

Disenchanted Modern Myths: A Critique of Linguistic-Geographical Determinism in the Narratives of Maritime and Agricultural Civilizations

Ke Ye

*The High School Attached to Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China
jadeye1212@163.com*

Abstract. In recent years, the concepts of maritime and agricultural civilizations have attracted growing attention, particularly in Chinese social media and cross-cultural discussions. These narratives are not only popular in public discourse but also quoted in academic debates about the relationship between geography, civilization, and language. This study critically examines this pervasive dichotomy. While some scholars argue that geography shapes civilization, which in turn shapes language development through distinct scripts, grammar, and pragmatics, this paper challenges the validity and generalizability of such claims. The fundamental flaw lies in the assumption that a civilization is shaped by a single dominant geographical environment, ignoring the reality that civilizations often coexist and interact within diverse geographical contexts. Based on this flawed premise, linguistic-geographical determinism also oversimplifies complex historical and cultural factors and relies on limited qualitative data. Evidence from various linguistic cases further refutes the notion that geography alone determines linguistic development. By pointing out the limitations of this dichotomy and uncovering its ideological underpinnings, this study emphasizes the need to move beyond colonial-era frameworks and adopt a more nuanced, diverse perspective on civilization. This work contributes to the broader discourse on postcolonial studies and highlights the importance of critically examining ideological influences in academic research.

Keywords: Linguistic-geographical determinism, Maritime and agricultural civilizations, Postcolonial critique, Ideological influences

1. Introduction

These years, the concepts of maritime and agricultural civilizations are becoming popular in Chinese social media, especially when it comes to cross-cultural discussions. For instance, platforms such as TikTok have accumulated over 230 million views on topics related to it. This kind of framework is also used by some linguistics scholars in China, who claim that due to the essence of the two civilizations, speakers in different regions may develop their languages along distinct paths, affecting the scripts, grammar and pragmatics [1-3].

However, existing researches mainly focus on the comparison between English and Chinese, and ignore other languages developed in maritime or agricultural civilizations. Because of this, their conclusion of linguistic-geographical determinism is limited in generalization. These findings also adopt qualitative data only, considering the civilization as an integral variable, which further makes it less objective. In terms of the concept of maritime and agricultural civilizations itself, it was proposed initially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and used to prove that some ethnic groups are inherently superior to others [4-6]. This could somewhat reverse cause and effect. In that case, the assumption based on this framework may not be reliable enough.

The aim of this paper is to categorize the claims of linguistic-geographical determinism in different aspects, point out their limitations, and figure out the hidden ideology behind that.

2. Literature review

2.1. Manufacturing the myth

The concepts of maritime and agricultural civilizations were not proposed by any single scholar at a specific moment, but gradually developed and refined by many people over a long period. Above all, Montesquieu is the first one to come up with the idea that “the empire of climate is the first of all empires”, which means different climates can shape citizens’ spirit in a profound way. To be more specific, he believes that human beings have very little sensitivity to pleasure in cold countries, whereas in warm regions, their sensibility is exquisite. So, people living in warmer areas are always lazier and more cowardly [4]. To conclude, this theory of Montesquieu provided an idea that geography and culture are connected for following researchers.

Then came the twentieth century. In *A Study of History*, Toynbee categorized different civilizations into 21 types, and frequently used geographical conditions as an explanation of their root causes. For instance, when it comes to Venice and Genoa, he suggested that it was developed maritime transportation that turned the Mediterranean into their own highway of commerce and liberty [5]. Although Toynbee did not formally propose the concepts of maritime and agricultural civilizations, he objectively provided metaphorical resources for later geographical civilization narratives, which were continuously amplified and refined by scholars in the second half of the 20th century.

Based on Toynbee’s theory, Umesao further treated grasslands, river oases, and maritime environments as the key variables explaining the divergence between the “First Zone” and the “Second Zone.” From his perspective, the First Zone represents marine countries with humid climates, such as Western Europe and Japan, developed in sequence and eventually succeeded in modernization. By contrast, the Second Zone is where the grasslands were repeatedly attacked by nomadic violence, forming an empire for defense, but it was difficult to develop in order [6]. After being translated into China, this could be assumed as an external theoretical catalyst for the construction of maritime and agricultural civilizations, because scholars in the 1990s were trying to shape a powerful concept of that to counter Western centrism indicated by Huntington [7]. But what is different from Umesao and Huntington is that some Chinese scholars tend to regard agricultural civilizations to be more peaceful and harmonious, whereas maritime civilizations always perform like marauders. Their ideas are also reflected in *Historic Textbook of Senior Middle School* [8].

Above all, although scholars have different opinions on which civilization is better or worse, most of them choose to search for evidence to support this binary framework, including some linguists.

