

CHAPTER TWO – THE BEGINNINGS OF CIVILIZATION: THE MYTHOLOGICAL RULERS AND THE XIA AND SHANG DYNASTIES

Although the classical Chinese texts record a chronological sequence of dynasties that ruled China during its bronze age, archaeology paints a different picture. While bronze-working began around 2000 BCE, by 1200 BCE there was not just one, but several bronze-based cultures throughout the land. Therefore, the primary issue that scholars of ancient China must address is how to reconcile these two conflicting records. Clearly there were bronze-working areas that existed apart from the traditional Chinese kingdoms, but whether these areas should be considered part of the same culture is a matter of debate.



Yellow Emperor

THE EARLY MYTHOLOGICAL RULERS

The first Chinese monarchs mentioned in the classical texts, such as Sima Qian 's Records of the Grand Historian, written in the Han period (206 BCE – 220 CE), are the Sān Huáng Wǔ Dì or the Three Sovereigns. Though different texts have given different names to these first mythological rulers, they agree upon their divine nature. They were said to be god-kings, who used their powers to teach the Chinese people the arts of writing, divination and geomancy. Following the Three Sovereigns are known came the Five Emperors. They were human rulers, unlike the Three Sovereigns, of whom the classical texts praise for their perfectly cultivated virtue. Like the Three Sovereigns, they were also instrumental in bringing the arts of civilization to the Chinese people. Foremost among the five was a figure known as Huáng Dì or the Yellow Emperor, who ruled for ninety-nine years, and was said to have developed the methods of traditional Chinese medicine, as well as the technique of weaving silk from silkworms. According to the ancient sources, succession in those days was not based on kinship. Instead, power was passed to the person who was deemed most capable of ruling. Thus, Emperor Shun, the last of the Five Emperors, abdicated from his throne in favour of his minister Yu, whom he saw as the ideal civil servant. However, upon his death, Yu passed his power on to his son Qi, setting the precedent for hereditary dynastic succession. This first dynasty, founded by Yu, is known as the Xia dynasty, and is traditionally dated from 2070 BCE to 1600 BCE.

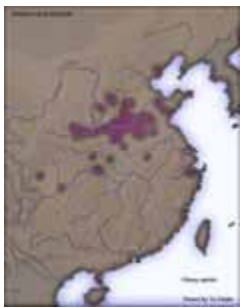
While the Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors are figures of legend, the Xia rulers straddle the line between myth and history. In fact, the question of whether or not the Xia dynasty really existed is an immense issue of contention among scholars of ancient China. Many believe the Xia dynasty is in truth more mythological than actual, for its existence has never been definitively confirmed by archaeology. While the earliest Bronze Age sites, which emerged in northern China around 2000 BCE, have often been

linked with the Xia, they contain no written records that could confirm the dynasty name or names of the rulers. Despite this, the Xia dynasty is usually included in the traditional Chinese chronology of dynasties. The foremost of early Bronze Age cultures associated with the Xia dynasty is the Erlitou culture, which was situated throughout the provinces of Shanxi and Henan. In fact, a site near the city of Yanshi in Henan, where archaeologists have uncovered a large urban settlement and tombs that date to roughly the same period as the Xia, has been speculated to be its capital.



Xia Ruins

THE SHANG DYNASTY



Shang Civilization

The successors to the Xia, the Shang dynasty (also called the Yin dynasty), are much more well-documented through both literary and archaeological sources. There were all together thirty-one Shang kings, who reigned from circa 1600 BCE until 1046 BC, where they were overthrown by the Zhou. The Shang capital during its height, from around 1200 BCE onwards, which stood near the modern city of Anyang, is known today as the Ruins of Yin. It was here that the famous oracle bones were unearthed in the 19th century. Originally sold as dragon bones with magical markings in Chinese medicine markets, and used for healing, these were really cattle and deer bones, as well as turtle shell fragments, inscribed with an archaic pictorial script. It was not until 1899 that two scholars, Wang Yirong and Liu E recognized the script as an ancient form of Chinese writing. Once deciphered, the inscriptions on the oracle bones revealed that they were in fact the divination records of the Shang royal house. They were used in a form of divination known as pyromancy, where fire would be applied to the bones, and the crack pattern that resulted due to the heat would be interpreted as a divine answer. Since 1899, over 48,000 of these oracle bone fragments have been translated and published. Further archaeological evidence that confirmed the existence of the Shang dynasty at Anyang was the discovery eleven royal-sized tombs, complete with grave goods of bronze, jade and ceramics. As classical Chinese history recorded that there were twelve Shang kings who reigned at Anyang, these eleven tombs accounts for the fact that the last Shang ruler was overthrown by the Zhou conquest, and would not have received a royal burial. There were also many smaller tombs, for the consorts of the Shang kings. Of all the royal tombs, only one of them had not yet been pilfered by grave robbers when archaeologists opened it. This was the

tomb of Lady Fu Hao, a consort of King Wu Ding, who ruled in the thirteenth century BCE. It contained over a thousand objects made of bronze and jade, such as ritual vessels, weapons and bells, as well as the remains of sixteen of her servants whose service was to continue in the afterlife. Together with the oracle bone record, the royal tombs at Anyang confirm without a doubt the historical existence of the Shang dynasty.



