

History of China for Kids

Part 1



By Rachel Bubb

This book (Part 1) goes through China's history from its beginnings in the Xia Dynasty through the Tang Dynasty. Part 2 goes through the Song Dynasty through modern history (up to 2021). My goal is to make history come alive for students and to tell it through stories so that students want to keep reading and learning. There are optional ideas for projects and introductions to painters and poets throughout this book. Special thanks to Katylin for helping me look over and proofread this book.

Rachel (June 2021)



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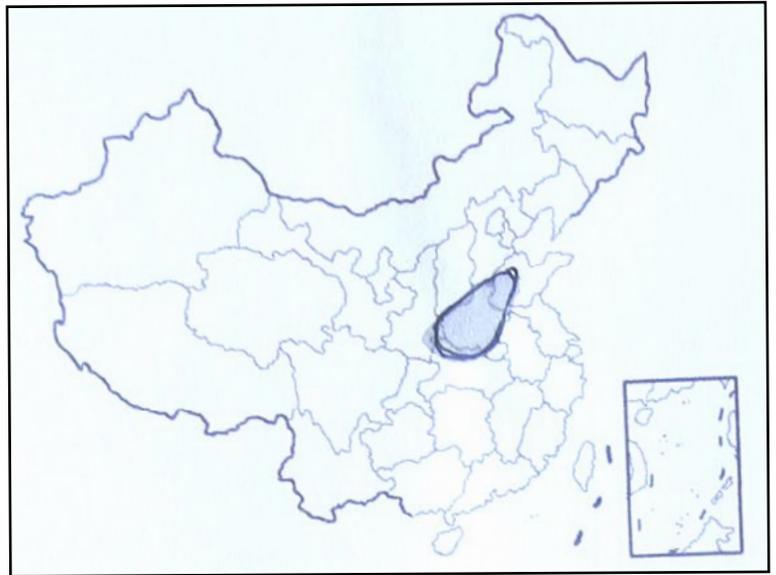
Posts to tie horses up to, Forest of Steles Museum, Xi'an, 2012.

Chapter 1: Xia Dynasty (2000-1700 BC)

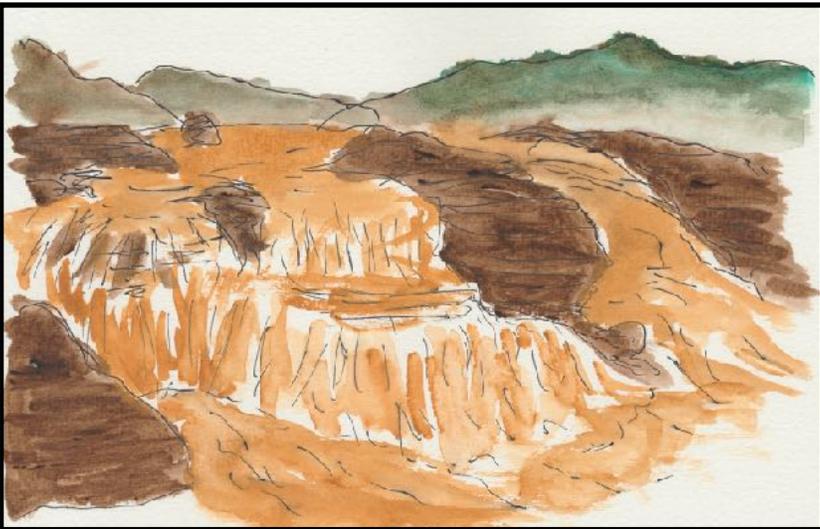
Throughout history people have often chosen to live close to a source of water: a river, a spring, or a well. People in China were no different. If you look at the map on the right, you'll notice two rivers. The one on the top is the Yellow River and the one on the bottom is the Yangtze River.

