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The Shang Dynasty of Ancient China

by Kim Biddulph

1600 BC to 1046 BC

Period Overview

The Shang Dynasty is the first well-documented, through written texts and archaeology, dynasty in China though earlier ones are mentioned in Chinese legend. It was based around the Yellow River in central China and is sometimes called the cradle of Chinese civilisation. It was a Bronze Age culture, so they didn't have knowledge of iron working. Writing was first developed in China in this period and many written texts were incised onto bones found in archaeological excavations. The culture was ruled over by a king and his relatives were the government. Archaeological excavations have revealed towns with palaces, tombs and craft working areas, such as Shang near modern-day Zhengzhou and Yin near modern-day Anyang.

Life during the Shang Dynasty

The majority of the people who lived under the Shang Dynasty were farmers. They grew millet, wheat and barley but not so much rice, which was farmed further south. A large irrigation scheme was constructed to bring the water from the Yellow River to the crops. They also kept sheep, pigs and oxen. It seems as if, even at this time, the silkworm may have been domesticated to produce silk. The farmers probably lived outside the big cities.

There were also craftsmen who worked in workshops just outside the city walls. Remains of jade, bone, pottery, and bronze-working have been found by archaeologists in these areas. Most of what they made would have been for use by the king and his nobles.

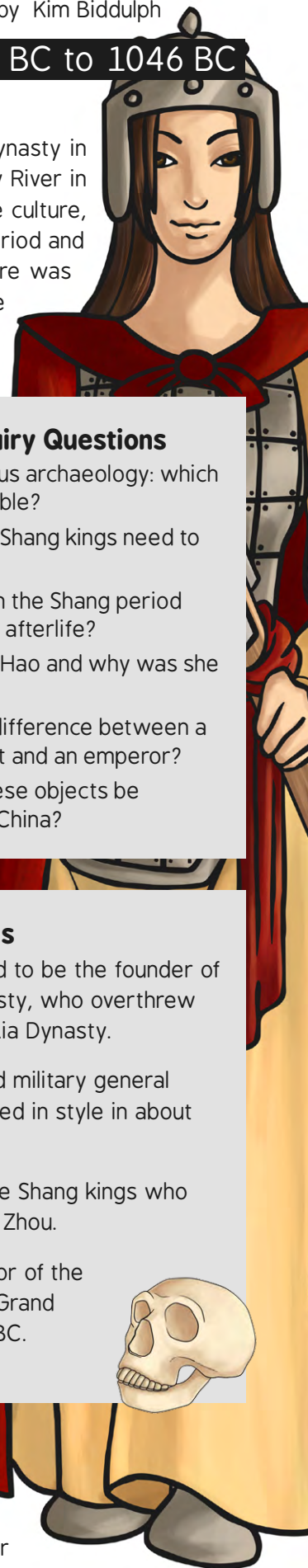
The king and the nobles lived inside the walled cities. The palaces had rammed earth floors and pillars to keep up the roof, whereas lower ranking people lived in wooden houses. There were temples where animal and human sacrifices were made to the Shang Di, the supreme god who ruled over the lesser gods of the wind, Sun and Moon, among others. Bronze vessels were used to collect blood from these offerings.

Changing Times

It seems as though successive kings, possibly from competing noble families within the Shang Dynasty, moved the capital city around over the centuries. The earliest capital city may be Shang, which is thought to be a city excavated near Zhengzhou. The last capital of the Shang is Yin, near modern-day Anyang.

The development of writing happened within the Shang Dynasty and made it easier for the government to conduct wars, organise craftsmen, and generally create a bureaucracy.

As time went on, the religion developed from having priests who would conduct divining ceremonies to see into the future to the king himself conducting such ceremonies. The questions and method itself didn't change. Tortoise shells or ox shoulder bones were inscribed with a question, often about an upcoming war, but also about when to plant seeds or whether the king would have a son, for instance, and then a number of shallow pits would be drilled into the other side. Hot pokers would be thrust into these pits and the pattern of cracks would tell the diviner or king the answer, which was also inscribed onto the bone.



