5.2: The Shang Dynasty

Introduction to the Shang Dynasty

The Shang Dynasty existed in the Yellow River Valley during the second millennium BCE. It built huge cities, monopolized bronze, and developed writing, until it was overthrown by the Zhou.

Learning Objectives

Compare the Shang Dynasty with the earlier Xia Dynasty

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- The Shang Dynasty (also called the Yin Dynasty) succeeded the Xia Dynasty, and was followed by the Zhou Dynasty. It was located in the Yellow River valley, during the second millennium BCE.
- The Shang Dynasty is the first period of prehistoric China that has been conclusively proven to have existed by archaeological evidence, such as excavated graves and oracle bones, the oldest substantial evidence of Chinese writing.
- Writing during the Shang Dynasty was already in an advanced form, suggesting that the written language had already existed for a long time.
- Under the Shang Dynasty, the Chinese built huge cities with strong social class divisions, expanded irrigation systems, and monopolized the use of bronze.
- The Shang Dynasty was overthrown in 1046 BCE by the Zhou, who established their own dynasty.
Key Terms

- **Oracle bones**: Inscriptions of divination records on the bones or shells of animals, dating to the Shang Dynasty of ancient China.
- **Anyang**: A city from the Shang Dynasty, the excavation of which yielded large numbers of oracle bones. This helped prove the existence of the Shang Dynasty.
- **Zhengzhou**: The modern-day area where the new capital of Shang was established during the Shang Dynasty.
- **Xia Dynasty**: The first dynasty in traditional Chinese history.

The Shang Dynasty (also called the Yin Dynasty) succeeded the Xia Dynasty, and was followed by the Zhou Dynasty. It was located in the Yellow River valley during the second millennium BCE.

Map of Shang Dynasty: This map shows the location of the Shang Dynasty in the Yellow River valley.

Jie, the last king of the Xia Dynasty (the first Chinese dynasty), was overthrown c. 1760 BCE by Cheng Tang. It is estimated the Shang ruled from either 1766-1122 or 1556-1046 BCE.

While scholars still debate whether the Xia Dynasty actually existed, there is little doubt that the Shang Dynasty existed. The Shang Dynasty is, therefore, generally considered China’s first historical dynasty.

Under the Shang Dynasty, a unified sense of Chinese culture emerged. This culture would continue to thrive and evolve, and many modern Chinese still see the Shang culture as China’s dominant culture. Under the Shang Dynasty, the Chinese built huge cities with strong social class divisions, expanded irrigation systems, monopolized the use of bronze, and developed a system of writing. Shang kings were believed to fulfill sacred, not political, purposes. Instead, a council of chosen advisers administered various aspects of the government. The border territories of Shang rule were led by chieftains, who gained the right to govern through connections with royalty.

The Shang Dynasty was overthrown in 1046 BCE by the Zhou, a subject people living in the western part of the kingdom.
Archaeological Evidence

The Shang Dynasty is the oldest Chinese dynasty supported by archaeological finds. These have included 11 major Yin royal tombs and building sites of palaces and rituals, as well as weapons and remains of human and animal sacrifices, and artifacts, including bronze, jade, stone, bone, and ceramic.

The oldest surviving form of Chinese writing is inscriptions of divination records on the bones or shells of animals—so-called oracle bones. However, the writing on the oracle bones shows evidence of complex development, indicating that written language had existed for a long time. In fact, modern scholars are able to read it because the language was very similar to the modern Chinese writing system.

Archaeologists have also found ancient cities that correspond with the Shang Dynasty. When Cheng Tang overthrew the last king of the Xia Dynasty, he supposedly founded a new capital for his dynasty at a town called Shang, near modern-day Zhengzhou. Archaeological remains of this town may have been found—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.

Anyang, in modern-day Henan, is another important (but slightly later) Shang city that has been excavated. 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.

Society Under the Shang Dynasty

The Shang Dynasty was located in the Yellow River valley in China during the second millennium BCE. It was a society that followed a class system of land-owners, soldiers, bronze workers, and peasants.

