

8: Early China *Applying the Model*

The Chinese Setting

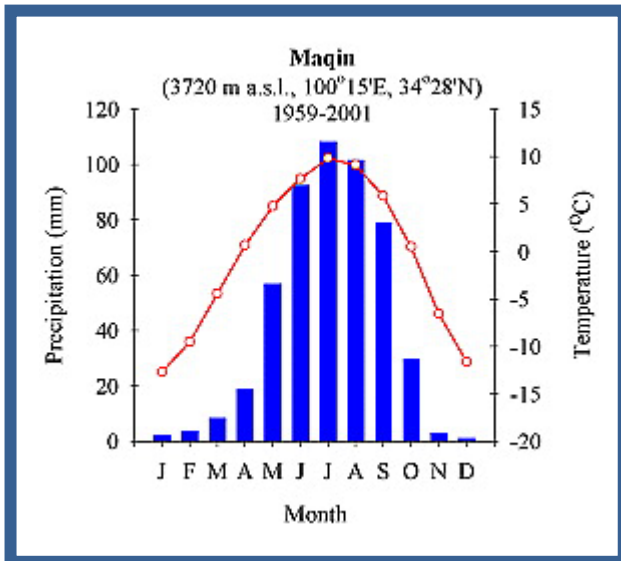
Humans have lived along China's river basins since prehistoric times. These rivers, especially the Hwang He (Yellow) River, offered the same benefits and created the same problems as other muddy rivers that were "cradles of civilization." Note that some of the area south of the Chang Jiang (Yangtze) River is also mountainous.



<http://www.imagekb.com/ancient-china-map-worksheet-answers>

Chinese civilization first developed in the Hwang He (Yellow) River valley about 2000 BCE.

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◀ Typical annual precipitation and temperature on the Tibetan Plateau where the Hwang He (Yellow) River originates. The plateau, extremely high and cold, is covered with “loess,” fine-grained soil brought in by wind. This soil easily erodes and is carried down the river as silt, giving the water the color that accounts for its name. Although the amount of precipitation (mostly hail) falling on the plateau may have decreased from ancient times, the annual pattern hasn’t changed. The graph is an average. The amount of precipitation has always varied a great deal from year to year.



<http://streetsofsalem.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/places-yellow-rive.jpg>

In ancient times, the main crop grown in the Huang He river valley was millet—a form of grain that produces starchy seed grains. Now the main crop in the valley and the north China plain is wheat. Although China is a huge country, with the largest population of any country on earth, only about 11% of the country is arable land. (In the United States, 17% is arable.)

<http://www.allianceabroad.com/wp-content/uploads/great-wall-of-china.jpg>



Another part of China's setting—the Great Wall—was built over many centuries, beginning around 600-700 BCE.

Fortifications and barriers extended 8,850 km (5,500 mi) along the northern border of the country (map).



http://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/community_images/97/313597/31418_61797.jpg

Above: Rice farming in terraced paddies. The Sichuan Basin and the Yangtze River valley (map, page 1) are major rice farming areas. This form of agriculture began in southern China more than 7500 years ago.

Investigation: Setting and Shared Ideas

“Attitude toward outsiders” is one category of Shared Ideas previously listed.

Based on aspects of setting illustrated on the previous pages, what attitude might traditional Chinese share toward outsiders? Give reasons for your answer that show possible relationships between setting and attitudes. (For example, based on the map, how much contact did the Chinese have with outside groups during much of their history?)

Another category of shared idea important in many societies is the relationship between individuals and the groups to which they belong—family, clan, tribe, and country.

- In some societies, most members think of themselves—gain their sense of self—as part of a family, clan, tribe, or other group, rather like fingers on a hand. They have little significance as individuals.
- In other societies, members see themselves as individuals, more like marbles than fingers.

Discuss with your group:

Which of these shared ideas (above) do you think was more likely among traditional Chinese in the southern, rice-growing region? In the northern, wheat-growing region?

