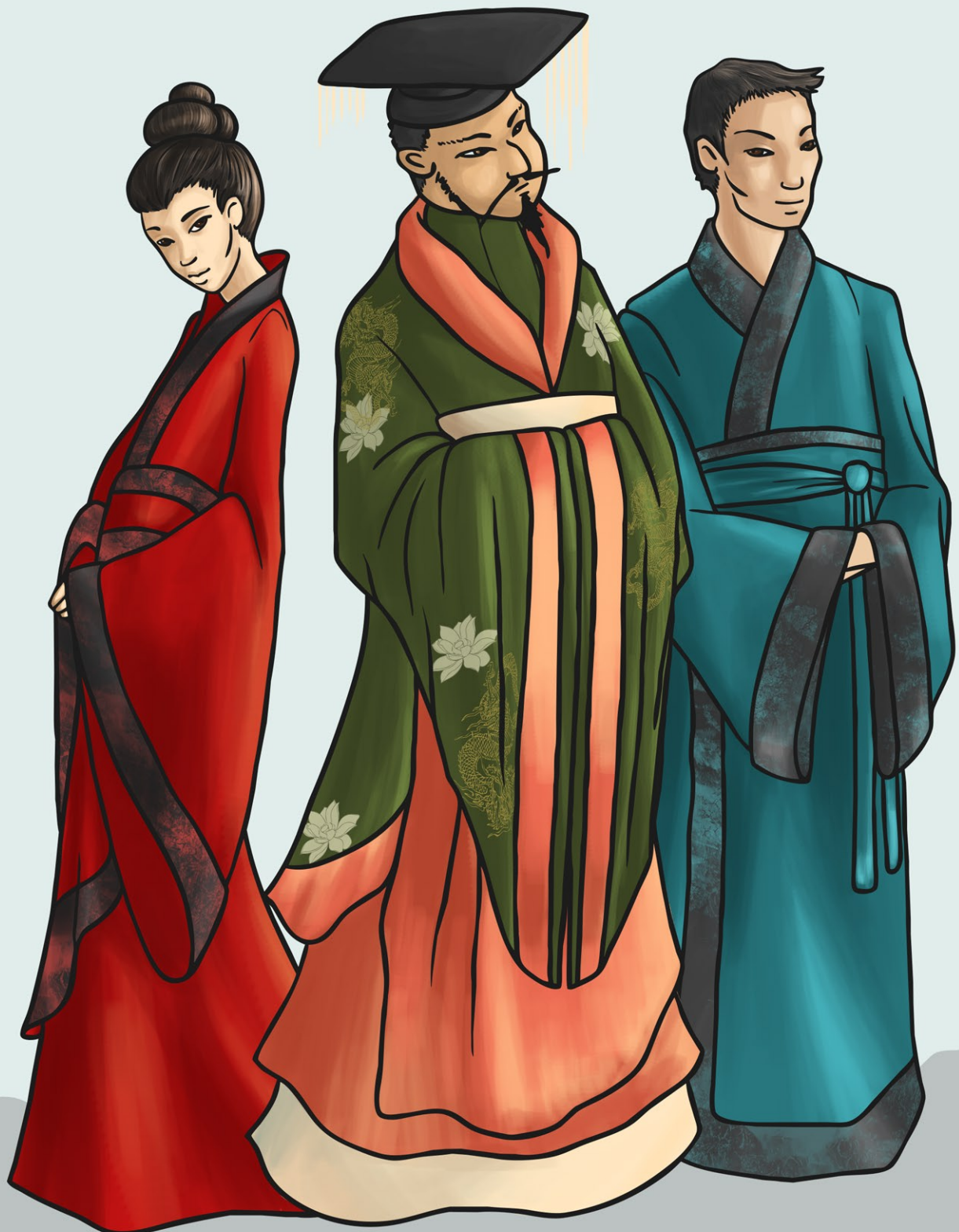


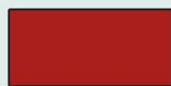
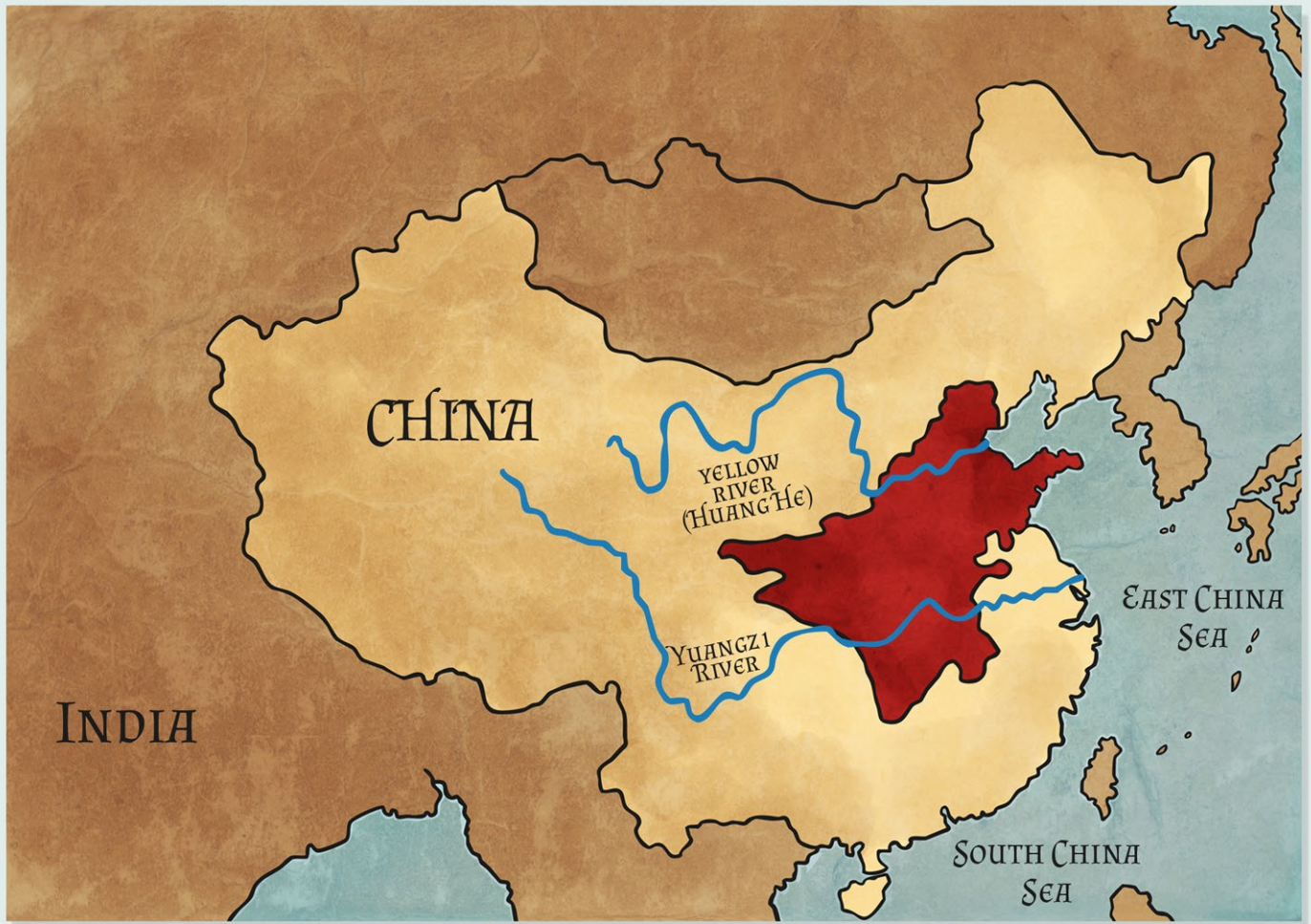
THE SHANG DYNASTY

Ancient China 1600 BCE to 1046 BCE



An informative book

THE SHANG DYNASTY



area of Shang culture



modern China



Who?

