

THE SHANG DYNASTY (c. 1500-1045 BCE) Oracle Texts and Ritual Bronzes

In traditional China, the story of the Chinese past began with accounts of a series of sage rulers whom most people now consider to be mythical. Among these, a figure known as the Yellow Emperor is often placed earliest (though some accounts add other sages before him); traditional tales would yield a date of about 2500 BCE for his era. Tales of the Yellow Emperor do not seem to have existed before about 3-400 BCE. Prior to that time, the most famous legendary sages were a trio of kings known as Yao, Shun, and Yu. Although it may be that none of these men were historical, in the minds of traditional China (and for many contemporary Chinese), the characters of these figures reflected key traits of Chinese culture.

Yao appears originally to have been the hero of a myth about astronomy. The great act of cultural creation for which he was deemed responsible was the determination of the movements of the sun and the creation of a calendar that matched the schedule of the human world with the rhythm of the natural seasons. In this way, Yao gets credit for the great achievement of adapting the “patterns” of the heavens to fashion a pattern for social activity. Yao is also celebrated for another great accomplishment: it is said that Yao concluded that his own son was not virtuous enough to succeed to the office of king, and so commanded that a search be undertaken to find in his kingdom a man of virtue so exalted as to be worthy of the throne. The search produced the name of a common farmer named Shun, a man whose achievements were entirely confined to his private conduct. Despite the fact that he had previously held no public office, Yao designated this man his successor solely on the basis of his character.

Shun appears originally to have been the hero of a moral legend about filiality: perfect dutifulness towards one’s parents. The virtue that brought him to the attention of Yao was this: although Shun was the son of two limitlessly evil parents, he never wavered in his unceasing devotion to them. Though his evil family hated him for his virtue and tried continually to kill him, Shun never allowed their actions to obscure his feelings of love for them or his blunt his efforts to act for their welfare. For this, he was made emperor – and it was enough: so fundamental was filiality in the eyes of Chinese legend-tellers, that the character that underlay perfect love and obedience to parents was the core of sagehood, and Shun, like Yao, was a perfectly wise and just ruler.

Shun acceded with Yao’s vision of the kingship by passing over his own son in designating a successor, instead appointing his Minister of Public Works, Yu, to be the next emperor. Yu was originally the hero of an important myth concerning a great flood

that occurred in China. The waters of all the major rivers swelled over their banks and the land was slowly sinking into sea. The legend tells us that Yu identified the problem as siltation of the river beds, and, using superhuman strength, personally dredged the rivers so they would again flow within their banks. This display of dedication to the state led Shun to designate Yu as his successor. Whether for good reasons or bad, Yu is said to have ended the tradition of non-hereditary succession to the kingship. He passed the throne on to his son, a succession that is said to have begun the earliest dynasty. Here, we begin a transition towards historical facts.

The earliest evidence we have about the origins of Chinese civilization date to the prehistoric era called the Neolithic (New Stone Age) – the term refers to the era when agriculture begins; in China, about 7500 BCE. Because there are no written records for the long period c. 7500 - c. 1500 BCE, our knowledge of Neolithic civilization is limited to an analysis of the character of archaeologically revealed living sites, graves, and objects, mostly pottery. On the basis of these, it has become clear that Chinese civilization originally coalesced from a variety of smaller cultural regions, very likely reflecting different ethnic groups. Sometime about 2000 BCE, a dominant state-like entity seems to have blossomed in the western part of the North China Plain. In China's historical tradition, the leaders of this political entity (or "polity") were part of an hereditary ruling house called the Xia, which is often said to be China's first dynasty, dated roughly 2000-1500 BCE. It is this dynasty which is said to have been founded by the sage king Yu. Whether the cultural remains we have recovered through archaeology truly belong to something as tangible as a state with a ruling dynasty – one, whose founder, perhaps, is the basis for the legend of Yu – is still under debate. Because no writing from this era has emerged to announce that there remains are the "Xia," we cannot be sure. For this reason, we do not here list the Xia among China's historical dynasties, although archaeological studies may in the future establish the historicity of the Xia beyond doubt.

Historical tradition tells us that about 1500, a group from the Eastern region of the Yellow River Valley conquered the Xia and established China's second dynasty, the Shang, and here we enter the historical era. About a century ago, archaeologists did, indeed, unearth an elaborate settlement site north of the Yellow River's lower reaches, occupied from about 1250-1050 BCE; they found there the earliest known written records of China. Inscribed on ox bones and turtle shells, which were used to speak to the world of spirits, written in a form clearly ancestral to later Chinese characters, these documents clearly announced that they were the records of the royal house of the Shang. Thus the Shang royal house became the earliest historically confirmed dynasty in Chinese history, and it is with the Shang that we truly begin our survey of China's cultural history.

The state governed by the Shang Dynasty seems to have been a rather loose confederation of tribe-like groups, who recognized the Shang royal house as possessing

Shang	c. 1700 – 1045 BCE ◀
<i>Zhou</i>	1045 – 256 BCE
<i>Qin</i>	221 – 208 BCE
<i>Han</i>	206 BCE – 220 CE
“Six Dynasties”	220 – 589
<i>Sui</i>	589 – 617
<i>Tang</i>	618 – 907
“Five Dynasties”	907 – 960
<i>Song</i>	960 – 1279
<i>Yuan</i>	1279 – 1368
<i>Ming</i>	1368 – 1644
<i>Qing</i>	1644 – 1911

some form of authority over them. The Shang was eventually conquered by one of these tribal members of its state, the Zhou tribe from Western China, in about 1045 BCE. The Zhou founded China’s longest-lasting dynasty – it existed, at least in name, from 1045 to 256 BCE, though its true power shrank drastically after 770 BCE. The Zhou is often thought of as including China’s “Classical” age, that is, the era during which China’s most enduring cultural features formed. In this section, then, we are casting

a brief glimpse at the culture of “proto-China,” for the Shang, though recognizably Chinese in written language, clan structure, and religious belief, really ruled China before Chinese culture had become aware of its own identity and special nature.

Our knowledge of the Shang derives principally from objects uncovered at the site of its last capital, located near the modern city of Anyang. Palace foundations, household neighborhoods, monumental tombs and common graves were all found there. Two types of objects were of special importance: the inscribed bones and shells used for communicating with the world of spirits, called “oracle texts,” and spectacularly elaborate and artistic bronze ritual vessels, used in sacrificial rites and buried in tombs. In this section, we will focus on these two types of objects to get a glimpse of China’s earliest civilization.



The Oracle Texts

The oracle texts, which constitute almost all of the first hand written record we possess of the Shang Dynasty, consist of primitive versions of Chinese characters etched on large turtle shells or the shoulder blades of oxen. The characters record the questions or statements which were proposed to the world of spirits at the time that the shells or bones were burned with hot pokers to make them crack. The cracks themselves provided the diviner with the spirits’ response to the statements (we don’t know how to interpret

the cracks). Occasionally, the content of the spirits' response is recorded in the inscription of the original question, and sometimes we are even told whether the response tallied with events as they turned out later, but this is rare.

A simple, typical inscription might look like this:

𠄎 𠄎 卜 貞 勿 登 人 三 千

Transcribing character by character, first into modern Chinese and then into word for word English we get:

辛亥 卜 殼 貞 勿 登 人 三千

xinhai-day crack Que divine don't *deng*-sacrifice men 3000

Translating that into normal English we would get:

“We cracked this bone on the day *xinhai*, Que made the divination: Should we not perform a *deng*-sacrifice of three thousand people?”



Oracle Text on a Turtle Plastron

“The day *xin-hai*” refers to the sixty day calendar cycle of the Shang (the same system which today gives us the Year of the Dragon, Horse, or whatever). “Que” was the name of a prominent diviner during the reign of the Shang ruler Wu-ding, who reigned about 1200 BCE. The final sentence records the question asked of the spirits. In view of its content, it is likely that the bone was cracked soon after a major battle in which many members of a non-Shang tribe were captured. (An attractive feature of Shang culture was the dutiful slaughter of surplus captives for the pleasure of natural and ancestral spirits.)

Below are ten further inscription texts which exemplify the range of topics about which the Shang king's diviners questioned the royal ancestors. The inscriptions concern the Shang high god Di, sacrifices to royal ancestors, the welfare of the king and his family, and matters of importance to the Shang state. In some cases, the king himself is recorded as interpreting the answer of the spirits. (If an “X” appears, it means we don't know how to pronounce the Chinese character used to represent someone's name; you can simply “bleep” the names of the divination dates and sacrifice types.)

1. Will Di order rain sufficient for harvest?
2. As for attacking the Qiong tribe, will Di provide us support?
3. The King has a toothache; is Father Yi causing it?

Note: Father Yi was a late uncle of the king.

4. We cracked this on *bing-shen* day, Que divining: On the following *yisi* day shall we offer wine libations to ancestor Xia-yi? The King prognosticated saying, “When we offer the libation there will be misfortune. There will perhaps be thunder.” On *yisi* day we offered wine libations. In the early morning it rained. Upon performing a *fa*-sacrifice the rain ceased. At the *fa*-sacrifice to Xian it also rained. We offered *shi* and *mao*-sacrifices to the Bird Star.
5. The King prognosticated saying, “There shall be misfortune.” On the eighth day after, *gengxu*, clouds in the form of a face covered the sun; a rainbow appeared and drank from the Yellow River.
6. Crack making on *guisi* day, Que divining: These ten days there shall be no disaster. The King prognosticated saying, “There shall be misfortune; there will perhaps come ill news thrice over.” On the fifth day thereafter, *dingyou*, there did indeed come ill news from the West. Guo of Zhi reported saying, “The Tu tribe have attacked my eastern territories; they have ruined two walled towns; also, the X tribe have overrun the fields of my western territories.
7. We cracked this on *jiashen* day, Que divining: Will Fu Hao have a fortunate birth? The King prognosticated saying, “If she gives birth on a *ding* day it shall be fortunate; if on a *geng* day, it shall be greatly auspicious.” On the thirty-third day thereafter, on *jiayin*, Fu Hao gave birth. It was not fortunate – it was a girl.

