

DISCOVERING China!

In Its Homeland

Q. *Let's say you want to explore another group's culture. How do you start?*

A. *Study the place where that culture was born. Ask: What clues can I find in the geography of this place? How did its environment shape the lives of the people who settled there? Take the case of China, for example....*

Family Gathering

Setting: A home in Beijing, China, in the summer of 2005

Characters: American teenagers, Amy and John Lee; Uncle Ru; Cousin Bao

Beijing Visit

Uncle Ru: Ah, here you are, Son, at the computer!

Bao: You're home early, Father! Was your flight good? Have you eaten lunch?

Uncle Ru: Yes, thank you, Bao.... And are these our visitors from Maryland! Nephew John! Niece Amy! Welcome to China's capital! I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived. My business trip took longer than I expected. Tell me: Are your parents enjoying their visit?

John: Oh, yes, Uncle Ru, thank you. They're out shopping now....

Amy: Mom wants to buy a set of the official mascot dolls for the Beijing Olympics. Dad's looking for jade. And Auntie Yu said she'll help them spend their *yuan*! We're all having an excellent time. Thank you for inviting us to stay with you....

Uncle Ru: But you are our family! Now, tell me: What have you seen in Beijing?

John: Dozens of construction cranes!

Uncle Ru: Yes, yes. The city is getting ready for the Olympics in 2008.

John: We met some of Bao's college friends at an Internet café. Then we all went biking in a park where their "green environment club" had planted lots of trees....

Amy: And on our way back, we rode through some *hutongs*. The lanes are so narrow! Bao explained that, centuries ago, *hutongs* were passageways between

the walls of family compounds! At the end of one *hutong*, we found an old Confucian temple....

John: Then yesterday, we took a subway to the Palace Museum, where emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties once lived. I was amazed at all the palaces and artwork behind the moat.

Amy: We saw the emperor's throne, too. And so many dragon images!

Uncle Ru: In ancient China, dragons were symbols of power and virtue, Amy. One legend tells about dragons who scooped up water from the ocean and poured it over China during a drought, to irrigate the parched farmland. Then the dragons turned *themselves* into China's great rivers!

Geography Matters

John: The Yellow and the Yangtze Rivers? They're a big part of China's history, aren't they?

Uncle Ru: Yes indeed. Archaeologists keep finding early records of Chinese civilization near both rivers. Here: I brought home a map to help you trace the rest of your journey through China. Bao can show you each river's path.

Bao: Well, both rivers rise on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, See? Here on the map. Then, as they zigzag toward the east coast, they plunge through these mountains and hills....

Uncle Ru: Now, notice where the rivers approach each other. That's where the hills give way to a fertile plain that stretches all the way to the coast....

Bao: It's the North China Plain. Here, I'll outline it on the map—like a half-circle.... Start the line at the coast northeast of Beijing, then curve it inland toward the northern bend of the Yellow River. Swing the line down, west of Xi'an. Then cross the Yangtze River and end up on the coast below Shanghai.

Uncle Ru: That region is called "China Proper." Its rich soil made it easy for early humans to domesticate animals and build farms and villages. Large cities developed. And China's civilization slowly spread throughout eastern Asia.

Amy: And that civilization was never destroyed?

Uncle Ru: Never. The language, arts, and customs of modern-day China have roots that are at least 6,000 years old. In a way, our culture was saved by our location! China is surrounded, in the south and west, by mountains, plateaus, and deserts.

Bao: ...And for thousands of years those barriers protected China from attack by empires in southwestern Asia and Europe.

A Riddle...

John: What about China's northern border?

Bao: Ah, China was vulnerable there. And that's why our early emperors began building....

Amy: ...The Great Wall! To defend China!

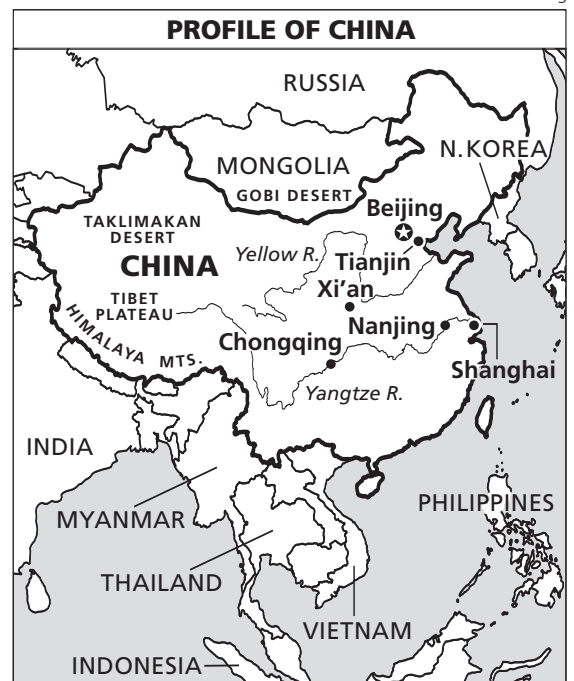
Uncle Ru: Yes. But the Great Wall isn't just one wall, Amy. It's a network of walls, built over many centuries.

