EAST ASIA

CIVILIZATION

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GEOGRAPHY SHAPES CULTURE AND HISTORY IN THE FAR EAST

By Craig Benjamin, adapted by Newsela
The complex and powerful states, dynasties, and civilizations that formed in East Asia were strongly influenced by the environments in which they prospered.
Floods help shape a worldview

What were the geographic advantages that favored certain locations for villages, towns and cities? What role did climate play in allowing powerful states to appear in some areas but not others? 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 flooded regularly for as long as we can measure in the historical and geological record.

Nothing can compare, though, to the catastrophic floods of August 19, 1931. The Yangtze river rose an astonishing 53 feet above its normal level in just one day. It unleashed some of the most destructive floodwaters ever seen. The floods were caused by a “perfect storm” of conditions. Monsoon rains, heavy snowmelt, and unexpected rains pounded huge areas of southern China.

All this water poured into the Yangtze. The river rose and burst its banks for hundreds of miles. The results were devastating: 24 million people were 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.

This is the power of nature. People throughout history have been forced to acknowledge it. In China, the realization has led to a widely quoted proverb: “Heaven nourishes and Heaven destroys.”

Emperors have tried to control the ups and downs of the environment. Yet, they’ve had little success. These natural and uncontrollable cycles profoundly influenced the formation of Chinese and East Asian culture.

The behavior of rivers has become a model for the constant change of natural forces. Nature is both creator and destroyer.
Big Historians believe that understanding geography and climate is necessary 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 some geographical similarities. They are about the same size, reside in the middle latitudes of the northern hemisphere, and have long coastlines and diverse topographies.

China is located in the eastern part of Asia, alongside the Pacific Ocean. This region 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, numerous islands, and more than 11,000 miles of coastline.

In a country the size of China, it is not surprising to find a great variety of topography, climate, and vegetation. The eastern regions are fertile plains that have been built up by China’s great river systems. This area has been settled and farmed for thousands of years. It is where all the great dynasties and their capitals were located.

In the north are extensive grasslands. They were the home of the cattle-raising nomadic peoples who interacted and clashed with China’s settled populations virtually from the beginning of history. The vast “grass oceans” hosted warriors such as the Mongols. Parts of the Great Wall were built to keep them out.

The southern regions of China consist of hill country and low mountain ranges. The south receives extensive rainfall. It’s ideal for growing rice. The success of rice farmers through the ages — since around 8000 BCE — explains why China has been 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. For ages they have acted as a formidable barrier to communication. To make these barriers even more challenging, between the mountain ranges are harsh deserts like the Taklimakan and Gobi.

There is little land for agriculture in the west, so the smallish populations there have been confined to oasis settlements or have lived as nomads on the steppes. Chinese civilization emerged in the more fertile east, north, and south.

China was isolated by its own “wild west.” It was cut off from the rest of Eurasia and from competing agrarian civilizations. Even today, these formidable 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 internally. Instead of trying to expand the country through conquest, China has focused on cultural and ethnic integration.

The mountains and deserts of the west limited contact between early imperial dynasties and other Afro-Eurasian civilizations for thousands of years. Eventually the barriers were opened by traders moving along the Silk Roads. These were the first connections between China and the rest of Afro-Eurasia. It was the Silk Roads that allowed many of the ideas and technological inventions of East Asian civilization — paper, printing, gunpowder — to reach the West. The impact they had on Europe was profound.

China’s two river systems have also greatly influenced its history and culture. The Huang He in the north is also known as the Yellow River. It got its name because of huge amounts of silt (yellow soil) that it carries from the plains into the ocean. Huang He 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 northern deserts, and then spills out onto the 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 thought of as a frontier, the very edge of the civilized world. Beyond it lay the endless and dangerous steppes. This was the realm of the “barbarians” — militarized pastoral nomads like the Xiongnu and the Mongols, China’s strongest 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 thousands of years some of the largest populations in the world lived within the Yellow River system. They faced the potential of regular flood devastation. Emperors tried numerous schemes to control these floods, but had little success.

The other major river of China is the Yangtze. The Yangtze is 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 almost 500 million people. 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. The Yangtze’s bend has perhaps been more important to Chinese civilization than the Yellow River’s. In southwestern China, all the mountainous valleys are arranged in a north-south direction thanks to the collision between the Indian and Asian tectonic plates. The great rivers that flow through these Himalayan valleys all start in the Tibetan Plateau in the north. Then they flow south toward the seas of Southeast Asia.

