GLOBAL SNAPSHOTs
Issues Transcending Regional Boundaries:
East Asia

Contents:

- 10 Things Students Should Know About: East Asia
- Global Issues:
  - Conflict and Resolution
  - Environment and Sustainability
  - Food Security
  - Trade and Economics
  - Popular Culture
  - Populations: Risk and Resistance
- Other Useful Resources

April 2016

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Area (km²)</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Pop. Density (km²)</th>
<th>HDI (2011)</th>
<th>Primary Language(s)</th>
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*Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Asia#Territory_and_region_data; and other wikipedia pages
1. East Asia is home to nine of the world’s 30 largest cities.

2. There are various types of governments in East Asia, including democratic republics and authoritarian dictatorships.

3. Diplomatic relationships between East Asian countries are complex, and vital to international stability.

4. East Asia is full of cultural and ethnic diversity; however, this sometimes leads to domestic tension, such as in the Xinjiang region of China.

5. East Asian states have made significant contributions to the innovation of green technology.

6. One of the current major challenges in East Asia is maintaining development while utilizing eco-friendly practices.

7. East Asian economies are an integral part of global markets.

8. The Japanese yen and the Chinese yuan are among the top traded currencies in the world.

9. Different government standards produce significant variation in the quality of products exported from East Asia.

10. A number of East Asian countries are experiencing strain on their domestic economies due to population aging.
**Conflict and Resolution**

**Overview of Conflict in East Asia**

**Description:** Despite the end of the Cold War, East Asia remains among the most potentially unstable regions in the world. Examples include the threat posed by North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and its unpredictable leadership; territorial disputes between China and Japan over the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands and between Korea and Japan over the Dokdo or Takeshima islands; ongoing tensions among China, Japan, and Korea traceable to World War II; and the perennial question of whether de facto independent Taiwan is a nation in its own right or a rogue province, all of which present challenges to peace and stability in East Asia.

North Korea stands as a continuing threat with its brinksmanship-style diplomacy, employing its WMDs as a bargaining tool. In 2002, North Korea expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials assigned to monitor their nuclear reactors and regained access to nearly 9000 spent plutonium fuel rods from which an estimated four to five nuclear weapons could be produced. This, coupled with North Korea’s successful missile program, presents an immediate concern for all nations of East Asia.

**Related Resources:**
- Wit, Joel S. North Korea Going Critical: the First North Korean Nuclear Crisis, Brookings Institution Press, 2004

**Sino-American Relations**

**Description:** Since President Richard Nixon normalized Sino-American relations in 1972, the two countries’ policies towards one another have vacillated between friendliness and caution. By keeping economic growth steady, participating in regional organizations, and cultivating bilateral relations, China maintained a policy of quiet diplomacy with its neighbors during the 1990s and early 2000s. After 9/11, China cooperated in the “War on Terror.” However, since the 2008 global financial crisis, China has become more assertive in the global arena. U.S. leaders are suspicious of China’s burgeoning military capabilities, human rights abuses, and economic policies towards dictatorships in the developing world. China could use its new-found economic clout to emerge as a rival to U.S. interests in East Asia. At the same time, American investors are excited over China’s booming economy and the prospect of selling to China’s 1.3 billion consumers. Furthermore, China is an indispensable partner in the Six-Party Talks, a venue for regional discussions over North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.

**Related Resources:**
Taiwan-Mainland China Relations

Description: The Republic of China (Taiwan) has existed in political limbo ever since the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island in 1949, following their defeat at the hands of the Communists. Since 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has maintained that Taiwan is a rogue province that must eventually be reintegrated into the larger Chinese state. From the perspective of the PRC, failure to hold Taiwan’s independence movement in check could set a dangerous precedent with regard to other Chinese territories (namely Tibet and Xinjiang). Anti-mainland sentiment flared briefly in Taiwan during the winter of 2004–2005 when the PRC’s National People’s Congress passed an anti-secession bill calling for military action against Taiwan should the island officially declare independence. After campaigning under a platform of increased economic growth and better ties with the PRC, Taipei mayor and KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou was elected in the 2008 presidential elections, reducing some of the tension between Taiwan and Mainland China. Ma was re-elected in 2012. In 2014, students and civic groups protesting the passage of a trade agreement between Taiwan’s KMT and Mainland China initiated the “Sunflower Student’s Movement,” named for the flower they adopted as their symbol. The protestors occupied the Taiwanese legislature, a first in Taiwanese history, and while unsuccessful in their bid to halt the trade pact agreement, brought new interest and energy to political activism in Taiwan.