John: ...We're going to visit the Wall tomorrow.

Uncle Ru: Well, good! And here's a riddle to ponder, while you're there. "How does the Great Wall show that Chinese culture is both old and new?"

John: We'll think about that, Uncle. *Xiexie!* Thank you!

Dave Herring



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Within Its People

Q When you study another culture, what can you learn from its people?

A You can learn about the beliefs they share, their lifestyle, their customs. Notice, too, what they take pride in, as a society. And what goals they share in common. Take the case of China, for example....

Keeping Journals

Setting: Various locations in China
Characters: Amy and John Lee, American teenagers who are keeping journals of their visit to China

Amy Writes (day 5)

So long, Beijing! We're flying to Xi'an, in Shaanxi Province. Mom and Dad are snoozing. I think they're tired, after walking so far on the Great Wall yesterday. Or maybe it's all the Beijing Duck we ate last night! Or maybe it was the excitement of seeing one of China's taikonauts (astronauts) at the airport this morning! Uncle Ru says "Taikong" is a Chinese word for "space." I'm glad Uncle Ru is traveling with us. His company exports goods from all over China, and he knows the coolest places to see.

John Writes (day 6)

A spectacular day! We saw the Terra Cotta Warriors near Xi'an. These life-size clay soldiers were buried underground 2,200 years ago! They were supposed to guard the tomb of Qin Shi Huang, the "first Qin emperor." (Mom said he was the first ruler to unify China under a central government.) Over time, people forgot about the "Warriors." But in 1974, they resurfaced. Some workers began digging a well near Xi'an. Then.... Oops!

Amy (day 9)

The day before yesterday we flew to Gansu Province, to see some great statues of Buddha in the Mogao Caves. Dad said Buddhism began in India

centuries ago, then spread to this part of China along a network of trade routes. That network (Dad called it the "Silk Road") stretched overland from China to Europe! And traders using it exchanged ideas, as well as goods. When we visited Xi'an's Great Mosque, one of the guides said that's how Islam entered China, too.

John (day 11)

Wow! China has 1.3 billion people whom I never met. But today, on a street in Chongqing, I heard a voice say *Ni hao?* ("How are you?" in Mandarin.) And I recognized Cousin Bao's friends—Kun and Da! We met in Beijing. Now they're on their way to Yunnan Province, to learn how the Bai people and other ethnic minorities use local herbs. It's their project for a college course, and they picked Yunnan because it's the home of 25 ethnic minorities. (25!)

Amy (day 14)

We took a boat trip to Yichang, on the Yangtze River. From there, we drove to the Three Gorges Dam. Uncle Ru said the dam will soon produce 10 percent of China's electricity. Dad said it seems that China is working hard to build up its supply of energy. "Yes, and we want *clean* energy," said Uncle Ru.

He added that China is always increasing its hydropower (the kind they produce at Three Gorges). And China uses wind, solar, and tidal power, too. "But," he said, "most of our energy still comes from coal and oil—fossil fuels that pollute." Mom nodded. "Americans worry about air pollution, too." Then I said: "This sounds like a social studies lesson." (Everyone looked at me! Why?)

John (day 16)

Mom wrote her Master's thesis on "Nanjing, Symbol of China's Sorrows and Hopes." And today, as we toured this beautiful city, she explained the title. Like other parts of China, Nanjing suffered terrible floods in its early history. But its people survived and, in the 14th

century, it became China's first capital under the Ming Dynasty. The city had a big setback in the 1860s, when it was almost destroyed during a Chinese rebellion in southeastern China. In 1937, it was bombed—then invaded—by Japan. Yet now it's the capital of Jiangsu Province, one of China's most prosperous areas. What a lesson in survival!

Amy (day 19)

Last stop, Shanghai. What an exciting city! Skyscrapers, shops, and a cell phone at almost everyone's ear. (Uncle Ru prefers text-messaging.) So far, we've visited a temple with beautiful white jade statues of Buddha. We saw the place where the Communist Party of China was formed in 1921. And we went to the city's new Pudong area, where Uncle Ru has offices. Johnny kept his digital camera busy.

John (day 21)

We're on a plane, waiting for takeoff. Last night, we took Uncle Ru to dinner, to thank him for his kindness. And early this morning, I took one last picture of China. It shows dozens of people doing *tai chi* exercises in a park. They look so graceful. And focused. And skilled. *Zaijian, Zhongguo!* Goodbye, China!...

