

The Shang Dynasty

Establishment of the Shang Dynasty

- The Shang Dynasty was established when *Cheng Tang* overthrew *Jie* – the last ruler of the Xia in 1675 BCE. The Shang would rule for over 600 years – until they themselves were overthrown by the Zhou in 1046 BCE.
- The Shang Dynasty was located primarily in the Yellow River valley – not far from where the excavated palaces attributed to the Xia were found.
- The Shang were a warlike clan. They used horse drawn chariots and were able to conquer with their superior weapons. These weapons and chariots were very similar to those used by Indo-Europeans in their migrations at the time. There is good evidence that the Shang had contact with, and borrowed the technology of, the Indo-Europeans.



Accomplishments of the Shang

- The Shang gave China its first written script of rudimentary characters. (The characters would change and mature over time.) The characters did not stand for sounds, but ideas. Thus people throughout China could learn to *read* Chinese script even if they *spoke* different languages. (The same way that $2 + 2 = 4$ is comprehensible throughout the world, regardless of what language is *spoken*.) This helped to unify China.
- The Shang are also known for their very detailed jade carvings and bronze work. Thousands of artifacts have been found including bells, urns, axe heads, pots and jewelry. The quality and detail in the carvings and the bronze molds is incredible!



Shang Culture

- The Shang engaged in the worship of *Shangdi* – the supreme deity. Shangdi ruled over all other gods (which controlled nature), and over the spirits of the deceased. It was believed Shangdi determined the success (or failure) of battles, of harvests, the flooding of the Yellow River, and the health of the kingdom.
- Shangdi could not be accessed directly through public worship or sacrifice, only Shang kings could gain access through the souls of their dead ancestors. It was believed that the souls of Shang kings would join Shangdi in the afterlife. Thus Shang kings often led ceremonies and offered sacrifices (sometimes human) to Shangdi.
- The Chinese character for “king” represents the king’s role as intermediary between earth and heaven. Three horizontal lines are connected with a single vertical line indicating communication between heaven and earth flowed through the king.
- Shang kings also sought the advice of Shangdi on many problems using *oracle bones*. Questions were written on bones (often flat shoulder blades) or tortoise shells. The bones were then heated until they cracked. Answers came from interpretation of the cracks.



Social Structure

- The King ruled Shang society, and the warrior class made up governing officials. They also were the primary landowners. There seemed to be a small middle class of merchants and artisans, with peasant farmers below. At the bottom were slaves.

The Shang Dynasty

1. How was the Shang Dynasty established? How long did it last?
2. Where was the Shang Dynasty located?
3. What allowed the Shang to be successful in battle? Where did the Shang get the new technology?
4. Who was Shangdi? Over what did he rule or have power?
5. Why did Shang kings lead ceremonies or sacrifices to Shangdi?
6. How does the Chinese character for "king" illustrate a king's role?
7. What were *oracle bones*? How were they used?
8. What did Chinese characters stand for?
9. How did the creation of a Chinese script help to unify a diverse China?
10. What was remarkable about Shang bronze and jade work?
11. What type of jade and bronze artifacts have been found?
12. Describe the social structure of the Shang.

The Shang Dynasty Key

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Primarily in the Yellow River valley – not far from where the excavated palaces attributed to the Xia were found.

3. What allowed the Shang to be successful in battle? Where did the Shang get the new technology?

They used horse drawn chariots and superior weapons. There is good evidence that the Shang had contact with, and borrowed the technology of, the Indo-Europeans.

4. Who was Shangdi? Over what did he rule or have power?

Shangdi – the supreme deity. Shangdi ruled over all other gods (which controlled nature), and over the spirits of the deceased. It was believed Shangdi determined the success (or failure) of battles, of harvests, the flooding of the Yellow River, and the health of the kingdom.

5. Why did Shang kings lead ceremonies or sacrifices to Shangdi?

Shangdi could not be accessed directly through public worship or sacrifice, only Shang kings could gain access through the souls of their dead ancestors.

6. How does the Chinese character for “king” illustrate a king’s role?

Three horizontal lines are connected with a single vertical line which indicates that com-

munication between heaven and earth flowed through the king.

7. What were *oracle bones*? How were they used?

Flat shoulder blades or tortoise shells used to divine the will of Shangdi. Questions were written on bones (often flat shoulder blades) or tortoise shells. The bones were then heated until they cracked. Answers came from interpretation of the cracks.

8. What did Chinese characters stand for?

The characters did not stand for sounds, but ideas.

9. How did the creation of a Chinese script help to unify a diverse China?

Thus people throughout China could learn to read Chinese script even if they spoke different languages. (And many languages were spoken in China...)

10. What was remarkable about Shang bronze and jade work?

The carvings or castings were very detailed and of high quality.

11. What type of jade and bronze artifacts have been found?

Bells, urns, axe heads, pots and jewelry.

12. Describe the social structure of the Shang.

The King and warrior class were at the top (as governing officials & large landowners), they were followed by middle class merchants and artisans. Below them were the peasant farmers, and then slaves.

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