Note: Fu Hao was a chief wife of the king.

8. We cracked this on *xinwei* day, Zheng divining: Should Fu Hao follow Guo of Zhi and attack the X tribe? Should the King attack Zhonglu from the East and march to where Fu Hao shall be?
9. On *jiawu* day the King cracked this and divined: Should we perform a *rong*-sacrifice? On the next *rong*-sacrifice day shall we follow Lord X to campaign against the Ren tribe? Will the ancestors above and below provide support and not visit disaster upon us? Will we be able to report at the Great City Shang that there has been no disaster? The King prognosticated saying, “It is greatly auspicious.”

10. We cracked this on *guisi* day, Que divining: These ten days shall there be no disaster? The King prognosticated saying, “There shall be misfortune.” It was as he said. On *jiawu* day the King went hunting a rhinoceros. The horse and chariot of Petty Minister Zai toppled over, and the King’s son Yang, who was driving the King’s chariot, also fell.

Shang Bronzes

No other Bronze Age culture ever achieved a level of aesthetic perfection in bronze comparable to Shang culture. The imaginative vision and technical expertise that are combined in Shang ritual vessels represent a peak of virtuoso art that is rare in world history.

It should be understood that to achieve such a level of magnificence, the Shang had to invest enormous resources. Copper and tin, the principal components of Shang bronzes, were not easy to come by. Although there are substantial deposits of these minerals within a few hundred kilometers of site of the late Shang capital, given the rudimentary forms of mining and transportation available, quarrying and shipping the ore to the capital would have been a great drain on labor and a major expense to the Shang elite.

Nor were these ores invested in productive industry. The Shang could have used copper or bronze to strengthen their ploughs, but they did not; they could have used them to reinforce their weaponry, but with few exceptions they did not. Bronze was reserved for the near-exclusive use of the ritual industries, and within that, chiefly for the manufacture of sacrificial vessels. It was the ancestors who enjoyed the fruits of the most developed form of manufacturing technology in Shang China.



The bronzes were crafted both for use and for display. The Shang people had inherited a highly developed craft of pottery from their Neolithic ancestors, a craft that had drawn ideas from many of the distinct agricultural societies that had flourished in China and joined the complex ethnic mix of the Shang. Potters did much more than produce pots, pans, dishes, and cups. A rich repertoire of conventional forms had evolved: tripods for boiling, covered steamers, bowls for hot grains, platters for meat and fish, kettles for hot drink, pitchers and jugs for wine, goblets, beakers, basins – each type

with its own conventional variety of ever-evolving forms.

The forms of the bronzes are outstanding artistic creations, but what particularly captures the imagination are the inscribed designs. The bronzes designs reflect a fantastic animal world, filled with dragons, monsters, regal birds, snakes, cicadas, and other animals, both real and fantastic. These animal images occupy space filled with intricate and pulsating patterns; the rarest surface of a Shang bronze is smooth, bare space – except for occasional punctuating regions of relative quiet, the fully evolved bronze conveys a sense of dynamic movement in every part.

Although there is a great wealth of animal imagery, a single motif tends to dominate the bronze designs, by its frequency, its size, and its central placement. This is the image of a strange symmetrical monster mask, known by Classical times as a *taotie* image. The *taotie*, Classical texts tell us, was a beast of insatiable greed – both of the Chinese characters used to write its name are based on the graphic element of the verb “to eat.” The *taotie* image that we see on the bronzes, with its staring eyes and ever-gaping jaw, does suggest such a rapacious beast – but why is it there?



Taotie pattern from Shang bronze

The *taotie* generally occupies the central bands, or “registers,” of the bronze, and is centered so that its symmetrical form extends to the edge of each side of the vessel. If you look at the entire form, the face of the beast stares at you. But if you look at either side alone, you see instead a full figure of the beast in profile. This double figure of the *taotie* is more visible in some cases than in others, but generally constitutes a basic feature of the motif.

There may be no issue of Shang culture that has created more controversy than the question of the significance of the eerie animal imagery of the bronzes. Some scholars think that the motifs may reflect a belief that in some way animals, perhaps those sacrificed to feed the ancestral spirits, acted as a type of mediating force to link the world of the living to those of the spirits. If so, this would represent a continuity with the Shang tradition of communicating with the spirits by means of turtle shells and ox bones – the oracle bone texts. However, neither turtles nor oxen seem to appear with any frequency on bronzes, which tend to be dominated by highly stylized renderings of birds, cicadas, dragon-like creatures, and the fantastic *taotie*.

The bronzes share with the oracle texts a common theme – the apparent Shang emphasis on ritual life. Among the oracle texts, no subject is more commonly or painstakingly divined than the intricate calendar of royal ancestral sacrifices. The bronze vessels testify to the tremendous importance of ritual – the investment of wealth and

labor in these instruments of food sacrifice to the ancestors is beyond estimation, and reflects at the center of the Shang state the highest priority valuation given to ritual goods and ritual action. The world of the dead and the living – or, more specifically, the realm of action that linked the dead and living worlds – was the principal concern of the Shang kings. The belief in their control over this axis was probably the key to their power.