Unit 4 – Ancient China
Setting the Stage

Ancient China

[Map of Ancient China with various geographical features labeled, including Taklimakan Desert, Kunlun Mts, Loess Plateau, and major rivers.]
The land of ancient China is part of a vast region that today is called mainland East Asia. Mainland East Asia includes the present-day countries of China, Mongolia, North Korea, and South Korea. In ancient China, a series of empires controlled territory in mainland East Asia that, at times, included parts of present-day Mongolia and the Korean Peninsula.

The physical geography of mainland East Asia had a dramatic effect on the settlement of ancient China. In the southwestern part of the region, the Himalaya Mountains prevented settlement. A high plateau lies north of these mountains. Because of its awe-inspiring elevation, this region has been called the “roof of the world.” The weather is extremely cold here all year round. To the north of this plateau lies desert land, where temperatures are too hot in summer and too cold in winter to make it a good place for people to live. Some groups did roam the area, raising livestock and moving from place to place, but life was hard for them.

To the east of this hostile land, the land is much more moderate. Hills, valleys, and plains are easy to navigate. Rivers provide fertile land for farming. Even the weather is milder, without the extremes of the western part of the country. For these reasons, most ancient Chinese chose to make their homes in this area. Over time, villages developed. Because of China’s physical boundaries, including mountains and deserts, the Chinese civilization developed in isolation for thousands of years.

The stability of early villages allowed empires to arise. Powerful leaders unified the country. Advances in civilization allowed empires to conquer more and more territory. The most advanced of these empires, the Han, opened ancient China to trade relations with other cultures to the west. Camel caravans traveled a 4,000-mile-long route known as the Silk Road. From the Huang He (Yellow River) in China, the route extended all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. As people, goods, and ideas traveled back and forth along the Silk Road, the rest of the world soon learned of the achievements of the ancient Chinese.