The Shang Dynasty was a time of rule under the Shang family in China from around **1600 BCE to 1046 BCE**. Their empire reached far into the East China Sea, beyond the Yellow River. The Shang way of living and its traditions reached very far throughout China.

Who ruled before?

Not much is known about who ruled before the Shang. There is a possibility that the Xia could have ruled but this is not definite. The only evidence of the Xia existing is from old Chinese history texts written over 2000 years ago.

Shang People

The Shang people lived with each other in small groups. They would frequently fight battles with neighbouring settlements.

There were at least 5 different capitals that they lived in, which include:

- Shang
- Zhengzhou
- Yin (this is Anyang today)



The Shang Government

The head of the Shang government was the king. He was very powerful and was supported by plenty of noblemen, some of which were his relatives.

A Shang king's ambition was to further and expand their rule by capturing neighbouring lands and building fantastic buildings and monuments.

In order to have enough workers for their lands and building projects, the Shang would capture soldiers from opposing armies and force them to work.

Shang Art

The Shang Dynasty was part of the Chinese Bronze Age and beautiful pieces of art have been found.

This is an intricately carved bronze wine vessel, called a 'hu' in Chinese.

A 'hu' is usually pear-shaped, with a long neck and narrow mouth.



Shang Kings



The First Shang King

He was known as Tang, Tang Cheng or Tai Yi. He realised that Jie, the last king of the Xia Dynasty had been mistreating his own people and was able to gain and gather supporters from 40 different kingdoms as a result of this.

After he came into power, the Shang maintained their place on the throne of ancient China for over 5 centuries.

Shangdi

The king was believed to have a special connection with the dead royal ancestors, who would then contact the supreme god **Shangdi**.

This made the king the closest human being to a god. He would seek counsel from the gods a lot and make his important decisions from it.

The king had a lot to oversee in his land, including his armies and noblemen that he needed supported from.



Moving Around

When crops had to be planted was amongst the many decisions that the Shang king had to make. For this job, he needed huge numbers of men to work in his fields.

The Shang capital was known to be moved by their kings a lot. It is not exactly clear why this is. There are the possibilities of disease, flooding and natural disasters or even just because the king had received warnings or instructions from his royal ancestors to move! If the king had decided to move, then everybody under their rule would also have to move.



The Throne: Boys Only!

Girls were not allowed to succeed the throne. Kingship passed from brother to brother or son. A nephew would take the throne from his uncle if there were no brothers or sons around.

The Last Shang

Di Xin was the last Shang king to rule. Though physically strong, he was unfair and a poor leader due to overindulging in his own pleasures too much. The state of Zhou took this opportunity to gather power and eventually overthrow the Shang.



Above are some horse drawn chariots that Shang Kings would have used to pull them during battles and royal hunts.

The Shang Wars



The strength and size of a king's army was a very important indicator of the power and might of a dynasty. Their armies could be made up of between 3,000 to 5,000 troops. For the largest battles, the numbers could reach up to 13,000! The Shang had great, powerful armies that enabled them to rule for over 500 years through 17 kings.

Advantages

The king was assisted by many noblemen and warriors when planning battles. Noblemen of the capital city gathered against the enemy, as well as many peasants from neighbouring friendly cities. The peasants would fight in the wars as foot soldiers.

Another great advantage of the Shang was their expert use of the metal bronze. They were excellent for making spear tips and axe heads. Shang soldiers were also provided bronze shields to defend themselves with.



An intricately forged dagger-axe head.
Such a weapon was deadly!

Shang Victory

One of the biggest advantages that the Shang had over their enemies was their use of horse-drawn chariots. Chariots were far faster and more mobile than soldiers running on foot and it also meant that they wouldn't become so exhausted. Their enemies had none and would get tired much quicker.

