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River Dynasties in China

MAIN IDEA

POWER AND AUTHORITY The early rulers introduced ideas about government and society that shaped Chinese civilization.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The culture that took root during ancient times still affects Chinese ways of life today.

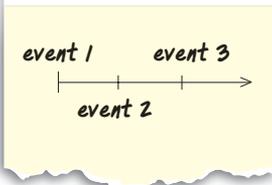
TERMS & NAMES

- loess
- oracle bone
- Mandate of Heaven
- dynastic cycle
- feudalism

SETTING THE STAGE The walls of China’s first cities were built 4,000 years ago. This was at least a thousand years after the walls of Ur, the great pyramids of Egypt, and the planned cities of the Indus Valley were built. Unlike the other three river valley civilizations, the civilization that began along one of China’s river systems continues to thrive today.

TAKING NOTES

Following Chronological Order On a time line, identify major events in early Chinese dynasties.



The Geography of China

Natural barriers somewhat isolated ancient China from all other civilizations. To China’s east lay the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. Mountain ranges and deserts dominate about two-thirds of China’s landmass. In west China lay the Taklimakan (TAH•kluh•muh•KAHN) Desert and the icy 15,000-foot Plateau of Tibet. To the southwest are the Himalayas. And to the north are the desolate Gobi Desert and the Mongolian Plateau.

River Systems Two major river systems flow from the mountainous west to the Pacific Ocean. The Huang He (hwahng•HUH), also known as the Yellow River, is found in the north. In central China, the Chang Jiang (chang•jyhang), also called Yangtze (yang•SEE), flows east to the Yellow Sea. The Huang He, whose name means “yellow river,” deposits huge amounts of yellowish silt when it overflows its banks. This silt is actually fertile soil called **loess** (LOH•uhs), which is blown by the winds from deserts to the west and north.

Environmental Challenges Like the other ancient civilizations in this chapter, China’s first civilization developed in a river valley. China, too, faced the dangers of floods—but its geographic isolation posed its own challenges.

- The Huang He’s floods could be disastrous. Sometimes floods devoured whole villages, earning the river the nickname “China’s Sorrow.”
- Because of China’s relative geographic isolation, early settlers had to supply their own goods rather than trading with outside peoples.
- China’s natural boundaries did not completely protect these settlers from outsiders. Invasions from the west and north occurred again and again in Chinese history.

China’s Heartland Only about 10 percent of China’s land is suitable for farming. Much of the land lies within the small plain between the Huang He and the



The Huang He, or Yellow River, is named for the color of its silt. This silt nurtured early development of Chinese civilization and is still a vital resource today.



Yellow silt gives the Huang He a distinctive color.

GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

- 1. Location** Describe the location of the Huang He and Chang Jiang in terms of where they begin and end.
- 2. Region** What area did the Shang and Zhou dynasties control?

Chang Jiang in eastern China. This plain, known as the North China Plain, is China's heartland. Throughout China's long history, its political boundaries have expanded and contracted depending on the strength or weakness of its ruling families. Yet the heartland of China remained the center of its civilization.

Civilization Emerges in Shang Times

Fossil remains show that ancestors of modern humans lived in southwest China about 1.7 million years ago. In northern China near Beijing, a *Homo erectus* skeleton was found. Known as Peking man, his remains show that people settled the river valley as much as 500,000 years ago.

The First Dynasties Even before the Sumerians settled in southern Mesopotamia, early Chinese cultures were building farming settlements along the Huang He. Around 2000 B.C., some of these settlements grew into China's first cities. According to legend, the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia (shyah) Dynasty, emerged about this time. Its leader was an engineer and mathematician named Yu. His flood-control and irrigation projects helped tame the Huang He and its tributaries so that settlements could grow. The legend of Yu reflects the level of technology of a society making the transition to civilization.

About the time the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley fell to outside invaders, a people called the Shang rose to power in northern China.

History *in* Depth

Lady Hao's Tomb

Lady Hao was a wife of king Wu Ding, a Shang ruler, during the 1200s B.C. Her relatively small grave contained some 460 bronze artifacts, 750 jade objects, and more than 6,880 cowry shells. Also found in the tomb beside Lady Hao's coffin were the remains of 16 people and 6 dogs.

Writings found in other places reveal a remarkable figure in Lady Hao. On behalf of her husband, she led more than one military campaign, once with a force of 13,000 troops. She also took charge of rituals dedicated to the spirits of Shang ancestors, a duty reserved for the most distinguished members of the royal family.

INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY

INTERNET ACTIVITY Create a multimedia presentation about Lady Hao's tomb and its contents. Go to classzone.com for your research.

The Shang Dynasty lasted from around 1700 B.C. to 1027 B.C. It was the first family of Chinese rulers to leave written records. The Shang kings built elaborate palaces and tombs that have been uncovered by archaeologists. The artifacts reveal much about Shang society.

