

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# EVERYTHING ABOUT ANCIENT CHINA

## GEOGRAPHY

Ancient China was a very geographically isolated area. To the west and southwest were the Tien Shan and Himalaya Mountains and a desert. To the southeast was a jungle and to the north was the Gobi desert. This isolation led the ancient Chinese to believe that China was the center of the Earth and the sole source of civilization, therefore naming themselves the “Middle Kingdom”.

Chinese culture began around 1500 BCE. They had a very advanced civilization. The ancient Chinese first lived along the Huang He River (also called the Yellow River) and the Yangzi River. These rivers helped the people grow crops and feed the large population. The rivers gave them water for irrigation and also transportation.



Chinese history began in the Huang He River Valley where Neolithic people learned to farm. The people need to control this river so they could grow food. If they could not control the river then they would not have irrigation and could not grow crops. Without crops they could not live. This need to control the river led to a very strong central government in ancient China. The Huang He River was also called the Yellow River. The Huang He/Yellow River got its name from the loess. Loess is a fine windblown yellow soil that is in the river. As this loess settles on the bottom of the river the water rises and then there is a flood. If the people could not control the floods then their crops and homes could be destroyed and people would die. Because of the floods the Huang He River was also called the “River of Sorrows” because it could bring such sadness to the people.

## THE SHANG DYNASTY

About 1650 BCE the Shang dynasty ruled China. They ruled until 1027 BCE. By studying the artifacts left behind by the Shang people we know that noblewomen had high social status. Most people in ancient China were peasants. The farmers lived together in farming villages. They lived in homes that had dirt floors that were dug below the ground. They did this to keep warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Peasants had very hard lives. Everyone in the family worked long days farming in the fields. When they were not farming they had to work for the king repairing irrigation ditches and dikes. If a war started then the peasant men had to go and fight.

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The Shang prayed to many gods (polytheistic) and also nature spirits. The Chinese people believed that the gods would not listen to prayers from common people; the gods would only listen to prayers from the ancestors of the king. This made the king very powerful because the people need him to pray to his ancestors to ask the gods for good things like health, wealth and victory in war. Later on the people decided that everyone could pray to their ancestors and the king was not the only one allowed to do this anymore. This special respect for their deceased (dead) ancestors is called “veneration of ancestors.” The people would pray to their deceased ancestors and ask them to speak to the gods and help them. The Chinese believed that Yin and Yang had to be in harmony for the well-being of the universe. Yin and Yang represent opposites –Yin was Earth, darkness and female forces and Yang was heaven, light and male forces.

## ORACLE BONES

The Ancient Chinese used oracle bones to see what would be in the future. On animal bones or turtle shells the priests would write a question. The question usually needed a yes or no answer. Priests then heated the bone or shell until it cracked. The cracks were then interpreted for the king. These answers were thought to be advice from the ancestors or gods.

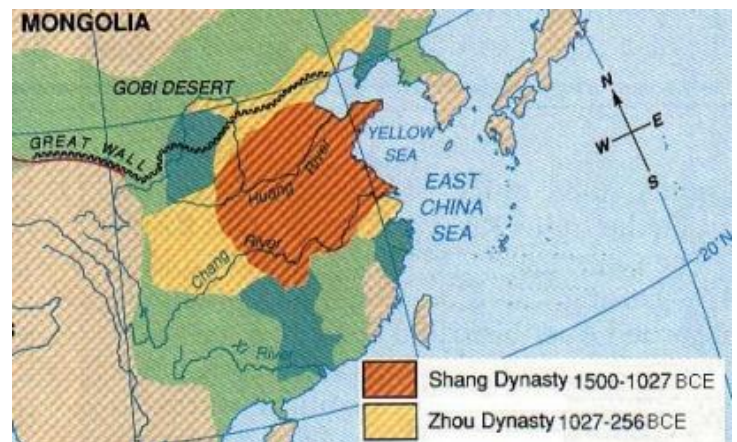


## ANCIENT CHINESE WRITING

Chinese writing is very difficult to learn. In ancient times only the wealthy learned to read and write. Even though it was a very hard language to learn, it did unite the people of the Chinese empire. Remember, China was a very isolated area. The ancient Chinese did not trade with other people very often until about 1000 BCE. By using the same kind of writing, people from different parts of the Chinese empire could communicate with each other. These people did not usually speak the same language, but they did write the same language. This brought the many different people together.

