

Classroom Connection

Why Does China Only Have One Time Zone?: A Lesson Activity for 7th- to 12th-Grade Social Studies and Earth Science Students

Written by John Frank, Center Grove High School, Indiana

The 48 contiguous United States are divided into four time zones. China, a nation almost as broad in width as the United States has only one national time zone. Why?

Historical Background:

When Sun Yat-sen and others established the Republic of China 1912, the nation was divided into five time zones.¹ After completion of the Chinese Communist revolution in 1949, Mao Zedong and the new leaders of China established a different policy. "From five time zones before the revolution, China became just one. As Communist rule extended across the vastness from Tibet in the west to Hainan Island in the east, all the nation's clocks were adjusted to reflect the new reality of unification. Beijing time now ruled throughout China (except, of course, in Taiwan)."² For the past 60 years, all of China has shared a single official time zone. This common national time produces some geographic distortions. For example, at the moment of sunrise in Beijing, when a daily flag raising ceremony takes place in Tiananmen Square, easternmost China has already experienced an hour of daylight. Westernmost China will not share Beijing's sunrise for another three hours. A unitary national time zone policy has produced political critics. For example, a number of minority Muslim Uighur citizens of China's western Xinjiang province do not observe official "Beijing time" but keep their own unofficial time, two hours later than national standard time. Some Uighur people view one national time zone as not only an inconvenience but also as an attempt by the national government to exert its dominance over distant minority peoples.³

Suggested Classroom Lessons:

I. Map Activity

Share the following information, and distribute to students a copy of an outline map of China⁴:

"At the end of the 19th century, time zones were introduced using the Greenwich Meridian (0 degrees longitude) as the "agreed-to" prime meridian or starting point. Since there are almost exactly 24 hours in a day and 360 degrees in a circle, each time zone was set up to be 15 degrees in width. So, it takes the Sun approximately one hour to traverse each time zone."⁵

To contrast China's one national time zone policy with conventional 15 degree time zones, conduct the following classroom activity. On a handout outline map of China, students can locate and label geographic locations mentioned in the "Historical Background" section of this lesson. Upon completion, instruct students to create multiple time zones for China that conform to world-side "conventional" 15-

¹ <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2009/0615/1224248850523.html>

² Michael Dutton, *Beijing Time* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 16.

³ <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/mar/31/world/fg-china-timezone31>

⁴ A free, printable outline map of China is located at <http://z.about.com/d/geography/1/0/Q/K/china.jpg>

⁵ <http://www.gsfc.nasa.gov/gsfed/educ/science/2000/10-27-00.htm>

degree wide time zones. To accomplish this task, draw time zone boundary lines at 75°, 90°, 105°, 120°, and 135° lines of east longitude.

II. Discussion Questions

After completion of the map activity, discuss with students the following questions:

- a. What does China gain from having one national time zone?

Possible responses include, "One time zone:

1. promotes transportation schedule uniformity."
2. facilitates business and governmental coordination. This increases efficiency."
3. is a different issue in China than in the United States because the vast majority of the Chinese population lives in the eastern one-third of the nation."
4. is not as important in China as in the U.S. because a much higher percent of the Chinese population are farmers and time zone issues are not as significant to rural farmers as to urban workers."
5. promotes nationalism."
6. increases the authority of the central government."

- b. What does China lose from having one time zone?

Possible responses include, "One time zone:

1. does not take into account natural forces. People in western China are forced to get up before the sun has risen and go to sleep before the sun has set."
2. undermines local autonomy and customs."
3. is a method of imposing Han Chinese culture upon ethnic minorities, far from the nation's capital city of Beijing."