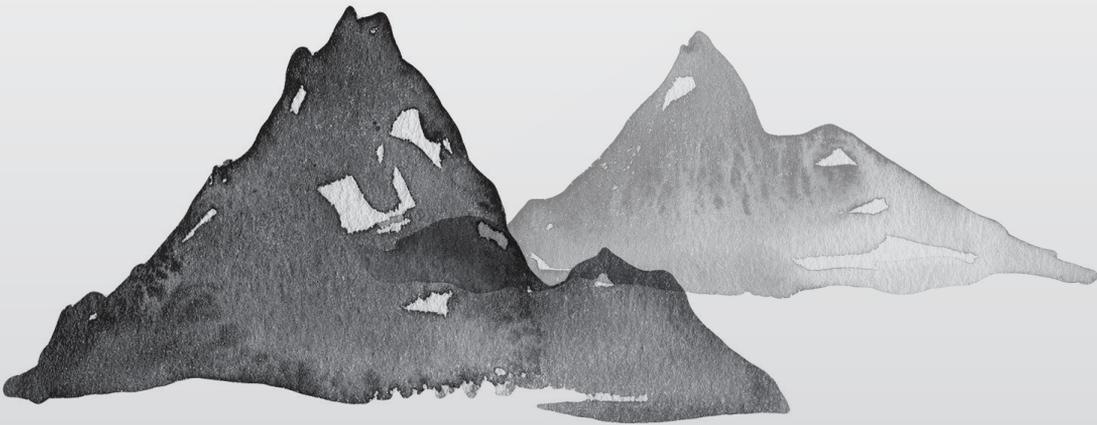




Chapter One



The Origin of Chinese Civilization 中国文化起源



River valley civilization refers to an agricultural nation or civilization that is located on a river and derives its sustenance from the river. The river gives the inhabitants a reliable source of water for drinking and agriculture. The first great civilizations, such as Mesopotamia, ancient India and ancient Egypt, all developed in river valleys. Huanghe (Yellow River, 黄河) civilization, is an ancient Chinese civilization that prospered in the middle and lower basin of the Yellow River. Agriculture was started on the flood plains of the Yellow River, and before long, through flood control and irrigation of the Yellow River, cities were developed and political power was reinforced. Some other rivers in China, such as the Yangtze River (长江) and the Zhujiang River (珠江), also contributed to the development of Chinese civilization. Finally, Chinese culture has persisted continuously in this world as a great civilization.

1.1 Yellow River Valley Civilization

The Yellow River, the principal river in northern China, is the country's second longest river—surpassed only by the Yangtze River. Its drainage basin is the third largest in China, covering approximately 750,000 km². The river originates in the southern part of Qinghai Province on the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau and flows through six other provinces and two autonomous regions in its course before emptying into the Bohai Sea, an embayment of the Yellow Sea of the North Pacific Ocean.

The Yellow River basin was the birthplace of ancient Chinese civilization. The basin, nurtured and sustained by the major rivers in northern China, has been the center of China for thousands of years. It is called the Yellow River because its water carries silt, which gives the river its yellow-brown color, and when the river overflows, it leaves a yellow residue behind, further cementing its name. While the river helps create fertile land suitable for farming, during certain times of the year, the Yellow River frequently overflows, and floods damage housing and crops across the North China Plain, an important agricultural region. For thousands of years, the Chinese have been building major public works to control floods and use water from the Yellow River for irrigation, such as hydroelectric dams in modern times. Despite the risk of flooding, the Yellow River basin is home to a huge population, and many of China's oldest cities are situated along its banks.

It is hard to say exactly when villages and tribes began to appear in the Yellow River basin, but most scholars agree that a major consolidation of power took place from around



2070 BC to 1600 BC, marking the establishment of the Xia Dynasty. Da Yu (大禹), a mythical figure who created systems to control floods in the Yellow River basin, is credited as the first emperor of the Xia Dynasty. With the ability to better control the Yellow River and save their crops from floods, Chinese rulers were able to consolidate their rule over China, and subsequently a number of dynasties headquartered in the region. The basin became the cultural, social and academic center of China. Therefore the Yellow River is often called “the cradle of Chinese civilization”.

