

A chariot buried in a Shang ruler's tomb was to serve the king in the afterlife.

# The Shang Dynasty

## 20.1 Introduction

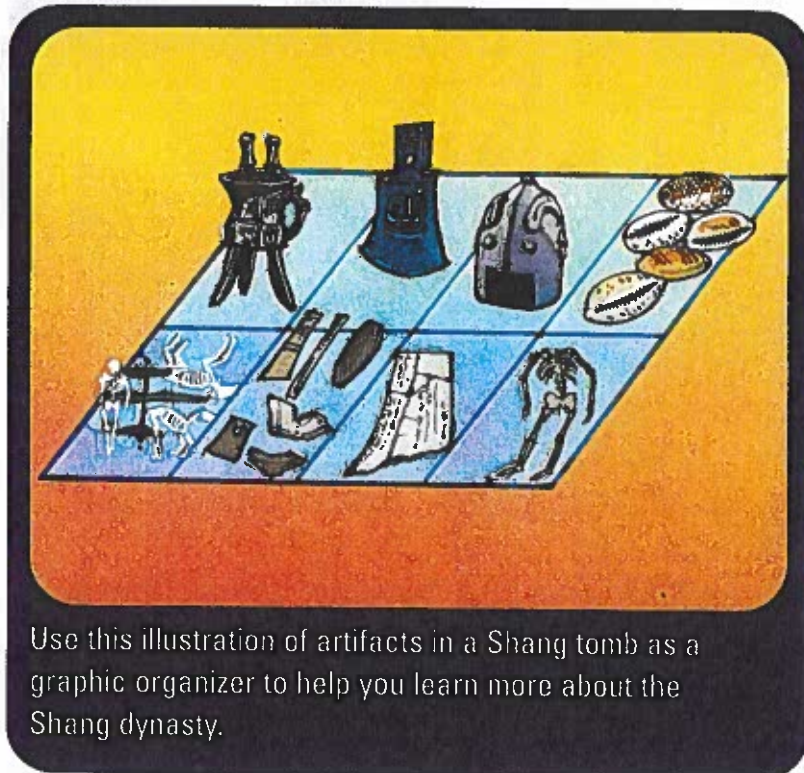
In Chapter 19, you explored five geographic regions of China. You learned that most of China's early farmers settled on the North China Plain, near the Huang He (Yellow River). In this chapter, you will explore one of China's earliest dynasties, the **Shang dynasty**. This dynasty ruled the area around the Huang He from 1700 to 1122 B.C.E.

Ancient China was not one country, but a number of clans, or extended families, led by warrior kings. Rival clans often fought each other. Occasionally, one clan became powerful enough to control all of ancient China and start a dynasty. The Shang (pronounced *shung*) was one such clan.

For hundreds of years, the Shang dynasty was considered to be a myth by western scholars. Stories about mysterious markings on animal bones hinted that the Shang might have been the first Chinese to learn to write. But there was no solid archeological evidence that they had existed.

Then, in 1899, a Chinese scholar found some bones with writing on them. He thought they might be Shang oracle bones. Oracle bones are animal bones and turtle shells with inscriptions carved by engravers. They were thought to tell the future.

Later, in the 1920s, the ruins of a Shang city were found at Anyang. Archeologists unearthed many artifacts from these ruins that revealed an ancient civilization. Let's see what they learned about **Shang government, social structure, religion, writing, art, and technology.**



Use this illustration of artifacts in a Shang tomb as a graphic organizer to help you learn more about the Shang dynasty.



Nobles lived in homes made of wood and earth near the king's palace. People of the lower classes lived in smaller earthen houses that were farther from the palace.

**human sacrifice** a person who is killed as part of a religious ritual

## 20.2 A Shang Capital City

Archeologists learned a lot about the Shang when they began excavating the ruins at Anyang in 1928. The ruins were the remains of one of the royal cities of the Shang. The city included a palace, a temple, and houses. There were also workshops for artisans who worked with bronze, pottery, stone, and jade.

The king's palace sat on a platform. The palace was made of mud-plastered walls held up by wooden posts. Under its foundations, archeologists found human bones. The bones suggest that the Shang performed **human sacrifices** when they built a new royal house.

