

Chapter 20

The Shang Dynasty

EQ: What do Shang artifacts reveal about this Civilization?

1. Introduction

In ancient times, most of China's early farmers settled on the North China Plain, near the Huang He (Yellow River). In this chapter, you will explore one of China's earliest dynasties, the Shang (shung) dynasty. This dynasty ruled the area centered in the Huang He valley, from 1700 to 1122 B.C.E.

Parts of ancient China were controlled by different clans, or extended families. Rival clans frequently fought each other. Sometimes, one clan became powerful enough to rule all of ancient China and begin a dynasty. The Shang was one example of such clans.

For hundreds of years, the Shang dynasty was considered a legend by Western scholars. Stories about some mysterious markings on animal bones hinted that the Shang might have been the first Chinese to use a system of writing. But still archaeologists had no solid evidence that the ancient culture had ever existed.

Then, in 1899, a Chinese scholar found some bones that had writing on them. He thought that they might be Shang oracle bones. Oracle bones are animal bones and turtle shells with inscriptions carved by engravers. In ancient times, many people believed that these objects could tell the future. Later, in the 1920s, the ruins of a Shang city were found at Anyang (ahn-yahng). Archaeologists unearthed many artifacts from these ruins. You will learn what these artifacts reveal about Shang civilization



2. A Shang Capital City



When archaeologists began excavating the ruins at **Anyang** in 1928, a great deal was learned about the Shang culture. These ruins were the remains of one of the royal cities of the **Shang dynasty**. The city included a palace, a temple, and houses. There were also workshops for artisans who created objects made of metals, pottery, stone, and jade. The king's palace sat on a platform. The palace was built of mud-plastered walls held up by wooden posts. Beneath its foundations, archaeologists found human bones. The bones suggest that the Shang performed human sacrifices when they constructed a new royal house.

Human sacrifices were also part of Shang burials. While excavating at Anyang, archaeologists found at least nine royal tombs. Each tomb had a large pit with ramps leading down to it from the north and south. When a king was buried, slaves, servants, and animals were led down the ramps into the pit. There, they were sacrificed as part of the Shang belief that the king must continue to be served in the afterlife.

This belief in life after death is likely the reason that metal vessels and containers of food were also buried with or near Shang kings. The treasures found in royal tombs include many weapons, carved jade ornaments, bone carvings, pieces of pottery, stone sculptures, and even chariots.

The artifacts unearthed at Anyang reveal some interesting facts about Shang beliefs and ways of life. Let's find out what conclusions scholars have drawn about this ancient civilization, beginning with the Shang government.

3. Shang Government

The Shang government was led by a powerful king. To extend his power, a king set up smaller kingdoms led by his younger brothers and nephews. When a king died, his power was often preserved by passing it to a younger brother or to a son.

Shang kings depended on strong armies to maintain their rule and to defend and **expand** their kingdoms. The kings took part in almost constant warfare with their enemies and fought to keep other **clans** under control. Prisoners of war were used as laborers and in human sacrifices.



The king's armies were especially powerful because Shang nobles had weapons made of **bronze**. The Shang were among the first civilizations in the world to discover how to make bronze from a mixture of copper and tin.



Shang armies were made up of large numbers of foot soldiers, archers, men mounted on horses and elephants, and fighters in chariots. The chariots were two-wheeled carts drawn by horses. Three soldiers rode in each chariot. The driver stood in the middle, with a spear carrier to his left and an archer to his right. Shang armies must have been a terrifying sight to their enemies.

4. Shang Social Classes

Shang society can be divided into six social classes. The king and his relatives were in the highest class. Below them were the nobles, artisans, traders, farmers, and slaves.

Nobles After the ruling family, the nobles made up the highest-ranking social class. Nobles fought in the king's armies. They also supplied the armies with weapons, foot soldiers, and chariots. In exchange for their **military** help, the king was unlikely to interfere with the nobles' control over the land.

Shang nobles enjoyed a life of luxury. They lived in great palaces and spent time hunting. We know that the Shang were great hunters, because large numbers of wild animal bones have been found at excavation sites. In addition, writings on oracle bones show that the king invited nobles to join him in hunting foxes, badgers, and other wild animals.

The king often gave nobles symbols of power, such as jade discs. The discs might be decorated with a “lucky” creature such as a dragon or tiger. Nobles often mounted the discs on posts in their homes.



Artisans This talented group formed a small social class that included potters, stonemasons, and workers crafting items of bronze and jade. These skilled workers had lower status than nobles but higher status than farmers. Artisans skilled in bronze were especially valued. They made the weapons used by Shang warriors. They also made and decorated containers for the king and his nobles to use in religious ceremonies, or simply

as symbols of their wealth.

