



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

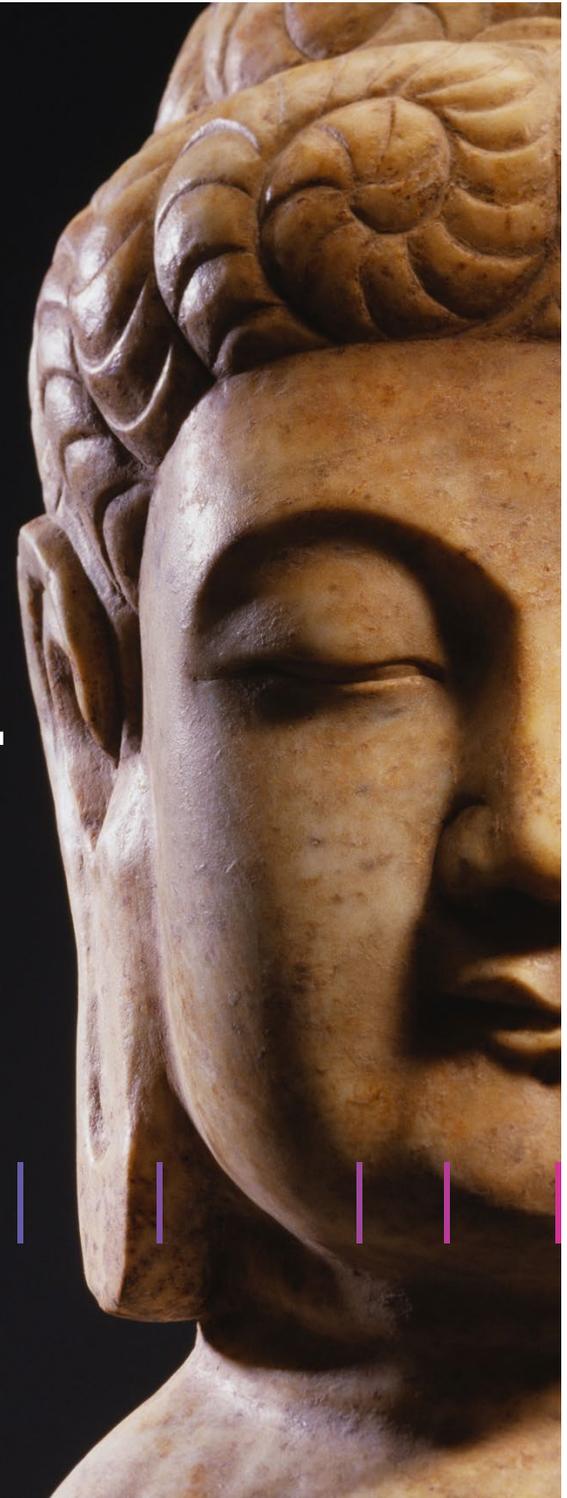
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EAST ASIA

