

Some Aspects of Geography of the Foochow Basin

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China, a densely populated country.—China is large in area but small in usable land. This means uneven distribution of population. Fully 83 per cent of population lives on 17 per cent of the land.¹

The Foochow Basin, a unit in China.—The Foochow Basin, one of these densely peopled units has an area of about 150 square miles with about 700,000 people. Foochow City, the Capital of the Fukien Province alone has 322,725 people while numerous surrounding villages make up the rest. Thus the basin has a density of about 4,000 persons per square mile.

All usable land is every where under cultivation including terraced slopes and land on the mountain tops, in order to furnish the necessary food supplies. The basin with a little more than one per cent of the area of Rhode Island, the most densely populated state, has an equal population. It has been estimated that about 60 per cent of the total population is directly dependent on the land. Each person in the basin then is entitled to own only .14 of an acre of land.

Because of the density of population horizontal expansion in the area is limited while vertical growth to the mountain tops and down along river banks has been going on for years.

The character of the population and the life of the people in the Foochow Basin.—There are at least four groups of people classified according to the topography and occupation. The first is the city group including those living in the walled city and in the suburb, south of the city. These people are connected mostly with business, commerce, government and the professions. In the walled city, "the bee hive," is found the greatest density of population.

The second group lives in villages scattered throughout the basin. These villages lie close together and are separated by very regular fields. Commonly all the people in each village are descendants of the same family. Among these rural communities both men and women work on farms and do other heavy work. These women are nicknamed "Field Women." They are recognized by three large and sword-like silver ornaments which they wear in the coil of the hair at the back of the neck.

¹ Independent Critic, No. 3, Peiping, page 9, 1932.

The third group is the "Boat Population" including thousands of people making their homes in tiny house boats moored along the banks of the Min River. Both men and women are skillful sailors. Modern means of communication have replaced to a large degree, their labor. The competition is keen. Their frantic efforts to get passengers to cross the river bring them to the attention of every new arrival in Foochow.

Besides handling local river traffic some of them make a living by fishing, and some engage in bringing cargoes back and forth between Foochow and interior towns. The Min River on account of rapids becomes less navigable toward its head. The native junks or sampans of various sizes carrying twenty to sixty tons of goods are dragged up the river by means of long bamboo poles and by hemp cables pulled by the members of the boat family.

The fourth group is a mountain population. Some people build their little scattered rural communities on surrounding mountain tops and valleys. Farmers have terraced all possible mountain slopes. The chief occupations are farming and the cutting of wood for fuel. Both men and women carry the products of their co-operative labor with poles on their shoulders to the densely populated community at the foot of their mountain.

Habits of thrift and industry have their roots in the geographic conditions and are of long tradition. Children, rich or poor, are taught to value even a grain of rice. "Do not waste nature's gift" is a family slogan. Meals are carefully planned to avoid possible waste. The average cost of living relative to American standards is low. The cost of food for each person is around two to four dollars per month.

The large family or clan system of living together is a reflection of geographic conditions. It has been practiced as a means of living more economically and with better mutual aid. In the family there may be only a few people who earn the living for the entire family of several generations under one roof. The spirit of sharing is considered a virtue.

Geographic Setting.—The geographic make-up of the Foochow Basin has profoundly affected the lives of its inhabitants as described above. The region is surrounded by very steep granitic mountains towering up to 3,000 feet forming a natural and most magnificent and unique basin. On account of ocean and mountain barriers the people formerly enjoyed perfect isolation. Geographic isolation and absence of conflict resulted in a spirit of conservatism.

A profound effect of Foochow's geographic setting is also found in its dialect. The basin has its own dialect, unintelligible to the people beyond the limits of the basin. But this linguistic handicap has been overcome in some degree by the enforced adoption of the national language (or Mandarin) in public meetings as well as in class rooms.

The Min River cuts through the basin approximately in an East-West direction. The periodic floods enrich the already fertile soil. For

many centuries the Min River served as the only means of communication between Foochow and the interior.

The climate is of the humid subtropical type. The mei-yu or moldy period together with fog occurs generally in March, April and May and has a very high humidity, so high that the moisture condenses on all cold objects. Human disposition is greatly affected by this unpleasant atmosphere.

Economic make-up of the Foochow Basin.—The tea trade forms the backbone of Foochow's economic make-up. In the most prosperous trade period tea represented 80 to 90 per cent of the total export. Tea and other trades together have suffered greatly on account of outside competition.

About 90 per cent of Foochow's exported commodities come from her hinterlands along the Min River valley. They include tea, timber, paper, bamboo and its products, and formerly camphor and tung oil and so forth. About 85 per cent of the imported goods are distributed in her hinterlands.²

Between the years 1871-1880 Foochow ranked third in the trade volume among seven leading trading centers in China. But between 1921-1929 Foochow was out of the list. The economic situation is becoming more critical. The trade situation has been very unstable.

Future of the basin and some of its problems.—Foochow is handicapped by mountainous topography which isolates her from favorable contact with the outside world. The Min River, the life line of communication, has a V-shaped valley with a narrow winding exit and is shallow in its upper river course. This limits the usefulness of the river.

Outlets of Foochow's commodities have rapidly been closed. Formosa, once Foochow's chief market, now exports into the Foochow Basin. England, once the chief tea customer, trades now with Ceylon and India. Smuggling of goods by Japanese into Foochow increases the seriousness of the situation.

The Chinese Government has laid a program for economic reconstruction. Many changes have been taking place which involve changes in the minds of many Chinese. There are forces pushing for modernization and there are forces retarding it. There is a constant conflict between the old and the new. Chinese are given a choice between modernization, and tradition and old heritage. They are given a choice between chopsticks and forks. All these changes will involve the changes of an entire philosophy of life.

Geography furnishes a skeleton, man must do the building. Better economic conditions mean greater buying power, world powers in turn share the benefits. This could only be attained by fair trade and better co-operation among nations.

² China Maritime Custom Report, Shanghai, 1861-1928.