THE INTER-RELATIONS OF GEOGRAPHY AND HUMAN ADVANCEMENT

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When I think about what factors into creating a culture, I seldom think of geography. But when one gets right down to it, geography plays an incredibly pivotal role in two of the most important categories of human interaction with the earth: agriculture and war. Both occupations go towards feeding a need in society and both produce innumerable advances in technology and human relations. According to texts currently under study in this class, the importance of geography (in the senses of features and border lines) is of paramount importance. But what makes them so important? How have the major geographical features contributed to the development of Asian culture with its subsequent arts, economy, politics, philosophies, and religions? These five categories are the topics my paper will attempt to trace the descent of from agricultural themes and war.

First I would like to explain the connection between early agricultural developments and the advent of war. In the beginning of the three histories of China, Korea, and Japan, each culture was one of hunters/gatherers. However, over time, the area surrounding settlements was picked clean and a new source of food was found in tilling the earth. This led to deforestation in all three countries to make way for fields and advancements in irrigation techniques and implements for sowing and reaping, (Murphey 208). In Korea, for example, Eckert writes that, “Thus at first having relied for their food on hunting, fishing, and gathering, these Neolithic people subsequently began to practice agriculture,” (4), and then speaking of the Bronze Age peoples, he comments on their
choice of location, “inhabiting the higher ground that overlooks flatlands along river courses, a terrain suitable for the agriculture,” (9). As agriculture became an increasingly more important source of food as well as the building block of an economy based on a barter system, the location in which one settled was forced to accommodate the land in which one could plant. Eventually, of course, each settlement ran out of room.

In Asia, predominantly in China, Korea, and Japan, the geography does not lend itself well to large populations being supported all in one place. The overabundance of mountains and surrounding oceans limits suitable dwelling places as well as arable land. This inconvenience led to innovative developments in steppe agriculture. In China “as population rose cultivation was pushed beyond them [plains] onto first gentle slopes and then increasingly steep ones,” (Murphey, 6). But even here, there comes a stopping point where cultivation can be pushed no further up a mountain. This in turn led to war, as the only way to acquire new lands with enough suitable acreage to support the burgeoning population.

The Confederated Kingdom of Koguryō in Korea was forced to warfare in order to acquire lands to supplement the “inadequacy of the resources within their borders,” (Eckert, 17). Kingdoms then developed based around how much food they could produce in the limited land they controlled. Murphey writes:

With increasing agricultural yields and total output, it was now possible to field large armies of men who could be spared from agriculture at least for parts of the year and could be fed on surpluses. Warfare became larger in scale and more ruthless, and its character changed from that of earlier chivalric contests of honor between aristocrats to one of more wholesale conquest and fights for survival. (39)
Geography in the sense of border lines became very fluid in the warring periods (which were most of the time) and this had an impact on the ways in which information flowed across continents and developments in civilization progressed.

A striking example of geography playing a pivotal role in the formation of an empire is evidenced in that of the Qin dynasty. The Qin were located on the frontier and its “mountain-ringed Qin base also helped to keep the fighting away from the Wei valley and its agricultural economy, the source of food, taxes, and soldiers, while the more fragile economies of the enemies were picked off one by one,” (Murphey, 56). Because of the protected nature of their food supply which supplied the armies they put in the field, the Qin empire was able to triumph over all contenders. Murphey explains how frequently it is the groups on the periphery who “eventually succeed to central power,” (56). Thus, geography comes into play in the formation of a dynasty by contributing to the survival of the two interconnected features of early life: agriculture and martial advancement.

Even as agriculture and war are byproducts of the geography which nourishes or hinders them, other accomplishments of civilization also stem from these factors. Early art in Korea, for example was based around things in nature. Eckert makes a case for the pottery of Korea’s Neolithic Age being connected first to the water (food supply) and then to agriculture, “comb-pattern pottery also were intended to represent water, the major source of early Korean Neolithic man’s food. But with the advent of agriculture straight line designs gave way to curved…” (8). Geography is apparent in these early art examples as water was a predominant feature in all three early civilizations it was the source of food, drink, and center of a settlement. Japanese and Korean people settled first
on the coastlines of the ocean and Chinese people on the major rivers. To each of these, water would be the source of life (and death due to flooding or storms) and hence one of the most important features of early life. With the advent of agriculture, water, though still vitally important for sustaining the crop, was augmented by worship of the product. Thus, even art came to reflect the change in the day to day life of the individual being substantially altered by natural surroundings and man’s taming of them for his own benefit.

