Shang Society and Shang Culture

While scholars still debate whether the Xia dynasty—according to traditional legends the first Chinese dynasty—actually existed, almost no one doubts anymore that the Shang dynasty existed and ruled China during its Bronze Age. Thus, the Shang dynasty is generally considered China’s first historical dynasty. It was under the Shang that writing first emerged among the Chinese, making it the beginning of the historical China. The Shang ruled from around 1600 to 1046 BC.

The Discovery of the Shang

For a long time, scholars doubted that the Shang dynasty ever actually existed. It was only with the discovery of the Shang oracle bones, pieces of bone or shell used for divination, that it was confirmed that the Shang dynasty really did exist. After this, archaeologists started searching out Shang sites, and in the middle of the twentieth century began to excavate Shang cities.

Both archaeology and oracle bones are important sources of evidence about the Shang dynasty. The oracle bones are especially useful, as they provide the bulk of the writing we have about the Shang. The king or professional diviners employed by the king would carve the name of the king and the date onto the bones, and write questions such as “Will we win the upcoming battle?” or “How many soldiers should we commit to the battle?” Such questions reveal a great deal about what was important to Shang society. Many of the oracle bones ask questions about war, harvests, and childbirth.

Once the question was inscribed in the oracle bone, the bone was heated until it cracked. The cracks were then interpreted, and on the other side of the bone the king or diviner would write his interpretation of the crack. Later, they would record on the bone whether the prediction came true. These interpretations and verifications present even more information about the Shang. In addition, the names on the bones verify the reigns of historic Shang rulers long thought to be legendary. This is confirmed by the fact that the oracle bones refer to other real people. For example, a famous oracle bone asks whether Fu Hao’s childbearing will be good. Fu Hao appears to have been the king’s consort, and her tomb has been found and excavated.

Shang Writing

The inscriptions on Shang oracle bones are the oldest surviving form of Chinese writing. The writing on the oracle bones shows evidence of complex development, indicating that the written language had been around for a long time before the first evidence of it appears. In fact, we can read the writing on the oracle bones (and other examples of Shang inscriptions) because the language was already very similar to the modern Chinese writing system.

Unfortunately, however, we have few examples of Shang writing outside of the oracle bones. There are some inscriptions on bronze objects, but most documents, such as government paperwork, receipts, and books, were written on bamboo strips.
and silk. These decomposed long ago, and are lost to us forever. Still, archaeology can help fill in the blanks left by lost Shang writing.

Shang Cities

According to legend, the Shang dynasty was founded when Cheng Tang overthrew the evil last king of the Xia dynasty. Tang supposedly founded a new capital for his dynasty at a town called Shang, near modern-day Zhengzhou. The archaeological remains of this town may have been found. It seems to have functioned as a sacred capital, where the most sacred temples and religious objects were housed. However, the effective capital of the kingdom moved from city to city, as different kings ruled from different cities, probably as a result of regional power struggles within the kingdom. The last and most important of these was a city called Yin, near modern-day Anyang, which acted as capital for the final 300 years or so of the dynasty, from about 1400 to 1046 BC. Anyang was a huge city, about 2,400 hectares in size (for a comparison, Indus valley cities were about 200 hectares). It was spread out in a multitude of different sectors, each one more like an individual village. Anyang also had an extensive cemetery with thousands of graves of what seem to have been nobles, along with eleven particularly large tombs, which may have belonged to the eleven Shang kings, who apparently ruled from Anyang. All of the kings’ tombs were looted long ago, but some smaller graves escaped looting long enough for archaeologists to excavate, and even these small graves were filled with enormous numbers of jade, bronze, and bone objects. They point to the enormous wealth of the rulers of the city, and many of the tombs would have required huge numbers of laborers in order to construct. These aristocratic tombs were also surrounded by the bodies of human sacrifices, sometimes just skulls, and the bones of human sacrifices have also been found inside of the tombs of Shang elites.

