

Ancient Chinese Dynasties: Xia and Shang

Geography of China

Chinese civilization begins in the second millennium BCE with the expansion of agricultural villages in the Huang He River, also known as the Yellow River valley in the northern part of the country. China has two major rivers, the Huang He and the Yangtze Rivers both allowed for civilizations to grow and prosper in these river valleys. Geographically isolated by distance from other early centers of civilizations like Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Indus Valley, Chinese civilization developed a distinctive style. Millet, the grain that became the staple of early Chinese life, grew so easily in the Yellow River valley's rich soil that it did not need additional fertilizer. Population grew because of this and toward the end of the second millennium those characteristics emerged that signify a civilization: the creation of governments, the development of a religious tradition, the use of metals, and the erection of public buildings. Because wood rather than stone or mud brick was the preferred building material, far fewer architectural monuments of early China survive than in India and the Near East.

The Xia Dynasty

The first Chinese dynasty was called the Xia. It appeared around 2200 BCE and fell around 1780. The Xia Dynasty thus began a period of family or clan control. It was during this period that Chinese civilization developed a ruling structure that employed both a benign civilian government and harsh punishment for legal transgressions. From this the earliest forms of Chinese legal codes came into being.

There is little historical evidence that existed about the Xia Dynasty, but Archaeologists have uncovered urban sites, bronze implements, and tombs that point to the possible existence of the Xia dynasty at locations cited in ancient Chinese historical texts. In 1959, a site was excavated containing large palaces that some Chinese archaeologists have attributed as capital of the Xia Dynasty, though at the time, Western archaeologists were reluctant to make this claim. Most archaeologists now identify the Erlitou culture as the site of the Xia dynasty.

The Shang Dynasty

The Chinese dynasty of the Xia was ended by descendants of the Shang. Around 1650 BCE the Shang controlled a corner of northern China along the Huang He River. The Shang Dynasty dominated this region until 1027 BCE. It was under the Shang Dynasty when Chinese civilization first took shape.

Government

Archaeologists have uncovered large palaces and rich tombs of Shang rulers. Shang Kings were warriors and often led their men into battle. From their walled capital in Anyang, they emerged to drive off nomads from the city. The king was the central figure in Shang government but it was probable that the king controlled a very small piece of land. The rest of the land was governed by loyal princes and nobles. These nobles helped the king rule his vast kingdom, so the early form of Chinese government was similar to the city-states of Sumer, and not a centralized monarchy.

Social Classes and Peasant Life

Shang society mirrored other early civilizations. Alongside the royal family was a class of noble warriors. Shang warriors used leather armor, bronze weapons, and horse-drawn chariots. These were devastating weapons that allowed the Shang to control their territory without fear of being conquered by neighboring peoples.

Most people in Shang society were peasants. They clustered together in farming villages where they led grueling lives. All family members worked in the fields, using stone tools to prepare the ground for planting or to harvest grain. When they were not in the fields, peasants were used to repair the dikes, or fight in the armies of their lords.

Shang Religion

The Shang developed a complex religion that focused on the worship of gods and nature. Chief among the gods was Shang Di and a mother goddess who brought plants and animals to earth. Gods like Shang Di would not respond to the pleas of mortals. Only great mortals like the family of the king could get the gods to listen. Thus, the prayers of rulers and nobles were used to bring good to the community as a whole to ensure good harvests and victory in war. The Chinese began to call on these spirits to bring them good fortune in times of need. To honor these spirits and gods the Chinese offered the gods sacrifices of food and drink.

The Chinese believed that the universe reflected a delicate balance between two forces, yin and yang. Yin was linked to the earth, darkness and female forces, while yang stood for heaven, light and male forces. To the Chinese these forces were not opposition but were both needed to keep the balance.

Chinese Writing

The ancient Chinese developed a system of writing. The system uses both pictographs and ideographs, signs that expressed thoughts or ideas. Some of the oldest examples of Chinese writings are oracle bones. On animal bones or turtle shells, Shang priests wrote questions to the gods. Priests heated the bones until they cracked, and from the cracks the priests can provide answers to the questions. The Chinese system of writing has over 10,000 characters and takes years to learn. But the amount of money it cost to learn left writing in the hands of the wealthy. At the schools they perfected reading, writing and calligraphy, which is an artistic form of writing.

In the chart below place the most important facts about each of the categories.

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Shang Writing	