CIVILIZATION



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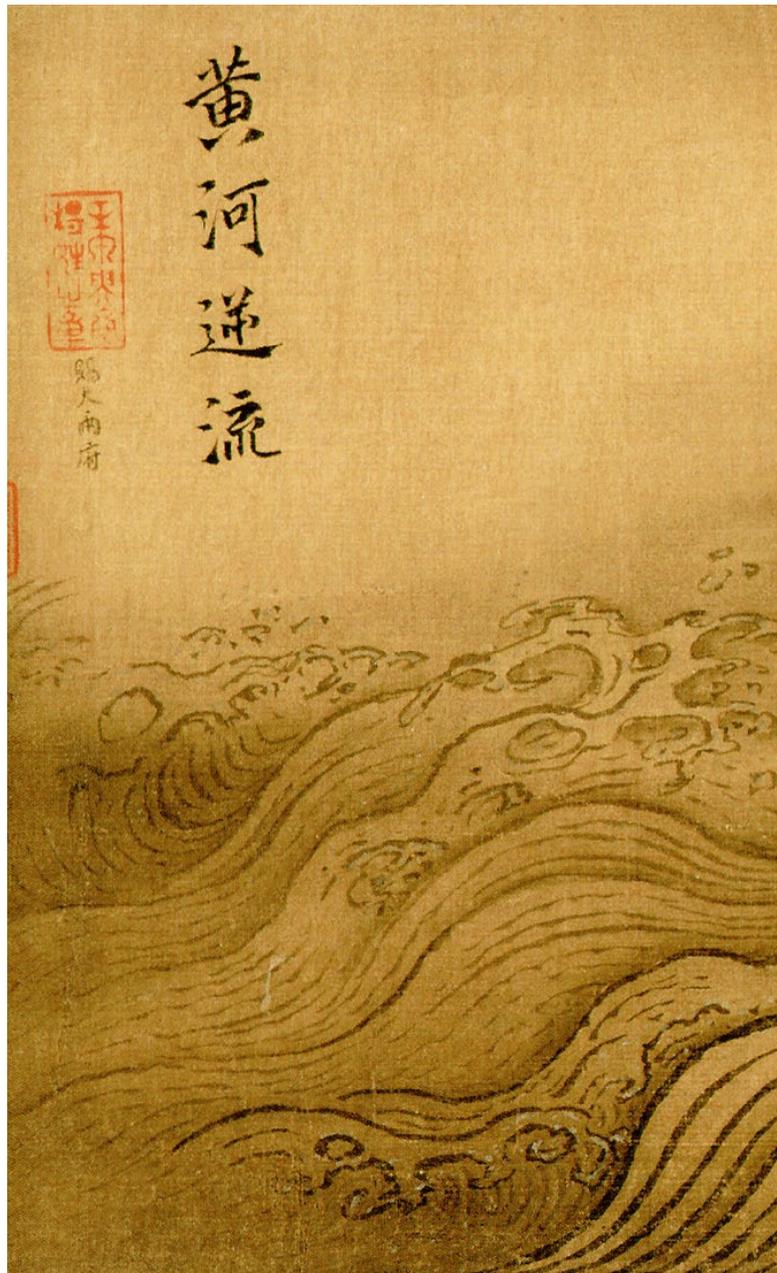


EAST ASIA

GEOGRAPHY SHAPES
CULTURE AND HISTORY
IN THE FAR EAST

By Craig Benjamin, adapted by Newsela

The complex and powerful states, dynasties, and civilizations that emerged in East Asia were strongly influenced by the environments in which they prospered.



Floods help shape a worldview

What were the geologic and geographic advantages favoring certain locations that facilitated the establishment of villages and towns — some of which grew into cities — in various regions of East Asia? What role did climate play in enabling powerful states, and eventually agrarian civilizations, to appear in some areas while other locations remained better suited for foraging? Let's begin to answer these questions with a story about floods in China.

China's two great rivers — the Yangtze and the Yellow — have been susceptible to regular flooding for as long as we can measure in the historical and geological record; nothing, however, can compare to the catastrophic floods of August 19, 1931. In just one day the Yangtze River rose an astonishing 53 feet above its normal level, unleashing some of the most destructive floodwaters ever seen. These floods were a product of a "perfect storm" of conditions — monsoons, heavy snowmelt, and tremendous and unexpected rains that pounded huge areas of southern China. As all this water poured into the Yangtze's tributaries, the river rose until it burst its banks for hundreds of miles. The results were devastating — 40 million people affected, 24 million forced to relocate, and more than 140,000 people drowned. An area the size of Oklahoma was underwater, and the southern capital city of Nanjing was flooded for six weeks.

Such is the power of nature. People throughout history have been forced to acknowledge it, but in China the realization has led to a widely quoted maxim: "Heaven nourishes and Heaven destroys." Despite the best efforts of emperors to regulate episodes of environmental boom and bust, these natural and uncontrollable cycles have profoundly influenced the core foundations of Chinese and East Asian culture. The behavior of rivers has become a model for the constant flux of natural forces, the balance between nature as creator and nature as destroyer. This is an example of why historical processes rely so heavily on the environmental context in which they take place. Big Historians believe that understanding geography and climate is necessary background to the study of any civilization. In this essay, we look at the physical geography of China, Korea, and Japan to see how it has influenced the cultural and political history of East Asia.

China

China and the United States share several geographical similarities. They are about the same size, reside in the middle latitudes of the northern hemisphere, and have lengthy coastlines and diverse topographies. China is located in the eastern part of Asia, along the west coast of the Pacific Ocean, a region that is also home to the Korean Peninsula and the island nation of Japan. With a total land area of more than 3 million square miles, China is the third-largest country in the world after Russia and Canada. China also has extensive seas and numerous islands, and a coastline that extends for more than 11,000 miles.

In a country the size of China, it is hardly surprising to find a great variety of topography, climate, and vegetation. The eastern regions are fertile alluvial plains that have been built up by China's great river systems. This is the region that has been densely settled and farmed for thousands of years, and where all the great dynasties and their capitals were located.

Along the edges of the Mongolian Plateau in the north lie extensive grasslands, the home of the pastoral nomadic peoples who interacted (and competed and clashed) with China's sedentary populations virtually from the beginning of history. The vast "grass oceans" hosted Saka and Yuezhi, Xiongnu and Hun, Jurchen and Mongol — militarized archer warriors whom segments of the Great Wall were built to keep out.

The southern regions of China consist of hill country and low mountain ranges. The south receives extensive rainfall, which is ideal for rice cultivation. The success of rice farmers through the ages — from around 8000 BCE, when the grain was first harvested and domesticated — explains why China has been consistently able to support a very large population.

China is also a mountainous country. The highest of these mountain ranges, including the Himalaya, the Karakoram, and the Tien Shan, are all located in the west, where they have long acted as a formidable barrier to communication. To make these topographical barriers even more challenging, the mountain ranges are interspersed with harsh deserts like the Taklimakan and Gobi.



The Great Wall of China

There is little arable land for agriculture in the west, so the smallish populations there have been confined to oasis settlements or have lived as pastoral nomads on the steppes. This led to Chinese civilization emerging in the more arable east, north, and south. Isolated by its own “wild west,” China was cut off from the rest of Eurasia and from competing agrarian civilizations. Even today, these formidable topographical barriers, and the vast distances necessary to cross western China, affect China’s relations with its western neighbors. Yet these barriers have their advantages too. Chinese governments from the earliest dynasties have been forced to focus on internal cultural and ethnic integration rather than on external expansion.

Although the mountains and deserts of the west limited contact between early imperial dynasties and other Afro-Eurasian civilizations for thousands of years, they were eventually breached by traders moving along the Silk Roads, the first connection between China and the rest of Afro-Eurasia. It was the Silk Roads (land and maritime) that allowed many of the ideas and technological inventions of East Asian civilization — paper, printing, gunpowder — to reach the West, where their impact was profound.

China’s two river systems have also greatly influenced its history and culture. The Huang He in the north, called the Yellow River because of huge amounts of silt (yellow loess soil) that it carries from the plains into the ocean, rises in the mountains of Tibet and flows 2,920 miles to the Yellow Sea. During its journey, it crosses the high western plateau, flows through the arid northern deserts, and then spills out onto the broad alluvial plain.

About midway along its course, the river takes a series of sharp turns — the so-called “great bend” — before resuming its path. This bend was long perceived as a frontier, the very edge of the civilized world beyond which lay the endless and dangerous steppes where one entered the realm of the “barbarians” — militarized pastoral nomads like the Xiongnu and the Mongols, China’s most formidable enemies.

The Huang He is also known as “China’s Sorrow” because of the misery its devastating floods have caused. The earliest cities, states, and civilizations of East Asia all appeared along the Huang He — the Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties were all centered there. So for millennia some of

the largest populations in the world lived within the Yellow River system and faced the potential of regular flood devastation. Emperors and court officials tried numerous schemes to control these floods, but with little success.

The other major river of China is the Yangtze, the third longest river in the world after the Nile and the Amazon. It flows from the Tibetan Plateau nearly 4,000 miles through southern China, until it empties into the sea beside Shanghai. The river’s basin area, about one-fifth the size of China, is home to so many people (almost 500 million) that if the Yangtze valley were a country it would be the third most populous in the world!

The Yangtze also has its great bend to the north, a bend that perhaps has been of even greater consequence to Chinese civilization than its Yellow River counterpart. In southwestern China, all the mountainous valleys are arranged in a north-south direction, products of the twisting of the landscape caused by the collision between the Indian and Asian tectonic plates. The great rivers that flow through these Himalayan valleys, like the south-running Brahmaputra and Mekong, all flow from the Tibetan Plateau in the north toward the seas that lap Southeast Asia.

The Yangtze would have gone the same way, depriving millions of Chinese people of its life-giving water, were it not for a singular topographical feature called Cloud Mountain. This massive wall of limestone is placed right across the path of the onrushing Yangtze, forcing the river to abruptly interrupt its journey south and turn sharply back to the north. The Chinese attribute the fortuitous placement of Cloud Mountain to the work of legendary emperor Yu the Great, who labored mightily to keep the river in China. Geologists, more accurately, attribute it to a particular quirk in twisting of the plate tectonic collision zone. Either way, without Cloud Mountain, Chinese history would have played out very differently.

The societies that emerged in Korea and Japan reflect their participation in an East Asian regional identity that revolved around China. We can talk about the existence of an “Eastern Hemispheric cultural zone” by the beginning of the Era of Agrarian Civilizations, just as we speak about the “East Asian region” as a semi-unified cultural and economic entity today. But Korean and Japanese civilizations never became carbon copies of China.

Korea

The Korean Peninsula extends from northeastern China and is otherwise surrounded by the Yellow Sea to the west, the Sea of Japan to the east, and the Korea Strait connecting the two seas. The Yellow Sea dividing China and the peninsula is only 120 miles wide at its narrowest point, and if you were to sail from southern Korea to Kyushu in Japan on a clear day, land would never be out of sight. The peninsula is about 85,000 square miles — or about the same size as England or the state of Utah. Most of the land is extremely rugged, mountainous, and heavily forested. This presented the first human migrants to Korea with a host of environmental challenges but also a range of possible settlement sites: a long, sinuous coastline with many microenvironments and marine resources, and many wooded interior environments such as river flats, and mountain valleys with access to forest foods, timber, fresh water, and caves.

Geologically, Korea consists mostly of a block of ancient granite that was laid down before the Cambrian era. On top of this are younger rocks — gneiss, more recent granites, and limestone. The limestone has produced large caves that are mostly accessible through fissures and cracks rather than through flat floors and entrances. Although these might have seemed attractive to early human migrants, few of these caves were the right shape or size to become practical dwellings. The ancient granites contain important metals — gold, copper, tin, and iron — all of which were accessed by early Korean states. Korea has been a major gold producer for a very long time.

Although Japan is so close, Korea has almost none of the volatile volcanic activity of its eastern neighbor. The only volcano is Mount Baekdu in the far north, which at 9,000 feet is also the highest mountain in Korea. Today the mountain contains an extinct crater filled with Heaven Lake; according to ancient legend, this was home to the gods. From Baekdu in the far north all the way to the southern tip of the peninsula, 70 percent of Korea's land consists of steep-sided mountains. It is their ruggedness rather than their height that has been so influential: the hills made it very difficult to cross from east to west, allowing cultures and kingdoms to develop in relative

geographical isolation from each other. One of these, the Silla Kingdom, grew strong enough in its remote southeastern enclave behind the Sobaek Mountains that it eventually overcame the mountainous terrain to conquer the other kingdoms and establish the first unified Korean state.

As with China, rivers have also played a critical role in the emergence of Korean culture. All of Korea's rivers twist and turn as they cut their way down from the mountains. Six are more than 400 kilometers long, and most of them run west or south. All the great capitals of Korean history have been located along the major rivers of the Taedong (where Pyongyang lies today); the Imjin-Han system (where Seoul is located); and the Kum further south.

During the last ice age sea levels were about 400 feet lower than they are today, which meant that much of the Yellow Sea was dry land, and Korea was connected to Japan. Paleolithic migrants were able to walk from China across the Yellow Sea Plain to Korea, and then on to Japan. As temperatures warmed about 11,000 years ago, sea levels rose, sealing off the inhabitants of Japan, and separating Korea from China, except along the northern border.

Early Korean people constructed a series of rituals, survival strategies, and ideas about the relationship of families to larger organizations that were products of the geographical context in which they emerged. These influenced their origin stories, such as the legend that Korean history dates to 2333 BCE, when King Tangun (a mythical figure born of the son of Heaven and a woman from a bear-totem tribe) established the first kingdom of Choson, or "Land of the Morning Calm." The name reflected well the tranquil forest camps, seaside villages, and river terraces of the Choson state.



Eight decorated screens called *Cypress Tree* attributed to Japanese artist Kano Eitoku

Japan

Japanese culture was perhaps even more powerfully influenced by the environment in which it formed. Modern Japan consists of four large islands — Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu — and thousands of smaller ones, with a combined area of roughly 145,000 square miles, which means it is just a little larger than Italy, and a little smaller than California. The 1,500-mile-long chain stretches from cool northern latitudes to warmer southern ones.

Because the islands are separated from the mainland by several hundred miles of water (120 miles at the closest point), this has fostered a sense of security that has allowed for the emergence of distinct Japanese culture. This isolation also helps explain why attempts to invade Japan were largely unsuccessful. But Japan has never been completely isolated from the cultural influences coming from sophisticated neighboring states like Korea and China.

The geographical chain of islands to which Japan belongs is much more extensive than just the Japanese archipelago; it stretches along the northwest edge of the Pacific from the Aleutian Islands in the north all the way to the Philippines in the south. This chain is the product of, and still heavily influenced by, the tectonic forces that shape the surface of the Earth. Japan sits at the intersection of no fewer than four tectonic plates (part of the Pacific region's "Ring of Fire") so has undergone regular violent shaping and upheaval. The devastating earthquake of 2011, which generated a massive tsunami, was just one of about a thousand earthquakes that rattle Japan every year.

Another product of Japan's tectonic location is that most of the country consists of geologically young mountains, driven up by these plate collisions. These mountains are steep and jagged, producing fast-moving streams and

regular landslides. The tectonic plate boundaries have also spawned volcanoes, the highest and most famous of which is Mount Fuji at 12,388 feet. These rugged and unstable mountain ranges are unsuitable for farming, limiting to settlement patterns, and difficult to climb or cross, so have been serious barriers for internal transportation and communication from the beginning of Japanese history. This led to the emergence of regionally autonomous states in early Japan, and to an early reliance on water transport.

The sediment regularly washed from these young mountains joins with rich volcanic soil to create narrow but very fertile coastal plains. Although the plains make up only 13 percent of Japan's area, their fertility marked them as where the first rice farmers settled, and where the first towns, cities, and states appeared. One of the most important of these plains is the Tsukushi Plain in northern Kyushu. Influenced by nearby civilizations in Korea and China, it became an early center of emerging Japanese culture.

Japan's location between the great mainland continent of Asia and the wide Pacific also creates a distinctive and challenging weather environment. In winter, cold winds blow out of Asia and dump large quantities of snow on the mountains of Japan. In the summer, warm moist air blows in from the south, bringing high temperatures and often torrential rains and typhoons. These weather systems have strongly influenced settlement patterns, and the formidable hurricane-like storms have had enormous historical consequences. Two attempted invasions of Japan by the Mongols were thwarted by powerful storms and strong winds that the Japanese considered divine, calling them kamikaze.

Because of its long north-south stretch and varied terrain, Japan also contains a wide variety of plants and animals. The combination of plentiful fresh water and a long growing season created a paradise for plants, and for the herbivores that feed off them. When foraging humans first crossed the land bridges connecting the Japanese archipelago to the Asian mainland about 35,000 years ago, they found a rich variety of potential foodstuffs awaiting them — forest and sea food, along with plentiful boar, deer, and many smaller animals.

Land and climate shape civilization

All these naturally occurring geological, geographic, and biological features — the flooding rivers, towering mountains, arid deserts, and rich alluvial plains of China; the narrow coasts, rugged mountains, and fast-flowing rivers of Korea; and the violent storms, earthquakes, volcanoes, and plains of the island nation of Japan — have been as fundamental in shaping East Asian civilization as any products of human ingenuity or will.

Image credits

A marble bust of Buddha from the Tang Dynasty

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A 12th century painting *The Yellow River Breaches Its Course*,
Beijing Palace Museum

Great Wall of China

© Frans Lemmens/Corbis

Undated painting of the mountains in North Korea,
Manchu veritable records

Cypress Tree by Kano Eitoku, c. 1590,
Tokyo National Museum

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