

Teacher's Notes: **Traders in Old China**

Overview: This map and cards can be used in a variety of simulation “games” that relate to trading in Chinese history.

The cards accurately describe environmental conditions and products in different regions, as well as the connections that Chinese people made in order to trade different kinds of goods

Grade: 4-12, depending . . .

Related Discipline: History

CC Standard: R6-1, R7-1, R8-1

Time: 1-4 class periods

**Preparation:** Prepare and distribute basemaps with the complexity you want – we provide one base with the activity, but the clickable file lets you make a map with any combination of rivers, highlands, and modern borders. Modern borders provide reference, but can get in the way of historic simulation.

**Setup:** To thrive economically, people in every place must have at least one BIGJob. (A BIGJob is a Basic Income Generating Job, a job that grows, mines, makes, or does something that can be sold to people in other places). People trade the products of their BIGJobs to people in other places, in order to get the money they need to buy the things they do not grow, mine, or make for themselves. Ask students how people learn about other places, in order to decide what they want to buy from and sell to people in those places. Put the question in historic context – before internet, cell phones, post office, accurate maps, or even printed books.

Explain that each student will get a card that describes a particular place in Asia. The card also has information about travel to other places and the items traders are bringing from those places.

Depending on how you want to run the simulation, the students have a specific short-run task (to gather information) and a long-run task. The long-run task can be one or more of several things –

- a. To decide where they want to focus on trading from their home location in the future,
- b. To decide where the country should invest tax money to build roads, railroads, etc.,
- c. To decide where the country should have police or troops to protect traders, or even
- d. To decide where would be the best place to become a bandit or raider.

**Procedure:** The simulation can have many different degrees of complexity and amounts of content information, and it can meet several different reading, speaking, listening, or writing standards. Start by giving each student a card from one of the core places (L, M, N, R, S, and maybe H).

Short-run task – to gather information. This can take several forms – in increasing order of time:

1. Make one round trip. Students read their own cards and write a one-minute speech to explain (to the whole class or a small group) where they live and what things are like there. Then they say where they want to go to trade. They can go to a place listed on their card and (if desired) one more place in the same direction. Finally, they identify items they will take to that place, and describe what they hope to buy there. Students listen to the presentations by other students. Then they get and read the cards from their destinations. After a time for individual thought or group discussion, they do one or more of the mapping extensions below.
2. Do two round trips. Students read their cards, then get the cards for the places where they choose to go. They can decide if they will go to two different nearby neighbors and back, or continue to another place in one direction before returning.
3. Do six or eight trip legs. Students plan trips to three or four destinations that can be reached in one or two trips from their home base. Then they get the cards for those places. With this option, they learn more first-hand and do not need to spend as much time exchanging information.
4. Travel and share notes. Students do one or more of the above, then get in small groups that include people from several different origins (say H, N, and R). In the groups, they compare notes with the goal of preparing a “trader’s guide” that explains what are the most profitable trading routes and which ones are too dangerous, time-consuming, or unprofitable.

Mapping extension 1: Students take notes on blank maps while other students are reporting on their places. Then they try to make one or more simple thematic maps – e.g., terrain, ecoregion (desert, grassland, forest), rainfall, farming and herding, etc. Explain that this is how people used to learn about foreign countries – they listened to the reports of travelers and tried to synthesize this information. The easiest task, given the nature of the cards, is to make a map of rainfall by identifying the places with enough rain for farming and then shading the areas around those places in order to make a regional map. “Prime the pump” by explaining that this is exactly how people make maps of many topics, from rainfall or land use to religion or Republican vote.

Mapping extension 2: Students take notes and decide what places are likely to become large trading cities. They make a map to communicate their findings.

Mapping extension 2: Students take notes and decide what routes (links between two neighboring places) are the most important for the economy and should be served by building better roads, providing protection, etc. This is one of the most important kinds of applied geography in the world today. (Show pictures of road construction, and ask who decides which roads to fix.)

**Vocabulary:** distance commodity trade barrier bandit nomad infrastructure  
PLUS a lot of facts about Chinese regions, Great Wall, Grand Canal, ports, Silk Roads, etc.

