

Asia: Human geography

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More than 18 million people live in Mumbai, India. It is one of the largest cities in Asia. Photo by: Anshuman Poyrekar/Hindustan Times via Getty Images

Asia is the largest continent in the world, covering approximately 30 percent of the Earth's land area. Of the seven continents, it also has the largest population; roughly 60 percent of all people on Earth live in Asia.



The geographic term “Asia” was originally used by ancient Greeks to describe the civilizations to the east of their empire. These ancient civilizations of Asia were varied and complex, and they pioneered the development of agriculture, city planning, and religion.

Today, Asia includes 47 countries. The cultural and political geography of the continent continues to inform and influence the rest of the world. We'll examine Asia's cultural geography first, and then discuss its political geography.

Historic Cultures

The oldest civilizations on Earth began in Asia, and several sprung up in the Fertile Crescent, a sliver of land in the Middle East. It arches from the Nile River Valley in modern-day Egypt to the Mediterranean coast, eastward toward Iraq and southward along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers until reaching the Persian Gulf. It is considered the birthplace of agriculture.

Nomadic people settled along the lush riverbanks of the Fertile Crescent to harvest wild wheat and barley to become the world's first farmers. This represented a fundamental shift in the lifestyle of early humans, who until that point had survived as hunter-gathers by living on the move in a constant search for food. As farmers, people learned to survive by taking control of the natural environment.

As more groups of people settled near each other and started working together, new tools were invented, such as the wheel, irrigation, and farming hand tools. With these, farmers could control wild grasses, such as wheat, barley, and lentils, and tame animals such as cows, sheep, and pigs.

Agriculture made cities and civilizations possible by letting humans produce more food than they needed to survive. Farmers could grow enough not just for themselves, but for a whole community. This meant that others had time to develop writing, religion, taxation, and trade. Ancient cities like Ur, for example, which was part of the Sumerian civilization, developed a writing system called cuneiform around 2100 B.C.

Ancient civilizations developed in the Indus Valley as well, near modern-day India and Pakistan. These cultures came up with early forms of city planning and construction. Buildings were well-organized and well-constructed, and cities were often surrounded by high walls to keep out invading armies and natural disasters like floods.

Cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro (both in modern-day Pakistan) even developed drainage systems, wells, and water-storage systems, which were the most advanced water systems of their time. The design of these cities dramatically cut down on the spread of disease and greatly influenced future city planning.

As these civilizations grew, religions were developing and spreading throughout Asia. Buddhism has its roots in Nepal and India in the late sixth century B.C. Trade routes allowed Buddhist thought to spread to other Asian territories. Today, Buddhism is the majority religion throughout much of eastern Asia, from Japan in the north to Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Laos in the south.

Modern cultures in Asian countries remain rooted in history, but they are also quickly changing with the times. Asia has a growing middle class and its film, fashion, and music industries are on the rise.

India is the world's largest producer of films, making more than 2,500 movies every year. Fabric-making traditions live on in countries like Uzbekistan, where workers dye, weave, and embroider textiles by hand and sell them internationally. South Korean pop music, nicknamed K-pop, has become a pop culture phenomenon in Asia and abroad.

These are just a few examples of the rich variety of culture found in Asian countries today.

Political geography is the set of relationships between governments, citizens, and territories. The political geography of Asia has undergone dramatic changes at both the local and international level. As the continent becomes more economically powerful, its political geography will become increasingly important internationally.

Historic Issues

One of the oldest and most difficult disputes in the political geography of Asia has to do with the Levant, an area in the eastern Mediterranean that has been occupied for thousands of years by the historic cultures of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.

The Levant is sometimes called "The Holy Land," as it is important to followers of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths. These are three of the largest and most influential religions in the world. Given the land's importance to so many groups, religious fights broke out in the Levant for thousands of years. Christian leaders persecuted Jews in the region during the late Roman Empire. During the Middle Ages, European Christians sent soldiers on crusades to conquer and convert the Levant's Muslim majority.

Israel, the only Jewish-majority nation in the world, was established in 1948. Before that, the area had been a British colony called Palestine. When Israel was created, many Palestinians were displaced and felt their land was being stolen. As soon as Israel was created, it was attacked by its neighbors in the Arab-Israeli War (1948). There have been several more wars in the years since, including the Suez Crisis (1956), the Six Day War (1967), and the Yom Kippur War (1973).

