

Topic Page: [Yellow River \(China\)](#)

Definition: **Yellow River** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

a river flowing from western China into an inlet of the Yellow Sea, an arm of the Pacific.

About 4345 km

Chinese Huang He Formerly Hwang Ho Huang Ho



Image from: [East Asia in Geography of the World](#)

Summary Article: **Huang Ho (Yellow River)**

From *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society*

THE ORIGIN OF the Huang Ho, also known as the Yellow River because of the voluminous ochre-colored sediments suspended in its lower course as it meanders through the North China Plain, is in two glacial lakes in the Bayankala Mountains in western China's Qinghai Province. The river begins its 3,400 mile journey by flowing east out of the high elevations and then making an abrupt turn to the north at the city of Lanzou. From this point the Huang Ho begins its circuit around the Ordos Desert, turning to the east and coursing through Inner Mongolia before heading south to its junction with the Wei Ho. At this point the river turns to the northeast and completes its final leg across the North China Plain and empties into the Bo Hai. The river has been alternately called "China's Sorrow" and "China's Pride."

The Sorrow designation is associated with the extensive losses of human life through massive flooding of the relatively shallow river at times in the past. Historians estimate that the severe floods in 1887 and 1931 resulted in the death of between two and six million people as the waters breached the manmade levies and spread quickly across the land.

The invocation of Pride relates to the role of the Huang Ho in agricultural development throughout the centuries and archaeological evidence that the origin of the Chinese civilization can be traced to the area surrounding the confluence of the Huang Ho and Wei Ho. This extremely fertile area is identified as one of the earliest culture hearths and clearly the agricultural region of longest continuous operation in the world. This agricultural center lies at the southern edge of the Loess Plateau, a region of highly fertile soil.

Loess is wind-deposited fine particulate matter deposited by winds coming across the Ordos Desert to the northeast. These winds are slowed just enough by the Tien Shan, a low mountain range south of the Loess Plateau, to allow the deposition of airborne material. Over the centuries, the accumulation of loess in some areas reached 200 feet in thickness. In some parts of the plateau, agriculturalists actually established homes within loess caves, a practice that proved disastrous during major flooding.

There is considerable concern about the fate of the Huang Ho because of a severe drought in the mountainous area where the river originates. The glaciers in the area are receding and the groundwater sources for the river are getting lower. Both of these negative outcomes have been attributed to global warming. Consequently, water availability at points downriver has been diminished. This

unfortunate outcome impacts agriculture productivity, which has been a mainstay of the region for millennia. Another, more direct negative impact on the Huang Ho has been the incredible expansion in economic activity along the river and the growth of large urban places where none had existed before the era of rapid and prolonged industrial expansion. In order to meet the needs of agriculture and industry in northern China, there are plans to divert water from the Yangtze River to the Huang Ho through two major man-made canals. Water pollution is widespread within the lower course of the river as industrialization continues its virtually ceaseless expansion while demands for increased agricultural output also expands to keep pace with the growing Chinese population.

Air pollution in the industrial sector, associated with the burning of coal, contributes significantly to the environmental woes of China. The country ranks second only to the United States in the amount of carbon dioxide emitted to the atmosphere. With the Kyoto Protocol not requiring China to reduce emissions, China has been able to expand its industrial base almost at will. As the country's goal, is to develop its economic structure as quickly as possible before the ultimate reductions in working-age individuals necessary begins to fall, the Huang Ho and other areas of the environment will continue to be degraded.

SEE ALSO:

Carbon Dioxide; China; Drought; Pollution, Air.

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