Learning Objectives

Summarize the social class system during the Shang Dynasty

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- The Shang Dynasty (also called the Yin Dynasty) succeeded the Xia Dynasty, and was followed by the Zhou Dynasty. It was located in the Yellow River valley during the second millennium BCE. Citizens of the Shang Dynasty were classified into four social classes: the king and aristocracy, the military, artisans and craftsmen, and peasants.
- Members of the aristocracy were the most respected social class, and were responsible for governing smaller areas of the dynasty.
- Next in social status were the Shang military—both the infantry and the chariot warriors.
- The Shang “middle class” were artisans and craftsmen, who mainly worked with bronze.
- The poorest class in Shang society were the peasants, who were mostly farmers. Some scholars believe they functioned as slaves; others believe they were more like serfs.
Key Terms

- **aristocracy**: The nobility, or the hereditary ruling class.
- **artisans**: Skilled manual workers, who use tools and machinery in a particular craft.
- **peasants**: Members of the lowest social class, who toil on the land. This social class consisted of small farmers and tenants, sharecroppers, farmhands, and other laborers on the land, forming the main labor force in agriculture and horticulture.

The Shang Dynasty (also called the Yin Dynasty) succeeded the Xia Dynasty, and was followed by the Zhou Dynasty. It was located in the Yellow River valley during the second millennium BCE. It featured a stratified social system made up of aristocrats, soldiers, artisans and craftsmen, and peasants.

The Aristocracy and the Military

The aristocracy were centered around Anyang, the Shang capital, and conducted governmental affairs for the surrounding areas. Regional territories farther from the capital were also controlled by the wealthy.

The Shang military were next in social status, and who were respected and honored for their skill. There were two subdivisions of the military: the infantry (foot soldiers) and the chariot warriors. The latter were noted for their great skill in warfare and hunting. Archaeological evidence has supported the use of horses and other cavalry during the late Shang period, c. 1250 BCE.

Artisans and Craftsmen

Artisans and craftsmen comprised the middle class of Shang society. Their largest contribution was their work with bronze, which the Chinese developed as early as 1500 BCE. Their work with bronze was a very important aspect of
society. Bronze weapons and pottery were commonly made, but the most prominent creations included 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.

Houmuwu Ding: The “Houmuwu Ding” is the heaviest piece of bronze work found in China so far.

Peasants

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. 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. Peasants were governed directly by local aristocrats.

Shang Religion

Shang religion was characterized by a combination of animism, shamanism, spiritual control of the world, divination, and respect and worship of dead ancestors, including through sacrifices.
Learning Objectives

Explain the religious foundation of Shang Dynasty culture

Key Points

- The Shang believed in spiritual control of the world by various gods. They also practiced ancestor worship. They appealed to the gods, including the supreme god Shangdi, and consulted their ancestors through oracle bones.
- The Shang established a lunar calendar using 29-day months, and 12-month years.
- There appears to have been a belief in the afterlife during the Shang Dynasty, evidenced by human and animal bodies and artifacts found in tombs.

Key Terms

- **animism**: The belief that spirits inhabit some or all classes of natural objects or phenomena, and that an immaterial force animates the universe.
- **shamanism**: A shaman is a person who is seen to have access to and influence in the world of spirits, and who typically enters a trance state during rituals, and practices divination and healing.
- **oracle bones**: Inscriptions of divination records on the bones or shells of animals, dating to the Shang Dynasty of ancient China.
- **divination**: The practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means.

Shang Religion

Shang religion was characterized by a combination of animism, shamanism, spiritual control of the world, divination, and respect and worship of dead ancestors, including through sacrifice. Different gods represented natural and mythological symbols, such as the moon, sun, wind, rain, dragon, and 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, so they would also 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.
Shangdi: One depiction of Shangdi, the Supreme Being who ruled over humanity and nature.

