

Ancient China Teachers Notes



1. Introduction

Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher, said, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand."

This Timemap lets students see the history of Ancient China unfold before their eyes. The visual representation of the topic lets them grasp things in a much more immediate way than any text could do. It also taps into their visual memory, letting the topic "stick" in students' minds much more readily than might otherwise be the case.

The purpose of these notes is to provide exercises which will help them understand that history much more effectively.

What does the Timemap of Ancient China offer?

The Timemap contains a sequence of maps giving an overview of the history of Ancient China, from its origins in about 2000 BC through to the Han Empire at its height, in 100 BC.

The maps have a considerable amount of information linked to them - more than is offered in most text books. This information is accessed by clicking on the "i" button, just below the date, and then clicking the hotspots which appear in the maps.

Also just below the date is a "Q". This button accesses a brief explanation as to what the map is about. The explanation is followed by a key question, designed to get students thinking about what the map is illustrating.

2. Knowledge and skills

2.1. Knowledge

The information about Ancient China contained in this Timemap can be accessed to provide:

- A "Big Picture" overview of the topic
- A more detailed look at specific events, periods and episodes, such as the fall of the Shang, the age of Confucius, the rise and fall of the Qin dynasty, the triumph of Han
- The development of key features of Chinese civilization, such as the presence of ancestor worship in prehistory, the triumph of Confucianism, the rise of the scholar-gentry, the evolution of the imperial system

- A focus on various strands, such as social & economic trends, government and military organisation, technological innovations, relations with "barbarians", and philosophy ((see also Appendix 2)
- The impact of geography upon history, made clear at the beginning of the Timemap, with descriptions of the great rivers and their valleys, of the loess soil of the north, of the significance of rice, and of the features and location of the steppes.
- The presence of global connections, apparent in the impact of Western innovations upon China (bronze, iron, chariots), and the impact of developments in China on the West (the expansion of China into central Asia may well have sent the Huns invading westward to help bring about the fall of the Roman empire).

2.2. Skills

- The Timemaps will give students a clear grasp of the Chronology of Ancient China
- The Causation - causes and consequences - of various changes in Ancient Chinese society or government are emphasised in the map-based information as well as in the questions linked to the maps
- Continuity and change is made very explicit in the Timemap
- The nature and impact of Conflict, both within Chinese society and in its dealings with external foes, is brought out clearly
- The occurrence of dramatic episodes in Ancient Chinese history, and references to traditional accounts about them, gives opportunities for students to think about historical Interpretation of events and developments.

3. Use with students

This Timemap on Ancient China can be used in several ways.

With the whole class

If a teacher wishes to briefly acquaint students with Ancient Chinese history before hurrying on to another topic in world history, then this Timemap will make an ideal whiteboard resource. It offers an attractive, visual overview of the history of Ancient China, and will give students a grasp of the key events and developments.

If a major unit on Ancient Chinese history is on the menu, the Timemap can be used as a supplementary resource, perhaps in an opening session to introduce the topic, or in a closing session, to reinforce points that have already been covered. Its visual treatment of the topic makes it ideal for these purposes.

As a student-based resource

This Timemap can be used as the main resource for studying the history of Ancient China. It has a large amount of information embedded in it - more than students will find in most text books. It is therefore ideal as a resource for an in-depth coverage of Ancient Chinese history.

The information is accessed by clicking on the "i" button, just below the date, and then clicking the hotspots which appear in the maps.

The Timemap is accompanied by several "helps" for students to study the information in it:

Worksheet

A worksheet is attached, which can be printed out, or alternatively used straight from screen.

The worksheet gives two or three questions for each map (sometimes more, sometimes less). Their aim is to get students looking at the information in the maps in a focussed way. They are ideal for bolstering students' knowledge about the topic.

The next two options are designed to encourage students to think more about what they are viewing and reading:

Key questions

Each map contains one or two key questions, accessed via the "Q" button. These questions follow a short description of what the maps are about, and they encourage students to think about the information in the maps, and how the events in a particular map fit in to the wider picture.

Activity suggestions

The above worksheet and key questions all relate to specific maps within the Timemap. If a teacher wants students to look at broader issues, then a series of suggested activities are set out below, section 4.

These activities make students look at some of the main issues in Ancient Chinese history. They are also designed to enhance students' historical understanding: chronology, change and continuity, causation, and interpretation.

Using with the class

A program of study based on using the Timemaps might go as follows:

If your intention is simply to introduce your students to the history of Ancient China, then get them to work through the questions in the worksheet, either individually or in small groups. This will encourage them to use the Timemap in a focussed way.

Alternatively, students could be asked to tackle the key questions given in each map (accessed via the "Q" button, below the date). These will also focus their attention on the information in the Timemap, and most will also require them to use their thinking skills.

If you wish to use the topic, and the Timemap, to develop students' skills as young historians, then get them to undertake the activities set out below, in section 4. This will use the information in the map to develop their awareness of key historical concepts such as chronology, change through time, causation, and interpretation. If you do not have time for your students to tackle all these activities, then choose those which are most appropriate to your students' abilities, or which ones will benefit them most.

4. Suggested student activities

Activity 1: Chronology

The purpose of this simple exercise is to give students an overall sense of the chronology of China's ancient history.