The Yellow River civilization originated in the Neolithic Age, a period characterized by the thriving of numerous regional cultures. Over time, some of these cultures merged, while others gradually declined. Despite these transformations, the Yellow River civilization continued to develop and strengthen. Through the integration and expansion of various cultures, it flourished during the Zhou Dynasty, significantly contributing to the unification of China. In terms of agriculture and technological advancements, the Yellow River civilization achieved remarkable feats, surpassing many of its contemporaries throughout the world.

From the Xia and Shang dynasties to the Tang Dynasty, the Yellow River region remained the center of political, economic, and cultural activities. Many ancient capitals were strategically located along the Yellow River, highlighting its pivotal role. Notable achievements in science and technology, such as the invention of the compass, which revolutionized navigation, and the development of advanced irrigation systems that significantly increased agricultural productivity, underscore the ingenuity of the Yellow River civilization. Handicrafts such as intricate pottery designs, luxurious silk fabrics, and elaborate bronze artifacts are also well-known and have become symbols of Chinese civilization. The written language that originated here has served as a vehicle for cultural transmission and laid the foundation for subsequent literary development. Renowned for these early accomplishments, the Yellow River civilization has laid the cornerstone for Chinese culture, philosophy, and governance, shaping the country’s identity and influencing future generations.

The Yellow River valley gave birth to the core elements of Chinese belief, such as the worship of ancestors and Heaven. Ancestor worship was deeply intertwined with the social structure of the time, with each tribe and dynasty organized around a patriarchal clan system. This practice reinforced blood ties, kinship ties, maintained family identity, and influenced power dynamics within the Yellow River civilization. To a large extent, ancestor worship involves rituals that maintain the integrity and continuity of the fundamental

unit of Chinese society—the family. Moreover, these ancestral worship practices fostered a deeper sense of identity and intergenerational familial and geographical bonds. Meanwhile, the worship of Heaven cultivated a pervasive Chinese identity and gave rise to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which endowed the ruling emperor and dynasty with the divine right to govern as long as they maintained Heaven's favor. This subsequently solidified the sense of a shared cultural and national identity among the people.

The mighty Yellow River is the symbol of the Chinese nation. From the towering Kunlun Mountain to the immense Pacific Ocean, it passes through grasslands and deserts, splitting the Loess Plateau (黄土高原) and moistening the land. It is this melting pot of hundreds of rivers that breeds the brilliant Chinese culture, broadens the minds of the Chinese people, and nurtures the largest nation in the world—the Chinese nation.

(Adapted from Travel China Guide, China Highlights and National Geographic websites.)

◆ Cultural Analysis

The Yellow River, the symbol of the spirit of the Chinese people—braveness, industriousness and assiduity, has facilitated the formation of the following characteristics of Chinese culture.

(1) River Valley Civilization

Ancient Chinese civilization sprouted from the river valleys though there is a long coastline in the east. The Yellow River is the cradle of Chinese civilization, and other river valleys also contributed to the development of Chinese culture in the following historical periods. Thanks to the great rivers, the Chinese created the initial civilization depending on the peaceful rivers during the earliest period of human society.

(2) Inclusiveness of Chinese Civilization

From its inception in the Neolithic Age, the Yellow River civilization has been a fusion of multiple tribal cultures, and throughout its development, it has always been inclusive and eclectic. Meanwhile, China, with its numerous rivers, has witnessed the unique local cultures nurtured by these waterways gradually merge and blend, ultimately shaping the rich and diverse Chinese civilization. Within this vast cultural tapestry, every cultural element is cherished and respected, seamlessly integrating into the intricate fabric of Chinese identity.



◆ Text Comprehension

1. Judge whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F).

- 1) The river valley civilization refers to an agricultural nation or civilization that is located on a river and derives sustenance from the river.
- 2) The Yellow River, the principal river in northern China, is the country's second longest river—surpassed only by the Yangtze River.
- 3) The Yellow River civilization is China's earliest civilization and one of the oldest in the world.
- 4) From the Xia and Shang dynasties to the Qing Dynasty, the Yellow River area was always the center of politics, economy and culture.
- 5) The Yellow River valley gave birth to the most basic form of Chinese belief: the worship of ancestors.

2. Answer the following questions.

- 1) What is the location of the Yellow River in China? How did it contribute to the development of early civilizations?
- 2) Can you list any achievements of the Yellow River civilization during the Xia and Shang dynasties?
- 3) Can you illustrate the inclusiveness of the Yellow River Valley culture?

