Activity Introduction

Run for the hills! Here comes the Floodplain Civilization of South and East Asia…
(whoosh)

Reading Passage Introduction

Hi there. So did you know that the early civilizations of South and East Asia were floodplain civilizations like Egypt and Mesopotamia? Well, it’s true. This, of course, means that they developed around a river, or rivers, plural, that flooded one to two times a year. Flooding is no good in most cases. However, back then, it made the surrounding lands rich and fertile…ideal for farming.

Now there were certain geographical differences that led these regions to develop a bit differently from Egypt and Mesopotamia. And that brings me to a very important point.

(beat) Are you listening? (beat) Good. Here it goes…Geography and civilizations go hand in hand… meaning that geography plays an important role in how civilizations develop.

And speaking of important, here’s a reading passage that will explain this in more detail...

Video 1

Hey, so today we’re going to talk about some of the major aspects of the Asian civilizations. To do this let’s start with those that developed in South Asia.
In South Asia, the Indus Valley, or Harappa, civilization formed around the Indus River in modern-day Pakistan and spread to parts of India, but then it mysteriously disappeared around seventeen fifty B.C.E. Of course, the story of civilization in that region of the world does not stop there.

After the Harappa civilization collapsed, India and its surrounding regions were desirable destinations for various invaders, such as the Aryans. The Aryans were an Indo-European people believed to have migrated from modern-day Iran and who invaded northwest India around fifteen-hundred B.C.E. This was the beginning of the Aryan Age.

The Aryans created a new culture by intermixing with the indigenous people of the region, the Dravidians. The Aryans were believed to be pastoralists, or people who raise livestock, and as you may know, they were also believed to be quite militaristic, since they organized themselves into tribes.

The most powerful of all the Aryan tribes was the Bharata tribe, which, by the way, is the official Sanskrit name for India.

It was during the Aryan Age that the Indian writing of Sanskrit developed. In addition, it was the Aryan religion from which the Indian religion of Hinduism would later develop. We'll learn more about that later.

Over time, the Aryans began to spread into northern parts of India. As they did, they adopted, or at least mixed with their own ways, the Dravidian ways of life… things such as farming, a taxation system, and religious beliefs.
As a result, from one thousand B.C.E. to four hundred B.C.E., the northern region of India experienced a great deal of development in terms of urban and economic growth. And so the kingdoms emerged.

Today, the Aryans are largely associated with the northern parts of India, while the Dravidians are largely associated with the southern parts; however, the two groups mixed enough to forge a region with a diverse, yet semi-unified, culture.

**Video 2**

So, one result of the encounter between the northern and southern Indian people was a complex, multi-tiered, social structure called the caste system, which segregated people into four groups, or castes.

At the top of the social hierarchy were the Brahmans, or the priests.

Second were the Kshatriyas, the warriors and landowners.

After that came the Vaisyas, who were the merchants and artisans…and finally came the Sudras, the poor farmers, farm workers, and menial laborers.

Notice how the Aryans assigned the three highest tiers to themselves, while the lowest tier was reserved for the non-Aryan people, the Sudras. The system was based on racial discrimination, and status was determined by skin color. Aryans were typically lighter in skin color, while the indigenous people of the region were typically darker.

So how did they get away with it?
Religion.

The Aryans used religious scriptures such as the Rig Veda to justify the existence of the discriminatory caste system.

Today, this caste system is legally outlawed in India; nevertheless, it is still very much ingrained in Indian society.

So now let’s turn our attention to China and its ancient people.

Farming in China is believed to have started in the Yellow River Basin around seven thousand B.C.E., while agriculture in the Yangzi River Basin began around five thousand B.C.E. As a result, small communal villages took shape, and distinct cultures developed.

One such culture called Yangshao arose in northern China around five thousand B.C.E. and lasted until about three thousand B.C.E. After that came the Longshan culture, which lasted until twenty-two hundred B.C.E.

It was around this time, twenty-two hundred B.C.E., that China’s most controversial dynasty is said to have emerged. The Xia dynasty. Why is it controversial? Mostly because scholars aren’t sure if it ever existed. Many believe it was just a myth, since there are no records in written history…it exists in oral history alone.

If it did exist, though, it might have been the first real Chinese state, lasting from twenty-one eighty B.C.E. to seventeen fifty B.C.E.
According to oral history, the Xia dynasty was a diverse society with a social hierarchy that included bureaucrats, scribes, artisans, and metallurgists, or people who worked with metals.

Of course, scholars still debate whether the Xia dynasty even existed.

**Reading Passage Introduction**

Now it’s time to learn a bit about the early empires, or dynasties, of South and East Asia. Don’t you just love saying those words, empire and dynasty…?!

Don’t you wish they made cars that were called empire or dynasty? I do. (beat) And I’d totally buy one… just so I could say (very dramatically, in a Beverly Hills snooty voice) ‘Hey everyone, this is my new empire’ or ‘How do you like my new dynasty?! Jealous?!’ … Wouldn’t that be awwwwwsome?!

Well, I’ve obviously had too much coffee!

Anyway, here’s a reading passage about empires and dynasties… enjoy!