

History
UNFOLDING

ANCIENT CHINA



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Introduction

China's Unique Civilization

Many of the world's first civilizations arose along the banks of major river systems. This was true of ancient Egypt, Sumer, and the other civilizations of Mesopotamia, as well as the civilization that developed along the Indus River. China also developed in the broad plain surrounding the lower reaches of the Huang He in northern China. But unlike the other civilizations, Chinese civilization also emerged in nearly total isolation from any other. For this reason, China was distinct and unusual in many ways. Today, it still seems to many to have a somewhat mysterious quality.

Of course, it also does exhibit many patterns similar to other civilizations. The same key features of ancient civilization seen elsewhere were also present in China—agriculture, roads, canals, bronze and iron, early forms of religion, kingship, writing, and literature. Yet in China, each of these had its unique qualities. We hope this set will help you give students a sense both of the commonalities and the unique characteristics of ancient China.

The 12 visual displays making up this set tell the story of ancient China through the Shang, Chou, Qin, and Han dynasties. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Land and the People

The isolated nature of China and the rugged Chinese landscape are the focus of the illustrations here, along with a consideration of the key role of the peasantry in the rise of ancient Chinese civilization.

Gods, Ancestors, Ethics

The ancient Chinese did worship gods of streams, mountains, rain, wind, and fertility, as did peoples in many other parts of the world. But respect for one's ancestors was also an especially strong component of their religion and rituals—as was an interest in divination and the future. On this basis, a flowering of philosophy and literature occurred in the sixth century BCE. It produced what are still seen as the great classics of Chinese culture.

The Qin Unification

The long Shang and Chou dynasties came to an end in 221 BCE, when a powerful and tyrannical ruler, Shi Huangdi, came to power. The Qin dynasty he founded lasted only a few years beyond his death, but it unified China and changed it in very significant ways. The illustrations here focus on those changes.

The Han Empire

The Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) maintained the centralization that took place during the Qin dynasty. The Han rulers expanded China into a mighty empire—one that rivaled in size, power, and achievement that of Rome in the same centuries.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Ancient China***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better understand how the natural environment affected the growth of ancient civilizations.
2. Students will better understand the unique impact of the natural setting on the rise of ancient Chinese civilization.

The Land and the People

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

“Civilization” is not an easy word to define, but most historians agree that the earliest of the world’s great civilizations first appeared along the banks of major rivers. This map shows four great river systems that birthed early civilizations. Three of these civilizations were close enough to one another to be in contact at an early stage. Those three are ancient Egypt, the Mesopotamian civilizations that grew up along the Tigris and Euphrates, and the civilization that developed along the Indus River in what is today India and Pakistan. But one civilization seems to have developed in almost complete isolation from these others—ancient China. This map suggests some of the reasons for the isolation that long protected China while also cutting it off from many outside influences.