The Shang king and his noblemen would ride into battle on their chariots, usually 3 men per chariot. Their method of attacking was to have one man driving the chariot while another stood on the platform and swung their long-handled dagger-axe at the enemy. It is always an advantage to be able to look down at the enemy, especially when using bows and arrows.

Shang bows were made from bone or horn and wood. It was a very strong contraption with a huge range.



Chariots were driven with 2 horses pulling at the front and 3 soldiers being carried on the platform behind.

War Spoils

The Shang took their profits of war in the form of prisoners, metals, food and livestock. The prisoners were then put to work for expanding the Shang's empire by building cities and monuments. Life was probably rather miserable and backbreaking for the working prisoners and some were even killed as sacrifices to the Shang gods!

The Common Shang People

Most of the Shang people were ordinary peasants working in fields and living in hard conditions. Being situated by the Yellow River, the land was very rich and fertile. China was a much wetter and warmer place than it is today, which made it perfect for growing crops. The Shang kings and nobles exploited this, along with their people, who had to work very hard to supply them with food all year round.

The main crop grown by the Shang was millet, as well as rice and wheat. A Shang farmer would use simple wooden and stone tools, along with some animals, to help plant and plough the land.



Ancient Techniques

Even today in China, ancient farming techniques are still used and the scene on the left probably isn't so different from one in the Shang Dynasty!

Below: Millet field

A Hard Life

Whilst the rich lived contentedly, the Shang peasants would have lived in pits dug into the earth, covered by a very basic roof made out of material. They would return to their homes after a long, strenuous day at work in the fields.

Though they were constantly cultivating food, it is quite clear that the Shang people themselves never got to taste it much themselves as their skeletons have shown that they were deeply malnourished! Their diet would probably have been made up of mostly grains and vegetables with occasional meat from the animals they reared.



Peasant Clothing

Chinese peasants wore very plain and simple clothing. Hemp was a widely used material but would have got very uncomfortable in wet and cold conditions. As well as farming, peasants would have to fight in wars for their king too.



Artisans

Life for Shang artisans was substantially more comfortable than those of the peasants. Their skills in metal, stone and woodworking was highly prized by the nobles and kings. Their work was amazingly intricate and still wondrous to look at today. Some artisans were even important enough to live within the capital city walls.

Left: an intricately made bronze mask.

Beautiful Currency

During the Shang times, little cowry shells instead of money were used to buy goods. The shells were collected from the South China Sea and good for carrying as they were very lightweight.



Shang Cities

Just like the people, very little is actually known about Shang buildings as not much has remained and we can only find evidence of its architecture under the ground.

The city of Shang was thought to have been built by the first Shang king, Tang. This city was surrounded by walls 10m tall and 20m in width!

Foundations of Shang buildings were made by laying heavy planks of wood on top of the soil, which was then pounded repeatedly to compact it. Once hard enough, the plank would be moved and another layer of soil would be added on top. This was repeated over and over until the foundation was high enough. Such a foundation would have probably taken 10,000 workers over a time of 18 years to complete!



Yin Xu

The city of Yin was the largest and last city of Shang settlement. It was established by the nineteenth Shang king, Pan Geng at around 1300 BCE. Shang rule of this city carried on for over 250 years before it was abandoned. 'Yin Xu' means 'ruins of Yin'.

Unlike the buildings from the Han Dynasty (second century BC), it is believed that the Shang had thatched roofs rather than tiled (below).



Shang Buildings

The city of Yin was a bit different to other early Shang capitals built because of the fact that it was not surrounded by huge walls all around. The central palaces and shrines at Yin were protected by small buildings built around them.

Shang buildings were made mostly of wood and clay, instead of stone like the Egyptians or Greeks, which is another reason why remains are much harder to find.

Timber frames were placed on top of wooden posts that were hammered into the dense earth foundations. The roofs were then thatched with thick, hard straw. Main halls were situated to the front of the buildings with bedrooms at the back.

Another Shang city was uncovered in 1999 at modern day Huanbei. Its foundations were very similar to those in Yin and a 170m courtyard area was also found.



