ARTICLE

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Asia: Human Geography

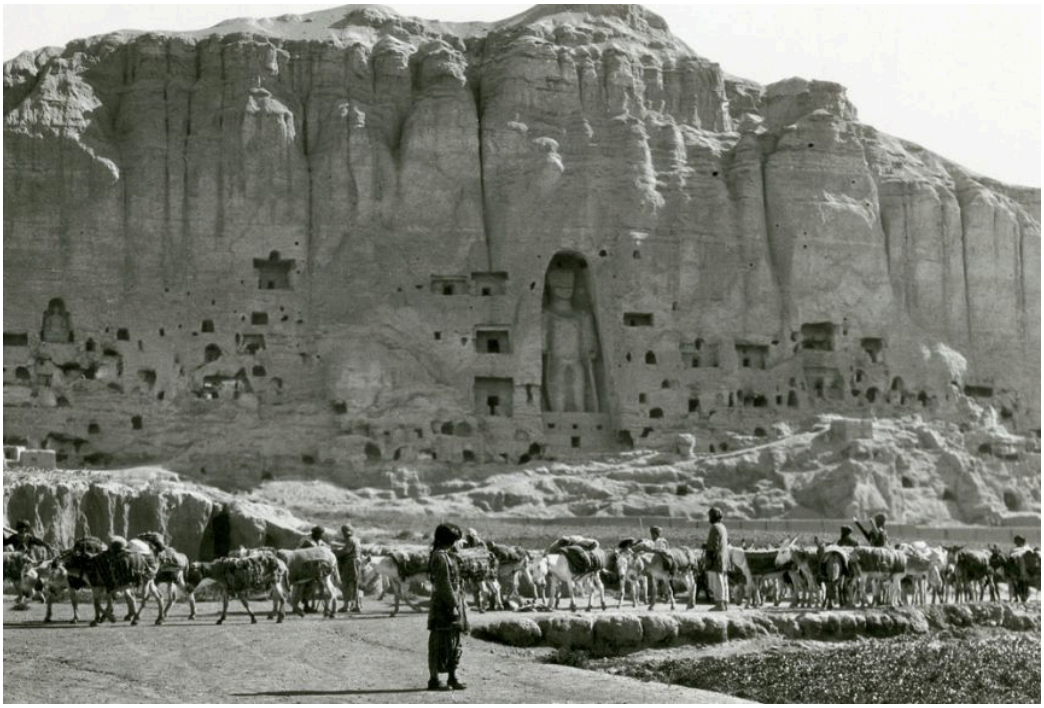
Asia is the largest of the world's continents and home to the world's oldest civilizations.

GRADES

6 - 12+

SUBJECTS

Arts and Music, Geography, Human Geography, Social Studies, World History



1/9

PHOTOGRAPH

Buddha Statue, Bamian, Afghanistan

"If one sits on the head of the Great Buddha and looks across the green valley, framed by the arch of the grotto and dotted with fort-like manors that are almost tiny villages, he has a view and a sensation of rare beauty."—Maynard Owen Williams National Geographic magazine, October, 1931

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAYNARD OWEN WILLIAMS

BACKGROUND INFO VOCABULARY

Learning materials

MAPS

- Explore Asia in National Geographic MapMaker

Asia is the largest of the world's continents, covering approximately 30 percent of the Earth's land area. It is also the world's most populous continent, with roughly 60 percent of the total population.

The geographic term "Asia" was originally used by ancient Greeks to describe the civilizations east of their empire. Ancient Asian peoples, however, saw themselves as a varied and diverse mix of cultures—not a

collective group. Today, the term “Asia” is used as a cultural concept, while subregion classifications describe the distinct geopolitical identities of the continent. These classifications are Western Asia, Central Asia, Southern Asia, Eastern Asia, Southeastern Asia and Northern Asia.

Today, Asia is home to the citizens of Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste (East Timor), Türkiye, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen.

Asia’s physical geography, environment and resources, and human geography can be considered separately.

Asia is home to the world’s earliest civilizations. Its indigenous cultures pioneered many practices that have been integral to societies for centuries such as agriculture, city planning and religion. The social and political geography of the continent continues to inform and influence the rest of the world.

Cultural Geography

Historic Cultures

The Fertile Crescent is considered the birthplace of agriculture. Civilizations developed along a series of watersheds, starting with the Nile River valley

and arching up the Mediterranean coast, eastward toward Iraq and southward along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers until reaching the Persian Gulf.

Nomadic peoples settled along the lush river banks to harvest wild wheat and barley, becoming the world's first farmers. This represented a fundamental shift in the lifestyle of early humans, who until that point had survived by following their food as hunter-gatherers. Through agriculture, people learned to sustain themselves by manipulating the natural environment.