Oracle Bones and Divination

The oldest surviving form of Chinese writing is inscriptions of divination records on the bones or shells of animals—so-called oracle bones. Oracle bones were pieces of bone or turtle shell 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.

Questions were 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. Many of the oracle bones ask questions about war, harvests, and childbirth.
Oracle Bone: This oracle bone from the Shang Dynasty dates to the reign of King Wu Ding.

The Afterlife

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 seen to protect against decay and give immortality. Archaeologists believed 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, so aristocrats' servants would be killed and buried with them when they died. Another interpretation is that these were enemy warriors captured in battle.
The Lunar Calendar

The Shang also established a lunar calendar that was used to predict and record events, such as harvests, births, and deaths (of rulers and peasants alike). The system assumed a 29-day month that began and ended with each new moon; twelve lunar months comprised one lunar year. Priests and astronomers were trained to recalculate the lunar year and add enough days so that each year lasted 365 days. Because the calendar was used to time both crop planting and the harvest, the king had to employ skilled astronomers to predict dates (and successes) of annual harvests; this would help him maintain support from the people.

Advancements Under the Shang

During the Shang Dynasty, bronze casting became more sophisticated. Military technology also advanced as horses were domesticated and chariots came into existence.

Learning Objectives

Describe some of the technical advancements made under the Shang Dynasty

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Bronze casting was perhaps the most important technology during the Shang Dynasty. The Shang made many objects out of bronze, including ceremonial tools, swords, and spearheads for the military.
- The Shang also domesticated horses and developed the chariot, which gave them a massive military advantage over their opponents.
- With these technologies, the Shang military expanded the kingdom's borders significantly.

The Burial Pit at the Tomb of Lady Fu Hao: This tomb is located in the ruins of the ancient Shang Dynasty capital, Yin.
Key Terms

- **chariot**: A two-wheeled, horse-drawn vehicle used in ancient warfare and racing.
- **Oracle bone**: Pieces of ox scapula or turtle plastron, used for divination in ancient China.

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**Shang Bronze Technology**

The Shang ruled China during its Bronze Age; perhaps the most important technology at the time was bronze casting. The Shang cast bronze objects by creating molds out of clay, carving a design into the clay, and then pouring molten bronze into the mold. They allowed the bronze to cool and then broke the clay off, revealing a completed bronze object.

![Shang Dynasty Bronze](https://human.libretexts.org/Under_Construction/History-Boundless-1581241200.epub/05%3A_Early_Chinese_Dynasties/05.…)

**Shang Dynasty Bronze**: This bronze ding vessel dates to the Shang Dynasty.

The upper classes had the most access to bronze, and they used it for ceremonial objects, and to make offerings to ancestors. Bronze objects were also buried in the tombs of Shang elite. The Shang government used bronze for military weapons, such as swords and spearheads. These weapons gave them a distinct advantage over their enemies.

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**Shang Military Technology**

The chariot was military technology that allowed the Shang to excel at war. Under the Shang, the Chinese domesticated...
the horse. Horses of that time were still too small to ride, but the Chinese gradually developed the chariot, which harnessed the horse's power. The chariot was a devastating weapon in battle, and it also allowed Shang soldiers to move vast distances at great speeds. A chariot burial site at Anyang (modern-day Henan) dates to the rule of King Wu Ding of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1200 BCE). 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.

These military technologies were important, because the Shang were constantly at war. A significant number of Shang oracle bones were concerned with battle. The Shang armies expanded the borders of the kingdom and captured precious resources and prisoners of war, who could be enslaved or used as human sacrifice. 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.

![Shang Dynasty Bronze Battle Axe](https://human.libretexts.org/Under_Construction/History-Boundless-1581241200.epub/05%3A_Early_Chinese_Dynasties/05.01_The_Bronze_Age/5.02_Carving_Horses/5.02_Carving_Horses_Axe/image1.png)

**Shang Dynasty Bronze Battle Axe:** This bronze axe is an example of Shang bronze work.

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