Illustrations 2A & 2B

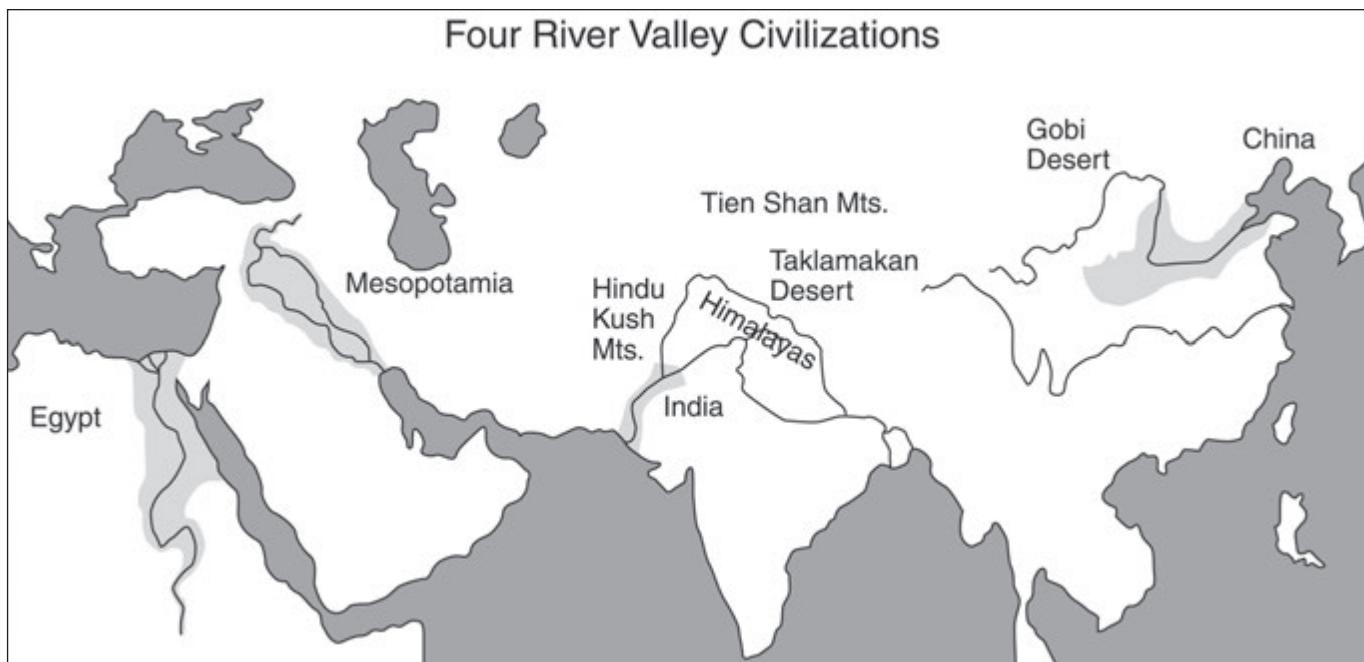
Civilization means cities, monuments, roads and canals, writing and literature, kings and armies. But first and foremost, it means agriculture. Without the shift from hunting and gathering to farming, a society cannot produce the extra food needed to feed the people doing all the non-agricultural tasks required in any civilized society. Farming villages began to appear in China more than 7000 years ago. Over the centuries, millions of peasants in China farmed small plots of land using simple tools of wood or stone. These 1908 photos of a man standing by a threshing machine and a farmer plowing a field show that well into the modern era, China’s peasants still used many of the same tools and methods as their ancient ancestors.

Illustrations 3A & 3B

Civilization was born along great river systems for several reasons: First, the flooding of these rivers regularly covered the land with new, fertile soil brought down from the mountains. Secondly, such rivers acted as highways, helping to link one village with another. And finally, the very destructiveness of the floods encouraged villages to work together to build the levees, dams, and canals needed to control the flood waters and channel water to crops. In China, flooding could be very serious, especially along the Yangtze (Illustration 3B). China’s response was a system of canals, levees, and dams that has withstood the test of time, as is proved by Illustration 3A showing an ancient canal still in use today.

Lesson 1 – The Land and the People

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. The gray areas on this map show the locations of four ancient civilizations. Each civilization grew up along one or two major river systems. Can you name the civilizations and the rivers along which they grew?
2. Historians say it is no accident that the world's first civilizations would develop along major rivers. Why do you think they believe this?
3. Of these four civilizations, evidence exists that three were able to make contact with one another from an early stage through trade and travel. Which three do you suppose these are? Why?
4. China may well have had some indirect contact with these other civilizations. But most historians think that ancient China grew up largely cut off from them. From this map alone, can you explain what some of the causes of this isolation might be?

Follow-up Activities

1. **Small-group activity:** Use this map as the centerpiece of a bulletin-board display entitled "Ancient China: A World Unto Itself." Look through old illustrated history books or travel books on China for illustrations or photos of the various natural settings in China and in the lands just to the north and west of it. You might try contacting Chinese government agencies or other sources to ask for photographs of such scenes. Try to at least find illustrations of the Himalayas, the Tien Shan and Kunlun mountains, and the Taklamakan, Ala Shan, and Gobi deserts. Write descriptive paragraphs for all the illustrations you use. Connect each illustration to its correct location on the map.
2. It is not clear from the above map what barriers (if any) along China's southern borders helped to keep it isolated. Using atlases in the library, draw your own topographical map of southern China and Southeast Asia. Use the map in a brief talk in class about how the geography of this region might or might not have added to China's isolation from the rest of the world.