

ANCIENT CHINA—PART 1



The Huang He, or Yellow River, in China

Unit Overview

Chinese civilization began over three thousand years ago. The Chinese people farmed the river banks of two, mighty rivers, the Huang He and the Chang Jiang. Here they built cities, formed governments and developed a written language. In these respects, they were much like the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians and the inhabitants of the Indus River Valley. However, China also had traits that made its civilization different from the others. As you will see, much of this had to do with the region's geography.

The Geography of China

Civilization in ancient China emerged later than it did in other parts of the world. In some ways, it developed in a similar pattern. For example, the Chinese established permanent homes in river valleys, built cities and created a writing system. However, the region's geography also caused this civilization to flourish in some unique ways. Although China did have contact with the outside world, its ability to interact with other civilizations was limited.

The Gobi Desert



A number of geographic barriers made the movement of people between China and other areas difficult. To the southwest, the rugged **Tien Shan** and **Himalaya** Mountains challenged travelers. At the same time, thick jungles separated China from Southeast Asia. The **Gobi Desert** and the **Taklimakan Desert** cutoff access from the north and the west. The **Pacific Ocean**, which must have seemed endless in ancient times, was to the east. Nonetheless, even though it was geographically isolated, Chinese civilization grew along the banks of the region's major rivers.

China's Great Rivers

Two major river systems begin in the Himalayas and make their way across China. The **Huang He**, also known as the **Yellow River**, flows for over 3,000 miles before it empties into the Pacific Ocean. Sometimes described as the world's muddiest river, it carries a large amount of rich, yellow silt. When the Huang He floods, it leaves behind a new layer of soil. In both ancient and modern times, this has enabled small farms to produce large amounts of food. Although floods have benefits, they are also destructive. Flooding washes away homes and drowns people. For this reason, the Huang He is sometimes called "**China's sorrow**".

The Major Rivers of the North China Plain



Map courtesy of Mapswire

Chang Jiang, or the **Yangtze River**, is China's other major river system. It follows 3,400-mile course through central China before it flows into the **Yellow Sea**. It is the longest river in China. In fact, it is the longest river on the continent of Asia. Throughout China's history, these two rivers have provided transportation, irrigation and farmland. Almost 90% of China's land that is suitable for farming lies between the Huang He and the Chang Jiang. Click on the icon below to test your knowledge of Chinese geography.

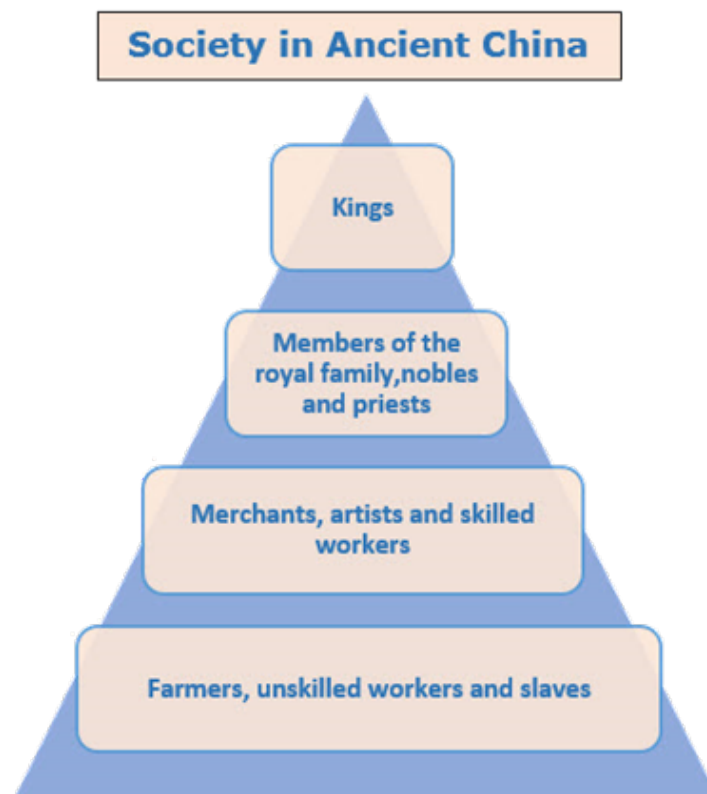


The Shang Dynasty

Historians have very little information about the beginning of Chinese civilization. However, archaeologists have found pieces of pottery dating back thousands of years along the banks of the Huang He. They have concluded that people farmed the land and built permanent homes here. As the population grew, towns appeared, and China's first

civilization emerged. There is also very little information about China's first leaders, but historians think that they were part of the **Xia Dynasty**. A **dynasty** is a line of rulers who belong to the same family. On the other hand, historians can tell us a great deal about the **Shang**, China's second dynasty.

The Shang family began to conquer towns and cities along the Huang He about 1750 BCE. The Shang leaders controlled the central part of the **North China Plain**, or the land between the Huang He and the Chang Jiang Rivers. As they conquered new territory, the kings sent members of the royal family to govern the more distant regions of the realm. The Shang built walled cities, including **Anyang**. This city became China's first capital. Unlike other ancient civilizations that you have studied, the Shang built cities, palaces and tombs out of wood and packed earth.



Like other civilizations, society in early China was based on a structure that can be pictured as a **pyramid**. The king and the royal family were regarded as the most important people. The king was the head of the army and a high priest, who communicated directly with the gods. Warriors were ranked just below them. Because the Shang built cities, Chinese society supported a class of craftsmen and artisans. They made bronze weapons, silk robes, jewelry, pottery and many other items. Merchants, who also made up this class, traded these products for things not found in northeastern China. Most people in Shang China were peasants. They prepared the land for planting and harvested the crops. When they

were not in the fields, they were forced to construct public projects. One of the most important was the building and repairing of the dikes. **Dikes** were walls built along the river banks to control flooding in certain areas. The population of China during the Shang Dynasty also included a small number of slaves, who were mostly captured during wars.