The Forbidden City

The Forbidden city in China today was built in the fifteenth century and is proof that the basic shape of Chinese architecture remained popular and unchanged for many centuries.

Dragon Bones

One of the many things found amongst Shang ruins were 'dragon bones'. These animal bones were found in Hsiao t'un, near Aanyang at the end of the nineteenth century. They were believed to have medicinal properties and sold by chemists to be put into special concoctions .

Many of the 'dragon bones' found had strange, special marks scratched onto them. What could they possibly be?

A Great Mystery

It all started one day when a chemist in Beijing was found to be selling some 'dragon bones' as part of a remedy for malaria sufferers. One of his patients had a brother who was a scholar of ancient Chinese scripts and noticed that the marking on the 'dragon bones' were very similar to some that were found on Chinese artefacts that have been found.

The 'dragon bones' were then found to actually be the undershells of turtles and shoulder blades of cattle.

However, the most astonishing discovery about the bones was the fact that the inscriptions were over 3.000 years old! This dated them back to the Shang Dynasty!

Before this discovery, there was not much evidence to support the existence of the Shang, though the Chinese historian, Sima Qian had written about the Shang reign in early records.



Dragons

In Chinese folklore, dragons are mysterious and powerful creatures. They symbolise power, luck and wisdom.

Fragments of the Past

After this amazing revelation, many excavations then took place, which unearthed over 100,000 bone fragments. The pieces of bone were pieces of a jigsaw that historians managed to fit together and explain the history of the Shang Dynasty. Not much could be explained about the ordinary Shang people through them, but the ancient royal rituals and ceremonies of the Shang were uncovered. They revealed the concerns and hopes of a Shang king, giving us a greater understanding of the dynasty.

Sacred Predictions

The Shang used mostly ox shoulder blades and turtle undershells (picture, right) to inscribe their questions to the gods as part of their rituals. The king's ancestors would then inform him of useful information, such as whether the crops would be successful that year or if a war should be fought or not.

The bones are now known as **oracle bones**. A special interpreter of the gods called a **diviner** would pass on the god's message to the king or the king himself would look at the oracle bones and decide their meaning.



Chinese Medicine

Chinese medicine is still practised widely today and is a very important part of Chinese culture though 'dragon bones' can no longer be found for sale!

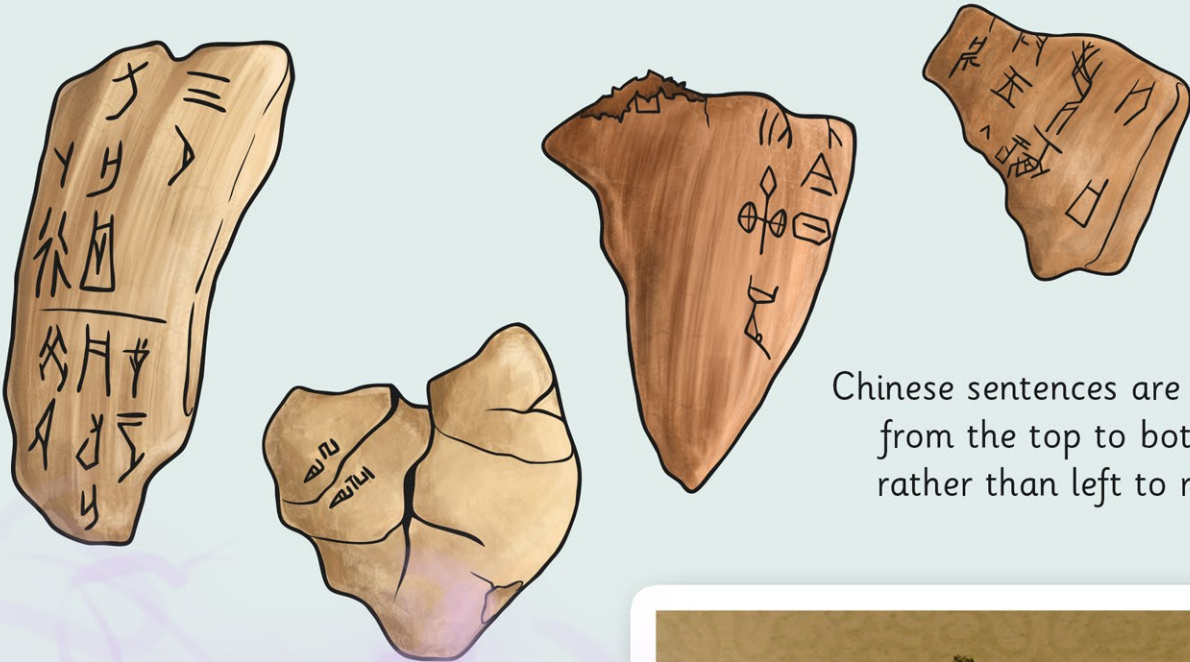
Sacred Messages of the Bones

Finding the sacred Shang bones was really exciting for historians as paper had not been invented yet, making it hard to find historical records. The earliest examples of Chinese writing were also found on the bones. A picture of royal Shang life could be put together from the sentences written.

It is a very fortunate thing that the Shang wrote on sturdy material like bone, rather than bamboo or wood as they would have perished from such a long time ago. Large, bronze vessels have also been found with inscriptions on them. Paper was not invented until the second century BCE, during the Han Dynasty.

Ancient Chinese Writing

The ancient Chinese writing system was based on pictures and pictographs of the things that they stood for. Each character is a word. Historians were amazed as they found many Shang Chinese characters to be very similar to the Chinese characters used today! This was proof of the link between the Shang's writing system and the modern Chinese system.



Chinese sentences are read from the top to bottom, rather than left to right.

Inscriptions

Chinese inscriptions were found on bronze sculptures, such as this turtle (right) as well as on bones (above).

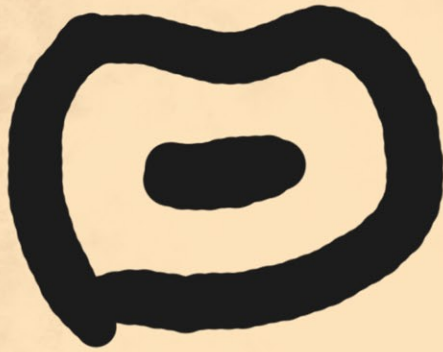


Our Link to the Past

There are a lot of similarities found between modern Chinese characters and ancient Shang characters. In fact, some have hardly changed!

For example:

Oracle Script



Modern Chinese



Meaning: Sun

The modern character is more uniform and angular than the Shang character.

Inscriptions

The Chinese calligraphy of today is rather intricate when compared to the simple strokes of the ancient characters. Chinese characters are not only made up of single words but of ideas too. Some characters are made up from a few characters put together. This writing is called Shang modern script.



This 'D' shape means 'moon' and the 3 strokes above it means the number 3. Can you guess what the 2 characters together could mean?

Shang Gods



Shangdi

The Shang were worshippers of their ancestors and other gods. Their ancestors would either protect or punish them and there were gods of the rain and the Yellow River, Huang He. There was one supreme god who reigned above all, his name was Shangdi. It meant 'Lord on High'.

He was so important that he had to be consulted by a king through his dead ancestors, rather than directly. Shangdi decides whether a war will be won or lost, the weather and the future.

Cracking the Future

Diviners and oracle bones played a huge part in Shang history as the kings would decide what to do from what the diviners predicted for the future. The diviners would poke a heated rod into pits on the underside of the bone or shell with the questions written on and then wait until it started to crack.

These cracks were then read and interpreted by the diviner to the king. They were the answers to the king's questions. The answer could be yes, no or unknown.



The Ultimate Sacrifice



The Shang were great believers in sacrifice and ceremonies. These ceremonies were performed to keep their ancestors pleased, as they could not directly worship Shangdi himself. The ceremonies were believed to bring luck, rainfall or even children.

