



CHINA

Overview

- The Shang had a number of religious practices, one of which was veneration of dead ancestors; Shang people made sacrifices to and asked questions of their ancestors.
- Ancient Chinese nobles sought to tell the future by writing on bone fragments or pieces of turtle shell and throwing those bones into a fire; the fortune seekers saw messages about the future in the cracks that formed.
- Shang dynasty craftspeople mastered bronze, an alloy of copper and tin; bronze weapons gave Shang foot soldiers and charioteers a tactical advantage in combat.

The first dynasty

The very earliest period in traditional Chinese history is called the **Mythical Period**, when—according to legend—the **Xia dynasty** ruled China. The **Shang dynasty**, the first historically confirmed dynasty, supposedly began when the Shang overthrew the Xia sometime around 1760 BC.

Did this overthrow actually happen? We're not sure. The Shang dynasty is the oldest Chinese dynasty whose existence is supported by archaeological finds, but more evidence for the existence of the Xia dynasty may yet emerge.¹ It's estimated that the Shang ruled the Yellow River Valley of China for most of the second millennium BCE—so about 1766 to 1046 BC.



Map showing the region controlled by the Shang dynasty in China. Map of China is in beige, with rivers in blue and the outline of the Shang-controlled area in green. Shang dynasty is located in the North China Plain in western China.

Region controlled by Shang dynasty. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

For centuries, people found what they called dragon bones—bones and shells with mysterious inscriptions—in many parts of China. Excavations of the ancient city of Anyang in the early twentieth century revealed tens of thousands of these bone fragments and bronze vessels, many of which had inscriptions in proto-Chinese characters. These artifacts contained records dating back to the Shang dynasty, allowing scholars to learn much about Shang life, such as their agricultural methods, medical treatments, legal system, and craft making styles.

The Shang built huge cities with strong social class divisions, expanded earlier irrigation systems, excelled in the use of bronze, and developed a writing system. Shang kings fulfilled a sacred, not political, role, while a council of chosen advisers and bureaucrats—official administrators—organized and ran the government.

Both banks of the Yellow River had massive amounts of loess pronounced like the English word less—a fertile sediment that allowed Shang-era farmers to grow a large surplus of food. This supported specialization and allowed a class of Shang artisans and craftspeople to develop sophisticated technology and culture.

Ultimately, the Shang dynasty was overthrown in 1046 BC by the Zhou, a **subject people**—a people who lived under imperial rule—living in the western part of the kingdom, but their cultural contributions carried on through future dynasties.



Writing and culture

The oldest surviving form of Chinese writing is found as inscriptions of divination records on the bones or shells of animals, called **oracle bones**; *oracle*, from a similar Latin root as the English word *orator*, means holy messenger or speaker. The writing found on oracle bones shows complexity, indicating that this language had existed for a long time. In fact, modern scholars are able to read it because the language is very similar to the modern Chinese writing system.

Oracle bones are pieces of bone or turtle shell that were used by the ancient Chinese, especially Chinese kings, in attempts to predict the future. The ancient kings would inscribe their name and the date on the bone along with a question. They would then heat the bone until it cracked and then interpret the shape of the crack, which was believed to provide an answer to their question.

Picture of a piece of ox bone with Shang-era writing. Writing is written vertically, like modern-day Chinese writing, in a red color.

Ox scapula with a divination inscription from the Shang dynasty. [Image](#) courtesy Wikipedia.

Different questions have been found carved into oracle bones, such as, "Will we win the upcoming battle?" or "How many soldiers should we commit to the battle?" The bones reveal a great deal about what was important to Shang society and often asked questions about war, harvests, and childbirth.

Toward the end of the dynasty, this practice of **divination**—predicting the future—was reserved for the king alone. As a result, oracle bones from this period give historians comparatively less insight into the lives and concerns of people in other classes.

Writing allowed science in the Shang dynasty to advance, as observations could be recorded more accurately. The Oracle Scripts are accounts of eclipses and other celestial events written by astronomers of the Shang period. Shang astronomers' works also showed advances in mathematics, the development of odd and even numbers, and principles of accounting. The *I-Ching*—also known as *The Book of Changes*—was either written or compiled at this same time, around 1250 to 1150 BC. The I-Ching is a book of divination with roots going back to the fortune tellers of the rural areas and their oracle bones.

Musical instruments were also developed by the Shang. At Yin Xu, near Anyang, excavations have revealed instruments from the Shang period such as the ocarina—a wind instrument—drums, and cymbals. Bells, chimes, and bone flutes have been discovered elsewhere.

The Shang created a lunar calendar, based on the cycles of the moon, that was used to predict and record important events, especially planting and harvesting of crops. Because lunar years are shorter than solar years, which are based on the Earth's orbit of the sun, Shang kings employed specially-trained astronomers who made adjustments and maintained the precision of the calendar.



