River Dynasties in China

BEFORE YOU READ
In the last section, you read about Indus Valley culture. In this section, you will learn about the earliest cultures in China.

AS YOU READ
Use the chart below to take notes on how geography and early cultures influenced the development of Chinese culture.

The Geography of China (pages 50–51)
How did geography affect China’s past?

The last of the great early civilizations arose in China and continues to this day. China’s geography caused it to develop apart from other cultures.

A great ocean, huge deserts, and high mountains isolate China from other areas. The mountains did not protect China totally, however. People living to the north and west invaded the land many times during Chinese history.

There are two rich rivers within China—the Huang He and the Yangtze. Almost all the good farmland in China lies between these rivers. The Huang He deposited huge amounts of silt when it overflowed. This silt is fertile soil called loess. The Chinese people also made use of the flood waters of these rivers.

1. Why did China develop apart from other cultures?

Civilization Emerges in Shang Times (pages 51–52)
What was the Shang Dynasty?

A few thousand years ago, some people began to farm along China’s rivers. About 2000 B.C., the first dynasty of rulers brought government to China.
Around 1500 B.C., a new dynasty, the Shang, began to rule. This dynasty left the first written records in China. Objects found in their palaces and tombs also tell us much about their society. Chinese people built their buildings of wood, not mud-dried brick as the other early cultures did. Huge walls made of earth surrounded these buildings to protect them. The walls were needed because it was a time of constant war.

The king and the nobles who helped him fight these wars were at the top of Shang society. At the bottom was the mass of peasants who lived in simple huts outside the city walls. They worked hard on the farms, using wooden tools because the Shang believed that bronze was too good to be used for farming.

2. What were three features of Shang culture?

3. Name three important values of Shang culture.

Zhou and the Dynastic Cycle (pages 54–55)

What is the Mandate of Heaven?

About 1027 B.C., a new group, the Zhou, took control of China. They adopted Shang culture. They also started an idea of royalty that was new to China. Good rulers, they said, got authority to rule from heaven. This was known as the Mandate of Heaven. They claimed the Shang rulers were not just and had lost the favor of the gods. That is why they had to be replaced. From then on, the Chinese believed in divine rule. However, it also meant that disasters such as floods or war pointed to a ruler that had lost the support of the gods and needed to be replaced. Until the early 1900s, the Chinese had one dynasty after another. This pattern of rise, fall, and replacement of dynasties is known as the dynastic cycle.

The Zhou gave members of the royal family and other nobles the rights to large areas of land. They established feudalism. Feudalism is a political system in which the nobles owe loyalty to the king. The nobles promise to fight for the rulers and to protect the peasants who live on the land.

Eventually the Zhou rulers lost all power. The nobles fought each other for control of China in a period called the “time of the warring states.” It lasted many hundred years. The Chinese people suffered during this time.

4. Name two important changes brought about by the Zhou.