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# River Dynasties in China

## TERMS & NAMES

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

### MAIN IDEA

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.

**SETTING THE STAGE** The walls of China's first cities were built 1,500 years after the walls of Ur, 1,000 years after the great pyramids of Egypt, and 1,000 years after the planned cities of the Indus valley. Though a late starter, the civilization that began along one of China's river systems 3,500 years ago continues to thrive today. The reason for this endurance lies partly in China's geography.

## The Geography of China

Natural barriers isolated ancient China from all other civilizations. To China's east lay the Pacific Ocean. To the west lay the Taklimakan (TAH-kloh-muh-KAHN) desert and the icy 14,000-foot Plateau of Tibet. To the southwest were the Himalaya Mountains. And to the north was the desolate Gobi Desert and the Mongolian Plateau. Two major river systems flow from the mountainous west to the Pacific Ocean. They are the Huang He (hwahng-HUH) in the north and the Yangtze (yang-SEE), in central China.

**China's Heartland** China's geography helps explain why early settlements developed along these main river systems. Mountain ranges and deserts dominate about two-thirds of China's land mass. About 90 percent of the remaining land that is suitable for farming lies within the comparatively small plain between the Huang He and Yangtze in eastern China. This plain was 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 China remained a center of civilization. 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.

**Environmental Challenges** Like the other ancient civilizations in this chapter, China's first civilization arose in a river valley. Then as now, the Huang He, whose name means "yellow river," deposited huge amounts of dusty yellowish silt when it overflowed its banks. This silt is actually fertile soil called **loess** (LOH-uhs) that is blown by the winds from deserts to the west. Like the Tigris, Euphrates, and Indus, the Huang He's floods could be generous or ruinous. At its worst, the floods devoured whole villages, earning the river the nickname "China's Sorrow." (One great flood in A.D. 1887 killed nearly a million people.)

Because of China's relative geographic isolation, early settlers had to supply their own goods rather than trading with outside peoples. However, 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.

### Background

With a few exceptions, this book uses the Pinyin system for writing Chinese names, which is now standard in most publications.

### Background

The Yangtze is also called the Chang Jiang (chahng jyahng).

## CONNECT to TODAY

### Three Gorges Project

The world's largest dam is being built between the dramatic granite cliffs that overlook the Yangtze River in central China. The dam, which is slated to open in 2003, promises to provide China with electrical power equivalent to ten nuclear power plants. However, no one is certain how control of the river's flooding will affect the plains downstream from the dam, which provide one-third of China's food.

Chinese officials hail the dam as an engineering achievement that ranks with the 2,000-year-old Great Wall of China. Yet its impact will affect both the future and the past. The lake created by the dam will displace more than a million Chinese residents. It will also drown forever the archaeological sites of some of China's earliest settlements.



## Civilization Emerges in Shang Times

Although Chinese civilization arose later than the others discussed in this chapter, humans have inhabited China for about a million years. 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 about 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. Yu's flood-control and irrigation projects helped tame the Huang He and its tributaries so settlements could grow. Since there are no written records from this period, the actual events of this time are unknown. During this period, however, farm surpluses allowed cities to grow. However, 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. The Shang Dynasty, which lasted from about 1532 to 1027 B.C., became the first family of Chinese rulers to leave written records. The Shang kings also built elaborate palaces and tombs that have been uncovered by archaeologists. Artifacts found among the remains have revealed a great deal 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



## SPOTLIGHT ON

### Lady Hao's Tomb

Archaeologists have discovered several Shang royal tombs near Anyang. While most of these vast underground tombs had been robbed over the centuries, a significant one was unearthed intact—the tomb of Fu Hao.

Lady Hao was a wife of king Wu Ding, who ruled during the 1200s B.C. Her relatively small grave contained some 460 bronze artifacts, 750 jade objects, and more than 6,880 cowry shells. The other, far larger Shang royal tombs must have contained even greater wealth.

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.

clearing. The higher classes lived in timber-framed houses with walls of clay and straw. These houses lay inside the city walls. The peasants lived in hovels 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, these walls demonstrate the Shang rulers' ability to raise and control large forces of workers.

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. The professional warriors, who made up the noble class, underwent lengthy training to learn the techniques of driving and shooting from horse-drawn chariots.

**Social Classes** Shang society was sharply divided between nobles and peasants. The Shang were governed by a ruling class of warrior-nobles headed by a king. 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.

Meanwhile, peasants tilled the soil for their overlords. The farmers had no plows, only wooden digging sticks, and hoes and sickles made of stone. (The Shang made magnificent bronze weapons and ceremonial vessels, but they believed bronze was too precious to be used for mere tools.) The soil was so rich, though, that it yielded two crops a year of millet, rice, and wheat.

## The Origins of Chinese Culture

The culture that grew up in China had strong bonds that made for unity. From earliest times, the group seems to have been more important than the individual. Above all, people's lives were governed by their duties to two important authorities—their family and their king or emperor.

**Family and Society** 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.

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.

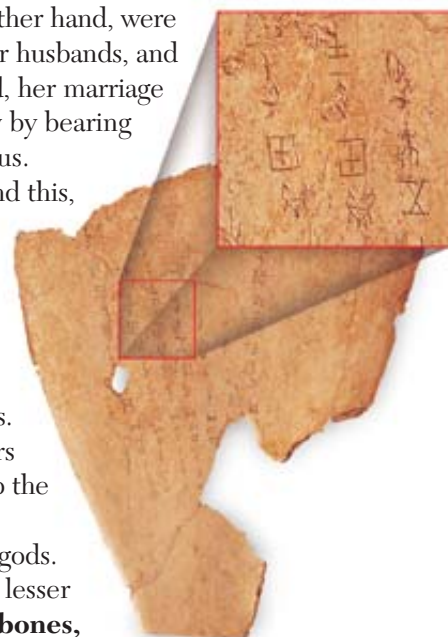
**Religious Beliefs** In China, the family was closely linked to religion. The Chinese believed that the spirits of family ancestors had the power to bring good fortune or disaster to living members of the family. The Chinese did not regard these spirits as mighty gods. Rather, the spirits were more 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.