1.2 Chinese Mythology

Chinese mythology is a collection of cultural history, folktales, and religious traditions that have been passed down for centuries in oral or written form. There are several aspects to Chinese mythology, including creation myths and legends, and myths about the founding of Chinese culture and the establishment of Chinese state. Chinese mythology generally concerns moral issues and informs people about their culture and values. Like many other mythologies, some people believe that Chinese mythology, at least in part, reflects a factual historical record.

There has been extensive interaction between Chinese mythology and the major belief systems of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Elements of early mythology were adapted into these belief systems, and some of the teachings and beliefs of these systems also became incorporated into Chinese mythology. For example, the spiritual paradise of Taoism was incorporated into mythology as a place where immortals and deities dwelled. Myths glorifying the benevolent rulers of the past, the Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns (三皇五帝), became an integral part of the Confucian political philosophy.

Creation myths in Chinese literature appear relatively late in Chinese culture. Some of the existing ones emerged well after the founding of Confucianism, Taoism, and folk religions. The stories exist in several often conflicting versions, with the creation of the first humans variously attributed to Pangu, Nüwa (女娲), and Yu Huang (玉皇, the Jade Emperor).

Nüwa, who appeared in literature no earlier than about 350 BC, is said to have created the human race. Her companion was Fuxi (伏羲), the brother and husband of Nüwa. These two beings are sometimes worshipped as the ultimate ancestors of all humankind. They are often depicted as half-snake, half-human creatures. Nüwa was also responsible for repairing the sky after Gonggong (共工) damaged the pillars supporting the heavens.

Pangu, who appeared in literature no earlier than about 200 BC, is considered the first sentient being and creator. In the beginning, there was nothing but a formless chaos. Out of this chaos there was born an egg, which remained for 18,000 years. When the forces of *yin* and *yang* became balanced, Pangu emerged from the egg, and set about the task of creating the world. With a swing of his great axe, he separated the *yin* and *yang*. The heavy *yin* sank to become the Earth, while the light *yang* rose to become the Heaven. Pangu stood between them and pushed up the sky. Eighteen thousand years later, Pangu lay to rest. Each segment of Pangu's colossal form transformed into the countless wonders of nature, including towering mountains, flowing rivers, the blazing sun, the shimmering moon, and more.

Yu Huang appeared in literature well after the establishment of Taoism in China. He is considered to be the first god and the ruler of all gods and goddesses. There are many myths about well-known gods and goddesses who were in charge of different aspects of culture, but all of them were subordinate to Yu Huang.

The early myths of China are scattered throughout various ancient texts, such as the *Shan Hai Jing* (《山海经》, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*), *Huai Nan Zi* (《淮南子》),



and *Shui Jing Zhu* (《水经注》, *Commentary on the Waterways Classic*).

Shan Hai Jing provides a detailed account of the myths, witchcraft, and religion of ancient China, as well as the geography, seas and mountains, history, medicine, customs, and ethnicities of that era. It is widely regarded as an early encyclopedia of China and has deeply influenced the mythical world portrayed in Qu Yuan's works. The mythological figures, sacred mountains, divine waters, and mystical creatures found in the *Chu Ci* (《楚辞》) can be traced back to the *Shan Hai Jing*.

Huai Nan Zi, a philosophy book compiled during the Western Han Dynasty, preserves abundant materials on mythical legends, including the ancient stories of *Nüwa Mending the Heavens* (《女娲补天》) and *Hou Yi Shooting the Suns* (《后羿射日》). Through this classic work, these splendid mythical stories have been passed down to the present day, becoming well-known to future generations.

Shui Jing Zhu, an ancient Chinese masterpiece of geography written by Li Daoyuan (酈道元) in the late Northern Wei Dynasty, details the flow direction, origins, and landscapes along the banks of various rivers. Additionally, the book records many mythical legends, such as the story of the *Goddess in Wu Mountain* (《巫山神女》) and the tale of *Cun Liu and Lu Ban* (《村留与鲁班》), among others. These mythical elements have enriched Chinese mythology.

After the Han Dynasty, China witnessed the emergence of independently authored mythological books dedicated solely to the documentation of myths and legends, marking the progression and sophistication of ancient mythology culture. *Hei'an Zhuan* (《黑暗传》, *Epic of Darkness*) is the only collection of legends preserved in epic form by a community of the Han Chinese, the inhabitants of the Shennongjia (神农架) mountain area in Hubei Province. It contains accounts ranging from the birth of Pangu (盘古) in pre-historical myth to the historical era.