Human sacrifices were also part of Shang burials. While excavating at Anyang, archeologists found at least 9 royal tombs. Each tomb was a large pit with ramps leading down to it from the north and south. When a king was buried, slaves, servants, and animals were led down the ramps into the pit. There they were sacrificed so that, the Shang believed, they could serve the needs of the king in the afterlife.

Because of their belief in an afterlife, Shang kings were also buried with or near bronze vessels and containers of food. The treasures found in royal tombs include bronze weapons, carved jade ornaments, bone carvings, pottery, stone sculptures, and even chariots.

The artifacts unearthed at Anyang reveal some interesting facts about Shang beliefs and ways of life. Let's see what else scholars have learned about the Shang, beginning with their government.

## 20.3 Shang Government

The Shang government was led by a powerful king who controlled the land. To expand his power, the king set up smaller kingdoms under his younger brothers and nephews. Power sometimes passed to a younger brother when a king died. Sometimes a son inherited the kingdom.

Shang kings depended on strong armies to maintain their rule. The kings engaged in almost constant war with their enemies. They fought to keep other **clans** under control and to defend and expand their kingdoms. They also captured prisoners in war to use as laborers and in human sacrifices.

The king's armies were especially powerful because Shang nobles had weapons made of bronze. The Shang were among the first people in the world to discover how to make bronze from a mixture of copper and tin.

Shang armies were made up of large numbers of foot soldiers, archers, cavalry riding horses and elephants, and fighters in chariots. The chariots were two-wheeled boxes drawn by horses. Three soldiers rode in each chariot. The driver stood in the middle with a spear carrier on his left and an archer on his right. The Shang army must have been a terrifying sight to their enemies.

**clan** a large group of friends and family

The Shang Empire, About 1122 B.C.E.



## 20.4 Shang Social Classes

Shang society can be divided into six social classes. The king and his relatives were at the top. Below them were the nobles, craftspeople, traders, farmers, and slaves.

### Nobles

The nobles made up the highest-ranking social class after the ruling family. Nobles fought in the king's army. They also provided weapons, foot soldiers, and chariots. In exchange for their military help, the king did not interfere with their control over the land.

Shang nobles enjoyed a life of luxury. They lived in great palaces and spent time hunting. We know the Shang were great hunters because of the large number of wild animal bones found at excavation sites. In addition, writings on oracle bones show that the king went hunting and invited nobles to hunt foxes, badgers, and other wild animals.

The king often gave nobles symbols of power, such as jade discs. The discs might show a "lucky" creature such as a dragon or tiger. Nobles often mounted the discs on posts in their homes.

Shang kings gave nobles jade discs to symbolize power. This disc is made in the shape of a dragon.

### Craftspeople

Craftspeople formed a small social class. This class included bronze and jade workers, potters, and stonemasons. These skilled workers had lower status than nobles but higher status than farmers. Bronze workers were especially valued. They made the weapons used by Shang warriors. They also made and decorated containers for the king and nobles to use in religious ceremonies or simply as symbols of their wealth.



### Traders

Like craftspeople, traders ranked below nobles but above farmers in Shang society. Scholars believe that the Shang traded extensively, because the modern Chinese word for merchant is *shang ren*, which



From stone sculptures like this one of an ox, archeologists have learned the kinds of animals raised by Shang farmers.

could also mean “Shang man.” During the Shang dynasty, people mostly traded goods. But they also used cowrie shells, a type of seashell, as money. The shells were valuable because they came from far away. The Shang had to trade with neighboring regions to get them.

### **Farmers**

Farmers were the largest social class in Shang society. They worked small plots of land, growing millet, wheat, barley, rice, fruit, vegetables, and nuts. They did not own the land they farmed. The land was under the control of either the king or the nobles. The farmers did not even get to keep most of their crops. They kept only enough to feed themselves and their families. They gave the rest to the nobles, who sent some to the king.

Even after the Chinese became good at making bronze and iron weapons, many farmers used simple wooden and stone tools. They dug with wooden sticks, weeded with stone-tipped hoes, and harvested grain with stone knives and scythes.

In addition to growing crops, farmers may have raised pigs and chickens. They also learned to keep and raise cattle.

### **Slaves**

At the very bottom of Shang society were slaves, who had often been captured in wars. They spent their lives building tombs and palaces. When their masters died, slaves were sometimes sacrificed so they could serve their masters in the afterlife.

