Lesson 1 Geography shapes Life in Ancient China

Due to the huge mountain chains, vast deserts, and large bodies of water made the spread of ideas and goods to China difficult.

Two major rivers flow toward the Pacific Ocean. The Chang Jiang, or the Yangtze is found in central China. The Huang He to the North is also called the Yellow River. Their flood waters deposited yellowish silt that makes fertile soil. In ancient times most farming was done in the very rich land between these rivers. This land called the North China Plain, has always been the center of Chinese civilization.

China has a varied climate like the United States. These different climates allow a variety of crops to be produced. Rice is grown in the moist South, while wheat and millet are grown in the drier North lands. China is the most continuous civilization in the world. About 1766 B.C., the Shang family kings began to control some cities. They set up a dynasty or rule by generations of one family. The kings were responsible for religious activities. They claimed to rule with the gods' permission. In the Shang culture, respect for one’s parents and ancestors are very important. Family was closely tied to religion. The Chinese believed that the spirits of their ancestors could bring good fortune to the family. Families paid respect to the father’s ancestors by making animal sacrifices in their honor. Men ruled with the family.

The Shang Dynasty: The Shang kings claimed to be able to influence the gods to help people. Shang kings received messages from the gods through oracle bones. These were animal bones or turtle shells on which Shang royal priest scratched questions to the gods. Next they touched the bones with heated rods to make them crack. The royal priests interpreted the cracks and scratched the answers on the bones. These scratch marks were an early form of a writing system. The Shang developed their own system of writing with pictographs. This system of writing used simple drawing, or characters for words or ideas. To be able to read and write a person has to know at least 1,500 characters. An educated person had to know at least 10,000 characters.

The Zhou Dynasty: The Zhou people moved down from the northwest. The Zhou ruler Wu Wang led a force that defeated the Shang. The Zhou kings established a new dynasty in China. Chinese dynasties rose and fell in a pattern. Historians call the pattern of the rise and fall of dynasties to China the "dynastic cycle". The idea that a good ruler had approval from the gods became a part of Chinese culture like the Egyptians. When a ruler was bad or foolish, the people believed the approval of the gods would be taken away. This idea was called the *Mandate of Heaven. The Chinese believed that troubles such as peasant uprisings, invasions, floods, or earthquakes meant that the Mandate of Heaven had been taken away. Like the Shang, the Zhou did not have a strong central government. Kings put people with family ties or other trusted people in charge of regions. These local rulers or lords owed loyalty and military service to the kings. In return the king promised to help protect their lands.

An invasion of Chinese lands was a constant theme in Chinese history. Nomads invaded from the north and west. Scholars developed ways of thinking due to trying to bring peace to the land because
of warlords trying to gain control of lands. The three ways of thinking were Legalism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Each was a philosophy, or a study of basic rules and ideas about the universe.

**Lesson 2 China’s Ancient Philosophies**

*Legalism* - or belief that rulers should use the legal system to force people to obey the laws. Those who followed this belief system saw disorder in society. These people decided that a strong government was the answer to China’s problems. Legalists believe that human nature is wicked and that people do good only if they are forced to do it. They believed that the government must pass laws to control the way people behaved. They believed that harsh punishments were needed to make people afraid to do wrong. Shan yang, a support of Legalism, wanted to force people to report to lawmakers. People who did not report would be executed. Legalists did not want people to complain about the government or question what it did. They favored arresting people who questioned the government or taught different ideas. They also taught that rulers should burn books that contained different philosophers or ideas.

*Confucius* - had ideas to end conflict and have peace in all relationships. Respect for others was absolutely necessary. Government should set a good example so that people would see what was correct. Students of Confucianism collected his ideas and recorded them in a book called the *Analects*. Confucius taught a code of proper conduct for people. These five basic relationships are: 1.- Father and son 2.- Elder brother and junior brother, 3.- husband and wife, 4.- friend and family, 5.- ruler and subject.