Sou Shen Ji (《搜神记》, *Anecdotes about Spirits and Immortals*), written during the Eastern Jin Dynasty, is a pioneering work in ancient Chinese mythology novels. Grounded in a rich array of mythical tales and folklore, it vividly showcases the profound imagination and creativity of the ancient Chinese people. Legends such as those of *Gan Jiang and Mo Ye* (《干将莫邪》) and the story of *Dong Yong* (《董永》) have been widely disseminated and cherished through the ages. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, more mythological fictions appeared, such as *Feng Shen Yan Yi*, a mythological fiction about the founding of the Zhou Dynasty; *Journey to the West* (《西游记》) by Wu Cheng'en, a fiction based on

the historical event of Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India, in which the pilgrims encounter a variety of ghosts, monsters, and demons; *Bai She Zhuan* (《白蛇传》), a romantic tale set in Hangzhou involving a snake who attains human form and falls in love with a man.

(Adapted from New World Encyclopedia website.)

◆ Cultural Analysis

Karl Marx took the era of myths as the childhood of human beings, and he proposed that the childhood of Chinese was very short, but as the initial phase of Chinese civilization, it also showed some typical characteristics.

(1) The Fragmentation of Chinese Myths

Myths in ancient China were usually spread in scattered and fragmented forms in various written materials. These sources encompass information pertaining to archaeology, literature, philosophy, geography, history and so on. Many of them preserve only a few myths, while some of them hold a comparative large number of myths. In China, there exists almost no sacred canon recording myths or sacred history like the *Bible* (《圣经》) or the *Koran* (《古兰经》), nor were there any literati who collected myths from oral tradition and compiled them into systematic and integrated mythology like the Greek collections ascribed to Homer (荷马) and Hesiod (赫西俄德).

(2) The Moralization of Chinese Myths

The virtue dominates Chinese myths. All the kings depicted in myths were virtuous and tried to bring peace and harmony to human beings, such as the Yellow Emperor, who united the people and brought order out of chaos, and Yu, who devoted himself to flood control. The ideas and spirit conveyed in myths usually encourage Chinese people to do something helpful to others.

(3) The Historicization of Chinese Myths

Many characters and events in the myths eventually become identified as historical figures and occurrences from the distant past. For example, some great kings in Chinese history have their origins in myths: the Yellow Emperor (黄帝), Da Yu, etc. According to Mao Dun (茅盾), many historical stories in ancient times were originally myths; ancient historians historicized the myths by rationalizing their unreasonable elements.



◆ Text Comprehension

1. Judge whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F).

- 1) Chinese mythology generally concerns moral issues and informs people about their culture and values.
- 2) *Shui Jing Zhu* and *Shan Hai Jing* focus on the record of Chinese myths.
- 3) *Hei'an Zhuan* is the only collection of legends in epic form preserved by a community of the Han Chinese.
- 4) A unique characteristic of Chinese culture is the relatively early appearance of creation myths in Chinese literature.
- 5) Some characters in Chinese myths eventually become identified as historical figures and occurrences from the distant past.

2. Answer the following questions.

- 1) Can you list any legendary kings in Chinese myths and tell some stories about them?
- 2) Can you name some literary works concerning mythical stories?
- 3) What connotative meaning can you get from the story of Pan Gu?

1.3 Chinese Dragon

The dragon is a totem of the Chinese nation and a symbol of China. It has the highest status among animals and is deified by and sacred to Chinese people.

People are quite familiar with the image of dragon, but nobody has ever seen a real one. The dragon was born from the imagination of people just like the phoenix (凤凰) and kylin (麒麟), so there is no official and fixed version of the birth of Chinese dragons. According to Wang Fu (王符), a scholar in the Eastern Han Dynasty, a Chinese dragon has the head of a camel, the antlers of a deer, the eyes of a rabbit, the ears of cattle, the neck of a snake, the belly of a clam, the scales of a carp, the claws of a hawk, and the paws of a tiger. The body parts may be different in different sayings, but all of them have their own implied meanings and symbolize strong power.