U.S. involvement in cross-strait tensions has varied. In April 2001, President Bush proclaimed the United States would do “whatever it takes” to help defend Taiwan. Yet by December 2003, he reaffirmed U.S. support for maintaining the status quo while simultaneously chastising Taiwan’s president for his unilateral approach in cross-strait relations.

Related Resources:

- Zagoria, Donald S., Breaking the China-Taiwan Impasse, Praeger, 2003
- John J. Tkacik, Jr., “America’s ‘China Policy’ Is in Urgent Need of Definition,” Heritage Foundation Reports, April 19, 2005
- http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/was-taiwans-sunflower-movement-successful/

Religious and Ethnic Conflict in Xinjiang

Description: Xinjiang, a province in northwest China, is a flashpoint for religious and ethnic unrest. Also known as East Turkestan, the vast northwest province occupies a sixth of China’s total land area and contains a trove of mineral deposits. The word Xinjiang, which translates to “new frontier,” was applied to the region by the Chinese in 1876 when the territory was forcibly annexed. Culturally and geographically, the region is more Central Asian than Chinese. In 1949, a full 95 percent of Xinjiang’s population was comprised of non-Han peoples, 75 percent of whom were Turkic-speaking Muslim Uyghurs. Today, due to Chinese Communist Party
(CCP) relocation policies, non-Han Chinese make up approximately 40 percent of the region’s population. Uyghur and Muslim calls for independence, other forms of social mobilization, and organized cultural and religious activities are met with violent repression and poorly documented imprisonment.

Today, a number of Xinjiang independence movements operate in exile from Germany, Turkey, and the United States. Since 9/11, the Chinese government has spuriously attempted to link Uyghur independence movements with Al-Qaeda in a bid to gain international support. In July 2009, a series of riots in Xinjiang’s capital were spurred by a brawl that had taken place a few days before at a factory in Guangdong province and resulted in the death of two Uyghurs at the hands of their Han coworkers. At least 197 people (mostly Han) died in the riots and nearly 2,000 were injured. According to Human Rights Watch, at least forty-three men disappeared following the riots, and as of January 2010, twenty-six men had received death sentences for their participation in the riots.

Related Resources:

Environment and Sustainability

Megacities in East Asia

Description: The number of megacities (cities in which the population exceeds 10 million) in the world is increasing rapidly; it is anticipated that 21 cities will achieve such status in the next fifteen years. As of 2015, East Asia was home to ten such cities; Tokyo (37.1 mil.), Seoul (22.5 mil.), Shanghai (20.9 mil.), Beijing (17.3 mil.), Osaka (17 mil.), Guangzhou-Foshan (16.8 mil.), Shenzhen (11.9 mil.), and Nagoya (11 mil.), Tianjin (11 mil.), and Chongqing (10 mil.). Rapid economic development across East Asia has fueled an unprecedented rate of rural-to-urban migration. While most people move to big cities because of the promise of improved economic conditions, urban leaders know that megacities put stress on the environment. Without proper sanitation systems and pollution controls, megacities spew pollutants into the air and water, harming people and the environment. In Japan, urban leaders are searching for new landfill sites as Tokyo residents dispose of more than 20,000 tons of trash a day. In China, new cities with populations under 500,000 are being created to absorb the rural-to-urban migration and prevent China’s big cities from swelling to unmanageable proportions. However, the creation of these buffer cities has had a negative effect on precious farmland, which is still vital to the Chinese population.

