Ancient China

Use the text to answer each question below.

1. The Chinese creation myth, or story about how the world began, is based on a giant named Pan Gu. Pan Gu lived inside an egg for 18,000 years. When he emerged, he separated the Earth and sky with his giant ax. Pan Gu stood between them and held up the sky. When Pan Gu died, his breath became the wind, his voice became thunder, his head became the mountains and his blood became the rivers. It’s no surprise that the Chinese creation myth deals with the size of the world—China itself is enormous, a large country with deserts, rainforests and some of Earth’s tallest mountains. In ancient times, China’s geography and large size kept its people isolated from other cultures. Many of its earliest peoples settled along the Huang He River. The Chinese used its waters to help them grow crops through irrigation, a method that diverts water and uses it to support agriculture.

Why was China isolated from other cultures for a long time?

A. The wet climate kept people from other countries from visiting.
B. The Huang He River acted as a natural barrier against invaders.
C. The region was large and had difficult terrain.
D. Pan Gu was a dictator who didn’t allow trade with other countries.

2. Ancient Chinese kings believed that they had been chosen by the gods to rule. They called this the Mandate of Heaven. If a king was cruel or unjust, this right could be taken away and given to another leader. The Shang Dynasty is one of the earliest Chinese dynasties historians have studied. Shang culture dates back to around 1750 BCE, when the Chinese were beginning to live in cities. During the Shang Dynasty, the Chinese worked with bronze tools, made beautiful objects out of jade stone and developed a written language. The Chinese alphabet doesn’t use letters to stand for the sounds of different words like the Latin alphabet; instead, it uses characters that represent words. This makes it easier to communicate with people who pronounce the same words differently. For example, the cities Peking and Beijing are actually the same place, China’s capital. It has two names in English because there are different ways of pronouncing the word in Chinese.

According to the Mandate of Heaven,

A. Chinese kings would rule in Heaven after they died.
B. Chinese kings had the divine right to create the alphabet.
C. Chinese kings had a god-given right to rule that could never be taken away.
D. Chinese kings had a divine right to rule if they were fair and kind leaders.
3. The Shang were overthrown by the Zhou tribe, who invoked the Mandate of Heaven and said the Shang were corrupt and brutal. The Zhou set up their own dynasty, expanded internal trade and printed copper coins.

The Zhou Dynasty was followed by the Qin. The Qin were great warriors and among the first to use cavalry, or fighters on horses. They standardized many things, including money, language and writing and developed a strict philosophy known as Legalism. Legalism was based on the belief that people were inherently bad and inclined toward selfish and criminal behavior and that extremely harsh laws were necessary to avoid chaos. The Qin installed their own governors when they conquered an area and divided communities into groups of five to ten families. Everyone in the group was responsible for keeping everyone else in the group in line. If one person broke a rule, everyone was punished. A group of 400 scholars, for example, was once buried alive for violating Qin laws.

Legalism was based on the belief that people

A. are naturally bad and can only be controlled with strict laws.  
B. must honor themselves and their ancestors.  
C. should not be held accountable for someone else’s actions.  
D. are inherently good and can be trusted to govern themselves.

4. Though they ruled for only 15 years, the Qin unified a large chunk of China and had a huge impact on Chinese society. To keep out unwanted guests—like the Mongols who lived in the north—they built China’s famous Great Wall, which is more than 3,000 miles long and averages 25 feet tall. It was built by joining many smaller, shorter walls that already existed into one giant barrier. Some parts are made of brick and others from grass and mud. Over the years, each dynasty made changes to the wall. During the Ming period, more than 1 million soldiers manned the Great Wall at any given time. In recent years, scientists discovered more than 600 miles of wall that were previously buried.

Why was Great Wall of China built?

A. to celebrate the emperor  
B. to prevent flooding  
C. to prevent invasions  
D. to keep people from fleeing
5. Many of the biggest advances in Chinese culture came during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Instead of harshly policing its citizens and allowing only a select group of people to advance socially and economically, it established a meritocracy. Meritocracies reward people based on their abilities instead of their relationships or wealth. For instance, if you wanted to work for the government, you had to pass an exam—you wouldn’t automatically get a position just because a family member already worked in that department. Other advances included the development of acupuncture, which is a type of medicine in which a doctor pricks the skin with needles to cure certain ailments. Buddhism from India was also introduced to China at around this time.

Which of the following is an example of a meritocracy?

A. a government that only gives jobs to members of certain families
B. a company that hires people based on their performance at past jobs
C. a school that allows students’ families to pay for them to receive higher grades
D. a film studio that only casts famous actors

6. During the Han Dynasty, the Chinese discovered that the Romans loved silks and spices, which the Chinese produced. The Chinese desired the Romans' gold, so traders traveled the 4,000 miles between China and Europe. Most of these merchants only went part of the way, but the goods made it back and forth, despite the fact that merchants were traveling across some extreme and treacherous landscapes. The collection of different trade routes was called the Silk Road. The Silk Road spread knowledge as well as goods and opened up new worlds to the Chinese and the Romans.

The Silk Road was

A. a single, long road between Rome and Beijing.
B. a set of trade routes between China and Europe.
C. a path connecting different silk producers in China.
D. a road paved with a substance made from silk.
7. The Han period also saw the development of two powerful philosophies that are still popular in China today: Confucianism and Taoism. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, lived in 500 BCE. He believed that people should listen to their elders and do their best to bring honor to their families. Confucius also believed in ancestral spirits that could either help their living descendants or bring down their wrath upon anyone disrespecting their family name. Taoism was founded by Lao Tzu, who lived in 600 BCE. Some people call Taoism a religion, but it’s more accurate to say that it’s a way of thinking and living. The word “Tao” means "The Way," and it is thought to be an invisible guiding force that exists in nature. The basic premise of Taoism is that people should live in harmony with the universe as much as possible. People should be like rivers and “go with the flow,” gracefully moving around obstacles in their life instead of fighting them.

Confucius believed that

A. there is an invisible guiding force that exists in nature called “The Way.”
B. people are inherently bad and must be controlled with strict laws.
C. people should get jobs based family connections rather than academic achievement.
D. people should respect their elders and live well in order to honor their families.