Use the Model “shared ideas” sub-categories below to identify other possible relationships between Chinese settings and shared ideas in each agricultural region:

- The basic nature of humans: Are people considered “naturally” good, evil or neither? What’s the relative value of people of various ages? Of males and females?
- Time: Is the past different from the present? If so, how? Is the present different from the probable future? Will the future be better, worse, or about the same?
- “The good life:” What do people want their children to be, do, and have when they become adults?
- Ownership: What are the rules for owning? What does “owning” mean? Should most things be owned by individuals, or by groups? What kinds of things are owned? How is ownership transferred?
- Acceptable action: What’s OK and not OK to do?
- Authority: Who should make important decisions affecting many people? How do officials get their power? How is it transferred to others?
- Status: Who’s considered important? Not important? Why? What can people “do” with high status or prestige?
- Causality: Why do things happen? What causes events, disasters, change?
- Outsiders: Who’s considered “them” and “not one of us?” Why?”

Compare Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Chinese settings. Which society would be most likely to continue for long periods without major changes? Describe possible relationships between Settings and rates of societal change.

Investigation: Conflict between Ideas

From the beginning of Chinese cities and civilization, about 2100 BCE, up until about 400 BCE, the people of China in the two main river valleys were governed by “dynasties.” The rulers in each dynasty were from a single extended family, and rule was inherited by a younger family member when a ruler died. Three dynasties ruled in succession during this period.

The Chinese believed dynasty-based rulers were given power by the “Mandate [approval and authority] of Heaven.” An ancient Chinese document explained:¹

In the twelfth month of the first year... [Chief Minister] Yi Yin sacrificed to the former king, and presented the heir-king reverently before the shrine of his grandfather. All the princes from the domain of the nobles and the royal domain were present; all the officers also... Yi Yin then clearly described the good character of the Meritorious Ancestor [the heir’s grandfather, the previous king] for the instruction of the young king.

He said, "Oh! In the past, the former kings of Xia carefully cultivated their good character, and then there were no calamities from Heaven. The spirits of the hills and rivers alike were all in tranquility; and the birds and beasts, the fishes and tortoises, all enjoyed their existence according to their nature. But their descendant did not follow their example, and great Heaven sent down calamities.

“Calamities” were events like invasions, drought, famine, and earthquakes. Over the centuries, millions of Chinese died from them.

About 722 BCE, central rule started breaking down. The Zhou dynasty, which assumed control in 1046 BCE, gradually lost power to regional warlords who frequently fought each other, and with non-Chinese invaders from the North. This time of disorder, sometimes called “the Spring and Autumn Period” (722-476 BCE) and the “Warring States Period” (476-221 BCE), was also a time of other kinds of change—new tools were invented for farming, warfare, food production, and new ideas about governing formed.

The plow with iron moldboard was probably invented by the Chinese late in the Warring States period.

<http://listverse.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/plowfinished.jpg-tm.jpg>



¹ <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/shu-jing.html>

A famous teacher, Kong Qiu (551-479 BCE), called “Confucius” by Europeans, “Kong Fuzi” (“Master Kong”) by the Chinese, expressed ideas that became extremely important in Chinese society. Some of those ideas:¹ Image: <http://www.biography.com/people/confucius-9254926>



“Those who respect and honor their parents and treat their brothers well are not likely to offend against their superiors. Those who are not likely to offend against their superiors are not likely to create disorder...Being respectful and honorable—is this not the root of humanness?”

The Master said, “If you lead people using regulations and keep order among them through punishments, the people will evade the laws and will lack any sense of shame. If you lead them instead through moral force (*de*) and keep order among them through ceremonies (*li*), they will have a sense of shame and will correct their own wrong actions.”

The Master said, “The noble person is concerned with rightness; the small person is concerned with profit.”

A follower of Confucius, Mengzi (called Mencius by Europeans), clarified and expanded these ideas:²

All human beings have a mind that cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. The ancient kings had minds that sympathized with unfortunate people, and, therefore, a sympathetic government. Because they had a sympathetic mind and a sympathetic government, governing the world was as easy as turning something around in the palm of the hand.

...one who does not have a mind that feels pity and compassion is not human; one who does not have a mind that feels aversion and shame is not human; one who does not have a mind that feels modesty and compliance to authority is not human, one who does not have a mind that knows right and wrong is not human.

