

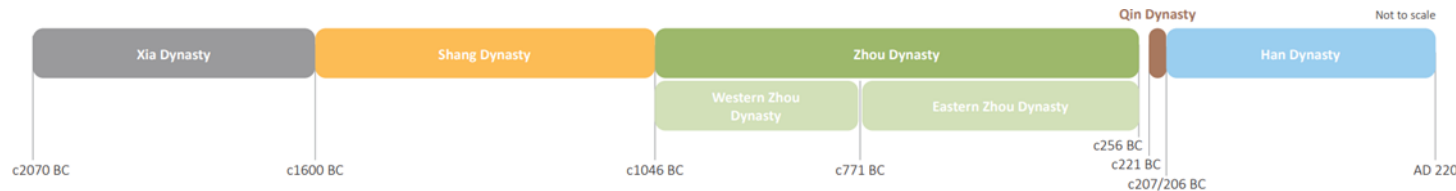


History

Shang Dynasty - Advent 2

Dynamic Dynasties

A dynasty is a system of rule where the throne passes from one member of a ruling family to another. Dynasties have ruled China for 4000 years, from c2070 BC until 1912. During that time, around 15 different dynasties have held power. Each dynasty made important changes to the country, but many aspects of life in China started during the first five dynasties.



Shang Dynasty

The Shang Dynasty is the earliest ruling dynasty in the recorded history of China. The Xia Dynasty is thought to have gone before, however there is no recorded evidence to support this. The Shang Dynasty reigned during China's Bronze Age, from c1600 to c1046 BC, and were known for their advances in bronze work, silk manufacture, jade carving and military technology.

Oracle bones

Oracle bones are pieces of sheep or cow bone, or turtle shell. Shamans or kings wrote questions on these bones to ask for guidance from the deities. Holes in the bones were then heated until they fractured. The patterns of fractures were interpreted as the answers to the questions. In this way, Shang Dynasty kings consulted the deities about the outcome of harvests, droughts, health issues and military strategies.



Religion

People in the Shang Dynasty worshipped the king of the gods, Shangdi. They also prayed to lesser gods who controlled aspects of the world, such as the sun, wind, rain and moon. People made offerings and sacrifices to please their deceased ancestors. They believed that the soul lived after death, so they buried objects, including ritual vessels containing food and drink, for the dead to use in the afterlife.

Bronze

Bronzeworking skills were a major advance during the Shang Dynasty. People learned to smelt copper, tin and lead to make bronze. Skilled craftspeople created vessels that were used for rituals and offerings to the gods. Bronze weapons, such as daggers and spearheads, also gave the Shang Dynasty warriors an advantage over their enemies.



Houmuwu ding from Yin Xu

Jade

Jade is a hard and rare stone, made from the mineral nephrite, which is difficult to shape and carve. Jade was used for jewellery, ornaments, weapons, tools and ritual objects. It was precious and a symbol of purity and virtue.



jade plaque, c3500-c2000 BC



jade bi

Power and hierarchy

There was a strict social hierarchy in the Shang Dynasty, with the king at the top and peasants and slaves at the bottom.

Everyday life

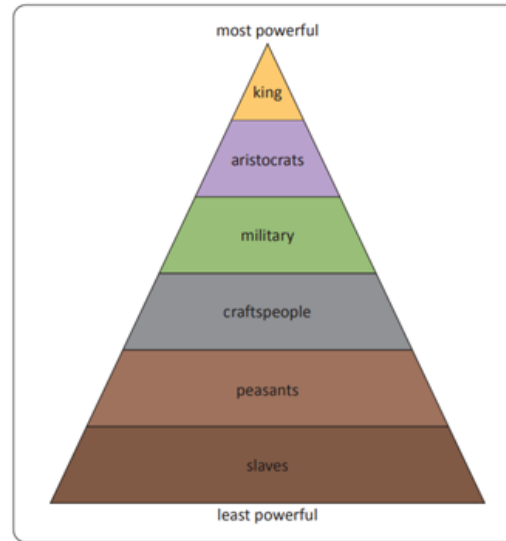
People in the Shang Dynasty lived in cities, towns and villages. Wealthy people lived in large houses made from wattle and daub, while poorer people lived in small houses made by digging into soft rock. The oldest man in each household was the head of his family. People had a wide variety of jobs, such as farmers, miners, bronzeworkers, craftspeople, soldiers and government officials. A person's social class determined the job that he or she was allowed to do. People ate rice, millet and fish and drank beer and yellow rice wine. Wealthy people ate a lot of meat.



bronze dagger-axe

Warfare

Warfare was a way of life in the Shang Dynasty. The king led the army. Foot soldiers were armed with bronze daggers and axes, and archers used powerful composite bows made from layers of animal bone, tendons and wood. Two-wheeled chariots, pulled by a pair of horses, carried an archer, a spearman and a charioteer. The chariots allowed the soldiers to travel quickly over long distances. Soldiers wore protective armour and bronze helmets.



Glossary

Ancestor

A person from whom someone is descended.

Deity

A god or goddess.

Imperial

Relating to an empire.

Oracle bones

Bones used to communicate with ancestors and gods.

Ritual

A ceremony that involves a series of actions performed in a fixed order

Sacrifice

To kill an animal or a person and offer them to the gods

Shaman

A priest who is believed to communicate with spirits.

Smelt

To melt metals at a high temperature

Tyrant

A ruler who has unlimited power over other people and uses it unfairly or cruelly.

Virtue

The quality of being morally good.