Ancient China

Si Ling-chi

Confucius

Chinese riverboat

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China’s Great Rivers

If you could travel across China, you would see that it is a land of flat plains, rich farmland, high mountains, and hot deserts.

Across part of this vast land flows the second longest river in Asia—the mighty Huang He. The Huang He is yellow in color because of the silt the river water carries with it. *Huang He* means “Yellow River.”
The Huang He begins high in the mountains and flows 3,400 miles across the land until it reaches the Pacific Ocean. Until quite recently, the Huang He often flooded farmland near its banks. The river water covered land that was usually dry, bringing with it silt that helped the crops to grow. Too much floodwater, though, was a bad thing!

The Yangtze River is 3,915 miles long. It, too, begins high in the mountains and brings water to farmers. The Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia. The Yangtze River is so large and fast that it carries most of its silt out to sea.
But what have these rivers got to do with ancient China? Well, like many early civilizations that began near rivers, an ancient Chinese civilization grew first along the banks of the Huang He. The civilization developed because farmers there were able to grow more and more crops on the rich farmland. More crops meant that more people could be fed, and over time the population increased.

How do we know about a civilization that began over four thousand years ago? Archaeologists spend time digging up the past. This pot is thousands of years old and was found in an area along the Huang He. Over time, other civilizations and kingdoms developed all across ancient China.
Not only were these rivers good for farming, but riverboats carrying important people, as well as food, traveled along the Huang and Yangtze Rivers.

Then, about fourteen hundred years ago, people began building a human-made waterway, called a canal, to connect the two rivers, and therefore other parts of China. This oldest, and longest, human-made waterway was used to transport food to the cities of ancient China. It earned the name the Grand Canal.
Family and Ancestors
In ancient China, every family member had a job to do. But the head of the family had the job of looking after the farm or business and taking care of the entire family. Important decisions, such as whom someone would marry or what job someone would do, were made by the head of the family.
Taking care of the family also included honoring the ancestors—the family members who had died. In ancient China, people honored their ancestors by continuing to treat them like part of the family. They talked to them and told them about important events. They brought them gifts and carved their names on little wooden blocks. Many of these things are still done today!
The Qingming Festival is an ancient celebration held in honor of all ancestors. Traditionally, people visited their ancestors’ graves and brought gifts of food and flowers. People still do this today. The Qingming Festival is also a celebration of spring. In fact, Qingming means “clear and bright,” like a beautiful spring day.

Another traditional festival that is held in honor of the ancestors is the Hungry Ghost Festival. The Hungry Ghost Festival happens each year in August, especially in the southern part of China. During this festival, unloved ancestors, or angry ghosts, are offered food so that they will not be hungry—or angry! Here you can see a painting from long ago that shows the angry ghosts being fed.
The Teachings of Confucius

Before China was one country, it was made up of different states, or kingdoms—each with a different ruler. The rulers often fought with one another. A man named Confucius spoke out against this fighting. Confucius said that if people were kinder, there would be fewer wars. Confucius said that people could change their ways. He became a teacher and traveled throughout China. Many people listened to his teachings and called him Master.
Confucius taught his followers many things. He said that goodness, or virtue, is shown by how people act. He also said that every person can be a prince by acting like one, even if he is not really the son of a king. And he said a king only deserves his job if he is kind to the people he rules.
Confucius taught that family should be very important in a person’s life. He said that families are special because they last across time—from parents and grandparents, to children and their children. He believed the people of China were one big family. Confucius wanted the rulers to act like thoughtful parents.
Eventually, the rulers of ancient China decided that people who had studied Confucius’s teachings would make the most honest and reliable members of the government. They decided that anyone who wanted to work for the government had to pass a test on the teachings of Confucius.
The Great Wall of China

Long ago, nomads lived in the lands outside of ancient China. They lived by hunting and herding animals. Nomads moved from place to place, looking for good areas to feed their sheep or goats.

The Chinese people did not want the nomads on their land. They did not like that the nomads did not settle in one place and that they lived without a government. And so a great stone wall was built across part of China to keep them out. This wall was called the Great Wall! Can you see the route of the Great Wall on the map?
The building of the Great Wall began under Emperor Qin. Emperor Qin was the very first emperor of China. He was a powerful leader who defeated the rulers of many kingdoms. He took their land and made China larger. To help protect the people and the farmland, Emperor Qin ordered that a long wall be built on the northern border of China.

Millions of people worked on building the Great Wall. Workers had to stack large, heavy stones to build a wall that is at least three stories high! It took many, many years to complete just part of the Great Wall. Lots of people died building it. Today the wall is about 5,500 miles long.
The Great Wall was built to keep the Chinese people safe from the nomads and other invaders. It also helped to protect the rich fields where valuable wheat and rice crops grew. Soldiers stood guard along the wall and in the watchtowers at all times.

Even so, nomads did still try to raid their rich and powerful Chinese neighbors. Sometimes they succeeded, and some even became rulers of China. But they always ended up following the Chinese way of life. Throughout China’s long history, many battles were fought along the Great Wall.
Writing the Chinese Language

You have already heard that Emperor Qin wanted a great wall across parts of China. But he also wanted there to be one style of writing in all of China. He believed that this would help to unite the people.