As more tribes settled and worked together, important agricultural innovations were developed, such as the wheel, irrigation and hand tools. Farmers used these tools to tame wild grasses, such as wheat, barley and lentils. Farmers also domesticated animals such as cows, sheep and pigs.

Agriculture made cities and civilizations possible by producing enough food for the community so not everyone had to provide for themselves. People not engaged in agriculture had time to develop writing, religion, taxation and trade. For instance, the cuneiform writing system has preserved the history of the metropolis of Ur, part of the Sumerian civilization, which developed around 2100 BCE.

The Indus Valley was another hotspot of early civilization. From 2600 BCE t 1700 BCE, settlements developed on the flood plain of the Indus River, stretching over a million square kilometers from northwestern India throug Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The cities of the Indus Valley civilization established early forms of urban planning and construction. Buildings were well-organized and built out of durable materials such as brick and stone. Cities contained docks along the river, granaries, temples, residences, and warehouses. Cities were often surrounded by high walls, which offered protection from both natural disasters, such as floods, and invading armies.

Placing a high priority on hygiene, cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro (both in modern-day Pakistan) developed drainage systems, wells, and water-storage systems that were the most advanced of their times. For example, wastewater was directed from a home's bathhouse to covered drains that lined major streets. Houses only opened to inner courtyards and smaller lanes. This privacy radically reduced the spread of disease. These efficient and sanitary systems greatly influenced future urban development.

The spread of religion is an important example of how cultural practices expand into distant territories through a variety of direct and indirect actions. Buddhism, for example, has its roots in Nepal and India in the late 6th century BCE. Well-established maritime and land trade routes allowed Buddhist thought to spread to other Asian territories. Missionaries joined Buddhist merchants on their ships and caravans, carrying with them religious manuscripts and images.

Buddhist missionaries remained in market cities for extended periods of time, facilitating the exchange of ideas and symbols. Today, Buddhism is th majority religion throughout most of eastern Asia, from Japan in the north to Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos in the south.

Art played an important role in the spread of Buddhism. Sculpture, paintings, and icons depicting Buddhist concepts and deities were easily understood and adopted by cultures outside Nepal and India. As Buddhist art was created in these specific cultural styles, the religion took on local significance in each region. Buddhism flourishes in part because it allowed its practitioners to express their devotion through creative means.

Asia's rich cultural heritage has modernized, along with its developing economies. The continent's growing middle class and increased investment from abroad support this modernization. Asian film, fashion and music highlight the relationship between historic cultures and contemporary markets.

India is the world's largest producer of films, producing more than 2,500 movies every year. Film production is so widespread in India that it is categorized regionally. Areas such as Mumbai, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu produce distinct films that reflect regional language and culture. Government and private industry have invested heavily in India's film industry, and today more than 30 film production companies exist in the country. The world's largest film studio, Ramoji Film City, is in the city of Hyderabad. It offers more than 500 set locations and has the space to produce 60 films at the same time.

Indian cinema is a major export. The largest film industry is centered around Mumbai, and nicknamed Bollywood. Bollywood films screen in more than 90 countries around the world, and earn millions of dollars, especially in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore. The growing

number of Indians working abroad has opened up new markets for Indian films. These so-called non-resident Indians (NRIs) account for roughly 12 percent of a film's total revenue.

Central Asia's tradition of textile-making is enjoying a period of revival in such countries as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. After the fall of the Soviet Union, these former Soviet republics used their cultural history t help define a new national identity. Vibrant hand-dyed textiles were an important part of this cultural tradition, especially in Uzbekistan. *Suzani* textiles played a central role in Uzbek family ceremonies and denoted a family's status.

Today, workers dye, weave, and embroider Uzbek *suzani* textiles by hand after a long period of industrial production. Craftswomen are updating traditional designs and using natural dyes, such as indigo, walnut and pomegranate, to create eye-catching pieces for the contemporary marketplace. Uzbek suzanis are sold internationally. Fashion and home décor companies from around the world have adopted *suzani* designs into their products. In order to support the growing demand, craftsmen's associations and nongovernmental organizations have been created to promote Uzbek textiles

South Korean pop music, nicknamed K-pop, integrates traditional Korean song with contemporary pop, hip-hop, electronic and R&B sounds. K-pop has developed into a pop culture phenomenon in Asia and abroad. Musical producers invest heavily in girl groups, boy bands and soloists. Performers are followed by millions of fans, mostly Asian young adults, who have adopted their style and fashion trends.

K-pop producers and artists have invested heavily in broadening their appeal abroad. Korean artists tour with international headliners and work with producers such as American rappers Kanye West and will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas. They also use Internet platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, to reach a larger audience. As a result, K-pop has a strong following in the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe.