Traders Like artisans, those who were traders ranked below nobles but above farmers in Shang society. Scholars believe that the Shang traded extensively. One clue comes from the modern Chinese word for “merchant,” *shang ren*, which could also mean “Shang man.” During the Shang dynasty, people mostly exchanged goods.

The Shang also used cowrie shells, a type of seashell, as money. The shells were valuable because they came from far away. The Shang people had to trade with neighboring regions to get them.

Farmers Farmers made up the largest social class in Shang society. They worked small plots of land, growing millet, wheat, barley, rice, fruit, vegetables, and nuts. They did not own the land they farmed. The land was under the control of either the king or the nobles. Farmers gave most of their harvest to the nobles, who sent a portion to the king. Farmers could keep only enough food to feed themselves and their families. Even after the Chinese became highly skilled at making bronze and iron weapons, many farmers continued to use simple tools made of wood and stone. They dug with wooden sticks, weeded with stone-tipped hoes, and harvested grain with stone knives and scythes.

Besides growing crops, farmers learned to raise cattle. They may also have raised pigs and chickens.

Slaves At the very bottom of Shang society were slaves. Many of these slaves were prisoners of war. They spent their lives building tombs and palaces. When their masters died, the slaves were sometimes sacrificed, in keeping with the Shang belief that slaves should continue to serve their masters in the afterlife.



5. Shang Religion



Shang religion centered on **ancestor worship**. The treasures buried in kings' tombs show that the Shang believed in a life after death. They also believed that dead ancestors had the power to help or harm the living. For this reason, the Shang honored their ancestors. As signs of respect, worshippers gave offerings of food, and sometimes made human sacrifices.

The Shang believed that their king's relationship to ancestral spirits had special significance. The king

inherited the right to rule from his ancestors. And among the king's responsibilities was a duty to follow the wishes of his ancestors.

Kings used **oracle bones** to seek their ancestors' advice on important matters such as when to hunt, where to build cities, and whether to go to war. The oracle bones were made from turtle shells or the shoulder blade of a cow. To ask a question, a holy man would make a statement such as this: "Tomorrow is a good day for the hunt." Then he would press a hot needle against the back of the bone. The heat would make the bone crack. The pattern of the crack was believed to be a message, which the holy man or king would translate. The holy man might then carve the message on the oracle bone. Today, these inscriptions reveal valuable information about life during the Shang dynasty.

6. Shang Writing

The inscriptions on oracle bones are among the earliest known examples of Chinese writing. In Shang writing, as in modern Chinese, characters stand for words rather than sounds. Early Chinese writing contained only pictographs, images that stand for objects. By the Shang dynasty period, people were also using logographs, characters that stand for words. For example, the character for "good" is a combination of the characters for "woman" and "child."

Having a written language helped unify the Chinese people. Although spoken language varied from place to place, people of the upper classes used the same written language.

7. Shang Art

Shang artists showed great skill in working with bronze. Shang artisans made beautiful vessels and other objects. Some bronze vessels had geometric **designs** and pictures of mythical creatures. The most common picture was an animal mask, later known as a taotie. It might have the horns of an ox, the ears of an elephant, the talons of a bird, the eye of a man, and the crest of a dragon. Some scholars say that these masks were symbols of all the beings in the world.

The Shang also produced remarkable jade pieces. Jade is a very hard stone. Workers made jade objects by sawing, filing, and sanding the stone.

The Chinese may have believed that the qualities of jade represented the qualities of a superior person. The hardness of jade stood for wisdom. Jade was also smooth and shiny. These qualities stood for kindness.



8. Shang Technology

Working with bronze was an important technology for the Shang. Artisans used bronze to make many tools of war. These included arrowheads, spearheads, ax heads, and helmets. The bronze making skill of the Shang is one of the reasons they were able to remain in power for more than five hundred years.



9. The End of the Shang Dynasty

The Shang excelled in war, enabling the ruling classes to build up great wealth. But, in time, these very strengths helped to bring about the end of the dynasty. Constant warfare eventually weakened the military power of the Shang.

The Shang had a system of money, using valuable cowrie shells that they received as part of their extensive trade with neighbors. The Shang king and his nobles spent extravagant amounts of money on their palaces, furnishings, clothing, and even their tombs. Over time, this lavish spending may have weakened the economy. A later king would say that the final blow was the corruption of the last Shang king. Rather than look after his people, he spent all his time on recreational activities like hunting. But no one knows whether this report was true.

Around 1045 B.C.E., a frontier state called Zhou (joh) rose up against the dynasty. Zhou armies under King Wu caught the Shang unaware, defeating and overthrowing them. One story says that, as Zhou rebels stormed his capital city, the last Shang king ran from the battlefield, put on all his jewelry, and threw himself into the flames of a fire.