With the advent of agriculture as a source of food, also came agriculture as a source of economy. At first crops could be used in trade, but eventually they became taxed as well as kingdoms grew in size. The rulers of kingdoms commenced trade with other countries in order to acquire things they lacked through more peaceful means than war. The proof of this can be seen in implements from other places being found in archaeological digs in a certain place, (Eckert, 6). Geography came into play in trade in other manners too as contacts were made with kingdoms further and further away, over mountains and across oceans. Various kingdoms which stood to profit as middlemen would jealously guard their territory and their businesses. There are several examples of this within the readings. Eckert writes about the Chin and Han China kingdoms wherein Chin wanted to trade with Han China but its hopes were frustrated by the “obstruction of Wiman Chosŏn, which dominated international trade in the region at that time,” (18). This desire for trade turned into war as Han China invaded because “Wiman Chosŏn’s strength and expansion, and the economic role it sought to play as intermediary in the trade” proved too great a threat to the Han to be allowed to exist.
Much the same thing happened in the world of politics as in economics, in the sense that neighboring kingdoms would create alliances only to break them. Politics also came into play in creating and governing territory. The Unified Silla kingdom in Korea, for example, “came into being through a process of territorial expansion, so it became necessary to create an expanded system of provincial and local government,” (Eckert, 48). A need for expanded farming land led to wars over such ground thus leading to territory expansion which brought up the need for ever larger government control. At times, these nations became vast empires needing multiple forms of government to keep them in check.

One of the more frequently used methods of control was a melding of civil government with a religion or philosophy. Japan is an excellent example of this in the 8th Century when they used Buddhism to unify the state:

The imperial court, which lacked physical power to gain allegiance from remote provinces, was able to bring the remote provinces securely under its fold through the moral suasion provided by the newly found faith. (Lu, 47).

The use of religion to strengthen the state was reinforced with the writing of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, also in the 8th Century, which promoted the idea that the emperor was descended from a god. Korea and China promoted similar tactics in politics, naming their emperors as divine ambassadors as well. In addition the Korean state of Koguryō, used Buddhism and Confucianism to provide structure to the administration of the government which in turn “laid the groundwork for external expansion,” (Eckert, 26).

Which leads us back to war. By utilizing such impressive props as Confucianism, Buddhism, and local religions such as Shinto\(^1\), various states could develop a sense of

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\(^1\) This included folk religious autumn harvest and spring planting festivals in which the ruler would occasionally take a major part.
nationalism in their populace. They could rule more effectively and have the people obey more easily. Though of course, the combination of state and religion can be a frightening weapon at times, it was still a most useful device with which early rulers commandeered their nations.

Through the many examples of conflict, trade, and agricultural advancements, history marched ever onwards. Geography played a crucial role in early days by limiting land available for production, living space, and ease of access to foreign territory. War increased the area available for agriculture, population growth, and access to newly conquered territory. The final question that I have to discuss is whether or not there was a way of advancing as a society without having ruined the earth. Advancements in agriculture and war destroyed the ground upon which they were inflicted. This can be seen in the problems facing the modern countries today because of deforestation, flooding, ozone levels, and enmity between nations. There is an excellent poem by Wang An-shih from the Sung Dynasty in China where he likens humanity to monkeys who take no care with the ecology:

Each in this host of monkeys made himself sleek and fat,
While the mountain was utterly ravished;
Wrangling with each other to fill their stomachs,
On talk of conservation no leisure was lavished. (Mair, 247).

As humans we deplete the resources of the land, fight with one another, and spare no thought to the ecosystem which supports us. As I have written, geography played a role in creating civilization through agriculture and war, but humans have also taken a part in destroying geography. Culture and civilization were formed by geography as water shaped the world into continents, perhaps now it’s time for geography to shape us once again from monkeys who don’t care to humans who do.
List of Works Cited


