

# Ancient Chinese Civilization Brief



Focus: The Huang River Valley was the location of an early civilization.

## Huang River Valley

Just as the Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations developed along the banks of great rivers, so did another early civilization. **The Huang River Valley in China is home to one of the world's earliest civilizations.** Archeologists know that people settled there about 3000 B.C., which is around 5,000 years ago.



The Huang River is about 3,400 miles long. It runs through the North China Plain. Huang means *yellow* in Chinese. The soil on the North China Plain is very fertile, and contains loess. **Loess is yellowish soil that blows off the Gobi desert and onto the North China Plain.** Loess also blows into the Huang River and gives it a kind of yellowy color.

One of the earliest settlements was located in Anyang, which is located along the banks of the Huang River. There is no written records from this period in Chinese history, but archeologists have found stone tools and other artifacts in this area. This is how they know people lived there.

Ancient Chinese civilization is slightly different from other ancient civilizations like the ones that existed in Egypt or Mesopotamia. That is because Chinese civilization and culture has an unbroken history. Many other ancient civilizations were conquered by other people and their civilizations changed. Some disappeared altogether. However, Chinese culture has existed for thousands of years, and exists still today.

## Dynasties

A **dynasty** means a series of political rulers belonging to the same family. The first dynasty in China was the **Shang Dynasty**. The Shang Dynasty existed during a time called the Bronze Age, a period of time when people made tools, weapons, and other things, like jewelry, from bronze.

The people who lived during the Shang Dynasty made homes of timber. The walls were made with wattle and daub. **Wattle is a kind of wooden frame made from interlacing strips of wood. Daub is a type of plaster that people made from soil, sand, and straw.**

During the Shang Dynasty, people wrote with pictographs. **A pictograph is a picture that stands for a word.** They also used ideograms and phonograms. Archeologists have found ancient deer and turtle bones that have pictographs from the Shang period carved on them. The Shang people were also skilled at making jade carvings.



The Zhou Dynasty is China's longest lasting dynasty. It dates from about 1046 B.C. until 256 B.C. That's nearly 800 years! Scholars divide the dynasty into two periods: the Western Zhou (1046 – 771 B.C.) and the Eastern Zhou (770 – 221 B.C.).

Like the Shang, the Zhou were farmers. They grew rice, wheat, and fruit. Silk production was also very important. Silk is produced from the cocoons of worms. It is spun into fabric that is used to make clothing and rugs.

The period of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty is often called the 'golden age' in China. That's because many important philosophers, like Confucius, lived during this time. The Eastern Zhou made advancements in irrigation. They also began to use iron to make tools and weapons.

Ancient China was divided into many different states. Often these states would war with each other. In about 221 B.C., a strong leader from one of these states gained control of China and **became China's first Emperor under the Qin Dynasty.** He was called Shi Huangdi.



Shi Huangdi began construction on the **Great Wall – built to stop other people from invading China.** Many emperors and dynasties had a part in building the Great Wall. It is over four thousand miles in length, and many parts of it are still standing today.

The Han Dynasty (206 B.C – A.D. 220) was a very influential period in Chinese history. During this period, paper and ink were invented. In addition, the Silk Road, the great trade route which connected China to many other civilizations, saw its beginnings. The Han people kept detailed records so modern scholars know a lot about this period. A Han writer named Sima Qian wrote a history of China that covered the first 3,000 years!

## Historical Overview

Spanning a period of over 4,000 years, China is considered to be the world's oldest continuous civilization. The earliest Chinese dynasties were known only from myth and legend until recent archaeological discoveries have revealed evidence of a highly accomplished civilization that existed as early as 1,700 B.C.

### Vocabulary:

Civilization – a society that has achieved a high level of culture in government, religion, technology, art, and science.

Archaeologist – a scientist who studies past cultures by analyzing their remains.

Dynasty – a line of rulers who passed authority down through generations in the same family.

Emperor – the supreme ruler of an empire.

Terra cotta – a baked clay material used for statues, pots, and buildings.

Mongols – a nomadic people from Mongolia, a country north of China.

Confucius – a Chinese philosopher and scholar born in 551 B.C. who taught respect for others and the importance of good citizenship.

Calligraphy – the art of handwriting.

Bronze – a metal made of copper and tin.

Silk – an expensive fabric woven from the cocoons of silkworms.

Porcelain – a hard, white ceramic ware commonly known as 'China'.

Jade – a green, semi-precious stone crafted in jewelry and objects of art.

Lacquer – a hard, shiny coating on furniture and other objects.

Scholar – a highly-educated person.

Merchant – one who makes a living by buying and selling goods.

Peasant – a poor farmer or worker.

Acupuncture – method of treating pain or illness by inserting small needles into the body.

THE DYNASTIES OF CHINA		
	<b>Shang Dynasty</b> 1766 B.C.-1122 B.C.	Writing on oracle bones tells of events and customs of the period. Wheeled chariots are introduced in warfare. Silk weaving is invented. Chinese writing develops.
	<b>Zhou Dynasty</b> 1122 B.C.-221 B.C.	Iron casting is invented, as are the multiplication tables. Irrigation is introduced on a large scale. The great philosopher Confucius teaches a code of behavior that spreads widely.
	<b>Qin Dynasty</b> 221 B.C.-206 B.C.	A warrior king unites much of China into one empire. A strict law code and tax system is designed. Writing, weights and measures are standardized. Building of the Great Wall begins.
	<b>Han Dynasty</b> 206 B.C.-A.D. 220	Buddhism is brought to China from India. Trade routes to India and Persia are established. Paper is invented. For the next 370 years, warring kingdoms keep China in disorder.
	<b>Sui Dynasty</b> A.D. 589-618	Powerful emperors reunite China. A great transportation network is built, including the Grand Canal linking the Huang and Chang rivers. Gunpowder is invented.
	<b>Tang Dynasty</b> A.D. 618-907	Tang emperors extend China's control to neighboring areas. Height of Silk Road trade. A golden age of art and learning develops. A half-century of disorder follows.
	<b>Song Dynasty</b> A.D. 960-1279	Age of high culture: printing, poetry, calligraphy. Movable type and paper money are developed; invention of compass.
	<b>Yuan Dynasty</b> A.D. 1279-1368	Genghis Khan leads Mongols from the northwest in an attack on China. His grandson Kublai Khan founds the Yuan Dynasty. His elaborate court is visited and described by Marco Polo.
	<b>Ming Dynasty</b> A.D. 1368-1644	European traders arrive. Commerce flourishes. Ming emperors build the Forbidden City in Beijing and extend the Great Wall.
	<b>Qing Dynasty</b> A.D. 1644-1912	Manchu invaders come from the north and set up the Qing Dynasty. Foreign trade and industry grows but nationalist uprisings bring on final collapse.