*Instructions: Read and Talk-to-the-Text, then answer the questions at the end of the article*

**Daily Life in Ancient China**

Daily life in ancient China changed through the centuries. Still, the Chinese maintained a belief in the gods and their ancestors during almost every time period. Chinese civilization began in about 5000 B.C., about 7,000 years ago, in the Yellow River Valley in northern China. In one of these early villages, called Banpo, archaeological evidence shows that women ruled and were in charge of religious life.

Small villages like Banpo grew into larger communities and then into cities. The Xia Dynasty was the first government in China that built large cities. The Xia family of kings lasted from 2070 to 1600 B.C.

After the Xia came the Shang Dynasty, which lasted 1600 to 1046 B.C. Writing was developed during this time period. During the Shang Dynasty, the first written evidence showed what life was like for people in ancient China.

**Social class, clothing and adornments**

Silk is thought to have been invented about 2696 B.C. The ancient Chinese believed it was discovered by the goddess Leizu, wife of the supreme god Shangti. She was having tea when a cocoon fell into her cup, and as it unraveled, she saw it was made from one, long thread of silk. Leizu planted mulberry trees for silkworms to eat. The nobles and royalty were the only people who could wear silk. Even those who made silk clothing and sold it could not wear silk. Most of the population of China wore clothing made of hemp.

A person's social class was determined, more or less, by birth. If one's father was a peasant, one would also be a peasant. The division between the ruling class, nobles, merchants and the working class peasants became even wider with the invention of writing. There was an upper class who could read and a peasant population who could not. From the Shang Dynasty on, though, a person could improve their station in life by passing the Imperial Examinations, a very difficult test which let them work for the government and move up to a higher class.

**There are many differences among the classes**

Distinctions between the classes in ancient times were also seen in hair styles and other personal choices. Men and women of all classes wore their hair long. They thought that one's hair came from one's ancestors and it was disrespectful to cut it. Just like the hair, the body was thought to be a gift from one's ancestors and should be treated well. For this reason, most people looked down on those with tattoos.

Both men and women of the upper classes grew their fingernails long to show that they did not have to work. They had servants do everything for them, even feed them, so they would not damage their nails.

The period known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms lasted from 907 to 960 A.D. The practice of foot binding began during this time period. The idea developed that beautiful women should have tiny feet.

Girls as young as toddlers would have their feet wrapped in bandages so tightly it broke their toes. Girls were in constant pain for years. Although this practice started among the upper classes, it soon became common for all women in China. Foot binding made working in the rice fields or doing any kind of manual labor very difficult. It was outlawed in 1911. Many women described crying from the pain for years, and said it never made them feel any more beautiful.

**Education and health care**

Only males received an education in ancient China. Girls were expected to stay home and learn how to be housewives and mothers. Confucius was a teacher and philosopher who lived around 500 B.C. He created the basics of Chinese education. Everyone was expected to know the Five Virtues of Confucius by heart. The Li, or manners, considered the most important were Ren (kindness), Xin (loyalty), Yi (honesty), and Zhi (knowing the difference between right and wrong). In 105 B.C., paper was invented. During the Tang Dynasty, which lasted from 618 A.D. to 907 A.D., woodblock printing made it possible to produce many copies of books. Before, each book had to be copied by hand.

Doctors were also all males by the time of the Tang Dynasty, although herbalists in rural areas could be women. Most doctors were priests or had a background in religious practices. After Buddhism arrived in China, Buddhist priests ran facilities. These were a combination of hospitals, clinics, orphanages, retirement homes, and counseling centers.

1. What do you think was the most important piece of information in the article?
2. How does this article reflect what you saw in *Mulan*? How is it different?
3. Describe 1 way ancient China was similar to modern USA, and 1 way it was different.

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**Ancient Chinese life and festivals**

Chinese culture is one of the oldest in the world today. Over 6,000 years ago this culture began to develop in the Yellow River Valley. Many of those ancient practices are still followed by people today.

**Farming, food and drink**

The main crop of China was rice. Rice was so important that people used it to pay their taxes. It was eaten at every meal and was even used to make wine. Wheat and other grains were also grown, but were never as important as rice.

Both then and now, Chinese meals are mostly vegetarian. People believed that a healthy diet led to a long life and avoiding meat was kind to animals. Fish with rice and vegetables was the most popular dish.

The most important drink was tea. Different leaves were blended for different tastes or to produce different effects. Tea was considered a powerful medicine, but was also just a popular drink people enjoyed drinking.

People would eat tea leaves with their meals as a vegetable. Tea was also considered an acceptable religious offering at temples.

**Home life, games and sports**

The home, just like today, was the center of the family's life. Women took care of the home while men worked outside of the house. Women, men and children of the peasant classes all worked in the fields.

Peasants lived in huts while middle-class people lived in wood houses.

Homes had bedrooms, a kitchen and a hall with a dining room and entertainment area. Families would eat in the hall and talk and listen to music or read.

Cats were the most popular pet in ancient China, and almost every home had one. Dogs were kept for protection and as a source of food.

The Chinese would play board games and also enjoyed playing kickball and other sports.

In every home, there were shrines. These were holy spots that were set up to honor ancestors and gods. In the kitchen, there was always the paper image of the god Zao Shen, whose job was to watch over the family.

Zao Shen was probably the most important god of the home. It was said that he would leave the house once a month to meet the other gods of the village. He would tell the other gods how the people were doing.

Right before New Year's Day, Zao Shen would leave to meet more gods in heaven. During that day, people would go to an image of Zao Shen and offer him food and drink. They would also smear his mouth with honey. This way, he would only give a good report when he met the gods.

**A variety of festivals**

There were national festivals, regional festivals and local festivals. A local festival might be a celebration of the birthday of someone famous, like an artist.

Many festivals were observed to rid a village of evil spirits. Others honored ancestors and gods.

The most important national festival was New Year's Day. Fireworks were set off to welcome the new year and to drive away evil spirits.

Animal skins were hung up outside of homes as offerings. People also made a special drink to protect them from illness caused by evil spirits or ghosts.

The New Year's celebration ended with a Lantern Festival. People would float lighted lanterns on water, play games, dance and hold feasts.

Other festivals took place during the year and each festival had its own purpose.

Festivals kept people in touch with their past and with cultural values. They were a very important part of people's lives in ancient China.

Today, many of these same celebrations are observed every year. Many are still performed in very similar or exactly the same ways.

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