Related Resources:


China’s Three Gorges Dam

Description The Three Gorges Dam is named after the majestic valley over which it towers. At 600 feet tall and 1.4 miles long, it is the world’s largest hydro-electric dam. Construction began in 1993 and structural work ended in May 2006, with the dam becoming fully functional in 2012. The price-tag of this massive project is officially estimated at US $22.5 billion, although unofficial estimates run much higher. Behind the dam, the waters of the Yangtze River form a reservoir more than 400 miles long and cover an area as large as Los Angeles. In the course of its construction, some 140 cities and villages, 1,600 factories, and at least 80,000 acres of arable land have been submerged. Advocates point out that the dam will protect against flooding and that its huge generators produce between 3 to 10 percent of the electricity needed in China. Currently, much of China’s electrical power is produced by coal-fired power plants that emit dangerous atmospheric pollutants. Critics argue that the human and environmental costs of the dam are incalculable. More than 1.3 million residents have been relocated amid charges of Chinese officials embezzling money owed to peasants for relocation compensation. Construction of the dam may mean the extinction of endangered species, including the Yangtze River dolphin and Chinese alligator. In addition, opponents of the dam argue that as the reservoir fills with sediment, the river behind the dam will grow increasingly torrential.

Continued on next page >>
Environment and Sustainability

Related Resources:

- Three Gorges Probe: http://journal.probeinternational.org/three-gorges-probe/ (a Canadian organization protesting the dam; the site has many news updates and links)

Air Pollution

Description: Air quality in China has deteriorated over the past decade due to unabated industrial growth under lax supervision from authorities. The burning of coal in particular has contributed to hazardous levels of particulate matter (PM), known to cause damage to both the heart and lungs. In Beijing, where smog daily blankets the cityscape, residents have grown louder in their calls for a government fix to the pollution problem. Former television journalist Chai Jing brought global attention to the issue with her 2015 documentary Under the Dome, which, after receiving an initial positive response from the CCP, was quickly ordered to be removed from Chinese websites.

Related Resources:

- http://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/campaigns/air-pollution/
Food Security

North Korean Famine

Description: The Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea is a totalitarian, isolationist, one-man dictatorship. Reliable economic data is not issued by the government, but North Korea is believed to spend at least 25 percent of its annual GDP on military development. A substantial amount of North Korea’s annual meager harvest (and food sent through UN programs) is diverted away from citizenry to the military. The combined effects of a reclusive state, mismanagement, fertilizer shortages, and a short growing season resulted in several consecutive years of famine in the 1990s. Between 1 and 2 million people are believed to have perished since 1994 as a result of these famines.

Related Resources:


Food and Drugs Manufactured in China

Description: In July 2007, the Chinese government executed the former head of the State Food and Drug Administration, Zheng Xiaoyu, for accepting bribes for the approval of untested and unsafe pharmaceuticals during his seven years as director. This was one of the more extreme steps the government took to reestablish international confidence in Chinese products after a series of incidents involving substandard exported goods. In March 2007, pet food containing wheat gluten from a Chinese manufacturer was found to be contaminated with the toxin melamine after pets in North America, Europe, and South Africa suffered renal failure and death. That same year concerns spread worldwide regarding contaminated toothpaste and counterfeit pharmaceuticals, especially those sent to the developing world to combat HIV/AIDS.

China has also been struggling with substandard food and drugs produced for domestic sale. Since 2000, the government has warned against counterfeit pharmaceuticals sold to Chinese hospitals and pharmacies. In 2004, dozens of Chinese infants starved to death drinking counterfeit baby formula that did not have any nutritional value. In 2008, contaminated milk products killed four Chinese babies and made thousands of others ill. China ordered the recall of the melamine-tainted milk products made by 22 companies, fired four officials, and detained a company chairwoman. The outbreak raised questions about the effectiveness of tighter controls China promised after earlier scares over contaminated seafood, toothpaste, and pet food exports. Part of the problem stems from a lack of adequate governmental oversight and impoverished rural producers who try to maximize their profits by using cheap, and sometimes illegal, raw materials.

Continued on next page >>
Food Security

Related Resources:

- Readings recommended by the United State Department of Agriculture on China:
  http://www.usdachina.org/en_index.asp
Chinese Monetary Policy and the United States

**Description:** Chinese monetary policy has important implications for both Chinese domestic politics and the economies of China’s trading partners. Historians sometimes claim that a spike in inflation in 1988 and 1989 helped precipitate the mass demonstrations and political instability that ended at Tiananmen in June 1989. Given this precedent, Chinese leaders have shown great concern for maintaining low inflation. Typically in fast growing economies such as China’s, inflation is substantially higher than in mature economies. The People’s Bank of China (PBC) has been able to tame inflation by increasing bank reserve requirements and raising interest rates, which the central government has supplemented with administrative measures such as price controls or the recent regulation restricting apartment purchases to new-home buyers. In 2010, China became the world’s largest exporter.