Confucius believed in good conduct and respect should begin at home. One of Confucius’s most important teachings was about filial piety, or treating parents with respect.

*Daoism* - The third philosophy began with Laozi. The name means “Old Master”. Daoist believed that a universal force called the Dao, or the Way, guides all things. All creatures, except humans, live in harmony with this force. To relate to nature and each other, each human being had to find an individual way, or Dao. The individual had to learn to live in harmony with nature and with inner feelings.

Daoist accepted things as they were. They did not want to be involved with the government. They tried to understand nature and live in harmony with rhythms. This included the idea of yin and yang or two things that interact with each other. The yin (black) stands for all that is cold, dark, and mysterious. The yang (white) represents all that is warm. Understanding yin and yang helped a person understand how he or she fits in the world.
Lesson 3 The Qin and the Han

*The new rulers of China came from the state of Qin. The new emperor took the name Shi Huangdi. He would unify and expand China. Qin ruler Shi Huangdi began ending internal battles between warring states. He conquered other states and soon China grew larger than it did under the Zhou. He believed in the Legalist way of running, the country. He tried to wipe out Confucian teaching. In fact he had 460 critics of Confucianists killed. He also ordered the burning of books that contained ideas he disliked. He wanted a strong central government. He took land away from noble families and forced them to live at the capital so he could watch them. These actions weakened the power of noble families and strengthened the emperor’s power. To unite the lands under his control he built highways and irrigation projects. He forced peasants to work on these projects and set high taxes to pay for them. He also set government standards for weights, measures, coins and writing. It made it easier to trade and do business everywhere in China. He planned to build a long wall (The Great Wall of China) along China’s northern borders to keep out invaders. Shi Huangdi died in 210 B.C. His son took over but was a less effective ruler than his father. A civil war broke out during his last years of control. A military general named Liu Bang defeated the Qin forces. He ended the war and united China. He started the Han Dynasty and lasted until during the same period as the Roman Empire.

Liu Bang kept the Qin policies of strong central government, but he lowered taxes. He made punishment less harsh. He set up a bureaucracy. In this way of governing, officials are chosen by the ruler ran offices, or bureaus. The officials helped enforce the emperor’s rule. They put family members and trusted people in local government positions. They tested people on their knowledge of Confucianism. When Liu Bang died his wife, Empress Lu, ruled for their young son. From 421 to 87 B.C., a descendant of Liu Bang named Wudi, ruled the Han Empire after Empress Lu died. He was called the Martial Emperor because he used war to expand China. Although he used war to gain control, the Han faced rebellions, peasant revolts, floods, famine, and economic disasters, but somehow they managed to stay in power for many years. They were industrious people whose civilization prospered. They worked and lived on farms. They wore simple clothing and sandals. Many Chinese call themselves the people of the Han. They identify strongly with their ancient past. Only the Chinese knew how to make silk (fabric). The silk was important in opening trading routes with the west.
Lesson 4 The Legacy of Ancient China

*Overland trade routes were called Silk Roads because traders carried silk and other goods on caravan trails. These trails stretched across two continents, Europe and Asia, they were called trans-Eurasian. Goods leaving China included silk.

*During the Han Dynasty Buddhist missionaries entered China along the Silk Roads. It spread to Japan and Korea from China.

   paper, and pottery. Exchanged goods from the west included sesame seeds, and oil, metals, and precious stones. One trade item Chinese valued was Central Asian horses. Ideas and cultural customs also moved on the Silk Roads, too. This spread of ideas and customs is called cultural diffusion.

*Several inventions emerged in China. The invention of a collar harness allowed horses to pull heavy loads. The wheelbarrow made it easier for farmers to more heavy loads by hand. Watermills used river power to grind grain. Paper was invented in China. Before that time, books were made of costly silt. The inexpensive paper was made from a mixture of old rags, mulberry tree bark, and fibers from the hemp plant.