2.2. Academic reframing: linguistic-geographical determinism

Based on existing research, linguistic-geographical determinism can be broadly categorized into three areas: scripts, grammar and pragmatics. Each of these aspects will be discussed in detail below.

In terms of scripts, the Chinese linguistic community has reparameterized maritime and agricultural civilizations into letters and characters. For instance, Gu, an expert in the comparative study of Chinese and western cultures, believes that western land was poor and hard to farm (as in the Mediterranean region), making people there turn to the sea and fight nature. Out of this experience arose such a worldview: there is only one truth, and one of two opposites must prevail. The same split is also reflected in their word list, whose signifier and signified are severed. So, users of this language must learn by heart which marks go with which things, for the signs and the things have no natural link. But on the other hand, Chinese characters have direct semantic function. To be specific, they are pictographic like the things they stand for, almost similar to brief strokes. This could be attributed to the developed agriculture in ancient China, where citizens lived and worked in peace and contentment, with the idea of the unity of heaven and man having emerged. In this case, Gu thinks Chinese characters are a microcosm of the external world; thus, they still maintain a connection with nature, making users feel that they are in harmony with it and the natural world it represents [1].

Similarly, Liu agrees that the difference between English and Chinese grammar can also be attributed to distinct ideas caused by geographical environment. From the syntax of English, the clear subject-verb structure mirrors the thinking mode of “subject-object dichotomy” in maritime civilization. At a glance, people can tell the verb from the noun and the subject from the object. Even in an inverted sentence where the subject sits in the object’s place, formal markers such as nominative and accusative case, or articles and demonstrative words before nouns, will still let users spot every part instantly. By contrast, under the agricultural civilization’s thought of the unity of heaven and man, Chinese sentences are built on topic structure rather than subject-verb structure. To grasp them, people rely on analogy, context, and horizontal correlation associations. From a lexical perspective, Chinese has no Indo-European prefixes, suffixes, roots, voice, number, or case, so words can land anywhere and switch roles freely without any change in form, like nouns acting as verbs, verbs as nouns, and adjectives as verbs [2]. In fact, China had no systematic grammar until 1898, when Ma Jianzhong published Ma’s Grammar based on the framework of Latin. But without it, the Chinese did not encounter any problem with language use in history [9].

Regarding pragmatics, Chinese reflects collectivism, whereas English mirrors individualism. This stems from the family and blood ties of agricultural civilization, and long-term cooperation has formed a collectivist society. But as for maritime civilization, people value the rights and freedoms of individuals, since they go abroad for business and have strong mobility, leading to the relatively loose bond with their families. Take euphemism as an example. In Chinese, when it comes to the death of soldiers, words like “donate the life” or “sacrifice for their country” are used very often. In English, however, no matter whose death it is, it is generally referred to as “at peace,” “be gone,” “be no more,” or “to go to a better place,” without a clear hierarchical order or involving collective interests. Life and death are personal matters [3].

However, the findings above share the same limitations. Firstly, when scholars search for linguistic evidence to support the binary framework of agriculture and maritime civilization, they only consider Chinese and English, which is clearly insufficient to cover all languages. Besides, because various languages and ways of thinking have already merged with each other, it is difficult to test a geographical environment as a separate variable to see whether users of different languages but under the same civilization will develop similar ways of thinking without being influenced by

any social relationships or life experiences. This further leads to a lack of qualitative data and oversimplification of the geographical environment as an integral variable, neglecting other historical and cultural factors.

2.3. Challenging linguistic-geographical determinism: evidence and counterarguments

There are many linguistic cases that can directly refute the views of scholars mentioned earlier. To start with, the pictographic feature of Chinese characters is not exclusive to agricultural civilization. The Minoan civilization is a maritime civilization in the Aegean region, mainly located on the island of Crete. Its citizens engaged in maritime trade, but their early writing system was pictographic script, which appeared approximately during the 2nd millennium BC. These pictographic characters were originally used for religious and sacrificial activities, and their symbols were mostly concrete shapes of animals, plants, and tools [10]. Apart from that, a clear subject-verb structure is not unique to the maritime civilization, either. Some researches have already found archaeological and linguistic evidence that supports an origin of Indo-European languages on the Pontic-Caspian steppes [11]. In this case, the distinct subject-verb structure in these languages may actually be a characteristic of inland civilizations.

Therefore, although languages and geographical environments may have the relativity, other factors like culture and history are as significant as the geography to be taken into consideration. For instance, the individualism reflected in English is more likely due to the Renaissance rather than the development of maritime trade, considering the fact that the former originated in the late 14th century, whereas the latter had not been prosperous until the mid-15th.

