EAST ASIA

CIVILIZATION

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BIG HISTORY PROJECT

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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 that favored certain locations for villages, towns and cities? What role did climate play in allowing powerful states and agrarian civilizations to appear in some areas? 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 flooding regularly 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, 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.”

Emperors tried to control the ups and downs of the environment. Despite their best efforts, these natural and uncontrollable cycles have profoundly influenced the foundations 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 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 of more than 11,000 miles.

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 alluvial plains that have been built up by China’s great river systems. This region has been densely settled and farmed for thousands of years, and is where all the great dynasties and their capitals were located. Along the edges of the Mongolian Plateau in the north are 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. Segments 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, which is ideal for rice cultivation. The success of rice farmers through the ages — since around 8000 BCE — 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 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 pastoral nomads on the steppes. This led to Chinese civilization emerging in the more fertile 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 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.

The mountains and deserts of the west limited contact between early imperial dynasties and other Afro-Eurasian civilizations for thousands of years. Eventually, they were breached 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, 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 yellow 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 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 thought of as a frontier, the very edge of the civilized world. Beyond this 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 thousands of years 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 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 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 of Southeast Asia.

The Yangtze would have gone the same way, depriving millions of Chinese people of its life-giving water, were it not for Cloud Mountain. This massive wall of limestone is placed right across the path of the onrushing Yangtze. It forces the river to abruptly interrupt its journey south and turn sharply back to the north. The Chinese attribute the lucky 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 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 a regional identity that revolved around China. At the beginning of the Era of Agrarian Civilizations there was an "Eastern Hemispheric cultural zone," just as the "East Asian region" is 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. It is surrounded by the Yellow Sea to the west, the Sea of Japan to the east, and the Korea Strait connecting 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 presented the first human migrants to Korea with many environmental challenges but also many possible settlement sites. Korea contains a long, curvy coastline with many microenvironments and marine resources, 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 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 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, so 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 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. 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. Korea was still connected to Japan. Paleolithic migrants were able to walk from China across the Yellow Sea Plain to Korea. From there they could continue 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 had rituals, survival strategies and culture that reflected the geography where they lived. These influenced their origin stories such as one dating to 2333 BCE. In this story, King Tangun, a mythical figure, 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.
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.

Because the islands are separated from the Asian mainland by several hundred miles of water (120 miles at the closest point), a distinct Japanese culture has emerged. But Japan has never been completely isolated from the cultural influences coming from sophisticated 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 climb or cross. They 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 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 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 a lot of snow on the mountains of Japan. In the summer, warm moist air blows in from the south, bringing high temperatures and torrential rains and typhoons. These weather systems have strongly influenced settlement patterns, and 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 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 food awaiting them — forest and sea food, along with plentiful boar, deer, and many smaller animals.
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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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Undated painting of the mountains in North Korea,
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*Cypress Tree* by Kano Eitoku, c. 1590,
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