Shang Religion

The human sacrifices found in Shang cities, particularly in the tombs of powerful Shang figures, indicate that they believed their servants would continue to serve them in the afterlife. For this reason, when a Shang aristocrat or ruler died, his or her servants would be killed and buried with the aristocrat. Alternatively, human sacrifices may have been enemy warriors captured in battle. For the Shang, what a person was buried with was important because they believed that a person would live on in the afterlife and take along the things they were buried with. The Shang believed the dead had great powers, and they worshipped their ancestors. They believed that failing to properly do this would mean that the ancestors would remove their protection from the living, allowing disaster to strike. People who lived under the Shang would consult their ancestors through oracle bones to seek their approval for any major decision, and to learn about their future success in harvesting, hunting, or battle. They believed that the ancestors could confer good fortune in these things, and in order to appease the ancestors they made offerings of food and drink.
In addition to their ancestors, the Shang worshipped a supreme god called Shangdi, who ruled over lesser gods who embodied the sun, the moon, the wind, the rain, and other natural forces and places. Nonetheless, they believed that Shangdi was distant from man, and for the most part Shangdi could only be reached through the worship of their ancestors. Shang kings, however, believed they could communicate with Shangdi, and many oracle bones seek out his approval for the decisions of the kings.

Shang Technology

Since the Shang ruled China during its Bronze Age, perhaps the most important technology at the time was bronze casting. They cast bronze objects by creating molds out of clay, carving a design into the clay, and then pouring molten bronze into the mold. They allowed the bronze to cool and then broke the clay off, revealing a completed bronze object.

The upper class had the most access to bronze, and they used it for ceremonial objects, such as ritual vessels used to make offerings to the ancestors. Bronze objects were also buried in the tombs of Shang elite. The Shang government also used bronze for military weapons such as swords and spearheads. Bronze weapons gave the Shang a distinct advantage over their enemies. Another military technology that allowed the Shang to excel at war was the chariot. Under the Shang, the Chinese domesticated the horse. The horse would still have been too small to ride at the time, but the Chinese gradually developed the chariot, which harnessed the power of the horse. The chariot was a devastating weapon in battle, and it also allowed Shang soldiers to move vast distances with great speed.

These military technologies were important, because it seems that the Shang were constantly at war. A significant portion of oracle bones used by Shang kings were concerned with battle—how many men to commit, whether the king could expect victory, etc. These armies pushed the borders of the Shang kingdom further, and brought back with them precious resources and prisoners of war, who could be enslaved or used for human sacrifice. The oracle bones also show a deep concern about the barbarians living outside the empire, who were a constant threat to the safety and stability of the kingdom, and the military had to be constantly ready to fight them.

The Fall of the Shang

The Shang dynasty was overthrown in 1046 BC by the Zhou (Chou). The Zhou were a subject people living in the western part of the kingdom. Supposedly, they rebelled against the last kings of the Shang and overthrew them. The Zhou founded a new dynasty. Under their rule, they moved away from worship of Shangdi in favor of Tian (“heaven”). They created the idea of the Mandate of Heaven. According to this idea, there could be only one legitimate ruler of China at a time, and this king reigned with the approval of heaven. A king could, however, lose the approval of heaven, which would result in his downfall. The Zhou claimed that the Shang kings had become immoral, that because of their excessive drinking, luxuriant living, and cruelty, the
Shang had lost heaven’s approval of their rule. The Zhou dynasty claimed to be replacing the Shang, and they would rule China for the next eight hundred years.

Summary

- While the Shang were once believed to be mythological, it is now accepted that they were a historical dynasty who ruled China from 1600 to 1046 BC. The most important sources of information about them are archaeology and questions written on oracle bones. Oracle bones tend to ask questions about warfare, harvests, and childbearing.
- The earliest Chinese writing we have comes from the Shang dynasty, though it was already in an advanced form by this period, suggesting that it had been developing for a long time before then. Even most Shang writing, which would have been recorded on bamboo strips and silk, has been lost.
- Shang cities were incredibly large and show significant social stratification. Rich tombs of the elite have been found, and they include human sacrifices.
- Shang religion was centered on ancestor worship and veneration of the Supreme Being, called Shangdi.
- Shang technology, especially bronze weapons and the use of horses and chariots, gave the Shang a military edge over their enemies.
- The Shang dynasty was overthrown around 1046 BC by the Zhou, who replaced them as rulers of China.