

The Yellow River

The Yellow River (Huang He) is approximately 5460km in length. It is the second largest river in China. The river originates in the mountains of Qinghai province and exits into the Bo Hai sea east of Beijing.

As the most heavily silt-laden river in the world, the Yellow River got its name from the muddiness of its water, which bears an ochre-yellow colour. The silt, called loess, is a windborne clay that is blown hundreds of miles from the Mongolian steppe.

The river is commonly divided into three stages. The upper part of the river runs through mountainous and arid regions for nearly 4,000 km, reaching Hekouzhen in Inner Mongolia just before turning sharply to the south.

In the middle reaches the river flows south between the Shaanxi and Shanxi Provinces, draining a basin consisting largely of thick deposits of loess which is eroded readily by rainfall and wind.

In the lower reaches, from Zhengzhou to the sea for a distance of 786 km, the river is confined to a levee-lined course as it flows north-easterly across the North China plain before emptying into the Gulf of Bohai. During two thousand years of levee construction, excessive sediment deposits have raised the riverbed several metres above the surrounding ground.

The high level of the riverbed means that the frequent breaches of the levees can cause utter devastation. Such devastation causes untold human suffering, and the Yellow River has gained the unenviable distinction as China's Sorrow. Records indicate that the river's levees were breached more than 1,500 times and its course changed over 20 times in the last three millennia. A major course change taking place in A.D. 1194 was probably the most devastating economically. Flood water rushed onto the Huai River basin south of the Yellow River and took over Huai River's drainage system for the next 700 years. The river adopted its present course in 1897 after the most recent course change occurred in 1855.