Technological innovation and exchange

Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, was a hugely important metal during the Shang period. Shang metal workers developed a highly sophisticated method for casting bronze and used it to make ceremonial objects and weapons. Bronze swords and spearheads were stronger than other available metals, giving Shang soldiers an advantage in battle.

Bronze vessel with three legs, two handles, and intricate carvings of symbols.

A Shang dynasty bronze vessel, often ceremonial objects, used to make offerings to ancestors. [Image](#) courtesy Wikipedia.

Mastery of bronze was an important advancement for the Shang militarily, but the combination of horse, chariot, and composite bow were also integral to its success. The chariot, a two-wheeled war cart pulled by horses, allowed Shang soldiers to move vast distances at great speeds and also acted as a mobile archery

platform. Shang archers also had composite bows, made by combining animal sinew and horn or bone with wood. These materials gave the bow more power than a wooden bow of the same size. Archers were able to keep their bows small enough to shoot easily while standing in a chariot without losing power.

These military technologies were important because the Shang were constantly at war. A significant number of oracle bone inscriptions show that the Shang used chariots as mobile command vehicles and in royal hunts. Members of the royal household were often buried with a chariot, horses, and a charioteer. Shang armies expanded the borders of the kingdom and captured precious resources and prisoners of war, who could be enslaved or used as human sacrifices. The oracle bones also show deep concern over the "barbarians" living outside the empire, who were a constant threat to the safety and stability of the kingdom; the military had to be constantly ready to fight them.

Bronze battle axe carved with an image of a grinning, possibly menacing face.



Bronze Battle Axe Shang dynasty—1600 to 1046 BCE—Excavated at Yidu, Shangdong Province, 1956. This axe was used in hand-to-hand combat and was also a ritual object symbolizing power and military authority. The tomb it came from likely belonged to a man of wealth and influence. [Image](#) courtesy Wikipedia.

The influence of the Early Shang extended hundreds of kilometers away from the capital, and many of the Shang bronze techniques diffused over large areas.⁷ The Shang in turn adopted skills, ideas, and even crops from some neighboring societies, such as wheat and axes, which may have come from Western Asia.⁸ However—because natural barriers like the ocean, mountain ranges, deserts, and steppes kept the Shang in relative isolation—the Shang dynasty as well as later dynasties evolved in unique and insular ways.

Power and social hierarchy

The Shang dynasty's power was concentrated in many ancient cities, some of which have been unearthed by archaeologists. The first Shang ruler supposedly founded a new capital for his dynasty at a town called **Shang**, near modern-day Zhengzhou, a city of 2.6 million people in eastern China's Henan Province. Archaeological remains of this town may have been found, and it seems to have functioned as a sacred capital, where the most sacred temples and religious objects were housed. This city also had palaces, workshops, and city walls.

Shang, along with other ancient Chinese cities, had two city walls—one inner and one outer wall. The common residents could live within the outer wall, but could not go past the inner wall, which enclosed a temple area, cemetery sites, bronze foundries, bronze casting areas, and bone workshops. The inner walls thus encircled an area of political elite and craft specialists, who together were the engineers of the important ritual performances. In this way, the architecture of these cities was designed to separate different social classes.



However, it seems that there were many capitals aside from this one, and rulers may have moved from one to the other because of religious rituals, military strategy, or food requirements. That suggests that the power of the dynasty was concentrated in the king, whose political authority was reinforced by the Shang religion. To consolidate their authority further, kings often went on excursions and military expeditions to walled towns outside the capitals where aristocrats had a lot of influence. Consolidating power in these areas was crucial, as control of peasant-farmed agricultural territories ensured sufficient resources for the inhabitants of the walled towns.

Map of north and central China showing major archaeological sites: Anyang, Erlitou, Erligang, Sanxingdui, Panlongcheng, and Wucheng. Land is brown and green with rivers in blue.

Major archaeological sites in north and central China dating from the second millennium BCE. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Anyang, another Shang capital, also in modern-day Henan Province, is another important—but slightly later—Shang city that has been excavated. It was located at the intersection between lowland agricultural areas of the North China Plain and mountains which acted as a defensive border. This site yielded large numbers of oracle bones that describe the travels of eleven named kings. The names and timeframes of these kings match traditional lists of Shang kings. Anyang was a huge city, with an extensive cemetery of thousands of graves and 11 large tombs—evidence of the city's labor force, which may have belonged to the 11 Shang kings.

Generally, Shang cities were not very well preserved in the archaeological record because of how they were built and the climate in northern China. Stone material was scarce, so the security of cities was reinforced by large walls made of compacted earth. Buildings were often constructed with dried mud over a framework of wooden posts. Cities were crucial to political and religious affairs, and they were the seats of administrative affairs, royal tombs, palaces, and shrines. Common people were concentrated in the agricultural areas outside the cities.

