



Ancient Agrarian Societies: Shang Dynasty China

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Traditionally, the Shang Dynasty is viewed as the second dynasty of Ancient China. But it's the first dynasty for which we have archaeological records. Its characteristics make it unique and the basis for Chinese society for thousands of years.

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Introduction

Chinese society has a long history stretching back more than 4,000 years. Early Chinese farming communities almost always grew up along river valleys. The earliest were founded along the Huang He River (Yellow River) in the north. Here people could access fresh water for drinking, bathing, irrigating crops, transportation, and for fertile soil. Chinese dynasties—rulers that passed their right to rule down through their family line—controlled much of this area.

Shang dynasty

The first dynasty mentioned in Chinese historical sources is the Xia. They are said to have ruled from about 2070 BCE to 1600 BCE. However, there is no archaeological evidence pointing to the existence of this dynasty. So, most historians refer to the Shang as China's first dynasty.¹ The Shang ruled from 1600 BCE to 1046 BCE.

The farming society that developed under the Shang dynasty grew a variety of grains and crops. Rice was grown, but nowhere near as much as in the south. Shang society, like most early farming societies, was divided into different classes of people. Rulers and the wealthy had the highest social position, followed by the military and government officials. Next came skilled workers such as craftspeople and finally the peasants, who were usually farmers. There is evidence that some peasants who acted as servants might have been slaves. At times, servants were buried alongside the wealthy. Historians suspect these people were slaves who were tied to or owned by the wealthy and powerful.



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 military. They even performed sacred rites such as communicating with spirits.

Most of the evidence for these communications with the spirit world comes from the thousands of oracle bones found by archaeologists. The Chinese believed in a mixture of animism—the belief that objects, places, and creatures have spirits—and other spiritual practices, including honoring ancestors. When a family member died, they became a part of the spirit world. The living often called upon their ancestors for help and advice. One way people communicated with their ancestors was through the use of oracle bones. Questions were written or scratched onto a bone by a diviner, someone who could communicate with the spirits. The bone was then heated until it cracked. The diviner would read the cracks and provide the person with an answer to their question. Toward the end of the Shang dynasty, the king became the main diviner, which further strengthened his two-sided role as both a state and a spiritual leader.

¹ Historical sources include *The Book of Documents*, *The Bamboo Annals*, and *The Records of the Grand Historian*. Archaeological evidence has been found in locations. At Yinxi (modern-day Anyang), the most undamaged tomb was found (The Tomb of Lady Fu Hao).

Surviving oracle bones provide an amazing amount of information about early Chinese culture. The questions, the people who asked the questions, and the answers are all engraved on the bones. The bones also provide us with a record of early Chinese writing. Shang-era script, composed of symbols called pictograms, closely resembles modern Chinese writing.

Cities, trade, and culture

The Shang kings founded many cities throughout the region. Some were walled in order to protect the citizens from outside invasions. The city of Erligang (modern-day Zhengzhou) had walls that were about 32 feet high and 65 feet thick. These walls protected an area of around 1.2 square miles.

The Shang period is also known for bronze casting and the creation of bronze tools, weapons, and crafts. While bronze was used to make weapons and farm tools, implements made from stone, bone, and jade were also widely used. Most craftwork would have been done in the home. As cities grew, however, early workshops were founded.

The tombs of the wealthy and powerful contained a wide range of items. This suggests that the Shang strongly believed in the afterlife. Tools, weapons, instruments, and beauty accessories were placed within the tomb to aid those who crossed over to the spirit world. Some of these tombs contained things like cowry shells, which indicates that trade took place between the Shang and coastal regions. The Shang community also used bronze-wheeled chariots. This indicates that the Shang interacted with the steppe people to the west, who were skilled in using horses and chariots. The Shang were accomplished in bronze making and early silk textile production. These goods would have been sought after by other communities in the region. East Asian networks of exchange, therefore, extended beyond the areas controlled by the Shang to encompass nearby farming and pastoralist areas.

In 1976, archaeologists found a completely preserved tomb in the Shang city of Yinxi (modern-day Anyang). The tomb was the final resting place of Lady Fu Hao. It revealed a lot of information about life for upper-class women during the Shang dynasty. Lady Fu Hao (c. 1250 BCE) was one of the many wives of King Wu Ding. Her tomb housed her body and the bodies of 16 servants and six dogs. In addition, there were almost 500 bronze pieces, including 130 weapons. Her tomb also held more than 700 jade items, stone objects, five ivory pieces, more than 500 bone ornaments, and 6,900 cowry shells.



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

Shang-era oracle bones tell us a lot about Lady Fu Hao's life. She was mentioned on close to 200 bones. The inscriptions reveal that she was a military general who led her own troops into battle. This is supported by the large number of bronze weapons found in her tomb. She was also seen as a spiritual guide who could perform sacred sacrifices and ask ancestors for aid. This type of power and privilege was unusual for women of the time.

From the Shang to the Zhou dynasty

The Shang dynasty ruled a large section of East Asia for more than 500 years. Eventually, they were challenged by the Zhou, another powerful group located in the plains of eastern China. The Zhou overthrew the last Shang king at the Battle of Muye in 1046 BCE. King Wu of the Zhou claimed the Shang king had lost the Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming*). This meant that the ruler had lost his virtue or morality and as a result, he no longer had the right to rule. Wu declared that the Shang king had lost his God-given right to rule.

The Zhou firmly established its base in the eastern portion of the Yellow River Valley. Over time they gained control over more territory to the west. In fact, the Zhou became the longest-ruling dynasty in Chinese history. It controlled a large part of modern-day China for almost 800 years.



Statue of Fu Hao at YinXu, By Chris Gyford. CC BY 2.5.

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