Emperor Qin asked a man named Li Si to create this new style of writing. In China today, everyone uses what Li Si created. It is, in fact, the oldest written language still used in the world.
Instead of using letters to spell words, Chinese people have a different picture for each whole word. These pictures are called characters, and they sometimes look like the words they stand for. The Chinese written characters for blossom and plum are shown here.
Why might learning to write Chinese words be more difficult than learning to write English words? Well, children in China have to learn new characters for every word—and there are thousands of words. We learn the twenty-six letters that make up the English alphabet, and with them, we can write every word in English. Which one sounds easier to you?

In China, people can write their characters across the page or down the page. Chinese writers begin by imagining there is a small square on the page. Inside the lines of the imaginary square, they carefully draw the characters. A character is made up of a certain number of lines, or strokes.
CHAPTER 6

Chinese Inventions

Look at your book. What is it made of? It’s made of paper. Think about all the times today you have seen or used something made of paper. A long time ago, in ancient China, people learned to make paper. They were the first people to do so, and they were the first to make and use paper money.

Early paper was made by mashing up rags, old rope, the bark of trees, and water. This mixture was then flattened and dried.

Paper became easy and cheap to make, and many things could be made from paper!
Imagine that every book in the world had to be made by hand, with someone writing every word on every page. For a long time, even for hundreds of years after the invention of paper, books were actually made this way.

Then, in ancient China, people came up with an easier way to make books. They developed an early form of printing. They made small blocks of wood and carved, or cut, a character on each block. They put the small blocks together. Then they put ink on the blocks. When paper was pressed on the blocks, a page of printed words appeared in seconds. The blocks could be put together in different ways to make other pages.
In America, fireworks light up the night sky on the Fourth of July each year. But did you know that fireworks were actually invented in ancient China?

One day, a very long time ago in ancient China, an experiment went wrong. As a result, a gray powder, called gunpowder, was invented. Gunpowder exploded when lit. People began to add ingredients to the gunpowder so that the explosions would be colorful. Today we call these explosions fireworks!
Many hundreds of years ago, the Chinese learned how to make porcelain. Porcelain is made from special white clay instead of the usual brown clay. Clay is a sticky, muddy substance that comes from the earth and is used to make pots, cups, plates, and other things.

The Chinese used porcelain to make beautiful, delicate dishes. These dishes were nicer and more valuable than the ones made from brown clay. Porcelain is often called china in English. Can you guess why?
Beautiful Silk

An old folktale tells us that thousands of years ago, a queen named Si Ling-chi was sitting in the garden of her royal palace. The queen was drinking tea and watching little caterpillars spin, or make their cocoons, in some mulberry trees. Suddenly one of the cocoons fell into her teacup!

Si Ling-chi watched the cocoon floating in her tea. She saw that a tiny thread had come loose from the cocoon. She pulled on it and was amazed to find that the cocoon was made from one very long thread. This was a silk thread. As the story goes, Queen Si Ling-chi learned to spin silk thread, which she used to make beautiful cloth.
The making of silk became a closely guarded secret. In fact, in China, you could be killed if you ever told a foreigner the secret of how silk was made. The reason for this was that silk could make people a lot of money. The Chinese wanted to be able to sell their silk to foreigners. Beautiful silk robes were made for the rich and powerful, including the rulers of China. Chinese rulers often wore the color yellow.
So many people went to China to buy silk that the main road from Europe to China became known as the Silk Road. There were many dangers on the Silk Road, including bandits and miles of hot, dry desert. But silk was so desired that people were willing to travel a long way to get it.
You may be wondering exactly how silk is made. Well, some of what’s involved in making it is the same now as it was thousands of years ago. To begin with, you need silkworms. Silkworms are fussy. They must have mulberry leaves to eat.

After munching on mulberry leaves for about forty-five days, the silkworms spin their cocoons. They spend three or four days making a single thread.

When the cocoons are ready, silk makers put the cocoons in steam or hot water to loosen the ends of the thread.

The thread from just one cocoon might be three thousand feet long—more than half a mile! The thread is used to make many things, including beautiful silk cloth.
The Chinese New Year

The Chinese New Year is the most important of all the Chinese celebrations. The celebration lasts for two weeks. This celebration goes back hundreds of years.

People everywhere fill their homes and streets with bright red decorations. Red is the color of good fortune and happiness.

Special wishes for the New Year are often written on the decorations. And food is an important part of the two-week celebration too. The food that is eaten is meant to bring good luck!
After a New Year’s Eve dinner that includes lots and lots of food, families spend time together playing games and talking. They often stay up all night.

At midnight, fireworks light up the sky. In the morning, Chinese children are excited because they get presents. Their parents give them little packages of “lucky money” wrapped in red paper. The rest of the day, people visit relatives, friends, and neighbors and wish one another good luck. And the present giving lasts for the next five to seven days!
The New Year’s Day parade is a part of the celebrations. The star of the parade is the Chinese dragon. People carry a large, colorful dragon through the streets and they perform a dragon dance. But the Chinese dragon is not like other dragons. It has a camel head, tiger paws, and eagle claws. It blows steam instead of fire. That’s because the ancient Chinese believed that dragons controlled the rains.
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