China has a large trade surplus with the United States (in 2012 it was running at close to a billion dollars a day). The PBC requires that Chinese exporters deposit the dollars they earn from exporting activities in state-owned banks, which are then required to hand over their dollars to the PBC in exchange for Chinese government bonds. The Chinese government “recycles” these dollars by purchasing U.S. government debt which helps them to maintain a competitively valued renminbi (the Chinese currency). Some believe China’s currency policy is beneficial to the U.S. because it reduces U.S. borrowing costs by keeping interest rates low. Other analysts argue this policy makes the U.S. dollar highly overvalued, which in turn makes U.S.-made goods artificially expensive, increasing unemployment. Some worry serious consequences would flow from a Chinese decision to stop purchasing U.S. debt. Others are more optimistic; a more competitive dollar would boost U.S. exports and import-competing products, thereby increasing U.S growth and employment.

**Related Resources:**

- Michael Pettis, “An exorbitant burden: Why keeping the dollar as the world’s reserve currency is a massive drag on the struggling US economy,” *Foreign Policy*, September 7, 2011
Effects of the Global Recession on East Asia

Description: In general, Asian countries began to see the effects of the recession in the second half of 2008, with significant decreases in exports and domestic demand. China and Japan moved quickly to pass stimulus packages to shore up government spending in hopes of buoying their economies. For China, the plan seems to have worked and future growth projections are optimistic. Initially, Japan weathered the global crisis well because the Japanese financial sector was not exposed to sub-prime mortgages or their derivative instruments. However, a downturn in demand for Japanese exports and slowing business investments pushed Japan deep into recession later in 2008. Government stimulus spending helped the economy recover in late 2009 and 2010, but the March 2011 earthquake again retarded appreciation of the Yen and forced the Bank of Japan to inject more than 325 billion dollars into the Japanese economy. Recent increases in worldwide consumer spending are promising, but debt problems in Europe continue to hurt Japanese exports. The global recession has also taken a drastic toll on South Korea’s economy, which has been impaired by a decline in global and domestic demand and deteriorating private investment. The ability of South Korea to recover from the downturn depends heavily on how the rest of the world fares; without a significant increase in exports, or a miracle turn-around in domestic demand, South Korea can also expect continued recession.

Related Resources:

- Up-to-date business news on East Asia: http://www.asiabusinessdaily.com/
- Asia Economic Institute: http://www.asiaecon.org/
Popular Culture

**Description:** In recent decades East Asia has become a producer of quality art, television, film, and music that are now consumed across the globe. Japan is known for its anime, a style of animation marked by exaggerated physical features that became a major cultural export during the 1980s and 1990s. It has since remained synonymous with Japanese culture for many. Anime in America has been popularized through TV shows like Dragonball, Naruto, and Pokemon, and the U.S. market alone is worth over $4 billion. Anime and manga (Japanese comics) have become an entryway into Japanese culture and language and one of the main drivers of fascination with the country among young people.

A more recent trend is the hallyu, or Korean wave, which swept across Asia in the 1990s and has since made inroads into Europe and North America. Dramas such as Winter Sonata and Boys Over Flowers found huge success in Asian markets in 2001 and 2008, respectively. Korean films have been popular among U.S. critics since at least 2003, when Park Chan-Wook’s Oldboy (itself based on a Japanese manga) premiered to rave reviews. In 2012 Kim-Ki-Duk’s Pieta won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, making it the first Korean film to win a best picture award at any of the three major film festivals. The Korean government actively supports hallyu as means of increasing its international visibility. In 2012, Korean pop rapper Psy’s music video for “Gangnam Style” became the first YouTube video to reach a billion views and was designated the most “liked” video on the site by Guinness World Records.

