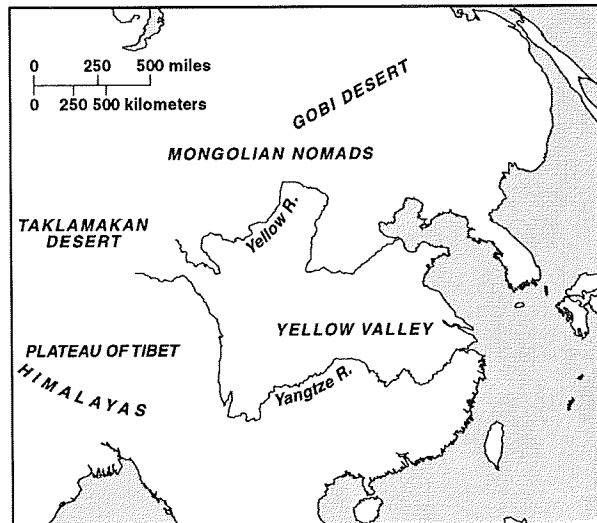


Ancient China

Chinese civilization began on a broad, flat plain called the Huang-he, or Yellow Valley. This valley lies between two large rivers, the Yellow and the Yangzi ("Long River"). When these rivers flood, they drop rich, yellow-tinted soil on the valley. This soil is good for farming.

Scientists believe that 6,000 years ago, the Yellow Valley was warm and covered with forests. People began to farm the rich soil. These early Chinese people lived in small villages and used stone tools. They learned how to grow grains like millet, wheat, and rice. They raised dogs, pigs, sheep, cattle, and horses for meat, milk, and fur. They made pottery for cooking and to hold food and water.

Centuries passed. The small villages in the Yellow Valley slowly grew into towns. The people learned how to use bronze, a



Ancient China was isolated from other lands by deserts, mountains, and the ocean.

metal made from copper and tin. They crafted bronze tools, weapons, and armor. The Yellow Valley people dug wells for water and built walls for protection.

Strong walls were important because the villages and towns often fought each other for land and power. The rulers of the most powerful groups became kings. Many of these ancient rulers passed power down to their children, making them a ruling family, or dynasty.

Historians call the Shang Dynasty the first great Chinese dynasty. The Shang Dynasty held power in ancient China for over 600 years,

Pronunciation Key

Huang-He (HWONG huh)

Shang (shang)

Shi Huangdi (shuh hwong DEE)

Yangzi (YANG dzuh)

from 1700 B.C. to 1027 B.C. The Shang people worshiped Shang Di, or "Lord on High." They believed that this spirit ruled over lesser spirits of the sun, moon, wind, rain, and other natural forces.

The Shang also believed that their ancestors went to heaven after they died. They sacrificed humans to honor these ancestors. When a Shang king died, hundreds of slaves and prisoners of war were put to death.

Pictographs and Characters

Chinese writing appeared during the Shang Dynasty. This early writing was carved on tortoise shells and other animal bones. They called these shells and bones "oracle bones." Shang rulers believed the oracle bones could carry messages from spirits and ancestors.

Oracle-bone writing took the form of pictures. These pictures, called pictographs, described persons, things, and ideas. (See "Chinese Pictographs," on this page.) Over the centuries, pictographs developed into symbols, called characters.

Only kings, nobles, officials, and scholars knew how to read and write. The common people did not read or write. But for those who could read, China's early writing allowed people in different

CHINESE PICTOGRAPHS

Modern Chinese writing developed over many centuries. The pictures carved on oracle bones during the Shang Dynasty slowly became the first Chinese writing. This ancient writing took the form of "pictographs," or written pictures. Many ancient Chinese pictographs look somewhat like the person, thing, or idea they are describing. For example, the pictograph of a tree looks like a tree. The pictograph of a human looks like somebody walking. (See examples below.)

Sometimes the ancient Chinese combined two or more pictographs to describe an idea. For example, the pictographs for the sun and the moon are combined to make "bright." (See example below.)

tree



human



sun



moon



bright



regions to understand each other, even if they could not understand each other's spoken language. This common written language helped unify ancient China.

With writing, the Chinese recorded the events of their time. For 3,000 years, from the Shang Dynasty until the 18th century, more documents were written in Chinese than in all the world's other languages combined. This large collection of Chinese writing has helped people understand China's history.

Natural Barriers and Nomads

Natural barriers also helped shape ancient China. To the west lay a forbidding desert of sand dunes. There was little plant life and almost no rainfall. Sandstorms were common. This desert claimed the lives of many ancient travelers. To the southwest, the high plateaus of Tibet and the snow-covered Himalayan Mountains made travel difficult. To the east lay the Pacific Ocean. For centuries, these natural barriers kept the Chinese from trading goods and ideas with other cultures. They also protected the Chinese from attack—except from the north.

Mongolia lies to the north of China. The high grassy plains of Mongolia, called steppes, were home to groups of warlike nomads. There were few natural

barriers between China and Mongolia. Traveling on horseback, Mongolian nomads frequently attacked China. The Shang Dynasty collapsed after long battles with Mongolian nomads.

Mongolian nomads did not conquer the Shang kingdom. They did, however, weaken the Shang armies. This made it possible for another kingdom, the Zhou, to attack the Shang from inside China. The Zhou, like many other groups, had grown warlike. Its leaders commanded a powerful army. The Zhou rulers built walled cities that served as fortresses. They ruled harshly over the peasants and soldiers, but protected all citizens from attack by other groups and from the Mongolians.

The fertile soil of the Yellow Valley, the growth of farming, the invention of writing, and the natural barriers that surrounded and protected China all helped this ancient culture survive and grow.

For Discussion

1. Where did Chinese civilization begin? Why did it begin there?
2. How has geography helped isolate China? What effect did this have on China? Why?
3. What was Chinese writing like? How did it help unify China?

The Rise of Chinese Civilization

Chinese civilization began about 2000 B.C. It has been one of the most successful civilizations in history. What accounts for its development?

Imagine that you are a historian. You want to find out why civilization in China developed.

Go through the article **Ancient China**. As you read, list on a sheet of paper all the factors that helped China develop.

From your list, choose the three most important factors.

Write a historical paper explaining why Chinese civilization developed. Organize your paper into the following paragraphs:

1. Introduction. (Explain what you are going to write about. You should write this after you have written the other parts of your paper—even though it appears first.)
2. Factor one. (Explain what the factor is and how it contributed to the rise of Chinese civilization.)
3. Factor two. (Explain what the factor is and how it contributed to the rise of Chinese civilization.)
4. Factor three. (Explain what the factor is and how it contributed to the rise of Chinese civilization.)
5. Evaluation. (Judge which factor you think was most important and explain why.)
6. Conclusion. (Summarize what you wrote.)

Be sure to check your paper for spelling, grammar, and punctuation.