Beer, grain, animals and humans were all sacrificed by the Shang. A tomb of a powerful king was discovered from around 1200 BCE that contained the remains of 90 followers with precious items and buried in coffins, 74 more people, 12 horses and 11 dogs! The amount of sacrifices made for the king demonstrated his importance and power. The huge pit would have taken thousands of workers to dig.

Bloodshed

It is believed that the Shang managed to sacrifice at least 13,000 people in their 250 year dynasty! Their methods were brutal, some skeletons in the tombs were found to be cut in half, mutilated or with no head. On one occasion, 300 slaves from an enemy tribe, the Qiang were slaughtered in a huge, bloody ritual. It was thought that the gods enjoyed so much bloodshed.



On the left is a picture of a tomb full of oracle bones and also containing a skeleton. The wine, food, blood and valuable objects placed into a tomb were thought to revitalise the living and the dead, as well as making sure that the dead king has a good life after death.

Lady Fu Hao

Lady Fu Hao is a significant figure from the Shang Dynasty. She was the first known female warrior in history, politician and high priestess which was very unusual for a woman. Her husband was the Shang king, Wu Ding.

Fu Hao also performed sacred ceremonies, which was very rare for a woman, since it was such an important part of life back then. It was clear from the writing on oracle bones that the king really loved, trusted and respected Fu Hao, as he was concerned for her health and well-being. She was an extraordinary and powerful woman of her time.

Goods Fit for a Royal

Another reason that Lady Fu Hao is regarded as being so important is because her tomb is one of the few that was still found to be intact with all its goods and belongings, back in 1976. This is rare as most tombs had been plundered by then.

Her tomb was situated in Anyang and measured about 6m x 4m at the entrance and 8m deep inside. This was not so big but her treasures that were buried with her were the true indication of her importance. Archaeologists found over 2,000 items: 460 bronze objects, 130 battle weapons, 750 jade ornaments, 500 bone carvings, 27 knives, 23 bells and over 7,000 cowry shells!



On the left are pictures of a couple of items found in Fu Hao's tomb. There is a square bronze vessel called a 'ding' (far left) and a bronze ritual wine container shaped like an owl (near left).

Shang Art

The Shang worked with many materials to produce works of art. These included clay, jade, bone and bronze. White, glazed pottery was made for rituals and daily use. Jade was carved and used in jewellery and ornaments. They are most renowned for their intricate bronzework.



Shang artisans loved to carve objects out of the precious green stone, jade. In ancient China, jade was believed to help the dead live a long and happy afterlife. They sometimes carved them into animal shapes (left).



Bone and ivory was also used for carving and sculpting (left).

Bronze

Bronze art would not have been possible to make if it were not for the methods of pottery, as clay models and moulds had to be made first, before the molten bronze could be poured in and set.

On the right is a ritual wine vessel surrounded by jade beads. The art of casting a bronze urn was very tricky indeed and the level of the Shang artisan's work was exceedingly high!



Beautiful Shang Bronze

The Shang Dynasty is known as China's Bronze Age. The reason for this is the sheer skill they showed in making beautiful bronze art. The designs are so complicated that it easily sets the Shang people apart from other civilisations of the time, who used much simpler tools, such as flint and stone.



Bronze was very valuable and difficult to find and produce in ancient China.

Bronze is an alloy of metals, meaning it is made up of different metals; copper, tin and lead. Shang kings and noblemen would send large groups of men to mine the metal ores for them. The ores were then heated and combined to make bronze.



