

What was China like?

In 1275 a 17-year-old Italian, Marco Polo, went to China. He travelled with his father and uncle. They all came from Venice, and they stayed in China for 17 years, until 1292. They were not the first Europeans to visit China, but the story that Marco Polo told on his return to Italy seemed so fantastic, that many did not believe it, and laughed.

Here are some of the things he described in Hangzhou, the capital city of China, or 'Heavenly City' as Marco Polo called it:

'There are immense quantities of every kind of food, such as deer, stags, hares, rabbits; and partridges, quails, chickens, and more ducks and geese than one could ever tell. Every day an immense quantity of fish is brought from the Ocean, to a distance of 40 kilometres upstream. One would never think that it could all be sold, yet in a few hours it is all gone, so great is the number of people used to living luxuriously, eating both fish and meat at the same meal. The city has 12,000 bridges, most of which are of stone, and those that cross the main canals and the Great Street are arched up so high, and are so cunningly built, that a large boat can pass beneath them without lowering its masts; yet carts and horses cross them, so well have the streets been kept level. There are numerous cold baths, staffed by attendants of both sexes, who bathe the men and women who go there, for they are used from childhood to



washing themselves with cold water at all seasons.'

He also commented on the people of China.

'The natives of Hangzhou are men of peace. They have no skill in handling weapons and do not keep any in their houses. They dislike strife or any sort of disagreement. They pursue their trades and handicrafts with honesty. They love one another so devotedly that a whole district might seem, from the friendly and neighbourly spirit to be a single household. The young ladies are modest, and do not keep watch at the windows gazing at passers-by. The people are superior in their customs and depth of learning, for they are ever intent upon their studies and scientific pursuits. They speak well and clearly, and they greet you courteously.'

Chapter one

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This is a picture of Marco Polo. Here is some further information about him:

- He visited China at the end of the period that you are going to investigate.
- China was conquered by the Mongols in AD 1279.
- Marco Polo was liked by the Mongol Emperor, Kublai Khan, who employed him along with other Europeans to help him rule China.
- Marco Polo did not learn Chinese.
- He travelled in many parts of China, and for three years was governor of a Chinese city.
- Marco Polo said that he told only one-half of what he had seen.

EVIDENCE: MARCO POLO

- 1 List the main points described by Marco Polo.
- 2 Write a description of China in the 1290s based on these extracts.
- 3 Which things would contemporary Europeans have found difficult to believe? Give reasons for your answer.
- 4 Marco Polo said a lot about China, but

there were also many amazing things that he omitted. This has caused some historians to doubt his account. How can we find out if his story, even with gaps of information, was accurate or not?

- 5 How useful is Marco Polo's evidence for an insight into Chinese life?

How did the people live?



A boat on the Yellow River

So far you have looked at the government, ideas and achievements of China. Now you are going to read about more ordinary things and everyday life of the people, most of whom worked on the land. As you look at these pages try to work out whether the people lived civilised lives.

≡ The North

Source A

The boats of the Yellow River are like slices of cut melon.

(Thirteenth-century poet)

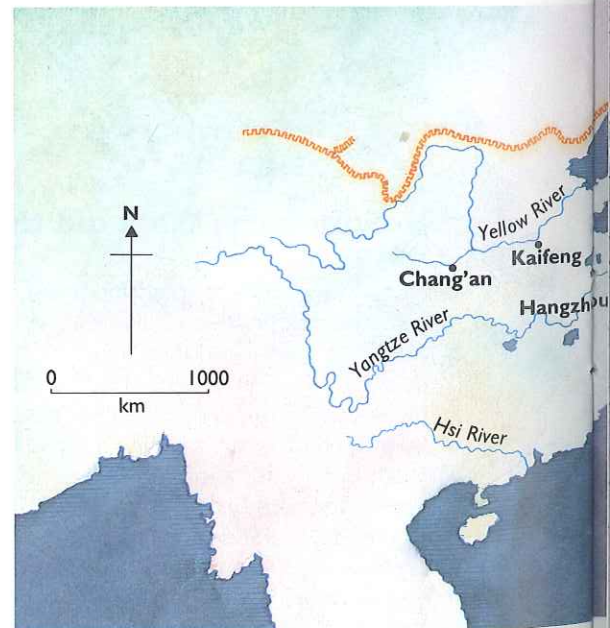
- The Yellow River gets its name from the yellow dust which is carried by winds from the north-west. This dust covers everything, and makes life difficult.
- For three months in the winter the ground is frozen for more than 30 centimetres. Rainfall is low apart from in the three summer months, when heavy rain makes the river flood easily. This can sweep away the crops. Dykes are crucial to