Summarize Chinese Shared Ideas suggested by the data so far. What might cause a dynasty to lose power and be replaced by another dynasty?

Why do you think “disorder” is an important concern to these Chinese?

What opinion is suggested here about the basic nature of humans?

Why might a time of disorder be a time when creative inventions and new ideas occur? Give reasons for your answer.

¹ http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/confucius_analects.pdf

² http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/mencius_human_nature.pdf

Below: Some ideas of Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE), prime minister of the province of Qin (pronounced “chin”) and Han Fei (d. 233 BCE). The ideas are called “Legalism.”^{1 2}

Shang Yang’s policies, particularly those emphasizing improved farming and military success, led to strengthening of the forces of Qin province, eventually leading to conquest of other parts of China, setting up the Qin dynasty. The word “China” as a designation for the nation is derived from the name “Qin.”

From Shang Yang:

In applying punishments, light offenses should be punished heavily; if light offenses are discouraged by this policy, then heavy offenses will not occur. If only light punishment is given for serious crimes, trouble will follow. The state that follows a policy of light punishment will surely be destroyed.

Now here is a young man of bad character. His parents rail at him, but he does not reform; the neighbors scold, but he is unmoved; his teachers instruct him, but he refuses to change his ways. Thus, although three fine influences are brought to bear on him – the love of his parents, the efforts of the neighbors, the wisdom of his teachers – yet he remains unmoved and refuses to change so much as a hair on his shin. But let the district magistrate send out the government soldiers to enforce the law and search for evildoers, and then he is filled with terror, reforms his conduct, and changes his ways. Thus the love of parents is not enough to make children learn what is right, but must be backed up by the strict penalties of the local officials; for people by nature grow proud on love, but they listen to authority.

From Han Fei:

The best rewards are those that are generous and predictable, so that the people may profit by them. The best penalties are those that are severe and inescapable, so that the people will fear them. The best laws are those that are uniform and inflexible, so that the people can understand them. ...

Hardly ten men of true integrity and good faith can be found today, and yet the offices of the state number in the hundreds. If they must be filled by men of integrity and good faith, then there will never be enough men to go around; and if the offices are left unfilled, then those whose business it is to govern will dwindle in numbers while disorderly men increase. Therefore the way of the enlightened ruler is to unify the laws instead of seeking for wise men, laying down firm policies instead of longing for men of good faith. Hence his laws never fail him, and there is no felony or deceit among his officials. ...

Compare these Legalist ideas with those of Confucius and Mencius, identifying similarities and differences. In your opinion, which was better? Give reasons for your answer.

¹ http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/book_of_lord_shang.pdf

² http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/hanfei_five_vermin.pdf

Follow-Up: Principles of Government

The differing ideas of Confucians and Legalists about human nature and how people should be governed are concerns for all governments. People in the United States, for example, disagree about the extent to which people in government can be trusted with power to make decisions.

Collect newspaper editorials and letters to editors related to government actions. Identify why each writer seems to be concerned, and the assumptions (ideas or beliefs about what's true) that might explain each writer's feelings.

For Teacher/Mentor--Overview:

This part, along with the previous (Early India) introduces no new concepts, but provides an opportunity to use the Model to compare and contrast societies. Suggestions for their use, such as for evaluation, are at the beginning of the “Early India” overview.

The objective of this unit is the same as the previous one: **Growth in each learner’s analytical skills and understanding of the Model, as applied to differing societies or cultural systems.**

A society as complex as China’s can’t be understood in significant depth in a brief unit such as this. However, a partial understanding of important Chinese shared ideas is a helpful beginning.

A major difficulty, of course, is that learners tend to assume that their own ideas, beliefs and assumptions about what’s right and true are either are, or should be, shared by all humans. Ethnocentrism is natural, and overcoming it and viewing other societies on their own terms (or looking at our own society objectively) is difficult.

The difficulties are suggested by the ancient observation that a fish would be the last to discover water. The too-familiar is hard to see.

Notes on the Investigations

Investigation: Setting and Shared Ideas

Much background information on Chinese worldview is readily available. As we’ve said elsewhere, no other information gives more insight into a society than its Shared Ideas. One excellent summary: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-doctoroff/chinas-worldview-three-ti_b_804496.html.