As discussed above, linguistic evidence is insufficient to support the dichotomy of civilization. In addition to it, the narratives of maritime and agricultural civilizations themselves are also defective. As a template for maritime civilization residents, the Greeks had already cultivated horticultural crops such as olives, grapes, apples, and figs as early as the Aegean civilization era [12]. Meanwhile, their agriculture technology was highly developed. People living there used crop rotation systems to improve land productivity and invented irrigation systems, such as the Acacia Canal, to ensure stable agricultural production [13]. What is similar is that China also had thriving maritime trade, even though it is a representation of agricultural civilizations. The Maritime Silk Road, mediated by trade goods ranging from spices to ceramics and silk fabrics, became a bridge connecting different regions, and a maritime world system emerged earlier than that of the western world [14]. These facts have revealed one thing: the production structures of maritime and agricultural civilization are not completely opposed. Instead, they can complement each other in the same region. That is why this binary framework is isolated and one-sided in its approach to understanding historical and cultural phenomena.

2.4. The ideological underpinnings of geographical determinism

With the evidence and counterarguments presented in section 2.3, the notion that geography shapes civilization, which in turn shapes language, has been shown to be flawed. Given that this framework fails to adequately explain the differences of various civilizations, its continued use by scholars today is not due to its explanatory power but rather to its role as a political narrative tool shaped by ideological forces.

According to Morin, knowledge and ideology are interwoven, with the formation and dissemination of knowledge being influenced by social and cultural contexts that often carry ideological hues [15]. For instance, Hegel, who first came up with the concept of agriculture and

maritime civilizations, provided a theoretical basis for colonialism, as the expansionism of maritime civilization was seen as an inevitable historical development. He also believed that people who have evolved by the sea possess a certain superiority and lamented the “moral lowliness” of those who remain isolated, giving moral justification to western colonialism [16].

Similarly, in Japan, scholars like Umesao categorized Western Europe and Japan into the same “First Zone”, in order to assert that Japan was as advanced as the West [17]. The reason why he proposed this narrative is to confirm Japan's status as one of the few civilized countries in the world, to eliminate the inferiority complex after the defeat and even since the Meiji Restoration, and to restore and enhance the self-esteem of the Japanese people. Therefore, it can be said that the ecological view of history is a product of cultural nationalism [18]. Apart from that, other Japanese scholars also actively claimed Japan as a maritime nation to serve its economic goals, especially in overseas economic expansion during the Cold War [19]. China is not an exception of using this narrative as a political tool, either. Some scholars have employed geographic determinism to argue for the natural moral legitimacy of their nation, aligning with nationalist agendas to bolster state authority and unity by defining agricultural civilization to be more peaceful and harmonious [8].

In these cases, researchers have chosen to identify civilizations along geography in order to demonstrate the superiority of one civilization over others. Meanwhile, a greater number of scholars have employed evidence from various fields, including linguistics, to validate the reliability of this framework. But from a postcolonial perspective, continuing to employ the geographical determinism framework or the maritime-agricultural civilization dichotomy from the colonial era essentially fails to break free from the shackles of colonialism. Instead, a truly equal and diverse perspective of civilization should be established. For example, Bhabha argued that the dialectical relationship between subject/object, self/other, and essence/phenomenon should be opposed and replaced with concepts such as contradiction, division, bidirectionality, and ambiguity [20]. Only in this way can a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of civilization be achieved.

3. Conclusion

This study has critically examined the narratives of maritime and agricultural civilizations and their application in linguistic-geographical determinism. By tracing the historical formation of the dichotomy and analyzing its use in the fields of scripts, grammar, and pragmatics, the paper demonstrates that such a binary framework oversimplifies the complexity of linguistic development. Evidence shows that language cannot be reduced to geography alone, as civilizations are not shaped by a single environment but by multiple, overlapping, and interacting contexts. Furthermore, the ideological underpinnings of this framework, rooted in colonial and nationalist discourses, reveal that its persistence is often tied less to explanatory power than to political and cultural agendas. Thus, the claim that geography directly determines language is both theoretically flawed and empirically unconvincing.

However, this study has certain limitations. The analysis primarily focused on Chinese scholars, since the binary of maritime and agricultural civilizations is rarely used outside of Chinese academia. As a result, the international dimension of the debate remains unexplored. Moreover, the discussion has largely concentrated on macro-level determinism, leaving open the possibility that geography may exert influence on language in more localized or micro-level contexts, such as phonological adaptation, lexical innovation, or semantic change shaped by specific ecological conditions.

Future research may therefore broaden the scope in two directions. First, comparative studies could include perspectives from other regions to clarify whether alternative frameworks of linguistic

determinism exist beyond the Chinese context. Second, more empirical work (especially quantitative or corpus-based studies) could help assess to what extent smaller-scale geographical factors, such as climate or terrain, shape linguistic practices without falling into reductionist determinism. By addressing these questions, future scholarship may contribute to a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the interaction between language, geography, and ideology.

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