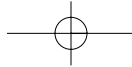
Through the spirits of the ancestors, the Shang consulted the gods. The Shang worshiped a supreme god, Shang Di, as well as many lesser gods. Shang kings consulted the gods through the use of **oracle bones**,

### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

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

This Shang oracle bone was found in the city of Anyang.





## 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

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** The earliest evidence of Chinese writing comes from the oracle bones. In the Chinese method of writing, each character stands for an idea, not a sound. 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.

The disadvantage of the Chinese system was the enormous number of written characters to be memorized—a different one for each idea. A person needed to know over 1,000 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 noble's children learned to write, but a peasant's children did not.

**Shang Technology and Artistry** People who were skilled in special crafts made up a separate class in Chinese society. Like other commoners, this group lived outside the walls of cities such as Anyang. They manufactured weapons, jewelry, and religious items for the city's nobles.

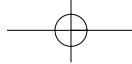
Bronzeworking was the leading craft in which Shang artisans excelled. Beautiful bronze objects were used in religious rituals and were also symbols of royal power. Some of these objects were small and graceful, such as bronze bells. Others were massive caldrons, weighing almost a ton.

In earliest Shang times, the Chinese also learned how to make silk cloth by drawing the fine threads from a silkworm's cocoon and weaving them into a light, beautiful fabric. Nobles prided themselves on their finely embroidered silk shoes, which they regarded as a symbol of civilization.



This detail from the ritual vessel shown on page 25 reveals the artistry of Shang bronze workers.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**B. Recognizing Effects** How did writing help unite China?



## Zhou Bring New Ideas

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

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:

### Vocabulary

**mandate:** a command or instruction from a higher authority.

### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

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.

Chinese history is marked by a succession of dynasties until dynastic rule was finally overthrown in the early 1900s. Historians describe the pattern of rise, decline, and replacement of dynasties as the **dynastic cycle**.

### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

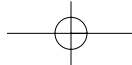
**C. Synthesizing**  
According to Chinese beliefs, what role did the Mandate of Heaven play in the dynastic cycle?



### Control Through Feudalism

The Zhou Dynasty controlled lands that stretched far beyond the Huang He in the north to the Yangtze in the south. In response to the challenge of governing this vast area, they 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. 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** Although warfare was common throughout the Zhou Dynasty, the era also produced many innovations. As large cities grew, the Zhou built roads and canals to supply them. These in turn stimulated trade and agriculture. The Zhou also introduced coined money, which further improved trade. To run the daily operations of the cities, a new class of civil servants, or government administrative workers, emerged.

The major technological advancement was the use of iron. The Zhou developed blast furnaces that allowed them to produce cast iron. This skill 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. Since iron is stronger than bronze, 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. For the first 300 years of this long period, 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 city of Hao, the Zhou capital. They murdered the Zhou monarch, but a few members of the royal family escaped eastward to the city of Luoyang (lwoh-YAHNG). Here in this new capital on the Huang He, the Zhou Dynasty pretended to rule for another 500 years.

In fact, the Zhou kings at Luoyang were almost powerless, and they could not control the noble families. Trained as warriors, 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.”

Even the style of warfare changed. Under feudalism, nobles had fought according to an honorable code of conduct. With the decline of law and order, professional warriors and mercenaries set the rules of battle. Peasant foot soldiers, supported by cavalry, replaced chariots as the main force on the battlefield. New weapons came into use, such as the crossbow, which would not be introduced in Europe until the Middle Ages.

In this time of bloodshed, traditional values collapsed. At the very heart of Chinese civilization was a love of order, harmony, and respect for authority. Now there was chaos, arrogance, and defiance. How could China be saved? The dynastic cycle was about to bring a new start at a time when migrations and invasions were changing the lands of all the early civilizations.



These Chinese coins shaped like a hoe and a knife come from the Zhou period. Their shapes may reflect the practice of using tools such as hoes and knives for payment before coins existed.

#### Background

By about 1000 B.C., most advanced civilizations produced iron tools and weapons. The cast iron of the Chinese was produced by a special process in which molten iron was poured into molds and allowed to harden.

#### Vocabulary

**mercenary:** a soldier who will fight in any army for pay.

## Section 4 Assessment

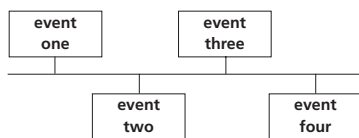
### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

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

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Create a time line of the major developments in the early Chinese dynasties, using a form such as the one below.



Which event do you think was the most critical turning point? Why?

### 3. ANALYZING

The group was often more important than the individual in Chinese culture. In your judgment, what are the benefits and drawbacks of this belief?

#### THINK ABOUT

- family roles
- the characteristics of a ruler
- role of spirit gods

### 4. ANALYZING THEMES

**Power and Authority** Do you think that the Zhou Dynasty's downfall resulted because of their method of control? Why or why not?

#### THINK ABOUT

- feudalism
- the large division of rich and poor
- the vast controlled lands
- the noble-king relationship