A History of East Asia
From the Origins of Civilization to the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction: What Is East Asia?

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, three of the world’s five largest national economies were in Asia, and the second and third largest, China and Japan, were both specifically East Asian.¹ This represents an astonishing reversal of the situation that had prevailed a century earlier, when a handful of Western European powers, together with the United States and Russia (and with Japan already as an emerging junior partner), dominated much of the planet economically, militarily, and politically. As late as the mid-twentieth century, East Asia still remained largely preindustrial, often bitterly impoverished, and desperately war ravaged. Even Japan, which had succeeded in asserting itself as a regionally significant modern power by the early 1900s, was left crushed and in ruins by the end of the Second World War in 1945. A fresh start was required in Japan, which gained momentum beginning in the 1960s. Since that time, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and eventually even the People’s Republic of China have all joined Japan — though each in characteristically different ways — in achieving dramatic levels of modern economic takeoff. Beyond any doubt, the economic rise of East Asia has been one of the most important stories of recent world history.

A persuasive argument can be made, moreover, that rather than representing some fundamentally unprecedented departure from past experience, the recent economic rise of East Asia is really more of a return to normal. For much of human history, China — the largest single component of East Asia — enjoyed one of the most developed economies on earth. Especially after the disintegration of the western Roman Empire, for a thousand years beginning around 500, China was probably the wealthiest country in the world, not merely in aggregate total but also in per capita terms. Even as late as 1800, as the Industrial Revolution was beginning in Great Britain, China is still estimated to have accounted for a larger share (33.3%) of total world production than all of Europe, including Russia, combined (28.1%).²

It is well known that such crucial technologies as gunpowder, paper, and printing were all invented in China. Less well known is that paper and printing actually had a significant impact on China long before those technologies transformed Europe.
Paper and printing helped to make books, and therefore also knowledge, relatively widely available in premodern China. It has been seriously suggested that China may have even produced more books than all the rest of the world combined prior to about 1500.³

Although, when compared to China, the other countries of premodern East Asia were each relatively quite small in size – in 1800, China’s population may have been roughly 300 million, Japan’s perhaps 30 million, and Korea’s 8 million – each made its own notable contributions and produced unique variants of East Asian civilization. Korea, for example, pioneered the development of metal moveable-type printing by at least 1234 (although moveable type made of baked clay rather than metal had been experimented with in China as early as the 1040s). Japan, remarkably enough, became perhaps the first non-Western society in the world to successfully modernize. Despite its relatively small size, in the modern era, Japan in many ways eclipsed China to become regionally dominant in East Asia, and for much of the late twentieth century Japan was the second most important economic power in the entire world, after only the United States.

Even when East Asia was at its relative poorest and weakest in the early 1900s, it continued to be globally significant. World War II, for example, began in East Asia, at a bridge near Beijing in 1937. Today there should no longer be any doubt of the region’s importance. China is a major rising world power, and although it remains poor and underdeveloped in per capita terms, parts of what is sometimes called Greater China already compare favorably with almost anywhere else on the planet. Hong Kong, for example, which is now a semiautonomous region of the People’s Republic of China, today enjoys a per capita income above that of such highly developed countries as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Switzerland, or indeed all but a handful of the world’s most prosperous lands. Taiwan and Singapore are both predominantly ethnic Chinese places that have also achieved notable economic success. Singapore now even has a higher per capita income than the United States.⁴ Japan, although it may have recently already been surpassed by China in terms of the total real size of its economy (measured in terms of purchasing power parity), probably still remains the world’s second most fully mature industrialized economy. South Korea is a spectacular example of a modern Pacific Rim success story, and North Korea, while decidedly less prosperous than the south, as an unpredictable and sometimes belligerent nuclear power nonetheless compels global attention.

