. It originates at Mount Tongbo in southern Henan Province and flows eastward through northern Anhui Province into Lake Hongze; from there it divides into two channels, one flowing directly into the Yellow Sea, and another flowing south into the Yangzi (Chang) River. The Huai, along with the Yangzi, Huang (Yellow), and Ji rivers, is one of the four principal rivers of China (*si du*).

Historically the lower course of the Huai River has changed significantly in response to the shifting course of other rivers and drainage projects. Originally it flowed directly into the sea; in the twelfth century the Huang River shifted its course southward and entered the sea through the Huai River channel, making the Huai River its tributary. The high silt content of the Huang River raised its bed above the level of the Huai, and the resulting drainage problems led to the expansion of Lake Hongze at their confluence. From this point onward the Huai River became a constant source of floods, and its

control became one of the most important and frequently discussed issues in Chinese river management. After the Huang River shifted its course northward once more in the early 1850s the lower course of the Huai was subject to almost a century of intensive engineering and flood control. Since 1950 the government of the People's Republic of China has tried to solve the flooding problem by a complex system of reservoirs, dams, and drainage channels.

The Huai River, aside from its importance for agricultural irrigation, has always played a crucial role in Chinese history as a transportation route. Beginning with the state of Wu in 486 BCE, successive governments have used the Huai as a major artery in larger efforts to connect rivers and forge broad river transportation networks, and water from the Huai was critical for the functioning of the Grand Canal linking Beijing with Hangzhou in the Yuan (1279–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. Together with the Qinling Range, the Huai has formed the geographic, economic, and cultural boundary between dryer, grain-growing northern China and wetter, rice-growing southern China. In periods of political disunity, such as the North and South Dynasties (220–589 CE), Five Dynasties period (907–960 CE), and the division between the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and Jurchen Jin dynasty (1125–1234), the Huai also formed a political boundary between the two regions. During the Yuan dynasty Han Chinese living south of the Huai and formerly subject to the Southern Song were termed *Nanren* and formed a class of subjects distinct from northern Chinese *Hanren*.

Matthew MOSCA

Huai River Management

Responsibility for the management of the Huai River has passed through many hands and organizations. In the early twentieth century the Nationalist Government attempted to reestablish control over Huai River management by forming the Huai River Conservancy Commission.

By the nineteenth century the Qing government, facing internal and external challenges, was unable to muster the resources to address deteriorating conditions in the Huai valley. In mid-century, the Qing government abruptly withdrew administrative responsibility over the Huai River management as it turned its interest to developing the littoral. The consequence was the complete collapse of Huai River control. Endemic cycles of flood and famine resulted in extreme social and economic dislocation in the Huai valley by the early twentieth century.

Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the “warlord” period of the teens and twenties, the Nationalist Government attempted to reestablish central control over the Huai River management as part of its national reconstruction program. One of the first institutions created by the Nationalist Government was the Huai River Conservancy Commission. Faced with severe hydraulic problems, the goals of the Huai River Conservancy Commission were two-fold: to stem flooding and to advance industrial development. The first goal was largely political—to preempt potential political opposition arising from economic dislocation in the valley. The second goal was to promote modern hydraulic practices such as hydroelectric generation and modern transport to serve the industrial goal of the Nationalist Government.

*Source: Pietz, D. A. (2002). *Engineering the state*. London and New York: Routledge, xvii.*

Further Reading

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