Life on the land was different in the North than in the South. The contrast between these two areas was great because of the two main rivers – the Yellow River in the North, and the Yangtse in the South. The environment of these two areas has not changed over the centuries.

control this. However, the dust and flood water does make the immediate land fertile.

- Work is intense in certain seasons – ploughing, sowing, reaping of millet and wheat – whilst at other times work is impossible.
- Animals like oxen are kept, and pastureland lies to the north of the river.
- The boats are as described in Source A – slender and shallow – to carry light loads for short journeys. The river either flows at great speed after heavy rain, or is almost dry.

This is the North of China today. The intensely cultivated hillsides are prominent. This has not changed for centuries.



Source B

The boats of the Yangtze are oval, like turtles, with tucked-in heads.

(Thirteenth-century poet)

- South of the Yangtze River is warm, with many lakes and rivers, and the people have always lived close to the water.
- The broad-based ships of the Yangtze carry heavy cargoes for many kilometres. The Yangtze is navigable for 2600 kilometres for small craft, and for over 320 kilometres for seagoing vessels.
- These boats 'like turtles' are the homes of families who spend most of their lives afloat.

Source C

Sailing along the creeks and waterways is the equivalent of cultivating vegetable gardens. Their fields are, so to speak, the middle of the lakes.

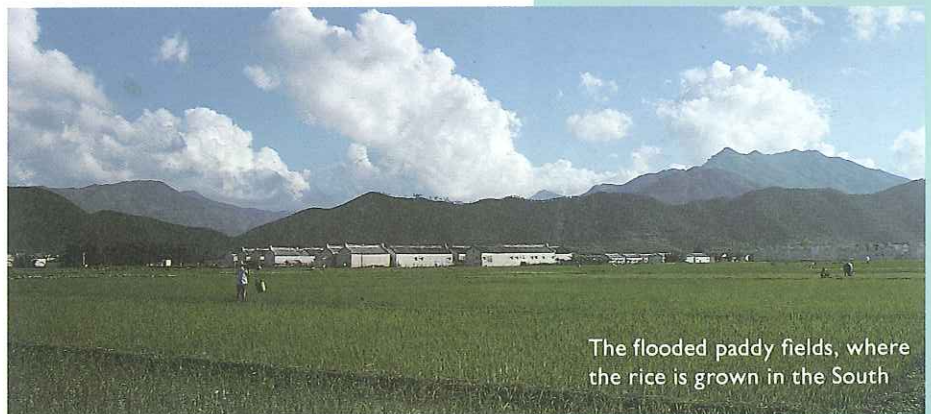
(A ninth-century northerner)

- The land is flat, enjoying a mild climate with light rain falling continually in the winter and spring, so agricultural work is continuous. Rice fields, with villages along the narrow dykes

which separate the paddy fields and which serve as wheelbarrow paths and footpaths, create an endless pattern.

- Terraces – that is cultivated ledges on the hillsides – are made for other crops.
- Silk-farming and fish-farming combine effectively. The mulberry trees – the leaves of which are the food for the silk-worms – grow around the edge of carp ponds. The carp feed on the silk-worms' droppings.
- Citrus fruits, dates and chestnuts are easy to grow. Lac trees and bamboo groves are popular and hemp is grown for the coarse cloth of peasant clothes. Horses, cattle, sheep and pigs are also raised in the villages.
- Near the towns, market gardeners produce things like leeks and ginger.

A town in the South of China today, showing the timelessness of life there



Notice how the two rivers – the Yellow and the Yangtze – divide the land.

The flooded paddy fields, where the rice is grown in the South

Village homes were usually a single courtyard with the main building positioned to the north, and other outbuildings like a pigsty nearby. The buildings were wooden with bamboo frames, and had a thatched or tiled roof. There was little privacy. Stone, which was regarded as a noble material for carving and ornamentation, was reserved for bridges, roads, paving for city streets, dykes, ramparts and Buddhist towers.