## 20.5 Religion Under the Shang

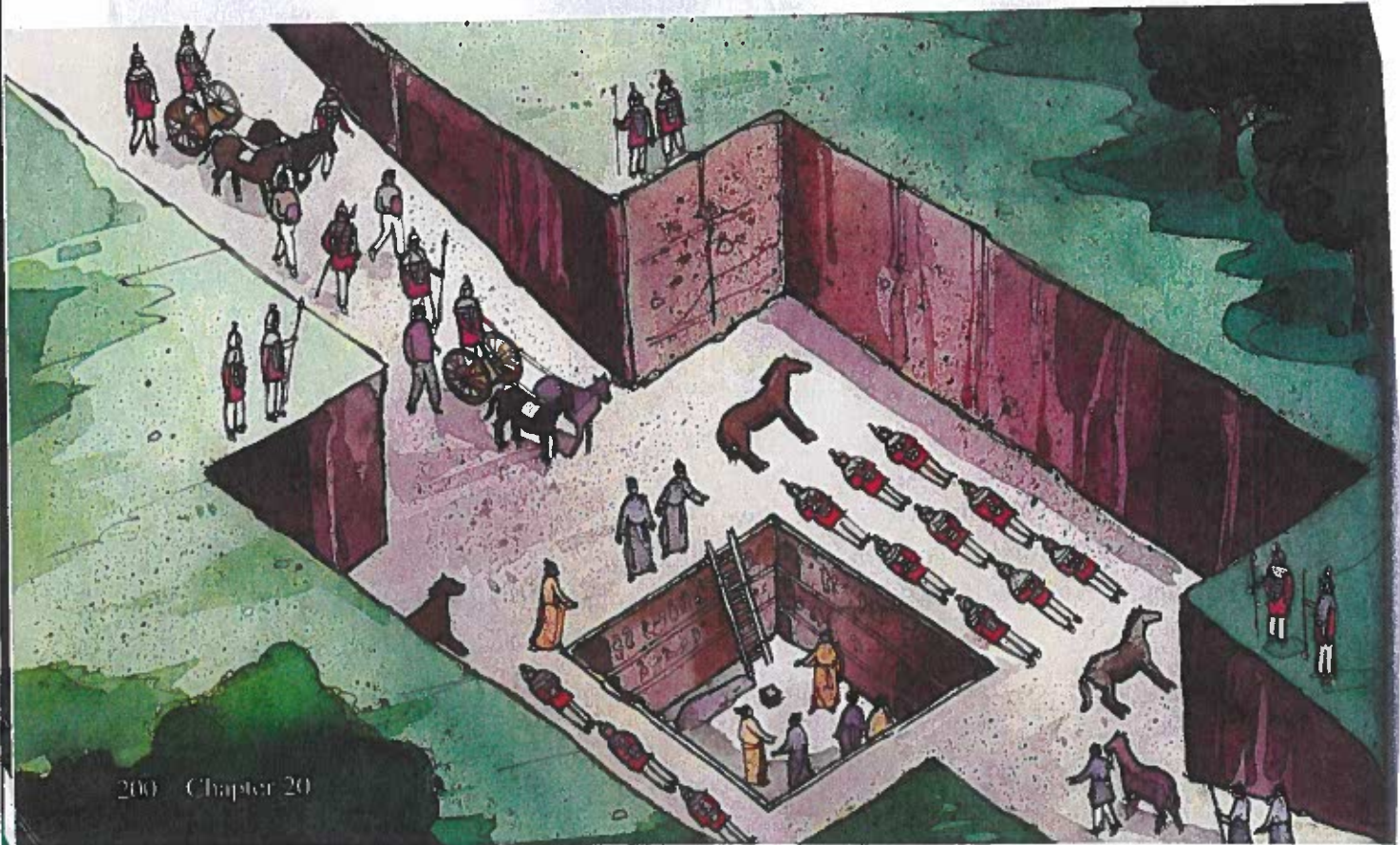
**ancestor worship** honoring ancestors through rituals, such as offering food and wine to the dead

The religion of the Shang centered on **ancestor worship**. As the treasures buried in kings' tombs show, the Shang believed in a life after death. They also believed that dead ancestors had power to help or harm the living. For this reason, they believed it was important for people to honor their ancestors. They did this through offerings of wine and food, and sometimes through human sacrifices.

