

Lesson 1 Geography Shapes Life in Ancient China

MAIN IDEAS

Geography Natural barriers isolate China's fertile river valleys from other parts of Asia.

Government The Shang Dynasty ruled China's earliest civilization, which arose near the Huang He.

Government Claiming approval from the gods, the Zhou conquered the Shang and took over China.

Geographic Features of China

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What effect did the physical features of China have on its early development?

Isolated by Barriers

- China's eastern border: Yellow Sea, East China Sea, Pacific Ocean
 - Gobi Desert to the north, Taklimakan Desert to the west
 - Pamir, Tian Shan, Himalaya mountains curve around western border
- Geography made it difficult to spread ideas, goods to China
 - Chinese civilization developed very distinctly

Two River Systems

- Two major river systems flow toward the Pacific Ocean
 - central Chang Jiang (Yangtze); northern Huang He (Yellow River)
- River floodwaters deposit silt; create fertile soil for farming
 - North China Plain is between rivers; is the center of Chinese civilization

A Varied Climate

- China is similar to U.S.
 - dry in west
 - seasonal in north
 - warm in southeast
 - rice grown in moist south; wheat and millet grown in drier north

REVIEW QUESTION

Why was the North China Plain the center of Chinese civilization?

The Shang Dynasty

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How did the Chinese language develop?

Shang Kings

- Farming settlements on Huang He grew into cities around 2000 B.C.
 - China is the world's oldest continuous civilization
- Shang family kings controlled some cities by 1766 B.C., set up dynasty
- Kings were responsible for religious activities
- Shang controlled central part of North China Plain
 - fought off nomads from north and west, such as the Zhou

Shang Families

- Respect for parents, ancestors was important
- Family was closely tied to religion
 - believed ancestors' spirits brought good fortune
 - made animal sacrifices to father's ancestors
- Men ruled within the family

Developing Language

- Shang kings claimed to receive messages from gods on oracle bones
 - **oracle bones**—animal bones, turtle shells where priests wrote to gods
 - scratch marks on bones were early form of writing system
- Developed **pictographs**—simple drawings, characters for words, ideas
 - created over 10,000 characters; similar to modern Chinese writing
- Many can read Chinese without ability to speak it—helped unify lands

REVIEW QUESTION

How did the Shang develop writing?

The Zhou Dynasty

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How were the Zhou able to conquer Shang lands?

The Zhou and the Dynastic Cycle

- Zhou conquered Shang around 1027 B.C., established new dynasty
- **Dynastic cycle**—pattern of rise and fall of Chinese dynasties
- Zhou kings sought gods' approval; led to idea of **Mandate of Heaven**
 - idea that good rulers had the god's favor became part of culture
 - troubles meant Mandate was withdrawn, it was time for new leaders

Zhou Government

- Lack of strong central government gave power to local lords
 - they gave their loyalty, armies to king who protected their lands
- Lords grew strong as towns became cities; depended less on king
 - fought among themselves and with others
 - expanded Chinese lands

The Time of the Warring States

- Nomads from the north and west invaded after 800 B.C.
- Invaders destroyed capital city of Hao, killed king in 771 B.C.
 - king's family escaped, founded new capital in Luoyang
- Because of weak kings, strong lords fought constantly
 - this led to Time of the Warring States around 403 B.C.

REVIEW QUESTION

How did the idea of the Mandate of Heaven help the Zhou take over the Shang?

Lesson Summary

- River valleys supported the rise of Chinese civilization, while some geographic features helped to isolate China from outside contact.
- The Shang developed a dynasty and a culture that included a system of writing.
- The Zhou claimed to rule using the idea of the Mandate of Heaven.

Why It Matters Now . . .

The culture developed by the Shang and the Zhou still influences Chinese ways of life today.