Zhang Yimou and Ang Lee are two well-established names in cinema. Yimou’s Hero (2002) and House of Flying Daggers (2004) received critical acclaim and multiple awards, and he was subsequently tapped to direct the opening ceremony of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Taiwanese born Lee is best known for Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Brokeback Mountain, and The Life of Pi, which won Lee an Academy Award for Best Director in 2012. Ai Weiwei has become a darling of the international art scene for his provocative, politically charged work. His exhibits Sunflower Seeds and Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads have traveled through galleries in London and New York. He has received multiple awards for his contributions to art and politics, including the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent in 2012 and first place in the ArtReview Power 100 Rankings in 2011. Although Weiwei is no longer under house arrest, he has been prevented by Chinese authorities from traveling outside the country.

**Related Resources:**

- [http://asiaenglish.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/HA/HA_EN_7.jsp](http://asiaenglish.visitkorea.or.kr/ena/HA/HA_EN_7.jsp)
- **Film:** Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry. Dir. Alison Klayman. Expressions United Media/MUSE Film & Television, 2012
China’s Floating Population

Description: The term “floating population” refers to the more than 211 million peasants (largely young men unable to make a living through farming) who drift into prosperous cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen in order to escape from rural poverty. Upon arrival, most are able to find work in low-paying and dangerous jobs in construction, the service industries, or as street peddlers. Largely undocumented and technically illegal, they are unprotected by China’s labor laws and are therefore frequent victims of exploitation. In addition to the population drain wrought by urbanization, rural China has seen a recent upswing in the number of riots and demonstrations in response to high taxation and uncompensated land grabs by corrupt officials. The floating population and its causes are symptomatic of an increasing disparity between prosperous/urban and poor/rural China that may come to threaten the stability of the nation as a whole.

Related Resources:

- “China’s Floating Population” (documentary, 2009): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqYBjoGmNQs

The Elderly in Japan

Description: Japan is the most rapidly aging industrialized nation in the world. As of 2012, at least 22 percent of Japan’s population was over the age of sixty-five. Population growth has slowed to a halt in recent decades due to a combination of falling birth-rates, the world’s highest life-expectancy, and an exceptionally small influx of immigrants. One of the most difficult demographic and economic problems facing Japan is how to provide an adequate retirement income for the elderly without overtaxing the working population. In the late 1980s, there were seven Japanese working and paying taxes for every one elderly Japanese receiving a public pension and public medical care. Today, there are only three working Japanese to support every retiree. The Japanese government has traditionally spent less on social welfare than have most other industrialized nations, relying instead on family members to take care of their elderly. But as older Japanese are less able to rely on their children, they are coming to depend more on the public pension system. Major reforms of the pension plan system were implemented in 1986 and in 2000, but politicians continue to raise the issue in Japan’s general election, indicating that more pension reform is needed.

Continued on next page >>
Populations: Risk and Resistance

Related Resources:

- Aging in Japan Website: http://www.jarc.net/int/

North Korean Refugees in China

Description: In the wake of famine, a great number of North Koreans fled across the border into China in the hopes of, if not prosperity, at least subsistence. Unlike the famous 38th Parallel—the heavily fortified demilitarized zone that serves as the border between North and South Korea—the border with China is more easily traversed. The Chinese government classifies North Koreans as illegal aliens rather than refugees. They are offered no form of government sanctioned assistance and are forced to rely on an underground network of (mostly South Korean) relief groups and missionaries. Those fortunate enough to find such aid are forced to live under a sort of house arrest, unable to seek employment for fear of being discovered. Other refugees are ruthlessly exploited by landowners or as factory workers. Those who are captured and repatriated face an even worse fate; failed asylum seekers are treasonous criminals in the eyes of the North Korean government and are forced to spend months or years laboring in brutal “reeducation” camps. China’s policy on North Korean refugees is grounded in a concern for good relations with its unpredictable nuclear neighbor.

Related Resources:

Other Useful Resources

East Asia:

- Books:

- Curricular Materials:

- Other Resources:

China:

- Books and Articles:

- Novels and Memoirs:

Japan:

- Books:
  - Gordon, Andrew. *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present.*
Other Useful Resources


- Novels, Memoirs and Stories:
  - Ibuse, Masuji, and John Bester. Black Rain. Tokyo [u.a.]: Kodansha Internat, 1994

Koreas:
- Books:

- Novels and Stories: