**1. SHANG DYNASTY**

The Chinese had settled in the Huang He, or Yellow River, valley of northern China by 3000 BC. By then they had pottery, wheels, farms, and silk, but they had not yet discovered writing or the uses of metals.

The Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 BC) is the first documented era of ancient China. The highly developed hierarchy consisted of a king, nobles, commoners, and slaves. The capital city was Anyang, in north Henan Province. Some scholars have suggested that travelers from Mesopotamia and from Southeast Asia brought agricultural methods to China, which stimulated the growth of ancient Chinese civilization. The Shang peoples were known for their use of jade, bronze, horse-drawn chariots, ancestor worship, and highly organized armies.

Like other ancient peoples, the Chinese developed unique attributes. Their form of writing, developed by 2000 BC, was a complex system of picture writing using forms called ideograms, pictograms, and phonograms. Such early forms of Chinese became known through the discovery by archaeologists of oracle bones, which were bones with writings inscribed on them. They were used for fortune-telling and record keeping in ancient China.

**Bone libraries and others**: ancient times. The earliest known libraries were connected with palaces and temples. In China, records of the Shang dynasty (1767?-1123? BC) were written on animal bones and tortoise shells. An early library called "The Healing Place of the Soul," in the palace of Egypt's King Ramses II (1304?-1237 BC) at Thebes, consisted of thousands of papyrus scrolls. Among the most important libraries in the ancient Near East was the palace library of Ashurbanipal (668?-627? BC) at Nineveh in Assyria. This early type of national library, collected "for the sake of distant days," consisted of over 30,000 clay tablets. Early librarians were usually priests, teachers, or scholars. The first known Chinese librarian was the philosopher Lao Tse, who was appointed keeper of the royal historical records for the Chou rulers about 550 BC.

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| **Shang Dynasty (1600-1100 BC)**  Tomb sites found in Anyang  **Tomb sites found in Anyang**  Like the Xia, the Shang dynasty was known only from historical records, until archaeologists uncovered ruins and tombs of the ancient Shang capital near Anyang in northern Henan province in 1927. Found also were over 100,000 animal scapulae and tortoise shells engraved with around 3,000 different written characters in the so-called oracle bone script. These are the oldest documented examples of fully-developed Chinese writing.  Jiagu wen (oracle bone script) found in Anyang  **Jiagu wen (oracle bone script), found in Anyang**  Historians today feel that the Shang culture was likely similar to the earlier Xia kingdom and centered on dynasties of kings who presided over rituals and ruled over villages of peasant farmers. Remains of large tombs, and altars made using rammed earth technology (walls and foundations made by ramming wet earth within large molds – a practice still used to make adobe dwellings in parts of China today), indicate a high degree of social organization was needed to produce these structures.  An bronze vessel with a taotieh design  **An bronze vessel with a "tao-tieh" design, found near Anyang**  Writings from the Han dynasty indicate that there were 30 Shang kings, and that succession was passed from elder to younger brothers as well as from father to son. Shang beliefs seem to have centered on ancestral spirits and a god known in the records as Shangdi, or “upper ruler.” The ruler was thought to have direct links to the powers on high. Rulers presided over a number of ministers who helped direct affairs of the palace, the realm, and ritual, as well as ranks of civil and military officials. Although rulers were typically male, Fu Hao, the wife of one ruler, is said to have been one of Shang’s most able military generals.  A chariot and horse bodies found in Anyang  **A chariot and horse skeletons, found in Anyang**  The tombs at Anyang indicate that sacrifice to the heavens and ancestors were an important part of Shang ritual life. Among the grave goods are sophisticated bronze ritual vessels, skillfully cast in clay molds using techniques first developed for pottery production. A common artistic motif on the bronzes was the “glutton” or “tao-tieh”—a kind of supernatural beast with gaping jaws (see the design in the photo above). Offerings of food and drink were placed in these vessels during rituals. Many remains of human sacrifices have also been uncovered from the tombs at Anyang, including a few skulls with more Western features. Chariots uncovered in the tombs suggest at least indirect contact with Mesopotamian cultures.  Bronze heads with masks made of gold found in Sanxingdui  **Bronze heads with masks of bronze and gold found in Sanxingdui**  In recent years Chinese archaeologists have uncovered a number of other early sites in southwest China. The [**Sanxingdui (Three Stars Cache)**](javascript:void(0)) site near Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, may be contemporary with Shang. The site is noted for is large assemblages of bronze objects–quite unlike those found in Shang. Of particular note are hundreds of stylized bronze heads – many broken – and existing in various sizes. Most outstanding is an abstract, life-size image of what seems to be a ritual specialist. The findings at Sanxingdui and nearby sites raise more questions about early cultures in China than they answer. But one thing is clear. As research continues, a fuller picture of the early origins of Chinese culture will emerge. |