Name: _____

Date: _____

ANCIENT CHINA
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A Five Thousand Year Old Tradition

Nearly 5000 years ago, farming communities formed along the Yellow River Valley in north-central China. The river is named for the fertile, yellow soil called loess (LOH-ess) that allowed farmers to grow barley, soybeans, and millet (MIL-it)—a small grain similar to wheat that thrives in dry conditions. They also domesticated pigs, dogs, sheep, and goats for food, clothing, protection, and labor.

Oracle Bones

The earliest evidence of Chinese writing comes from bones dating to about 1200 BCE. The people believed that certain holy men were oracles who could communicate with the spirit world. They heated animal bones and turtle shells until they cracked, interpreted the patterns, and then carved the characters directly into the "oracle bones" as messages from ancestors and spirits. Because the writing was already so advanced, historians believe it developed long before these bones were carved.

As early as 7,000 years ago, families carefully buried their dead, packing the graves with food vessels, tools, ornaments, and weapons. By using the same burial sites for generations, they left behind the first signs of the traditional Chinese belief that ancestors continued to look after their families after death.

The Importance of Family

Family occupied the most sacred place in their religious life. While the people of the Yellow River valley were polytheists, their gods were less important than honoring and remembering ancestors. Physical evidence reveals that this deep reverence was already an ancient tradition long before the first written records appeared.

Rammed Earth Houses

Many families in northern China lived in houses made of rammed earth. The same loess that provided topsoil also provided sturdy shelter. Unlike coarser soils found in most parts of the world, loess is incredibly fine and grips together tightly when packed. Builders mixed it with water, poured it into wooden frames, and packed it down layer by layer. Workers used heavy wooden tampers—and sometimes their bare feet—to stamp the mud until it became as hard as stone.

Northern China experiences hot summers and cold winters, but walls several feet thick helped keep homes cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Properly constructed rammed earth made from loess proved remarkably durable. Some walls built thousands of years ago still stand today.

Taming the Yellow River

The unpredictable Yellow River could flood without warning, wiping out entire villages in a single day. To survive, workers dug massive ditches, carved canals, and built dams to control the river. This massive, shared struggle did more than protect their crops—it bound different families together, forging the first common culture across northern China.

The Steppe

North of the Yellow River Valley lay an entirely different world. Beyond the farms stretched the vast grasslands of the Eurasian Steppe, home to peoples whose way of life differed from that of the settled farmers. To protect themselves from attack, many communities surrounded their settlements with earthen walls and ditches. Like flood control projects, these defenses often required people to work together for the common good.

The Tradition Lives on

Thousands of years have passed since the first farmers settled along the Yellow River, but many of the traditions they established remain familiar today. Modern Chinese society is vastly different from the world of oracle bones and rammed-earth villages, yet the importance of family, respect for ancestors, written language, and a deep sense of community can still be seen across China. Few civilizations can trace so many of their traditions so far back in time.

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Name: _____

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Fill in the Blanks

Nearly __,000 years ago, f__r__i__g communities formed along the Y__ll__w River. The river is named for l__e__s, a f__r__i__e soil that allowed farmers to grow b__r__ey, s__y__e__ns, and m__l__et, a small grain that thrives in d__y conditions. People also domesticated p__gs, dogs, s__e__p, and g__a__s for food, c__o__h__ng, protection, and l__b__r. Loess provided both t__p__o__l and b__i__d__ng material. Because it is f__n__r than most s__i__s and g__i__s together tightly when p__c__ed, builders poured it into w__o__en forms to create durable r__m__ed-e__r__h houses whose thick walls helped keep homes cool in s__m__er and warm in w__n__er. Family occupied asignificant place in r__l__g__o__s life as people believed a__c__s__o__s continued to watch over them. Around 1200 BCE, o__a__les heated a__i__al bones and t__r__le shells until they c__a__k__d. They i__t__r__r__t__d the p__t__e__ns, and carved characters into the oracle bones as *s__i__i__u__l messages. Many traditions established along the Y__ll__w River remain important in China today.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. What is loess?

_____

_____

_____

*2. Why was loess particularly suited for building rammed earth houses?

_____

_____

_____

*3. What was the significance or oracles bones?

_____

_____

_____

4. What was the Eurasian steppe?

_____

_____

_____

*A higher order learning question. Any reasonable answer will be accepted.

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