4.6: China from Neolithic Village Settlements to the Shang Kingdom

Chapters Two and Three covered the development of the first major civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India. In each case, rivers were particularly important to that process because they offered a stable supply of water for agriculture. Similarly, in China, the first major states emerged along China’s second longest river—the Yellow River. These states are the Xia [shee-ah] Dynasty (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE), Shang [shawng] Dynasty (1600 – 1046 BCE), and Zhou [joe] Dynasty (1045 – 256 BCE). Each of these kingdoms was ruled by a line of hereditary monarchs hailing from one lineage, which is why they are also referred to as dynasties.
Because written sources don’t become available until the Shang Dynasty, historians have relied heavily on the archaeological record to reconstruct the process by which these states arose. Looking back at the end of the Paleolithic era (c. 10,000 BCE), East Asia was sparsely populated by bands of foragers living in temporary settlements. During the eighth millennium BCE, in China, some of these hunter-gatherers turned to domesticated cereals for a stable food supply and settled into villages so they could cultivate them. Thus, the Neolithic Age (8000 – 2000 BCE) commenced.

Figure 1: Neolithic cultures in China c. 4000 BCE | Note the location of Yangshao culture along the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River, where nearly a thousand settlements have been identified by archaeologists. Author: Lamassu Design Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Over the course of those six millennia leading up to the Xia Dynasty, Neolithic communities became more diverse and complex. For instance, for the period 5000 – 3000 BCE, archaeologists have identified at least eight major regional Neolithic cultures located along rivers and coasts (see Map 1). They did so by examining pottery styles and village settlement patterns. One example is Yangshao culture, which was concentrated along the middle reaches of the Yellow River. Over one thousand sites left behind by millet-farming village communities have been discovered. Jiangzhai (c. 4000 BCE), for instance, was a moated village settlement that occupied roughly thirteen acres (see Figure 1). It was composed of related lineages and tribal in organization.

During the third millennium BCE, Yangshao culture was gradually supplanted by Longshan culture (c. 3000 – 1900 BCE), which emerged further to the east, along the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. In 1928, when archaeologists excavated a site near the town after which Longshan was named, they found evidence for a culture that had laid the foundations for the kingdoms that emerged in the second millennium BCE, including the ruins of numerous walled towns with cemeteries outside (see Map 2). Their rammed-earth walls protected urban areas with public buildings, roads, and drainage systems. The cemetery’s arrangement suggests that people living in the towns were buried alongside clan members, but also that some members were wealthier and more powerful: while most graves had nothing but a skeleton, others contained numerous artifacts, such as pottery and jade.
Based on this evidence, archaeologists have concluded that, during the third millennium BCE, population grew and some of it shifted from villages to walled towns. These walled towns developed into political and economic centers exercising control over and serving as protection for surrounding communities. Individuals with more elaborate graves were likely political and religious leaders, and served as chieftains. Hence, numerous competing chiefdoms emerged, providing the foundation for more powerful kingdoms to follow.

Ancient Chinese histories identify the first major kingdom as the **Xia Dynasty** (c. 1900 – 1600 BCE). However, these were written many centuries after the kingdom about which they speak and, lacking written evidence from the dynasty itself, specialists have been unable to definitively establish its location. Nevertheless, most agree that the Xia capital was located along the Yellow River at Erlitou [are-lee-toe] (see Map \(\PageIndex{2}\)). At its peak of activity from 1900 – 1600 BCE, this town looks like something more complex than a chiefdom. Erlitou included a central, walled palace complex (see Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\)), workshops for the production of bronze and pottery, and elite burials containing bronze weapons and jade, suggesting a socially stratified, Bronze Age civilization and kingdom. That is why many historians identify it as the capital of the Xia Dynasty.
With the **Shang Dynasty** (1600 – 1046 BCE), we formally step into China's historical period. In 1899, in an apothecary, a Chinese scholar came across mysterious bones that were being ground up for use as medicine. He immediately recognized that the Chinese characters inscribed on them were very ancient. Subsequently, the origin of these bones was traced to fields in **Anyang** [anneyawng], China where, beginning in 1928, excavations were carried out. Similar to the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization, a lost civilization was revealed on the North China Plain, the one difference being that traditional histories of a later time had documented this one (see Map \(\PageIndex{3}\)).

The findings were substantial. A diverse array of settlements with a royal capital at the center covered nearly thirty square kilometers (see Map \(\PageIndex{4}\)). Archaeologists have identified 53 pounded earth foundations as the floors of royal palace-temples and the ruins in their vicinity as residential areas for elites and commoners; sacrificial pits; and workshops for the production of bronze, pottery, and stone. Also, a royal cemetery with eight large tombs and...
dozens of smaller ones lies to the northwest. The larger graves were roughly half the size of a football field, each accessible through four ramps whose orientation to the cardinal directions gives them the appearance of crosses. Deep down at the bottom of each tomb’s central shaft, wooden chambers were built to house the dead bodies of Shang kings. Shockingly to us, dozens of human skeletons were placed above and below these, presumably as servants to accompany rulers in the afterlife (view reconstruction of a Xia Dynasty palace at Erlitou at the following link: http://www.waa.ox.ac.uk/XDB/images/world/tours/china-erlitou2.jpg).

Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\): Royal Tomb of Lady Fu Hao | The royal tomb of Lady Fu Hao, principal consort to King Wu Ding. Shang royalty were buried with a rich assortment of personal belongings, bronzes, and servants. Author: Chris Gyford Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

**Anyang**, we now know, served as the last capital of the Shang Dynasty, from 1200 to 1046 BCE. It was at the center of a loosely governed territorial state located on the North China Plain. Shang kings directly governed the capital and its vicinity, but likely controlled areas farther out by building confederations with locally powerful lineage chieftains, and regularly hunting, warring, and carrying out rituals with them. Some of those leaders were directly related to the Shang kings, and some were allies by marriage.

Map \(\PageIndex{4}\): Shang Dynasty Site at Anyang | This map shows features of the Shang Dynasty site at Anyang,
including the location of the palaces and temples of the last nine Shang kings. Yinxu is a Chinese term for Shang ruins. 

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The bones are the most important source for understanding this kingdom. Most of the two hundred thousand fragments found so far are either turtle plastrons or scapula from cows. Interestingly, these were used for divination, which is why they are called oracle bones (see Figure 4). When Shang kings or his diviners sought to know the future, they would proceed to a temple erected in honor of a Shang deity or the spirits of deceased ancestors in the royal line. Before a stone tablet, they would make a statement about what might happen (for example, “It will rain,” or “If we attack the Mafang [high god], Di will confer assistance on us”), and then apply heat to a hole bored into a bone until it cracked. The crack was viewed as the response from the god or spirit. The king would then determine whether or not it was auspicious, and a record would be inscribed on the bone, sometimes including the actual outcome (see Figure 5). From these, we know that Shang elites believed that a high god Di, nature gods, and the spirits of deceased kings controlled the future. That is why Shang kings had massive bronzes cast and carried out sacrifices for them. The bronzes were filled with food and placed at the temples, literally to feed the spirits. Likewise, the sacrificial pits show that a substantial shedding of blood for these higher powers was a regular occurrence. Shang elites worshipped their ancestors and frequently divined to determine their will.

Figure 4: Cache of oracle bones found at Anyang, China Author: Xuan Che Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0
Figure \(\PageIndex{5}\): An individual scapula showing the cracks made and Chinese characters inscribed during the divination process Author: Herr Klugbeisser Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0