The dragon is deified as the Dragon King, a supreme deity who reigns over the seas, governing all marine creatures and managing water and weather. In Taoism, there are four Dragon Kings, each with jurisdictions over one of the Four Seas: the East Sea, the South Sea, the West Sea, and the North Sea. As noble deities, the Dragon Kings are welcomed into temples and worshipped by believers. Their majestic and unique powers make them masters of weather and water, enabling them to bring abundant rainfall or decree drought, which significantly affects agriculture. Within temples, dragon motifs and sculptures of the Dragon Kings can be seen everywhere, with some temples even enshrining multiple Dragon Kings.

In terms of the origin of Chinese dragon, there are many explanations. One of the explanations is widely recognized: Chinese dragon is created through totems. The origin is clearly stated in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记》): The Chinese dragon is an integrated creature composed of several animals that served as totems for tribes involved in tribal wars, in which the Yellow Emperor defeated other tribes and united the country. As such, Chinese dragon became a totem of the whole nation, and headed forward with the nation into a new chapter of unification. The Yellow Emperor is considered to be the emblem of the dragon, and the Chinese people regard themselves as descendants of this nation and the dragon. In the thereafter several thousand years, dragon is a symbol of China, and an intangible bond uniting Chinese people. To Chinese, dragon brings them luck, well-being and all good things.

The legendary story of the Yellow Emperor and dragon influenced other emperors to follow his example. Therefore, emperors in ancient China considered themselves as the incarnation of dragon, and everything used by the emperors was ornamented with dragon motifs to show their status as the highest ruler, and their strong power and majesty. Chinese dragon's deep relationship with emperors can be seen from emperors' birth to death: on the day of an emperor's birth, strange phenomena related to dragons, like strange weather, would take place.

Several items used by emperors are believed to have special functions and significance. First is the clothes. Clothes embroidered with five-clawed dragons symbolize imperial authority, which should be worn by emperors only, called the Dragon Robes. Anyone other than the emperor who wears this special robe will be deemed a traitor to the nation. Specific rules govern the production of garments with dragon motifs, which are worn by princes or other members of the royal family. Second are the seals, which are usually carved from jade. The Heirloom Seal of the Realm (传国玺), first carved during the



Qin Dynasty, was exclusively possessed by emperors and served as a symbol of imperial power. Historically, it was passed down through generations of emperors. And other kinds of seals with dragon ornaments were also used by emperors and held official validity and authority.

Dragon is not only worshipped by the royal, but also by ordinary people. People's love and worship for dragons can be seen everywhere, from a person's name to a person's possessions. Ordinary people may have a name related with dragons, like Jackie Chan's Chinese name Cheng Long (成龙) means "to become a dragon", and they may name a place or a thing after dragons, like the Heilongjiang Province (黑龙江省). People may have a piece of furniture, wares, and other things ornamented with dragons, and may worship the Dragon King in a temple. They may go somewhere by dragon boat, and may perform dragon dances during festivals.

(Adapted from Top China Travel website.)

◆ Cultural Analysis

The Chinese dragon is benevolent, powerful and brings good fortune. It has played an important role in the history, politics and culture of the Chinese nation and the Chinese language.

(1) The Symbol of Chinese People

The origin of the Chinese dragon is connected with China's tribal history. It is said that when the Yellow Emperor defeated another tribe, he incorporated that tribe's animal totem into his own coat of arms—the snake. The body of the snake became mixed with the limbs and features of other animals as tribes were annexed, creating a dragon. The Yellow Emperor at last united all the tribes of ancient China, so the dragon symbolizes a unified China and till today all Chinese call themselves the descendants of the dragon.

(2) The Symbol of Imperial Power and Authority

According to legend, the dragon can walk on land, swim under water, and soar through the sky. It has incredible power. For thousands of years, Chinese emperors revered it as the symbol of power and dignity. While all Chinese people are said to be descendants of the dragon, the emperor has long been considered the human incarnation of the dragon. Historically, the Chinese emperor was the only person with the right to wear robes with dragon patterns.

(3) The Symbol of Good Luck

The Chinese dragon represents prosperity and good luck, and is also a rain deity that fosters harmony, which is different from the connotation of the European dragon—in European cultures, the dragon is a fire-breathing creature with aggressive connotations. Usually they are mean-spirited, greedy beings who hoard treasure.

