China: The Early Cultures

Background Information (highlight key points as you read)

China is a large country with a diverse climate and topography. Its history started in the Huang He (Yellow River) Valley with the Xi (Hsia) dynasty about 3500 years ago. A series of dynasties ruled China until 1911.

The dynasties ruled territories that overlapped but were not identical to modern China. Modern China covers an area roughly equal to the United States. It stretches north to south from the latitudes of Maine to Puerto Rico. This includes a variety of climates. At the mouth of the Xi River, Hong Kong has a tropical monsoon climate that averages 84°F (28°C) during the winter months of December through March. The wet months are in the summer. In May, the monsoon winds bring 16 inches (400 mm) of rain. This year-round growing season and wet summer make it possible to grow two crops of rice a year. The rains make the Xi River China's second biggest river in volume of water carried. The river traffic makes Guangzhou (Canton) a major port.

Farther north the growing season shortens and the rainfall decreases as the winds carrying moisture pass over land. The growing season is long enough to grow a crop of rice. At the mouth of the Chang Jiang (Yangtze, Long River), the water can freeze occasionally from November to the end of March. Along the Huang He (Yellow River), average annual rainfall ranges from 39 inches (1000 mm) to 10 inches (250 mm). Summers are hot and humid, sometimes reaching 104°F (40°C), and winters are cold. This climate is roughly like that of North Dakota or Kansas. Like those states, this area grows wheat. Millet is grown in the drier parts.

In Tibet (Xi Zang) conditions are shaped by the inland location and the Himalayas, the highest mountains in the world. The average altitude in Tibet is 13,000 feet (4000 meters). As a result, the climate is cool and dry. Daily average high temperature in Lhasa in June is 73°F (23.3 °C), and rainfall is 16 inches (410 mm) per year. There is some farming in Tibet, but herding is a major part of the economy.

Within this pattern, the weather is quite variable. Typhoons occur each year in the south, producing damaging floods. The rate of rainfall varies as much as 30 percent from one year to the next, so China suffers from drought as well.

Land in China slopes from mountains and hills down to a coastal plain. The major rivers start in the highlands. The Chang Jiang runs mostly through hills, emerging from a series of gorges that restrict navigation. Then it flows to its delta on the coast. The active traffic on this major transportation route makes Shanghai a major port.

The Huang He carries less water and is not very useful for transport. It is a menace, often called "China's Sorrow." The danger is created by the yellow silt that gives the river its name. The silt comes from the loess hills that the river cuts through. Loess is a soil deposited by the wind. The cumulative result of thousands of years of dust storms is a 400-foot (121-meter)-thick layer of rich soil. The region is dry. Average rainfall is 10-20 inches (250-500 mm) a year. People in the loess hills dig their homes by cutting into the hillsides. Such earth homes are warm in the winter and cool in the summer, but collapse during earthquakes. In a quake in 1920, about 300,000 people died.

Even when the soil leaves the region in the water of the river, it causes trouble. For centuries Chinese governments have been building dikes for flood control. As the river flows between the dikes and slows as it reaches more level land, it drops the yellow silt. As the river bed silts up, the dikes must be raised. In time the river bed between the dikes was built up above the level of the bordering land. This led inevitably to flooding when the dikes failed. During the floods, the river made major course changes. There have been 10 such changes in historic times. The most recent was in 1947, when the modern river was restored to a course it had run in earlier times (A.D. 1100-1289). The map with this lesson shows the modern river.

The rulers of China have supplemented the rivers by building canals. The most famous was the Grand Canal. Actually there were two Grand Canals, built by different dynasties. The first was built by the Sui dynasty (A.D. 585-618) and ran from the Chang Jiang to Kaifeng and Loyang. The next dynasties moved their capitals to Chan-gan (Sian, Xian). The Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) constructed a new canal partly because the Huang He had changed course and partly because their capital was Tatu (Beijing, Peking). The new canal ran a bit closer to the coastline and north to Beijing. The map shows the earlier version of the canal.

The other great construction project of the Chinese rulers was the Great Wall. The earliest sections of the Great Wall date back to 450 B.C. Early walls were not continuous and were not as elaborate as later versions. Some were simple dirt banks. Obviously they failed to keep the foreigners out. The Yuan dynasty was a Mongol dynasty that came out of central Asia under Genghis Khan. Later, the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) drove out the Mongols and built the final and most elaborate version of the Great Wall. It was a massive masonry structure, wide enough for five horses or ten men to move abreast. It included ramparts guarded by 30 to 50 soldiers at intervals ranging from 109 yards to 327 yards (100 meters to 300 meters), depending on terrain.

There were signal towers spaced 1 to 3 miles (2.5 to 5 kilometers) apart. In case of attack, signals were sent by smoke in daylight and fire at night. All this effort was in vain. The Ming were overcome by outsiders from the north, the Qing (Ching or Manchu) dynasty. The Qing were the last dynasty, ending in 1912.
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Read all directions before starting work. Print all labels neatly.

1. With blue pencils, color the bodies of water light blue. Label the following in dark blue:
   - Bay of Bengal
   - Sea of Japan
   - Yellow Sea
   - East China Sea
   - South China Sea
   - Gulf of Thailand

2. With a blue pencil, trace the course of the following rivers. Label them in blue.
   - Huang He (Hwang Ho, Yellow)
   - Chang Jiang (Yangtze)
   - Xi (Hsi, Si)
   - Mekong

2. Locate and label the following cities. Underline the labels.
   - Hangzhou (Hangshow)
   - Changan (Xian, Sian)
   - Guangzhou (Kwangchow, Canton)
   - Hong Kong
   - Macau
   - Bianjing (Kaifeng, Pienching)
   - Nanjing (Nanking)
   - Beijing (Peking, Chungtu)
   - Luoyang (Honan, Loyang)
   - Shanghai

3. Locate and label the following areas in and around China:
   - Manchuria
   - Mongolia
   - Tibet (Xizang)
   - Xinjiang (Sinkiang)
   - Taiwan (Formosa)
   - Korea
   - Nepal
   - Burma (Myanmar)
   - Vietnam
   - Laos
   - India
   - Hainan

4. With a brown pencil, mark the Himalayan Mountains with a wavy line. Label them in brown "Himalayas."

5. With a red pencil trace the Great Wall as of A.D. 750 and label it in red.

6. With a green pencil, trace the Grand Canal and label it in green.

7. With a pink pencil, trace the borders of the area controlled by the Zhou dynasty (Chou) (1066-221 B.C.). Label the borders in pink "Zhou dynasty."

8. With a tan pencil, trace the borders of the Qin dynasty (Ch'in) (221-206 B.C.). Label the borders in tan "Qin dynasty."

9. With a purple pencil, trace the borders of the "Empire of the Great Khan about 1290." Label the border.

10. With an orange pencil, trace the borders of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Label the borders in orange "Ming dynasty."