

East Asia

Land, Peoples and Languages of East Asia:

Geography:

Eastern Asia lies between the uplands of Central Asia and the Pacific. It is a region of highlands, deep valley and fertile plains. Its main rivers are the Yangtze (Chiang Jiang) River and Huang Ho (Yellow or Huang He) River. Along the eastern coast of Asia are the Kamchatka peninsula, really part of Northern Asia and a series of islands- Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu- form the country of Japan while farther south is the smaller island Taiwan (Formosa). The Korean Peninsula lies opposite Japan.

Western part of China is the least explored part of the world. The Tien Shan and the Sayan ranges forms its northern boundary and extends to the Great Himalayan ranges in the south where Mt Everest (29,028 ft.) is considered China's highest point. Mongolia lies within the northern bounds of China and Tibet together with the Chinese Turkestan(or western Chinese province of Turkestan.) lies within southwest China.

Mongolia and Sinkiang are areas of high, barren plateau, with some grasslands and desert regions like the Takla Makan and the Gobi desert. The Tibetan plateau is extremely high. It is an area of cold deserts, stark mountains and deep valleys. Near the Tien Shan Mountains in Sinkiang is the Turfan depression which is about 500ft. below sea level.

Japan is consists of some 4,000 islands forming an extended arc off the coast of East Asia. The 1,200-mile-long archipelago has 4 sizeable home islands. The northernmost is Hokkaido which is considered cold and underpopulated. Honshu, the main island, is the largest and most populated. To its south, lie the two islands of Shikoku, traditionally known as the Four Provinces and Kyushu, the Nine Provinces. The highest elevation is Mt. Fuji (12,390 ft.) and the longest river is the Shinano (370 km.)

Korea on the other hand, is a peninsula suspended from the Asian mainland at its northern end (Manchuria and Siberia) and projecting southward into the waters of the western Pacific. This 600-mile-long peninsula faces eastward across the Sea of Japan(East Sea) The northern zone of the nation of the nation, occupied successively by Soviet military forces and a communist dictatorship since 1945, comprises 122,370 square km. while the Republic of Korea to the south is slightly smaller with 98,447 square km.

China is the ancient source and today the central bulk of one of the great areas of civilization, which in recent years have come to be called as East Asia. When Europeans first traveled far to the east to reach Cathay, Japan and the Indies, they naturally gave these distant regions the general name "Far East" For the people who lived there, however, it is neither "East" nor "West" and certainly not "Far". A better term for the area is "East Asia", which does not imply the outdated notion that Europe is the center of civilization.

East Asia can be defined in three ways: in geographic terms as the area east of the greatmountain and desert barrier that bisects Asia; in racial terms as the habitat of

Mongoloid man; and in cultural terms as the domain of a civilization rooted in that of ancient China.

Ecosystem:

One determining influence on East Asian civilization has been its relative isolation from the other great civilizations of mankind. Separated by great distances and formidable mountains and deserts, it developed distinctive cultural patterns that have been retained in large part until today.

The home of the early East Asian civilization in North China was very much more isolated than were these other early centers. On one side stretched the seemingly boundless Pacific. On the other side rose the tremendous central massif of Asia- the Himalayas, Tibetan Plateau, more than ten thousand feet high, and the huge mountain chains that radiate from this roof of the world.

Climate also contributed to East Asia's distinctiveness. The Climate of East Asia, like that of India, is determined largely by the great land mass of Asia. In winter the air over Central Asia, far removed from the ameliorating influence of water, becomes very cold and heavy, flowing outward and bringing cool, dry weather to the southern and eastern fringes of the continent. In summer the reverse takes place. The air over Central Asia warms up and rises, and moist oceanic air rushes in to take its place, dropping a heavy load of water on the continental fringes.

As a result of these monsoon winds, most of East Asia have ample rainfall during the best growing months. This distinctive climate gave East Asia an agricultural pattern quite different from that of the West. Many of the principal crops and animals of East Asia, notably rice, soy bean, chicken water buffalo and the pig seem to have come from hot and humid Southeast Asia. In the more intensive agriculture of East Asia domesticated animals were used less and manpower more. The chief cereal of most of East Asia has been rice which grows best in flooded fields and is well adapted to the hot, wet summers of this area.

The monsoonal climate in East Asia brings hot and rainy summers, giving rise to a great variety of temperate and tropical vegetation. China has the most varied vegetation of any country of the world, with about 30,000 species, excluding mushrooms and mosses. About two-thirds of Japan's total area is forested (roughly 10 percent of China is under forest cover); sizeable tracts remain untouched. One reason for this difference is the traditional respect that the Japanese have had for their scenery.

North of the Yangtze River, much of China was once covered by primeval deciduous forest, most of which has been removed to create farmland. A wild growth of trees and shrubs survives throughout the cultivated areas and parklike tree growths and stands of bamboos are widespread. The original forest cover included 60 different genera of tall trees which includes: oak and maple, linden, chestnut, hornbeam, magnolia, tulip tree, camphor tree, cedar, sweet gum, catalpa and lianas(vines). Palm trees are found throughout the South China, South Korea, as well as in the southern part of Japan.

East Asia also has endemic kinds of deer. The Siberian tiger, originally native to southeastern Siberia, Manchuria and Korea has spread southward through eastern China into all of Southeast Asia and Northern India. The giant panda inhabits the lower mountain margin of China bordering Tibet; the lesser panda- a member of the racoon

family- is a Himalayan animal. The large rivers of China have a rich fish life, among which is the paddlefish of North America. Another fresh water animal is the giant salamander, found in Japanese waters.

The People: Racial and Linguistic Groupings:

The area from the great Asian barrier eastward is for the most part the domain of the Mongoloid man. One of the predecessors of modern man in East Asia is the Peking Man, whose skeletal remains were discovered in a cave near Peking in 1927. Living about 400,000 BCE, he had tools, used fire and was a hunter. He also had certain physical features that are more characteristic of Mongoloid man than of the other modern races. More recently a still earlier precursor of Mongoloid man, dating back some 500,000 BCE, was the Zhoukoudian man (Choukoutien).

When the curtain rises on the first act of recorded history in East Asia, the Mongoloids have been in solid block covering almost the whole area. Their relative shortness of limb, which facilitates the retention of body heat, and their fleshy, narrow eyelids, which protects the eyes from snow glare are thought by some to be a result of an original cold habitat in Northeast Asia.

The range of skin color among Mongoloids, from very light in the North to dark brown in southern areas is clearly a product of the environment. The other distinctive features of Mongoloid man are straight black hair, relatively flat faces and dark eyes. The peripheral areas of East Asia contain many survivors of non-Mongoloid races. The most interesting of these are the **Ainu**, at present restricted to the northern extremities of Japan, who show certain traits of Caucasoid man. For example, they have considerable facial and body hair, a feature notably lacking in most Mongoloid.

The Sinitic Languages:

The significant human divisions within East Asia as in the West, are primarily linguistic rather than racial. The largest linguistic division in East Asia is the Sinitic (or Sino-Tibetan) family of languages, which is comparable to the great Indo-European family that spreads over most of Europe and most of the Islamic and Indian zones of civilization. The Sinitic family of languages occupies a very solid block in the center of East Asia, covering all of China proper, Tibet, Thailand, Laos, most of Burma, and perhaps Vietnam. Except for the Tibetans, all the member of this language group appear to have been farmers since the Neolithic period, sedentary occupants of their part of the world, contrasting with the early Indo-Europeans, who were often nomadic, herding peoples and therefore wandered far afield.

Within the Sinitic group, Chinese is by far the largest linguistic subdivision. Chinese-speaking people have been in North China since the earliest recorded times. They have spread by emigration and also have assimilated culturally and linguistically allied groups. In time they came to occupy almost the whole of China proper and most recently Manchuria, much of inner Mongolia, parts of Sinkiang, most of Taiwan, as well as Chinese sectors in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, where Chinese now constitute more than 40 percent of the population, and Singapore, where they are the great majority.

In the course of this expansion the Chinese language divided into several mutually unintelligible languages, as distinct from one another. Chinese proper, which has been called Mandarin, is spoken as a mother tongue by more people than any other language in the world. Its various dialects cover all North China and most of Central and Southwest China. Along the coast from Shanghai southward to the Vietnam border, the Chinese-type tongues, usually miscalled “the Chinese dialects,” are all quite distinct from Mandarin. There are the Wu “dialect” of the Shanghai area; the Min “dialect” of Fukien, subdivided into the Fukienese and Amoy “dialect”; Hakka in several widely scattered areas; and finally, Cantonese.

These various coastal “dialects” are also the languages of Taiwan and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Cantonese is the language of most Chinese communities in the United States. In addition to the Chinese languages, there are several other groups of Sinitic tongues spoken by peoples in Southwest China and contiguous areas. The Tibeto-Burmese group includes the Tibetan dialects, Burmese and several others. The Thai group of Thailand and Laos, and Vietnamese, the language of modern Vietnam, are usually included among the Sinitic languages.

Altaic and Other Language Groups:

North of the Sinitic bloc is a large group of Mongoloid peoples who speak languages of a family as distinct from the Sinitic tongues as from the Indo-European. This linguistic family has been named Altaic after the Altai Mountains in Mongolia. These peoples, like early Indo-Europeans but in sharp contrast with their sedentary neighbors to the south, were nomadic, horse-riding sheep herders. They have moved about a great deal; indeed, some have wandered entirely out of East Asia.

Turkish, Mongolian and Tungusic are usually considered to be the three major Altaic language groups. Turkish-speaking groups now inhabit Turkey and the greater part of Central Asia, although in the course of their wanderings, they absorbed a sometimes preponderant quantity of Caucasoid blood. The Mongols occupy much of Mongolia and many isolated pockets in Central and West Asia. Tungusic-speaking tribes, such as the Manchus, once constituted the chief population of Manchuria and the Siberian areas to the north. Since Korean and Japanese show close structural resemblances to the definitely Altaic languages, the Koreans and the Japanese maybe two eastern extensions of Altaic-speaking peoples into predominately agricultural areas..

A third great linguistic family of East Asia is the Austranesian, which includes the languages of Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and the tongues of the aborigines of Taiwan. The Khmer of Cambodia probably represents still another linguistic family.