Religion in Ancient China

In Shang culture, it was very important to show respect for parents and grandparents. This way of thinking became part of the religion practiced in early China. The Chinese thought that the spirits of their **ancestors**, or departed family members, would provide help in times of need and would bring good luck. People in Shang China also worshipped gods and spirits that they believed lived in the mountains and the rivers. Today, many modern Chinese continue to honor their ancestors by visiting temples and by burning paper copies of clothing or food. These copies are symbols things that the dead may need in the afterlife.

Oracle Bone from Ancient China



Shang kings relied on gods and spirits for wisdom and power. Because they were also high priests, these rulers always consulted them before making any important decisions. They used **oracle bones** to predict the future. Oracle bones were broken turtle shells or bones from oxen. Kings and priests scratched questions on them. For example, a leader might ask if it was a good time to go to war or if someone would recover from an illness. Then, the

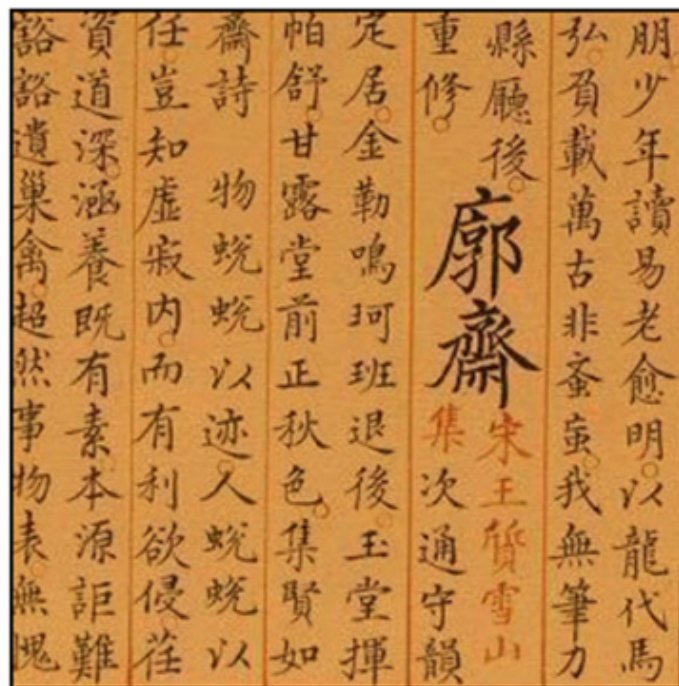
high priests placed hot, metal rods on the bones. This caused the bones to crack. Priests studied the cracks and interpreted the patterns as answers from the gods. Archeologists believe that scratches on oracle bones were the first examples of a written language in China.

The Development of Written Language

China's language in its written form began with **pictographs**. Pictographs are small pictures used to represent specific things, such as mountains, the sun, trees or animals. For ideas and more complicated concepts, the Chinese used ideographs. **Ideographs** combined two or more pictographs to show complex things, such as seasons of the year.

English, Arabic and Spanish are all examples of languages based on an **alphabet**. Each character in an alphabet stands for a particular sound. On the other hand, the Chinese language is very different. It does use some characters to represent sounds, but most stand for whole words. The characters are also made up of many different strokes. Over time, this resulted in a written language composed of thousands of characters. For example, a person would need to memorize over 1,500 characters just to write a few basic sentences. A well-educated person had to memorize over 10,000 characters.

Examples of Written Chinese Characters



In ancient China, this written language, based on pictographs and ideographs, served a very important purpose. Even though people throughout China spoke different languages, they all used the same written language. This helped to unify the Chinese people. In recent years, China has reduced the number of characters necessary for basic communication. However, Chinese is still one of the most difficult languages to learn.

Chinese Accomplishments during the Shang Dynasty

While the Shang ruled China, people learned a variety of skills that added to the world's growing body of technical knowledge. Chinese farmers were the first to plant seeds in organized rows rather than simply scattering them in the fields. They used water buffalos to help with the farm work. This made harvesting millet, rice and other grains more efficient. By 1000 BCE, the Chinese had discovered that the cocoons of silk worms, which fed on mulberry trees, could be used to make thread. These threads were woven together to make **silk**, a beautiful, luxurious cloth. Silk eventually became China's most valuable export. When the Shang ruled China, weapons and tools were made from **bronze**, a combination of copper and tin. Artists also used this metal to make sculptures, urns and drinking cups. The Shang rulers used these to decorate their palaces, along with jade and ivory carvings. Chinese workers fashioned fine dishes and cooking utensils out of white clay.

A Nobleman Wearing Chinese Silk Robes



The Shang kings lived a life of luxury, but their people did not. This eventually cost them their kingdom. **Wu Wang** led a successful rebellion against the Shang Dynasty in 1045 BCE. He founded the **Zhou Dynasty**, which would rule China for the next 800 years. What kind of leaders were the kings of the Zhou Dynasty? What do we know about them? How did life in ancient China change under their leadership? We will explore these questions in the next unit. In the meantime, click on the graphic pictured here to watch a video about the impact of the Shang Dynasty.



Time for a Quick Review

Before moving on to Unit 17, review the names and terms found in Unit 16. Be sure you can answer the “Can I” questions with a loud “yes”.

Can I

...identify the geographic features of China?

...cite the benefits and hazards of living near rivers?

...give examples of how humans modified the environment of China?

...cite examples of the enduring influence of ancient China?

...cite factors that limited Chinese contact with the outside world?



Additional Activities and Resources

[Unit 16 Organizer](#)

[Article with Quiz: Shang Dynasty—China's First Recorded History](#)