Today, there are two Palestinian Territories, the West Bank and Gaza, which both border Israel, and tensions between Israelis and Palestinians are still high. Treaties, such as the Camp David Accords (which established a lasting peace treaty between Egypt and Israel) have tried to make peace in the Levant.

The colonization of Southeast Asia is another example of how historic political geography can influence an entire region. Colonialism is when a country rules over a foreign people from abroad. Southeast Asia was colonized, by a variety of foreign powers, for more than 1,000 years.

Europe, the United States, and Japan ruled over Southeast Asian peoples from the 1500s to the mid-1940s. Colonialism allowed these empires to expand their territory, increase trade, import cheap raw materials and spread their culture.

During this period, the Dutch and British established extremely powerful companies that oversaw trade and labor in colonies throughout Asia. The Dutch East India Company, based in Indonesia, even had the power to print its own money and engage in war. It enforced harsh labor practices on local people and made fortunes shipping spices and precious metals back to Europe.

Colonialism was held in place with violence. The French, for example, used their military to maintain control over local people in their colonies, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

The countries of Southeast Asia are now independent, but their economies, politics and cultures are still affected by the history of colonialism. For instance, the Vietnamese language is written using the Roman alphabet. This is because Vietnam was ruled, for almost a hundred years, by the French.

As the colonial period approached its end, Asia was deeply affected by another global event - World War II. Japan was the most devastated Asian country in terms of loss of life and physical destruction.

After the war, however, Japan experienced a period of record economic growth. Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry came up with new ideas to help coordinate businesses and production. The government spent money building efficient transportation, communications, and technology systems.

Current Issues

The economies in India and China have grown dramatically in the last 20 years. This growth has had both positive and negative effects.



China has the world's fastest-growing economy. It has been getting about 10 percent bigger every year for the past 30 years. This is largely because China is the world's largest manufacturer and exporter of goods.

As a result, wages have increased in China, giving workers a better standard of living. China has become a superpower on the international stage, and it invests its wealth around the world. It is predicted to become the world's largest economy in the coming decades.

The rapid growth in China has caused a number of social, environmental and economic problems, though. While cities have expanded, many people in the countryside have been left out. Millions have had to migrate to crowded cities to find jobs.

Meanwhile, manufacturing has led to extreme pollution in the air, water, and soil, causing major health problems for people in modern-day China.

India's growth has been drastically different from China's. It is largely driven by the fast-growing services industry, not the manufacturing industry. In particular, India has become a major producer of information technology services. Its telecommunications industry, which focuses on phone and Internet services, relies heavily on India's highly educated, English-speaking population.

India's growth has caused hourly wages to double during the past decade, bringing more than 430 million Indians out of poverty and creating an immense middle-class population. Like China, India has become more powerful internationally as it has become wealthier.

While countries have become wealthier overall, there are extreme gaps between the rich and the poor. India still has the world's largest concentration of people living in extreme poverty; they are people who survive on less than \$1.25 per day. As in China, there has been growth in India's cities, but poor communities in the countryside have paid a price.

There have been rapid changes in Asia's Arabic-speaking region, as well. In the "Arab Spring" of 2011, social and political groups across the region staged protests calling for reform. They wanted government leaders to hold elections and give over control to the people. Some governments compromised with protesters, while others responded with military force.

Future Issues

Asia's political and economic power is likely to keep growing. Continued growth, however, will likely have several serious effects on the environment.



For example, there has been an extreme loss of forest cover in Southeast Asia due to over-harvesting of timber, and it is now threatening the region's economy and wildlife. Between 1990 and 2010, Southeast Asia's forests shrank in size by roughly 81.5 million acres, an area larger than Vietnam.

Governments and others organizations are trying to fight over-harvesting. Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) has developed a network of more than 600 community forest management agreements that bring local people and the government together. Organizations such as the Forest Stewardship Council and the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme enable forest industries to do their work in more sustainable and environmentally-friendly ways.

Perhaps the most serious threat to the environment is the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which causes global warming. Nowhere are the dangers of global warming more real than in Maldives, a country of hundreds of islands in the Indian Ocean. The effects of rising sea levels, which result from warmer temperatures, can already be felt there. A 2004 tsunami flooded the entire country, killing 82 people, displacing 12,000 people and inflicting \$375 million in damage.

The effects of global warming on Maldives will only become more painful and widespread in the coming decades. The Maldivian government has been trying to force the international community to pay attention to the problem. In 2009, President Mohamed Nasheed held the world's first underwater cabinet meeting in order to highlight the effects of climate change.