This Han pottery model was found in a tomb. It shows a pen full of sheep.

Everyone in the village, except the old, lame and infirm, worked from dawn till dusk to cut, thresh, dry and store the rice at harvest time. Children looked after the buffaloes and fed the animals in the yard (pigs, chickens and sometimes edible dogs) throughout the year, as well as gathering scarce firewood and collecting water from the well. In the winter some villages had schools where the children could learn the basics of writing and arithmetic.

What was peasant life like?

There has to be much guesswork about peasant life in China, because there are nothing like the records of the medieval villages of Europe. There are a few official handbooks for peasants on how to grow the best crops, and some tomb objects, but much is assumed because peasant life has changed very little over the centuries.

Peasant order

Farmers were very skilful. Their work was very detailed – more like gardening than farming. They relied on knowledge of local soils, weather, plants and fertilisers, especially in the rice fields. They grew huge amounts of food.

Work on the land and its crops resulted in close family and village life. The head of the family and village elders were respected and this resulted in peace in the countryside for much of the time. The peasants were too busy providing food for the family, paying taxes, and avoiding forced labour, to be troublesome. In return the peasants were protected by the Emperor's government. Several Han edicts open with, 'The world is based on agriculture,' showing how valuable village life was to China's peace and prosperity.

Peasant disorder

Poverty was real and could be caused by harsh taxes. This poem by a Song poet expresses this:

Source D

They do not grudge tending the rice in spring
But fear the payment of taxes in the autumn;
The evil officials act like sparrows or rats
And the thieving clerks like locusts or caterpillars;
They take extra with their enlarged measures.
People cannot avoid being flogged to make them pay up
And are further oppressed with private debt;
No smoke rises from the abandoned homesteads,
Never once in their lives have they tasted
Rice clean and bright as the cloudstone;
Those who eat it are always the idle
The mouths who grow it are forever watering.

Rebellion could result from harsh taxes, forced labour, and floods and droughts. In a crisis peasants often fled from their villages and beggars would roam around. The government lost taxes and had to hand out tools and seeds to assist the people in returning to normal life. At such times the peasants might rebel.



A short text on peasant life survives from about AD 100 to 170

and gives an ideal view of twelve months. Here are some of the tasks.

1st month

New Year's Day: keep the festival. Purify themselves before offering strong drink to the shrine of their ancestors; pray for happiness and prosperity.

There are few jobs so send the boys to school.

Transplant trees like lac, bamboo, pine and oak.

Sow melons, gourds, onions and garlic.

Sweep up decayed leaves, and manure the fields.

Prune the trees and break up heavy ground. Visit social superiors.

2nd month

Offer leeks and eggs to lord of the soil and spirits of the seasons.

3rd month

Practise archery in case of robbers.

Repair gates and doors; replaster walls and apply coat of lacquer. Break up the arable land soil, and light sandy soils.

5th month

Cut hay and collect firewood because the rains will soon make the paths too muddy to use.

Put bran for animal fodder in the winter in sealed jars to keep out maggots.

Collect herbs.

6th month

Textiles spun by the women; later the women dye the cloth and make it into clothes.

8th month

Cut hay, and offer leeks and eggs to lord of the soil and spirits of the seasons.

Present piglets and millet to the ancestral graves.

9th month

Check weapons, and prepare for the needs of the sick and orphans in the coming winter. Repair granaries and storage pits.

10th month

Women work on the hemp and make sandals.