Possible Enquiry Questions

- History versus archaeology: which is more reliable?
- Why did the Shang kings need to write?
- Did people in the Shang period believe in an afterlife?
- Who was Fu Hao and why was she unusual?
- What's the difference between a king, a priest and an emperor?
- Should Chinese objects be returned to China?

Key Individuals

Cheng Tang: said to be the founder of the Shang Dynasty, who overthrew the legendary Xia Dynasty.

Fu Hao: wife and military general of Wu Ding, buried in style in about 1200 BC.

Di Xin: last of the Shang kings who lost against the Zhou.

Sima Qian: author of the Records of the Grand Historian in 91 BC.

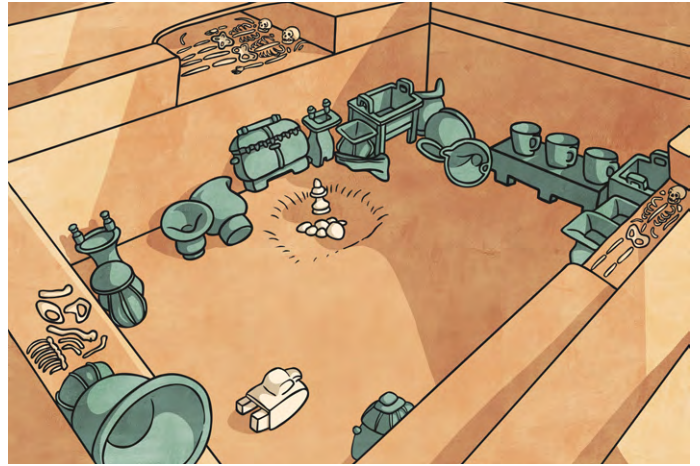
Broader Context

The Bronze Age started in Europe around 3000 BC and continued to about 800 BC.

Writing and the calendar was developed in Mesopotamia around 3500 BC, the earliest in the world. In Mesoamerica, the two were not developed until about 300 BC.

Early civilisations were:

- the Indus Valley in about 2600 - 1900 BC;
- the Assyrian kingdom in 2400 - 1800 BC;
- the Ancient Egyptian Old Kingdom 2700 - 2200 BC;
- the Minoan civilisation on Crete 1900 - 1100 BC.



Tomb of Lady Fu Hao

Shang Dynasty Time Periods:

Erlitou Phase:	1650 BC - 1500 BC
Erligang Phase:	1500 BC - 1300 BC
Anyang /Yinxu phase:	1300 BC - 1000 BC

Timeline of Key Events:

(All dates below are approximate)

1600-1500 BC	Capital at Shang near Zhengzhou.
1300 BC	Capital moved to Yin near Anyang.
1250-1192 BC	Reign of Wu Ding.
1200 BC	Tomb of Fu Hao, Wu Ding's wife.
1147-1113 BC	Reign of Wu Yi.
1112-1102 BC	Reign of Wen Ding.
1101-1076 BC	Reign of Di Yi.
1075-1046 BC	Reign of Di Xin.
1046 BC	End of Shang Dynasty
AD 1899	'Dragon bones' used in Chinese medicine were found inscribed.
AD 1928	'Dragon bones' traced back to a site near Anyang, which was excavated.

Places to Visit

Although obviously no sites of significance exist in the UK, objects from the Shang Dynasty period of China are found in some British Museums, such as:

[British Museum](#), London

[Fitzwilliam Museum](#), Cambridge

[Museum of East Asian Art](#), Bath

[Ashmolean Museum](#), Oxford

[National Museum of Scotland](#), Edinburgh

[Durham University Oriental Museum](#), Durham

Big Concepts

Exploring how archaeological evidence and written evidence is different and complimentary. This topic also gives you the chance to talk about the reliability of oral histories written down many centuries after the events they describe.

The nature of government, and change from largely egalitarian societies to a very hierarchical structure can be explored through this topic.

The invention of writing and the calendar are notably tied into developments in government.

What did the Shang Dynasty ever do for us?

Modern Chinese writing has evolved directly from the early written symbols developed in the Shang period. The writing was developed to express calendar dates and so is linked with the organisation of the year into time periods that helps farmers plan ahead. These developments are paralleled in the development of writing and calendars in Europe.

Further Information

[British Museum Information](#)

[China Culture](#)