



The Shang Dynasty, 1600 to 1050 BCE

The Shang Dynasty marked the middle of China's Bronze Age and was a dynasty that made great contributions to Chinese civilization. Scholars do not fully agree on the dates and details of the earliest Chinese dynasties, but most accept that the Shang Dynasty is the first one to have left behind written records and solid archaeological evidence of its existence. The Shang is the second dynasty of the Three Dynasties Period. Legends speak of the earlier Xia dynasty, but no written records from that time have been found to confirm this. Even though texts written later than the Shang Dynasty mention the Xia Dynasty, Western scholars argue that they are not enough to prove it truly existed. Therefore, most Western scholars regard the legendary Xia as an early civilization that existed between the Neolithic and Shang cultures. But many Chinese scholars firmly believe that the Xia did indeed exist even if written records have never been found.

Because the Three Dynasties' civilization occupied the Yellow River valley, this geographic area is often called the birthplace or cradle of Chinese civilization. While this is true in some regard, one must keep in mind that the Shang was but one of several contemporary civilizations in China.¹ It may have been the only one with written records, but that does not mean it was the only one in existence. More recently discovered archaeological sites far away from the Yellow River valley reveal distinctly different cultures from the Shang, and scholars are now trying to determine how much these cultures influenced each other.

Oracle Bones

Before the discovery of the Shang oracle bones and the interpretation of their inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, scholars had no firm proof that the Shang Dynasty existed. Up to that point, Shang history had been based heavily on historical accounts written long after the Shang period ended. Shang bronze inscriptions were usually very short. With so little information, scholars questioned whether the dynasty even existed. The information and details inscribed onto oracle bones matched what was recorded in texts written centuries later, thereby providing the evidence scholars needed. The oracle bone inscriptions and the bronze inscriptions mark the beginning of written Chinese history.

The king or professional diviners hired by the king used oracle bones to make predictions about the future or to answer questions such as, "Will the king have a son?", "Will it rain tomorrow?", "If we send 3,000 men into battle, will we succeed?", or even "Is the long drought caused by ancestor X?"² The scribe carved the

question onto a bone (most often the shoulder bones of water buffalo or other cattle) or a tortoise plastron.³ On the other side of the bone or plastron he would carve a number of small pits. He then inserted a hot metal rod into these pits until the bone cracked; and the king or diviner interpreted the cracks. Then, on the other side of the bone, the scribe carved the answer and the eventual outcome.

By analyzing oracle bone inscriptions, other artifacts, and archaeological sites such as tombs and ancient cities, scholars have been able to piece together many details of Shang civilization. They have confirmed the names of its kings, its style of government, its military history, its religious beliefs and rituals, and its society.

The Kingdom

According to legend, the Shang Dynasty was founded sometime around 1600 BCE by a virtuous man named Cheng Tang, who overthrew the evil king of the legendary Xia. The Shang Dynasty was a monarchy governed by a series of kings, 29 or 30 in total, over the course of almost 600 years.⁴ The king was served by officials who held specialized positions of authority and function; and the officials belonged to a hereditary class of aristocrats, usually related to the king himself.⁵

While the king lived in and ruled from a capital city, it wasn't always the same city. Although historical records mention many different Shang capitals, only a few have actually been confirmed with archaeological evidence. No one knows exactly why a king would move the capital but some scholars think it had to do with internal power struggles within the royal family.

Cheng Tang is said to have established the dynasty's first capital at a town called Shang (near modern-day Zhengzhou), but later kings moved the capital many more times, the last being a place called Yin (near modern-day Anyang). Archaeological evidence suggests that the town of Shang was the ancestral capital of the dynasty that remained in a fixed location throughout the dynasty. It was where the Shang kings kept their most sacred ancestral temples, tablets, and regalia. The political capital was where the kings lived and ruled from. While the political capital moved many times during the dynasty, the ancestral capital never moved.⁶

The core of the dynasty was located in the northern part of modern-day Henan province, in a triangular area between the cities of Anyang, Luoyang, and Zhengzhou, the latter two of which are on the Yellow River. In addition to uncovering the remains of several Shang cities, archaeologists have found huge tombs of many Shang kings and their families. Even though the dynasty was centered in this

area, its culture reached places much farther away.

As the oracle bones and other artifacts and records revealed, the Shang kings were constantly at war with outsiders near and far. Many of the oracle bones bore questions related to battles, such as the outcome of a future battle or how many men to send into battle. The king sent out armies of as many as 13,000 men to fight battles on behalf of the kingdom. Victorious armies brought back prisoners of war—as many as 30,000 at a time—who either became laborers or ritual sacrifices.⁷ The armies also helped gain new territories and bring back precious resources for the kingdom.

Religion

The Shang worshipped the “Shang Di,” who was the supreme god that ruled over the lesser gods of the sun, the moon, the wind, the rain, and other natural forces and places.⁸ They also worshipped their ancestors because they believed that although their ancestors lived in heaven after their death, they were still actively involved in the affairs of family and descendants. The kings communicated with their ancestors using oracle bones and made frequent sacrifices to them. As in many other societies, they sacrificed animals to royal ancestors and to various nature gods, using sacrifices to ask the ancestors or gods for help and to feed the ancestors or gods to keep them strong.⁹ They believed that if they failed to properly worship their ancestors, their family and the kingdom would experience many disasters.