Political Geography

Political geography is the internal and external relationships between a continent's various governments, citizens, and territories. Asian governments and citizens have created and responded to political and social change in ways that have profoundly affected these relationships at both the local and international level. As the continent continues to increase its political and economic prominence, its policy decisions will hold greater weight for the global community.

Historic Issues

One of the oldest and most intensely debated political disputes continues to be negotiated in the Levant, an area in the eastern Mediterranean. The Levant, part of the Middle East, has been continuously occupied for thousands of years by the historic cultures of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel.

The Levant is sometimes called "The Holy Land." This small region is spiritually important to followers of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths. These are the three most populous and influential monotheistic religions in

the world. All three faiths trace their origins to the Jewish patriarch Abraham. For this reason, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are known as the "Abrahamic religions."

The religious conflict between Abrahamic religions in the Levant has endured 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.

The most recent conflict in the Levant is between Israel and neighboring nations. Israel, the only Jewish-majority nation in the world, was established in 1948. Prior to 1948, the area was a British colony called Palestine. Many non-Jewish natives identify as Palestinians. Neighboring states—including Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt—accepted Palestinian immigrants and rejected the new Israeli government.

Major wars plague the region, including the Arab-Israeli War (1948), the Suez Crisis (1956), the Six Day War (1967), and the Yom Kippur War (1973). Smaller conflicts, including incidents of terrorism, are associated with Palestinian uprisings, or intifadas. The First Intifada, which included nonviolent protests as well as armed assaults, took place in the late 1980s. The Second Intifada took place between 2000 and 2005.

The conflict in the Levant has resulted in Israel creating two Palestinian territories (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) within its boundaries. Treaties, such as the Camp David Accords (which established a lasting peac treaty between Egypt and Israel) have attempted to negotiate a lasting

peace in the Levant.

The colonization of Southeast Asia is another example of how historic political geography can influence an entire region. Colonialism is foreign political rule imposed on a people. Chinese, Japanese, and European colonization of Southeast Asia lasted for more than 1,000 years. China, for instance, was the ruling power in Vietnam from about 110 BCE to 900 CE.

Colonial powers from Europe, the United States and Japan imposed their rule on Southeast Asian peoples from the 1500s to the mid-1940s. While these powers had distinct motives, they were generally looking to expand their territory, increase trade, import cheap raw materials, and impose their cultural practices.

The Dutch and British established extremely powerful companies that oversaw trade and labor in their respective colonies. The Dutch East India Company, based in Indonesia, had the power to print its own money and engage in war. They enforced harsh labor practices on local peoples, who worked to collect lucrative spices and extract precious metals. These resources were then sold in Europe.

Spanish and Portuguese colonists spread the Roman Catholic faith by converting indigenous peoples, especially in the Philippines. The French used their military to maintain control of their colonies, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

The countries of Southeast Asia are now independent. However, their economies, politics, and culture still maintain aspects of the colonial period.

For instance, the Vietnamese language is written with the Roman alphabet not the glyphs, ideograms or indigenous alphabets of neighboring Asian nations. This is because the written Vietnamese language was established by the French, who use a Roman alphabet.

As with the colonial period, Asia was deeply affected by World War II and its aftermath. Japan was the most devastated Asian country in terms of loss of life and physical destruction. However, it also experienced a record period of economic growth after the war. Investment from the United States and innovative economic restructuring by the Japanese government stimulated this growth.

Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry coordinated partnerships, known as *keiretsu*, between manufacturers, suppliers, distributors and banks in order to streamline industry. The ministry also created a strong export economy, focusing on technology industries that still define Japan's global image. Capital was invested in Japan's infrastructure, especially in efficient transportation systems, communications and technology. Japan's intense public and private investment increased its gross domestic product (GDP) from $91 billion in 1965 to more than $1 trillion in 1980.

Current Issues

India's and China's economic growth has been profound in the last 20 years Both countries have removed government controls, increased foreign trade, and built strong export-based economies. This economic growth has had both positive and negative effects.

China has the world's fastest-growing economy, increasing nearly 10 percent 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 of this growth, wages have increased rapidly, giving Chinese workers a better standard of living. More Chinese people have access to excellent health care, electricity, and education. China has a strong presence in international politics and influences important debates, such as those surrounding terrorism and climate change. China has used its newfound wealth to invest around the world. China has invested billions of dollars in Nigeria, for instance, to extract oil. Predicted to be the world's largest economy in the coming decades, China's economic decisions will greatly affect how and where future development occurs around the globe.

But China's rapid growth has caused a number of social, environmental, and economic problems. Rapid industrial growth in the cities has impoverished rural workers, who must migrate to congested urban areas to find jobs. Industrial activity has put stress on the country's energy and transportation systems and degraded air, water, and soil quality. Industrial growth also has major implications for global climate change, as China is the world's largest producer of carbon dioxide emissions.

India's growth has been drastically different from China's. India is a democracy, while China is a totalitarian state. This means that social and political reforms are debated more openly in India, and change is often more difficult because power resides in coalitions instead of one political party.

Unlike China, India's growth is largely a result of its rapidly

growing service industry—not its manufacturing sector. In particular, India has become a major exporter of information technology services. Its telecommunications industry, which focuses on phone and Internet services, added more than 200 million subscribers in 2010. The country also hosts seven of the world's top technology outsourcing companies, which rely 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. Much like China, India's urban infrastructure and global influence have also improved.

Despite this economic growth, India remains socioeconomically divided. India still has the world's largest concentration of people living in extreme poverty—below $1.25 per day. The difference in revenue between India's more industrialized states and its poorer agricultural states has widened substantially. Much like China, India's urban infrastructure, education and health systems are having difficulty adjusting to the large number of poor, rural migrants moving into cities.

In Asia's Arab region, conservative governments are under pressure from their citizens and the international community to enable political, economic, and social reform. While authoritarian rulers control the majority of these countries, their citizens broadly support democracy. In the so-called "Arab Spring" of 2011, social and political groups across the region staged armed protests calling for democratic reform. Governments have responded to these protests with both military force and political compromise. Syria and Jordan exemplify this political change in Arab Asia.

Protesters in Syria called for the legalization of political parties, the removal of corrupt officials, and the repeal of Emergency Law, which allows arrests without charge. In response to the protests, the Syrian government launched military campaigns to repress protesters. These campaigns have killed thousands of people. Hundreds of Syrians have been jailed. The international community has responded by placing economic and political sanctions on the Syrian government.

Jordanians have staged weekly protests against corruption, rising prices, poverty, and unemployment. King Abdullah has responded to these protests by replacing his prime minister and forming the National Dialogue Committee. Made up of both government officials and opposition leaders, the committee is in charge of drafting reforms, including new laws for elections and political parties.

The implications of this complicated and often violent process of political reform are still too early to determine in Syria, Jordan and other Asian states that have joined a common democratic cause. What is certain is that these changes will increase public participation in the political process.

Future Issues

Asia's growing political and economic prominence will continue to place stress on both local and global processes. Great focus has been placed on how Asia's increased development has negatively affected the environment. National governments and international organizations are working to protect local natural resources and the broader global climate.

The extreme loss of forest cover in Southeast Asia due to overharvesting of timber threatens the region's economy and biodiversity, as well as the world's carbon budget. Between 1990 and 2010, Southeast Asia's forests contracted in size by roughly 33 million hectares (81.5 million acres), an area larger than Vietnam. By 2020, these forests are expected to shrink by an additional 16 million hectares (39.5 million acres).

This loss would mean an additional 8.72 gigatons of carbon dioxide would enter the world's atmosphere. It would destroy forests with important ecological value, such as Indonesia's lowland tropical forests. Furthermore, the loss would dramatically decrease the productivity of the region's wood industries, a main economic generator for many Southeast Asian countries.

International organizations and regional and national governmental bodies are enforcing sustainable forestry practices in order to combat forest degradation. The Cambodian government, for example, has encouraged the planting of fast-growing trees, modernized wood-processing equipment, and banned the export of many types of logs. Myanmar (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 pursue sustainable development. Roughly 3.5 percent of Southeast Asia's total forest area was sustainably certified in 2010.

Maldives, a country of hundreds of islands and atolls in the Indian Ocean, symbolizes the current and future effects of global climate change. Rising to only 2.3 meters (7.7 feet) above sea level at its highest point, Maldives has

already felt the effects of rising sea levels. A 2004 tsunami flooded the entire country, killing 82 people, displacing 12,000, and inflicting $375 million in damage.

The effects of global warming on Maldives will be more widespread during the coming decades. Along with rising sea levels, the country will be susceptible to coastal erosion, higher storm surges, and loss of biodiversity. This will drastically affect the country's tourism-based economy. A loss of beachfront property coupled with warmer winters in the Northern Hemisphere would keep residents of Europe and North America from visiting the islands.

The Maldivian government has taken decisive steps to curtail the effects of climate change, commanding the attention of the international community. Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom supported the construction of the artificial island of Hulhumalé, which now houses a hospital, school, government buildings, and residences for 50,000 people. Hulhumalé sits on ground several meters higher than the rest of the country.

In 2009, Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed held the world's first underwater cabinet meeting in order to highlight the effects of climate change. At a table 6 meters (20 feet) below the water's surface, Maldivian leaders signed a document calling on all countries to cut their carbon dioxide emissions. President Nasheed also agreed to make Maldives the world's first carbon-neutral country by switching entirely to wind and solar energy within a decade. These acts have demonstrated that those who affect and are affected by climate change need to take decisive steps to create lasting environmental improvements.