◆ Text Comprehension

1. Judge whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F).

- 1) People are quite familiar with the image of the dragon though it was born from the imagination of people.
- 2) The body parts of the Chinese dragon may vary in different sayings, but all of them have their own implied meanings and symbolize strong power.
- 3) In Buddhism, there are four Dragon Kings who have respective jurisdictions over the East Sea, the South Sea, the West Sea and the North Sea.
- 4) Dragon is a totem of the Chinese nation, a symbol of China and all Chinese are proud to call themselves “the offspring of the dragon”.
- 5) In feudal society, clothes embroidered with five-clawed dragons to show imperial authority could only be worn by the royal families.

2. Answer the following questions.

- 1) What is the appearance of Chinese dragon and what does dragon mean to Chinese?
- 2) How is the dragon connected with imperial power in China?
- 3) Can you list some activities to illustrate Chinese people's love for dragons?



◆ Exercises

1. Match each of the mythological fictions with its description.

Mythological Fictions	Descriptions
1) <i>Shui Jing Zhu</i>	a) The collection of legends in epic form preserved by the inhabitants of the Shennongjia mountain area in Hubei Province
2) <i>Shan Hai Jing</i>	b) A fiction based on the historical event of Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India, in which the pilgrims encounter a variety of ghosts, monsters, and demons
3) <i>Feng Shen Yan Yi</i>	c) Characterized by rich allusions to ancient historical mythology dating back to the dawn of Chinese civilization
4) <i>Hei'an Zhuan</i>	d) An early encyclopedia of China describing the myths, witchcraft, and religion of ancient China
5) <i>Li Sao</i>	e) A romantic tale set in Hangzhou with a snake who attains human form and falls in love with a man
6) <i>Journey to the West</i>	f) Commentaries on the briefer work <i>Waterways Classic</i> and famous for its extensive record of geography, history, and associated legends
7) <i>Bai She Zhuan</i>	g) A mythological fiction about the founding of the Zhou Dynasty

2. Choose the best answers to each of the following questions. You may choose MORE THAN ONE answer.

- The Yellow River is nicknamed as _____.
 - The Cradle of Chinese Civilization
 - The Great River
 - China's Sorrow
 - The Long River
- Chinese mythology has extensive interaction with major belief systems such as _____.
 - Confucianism
 - Legalism
 - Mohism
 - Taoism

- 3) Which of the following statements is true about the image of Chinese dragon?
 - A. People have seen a real dragon in history.
 - B. Chinese dragons have an official and fixed appearance at their birth.
 - C. The body parts of Chinese dragons symbolize strong power.
 - D. According to Wang Fu, Chinese dragon has ears of an elephant.

- 4) Which of the following statements is true about Chinese dragon's deep relationship with emperors?
 - A. Chinese emperors, princes and other members of royal family have the right to wear Dragon Robes.
 - B. Ancient Chinese emperors consider themselves as the incarnation of dragon.
 - C. On the day of an emperor's death, strange phenomena related to dragon would take place.
 - D. Dragon motifs can show the emperor's status as the highest ruler, his strong power and majesty.

3. Translate the following sentences.

- 1) 黄河文明是在黄河中下游地区繁荣起来的古老的中华文明。
- 2) 中国古代文明属于大河文明，具有典型的农业文明特征。
- 3) 中国神话故事里的帝王都是善良的，他们努力给人类带来和平与和谐。
- 4) 龙王是海洋中的最高统治者，控制着所有海洋生物、水和天气。
- 5) 龙象征着统一的中国，直到今天，中国人仍自称为龙的传人。

4. Discuss the following questions.

- 1) Can you list the benefits a river can bring to the inhabitants? What is the role of the Yellow River in Chinese culture?
- 2) What are the functions of the myths in a culture?
- 3) What are the differences between Chinese dragon and Western dragon?



5. Work in groups. Do research on the river civilizations and fill in the table below. Then report your findings to the class.

River Civilization	Time/Period	Rivers/Places	Main Achievements
Ancient Chinese civilization			
Mesopotamian civilization			
Harappan civilization			
Ancient Egyptian civilization			

◆ Extended Readings

Chu Culture 楚文化

According to legends recounted in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, the ruling family of Chu descended from the Yellow Emperor and his grandson and successor Zhuanxu (颛顼). Zhuanxu's great-grandson Wuhui (吴回) was put in charge of fire by the Emperor Ku (喾) and was given the title of Zhurong (祝融). One of his descendants, Xiong Yi (熊绎), was enfeoffed by King Cheng (周成王) with the fiefdom of Chu. Then the first capital of Chu was established in Danyang (丹阳).

