

# Shang Dynasty: China's First Recorded History

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.28.17

Word Count **646**

Level **830L**



A pit of oracle bones at Anyang, China. Oracle bones were first used by the Shang dynasty. Photo from Wikimedia

Recorded history in China begins with the Shang dynasty. A dynasty is a long period of rulers from the same family.

Scholars today think the Shang dynasty began sometime in the mid-1700s to the mid-1500s B.C. There was one event more than any other that signaled the beginning of the Shang Dynasty: the Bronze Age.

During the Shang dynasty, using the metal bronze became common. Bronze containers for drinking were used in ceremonies. Bronze chariots and axes were used in battle.

Thousands of artifacts from the ruins of the last capital of the Shang were found in the late 1920s and 1930s.

## Royalty had tombs full of artifacts

Metal was linked with royalty. So, the tombs of Shang kings had hundreds of small bronze objects inside them. One tomb was discovered with 468 works of bronze and 775 pieces of jade, which is a green stone. Some of the bronze objects found contained the first Chinese characters ever written.



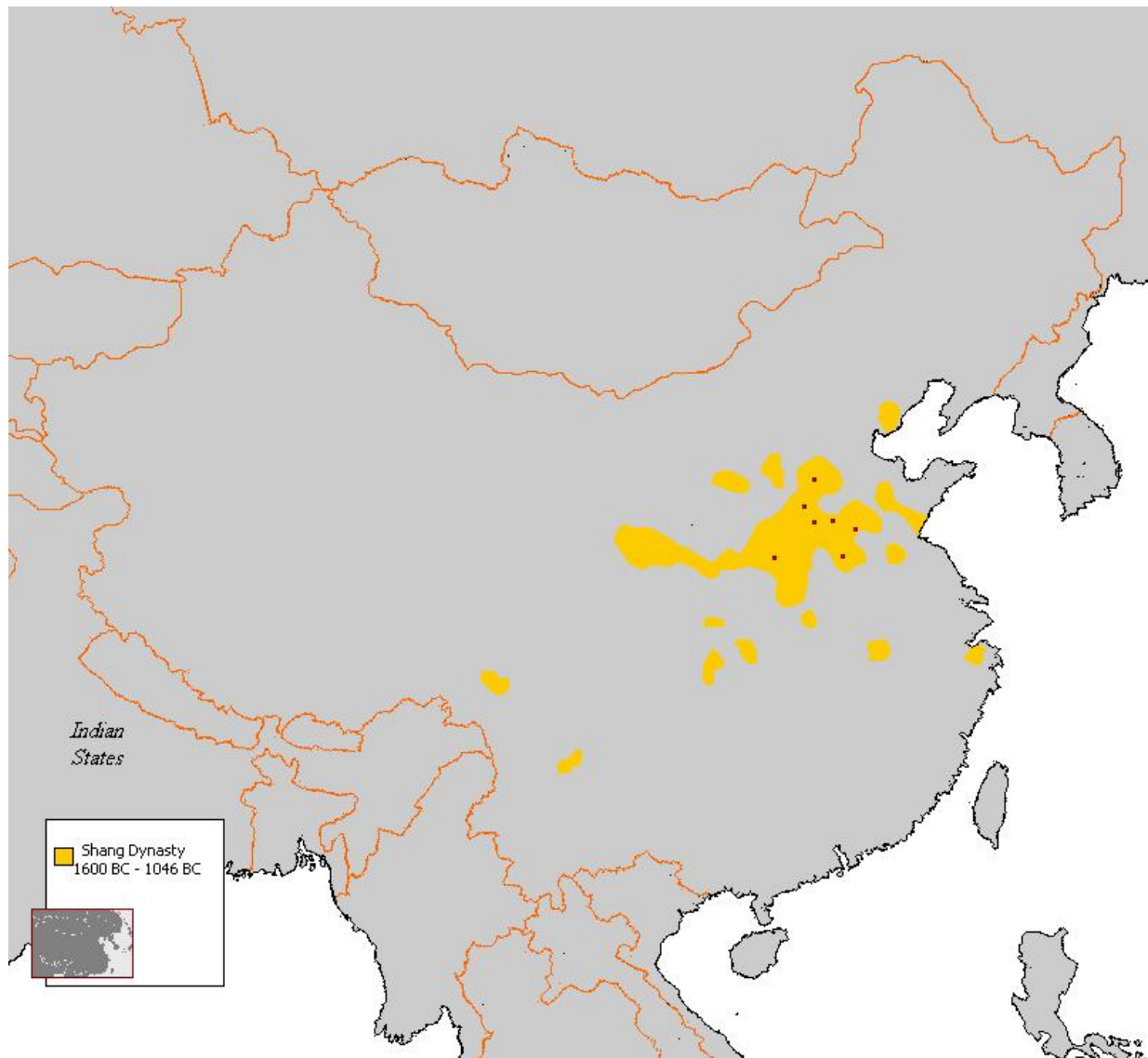
Other examples of early Chinese writing include inscriptions on bones. Ancient Chinese priests used tortoise shells and cattle bones to answer questions about the future. They used the cracks formed by holes punched in the bones to explain things. These bones also were a way to write down the history of the dynasty and the timeline of kings.

The Shang were skilled workers. They made objects of bone, jade, ceramics, stone, wood, shells and bronze. These items were discovered in palaces from that time.

The people of the Shang dynasty lived off the land. At first, they wandered as nomads. As time passed, they settled permanently on farms. Flooding by the Yangtze and Yellow rivers was possible, so the ancient Shang developed ways to protect themselves.

The farming of grains, wheat, rice and barley crops provided the major sources of food. The people also hunted and raised animals.

## Defined social structure



Like many other ancient cultures, the Shang created a social pyramid. The king was at the top, followed by top military leaders, priests, merchants and farmers.

Burials were one way in which the social classes were separated from each other. The rich elite were buried in special tombs with various objects for their use in the afterlife. Even an elephant was found among the ruins of an ancient tomb. The poor, lower classes were buried in pits of different sizes. And, people of the lowest classes were sometimes tossed down wells after they died.

All of the classes, however, had one thing in common: religion. Today's major religious practices in China had not yet been formed. During the Shang dynasty, people worshipped many gods.

## **Please your ancestors**

Worshipping ancestors was also very important to the Shang. It was thought that the success of crops and the health and well-being of people were based on the happiness of dead ancestors. If the ancestors of a family were pleased, life for that family would be good. If the spirits were not pleased, bad things could happen.

Shang Ti was the god worshipped by everyone during the Shang dynasty. Shang Ti was believed to be the link between people and other, less-powerful gods than himself. He was also seen as the link between humans and the spirits of the dead. The Shang thought that dead ancestors visited Shang Ti and received their instructions from him. So, it was very important to make sure that Shang Ti was happy. This was done with rituals, prayers and offerings.

The last king of the Shang dynasty was King Zhou. He was a cruel man known for torturing people. The dynasty had been weakened by repeated battles with nomads and warring tribes within China. King Zhou was ousted by the rebel leader Wu-wang in 1111 B.C. The Shang dynasty ended afterward.

**Quiz**

- 1 Read the section "Defined social structure."

Which paragraph explains what united the different classes of people in the Shang dynasty?

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Royalty had tombs full of artifacts."

*The people of the Shang dynasty lived off the land. At first, they wandered as nomads. As time passed, they settled permanently on farms. Flooding by the Yangtze and Yellow rivers was possible, so the ancient Shang developed ways to protect themselves.*

Which answer choice is an accurate explanation of this paragraph?

- (A) The people of the Shang dynasty slowly changed the way they used the land to live.
- (B) The people of the Shang dynasty were able to stop rivers from ever flooding.
- (C) The people of the Shang dynasty stopped using the land when they settled permanently.
- (D) The people of the Shang dynasty stopped living off the land because rivers flooded.
- 3 Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].

*Thousands of artifacts from the ruins of the last capital of the Shang were found in the late 1920s and 1930s.*

Which selection from the section "Royalty had tombs full of artifacts" BEST explains what "artifacts" are?

- (A) They used the cracks formed by holes punched in the bones to explain things.
- (B) They made objects of bone, jade, ceramics, stone, wood, shells and bronze. These items were discovered in palaces from that time.
- (C) Flooding by the Yangtze and Yellow rivers was possible, so the ancient Shang developed ways to protect themselves.
- (D) The farming of grains, wheat, rice and barley crops provided the major sources of food. The people also hunted and raised animals.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Please your ancestors."

*Worshipping ancestors was also very important to the Shang. It was thought that the success of crops and the health and well-being of people were based on the happiness of dead ancestors. If the ancestors of a family were pleased, life for that family would be good. If the spirits were not pleased, bad things could happen.*

What is the meaning of "ancestors" based on this paragraph?

- (A) crops and health
- (B) aunts and uncles
- (C) frightening spirits
- (D) dead family members