In small groups, students look through the Timemap and complete the following exercise:

Put the following events in chronological order:

The life of Confucius

The foundation of the Han dynasty

The sack of the Zhou capital by a rebel prince

The unification of China under the Qin

The fall of the Shang dynasty

Draw a timeline of Ancient Chinese history, starting in 2000 BC and ending in 100 BC. Place on it the above key events of Chinese history.

Activity 2: Continuity and Change

The next exercise is designed to move students towards an understanding of how chronology links to continuity and change in Chinese civilization.

As individuals or in small groups, they complete the following task:

Using the maps and information in the Timemap, you can see that Chinese civilization and society changed over time. Divide the history of Ancient China into three parts - early, middle and late.

Each period should be distinguished from the other two, not only by where it is chronologically, but by such issues as, is China unified or not? How complex is its economy and society? How advanced is its technology? Has it developed a great philosophy?

Changes in each of the different strands of course happen at different times. However, taking them together, distinguish three broad periods in Ancient Chinese history.

There are no right answers - you have to use your own judgement, and be prepared to give reasons for your choice.. Mark on a timeline where you think the dividing lines between the three periods should go.

What are the distinctive features of each of these three periods? Is China divided or unified? Is it small or large? Does it have a more complex government and society, or simpler ones? Does it have a more advanced technological base, or a less advanced one?

Do you think that the traditional division of Chinese history into dynasties is a good approach?

The students write up their findings.

Activity 3: Significance

Historians often have to make judgements about how important historical events or developments are. This exercise gives students practice in this skill, whilst at the same time encouraging them to think about Ancient Chinese history in a deeper way than they might otherwise have done.

The exercise is to go through the Timemap and choose the THREE most important events or developments in the history of Ancient China. These events might be in the realm of politics, or war, or technology, or ideas etc.

It is best if they do this in small groups. In a plenary session at the end, each group gives a brief presentation on their choices, giving reasons for them. After three or four groups have done their presentations it may be obvious that most of the groups will have made similar choices. At that time it might be good to ask, has any group made a choice that is different from those already covered.

The "wrap-up" might finish off with the class voting for three options.

There are no right answers. The key thing is for the students to evaluate the consequences of the events or developments - how significant and enduring were they?

Activity 4: Causation

Using the Timemap as their basic source, and other sources if they have the time - encyclopaedias (preferably not Wikipedia*); websites; library books - students research different aspects of Ancient Chinese history. A good guide to what these aspects might be can be gained from the section above, 2.1: Knowledge > "specific events, periods and episodes"; "key features"; and "strands".

The students are divided into small groups, each taking one aspect, e.g. The Shang dynasty (from "specific events, periods and episodes")....the scholar gentry (from "key features")....technological innovations (from "strands")...and so on.

They prepare and deliver a presentation on their topic. They trace developments within their strands, and should relate developments within these strands to the big picture of Chinese history; to bring out the causes of changes, and the impact these changes had on broader developments. Where appropriate, they should be encouraged to give their own opinions on whether developments were beneficial or not.

A "wrap-up" session should then follow, concentrating on how all these different features and strands interacted with one another.

(* This is not because Wikipedia is poor, but because students should be learning to range further afield than this too-popular resource.)

Activity 5: Interpretation

The following exercise is designed to encourage students to think about how historians interpret events.

Students should be made aware that, before the 20th century, most Chinese historians

followed the teachings of the philosopher, Confucius, and his disciple, Mencius. They can read a brief summary of this teaching in the Timemap. It can be seen that these philosophers stressed the idea that all people, especially rulers, should live moral lives. They should have the welfare of others at heart.

If they have the time, they should research the teachings of Confucian and Mencius a little more.

Three episodes that figure prominently in the history of Ancient China are the fall of the Shang dynasty, in c. 1100 BC, the fall of the early, or Western, Zhou, in 771 BC, and the rise of the Qin dynasty.

In the first two of these cases, the traditional version of events is given briefly in the information on the relevant maps. As individuals or in small groups, students should look at these accounts and discuss how they, as modern, Western historians, would treat these topics, and how this is different from the ways Confucian scholars treated them.

The third case is that of the First Emperor of China.

No reference to the traditional accounts is given in the Timemap. However, students should look at the information about the Qin and the First Emperor, and

- a) list their achievements;
- b) evaluate these achievements, and
- c) identify why the Confucian historians found them so repulsive.

The students write up their findings.

Activity 6: Essay questions

1. Outline the rise of the gentry, one of the most important classes in Chinese history, explaining why they became so important.
2. The very name "China" probably comes from an old translation of the word "Qin". The Chinese people today call themselves the "Han". From the information presented in these maps, explain why these two dynasties are still regarded as being so important in Chinese history.
- 3: Describe how developments on the steppes of central Asia shaped the history of Ancient China.

Appendix 1:

Below is a little more on the strands of Ancient Chinese history encountered in the Timemap:

social & economic trends: decline of old nobility, growth of industry, trade and urbanism, rise of more complex society, spread of education

government: decentralization of power, civil service, imperialism, diplomacy, centralization

military organisation and technology: chariots, horses, crossbow, large infantry armies, border defences and so on

technological developments: bronze, iron, canals and irrigation, steel, wheelbarrow

relations with "barbarians" and the role of central Asia in ancient Chinese history: influences from the west; the nomad threat; absorption of peoples into Chinese culture

thought and religion: the rise of Confucianism