



# River Dynasties in China

Chapter Two Section Four



# Geography of China

- ☞ Natural barriers isolated China from all other civilizations
  - West- Taklimaken Desert and the Plateau of Tibet
  - Southwest- Himalayan mountains
  - North - Gobi desert and Mongolian Plateau
- ☞ Two major river systems flow from the mountains in the west to the Pacific Ocean
  - North- Huang He River
  - Central China- Yangtze River
- ☞ Mountain ranges and deserts dominate 2/3 of China's land mass.
- ☞ 90% of the remaining land that is arable lies within the plain found between the Yangtze and Huang He rivers.

# The Chinese View

- ☛ The Chinese viewed their land as the center of the civilized world
- ☛ The Chinese called their country the Middle Kingdom
- ☛ The Chinese believed that people who lived outside the Chinese civilization were barbarians

# Huang He

- ☛ China's first civilization arose in the Huang He River Valley
- ☛ Huang He means yellow river because of the huge amounts of yellowish silt that it deposits when it floods.
- ☛ The silt is fertile soil called loess that is blown by the winds from the deserts to the west
- ☛ The river is nicknamed China's Sorrow because of the devastation it causes when it floods (one million people were killed when the river flooded in 1887)

# Early people in China

- Humans have inhabited China for about one million years
- Fossil remains show that ancestors of modern humans lived in southwest China about 1.7 million years ago
- A Homo Erectus skeleton called Peking man was found in northern China near Beijing
- The presence of Peking man shows that people settled the river valley about 500,000 years ago.

# Xia Dynasty

- Around 2000 B.C. farm settlements along the Huang He grew into China's first cities
- China's first dynasty the Xia probably emerged at about this time
- The leader of the Xia dynasty was an engineer and mathematician named Yu.
- Yu's flood control and irrigation projects helped tame the Huang He and its tributaries so its settlements could grow.
- There are no written records of this time so actual events are unknown but legend reveals a level of technology that reflects a society making a transition to civilization

# The Shang Dynasty

- 1532 B.C. the Shang Dynasty rose to power in northern China and ruled until 1027 B.C.
- The Shang were the first family of Chinese rulers to leave written records
- Shang kings built elaborate palaces and tombs
- One of the most important Shang cities was Anyang
- Anyang stood in a forest clearing and was built mainly of wood.
- The upper class lived inside the city walls in wood-framed houses that had walls of clay and straw
- Peasants lived in hovels outside the city walls

# Shang Cities

- The Shang surrounded their cities with massive earthen walls
- Archaeologists have found the ruins of one city that had an earthen wall that was 118 feet wide at its base and encircled an area of 1.2 miles.
- Archaeologists estimate that it probably took 10,000 men 12 years to build the wall.
- The Shang rulers were constantly waging war
- A noble class of professional warriors were trained in how to drive and shoot from horse-drawn war chariots.



# Shang society

- Shang society was sharply divided between nobles and peasants
- The Shang were governed by a ruling class of warrior-nobles ruled by a king.
- The noble families owned the land and governed the scattered villages within Shang lands and paid tribute to the Shang king in exchange for local control
- Peasants farmed the land for their overlords
- Farmers had no plows, only wooden digging sticks and hoes and sickles made of stone
- The soil was so rich that it yielded two crops a year of millet, rice, and wheat.

# Family in China

- In Chinese culture the group seems to have been more important than the individual
- Peoples lives were governed by their duties to their family and to their king or Emperor.
- Family was central to Chinese society
- The most important virtue was respect for one's parents
- The elder men in the family controlled the families property and made important decisions
- Women were treated as inferiors, expected to obey their fathers, husbands and later their sons.
- When a girl was between 13 and 16 years old her marriage was arranged and she moved into the house of her husband
- She could improve her status by bearing sons for her husbands family

# Chinese religious beliefs

- ☛ 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 spirits were 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 their ancestors the Shang consulted the gods.
- ☛ The Shang worshipped a supreme god called Shang Di as well as many lesser gods.
- ☛ Shang kings consulted the gods through the use of oracle bones.

