

Journey Down the Yellow River: Building an Ancient Civilization

Materials Needed

- A large tray, baking pan, or plastic bin (to create a mini-landscape)
- Sand, dirt, or brown sugar to fill the tray
- A small pitcher of water
- Yellow food coloring or a spoonful of dirt to mix in the water
- Small building blocks, stones, or LEGOs (for houses)
- Green paper shreds, small twigs, or lentils (for crops)
- Air-dry clay or Play-Doh (brown or terracotta color)
- Paper, crayons, or markers
- A smooth, flat rock or a piece of brown cardboard (for "oracle bone")
- Optional: Pictures of Yellow River pottery, jade carvings, and oracle bones (can be viewed on a screen)

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Explain why the Yellow River was important for ancient Chinese people.
- Build a model of a Yellow River settlement and explain its parts.
- Create a piece of art inspired by the Shang Dynasty.
- Describe one rule or job from this ancient civilization.

Lesson Plan

Part 1: Introduction (10 minutes)

The Hook: Where Would You Build a City?

Let's pretend we're explorers looking for the perfect place to build a new home for our family. What is the number one most important thing we would need to find? Is it trees? Mountains? What about... water! Why is water so important? (*Listen for answers like: for drinking, washing, growing food.*)

A long, long time ago in a land called China, a group of people found the perfect spot right next to a giant, powerful river. It wasn't a blue river, though—it was yellow! Today, we're going to become time travelers and visit the people of the Yellow River Civilization to see how they lived, what they built, and the amazing things they created.

Today's Adventure Goals

"By the end of our journey, you'll be a Yellow River expert! You'll know why the river was both a friend and a foe, you'll build your own mini-village, and you'll even make art like an ancient artist."

Part 2: The Body - Building Our World (30-40 minutes)

Activity 1: The "Mother River" and "China's Sorrow" (I Do)

Educator's Turn: "First, let's make our river. Watch what I do."

1. Set up the tray with sand. Carve a winding path through the middle for the river.
2. Mix the yellow food coloring or dirt into the pitcher of water. "The Yellow River gets its color from special, dusty yellow soil called 'loess.' It's super fine, like flour."
3. Slowly pour some of the 'yellow water' into the river path. "When the river flowed calmly, it gave people water for their farms. That's why they called it the **Mother River**—it gave them life!"
4. Now, pour the water a little faster so it overflows the banks. "But sometimes, huge floods would come! The water would rush out and could destroy homes and farms. That's why it also had a scary nickname: **China's Sorrow**."
5. Point to the wet sand on the riverbanks. "But look! After the flood, the river left behind all that wonderful loess soil, which was like a vitamin for the ground, making it perfect for growing food."

Activity 2: Building Our Settlement (We Do)

Our Turn Together: "Now that we have our river, let's build a village. We need to be smart about it."

- **Think Together:** "Where should we put our houses (blocks)? Right next to the water where it might flood, or a little higher up on safer ground?" Guide the learner to place the blocks on a slightly raised part of the sand, but still close enough to get water.
- **Let's Farm:** "Where is the best place to plant our crops (green paper shreds/lentils)? Right in that rich, muddy soil the river left for us!" Let the learner "plant" the crops along the riverbanks.
- **Talk About Architecture:** "Their first houses were very simple. Sometimes they even dug pits and built the house half underground to stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer."

Formative Check-in: Ask, "Can you show me why your village is in a good, safe spot?"

Activity 3: Becoming an Ancient Artist (You Do)

Your Turn to Create: "The people who lived here, especially during the Shang Dynasty, were incredible artists. They made amazing things from clay, bronze, and a special green stone called jade. They also invented one of the first forms of writing by scratching pictures onto bones!" (*Show pictures of pottery and oracle bones if you have them*).

"Now, it's your turn to be a Shang artist! You can choose one of two projects:"

- **Choice A: The Potter.** Use the clay or Play-Doh to shape a pot, bowl, or vase. Use a stick or your fingernail to carve designs into it. Famous designs were spirals, lines, and simple animal faces.
- **Choice B: The Oracle.** Use the flat rock or cardboard as your 'oracle bone.' The king would ask questions on these bones, like "Will the harvest be good?" Then they would heat the bone until it cracked, and a special person would 'read' the cracks to find the answer. Draw some simple picture-symbols on your bone and ask a question about the future.

Success Looks Like: Your creation has a pattern or symbol that looks like it could come from ancient China. You can explain what you made (a pot for storing grain, or an oracle bone with a question).

Activity 4: Leaders, Rules, and Trading (We Do Discussion)

Let's Talk: "As our village got bigger, it needed a leader to make rules and keep everyone safe. The

first great leaders were the kings of the Shang Dynasty."

- **Civics and Governance:** "What kind of jobs do you think people had in our village?" (*Guide them: Farmers, potters, soldiers, builders, and the king!*) "What's one rule our king should make to keep everyone happy?" (e.g., *Share food, help your neighbor rebuild after a flood.*)
- **Trading:** "They were great farmers, but they couldn't get everything they wanted. So, they would trade their extra grain and beautiful pottery with people from far away to get things like salt and pretty jade stones."
- **Decline:** "Even great kingdoms don't last forever. After many hundreds of years, the Shang kings were defeated by new leaders. But the amazing things they invented, like their art and writing, were so important that they were carried on for thousands of years!"

Part 3: Conclusion (5-10 minutes)

Time-Traveler's Report

"Our journey back in time is over! Let's report on what we found."

- **Recap:** "What were the two nicknames for the Yellow River?" (Mother River and China's Sorrow). "Why did it have those names?"
- **Show and Tell:** Have the learner give you a tour of their settlement model and show you their art project.
- **Reinforce Takeaway:** "The Yellow River civilization was one of the first great civilizations in the world. It started a story in China that continues even today, with amazing art, writing, and ideas that all began right there, on the banks of a muddy yellow river."

Summative Assessment

Ask the learner to act as a "tour guide" for their sand tray village. The tour should successfully explain:

1. Why they built their village in that specific spot (referencing the river's floods and fertile soil).
2. What their art piece is and what it was used for (e.g., "This is my pot for holding water").
3. One job a person in their village would do (e.g., "This person is a farmer growing millet").

Differentiation and Extension

- **For Younger or Struggling Learners (Scaffolding):** Focus mostly on the hands-on building and art activities. Provide templates of ancient Chinese symbols to trace onto their pottery or oracle bone. Use sentence starters for the final tour, like "I put the houses here because..."
- **For Older or Advanced Learners (Extension):**
 - Research the tomb of Lady Fu Hao, a famous Shang Dynasty queen and general. What amazing treasures were found with her?
 - Try to write a short message using a few simple Chinese characters (pictographs) like 'river' (河), 'mountain' (山), and 'person' (人).
 - Compare the Yellow River Civilization to another ancient river civilization, like Ancient Egypt and the Nile. What is one thing that was the same and one thing that was different?