East Asia is therefore a critically important region of the world; but what is East Asia? What makes it East Asian? Asia as a whole is actually not a very coherent cultural geographic entity. The concept of Asia is one that we have inherited from the ancient Greeks, who divided the world broadly into two parts: Europe and Asia. For the Greeks, however, this original Asia was primarily just the Persian Empire. As the scope of Asia expanded beyond Persia and what we now call Asia Minor, it came to include so many different cultures and peoples that the label was drained of most of its significance. By the late 1700s, for example, two-thirds of the world’s total population and 80 percent of the world’s production were all located in Asia. This Asia was nothing less than the entire Old World minus Europe. If
Asia in its entirety is not a very meaningful term, however, the word can still serve a useful purpose as a terminological anchor for certain geographic subregions, such as South Asia and East Asia, which do have more historical coherence. 5

Even these subregions, of course, must still be somewhat arbitrarily defined. Premodern East Asians certainly did not think of themselves as either Asians or East Asians. Today the U.S. State Department lumps Southeast Asia and even Oceania together with East Asia under its Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Geographic regions can be defined in many ways, and a variety of labels applied to them to suit different purposes. In historical terms, however, and especially in consideration of shared premodern culture, East Asia is most usefully defined as that region of the world that came to extensively use the Chinese writing system, and absorbed through those written words many of the ideas and values of what we call Confucianism, much of the associated legal and political structure of government, and certain specifically East Asian forms of Buddhism. It is a fundamental premise of this book that East Asia really is a culturally and historically coherent region, deserving of serious attention as a whole, and not just as a random group of individual countries or some arbitrary lines on a map.

At the same time, East Asia is also part of a universally shared human experience. In the current age of globalization, of course, the planet today is especially closely interconnected – but global human ties actually go back to the very beginning of human existence. Such interconnections always remained reasonably active, particularly within the Eurasian Old World. At the opposite extreme of focus from this global perspective, East Asia itself (like Western Europe) is also composed of several independent countries, each of which in turn contains various internal levels and types of subdivision.

Specifically, East Asia today includes what is sometimes called Greater China (the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and somewhat more peripherally, Singapore), Japan, and Korea. In addition, Vietnam presents a marginal case, because it occupies a transitional zone that straddles both East and Southeast Asia. Vietnam did have significant historical ties with China. One book about Vietnam published in the mid-twentieth century was actually even titled Little China. 6 At that time, however, Vietnam was perhaps most commonly referred to as Indochina, a composite designation (reflecting both Indian and Chinese influences over a mosaic of indigenous cultures) that appropriately conveys something of Vietnam’s true hyphenated cultural complexity. Because Vietnam is typically included in surveys of Southeast Asia, it will not be comprehensively covered in this book.

East Asia has an historical coherence as a civilization that is roughly equivalent to what we think of as Western civilization, with the Bronze Age prototype that first emerged in high antiquity in the region we now call China providing approximately the same sort of core historical legacy for the modern countries of China, Japan, and Korea that ancient Greece and Rome left for modern Italy, France, Britain, Germany, and what we think of somewhat vaguely and imperfectly as “the West.” This volume, while paying due attention to both the larger global interconnections and to local differences, will attempt to present a relatively integrated history of
East Asia as a whole. It will also, somewhat unusually, focus relatively closely on that period in Middle Antiquity (beginning roughly in the third century BC) when a coherent East Asian cultural region that included China, Japan, and Korea first emerged.

It should be emphasized, however, that no such “civilization” is a permanently fixed and isolated concrete reality. What we call civilizations are merely abstractions that people imagine around certain historical continuities and connections that someone has decided are significant – they have no hard reality. Borders are always permeable, all cultures interact and exchange both artifacts and ideas, and multiple nested layers of distinction can be discerned everywhere within what is ultimately a single global human community.

In the present age of globalization, moreover, all such regional civilizational distinctions are to some extent blurring. Since the twentieth century, many of the features that made East Asia East Asian, such as the unique writing system, Confucianism, and traditional-style monarchies, have been sometimes quite self-consciously challenged, rejected, or abandoned in the name of either (or both) universal modernization or local nationalism. The various nations of modern East Asia are today, in some ways, both more different from each other and, at the same time, paradoxically, more like every other successful modern country on the planet than may have been the case (at the level of the educated elite anyway) in premodern times. Yet the legacy of the old vocabulary does live on. South Korea, for example, is simultaneously a thoroughly modern, Westernized country with especially close ties to the United States, which is also sometimes called the “most Confucian” country in Asia! The very fact of dynamic modern economic success being so disproportionately concentrated in the East Asian region by itself suggests also that there may still be something distinctive about East Asia.

If East Asia remains a moderately coherent cultural region even today, on the other hand, East Asia has also always been internally diverse. Not only are the major nations of East Asia often sharply different from each other but each nation also contains within itself cascading layers of internal differences. And East Asia has changed greatly over time, too, most obviously and abruptly in the modern period but also throughout history. There was no timeless, traditional continuity in premodern East Asia.