## THE ZHOU DYNASTY

In 1027 BCE, the Zhou fought the Shang and beat them. The Zhou dynasty ruled China until 256 BCE. Under the rule of the Zhou, China created a feudal state. Feudalism was a type of government where local lords ruled over their own land but owed military support and loyalty to the ruler. Feudal rulers had a lot of power. During the Zhou dynasty China’s economy grew. They learned how to make iron and started making their weapons and farm tools out of it. Iron was stronger and cheaper so the Chinese had better weapons and tools and could give these weapons and tools to more people because they were cheap to



make. During the Zhou dynasty the Chinese made the first books. The Chinese also began using money for the first time. The use of money made trade easier. New roads and canals were built and this also helped trade grow and more trade means they will have a better economy. When the economy grew the population also grew. By the end of the Zhou Dynasty, China had increased in size, population, and prosperity (prosperity means success and wealth).

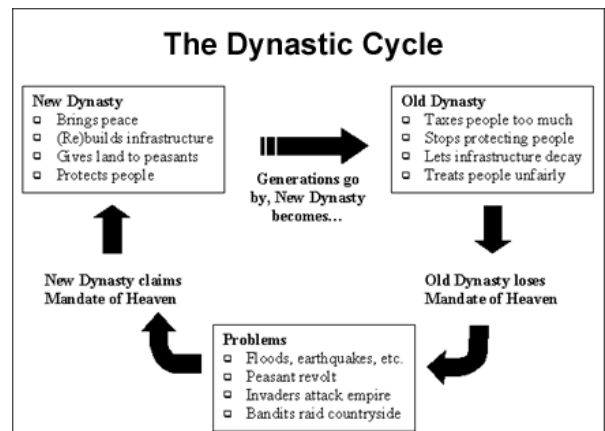
## THE SILK ROAD

By 1000 BCE the Chinese had learned how to make silk. Only nobles and royalty could buy this expensive beautiful fabric. Silk became China's most important and valuable export (exports are goods that are sent to another place and sold to other people). The Chinese did not tell anyone how to make this silk because they did not want other people to steal this secret and take this profitable (profitable means making a lot of money) export away from them. The trade route (road) that took the silk to other parts of the world was called the Silk Road. The Silk Road linked China to the west.



## THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN

The Mandate of Heaven was the divine right to rule. This means that the rulers of ancient China believed that the gods had given them the right to rule by giving them the Mandate of Heaven. If China was having all good things like wealth, good crops and victory in war, then they believed the ruler had the Mandate of Heaven. When things started to go bad in China, like sickness, bad crops, floods and defeat in war, then they believed that gods had taken the Mandate of Heaven away from the ruler and they needed to find someone new to rule them. When a new person came to power in China they would say that person now had the Mandate of Heaven, or the right to rule given to them by the gods. As long as the dynasty provided good government, it kept the Mandate of Heaven. If the rulers became weak or corrupt (not honest), the Chinese believed that Heaven would take away its support for that ruler. The rise and fall of dynasties was called the dynastic cycle. Each time a new ruler came to power the dynastic cycle started over.





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- 1) What made ancient China a very isolated area?
- 2) Why was the Huang He River also called the “River of Sorrows?”
- 3) Why did the Shang pray to their ancestors?
- 4) What does veneration of ancestors mean?
- 5) What were oracle bones?
- 6) How did Chinese writing create unity?
- 7) List three accomplishments of the Zhou dynasty.
- 8) Why did the Chinese try and not tell anyone how to make silk?
- 9) Were the ancient Chinese monotheistic or polytheistic?