One focus of the first activity is the contrast between societies that focus on individuals and downplay the groups to which they belong, and those that focus more on the group. A fascinating recent study, led by Thomas Talhelm, and published in the journal *Science*, looks specifically at China in this regard, and notes contrasting views between groups within China. An article in the *New York Times* by Stanford anthropologist T. M. Luhmann summarizes the study:¹

“Americans and Europeans stand out from the rest of the world for our sense of ourselves as individuals. We like to think of ourselves as unique, autonomous, self-motivated, self-made. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/01/obituaries/01geertz.html>) observed, this is a peculiar idea.

“People in the rest of the world are more likely to understand themselves as interwoven with other people — as interdependent, not independent. In such social worlds, your goal is to fit in and adjust yourself to others, not to stand out. People imagine themselves as part of a larger whole — threads in a web, not lone

¹ Luhmann, T. M., “Wheat People vs. Rice People; Why Are Some Cultures More Individualistic Than Others?” *New York Times* Opinion Pages, Dec. 3, 2014.

horsemen on the frontier. In America, we say that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. In Japan, people say that the nail that stands up gets hammered down.”

“The authors of the study in *Science* argue that over thousands of years, rice- and wheat-growing societies developed distinctive cultures: “You do not need to farm rice yourself to inherit rice culture.”

“Their test case was China, where the Yangtze River divides northern wheat growers from southern rice growers. The researchers gave Han Chinese from these different regions a series of tasks. They asked, for example, which two of these three belonged together: a bus, a train and train tracks? More analytical, context-insensitive thinkers (the wheat growers) paired the bus and train, because they belong to the same abstract category. More holistic, context-sensitive thinkers (the rice growers) paired the train and train tracks, because they work together.

“Asked to draw their social networks, wheat-region subjects drew themselves larger than they drew their friends; subjects from rice-growing regions drew their friends larger than themselves. Asked to describe how they’d behave if a friend caused them to lose money in a business, subjects from the rice region punished their friends less than subjects from the wheat region did. Those in the wheat provinces held more patents; those in the rice provinces had a lower rate of divorce.”

Differences in ideas grew out of the differing patterns of action required for growing rice and wheat. Rice is far more labor intensive, and requires much more cooperation with other farmers to maintain paddies and share water. This is clearly illustrated by the photo of rice paddy workers in the materials for learners.

Links to Talheim’s original article and summaries in *National Geographic* and *The Economist* are on Talheim’s website (<http://thomastalhelm.weebly.com/research.html>).

Another consequence of Setting on the Shared Ideas of many Chinese people grew out of their relative isolation from other parts of the world and other peoples (except the invasion-threatening tribes to the north). Separated by mountains, desert, ocean and distance from other societies, the Chinese were left to develop civilization on their own. This led to (1) a society rather unlike that of westerners, (2) a great deal of stability over long periods that allowed the Chinese to maintain their distinctive society, and (3) a traditional suspicion of outsiders.

Investigation: Conflict between Ideas

An interesting brief historical document showing the conflict between Confucian and Legalists ideas is at http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/debate_salt_iron.pdf. The Confucians said:

“We have heard that the way to govern men is to prevent evil and error at their source, to broaden the beginnings of morality, to discourage secondary [i.e. non-farming] occupations, and open the way for the exercise of humanness and rightness. Material profit should never appear to be a motive of government.

“But now in the provinces, the salt, iron and liquor monopolies, and the system of equitable marketing, have been established [by government] to compete with the people for profit, dispelling rustic generosity and teaching the people greed. Therefore those who pursue primary occupations [farming] have grown few and those following secondary occupations [trading] numerous. As artifice increases, basic simplicity declines; and as the secondary occupations flourish, those that are primary suffer. When the secondary is practiced the people grow decadent, but when the primary is practiced they are simple and sincere. When the people are sincere then there will be sufficient wealth and goods, but when they become extravagant then famine and cold will follow.”

Government officials replied by citing the necessity for military forces to protect inhabitants living near the border, and said the profits from the government monopoly on salt and iron were necessary to pay for this protection.

(HLB) July 2015; added Shared Idea categories (p. 4) December 2021