As an illustration of this ongoing process of change, we might ask ourselves a surprising question: how old is China? It is often supposed that Chinese civilization is the oldest continuously existing civilization in the world, having emerged out of the late Stone Age (the Neolithic), flowered into the full glory of Bronze Age civilization beginning as early as 2000 BCE, and survived thereafter without interruption to the present day. In fact, there is some truth to this popular story. Though it may be difficult to pinpoint many aspects of late Stone Age culture that can still be observed today (although silk, a preference for pork among meats, and the cultivation of rice could be cited as conspicuously long-standing cultural markers), it is highly significant that the very first writing samples to be found in the area of China, dating to approximately 1200 BCE, were already written in
an archaic version of the same Chinese language, and the same Chinese writing system, that is still used today. In this sense, China is very old indeed.

The earliest books written in that Chinese language, produced over the course of the last thousand years BCE, formed the nucleus of a deeply cherished literary canon that remained continuously fundamental to what we call Chinese civilization, at least until the start of the twentieth century. During the course of that same formative last millennium BCE, a discernable consciousness of being Chinese (called Huaxia), in opposition to neighboring alien peoples such as the Rong, Di, Man, and Yi, may also be said to have emerged. Thus the Warring States of the late Zhou era (403–221 BCE), though each were independent sovereign countries, could also all be described as being different Chinese kingdoms surrounded by various non-Chinese peoples.

After the Qin unification of these Warring States into the first empire in 221 BCE, an enduring ideal of unity under a single centralized imperial government was also firmly planted. Although China's subsequent remarkable record of enduring political unity is sometimes explained in terms of presumed ethnic and cultural homogeneity (it is too easy to assume that the Chinese are naturally unified because, after all, "they are all Chinese"), it may well really have been more the other way around: China's present-day relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity is the end product of millennia of political unity. Certainly the early Chinese Empire's population was quite mixed.

Even after that first imperial unification in 221 BCE, however, China continued to change. There have been roughly eighty historically recognized premodern dynasties in the place we call China (although only about a dozen are considered to have been truly major dynasties). Each dynasty was in some sense a separate state. Many had identifiable non-Chinese rulers. In addition, China has also undergone repeated periods of division since that first imperial unification, and even during periods of great unity, fashions still changed. As Guo Maoqian (fl. 1264–1269) observed in the thirteenth century, "folk songs and national customs also have a new sound each generation."

Premodern China was far from static.

If China can be called an ancient civilization, at the other extreme, it is also possible to argue that the very concept of a Chinese "nation" did not even exist until about 1900. It is generally believed that the nation-state is an invention of the modern West, and certainly the word nation (minzu, designating "a people" rather than a country or state) was imported into the Chinese language only at the end of the nineteenth century. China first attempted to reconfigure itself as a modern Western-style nation-state only with the overthrow of the empire and establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. Moreover, the specific country that most of us think of today simply as "China," which is more formally known as the People's Republic of China (PRC), dates only from 1949. Nor was this merely a new name for an old reality: in the entire history of the planet, there can have been few revolutionary ruptures that were intended to be as total and sweeping as that of the New China following its 1949 "liberation." In hindsight, of course, many of the revolutionary changes imposed after 1949 did not prove to be very
durable, and in recent years, there has even been some revival of older traditions; yet the PRC still does mark a sharp break in the continuity of history.

Even the word China is itself, literally, not Chinese. The English word China probably derives from the Sanskrit (Indian) Cīna, which in turn may have derived from the name of the important northwestern frontier Chinese kingdom and first imperial dynasty, Qin. Not only did the Chinese people not call themselves Chinese, it could be argued that there was no precise native-language equivalent term at all, at least before modern times. One distinguished scholar has even gone so far as to claim that the concept and word China simply “did not exist, except as an alien fiction.”

To be sure, the ancient Chinese did already have some reasonably coherent self-conceptions. The names by which early Chinese people identified themselves were frequently those of specific kingdoms or imperial dynasties, such as Qin, Chu, or Han, but there were also a few more all-encompassing ancient Chinese-language words that we might reasonably translate into English as “China” or “Chinese,” such as Huaxia 华夏, which has already been mentioned, and Zhongguo 中國. Even these, however, were not perfectly synonymous with the English word China. Initially, Huaxia seems to have been a somewhat elastic cultural marker, referring neither to race nor ethnicity nor any particular country but rather to “civilized,” settled, literate, agricultural populations adhering to common ritual standards, in contrast to “barbarians.”