Early Cities Among the oldest and most important Shang cities was Anyang (ahn•YAHNG), one of the capitals of the Shang Dynasty. Unlike the cities of the Indus Valley or Fertile Crescent, Anyang was built mainly of wood. The city stood in a forest clearing. The higher classes lived in timber-framed houses with walls of clay and straw. These houses lay inside the city walls. The peasants and craftspeople lived in huts outside the city.

The Shang surrounded their cities with massive earthen walls for protection. The archaeological remains of one city include a wall of packed earth 118 feet wide at its base that encircled an area of 1.2 square miles. It likely took 10,000 men more than 12 years to build such a structure. Like the pyramids of Egypt or the cities of the Indus Valley, these walls demonstrate the Shang rulers' ability to raise and control large forces of workers. **A**

Shang peoples needed walled cities because they were constantly waging war. The chariot, one of the major tools of war, was probably first introduced by contact with cultures from western Asia. Professional warriors underwent lengthy training to learn the techniques of driving and shooting from horse-drawn chariots.

MAIN IDEA

Comparing

A What did Shang cities have in common with those of Sumer?

The Development of Chinese Culture

In the Chinese view, people who lived outside of Chinese civilization were barbarians. Because the Chinese saw their country as the center of the civilized world, their own name for China was the Middle Kingdom.

The culture that grew up in China had strong unifying bonds. From earliest times, the group seems to have been more important than the individual. A person's chief loyalty throughout life was to the family. Beyond this, people owed obedience and respect to the ruler of the Middle Kingdom, just as they did to the elders in their family.

Family The family was central to Chinese society. The most important virtue was respect for one's parents. The elder men in the family controlled the family's property and made important decisions. Women, on the other hand, were treated as inferiors. They were expected to obey their fathers, their husbands, and later, their own sons. When a girl was between 13 and 16 years old, her marriage was arranged, and she moved into the house of her husband. Only by bearing sons for her husband's family could she hope to improve her status.

Social Classes Shang society was sharply divided between nobles and peasants. A ruling class of warrior-nobles headed by a king governed the Shang. These noble families owned the land. They governed the scattered villages within the Shang lands and sent tribute to the Shang ruler in exchange for local control.

Religious Beliefs In China, the family was closely linked to religion. The Chinese believed that the spirits of family ancestors had the power to bring good fortune

Vocabulary

tribute: payment made to keep peace

or disaster to living members of the family. The Chinese did not regard these spirits as mighty gods. Rather, the spirits were more like troublesome or helpful neighbors who demanded attention and respect. Every family paid respect to the father's ancestors and made sacrifices in their honor.

Through the spirits of the ancestors, the Shang consulted the gods. The Shang worshiped a supreme god, Shang Di, as well as many lesser gods. Shang kings consulted the gods through the use of **oracle bones**, animal bones and tortoise shells on which priests had scratched questions for the gods. After inscribing a question on the bone, a priest applied a hot poker to it, which caused it to crack. The priests then interpreted the cracks to see how the gods had answered.

Development of Writing In the Chinese method of writing, each character generally stands for one syllable or unit of language. Recall that many of the Egyptian hieroglyphs stood for sounds in the spoken language. In contrast, there were practically no links between China's spoken language and its written language. One could read Chinese without being able to speak a word of it. (This seems less strange when you think of our own number system. Both a French person and an American can understand the written equation $2 + 2 = 4$. But an American may not understand the spoken statement "Deux et deux font quatre.")

The Chinese system of writing had one major advantage. People in all parts of China could learn the same system of writing, even if their spoken languages were very different. Thus, the Chinese written language helped unify a large and diverse land, and made control much easier.

The disadvantage of the Chinese system was the enormous number of written characters to be memorized—a different one for each unit of language. A person needed to know over 1,500 characters to be barely literate. To be a true scholar, one needed to know at least 10,000 characters. For centuries, this severely limited the number of literate, educated Chinese. As a general rule, a nobleperson's children learned to write, but peasant children did not. **B**



▲ The earliest evidence of Chinese writing is seen on oracle bones like this one found in the city of Anyang.

MAIN IDEA

Recognizing Effects

B How did writing help unite China?

Chinese Writing

The earliest writing systems in the world—including Chinese, Sumerian, and Egyptian—developed from pictographs, or simplified drawings of objects. The writing system used in China today is directly related

to the pictographic writing found on Shang oracle bones. As you can see in the chart below, the ancient pictographs can still be recognized in many modern Chinese characters.

	ox	goat, sheep	tree	moon	earth	water	field	heaven	to pray
Ancient symbol									
Modern character	牛	羊	木	月	土	水	田	天	祝



Zhou and the Dynastic Cycle

Around 1027 B.C., a people called the Zhou (joh) overthrew the Shang and established their own dynasty. The Zhou had adopted much of the Shang culture. Therefore, the change in dynasty did not bring sweeping cultural change. Nevertheless, Zhou rule brought new ideas to Chinese civilization.