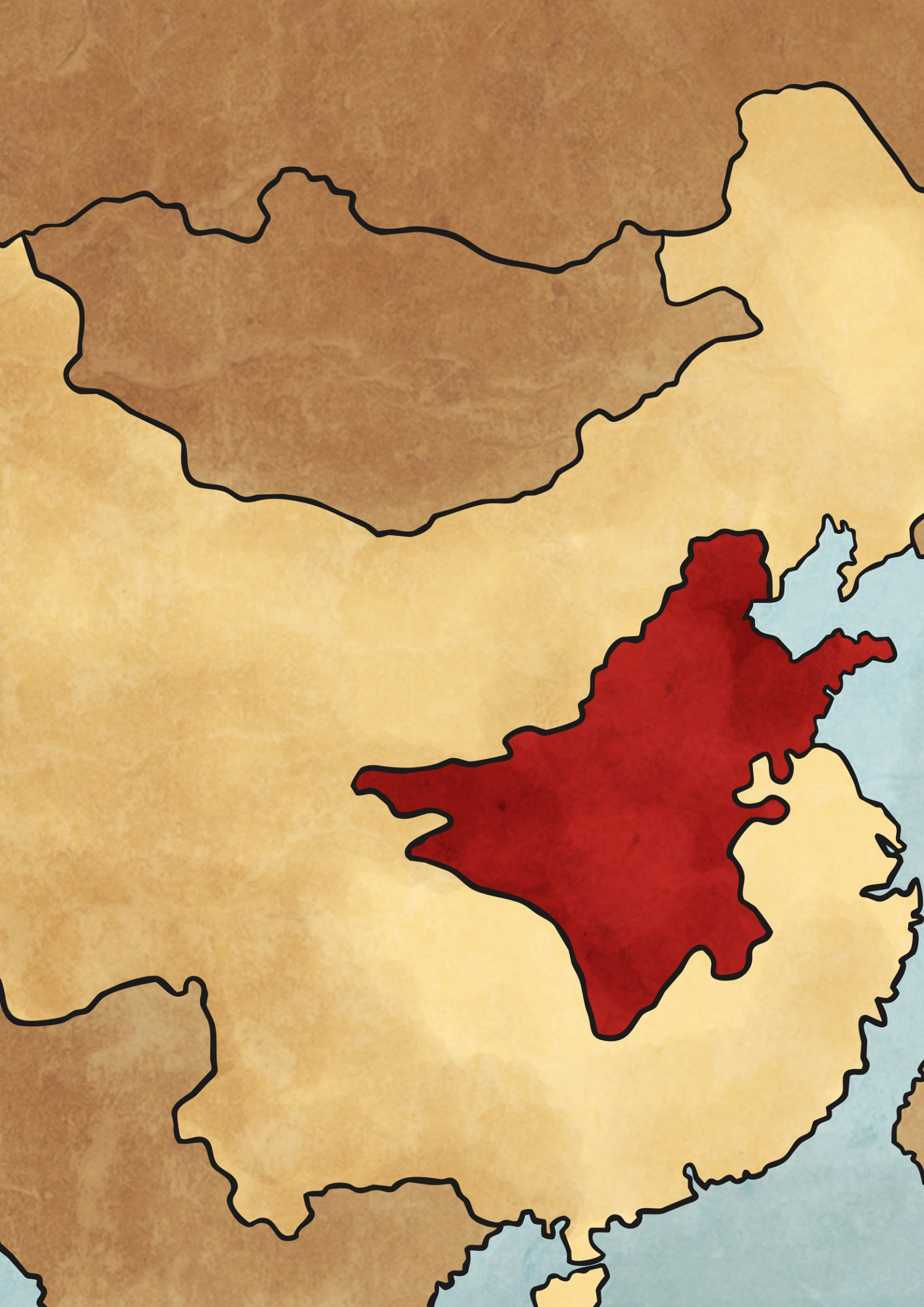
Masks

Working with bronze was very difficult, especially to such a high standard. Many animal masks like the one on the right, were found in Anyang. It looks like it could be a dragon mask, though other examples of tigers, bears and monsters were also made.

The advancement of the Shang and their bronze work is clear in how items from the early period were much more simplified, and became more intricate throughout the later years. Many also had inscriptions written on them.

Shang art found in bronze, bone, clay or stone was highly prized and showed remarkable workmanship.







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