Zhongguo — “the central country” (or “countries,” since the Chinese language does not make a grammatical distinction between singular and plural), which is often more quaintly rendered as the “Middle Kingdom” — in a somewhat similar manner also contrasts the civilized countries in the center against an outer fringe of barbarians. Initially this term Zhongguo may have really referred only to the royal capital city. Later, during the Warring States period, Zhongguo definitely had to be understood as plural because there were multiple “central” countries then. This term Zhongguo long remained more of a geographic description rather than a proper name, referring simply to the countries in what was imagined to be the center of the world: the Central Plain area of north China. Even as late as the third and fourth centuries CE, some five hundred years after the first imperial unification in 221 BCE, the entire southern half of what we would think of today as China proper could still be explicitly excluded from the Zhongguo. After the northern conquest of the southern (Chinese) state of Wu in 280, for example, a children’s verse predicted that someday “Zhongguo [the north] will be defeated and Wu [in the south] shall rise again.”

Today Zhongguo is probably the closest Chinese-language equivalent to the English word China. Even so, both the modern People’s Republic, on the mainland, and the Republic of China (confined to the island of Taiwan since 1949) are still officially known, instead, by a hybrid combination of the two ancient terms Zhongguo and Huaxia: Zhong-hua 中華.

Many Westerners today find the implicit conceit that China is the Middle Kingdom alternately either offensively arrogant or simply ridiculous. Such
ethnocentricity was hardly unique to China, however. Nearly all early civilizations, in fact, viewed themselves as occupying the center of the world. While China may be a little unusual in having this ancient conceit preserved in a name that is still used today, our own name for the Mediterranean Sea also comes originally from a Latin expression meaning “middle of the earth.” We have merely become accustomed to the name, no longer understand much Latin, and have forgotten what it means.

Furthermore, it was Westerners who more literally referred to foreigners as barbarians. Barbarian is an English word that derives from an ancient Greek expression for those unintelligible “bar-bar” noises emitted by strangers who were so uncivilized as not to speak Greek. Not only did the ancient Chinese naturally not use this Greek word, there really was no word in classical Chinese that was exactly equivalent to it. There are, indeed, several Chinese terms that are commonly loosely translated into English as “barbarian,” but this (as is often the case with translations) is a little misleading. More precisely, they are all generic Chinese names for various non-Chinese peoples. The word Yi, for example, was used for non-Chinese peoples in the east. Such names were often no more accurate or authentic than the name Indian that was mistakenly applied by early modern Europeans to the natives of the Americas, yet like the term American Indian, they remain fundamentally names rather than words meaning “barbarian.”

If China is not a Chinese name, then, what about our familiar names for the other East Asian countries? The English word Japan is actually a distorted version, via Malay, of the Chinese pronunciation (Riben in current standard Mandarin, which can also be spelled jih-pen in an older spelling system) of the two-character name 日本 that in Japanese is pronounced Nihon (or Nippon). This name Nihon — the “Origin of the Sun” — is, however, a genuine early native Japanese name for Japan, although one that could probably only have been conceived from a vantage point outside of Japan, further west, and that may have been first used by immigrants to Japan from the continent. The name was apparently consciously adopted by the Japanese court in the late seventh century for the favorable meaning of its written characters.12

In some ways, it could be argued that Japan has been less chimerical as a country and has displayed more historical continuity since antiquity than China. Since the dawn of reliably recorded history, Japan has had, quite uniquely in the entire world, only one ruling family. There has been only one Japanese dynasty, in contrast to China’s roughly eighty dynasties and two postdynastic republics. Yet on the other hand, Japanese emperors have rarely wielded much real power, court and emperor have often been quite irrelevant to the overall history of the Japanese islands, and Japan, too, has been divided. Much Japanese “tradition” is, moreover, not really so very ancient, and important parts of it ultimately can be traced to foreign origins. Japanese Zen Buddhism, for example, is an especially Chinese form of what was originally an Indian religion. The quintessentially Japanese art of the tea ceremony (chanoyu) was born only in the late fifteenth century, although the Japanese had learned to drink tea (from China) centuries earlier. Sushi, as we know it, “began as a street snack in nineteenth-century Edo-era Tokyo.” The Japanese national sport
of Œïdö was invented, as such, only toward the end of the nineteenth century—by the same man who would also serve as Japan’s first member of the International Olympic Committee. Even the Japanese nation-state itself arguably only took its final shape during the nineteenth century.\(^\text{13}\)