**Debrief:** Highlight student comments that describe major trade routes that emerged at various times in China’s long history (many of these were rebuilt in different dynasties, after falling into disrepair during periods of disorder between dynasties):

- The Grand Canal can carry food north or south in eastern China. This canal goes from the area around Place U on the Yangtze Jiang (Jiang means “clear river”) through Place S on the Huang He (He means “muddy river”) and on to Place T (near the modern capital of Beijing). This route was important in times of crop failure due to flood or drought in any of these regions.
- The on-and-off trade with northern nomads for horses and hides. The times of trade alternated with times when Chinese farmers needed defense against raids by the northern nomads. These raids are the reason for the Great Wall and various military expeditions in Chinese history.
- The Silk Road (and ocean ports) sent Chinese products (silk, tea, ceramics) to India (for spices), Arabia (perfumes), Africa (gold), and Europe (glass and weapons). It is important to note that single trader seldom went the entire length of a long route such as the Silk Road. The Silk Road, after all, was more than twice as long as the Oregon Trail in the United States. The Oregon Trail generally exhausted the travelers, usually destroyed their wagons and other equipment, and often killed their draft animals. Moreover, few Silk Road traders could afford the equipment needed to travel in so many different environments – hot deserts, cold plateaus, snowy mountains, dangerous grasslands occupied by marauding nomads, etc.

Travelers like Tamim Ibn Bahr or Marco Polo, however, could “hitch” with several traders in turn. For a list of famous Silk Road “hitchhikers” in the past, see

<http://www.silk-road.com/artl/srtravelmain.shtml>

These old trade connections help explain a lot about the modern geography of China:

- a. concentration of population near the east coast and along the major rivers,
- b. the importance of Shanghai (Place U) and Hong Kong – Guangzhou (Place V) as industrial and trading centers,
- c. the development of regionally successful but still partially isolated centers like Chongking in the Szechuan Basin (Place K) or Kunming (south of Place J).
- d. The still-important trading centers of Kashgar (Place A) and Lanzhou (L) – for example, Lanzhou is the terminus of the recently finished oil pipeline from Kazakhstan in Central Asia (and Kazakhstan is the site of three of the eight largest oil discoveries since 1990).
- e. Internal cultural differences, such as the isolated and semi-autonomous Tibetan Buddhists who live near Place I, and the Islamic people who live around Places D, E, F, and G.

**Answers:** As with any open-ended simulation, there are few absolutely “right” or “wrong” answers. You can compare their maps (or have them compare maps) with a printed atlas or the clickable pdf. An alternative is to give them access to the clickable mini-Atlas, or use the clickable file to make some thematic maps of specific topics that connect this lesson with your curriculum.

**Extension:** Have students look at modern trade connections – especially for energy, minerals, electronics, automobiles, clothing. See the multimedia presentations on Tea in China or the activities on Oil Trade in the Southwest Asia folder or Foreign Investment in the United States folder.

Emphasize that at some point every trading society (indeed, every successful economy) must go through the process that is modeled in this simulation. Someone must “travel” (either in person or through research) to a different place in order to discover what things could be produced in your place and sold in that place. Even today, this “job” provides employment for hundreds of thousands of market analysts in the United States. Then there are the people who figure out how to route trucks or trains, and then decide where to put warehouses, internet routers, and other infrastructure. A related task involves deciding where to locate a new discount store, organic farm, auto-parts factory, theme park, or whatever. Like the ancient Grand Canal or Silk Roads, these economic decisions usually involve a mix of public investment (e.g., building canals and forts back then, or highways, airports, and telecommunications now) and private decisions (trading bazaars and caravanserais in the old days, and motor vehicles, warehouses, hotels, conferences, etc. today).

At the same time, this activity can provide a lot of background for interpreting Chinese history, from ancient dynasties to the Opium Wars, the Communist takeover, and the current market liberalization. One important take-away point is that China is far from homogenous, climatically, ethnically, or economically – if the card simulation has not made that point, see the multimedia presentation on Coastal City and Inland Village. The presentation on Vegetation Greenup in Tibet has more photos from this remote part of China.