# Oracle Bones

- ☛ Oracle bones were animal bones and tortoise shells on which priests had scratched questions to the gods.
- ☛ After inscribing the question a priest applied a hot poker to the bone causing it to crack.
- ☛ The priest would then interpret the cracks to determine the god's answer
- ☛ The earliest evidence of Chinese writing comes from oracle bones.

# Chinese Writing

- In Chinese writing each character stands for an idea, not a sound.
- There were practically no links between the Chinese spoken language and the written language
- A person could read Chinese without being able to speak a word of it.
- People in all parts of China could learn the same system of writing even though they spoke very different languages.
- There were an enormous number of written characters to memorize...1000 to be barely literate and up to 10,000 for a scholar
- As a general rule only the children of nobility were taught to read

# Skilled Artisans

- ☛ People who were skilled in special crafts made up a separate class in Chinese society
- ☛ They made weapons, jewelry, and religious items for the nobility
- ☛ They lived outside the walls of the city like other commoners
- ☛ Bronze-working was the leading craft in which Shang artists excelled
- ☛ Bronze objects were used in religious rituals and were symbols of royal power
- ☛ In early Shang times the Chinese learned how to make silk cloth.
- ☛ The light beautiful fabric was used to make robes and silk shoes.

# The Mandate of Heaven

- 1027 B.C. a people called the Zhou overthrew the Shang and established their own dynasty
- The Zhou had adopted much of the Shang culture so the change in dynasty did not bring a change in culture.
- The Zhou leaders declared that the gods had taken away the Shang right to rule and given it to the Zhou.
- This explanation developed into the idea called the Mandate of Heaven
- **Mandate of Heaven**- that the right to rule was granted by the gods and a just ruler would have divine approval but a wicked or foolish king could lose the Mandate of Heaven and the right to rule

# Dynastic Cycles

- China was ruled by a series of dynasties until dynastic rule was overthrown in the early 1900's
- The pattern of rise, decline, and replacement of a dynasty is called dynastic cycle
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# Chinese Feudalism

- The Zhou Dynasty controlled lands that stretched from beyond the Huang He in the north to the Yangtze in the south
- Because their empire was so vast the Zhou gave control of the different regions to members of the royal family or other trusted nobles
- They establish a system of feudalism - a political system in which nobles or lords are granted the use of lands that legally belong to the king
- In exchange the nobles owed loyalty and military service to the king and protection to the people who live on their estates
- Eventually local lords became less dependant on the king and fought among themselves and with neighboring people for money and power.

# Technology and Trade

- During the Zhou dynasty large cities grew in China and the Zhou built extensive road and canal systems to supply the cities
- The Zhou introduced coined money, and a new class of civil servants who worked in government administration
- The biggest technological achievement of the Zhou was the use of iron
- The Zhou developed blast furnaces that allowed them to produce cast iron.
- Cast iron was stronger than bronze and was used to create iron weapons and farm tools

# Decline of the Zhou

- The Zhou ruled from 1027 B.C.-256 B.C
- The first 300 years was generally peaceful and stable
- Gradually Zhou rule weakened
- 771 B.C. nomads from the north sacked the city of Hon, the Zhou capital and murdered the Zhou king.
- Members of the Zhou royal family escaped to the city of Luoyang and set up another capital where they tried to rule for the next 500 years.
- The Zhou kings at Luoyang were almost powerless and could not control the noble families
- Eventually the nobles became kings in their own territories
- The later years of the Zhou dynasty are called the “time of the warring states”

# New style warfare

- Under the old system of feudalism the nobles fought according to a strict honorable code of conduct
- As Zhou law and order declined professional mercenary soldiers set the rules for battle
- Peasant foot soldiers supported by cavalry replaced chariots as the main weapon of war
- New weapons were used like the crossbow
- Traditional Chinese values of order, harmony and respect for authority collapsed