As for Korea, the English name derives from that of the Koryó Dynasty (918–1392), which in turn was an abbreviation of the name of an even older northern kingdom called Koguryó (roughly first-century to 668 ce). In this respect, our English name Korea somewhat resembles the probable derivation of our name for China from the early dynastic name Qin. Just as Qin is not quite really entirely synonymous with China, neither is Koryó exactly the same thing as Korea. Today, North Koreans prefer to invoke the memory of the oldest legendary Korean kingdom, Chosön, while South Koreans are inclined to use the name Han’guk, the “Country of the Han,” the name of the peoples who were the inhabitants of the southern parts of the Korean peninsula in the early historical period. (The Chinese today are also called the Han people, but this is an entirely different Han, written 安, which just happens to sound like the Korean Han 개.) Although Korea is today an exceptionally good example of an ethnically homogeneous modern nation-state (marred by political and ideological division, north vs. south, since 1945), it can be argued that Korea, as such, never really existed prior to the first unification of the peninsula under native rule in 668.

Vietnam will not be exhaustively surveyed in this volume, but the story of how Vietnam got its name is nonetheless relevant and fascinating. The name Vietnam was first proposed, incredibly enough, from Beijing in 1803. Prior to that time, what we think of as Vietnam had most commonly been called Annam. (Still later, as a French colony, it was widely known in the West as Indochina, as previously mentioned.) The new nineteenth-century name Vietnam was consciously intended to evoke the memory of an ancient (208–110 BCE) kingdom called Southern Viet (pronounced Nam Viêt in Vietnamese). Because the capital of that ancient Southern Viet kingdom had been located at the site of the modern city of Guangzhou (in English, Canton), in China, however, nineteenth-century Vietnam was obviously somewhat farther south. When the old name was revived, it was therefore slightly altered by changing it from Southern Viet to South of Viet. This adjustment was achieved in Vietnamese (and in Chinese) simply by transposing the word order: from Nam Viêt to Việt Nam.\(^\text{14}\) The reason, then, why the capital of the ancient kingdom of Southern Viet was, somewhat surprisingly, located north of modern Vietnam in what is now China, was because the very earliest Bronze Age kingdom called Viet (in Chinese, Yue 越), from which all of these names presumably ultimately derived, had been located even farther north, in the vicinity of the modern Chinese Province of Zhejiang, almost halfway up the coast of what is today China! Early Chinese texts, in fact, referred to most of what is now southeast China as the land of the “Hundred Viet.”

This story helps illustrate just how far from being static and unchanging traditional East Asia actually was. Not only was Vietnam a new name in 1803, but the total assemblage of territory and ethnic groups that now make up Vietnam was also rather new and unprecedented at the time. Independent Vietnam had
originated (in the tenth century) only in the Red River valley area of what is now the north. After centuries of southward expansion (and sometimes division), when a new emperor finally unified all of Vietnam at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was in some ways "a kingdom . . . that had never before existed."\(^{15}\)

To say that Vietnam did not exist before the nineteenth century is, of course, at some levels as absurd as trying to claim that China did not exist until modern times either. Yet in fact, neither China nor Vietnam had really existed previously under precisely their present names and current configurations, despite their genuinely ancient pedigrees. No country, people, or civilization exists unchanged forever. These are dynamic ancient streams that have continually been renewed. History is all about change, and East Asia has experienced as much change as almost any comparable region. This is the story of East Asian history.

**For Further Reading**


1 The Origins of Civilization in East Asia

According to a now lost Old Record cited in the thirteenth-century Korean history Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms (Samguk yusa), the divinity Hwanung descended from heaven to Mount Taeban, a sacred peak at the source of the Yalu and Tumen rivers on the border between present-day Korea and China, where he mated with a she-bear he had helped transfigure into human shape. From their union was born the great Lord Tan’gun, supposedly in the year 2333 BCE, who founded the country known as Old Choson and who is widely celebrated today as the father of the Korean nation.

Meanwhile, according to a quite different Record of Ancient Matters (the Japanese Kojiki, compiled in 712 CE), the grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu was sent down to earth from heaven, bearing the three sacred Japanese imperial regalia – the curved magatama bead, bronze mirror, and sword – to become the founder of the Japanese imperial line (the same line that still occupies the Chrysanthemum throne in Tokyo today) and the origin of the Japanese nation.