The border territories of Shang rule were led by chieftains who gained the right to govern through connections with royalty. Shang relied heavily on neighboring fiefs for raw materials, much of which was devoted to ceremonial performances. **Fiefs** were lands given to social elites to govern on behalf of a more powerful ruler. The holder of a fief was expected to provide resources political and military support to the ruler. Fiefs also had important economic roles; they often organized irrigation and flood control systems and supervised their construction.

The Shang enacted a **feudal system**, a system in which duties are tied to land ownership, with sharp class divisions based on clan birthright. The aristocracy were centered around **Anyang**, which was the seat of governmental affairs for the surrounding areas. Regional territories farther from the capital were also controlled by the wealthy.

After the kings and the aristocrats, the Shang military were next in social status and were respected and honored for their skill. There were two subdivisions of the military: the infantry, or foot soldiers, and the chariot warriors. The latter were noted for their great skill in warfare and hunting.

There were many local rulers who held hereditary titles. In this imperial system, elite classes benefitted from the production of peasants and large-scale projects under elite control, usually operated using various forms of unfree labor.

There is also evidence of a class of proto-bureaucrats, many of whom were titled officials, who had managerial roles and kept extensive records. Their duties likely involved keeping an inventory of ritual materials, orchestrating ritual performances, managing large construction projects and bronze foundries, and tracking incoming tributes.

Artisans and craftspeople comprised the middle class of Shang society. The rulers and aristocrats patronized these artisans in order to gain luxury goods for both personal consumption and ceremonial purposes. Their largest contribution was their work with bronze, particularly ritual vessels and treasures, many of which were discovered via archaeological findings in the 1920s and 1930s. Shang aristocrats and the royalty were likely buried with large numbers of bronze valuables, particularly wine vessels and other ornate structures.

At the bottom of the social ladder were the peasants, the poorest of Chinese citizens. They comprised the majority of the population and were limited to farming and selling crops for profit in a constraining feudal system. Archaeological findings have shown that masses of peasants were buried with aristocrats, leading some scholars to believe that they were the equivalent of slaves. However, other scholars have countered that they may have been similar to **serfs**, who were tied to aristocrat-held land and gave aristocrats part of their harvest. Peasants were governed directly by local aristocrats. One of the ways that historians know about these social hierarchies is by examining cemeteries, which were often grouped in different neighborhoods and varied in quality according to the status of the people buried there.

Shang religion

Shang religion was incredibly important, and it extended into the political and economic spheres. The Shang religion and state power were closely connected; state power was consolidated through a sense of reverence for royal Shang ancestors. Further, by the end of the Shang dynasty, the king was the only one who could interpret the oracle bones, thereby making him the head shaman.

The Shang religion was characterized by a combination of **animism**, the idea that everything has a soul; **shamanism**, the belief in shamans who have the ability to communicate with the spiritual world; ancestor worship; and divination. Different gods represented natural and mythological symbols, such as the moon, the sun, the wind, the rain, the dragon, and the phoenix. Peasants prayed to these gods for bountiful harvests. Festivals to celebrate gods were also common. In particular, the Shang kings, who considered themselves divine rulers, consulted the great god Shangdi—the Supreme Being who ruled over humanity and nature—for advice and wisdom. The Shang believed that the ancestors could also confer good fortune; the Shang would consult ancestors through oracle bones in order to seek approval for any major decision, and to learn about future success in harvesting, hunting, or battle.

It appears that there was belief in the afterlife during the Shang dynasty. Archaeologists have found Shang tombs surrounded by the skulls and bodies of human sacrifices. Some of these contain **jade**, which was thought to protect against decay and grant immortality. Archaeologists believe that Shang tombs were very similar to those found in the Egyptian pyramids in that they buried servants with them. Chinese archaeologists theorize that the Shang, like the ancient Egyptians, believed their servants would continue to serve them in the afterlife. Because of this belief, aristocrats' servants would be killed and buried with them when they died. Another interpretation is that these were enemy warriors captured in battle.

One elaborate tomb which has been unearthed was that of Lady Hao, a consort of a Shang king who reigned around 1200 BC. The artifacts found in her tomb indicate that she had a high social status and a great deal of power in Shang



society, which makes historians speculate about the role of women in the Shang dynasty. Based on the artifacts found in Lady Hao's tomb, it seems that she had her own wealth and political influence, and it is possible that she also had a prominent role in the military, as many bronze weapons were found buried with her.

Brick-lined tomb holding skeletons on the side and dark-colored pottery in the center.

Tomb of Lady Fu Hao, Yinxu, Henan, China. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.