In the mid-8th century BC, Chu rose around the present Hubei Province, in the fertile valley of the Yangtze River in southern China. Sometime between 695 and 689 BC, the capital of Chu moved southeast from Danyang to Ying (郢). Ying was one of the largest cities in the world then with an area of 15.75 km² and walls 16 km long. It was a large-scale ancient city with magnificent palaces, large handicraft workshops, dense residences, wide city gates and a good drainage system.

According to archaeological findings, Chu's culture was initially quite similar to that of other Zhou states of the Yellow River basin. However, subsequently, Chu absorbed indigenous elements from the conquered Baiyue lands to its south and east, integrating these unique features into its own cultural fabric. As a result, Chu evolved into a hybrid culture that was distinct from those of the northern plains. Therefore, Chu fostered a brilliant culture that ultimately surpassed all other regional cultures in terms of achievements, leaving an enduring legacy on the historical and cultural landscape of China. Among these legacies is the unique and famous epic poem *Li Sao* written by Qu Yuan, a nobleman of Chu, which initiated a tradition of romanticism in Chinese literature. Ultimately, with the unification and development of Chinese society, the cultural heritage of Chu became an integral part of the broader Chinese culture.

Despite the fact that early Chu burial offerings consisted primarily of bronze vessels in the Zhou style, the bronze wares of the Chu State also have their own characteristics. For example, the bronze *jin* (铜禁, altar table) unearthed from the Chu tomb in Xichuan (淅川), Henan Province, is complex in shape. Dated to the mid-6th century BC, it was one of the early confirmed examples of lost-wax cast artifacts discovered in China. Later Chu burials, especially during the Warring States Period, featured distinct burial objects, such as colorful lacquerware, iron implements, and silk fabrics, accompanied by a reduction in bronze vessel offerings.

Common Chu motifs are vivid depictions of wildlife, mystical animals, and natural imagery, such as snakes, dragons, phoenixes, tigers, free-flowing clouds, and serpent-like beings. Usually the phoenix is considered as the totem of Chu people. Some archaeologists have speculated that Chu may have had cultural connections with the previous Shang Dynasty, since many motifs used by Chu appeared earlier at the Shang sites, such as serpent-tailed gods. Later Chu culture was known for its affinity for witchcraft. With the development of Chu culture, there was a shift in the witchcraft doctrine. Some rational aspects were integrated into Taoism, while some imaginative elements were recorded in Li Sao. The basic belief of the Chu people was the “Worship of the sun and fire”, which was based on their worship of nature and ancestors. The Yan Emperor (炎帝), the God of the sun, was venerated by the Chu people, and Zhurong, the God of fire, was revered as their ancestor. Therefore, they used red color in garments, architecture, wares, etc. They liked the east because the sun rises in the east, and they buried the dead in tombs facing east.

Chu had achieved a remarkable level of expertise in various fields, including bronze smelting, colorful silk weaving, embroidery, and lacquer ware manufacturing. Great accomplishments were also made in the artistic realm, particularly in music, dance, painting, and sculpture. Because of rich mine resources, the melting and casting techniques were finely developed. The bronze wares, gold wares and iron tools of Chu represented the highest standards at that time. The musical bells and chimes were dug out in 1978 from the Tomb of Marquis Yi of State Zeng (曾侯乙墓), which represented the highest level of bronze casting.

(Adapted from Wikipedia and Britannica websites.)

The Xia Dynasty 夏朝

The Xia Dynasty was the first government to emerge in ancient China and the first to adopt the policy of dynastic succession. Consequently, the Xia was the first dynasty of China.

The Xia Dynasty was overthrown by the Shang Dynasty, a historically more certain governmental entity, which was subsequently overthrown by the Zhou Dynasty. The argument that regards the Xia Dynasty as mythological holds that the Zhou (and later dynasties) wanted to make clear that the previous dynasties lost their right to rule because of immoral conduct, and thus created a proto-dynasty—the Xia—as a prehistoric model.

