Mighty Rivers

China’s rivers helped shape the early civilizations that developed there. This is especially true of the Huang He in the north and the Chang Jiang in the south.

From the high plateaus of western China, the snow-fed waters of the Huang He flow eastward for about 2,900 miles. As the river crosses China’s northern deserts, it cuts through deposits of yellow silt called loess. This yellow silt colors the water and gives the Huang He, or “Yellow River,” its name. Farther downstream, the Huang He drops the loess along its banks before emptying into the Yellow Sea. The soil there is fertile from the loess deposited by the Huang He.

Both rivers can cause terrible floods that destroy homes and drown people. The Huang He’s floods can be so bad that the ancient Chinese called it “China’s Sorrow.”

Reading Check: Compare and Contrast.

How are the Huang He and the Chang Jiang similar? (answer this in your social studies notebook)
Mountains, Plateaus, Deserts, and Plains

To understand the landscape of China, imagine stairs with three steps. If you move across China from west to east, each step becomes lower.

The top step, the highest, would be western China. There stand the Himalayas, the highest mountains on Earth. North of the Himalayas is the world’s largest and highest plateau, called the Plateau of Tibet. Even farther north are more tall mountains, deserts, and dry, treeless grasslands called steppes.

The middle step, or central China, is also made up of mountains and plateaus. The geographic features are lower here than those of western China. Across the far north of central China is a desert called the Gobi, which sits on a high plateau surrounded by mountains and steppes.

The bottom step, or eastern China, has China’s lowest land. The wide valleys and fertile plains of the Huang He and Chang Jiang are located here. A long coastline along the Pacific Ocean makes up almost the entire eastern border of this region.

Eastern China has a varied climate, with the northern part having cold, dry winters and warm, rainy summers. Although the growing season is short, early farmers grew plentiful crops in the Huang He Valley’s fertile soil. The warmer, rainier climate of the southern part provides a longer growing season. For centuries, farmers have grown rice in the Chang Jiang Valley.

Some Chinese farmers grew rice using terrace farming. They dug terraces on the slopes of hills and mountains. Along each terrace’s edge, a small wall held in water. Rice was planted in the water-filled terrace.

A World Apart

In ancient times, the geographic features of China isolated the country from the rest of the world. Natural barriers, such as mountains, deserts, rivers, and seas, made travel to and from China challenging.

The early Chinese were so isolated that they came to believe that China was the world’s only civilization. They called the world Tian Xia, which means “All Under Heaven.” They believed that China was the center of All Under Heaven.

Many geographic features also separated the people living within ancient China. Rivers, deserts, mountains, and great distances made the governing, or rule, of large areas of China difficult. These features also allowed people living in different parts of China to develop their own cultures. The people of each region even had their own dialect, or way of speaking, just like people in China today.

In time, the people of ancient China came to share a common heritage, or set of ideas passed down from one generation to another. China’s ancient heritage includes legends, or stories passed down from earlier generations.

Many of these legends explain the origins of the land and people of China. One well-known legend tells that the universe began as an egg. Pan Gu, the creator, slept inside the egg until the egg cracked. Then Pan Gu climbed out. He pushed up the top half of the eggshell, and it formed the sky. The bottom half became Earth.