Because the Shang believed in the afterlife and ancestor worship, they thought very seriously about burial and what was to accompany the deceased to his or her grave. The vast and elaborate tombs of the Shang royal family are signs of their strong beliefs. Among the many treasures buried in important people’s tombs were the remains of many other people. Some were nameless individuals who had been captured during battle and used as human sacrifices at burials. Others were relatives or lower-ranking dependents of the deceased. This practice of burying lower-ranking people reflected the Shang’s belief that those related to a king or lord by blood or service in life were expected to continue that relationship in death.¹¹

Shang Contributions to Chinese Civilization

The Shang made many contributions to Chinese civilization, but four in particular define the dynasty: the invention of writing; the development of a stratified government; the advancement of bronze technology; and the use of the chariot and bronze weapons in warfare.

The Invention of Writing

The oracle bone inscriptions are the oldest known form of Chinese writing. By comparing and equating the inscriptions to modern Chinese characters, scholars have shown that the Shang had already developed all the principles of the modern writing

system used today. In fact, Chinese writing has undergone relatively few changes since it was first developed 3,500 years ago.

Since Shang documents were originally recorded on strips of bamboo and silk that have long since decomposed, the oracle bones and bronze inscriptions bear the only written history from the Shang era. Since Shang bronze inscriptions were very short and did not say much, most of what is known about the Shang Dynasty is from the oracle bones. Toward the end of the Shang, writing was also inscribed on bronze objects.

A Stratified Government and Society

The Shang political system was organized into a hierarchy, meaning that it had many levels of rank and many specialized functions and jobs, all passed down within a noble family. Shang society was also hierarchical with many different levels of social rank.

The invention of writing had a profound effect on Shang government and its ability to rule. It increased the government’s ability to organize on a large scale, whether it be to oversee a hierarchical administration; rule the state’s many territories; organize the mining of large quantities of ore for bronzework; wage large military campaigns; construct city walls and palaces; or build elaborate tombs for themselves.

Bronze Technology

The Shang Dynasty existed during China’s bronze age. At that time, bronze represented power, wealth, and luxury. By looking at the way bronze was used by the Shang, it is clear that only those with any degree of power in the kingdom had access to using bronze objects. Shang bronzes fall into two categories: weapons or ceremonial vessels for food and wine. By far, most of the pieces are ceremonial vessels and speak of a society and culture that valued rituals, such as rituals for burial, celebration, and worshipping gods and ancestors. Bronze was not used for common tools, such as hammers or hoes.

Archaeologists have dug up thousands of Shang bronze pieces, ranging from small objects to huge food and wine vessels weighing as much as 2,000 pounds. The artistry and workmanship of the bronze pieces reveal the Shang’s mastery of bronze technology. The Shang perfected a technique known as piece-mold casting, a complicated process that involved creating a mold out of clay; carving a design into it; pouring molten bronze into the mold; cracking the mold away; and adding handles as a final step. The actual shape, design, and decoration of ritual vessels changed over time according to changing importance of rituals and belief systems.

The Use of the Chariot and Bronze Weapons in Warfare

The advancement of bronze technology and the use of bronze weapons gave the Shang military great advantage over their enemies and completely changed the way they fought wars. They used newly-developed weapons like the bronze-tipped halberd and

spear, the compound bow; and most importantly, they used horse-drawn chariots. The chariot, which had most likely been introduced from western Asia, completely changed the way battles were fought. Chariots allowed commanders to supervise their troops efficiently and across great distances. They also gave soldiers a significant edge over their opponents by making them highly mobile and fast. Since war was central to life during the Shang Dynasty, these developments in weapons were very important in allowing the Shang to maintain its military supremacy.

The End of the Shang

The Shang Dynasty ended in about 1050 BCE, when conquerors from the state of Zhou invaded the capital and successfully toppled the Shang Dynasty. The Zhou conquerors claimed to overthrow the Shang Dynasty for moral reasons. They said that the Shang king was evil and that heaven no longer wanted him to rule. They blamed the Shang's downfall on its king's excessive drinking, indulgent lifestyle, and immoral behavior. The downfall remained a cautionary tale to kings and emperors for years to come.

Notes

1 Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, editors, *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14.

2 Charles O. Hucker, *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), 29.

3 David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 6.

4 Kwang-Chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 6; David N. Keightley, "The Shang: China's First Historical Dynasty," in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, edited by Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 232.

5 Hucker, 30.

6 Chang, 212.

7 Chang, 194.

8 Richard Hooker, "Ancient China: The Shang" (1996), <<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/ANCCCHINA/SHANG.HTM>>, 1.

9 Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History: China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 25.

10 Ebrey, 25.

11 Keightley, "The Shang: China's First Historical Dynasty," 286.