Shang Oracle Bones

At its height around 1200 BCE, the Shang capital at Anyang was an impressive city. Enclosed within a high wall of rammed earth, it included a palace complex as well as religious temples and altars. Text from the oracle bones show that the Shang kings also acted as high priests. Besides performing oracle bone divination, the kings offered the sacrifices to the myriad gods and divinities of ancient China. These included Di, the high god of rain and thunder, as well as the numens of the sun and moon, the four winds, the rivers and mountains, and the ancestors of the royal house. Sacrifices could involve hundreds of animal victims, as well as human war captives. The royal ancestors were especially important because they were believed to be able to appeal to Di directly, on behalf of the king. They were also thought to have significant power of their own, being able to assist the king in battle and curse his enemies. Advice from the ancestors was sought through writing on the oracle bones, and their responses interpreted by the crack pattern on the heated bone. Advice was sought in matters such as harvest expectations, military expeditions, tribute payments and natural disasters. Sometimes the queries posed by the king were of a more personal nature, such as the meaning of a certain dream.

SHANG ERA DEVELOPMENTS



Shang Bronze Weapons

The Shang dynasty is known among archaeologists for its remarkable bronze artifacts. In China, bronze working of ceremonial and ritual vessels started around 2000 BCE. These were cups, goblets and cauldrons used to hold food and wine, either during meals or as sacrifices to the gods. Compared with bronze work from contemporary ancient civilizations, Shang bronzes stand out in terms of both quantity and quality. Shang bronze making involved the mining and refining of copper, tin and lead ores, the production and transportation of charcoal, and lastly, the casting process. The entire process would have required not only a large number of labourers, but also a considerable amount of labour specialization. It is estimated that as many as three hundred craftsmen were required in the production

of the largest Shang bronze vessel found, which weighed 875 kilograms. Images of birds and animals are prominent in Shang bronze work, most notably the image of a stylized animal face known as the taotie. Scholars are unsure of why animal images dominate Shang bronzes, as the artwork of ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Babylonia are mostly decorated with agricultural motifs and human images. Though bronze working did not begin with the Shang, they were the first culture in China to exploit its military potential. Beginning around 1500 BCE, was the large-scale production of bronze-tipped weaponry, including spears and halberds. From 1200 BCE onwards, bronze was also used for the spokes on chariot wheels. Chariot technology, which originated in Central Asia, gave Shang armies a mobile and tactical edge over their enemies. Shang armies could be composed of over ten thousand men, and frequently campaigned against the many tribes who lived on the borders of Shang territory. The Shang state relied upon war. War booty was an important source of revenue for the Shang economy, and human war captives became slaves and sacrificial victims.

The greatest developments of the Shang period, however, can perhaps be found in writing. The earliest Chinese writing can be found on Late Neolithic pots. The first full sentences, however, come from the Shang oracle bones. With its use in divination, writing was a major element of Shang culture. It was also absolutely vital to political control, for it allowed for communication across a large, expanding kingdom. Shang writing, like modern Chinese, was an entirely logographic script, with each character representing a word. During the Shang period, and indeed throughout all of Chinese history, the logographic script was an essential facilitator of communication because regional spoken languages were quite often mutually unintelligible. In addition, the logographic script allowed literate Chinese to read texts written centuries before their own time period, because logographic characters evolve much slower than phonetic languages. Thus, China's written language has played a crucial role in holding China together from the Shang era to the present. It has also been significant for the history of East Asia, with Korea, Japan and Vietnam all adopting the Chinese script at some point in their histories. Chinese scholars and academics were well-read throughout all of East Asia, with Korea and Japan even adopting the Confucian-based exams for civil service. Thus through its writing system, it is undeniable that China has significantly shaped the cultures of its East Asian neighbours.

SEPARATE BRONZE AGE CULTURES



Sanxingdui Gold Masks

Although the Shang kingdom is regarded as the first Chinese state, it was in no means comparable in size to modern-day China. Shang cities were located primarily in the Yellow River Valley, in the provinces of Henan and western Shandong, with the southernmost settlements along the main branch of the Yangzi river. Shang technology such as bronze working, however, diffused beyond the territory they controlled. In other areas along the Yangzi and in Jiangxi province, many bronzes have been found that were made

in the Shang style, yet differ stylistically. The Yangzi region in particular has produced some outstanding bronze finds, such as pits containing several large musical bells buried together. Such finds provide evidence for the fact that the political and religious elites in this area were able to monopolize wealth and power much like Shang kings. Whether an area such as this should be considered to be part of Shang civilization, or simply a culture that borrowed heavily from the Shang is a matter of debate. There are unfortunately no written documents found for this culture, so it is unknown what language they would have spoken. North of the Shang core was another independent bronze working culture quite unlike the Shang, with their bronzes being more reflective of the Central Asian and Siberian style. However, they shared the Shang practice of oracle bone divination, so some cultural fusion between the two must have occurred. In 1986, another culture contemporary to the Shang was discovered at Sanxingdui, in western Sichuan. Here archaeologists uncovered a walled city of nearly two square kilometres. Archaeological finds from large sacrificial pits in this area have produced objects never found at Shang sites, including golden masks and ivory elephant tusks. There is also no trace, however, of the practice of human sacrifice from the Sanxingdui culture. For some reason, this city was abandoned around 1000 BCE, and with no sites from later periods that suggest the culture's continuation. It is only through archaeology that Sanxingdui mysterious civilization is known, for it has never been recorded in Chinese history.

The discovery of sites such as Sanxingdui suggests a political landscape of Bronze Age China rather different from the traditional perspective. While the Shang kingdom has always been considered the central and dominant state of China in the 2nd millennium BCE, the lack of written records from non-Shang cultures has prevented historians from completely understanding the power dynamic between the Shang and its neighbours. At this time period, a vast number of tribes and smaller kingdoms besides the Shang must have inhabited China. Some of them would have enrolled as tributary states, or vassals of the Shang dynasty, while others clearly remained hostile. The mighty Shang kingdom met its match in 1045 BCE, when a vassal state named Zhou would conquer and displace the Shang as the dominant political power in China.

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