In China people first started to live

around the Yellow River. The Yellow River gets its name from being yellow in color. Well, it's actually more brown than yellow, but "Yellow River" is a much better name than "Brown River." It's not always yellow though. This river starts (like many rivers) up in the mountains in a spring that runs down



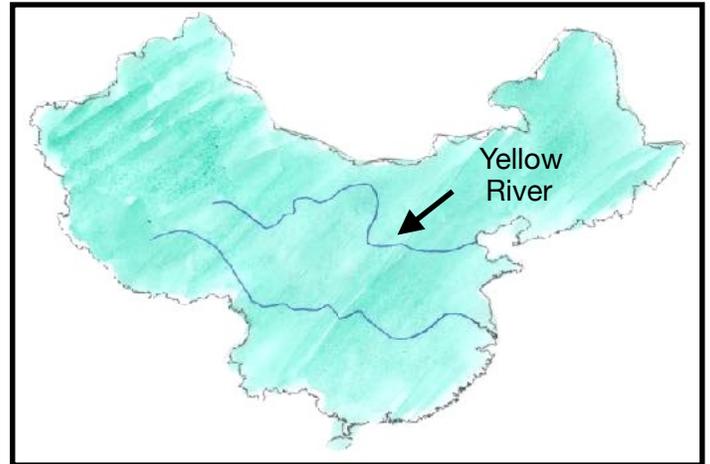
the mountain and winds its way through the country until it runs into the ocean. It's actually blue and clear in color until about half-way through, where there's a big loop. Here it goes through something called the Loess Plateau where the water picks up a lot of minerals and loose dirt, making the water look brown.



The reason people wanted to live close to this river was because they needed water to live. Back then there were no pipes or faucets. They couldn't just turn the water on and take a shower or wash dishes or get water to drink. Every time they needed water they had to walk down to the river with buckets and bring back water or bring up water from a well.

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People also lived in different homes than we live in today. There was no concrete at this time and no tall buildings. They would often use sticks and dried grass for the roof. Often the floor would be dirt and there wasn't a lot of furniture. A picture on the right shows what kind of homes they might have lived in during this time. Most likely, they weren't that warm during the winter so people had to wear really warm clothes. One thing about these homes is that they didn't take a long time to build. However, they often had to put new dried grass and branches on the roof to keep the water out. They might not have had doors but maybe hung a piece of cloth from the door frame instead.



An old home

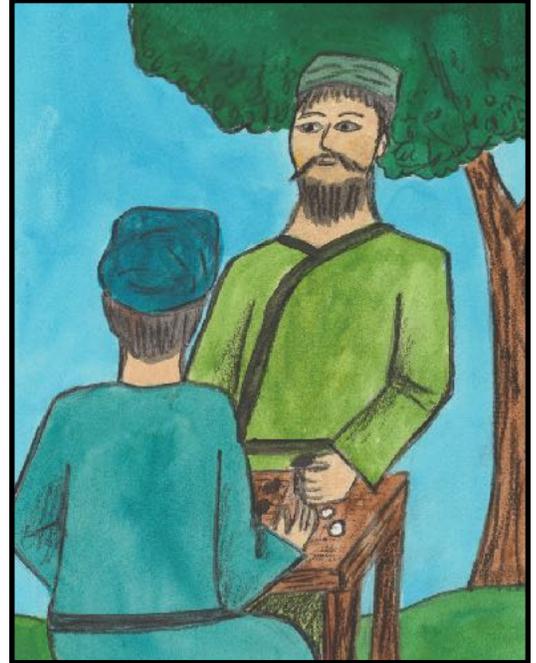
The first king of China lived a long, long time ago. This was before there were books or paper or even pens and pencils. Everything we know about the people that lived in this time was from stories that people passed on to their children, who told their children, and many more children after that.

We'll start with the three "Greats." These are the three legendary leaders of China from long ago. The first one is a man named Yao or Yao the Great. He wanted to be a good ruler but he saw that if his son became ruler after him, he would be a bad ruler and it might be very bad for the country. He didn't know what to do. One night he had a dream where he was playing a new game. The next day (or a few days after that) he taught this game to his son, hoping that it would help him do something good with his life. His son loved the game and started playing it

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with his friends who played it with their friends. Soon many people were playing this game. This game is actually still played today- it's called "Wei Qi" in Chinese or sometimes "Go" In English. It uses little black and white stones and a square board.

