

CASE STUDY

UNEVEN POPULATION DISTRIBUTION IN CHINA

China is home to around 1.3 billion people. This is four times greater than the population of the USA. Yet, despite this contrast in the number of people, some similarities in their distributions, are obvious. The highest concentrations of people are found along China's east coast. Density reaches a maximum in the province of Jiangsu, which is home to many of the world's leading exporters of electronic equipment and has been China's largest recipient of foreign investment over many years. Further south, an urban mega-region of 120 million people has grown around the Pearl River Delta. It includes the conjoined cities of Shenzhen, Dongguan and Guangzhou. Hong Kong and Macao also form part of this region. Although both territories have been returned to China, they were formerly under British and Portuguese control respectively and have long been important trade hubs where many people have wanted to live.

Population density falls markedly towards the west in China. This reflects both human factors (the reduced potential for international trade with distance from the coastline) and physical factors. Parts of China's interior are extreme environments. The Tibetan plateau is a high-altitude region covering 2.5 million square kilometers, where temperatures fall as low as -40°C in the winter months. The Gobi desert is a vast, sparsely populated area that overlaps part of northern China.

Political influences

In the last 40 years, major population relocations have taken place, which have reduced the population density of some provinces while increasing the density of others markedly. China's total population has not grown very rapidly on account of (until recently) strict political controls limiting the number of births (see page 30). Therefore, population changes in most regions are largely attributable to migration.

- Since 1978, when political and economic reforms began in China, more than 300 million people have left rural areas in search of a better life in cities.
- Only a strict registration system called *hukou* has prevented rural villages from emptying altogether. During this time, the percentage of China's population living in cities has risen from 20 to nearly 60 per cent.
- Between 1990 and 2010, the population of Guangdong province in the Pearl River Delta grew from 62 million to 104 million: a phenomenal rise over a 20-year period.

China's population distribution is shown in Figure 1.9 using a choropleth map. This is a type of map which uses differences in shading or colouring to indicate the average value (in this case of population density) found in a particular area or territory. Figure 1.8 is also a choropleth map.

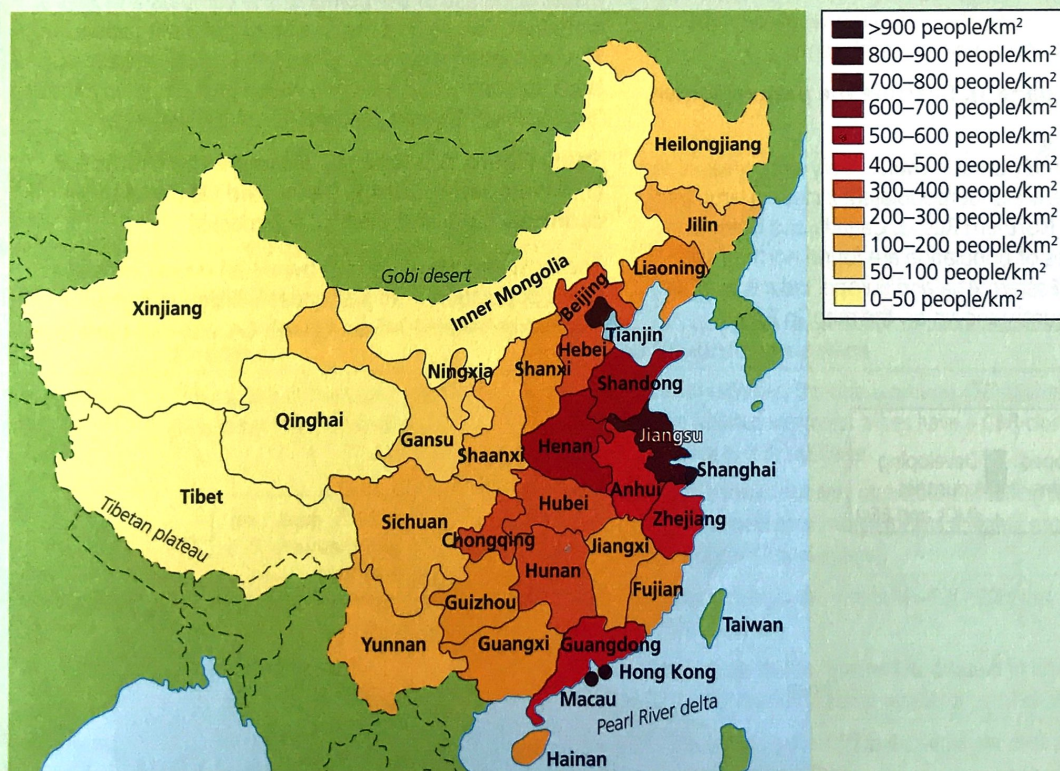


Figure 1.9 The uneven population distribution of China shown as a choropleth map

PPPPS CONCEPTS

Think about the strengths and weaknesses of Figures 1.8 and 1.9 as ways of showing how population is distributed between different places within a country. Can you suggest any improvements?