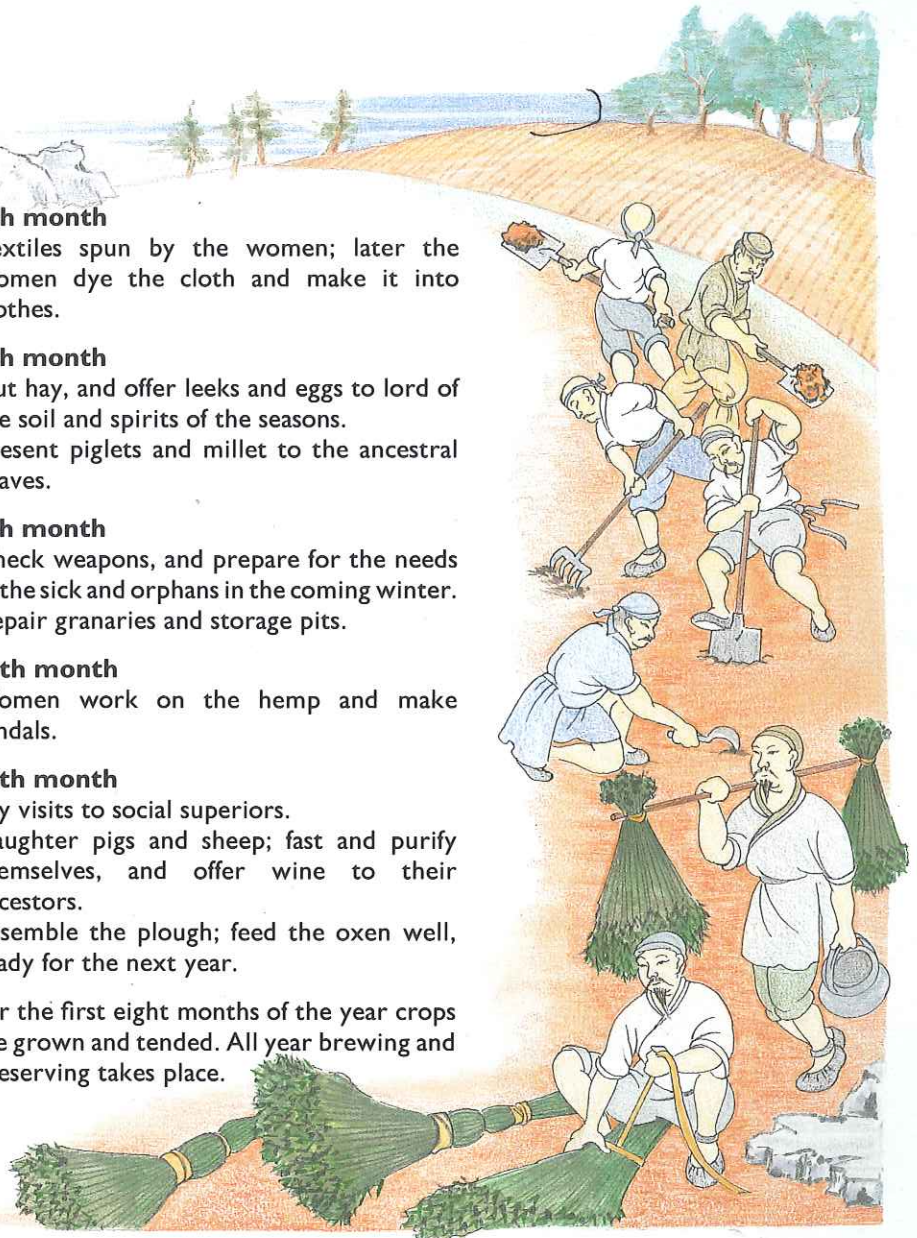
12th month

Pay visits to social superiors.

Slaughter pigs and sheep; fast and purify themselves, and offer wine to their ancestors.

Assemble the plough; feed the oxen well, ready for the next year.

For the first eight months of the year crops are grown and tended. All year brewing and preserving takes place.



EVIDENCE: PEASANT LIFE

- 1 Would you have preferred to live and work in the North or in the South of China? Write a letter to a friend being educated in a city who is missing village life explaining your choice by reference to the evidence.
- 2 For the area that is **not** your preference, present an official report to encourage people to live and work there. Include its special features, problems and contrasts.
- 3 **a** What impressions of peasant life do you get from the peasant calendar?
 - b** How useful is it as evidence?
 - c** What other aspects of peasant life would you like to learn about that are not mentioned here? Explain why.
- 4 **a** What do you think this peasant saying means: 'The collective earth is an orphan; the private plot is a child.'
 - b** Does the information on pages 30 to 33 support this saying?
- 5 Using the civilisation chart on page 7, decide whether this evidence for peasant life adds to, or reduces, the idea of China as a civilisation.