Mandate of Heaven To justify their conquest, the Zhou leaders declared that the final Shang king had been such a poor ruler that the gods had taken away the Shang’s rule and given it to the Zhou. This justification developed over time into a broader view that royal authority came from heaven. A just ruler had divine approval, known as the **Mandate of Heaven**. A wicked or foolish king could lose the Mandate of Heaven and so lose the right to rule. The Duke of Shao, an aide of the Zhou leader who conquered the Shang, described the mandate:

PRIMARY SOURCE

Heaven, unpitying, has sent down ruin on Yin [another name for Shang]. Yin has lost the Mandate, and we Zhou have received it. I dare not say that our fortune would continue to prosper, even though I believe that heaven favors those who are sincere in their intentions. I dare not say, either that it would end in certain disaster. . . .

The Mandate of Heaven is not easy to gain. It will be lost when men fail to live up to the reverent and illustrious virtues of their forefathers.

DUKE OF SHAO, quoted in *The Chinese Heritage*

The Mandate of Heaven became central to the Chinese view of government. Floods, riots, and other calamities might be signs that the ancestral spirits were displeased with a king’s rule. In that case, the Mandate of Heaven might pass to another noble family. This was the Chinese explanation for rebellion, civil war, and the rise of a new dynasty. Historians describe the pattern of rise, decline, and replacement of dynasties as the **dynastic cycle**, shown above. 🕒

Control Through Feudalism The Zhou Dynasty controlled lands that stretched far beyond the Huang He in the north to the Chang Jiang in the south. To govern this vast area, it gave control over different regions to members of the royal family and other trusted nobles. This established a system called **feudalism**. Feudalism is a political system in which nobles, or lords, are granted the use of lands that legally belong to the king. In return, the nobles owe loyalty and military service to the king and protection to the people who live on their estates. Similar systems would arise centuries later in both Japan and Europe.

At first, the local lords lived in small walled towns and had to submit to the superior strength and control of the Zhou rulers. Gradually, however, the lords grew stronger as the towns grew into cities and expanded into the surrounding territory.

Vocabulary

mandate: a command or instruction from a higher authority

MAIN IDEA

Synthesizing

🕒 According to Chinese beliefs, what role did the Mandate of Heaven play in the dynastic cycle?

Peoples who had been hostile toward the lords gradually accepted their rule and adopted Zhou ways. As a result, the local lords became less dependent on the king. More and more, they fought among themselves and with neighboring peoples for wealth and territory.

Improvements in Technology and Trade The Zhou Dynasty produced many innovations.

- Roads and canals were built to stimulate trade and agriculture.
- Coined money was introduced, which further improved trade.
- Blast furnaces that produced cast iron were developed.

Zhou cast iron production would not be matched in Europe until the Middle Ages. The Zhou used iron to create weapons, especially dagger-axes and swords. They also used it for common agricultural tools such as sickles, knives, and spades. Iron tools made farm work easier and more productive. The ability to grow more food helped Zhou farmers support thriving cities.

A Period of Warring States The Zhou ruled from around 1027 to 256 B.C. The Zhou empire was generally peaceful and stable. Gradually, however, Zhou rule weakened. In 771 B.C., nomads from the north and west sacked the Zhou capital and murdered the Zhou monarch. A few members of the royal family escaped and set up a new capital at Luoyang.

However, the Zhou kings at Luoyang were almost powerless, and they could not control the noble families. The lords sought every opportunity to pick fights with neighboring lords. As their power grew, these warlords claimed to be kings in their own territory. As a result, the later years of the Zhou are often called “the time of the warring states.”

Amidst the bloodshed, traditional values collapsed. The very heart of Chinese civilization—love of order, harmony, and respect for authority—had been replaced with chaos, arrogance, and defiance. As you will learn in Chapter 4, the dynastic cycle was about to bring a new start to Chinese civilization.



▲ These Chinese coins are made of bronze. Their shape resembles a digging tool such as a hoe or spade.

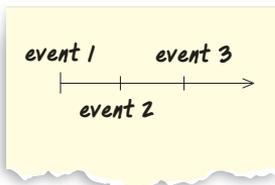
SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT

TERMS & NAMES 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- loess
- oracle bone
- Mandate of Heaven
- dynastic cycle
- feudalism

USING YOUR NOTES

2. Which event do you think was a turning point in Chinese history?



MAIN IDEAS

3. Between which two rivers is the heartland of China found?
4. What family obligations did a Chinese person have?
5. How is the dynastic cycle connected to the Mandate of Heaven?

CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. **RECOGNIZING EFFECTS** In your judgment, what are the benefits and drawbacks of the belief that the group was more important than the individual?
7. **COMPARING** How did the social classes in Shang society differ from those in Egyptian society?
8. **ANALYZING MOTIVES** Do you think that the Zhou Dynasty's downfall resulted from its method of control? Why or why not?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **POWER AND AUTHORITY** Study the dynastic cycle. Then write a **letter to the editor** suggesting that the current ruler should be replaced.

CONNECT TO TODAY CREATING A POSTER

Research the Three Gorges Dam Project in China. The project will place dams on the Chang Jiang. Create a **poster** showing the locations of the dams, some statistics about them, and an explanation of the project's purpose.