

Shang Dynasty



Figure 1: An ancient Chinese bronze vessel known as a gong was used for serving wine. It dates to the Shang dynasty, between about 1600 bc and 1046 bc.



Figure 2: An animal bone from China's Shang period—between about 1600 and 1046 bc—is inscribed with characters of the earliest known form of Chinese writing.



Figure 3: An ancient Chinese wine beaker known as a gu was cast in bronze during the Shang period, between about 1600 bc and 1046 bc.

The first dynasty in China for which there is both written and archaeological evidence is the Shang dynasty. According to legend, there was an earlier Chinese dynasty named the Xia dynasty, but it might not have actually existed. Although historians are not certain exactly when the Shang ruled, the dynasty is thought to have begun about 1600 B.C. and ended in 1046 B.C. The Shang created one of the earliest advanced civilizations in East Asia.

The Shang kingdom was centered in the North China Plain. It extended as far north as what are now Shandong and Hebei provinces and westward through what is now Henan province. The kings of the Shang are believed to have occupied several capitals one after another. One of the capitals was possibly at what is now Zhengzhou, where there are rich archaeological finds. In the 14th century B.C. the dynasty settled at Anyang. The Shang were overthrown in the 11th century B.C. by the neighboring Zhang people.

During the Shang period the king appointed local governors, and there was an established class of nobles. The masses worked chiefly in agriculture. The king made pronouncements as to when to plant the crops. The society had a highly developed calendar system with a 360-day year of 12 months of 30 days each. The calendar took into account the cycles of both the Sun and the Moon.

Chinese writing began to develop during the Shang period. Although no literature survives from the time, archaeologists have found many records and ceremonial inscriptions carved into or brushed onto bone or tortoise shells. These records are the earliest known writing in China.

The Shang also excelled in bronze work. While the earliest bronzes of the Shang were primitive, they eventually grew more advanced. Later Shang bronze works included elegant ceremonial objects as well as a substantial range of cooking and serving dishes and various utensils and ornaments.

The bronzes were often richly decorated. Pottery objects were abundant, and some of the pottery seems to have been shaped on a potter's wheel. Shang pottery included dishes and bowls in a white glaze for ceremonial and ritual use, as well as black pottery in a rich brown glaze for more-everyday purposes. Shang potters also created molds for casting bronzes. In addition, jade carving became quite advanced during the Shang period. Ceremonial weapons of jade were made, as well as jade fittings for actual weapons. Jade figurines included both human and animal shapes carved in the round in careful detail. Many of these jade objects were found in tombs of the Shang period.

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