Much earlier, in China, various ancient royal houses also typically claimed divine or miraculous origins, although Western scholars have generally been more impressed by the relative absence of important creation myths from the dawn of Chinese history. The traditional version of China’s story begins, instead, with a more apparently human age of (legendary) cultural heroes, starting with Fuxi (supposedly dating from 2852 BCE), who first domesticated animals; Shennong (from 2737 BCE), who invented farming; and the Yellow Emperor (ruling from 2697 BCE), who is popularly viewed as the ancestor of the Chinese people.

Though the Japanese emperor officially renounced his divinity after World War II, in 1946, and few people today are likely to believe literally the story of Japanese imperial descent from the sun goddess, some of these myths and legends are still quite charming. It is doubtful, however, that many non-natives, coming from different religious and cultural traditions, ever gave much literal credence to any such stories of divine descent. Early modern Europeans, for example, brought
their own quite different sets of expectations about possible East Asian origins. Not untypically, in a book published in Amsterdam in 1667, Athanasius Kircher speculated that the Chinese must have descended from the biblical Noah's son Ham via Egypt, which would have also explained the apparent (but very superficial) similarity between Chinese writing and Egyptian hieroglyphics.⁶

Even after Europeans became better informed about East Asia, the theory that civilization must have diffused to China (and everywhere else) from a common universal point of origin somewhere in the Middle East long continued to be widely accepted. The implication that all civilization originated in the West (even though this was a "West" whose history began, strangely enough, in the Fertile Crescent that is now Iraq and Egypt) and that all non-Western native peoples must therefore have been incapable of achieving civilization on their own was understandably rather offensive to many non-Westerners. As new archeological evidence mounted steadily over the course of the twentieth century that Bronze Age civilization in China was actually very ancient and showed little evidence of direct importation from the West, an opposing theory of almost completely independent indigenous origin came to be preferred by many scholars. A classic 1975 study by Ping-ti Ho, for example, famously labeled China the "Cradle of the East," in conscious parallel to the so-called Cradle of (Western) Civilization in the Fertile Crescent of Egypt and Mesopotamia.⁷

It was probably always a mistake, though, to assume that the only option was a binary choice between diffusion from a single common source and entirely independent local development. In fact, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives. People have always traveled and communicated across sometimes vast distances, yet it is also true that movement was usually extremely slow and difficult in antiquity, and local communities, especially if they are relatively distant and isolated, naturally do develop independently. The most likely explanation for all the different historical civilizations of the world is a combination of common ultimate human origins and multiple ongoing processes of local diversification and exchange, in a process of interaction that has been described as "not so much diffusion as dialectic."⁸

New breakthroughs in the science of genetics, especially the study of mitochondrial DNA, make it seem increasingly likely that all modern human beings everywhere throughout the world share relatively recent common ancestors and are closely related. A currently influential theory is that modern humans spread across the planet from a shared ancestral homeland in Africa only within the last one hundred thousand years. From carbon 14 dating, we know that modern humans had reached eastern Eurasia by at least 25,000 BCE and possibly as early as fifty to sixty thousand years ago. Even leading scientific skeptics of this out of Africa theory acknowledge that entirely independent origins for different human populations are improbable and suggest instead merely that local human variations developed over a much longer period of time within a loose network of genetic exchanges sufficient to maintain the overall commonality of the human species.

Globally, then, there were three major centers of late Stone Age (Neolithic) cultural development based on the critical breakthrough to agriculture: one in
western Eurasia, involving wheat and barley; one in eastern Eurasia, involving rice and millet; and one in the Americas, based on maize (corn). Within eastern Eurasia, in turn, there were also multiple local late Stone Age cultures. These cultures, furthermore, did not necessarily align with any modern national borders. It is misleadingly anachronistic to think of these Stone Age peoples as already being Chinese or Korean or Japanese, for example.

Merely within the territory that we think of now as China proper, there was much local variation, and also a very significant broad division between north and south. The peoples of the south cultivated rice — by at least 8000 B.C. in the lower Yangzi River valley — were fond of boats, tended to elevate their houses above ground level on posts, produced pottery with impressed geometric designs, and probably spoke languages more closely related to those now spoken in Southeast Asia than to modern Chinese.