According to historians like Sima Qian (145–86 BC), there was once a great ruler named Huangdi better known as the Yellow Emperor who emerged from prehistoric

tribal system to rule the region of Shandong. The Yellow Emperor is credited with laying the foundations of Chinese culture and establishing a government system that lasted for centuries. He is attributed with the invention of musical instruments, the development of silk production, the institution of laws and customs, and significant advancements in the fields of medicine and agriculture. After his death, he was buried in the mausoleum in what is now Huangling County (黄陵县), Shaanxi Province, which is now a popular tourist attraction.

Huangdi was succeeded by his grandson Zhuanxu, one of the famous Five Emperors, who founded the Xia tribe. After defeating their rivals, the Xia established the first dynasty in China under the leadership of the Emperor Yao (尧). Yao ordered the construction of great palaces, and small villages of huts grew into urban centers. He is considered a great philosopher king who ruled his people wisely and worked for their best interests following the precepts of Huangdi.

During his reign, Yao had a serious problem in controlling the flooding of the Yellow River which disrupted agriculture as well as caused his people to drown or be displaced. He appointed a man named Gun (鲧) to take care of this situation. Gun tried for nine years to stop the flooding but every year it grew stronger and more lands were flooded and more people were killed. Finally, Gun constructed a series of dykes which he hoped would hold back the water, but the dykes collapsed, causing more destruction and deaths. By this time Yao had relinquished rule to his successor Shun (舜), who was not pleased at Gun's failure to control waters. According to some versions of the tale, Gun then killed himself, while according to others he was imprisoned by Shun. After him, Emperor Shun appointed Gun's son Yu (禹) to complete the work and stop the flooding.

Yu learned from his father's mistakes: Gun tried to do too much by himself, underestimated his need for help, and overestimated his abilities. He also acted without respect for the forces of nature and worked against the water instead of working with it. Yu sought help from the surrounding tribes and had them construct canals to channel the water to the sea.

Yu's project lasted 13 years, during which he was so dedicated to his task that he never returned his home once, even though he passed by it three times. Yu's wife and young son would call out to him as he passed by and his colleagues would advise him to go home and rest, but Yu would not abandon his task until it was completed. His single-mindedness and dedication inspired those around him, who looked up to him as a role model and worked harder until the river was brought under control and there were no more floods.

Once the water problem had been solved, Shun was very proud of Yu and placed him in command of his army. Yu led his men against the Sanmiao (三苗), a tribe hostile to the Xia, who were constantly raiding its borders. He defeated the Sanmiao and drove them out of the land, and as a reward for his victory, Shun declared him heir to the throne.

Yu's reign is considered to be the beginning of the Xia Dynasty, and he is known as Yu the Great not only for his victories over the floods and the Sanmiao but also because he established a stable central government and divided the country into nine provinces, making such a huge area easier to govern.

Yu ruled for 45 years, and on his deathbed, he named his son Qi (启) as his successor. Qi had been a young boy during the time of the great flood, and many people loved the story of how his father refused to return home until the flood stopped and how well young Qi accepted his father's absence. Yu intended to name his minister as successor, and did not want his son to have the burden of ruling, but so many people favored Qi that Yu had no choice. In naming Qi as his successor, Yu initiated the policy of dynastic succession.

Qi's son, Tai Kang (太康), was a poor ruler but many of his successors were highly skilled and numerous inventions and innovations were attributed to the later years of the Xia Dynasty, such as the development of armor in warfare and rules of chivalry in battle. The fourth ruler after Qi was the great hero Shao Kang (少康), who revitalized the country and was well known through many legends about him. The Xia Dynasty began to decline under the rule of Kong Jia (孔甲), who preferred drinking strong liquor to his responsibilities. He was succeeded by Gao (皋) who was succeeded by Fa (发), and neither of them did much to improve the lives of anyone but themselves. The last emperor was Jie (桀), who was known as a tyrant and lost the mandate of heaven to rule. He was overthrown by Tang (汤) who established the Shang Dynasty.

Most of the above had been considered mythology until archaeological evidences began to emerge between 1920s and mid 1960s to confirm the recording of historians. Even now, the academic consensus is that the history of the Xia Dynasty is largely mythological, even if such a dynasty did actually exist. The skepticism grew because there were no early accounts of the Xia Dynasty and no physical evidence argued for its existence. It is believed that historians, especially the famous Sima Qian, created the Xia Dynasty as a model precedent to explain and justify dynastic changes in China.

(Adapted from World History website.)