The Yangtze would have gone the same way, and millions of Chinese wouldn’t have its life-giving water, if it weren’t for Cloud Mountain. This massive wall of limestone sits right across the path of the onrushing Yangtze. The river is forced to suddenly interrupt its journey south and turn sharply back to the north.
The Chinese give credit for the placement of Cloud Mountain to legendary emperor Yu the Great, who worked mightily to keep the river in China. Geologists attribute it to plate tectonics. Either way, without Cloud Mountain, Chinese history would have been very different.

The societies that emerged in Korea and Japan were influenced by China’s identity. Still, Korean and Japanese civilizations never became exact copies of China.

Korea

The Korean Peninsula juts out from northeastern China. It is surrounded by the Yellow Sea to the west and the Sea of Japan to the east. The Korea Strait connects the two seas. The peninsula is about 85,000 square miles — about the same size as England or the state of Utah. Most of the land is extremely rugged, mountainous, and heavily forested.

This geography presented many challenges to the first migrants to Korea, but also offered many possible sites to settle in. There was a long, curvy coastline with many marine resources; wooded interior environments; 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. The limestone has produced large caves. Although the caves might have seemed attractive to early human migrants, few of them were the right shape or size to live in. The ancient granite contains important metals — gold, copper, tin, and iron. Korea has been a major gold producer for a very long time.

Although Japan is so close, Korea has almost none of the volcanic activity of its eastern neighbor. The only volcano is Mount Baekdu in the far north. At 9,000 feet, it’s also the highest mountain in Korea. Today the mountain contains an extinct crater filled by 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 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. Cultures and kingdoms developed in relative geographical isolation from each other.

One of these cultures, the Silla Kingdom, grew strong in its remote southeastern location behind the Sobaek Mountains. Eventually it overcame the mountainous terrain to conquer the other kingdoms. The Silla established 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. 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. This meant that much of the Yellow Sea was dry land. At the time, Korea was still connected to Japan. Paleolithic migrants were able to walk from China across the Yellow Sea Plain to Korea. Then they could continue on to Japan. When temperatures warmed about 11,000 years ago, sea levels rose. This sealed off the inhabitants of Japan, and separated Korea from China, except along the northern border.

Early Korean culture reflected the geography. One Korean origin story dates to 2333 BCE. In this story, mythical King Tangun established the first kingdom of Choson, or “Land of the Morning Calm.” The name reflected the tranquil forest camps, seaside villages, and river terraces of the Choson state.
Japan

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

The islands of Japan are separated from the Asian mainland by several hundred miles of water. Because of this great distance a distinct Japanese culture emerged. But Japan has never been completely isolated from the cultural influences coming from neighbors like Korea and China.

Japan belongs to a geographical chain of islands that stretches from the Aleutian Islands in the north, all the way to the Philippines in the south. This chain is the product of the tectonic forces that shape the surface of the Earth. It is still heavily influenced by them.

Japan sits at the intersection of at least four tectonic plates. Part of the Pacific region’s “Ring of Fire,” it 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.

Japan’s tectonic location means 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 created volcanoes. The highest and most famous is Mount Fuji at 12,388 feet. These rugged and unstable mountain ranges are unsuitable for farming, not ideal for settlement, and difficult to cross. They have been serious barriers to transportation and communication from the beginning of Japanese history. This led to the emergence of regional independent states in early Japan, and to an early reliance on water transport.

Sediment washed down from these young mountains joins with rich volcanic soil to create very fertile coastal plains. The plains make up only 13 percent of Japan’s area, but they are crucial to Japanese civilization. Because of their fertility, the plains are 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 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 snow on the mountains of Japan. In the summer, warm moist air blows in from the south, bringing high temperatures, torrential rains and typhoons. These weather systems have strongly influenced settlement patterns.

The strong hurricane-like storms have had enormous historical consequences. Two attempted invasions of Japan by the Mongols were stopped by powerful storms and strong winds. The Japanese considered these storms divine and called 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. Land bridges once connected Japan to the Asian mainland. About 35,000 years ago, humans first crossed them into Japan. A rich variety of potential food awaited them. There was forest and sea food, along with plentiful boar, deer, and many smaller animals.

Land and climate shape civilization

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 intelligence or will.
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A 12th century painting The Yellow River Breaches Its Course,
Beijing Palace Museum

Great Wall of China
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Cypress Tree by Kano Eitoku, c. 1590,
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