The peoples in the north, meanwhile, centering especially around the Yellow River valley and what is commonly called the Central Plain, grew millet and often lived in houses dug partially below ground level, perhaps for insulation purposes. At least some of these northern peoples must have spoken an early form of the Chinese language. The most famous of these northern cultural complexes (dating from about 5000 B.C.) is called Yangshao by modern archeologists and is known for its vividly decorated “painted pottery.”

Along the northernmost fringe, roughly in the region now called Inner Mongolia, the climate apparently became somewhat colder and drier beginning around 1500 B.C., and the peoples living there gradually turned away from agriculture toward the raising of livestock. Animals that can graze, feeding themselves by eating wild grass, such as sheep and cattle, began to predominate over the pigs that have traditionally provided the staple meat in the Chinese diet but that cannot graze and require the support of an agricultural society. As mastery of the technique of horseback riding — apparently first achieved in the western reaches of that great belt of grassland called the steppe, which stretches from the Hungarian Plain in Europe eastward to Mongolia — finally spread to the vicinity of China, perhaps by roughly 500 B.C., these northern peoples became true pastoral nomads.

These livestock-raising nomads then became the great cultural “other,” and frequent military opponent, of the Chinese people for most of premodern history. Many of these nomads actually lived within the borders of what is now China, however, in Inner Mongolia, and sometimes even farther south in China proper. These nomads interacted in a dynamic fashion with the agriculturally based Chinese civilization, forming what could alternatively even be conceived of as a single system with two opposing poles. Nomads, or at least seminomadic ranchers, provided not a few of the ruling families of Chinese imperial dynasties. Clearly, despite their sharp differences, the pastoral nomads of Inner Mongolia and the farmers of northern China were historically bound together.

On the Korean peninsula, meanwhile, there were also multiple prehistoric cultures — some overlapping with Manchuria, in what is now China. By the end of Korean prehistory, there are also some tantalizing hints of connections with the Japanese islands. What appears today to be the striking homogeneity of Korean
national identity was probably originally "forged from diverse elements." This present-day Korean cultural uniformity, furthermore, did not really coalesce until relatively late. Although rice cultivation was known on the Korean peninsula by at least 1000 BCE, and bronze metalworking appeared perhaps a few centuries later, the details of Korean history remain largely a mystery until the peninsula began to be mentioned in Chinese documents of the early imperial era.

Some time before those first documentary references, people from the Korean peninsula had probably begun crossing the straits south into the Japanese islands. Much earlier still, Japan may have once been connected to the mainland of Asia by a land bridge, and there may have also been some ancient maritime connections between Japan and Southeast Asia. Certainly there were humans on the Japanese islands from very early times. Japan is notable, in fact, for having produced perhaps the earliest known pottery on earth, from around 11,000 BCE. Yet the population of Japan in the late Stone Age always remained sparse – probably never numbering more than roughly a quarter million people throughout the islands – and extensive farming and metalworking did not appear in the Japanese islands until as late as about 300 BCE. The relatively sudden surge of major new developments after that time is associated with new arrivals from the Korean peninsula. As is the case with Korea, moreover, the earliest written description of Japan appears in a Chinese text, this one dating from the third century CE.

If all modern human beings share common ancestors, and if there has always been more contact and exchange between different population groups than is sometimes imagined, it is also the case that in antiquity, mobility was commonly limited, especially for agricultural peoples bound to farmland. Everywhere there was much local independent cultural development. Some communities were relatively more isolated than others, and within the Eurasian Old World, East Asia may have been especially something of a world apart. One particularly visible emblem of East Asian cultural uniqueness was the use throughout East Asia in premodern times of a writing system (a script) that is strikingly different from the Middle Eastern–derived alphabets and phonetic spelling systems that eventually came to be used everywhere else in the world.

"Far more than princes, states or economies, it is language-communities who are the real players in world history," writes Nicholas Ostler. It has been observed that the same Old English word that meant "people" or "nation" could also indicate "language." Languages are frequently central to the self-identification of human communities (and the primary barrier to communication with others), and they constitute a vital piece of the story of East Asian civilization. Indeed, the most Chinese thing about China may very well be the language. Some basic understanding of the languages of East Asia is therefore fundamental at the outset, even though these languages are by definition foreign to native speakers of English, and any discussion of language runs the risk of quickly becoming dauntingly technical. I will try to keep it simple.