Yao the Great was getting old and wanted to retire. In some countries a king rules until he dies, but sometimes in China an emperor or king retired instead and let their son or the next person rule. Yao the Great started looking for a good man who could rule after him and came across a man named Shun. Shun was a distant relative and seemed like he would be a good ruler. Yao the Great gave him a job: rule a smaller part of the country. Even though Shun never was a leader like this before, he ruled well and Yao the Great made Shun the next emperor.



Shun the Great was known for dividing the country up into twelve different provinces. He did this to better organize and run the country. While he was ruling, the Yellow River started flooding. Many people's homes and villages often got flooded. However, it flooded for nine years! That's a long time!



Shun the Great looked for someone who could fix the flooding problem and he found a man named Gun. Sadly, the plan that Gun had didn't work and the river still flooded. Gun's son, Yu, came along and took over the job from his father. Just before this, Yu got married and had a son. It's said that for the next thirteen years Yu was busy going up and down the river to solve the flooding problem. He got people to work together, and made some walls and canals for the water to go through instead of flooding the

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villages when the water rose. During these thirteen years he went by his own village a few times, but only stopped by to see his wife and son three times. All the work he put into this project paid off and the flooding stopped for a long time.

When Shun the Great wanted to retire, he also didn't think his son would be up to the job of being emperor so he started to think of who could be the emperor after him. He decided to make Yu the next emperor and Yu is now remembered in history as Yu the Great. Later when Yu the Great was ready to retire, he also didn't want his son to be the next emperor because he knew how much pressure and responsibility it was to lead a country. He didn't want his son to have that kind of pressure and stress, so he wanted to have someone else rule. However, the people who lived then only wanted Yu the Great's son because they remembered how growing up he only saw his father (Yu the Great) three times in three years. For them, it meant that he really understood the importance of the country and running it well, so in the end Qi (Yu the Great's son) became the next emperor, starting the first dynasty in Chinese history: the Xia Dynasty.

Like many dynasties in Chinese history (and in most countries), some emperors were good and did a lot for the country and others were lazy and spent all the country's money and their time on whatever they wanted to. This happened in the Xia Dynasty. By the time the fifth emperor of the Xia Dynasty came around, the emperors were getting worse and worse. In fact, it got so bad that a man named Han Zhuo came along to take over the country. The emperor was killed in a battle and news came back to the palace that he was dead. When the empress heard this, she knew she had to either run away or get killed there. She remembered seeing a hole under the wall where gods used to go in and out of the palace. She went through this hole that night and escaped.



Hardly anyone knew that she was pregnant at the time. She ran away to her parent's home, which must've been so tiring walking so far when she

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was pregnant. A few months later her son was born. Shao Kang's mom and grandparents tried to teach him as best as they could about running the



country and told him stories about China's history, in hopes that he might be able to take back the country at some point in the future. That time came when Shao Kang was sixteen years old. Han Zhuo heard that the former emperor had a son and sent his two sons to look for Shao Kang to kill him. When Shao Kang heard this he left his family's home and went up north to live with a tribe there.

When Shao Kang was there, he learned how to fight, married the leader's daughter, and started a family. However, before long he decided that he did want to fight and become the next emperor. He traveled around to different cities to encourage people to come and fight with him. Many people were happy to join him because Han Zhuo was a really

bad leader that many people didn't like. In the end Shao Kang was able to take back the country and became one of the best emperors of the Xia Dynasty. Sadly, the emperors who came after Shao Kang weren't as good as he was.

Review Questions:

1. Why did people live close to the water?
2. Why is the Yellow River called "Yellow"?
3. Tell the story of one of these men: Yao the Great, Shun the Great, or Yu the Great.
4. Explain why Yu the Great didn't want his son to be emperor after him.
5. Why did Shao Kang grow up away from the palace?