2 Ancient China

READ TO LEARN

Key Vocabulary
plateau
dynasty
ancestor
oracle

Key Places
Huang River Valley
An-yang

Read Aloud

Civilization in the land known as China began more than 3,000 years ago. As you know, there were civilizations in other parts of the world before China. However, these earlier civilizations did not survive into modern times. The Chinese civilization is special because it exists even today. It is the oldest continuous civilization in the history of the world.

Read for Purpose

1. WHAT YOU KNOW: What river valley civilizations have you studied?
2. WHAT YOU WILL LEARN: How do we know that China has a rich and ancient past?

GEOGRAPHY OF THE HUANG RIVER VALLEY

Some of the oldest signs of life left behind by early people are found in China. By 4000 B.C. farming communities had grown up throughout the Huang (hwâng) River Valley. It was along the banks of the Huang [Hwang] River that civilization was born in China.

The mighty Huang River begins its long journey to the sea in the vast plateau (pla tô') of Tibet. A plateau is an area of flat land raised above the surrounding land. The Huang winds its way across the vast North China Plain and finally empties into the Yellow Sea.

The Huang and its tributaries brought both joy and sadness to the people of the North China Plain. The rivers became known as "China's Sorrow." In their ordinary floodings, fertile deposits of silt were left behind. About every 25 years, however, terrible flooding occurred. River waters rushed over the surrounding land. These terrible floods washed crops away, causing famines lasting many seasons and bringing "sorrow" to China's villagers.
THE SHANG DYNASTY

The farming villages of the Huang River Valley, like the other river valley civilizations you have studied, grew into towns and cities. Then, in about 1700 B.C., a powerful family called the Shang united the valley. They began a legacy of family rule that lasted until the twentieth century.

The Shang founded, or set up, a dynasty (di' nas tē). A dynasty is a line of rulers who belong to the same family and pass control from one generation to the next. The Shang dynasty lasted nearly 600 years, from about 1700 B.C. until 1122 B.C.

Sometime after 1600 B.C., the Shang built a great city called An-yang (ān' yāng). An-yang rose on one of the Huang's many tributaries. Like the great cities of Egypt and Mesopotamia, An-yang was the political and cultural center of ancient China.
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY

The family was also an important governing unit in ancient China. Everyone's role in the family was fixed from birth to death. The elderly, or the oldest members of the family, were especially respected and had a lot of influence. The young had almost no say in family affairs. The oldest man was in charge of the family's possessions. He also had final approval of any important family matters. The oldest woman had power over all other women in the household. Children were expected to obey their parents and grandparents without question. One of the most important values in Chinese society was respect for one's parents.

In ancient China, the family was closely linked to religion. The spirits of family ancestors (an' ses ters), or the people from whom one is descended, were very special. Spirits of dead ancestors were thought to have the powers to bring good luck or disaster to living members of the family. The Chinese did not think their ancestors were mighty gods. They believed the spirits of their ancestors were more like helpful or troublesome neighbors. Every family paid respect to its ancestors and made small shrines in their honor.

ORACLE BONES

About 100 years ago on the North China Plain, farmers began to plow land that had not been cultivated "as
long as they could remember.” In these fields the farmers found strange bones. Even more strange were the marks and writing on them. The bones were also oddly cracked.

At first the farmers thought the bones were those of ancient dragons, a popular animal of Chinese legends. Later, some of the bones were given to archaeologists for study. These scholars knew that the bones did not come from dragons but from the shoulder blades of pigs and oxen. Moreover, scholars also realized that the markings on the bones were clearly a form of writing—the earliest trace of writing in East Asia.

This is how writing on the oracle bones began. It worked this way. Suppose that a Shang king wanted to know if a drought were about to strike the land. He had his scribe write the following question on a bone: “Is there a drought coming?” Then, the king gave the bone to an oracle (ərˈə ˈkəl). Oracles are special priests who are believed to receive messages from the gods. In order to receive the answer, the oracle applied heat to the bone until it cracked. Then he “read” the cracks and interpreted what he believed to be the gods’ answer to the king’s question.

The king was not the only one to consult these oracle bones. Many of the Shang people used them to ask the gods their own questions. If you had lived in ancient China, what kinds of questions might you have liked to ask?

**CHINESE WRITING**

Like the writings of the ancient Egyptians and the Sumerians, the writings of the ancient Chinese tell us about a rich history. Like hieroglyphics, the earliest examples of Chinese writing show pictures of objects. Modern Chinese writing developed from the system of picture writing used in China 3,500 years ago.

The Chinese language does not have an alphabet. As you know, there are 26
The scribes of ancient China drew pictures for words. How did the symbol for the word meaning "mountain" change over time?

THE LEGACY OF ANCIENT CHINA

The Huang River Valley is today part of a vast modern nation. Much of present-day Chinese culture traces its origin back to the Shang dynasty. Even today, remembering the past has a special significance in China. The Chinese believe that the events of long ago should be used as models or guides for the present. "Those who ignore the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them," one Chinese philosopher said. In Chapter 19, you will learn more about the history of China.

Check Your Reading

1. What are ancestors?
2. How does Chinese writing differ from our writing?
3. GEOGRAPHY SKILL: Why is the Huang River known as "China's Sorrow"?
4. THINKING SKILL: How was the Huang civilization similar to the Indus civilization? How was it different?