CHINESE WISDOM

- **What?** "Confucius said.... Shall I teach you what wisdom means? To know what you know, and know what you do not know — this ... is wisdom." — *from a tradition more than two thousand years old*
- **Who?** "...I come home late. The night / Is half spent. I stand for a / Long while in the doorway. / My young son is still up, reading. / Suddenly, he bursts out laughing, / And all the sadness of the / Twilight of my life is gone." — *from "I Walk Out Into the Country at Night," by Lu Yu [Lu You], poet in the 12th century CE*
- **Where?** "When poor, you can walk in a crowd and never be seen; when rich you can hide in the woods and be obvious to all." — *Saying among Chinese farmers, early 1900s*
- **How? (Why?)** "One prospers in worries and hardships, and perishes in ease and comfort." — *from a speech by Wen Jiabao, after being installed as China's new Premier, March 2003*

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Through Its Heritage

Q Every society honors its own heritage. But how can you tell what that is?

A Pay attention to the traditions that the society holds on to. Look at the origins of its government. And notice how it relates, as a society, to the rest of the world. Take the case of China, for example....

Special Report

Setting: A classroom in Maryland
Characters: Mrs. Bonn, a teacher; students Amy and John Lee; other students, including Bobby, Isa, and Drew

Memories

Mrs. Bonn: Welcome to the World Cultures Book Club! Usually, at our meetings, we discuss books about various cultures. But today, we have a special treat. Amy and John Lee recently visited their uncle in China. And today, they're going to tell us about that visit. Amy?

Amy: Thank you, Mrs. Bonn.... Before we begin, Johnny is handing out copies of a map of China. Notice the line around the east-central region.

John: That's the region where we traveled. It's called "China Proper," and it's where China's civilization began, thousands of years ago.

Amy: We're also giving you copies of notes from our travel journals. Why don't you take a few minutes, now, to read through the map and notes....

John: Okay? Is everybody ready? Are there any questions?

Drew: Yes. Why didn't you travel through western China?

Amy: We had only 21 days, and China is as big as the USA! But Dad talks about going to Xinjiang, next time. Xinjiang is in the west, in the same part of China as the Taklimakan Desert. Our uncle said it has mountains and beautiful oases. But there's a lot of building going on there, too. China is putting in big oil pipelines and lots of new roads.

Impressions

John: In fact, now that China's people have so many cars, new roads are opening up everywhere. On one train trip, we spotted five construction crews.

Amy: The government is also planting thousands of acres of trees, to stop soil erosion and reduce air pollution....

John: It's like the new "Green Wall" of China!

Amy: Yes! The People's Republic of China (PRC)—that's China's formal name—is really into environmental protection (EP). But our uncle says that EP takes a lot of money, and so do China's welfare programs. Some Chinese farmers are very, very poor.

Isa: I'm confused.... Your descriptions of China's cities make the country sound modern. But you kept on visiting ancient sites.... You say that Chinese farmers are poor, but Shanghai sounds wealthy. Which is the "real" China?

John: I think my uncle would say it's all those things. China's economy is growing and changing very quickly. And a lot of people are taking new kinds of jobs in high-tech industries. When a country goes through that kind of change, some older types of jobs disappear, and people get laid off.

Amy: But no matter how much the economy changes, China's people seem very proud of their cultural history. China was an empire for thousands of years. And Uncle Ru says the people won't abandon that rich heritage, even though the age of emperors has passed....

Questions

Isa: No more emperors?

Mrs. Bonn: Let's be sure we know the background! Three points: (a) China's last emperor was forced to give up his throne in 1912. (b) Chinese leaders then formed a republic, but it was torn apart by two long wars—a war with Japan and a civil war. (c) In 1949, the Communist Party of China won the civil war, and that's when the PRC was formed....

Amy: Oh, thanks, Mrs. Bonn!

Bobby: John, Amy said that the Chinese people won't abandon their heritage. But didn't they do that, when they formed a Communist government?

John: Let me share a story with you. One night during our trip, Dad asked Uncle Ru how he feels when outsiders criticize China for not being a democracy. Uncle Ru thought for a long time. Then he said: "Well, actually, China's villages do have democratic elections. But let me answer you another way. I recently gave John and Amy a riddle: *How does the Great Wall show that Chinese culture is both old and new?*" Dad asked what the riddle means, and my uncle said: "Same Wall, different role! The Wall was built to keep invaders out. But now we invite tourists in, to admire it. Similarly: No matter what role China's government plays, it will always reflect China's culture. That's very important, in China...."

Isa: Your uncle sounds like a philosopher! Do you think he'll ever come to the USA?

Amy: I'm not sure. But his son is coming to Washington, DC, next year, to attend college. Maybe we can invite him here, to one of our meetings!...

Mrs. Bonn: He would be most welcome. Tell him that! Thank you, Amy and John!

FOR YOUR NOTEBOOK

- **Big population!** China is about the same size as the USA, but its 1.3-billion population is over 4 times larger than the U.S. population!
- **Ethnic groups.** About 92 percent of all Chinese people are members of the Han ethnic group. The remaining 8 percent include 55 different ethnic groups.
- **Government.** Since 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has set all major policies for the People's Republic of China (PRC).
- **Socialist market economy.** China's economy used to be planned and operated by the government. Under a new socialist market economy, the PRC still owns several big industries. But it encourages private businesses and world investors, too.
- **Rapid growth.** China now has the world's fastest-growing major economy, and it ranks 3rd in world trade.