

The Shang Dynasty

Trace the boundaries of the Shang dynasty on the map below. Notice that Shang China included much of the Huang He plain.

During the Shang dynasty, most people were still peasants, or poor farmers. They lived in villages and spent their lives working in the fields and struggling to control the flooding rivers. They farmed small plots of land and lived in simple houses.

Walled Cities

Archaeologists have discovered that most Shang people lived in farming villages. Some, however, lived in large walled cities. For example, one Shang city was surrounded by an earth wall 30 feet high, 65 feet thick, and four and a half miles long. With simple hand tools, it would probably have taken 10,000 workers 18 years to build such a wall. To complete it, Shang rulers must have developed complex ways of organizing people. They must also have become skillful in engineering.

Within the walls lived rulers, priests, and warriors. Their huge temples and palaces were built on raised earth terraces. Skilled craftworkers lived outside the walls in neighborhoods made up of people who practiced the same craft. Farmers lived in nearby villages.

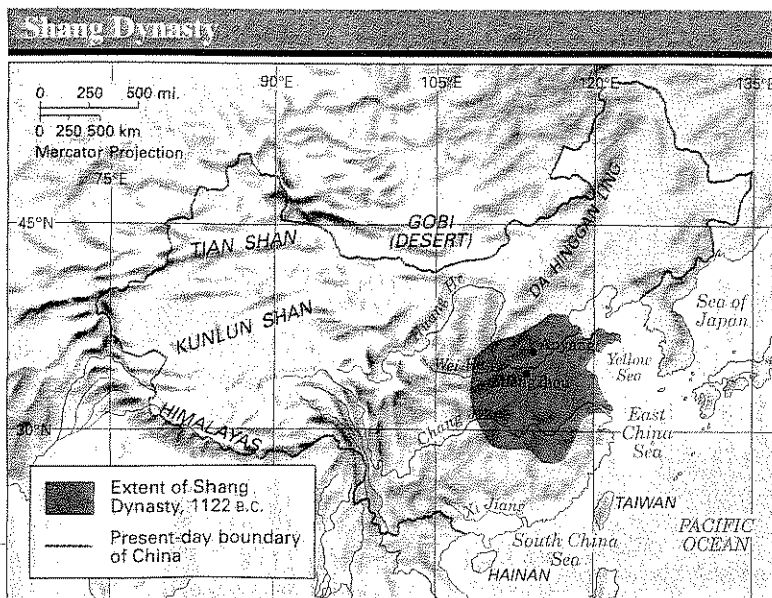
In the Shang capital of Anyang, archaeologists have found thousands of cowrie shells like those shown on this page. Cowrie shells served as an early form of money to buy small items like tools and weapons. They were used in the 1000s B.C., before the Bronze Age brought the use of metal coins.

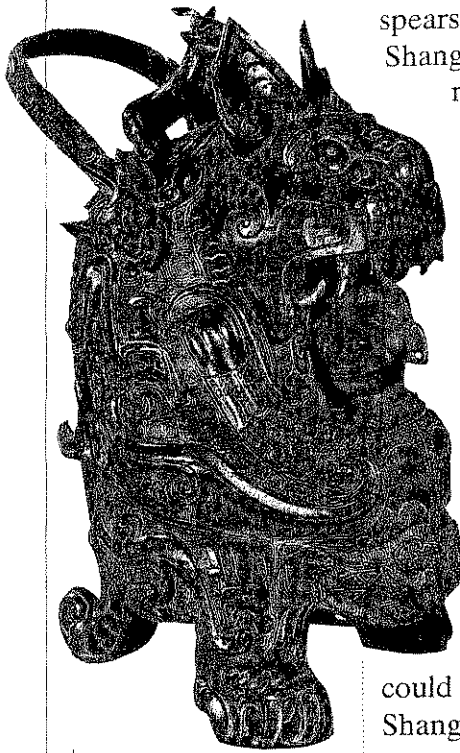
The Bronze Age

Around 1600 B.C., Shang craftworkers in the city of Yenshih (*yen shee*) made an important discovery. They learned to mix tin and copper to produce a hard and beautiful metal called bronze. This new metal was quite valuable because bronze was much stronger than tin or copper. In Anyang, archaeologists have found bronze pots, plates, ceremonial vessels,

▲ Cowries are snails found in the coastal waters of the Pacific and Indian oceans. The shells shown here are life-sized.

▼ Find the Huang He on this map. Shang farmers learned to tame the wild water buffalo that roamed the river's flood plain.





▲ Shang craftworkers created this 14-inch-high bronze vessel in the shape of a man within a tiger's open jaws. No one knows whether the tiger is protecting the man or eating him. What do you think?

Across Time & Space

Westerners wear black as the color of mourning when someone dies. The Chinese wear white. These seem the opposite until you realize that both cultures are really doing the same thing—avoiding colorful clothing.

■ How did the Shang people live, and how did their religious beliefs affect their lives?

spears, and even chariots. These Shang pieces are skillfully decorated with complex patterns and animal faces.

Religion

The early Chinese believed in many gods. They worshiped individual gods that they believed controlled the sun, moon, stars, rivers, and mountains. They also worshiped a supreme god, Shang Di (*shahng dee*), who took a personal interest in the world and its people. They believed their priests could communicate directly with Shang Di.

Ancestor Worship

As important to the Shang as their gods were their **ancestors**—relatives who had lived before them. The Chinese believed that the wise spirits of their ancestors controlled every part of their lives. Chinese fathers, as the heads of their households, made frequent offerings to their ancestors. Even the king would make offerings to his ancestors at special religious ceremonies.

Burials

Shang leaders believed that when they died, they joined their ancestors. They were buried in deep pits dug in the shape of a cross. Like the Egyptian pharaohs, Shang kings were buried with the things they might need in the next life. These included pottery jars, bronze weapons, jade ornaments, and even war chariots.

In one royal tomb at Anyang, archaeologists found the remains

of nine guards and nine dogs that had been killed and placed around the prince's coffin. They also found the prince's chariot with its four horses and three armed warriors buried alongside.

Oracle Bones

To guide them in this world, Shang kings consulted their ancestors by means of oracle bones. An **oracle** is a prediction about the future. First, the priest would carve the king's question on an animal bone or a turtle shell. Then he would drill holes in one side of the bone and heat it. When the heated bone cracked, the priest looked at the pattern of cracks to find the oracle and answer the king's question.

Kings often asked questions about daily life—for example, whether the day's hunt would be successful. Like us, they also wanted predictions about the weather. The question on one oracle bone reads, "Will the weather be fine tomorrow?" The priest's forecast was, "This evening it will rain; tomorrow, it will be fine." Some of the bones have notes telling whether the oracle was correct. This priest was apparently a good weather forecaster. The bone notes, "In the night rain was granted; the next day it was fine."

Archaeologists have found more than 100,000 of these oracle bones. They contain the earliest known examples of Chinese writing. Readers today can recognize many of the more than 2,000 characters engraved on the 3,600-year-old bones. Read A Closer Look on page 267 to discover more about the development of Chinese writing. ■