



Ancient Agrarian Societies: Shang Dynasty China

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

The Shang Dynasty was the second dynasty of Ancient China. But it's the first dynasty that has existing archaeological records. The Shang has left an impact on Chinese society for thousands of years.

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Introduction

China has a long history stretching back more than 4,000 years. Before the rise of cities, small farming communities sprang up. The earliest were founded along the Yellow River in the north of China. The river provided fresh water for drinking, transportation, and growing crops.

Much of this area was controlled by Chinese dynasties. A dynasty is a succession of rulers that pass their right to rule down through their family line. Dynasties can last for hundreds of years.

Shang dynasty

Historians believe the Shang were China's first dynasty. The Shang ruled from 1600 BCE to 1046 BCE. There is archaeological evidence for this period. This includes Chinese histories written from the fifth to first century BCE. Artifacts have been found dating back to the Shang Dynasty.¹

Like most early farming societies, Shang society was divided into different classes of people. Rulers and the rich had the highest social position. Under them came soldiers and government workers. Next came craftspeople and other skilled workers. The lowest level was made up of peasants, who were usually farmers. Some peasants acted as servants.

Some servants might have been slaves. At times, servants were buried alongside the rich. They were killed when their master died so they could serve their master in the afterlife.



[Outline map of the Shang Dynasty's boundaries.](#) By Lamassu Design Gurdjieff, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Writing and spiritual beliefs

The Chinese believed that the gods had given their kings the right to rule. Kings made laws and commanded the army. They also communicated with spirits. These spirit beings provided answers to many kinds of questions.

The Chinese of the Shang period were animists. They believed that objects, animals, and places have spirits. They also believed deeply in honoring their ancestors. When someone in a family died, they became a part of the spirit world. The living often called upon their ancestors for help.

People communicated with their ancestors through the use of oracle bones. First, they would meet with a diviner. A diviner was someone who could communicate with spirits. A person's question was written or scratched onto a bone by the diviner. The bone was then heated until it cracked. The diviner would read the cracks and provide the person with an answer to their question.

¹ Historical sources include *The Book of Documents*, *The Bamboo Annals*, and *The Records of the Grand Historian*. Archaeologists have made discoveries at many locations. The Tomb of Lady Fu Hao was found at Anyang. It was the most undamaged tomb to be found.

Thousands of oracle bones have been dug up across China. They provide an amazing amount of information about early Chinese culture. The questions, the people who asked the questions, and the answers are all recorded on the bones. The positions people held in society are described. All of this shows us a great deal about how people lived. It also shows us what people cared about.

Cities, trade, and culture

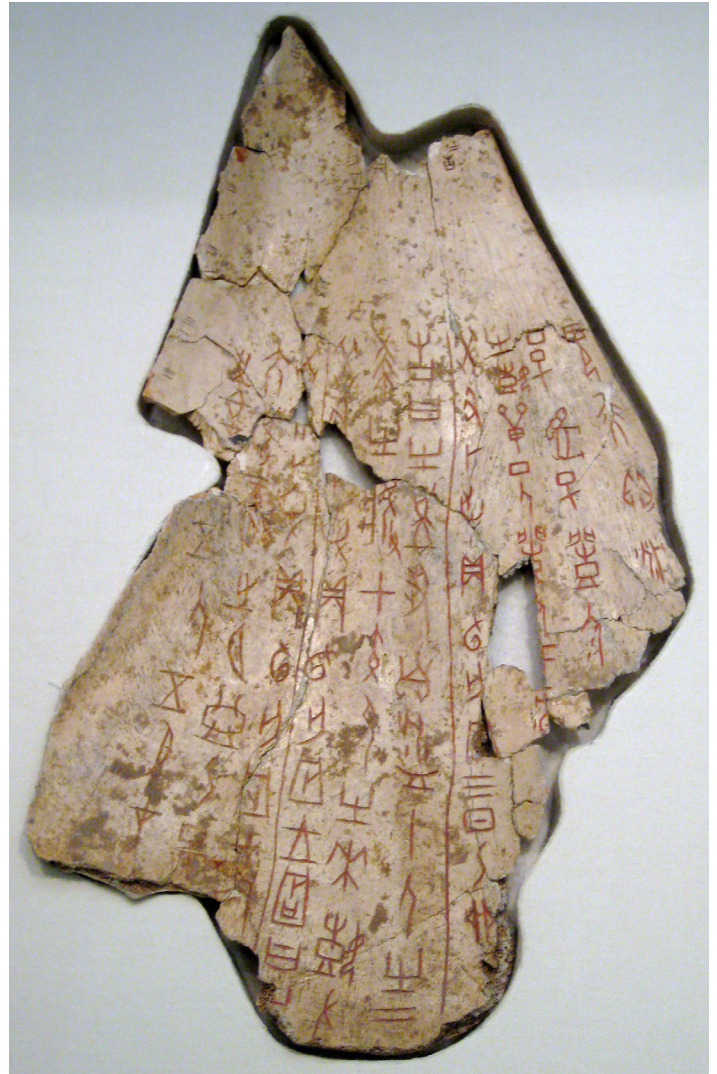
The Shang kings founded many cities. Some were walled to protect against invasions. The city of Erligang had walls that were about 32 feet high and 65 feet thick. These walls protected an area of about 1.2 square miles.

The Shang period is also known for bronze casting. Bronze was used to make weapons, farm tools, and many other objects. Stone, bone, and jade were also widely used. These artifacts also help historians learn about trade in the Shang dynasty. Cowry shells indicate trade with coastal regions. Chariots indicate interactions with people from the steppe, who were knowledgeable about horses and chariots. It is also likely that other communities wanted to trade with the Shang for their bronze and silk.

The Chinese strongly believed in the afterlife. Because of this, tools, weapons, and many other things were placed in the tombs of the rich and powerful. They were meant to aid those who had crossed over to the spirit world.

In 1976, archaeologists found a major Shang tomb in the city of Anyang. The tomb was the final resting place of Lady Fu Hao (c. 1250 BCE). Lady Fu Hao was one of the many wives of the Shang king Wu Ding. She was buried with 16 servants and six dogs. There were also thousands of objects in her tomb. They included about 130 weapons.

Oracle bones tell us a lot about Lady Fu Hao's life. She was an army general, who led her own troops into battle. She was also a spiritual guide. She performed sacred sacrifices and asked ancestors for aid. It was very unusual for women of her time to hold such a high position.



Oracle bone (ox scapula) from the reign of King Wu Ding (late Shang), c. 1200 BCE, National Museum of China. By BabelStone, CC BY-SA 3.0.



[*Statue of Fu Hao at Yinxu*](#), By Chris Gyford. CC BY 2.5.

From the Shang to the Zhou dynasty

The Shang dynasty ruled much of East Asia for more than 500 years. In 1046 BCE, they fell to the Zhou. The Zhou were a powerful family group from eastern China. King Wu of the Zhou claimed that the Shang king had lost his morals. As a result, the Shang king lost the Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming*). This meant the king was no longer fit to rule.

The Zhou became the longest-ruling dynasty in Chinese history. It controlled a large part of China for almost 800 years.

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