The king's relationship to ancestral spirits was especially important to the Shang. In Shang belief, kings had the power to rule because they were descended from powerful ancestors. But kings also had responsibilities, including a duty to follow the wishes of their ancestors.

Kings used oracle bones to ask their ancestors' advice on such important matters as when to hunt, where to build new cities, and whether to go to war. The oracle bones were made from turtle shells or the shoulder blade of a cow. To ask a question, a holy man made a statement such as "Tomorrow is a good day for the hunt." Then the holy man pressed a hot needle against the back of the bone. The heat would make the bone crack. The pattern of the crack was believed to be a message, which the holy man or king translated. He might then carve the message on the oracle bone. Today these inscriptions reveal valuable information about life under the Shang dynasty.

The artifacts found buried in Shang tombs, such as this one, included animals, soldiers, servants, and various objects.



## 20.6 Writing Under the Shang

The inscriptions on oracle bones are among the earliest known examples of Chinese writing. In Shang writing, as in modern Chinese, characters stand for words rather than sounds. At first, Chinese writing contained only pictographs, images that stand for objects. By the Shang dynasty, people also used **logographs**, characters that stand for words. For example, the character for “good” is a combination of the characters for “woman” and “child.”

Having a written language helped to unify the Chinese people. Although spoken language varied from place to place, people of the upper classes used the same written language.

**logograph** a written character that represents a word



## 20.7 Art Under the Shang

Shang artists showed great skill in working with bronze. Craftspeople made beautiful vessels and other objects. Some bronze vessels had geometric designs and pictures of mythical creatures. The most common picture was an animal mask, later known as a *taotie*. It might have had the horns of an ox, the ears of an elephant, the talons of a bird, the eye of a man, and the crest of a dragon. Some scholars say it was a symbol of all the beings in the world.

The Shang also produced outstanding jade pieces. Jade is a very hard stone. Jade workers made objects by sawing, filing, and sanding the stone.

The Chinese may have believed that the qualities of jade represented the qualities of a superior person. The hardness of jade stood for wisdom. Jade was also smooth and shiny. These qualities stood for kindness.

Shang writing is the ancestor of modern Chinese writing. Inscriptions have been found inside objects like the rhinoceros statue above.

Shang craftspeople made fine jewelry from jade. The jade pendant below is shaped like a fish.



The Shang made a variety of weapons out of bronze.



## 20.8 Technology Under the Shang

Working with bronze was an important technology for the Shang. Craftspeople used bronze to make many tools of war, including arrowheads, spearheads, ax heads, and helmets. The bronze-making skill of the Shang is one of the reasons they were able to remain in power for more than 500 years.

## 20.9 The End of the Shang Dynasty

The Shang excelled in war, and the ruling classes built up great wealth. But in time these very strengths helped to bring about the end of the dynasty.

Fighting so many wars eventually weakened the military power of the Shang.

The Shang king and his nobles spent enormous amounts of money on their palaces, furnishings, clothing, and even their tombs. In time, this lavish spending may have weakened the

**economy.**

A later king would say the final blow was the corruption of the last Shang king. Instead of looking after his people, he spent all his time on pleasurable activities like hunting. But no one knows if this was true.

Around 1045 B.C.E., a frontier state called Zhou (pronounced *joh*) rose up against the dynasty. Zhou armies under King Wu caught the Shang unaware, defeating and overthrowing them. One story says that the last Shang king ran from the battlefield, put on all his jewelry, and threw himself into the flames of a fire as Zhou rebels stormed his capital city.

**economy** a system of managing the wealth of a country or region



## 20.10 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about one of China's earliest dynasties, the Shang dynasty. The ruins and artifacts found at Anyang showed that the Shang believed in an afterlife. Kings were buried with goods that would be useful to them in their life after death.

Shang kings were powerful rulers who kept their power through military might. Shang society can be divided into six social classes. These were the king's clan, nobles, craftspeople, traders, farmers, and slaves.

The Shang practiced ancestor worship and, sometimes, human sacrifice. Their writing used logographs as well as pictographs. Shang craftspeople excelled in working with bronze and jade.

The Shang ruled in the valley of the Huang He for some 500 years. China's next line of rulers was the Zhou dynasty. In the next chapter, you'll learn more about the Zhou. You'll also explore three important philosophies (schools of thought) that developed toward the end of their reign.

Archeologists unearthed this Shang tomb, which is more than 300 feet long and 60 feet deep.

