9.3: East and Southeast Asia's History and Settlement

The history of human settlement in East and Southeast Asia begins in China. Evidence of modern humans can be found in the region dating back to over 80,000 years ago. Around 10,000 years ago, several cultural groups emerged in China during the Neolithic Period, also known as the New Stone Age. This was a time of key developments in early human technology, such as farming, the domestication of plants and animals, and the use of pottery. Along China's Yangtze River, humans first domesticated rice around 6500 BCE. Villages, walled cities, and great dynasties, or families of rulers, emerged later.

While some early humans stayed in East Asia, others followed the coastline and continued on to Southeast Asia likely over 50,000 years ago. This was during the glacial period known as the Ice Age. Global temperatures were much colder and huge sheets of ice covered North America, Europe, and Asia. Since so much water was trapped in these huge glaciers, ocean levels were actually much lower than they are today. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the other islands of Southeast Asia were a single landmass known as Sunda (Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\)). Those cultural groups who had seafaring knowledge continued on, populating Australia and the surrounding islands. During the Ice Age, the southern islands of Japan were also connected to the rest of Eurasia, allowing the indigenous groups of Japan to migrate from what is now mainland China.
In East Asia, the Chinese dynasties dominated the political landscape for much of the region’s history. They established trade routes, a strong military, and forged connections with Korea and Japan. China became a unified state under the Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, and this long period of stability is viewed as a golden age in Chinese history. The dominant ethnic group in China, the Han, take their name from this ruling family. It was also during this time that Confucianism became the state religion. Confucianism takes its name from the influential Chinese philosopher and teacher Kong Fuzi (551-479 BCE), often referred to by the Latinized version of his name, Confucius. One of Confucius’ key teachings was the importance of relationships, both within the family and within society as a whole and the religion emphasizes human goodness and self-reflection rather than the worship of a divine being. Confucius also emphasized education and his teachings have dominated Chinese culture for centuries.

In general, the Chinese dynasties were largely isolationist. China has a number of physical barriers that separate it from the rest of Asia, such as the Himalayas, the rugged western highlands, and the Gobi Desert. The only region where it was vulnerable to invasion was its northeastern region. Here, the ruling families of China built a series of walls, known today as simply the Great Wall of China (Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\)).
However, the term “the” Great Wall of China is a misnomer. In fact, there is a series of overlapping walled fortifications that began being constructed by early dynasties in the 5th century BCE and continued through to the 17th century CE. Walls are a defensive military structure and are thus an expression of a civilization that wished to be left alone. Emperors generally disregarded China’s extensive coastline, and where port cities did emerge, they were primarily used for local trade.

In Southeast Asia, however, trade links with South Asia brought Hinduism and later Buddhism to the region. Port cities emerged, as well as cities that were religious or ceremonial centers. The Hindu rulers of the region were often viewed as divine, but in order to secure the favor of the gods, and the blessings of the Hindu priests, they agreed to build temples. Angkor Wat, in Cambodia, for instance, was built in the 12th century as the king’s state temple and capital city (Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\)). It was later transformed into a Buddhist temple, which it remains today. The temple complex is the largest religious structure in the world.

Eventually, Islam spread to Southeast Asia, particularly as a result of Sufi missionaries, part of a mystical branch of
Islam. In the present-day islands of Malaysia and Indonesia, in particular, local rulers and communities embraced Islamic theology. Today, more Muslims live in Indonesia than in any other country on Earth.

Buddhism continued to dominate the religious landscape of much of Southeast Asia as well as in Japan. During the Heian period, lasting from the late 8th centuries to the 12th century CE, many of the features of modern Japanese culture emerged, such as its distinctive art and poetry, as well as Buddhist-inspired architecture. A ruling class of warriors, known as a shogunate, would later take control of Japan beginning a feudal period in the country's history.

The evolving landscape of this region would be completely transformed by colonization, with sweeping political and economic changes that continues to shape the geography of the region today. Beginning in the 16th century, European colonial empires became interested in Southeast Asia. Before long, Europeans established permanent colonies. The Spanish would settle the Philippines, the Netherlands established the Dutch East Indies in present-day Indonesia, the French created Indochina in mainland Southeast Asia, and the British would take over Burma, now known as Myanmar, and Malaysia. By the 1800s, only Thailand would remain independent and functioned largely as a buffer state separating the British and French colonial spheres.

Japan took note of these imperial pursuits. In 1868 CE, the Japanese Emperor Meiji ended the shogunate and began a series of reforms known as the Meiji Restoration. As part of the reform, the government sought to increase Japan's modernization and industrialization and began a systematic study of the developed world. Why were some countries more powerful and more industrialized than others? Britain, for example, was an island nation like Japan and yet was considered to be the most powerful country in the world. Education was critical, as was industrial technology, but Japanese leaders believed that Britain's colonial ambitions, its direct control over the resources of other areas, was key to its success.

By the beginning of World War II, Japan had built up an impressive military and had colonized much of East and Southeast Asia including northeastern China, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, French Indochina, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Figure \(\PageIndex{4}\)). In 1941, Japanese military forces attacked the US base Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Following the attack, the US declared war on Japan and entered World War II.
Following Japan’s loss in World War II, the countries of East and Southeast Asia were able to acquire independence. Some countries, like the Philippines and Burma, achieved independence through a peaceful turnover of control, while others such as Indonesia won independence only after a violent period of opposition. The end of World War II reshaped not only the political map of East and Southeast Asia but development in the region as well.

**Neolithic Period:**

also known as the New Stone Age, a time of key developments in early human technology, such as farming, the domestication of plants and animals, and the use of pottery