

Life in The Shang Dynasty

The Shang Dynasty, which ruled ancient China from approximately 1600 BC to 1046 BC, represents one of the most significant early civilisations in Chinese history. Centred on the fertile plains of the Yellow River valley, the dynasty grew wealthy through farming, trade and military conquest. Farmers cultivated crops such as rice, wheat and millet and reared animals including pigs, cattle and silkworms, whose thread was woven into silk — a luxury traded across great distances.

Shang society was hierarchical. The king exercised absolute authority over both political matters and religious rituals, reinforcing his position as the link between humans and the gods. A class of nobles supported royal rule, while priests played a crucial role in interpreting messages from ancestors and deities. This was done primarily through oracle bones — animal bones or tortoise shells that were heated until they cracked, with the patterns then interpreted as divine guidance on matters ranging from warfare to the weather.

The dynasty is celebrated for its remarkable cultural achievements. Shang craftsmen produced intricately decorated ritual vessels of extraordinary quality, demonstrating highly advanced technology. The writing system developed during this period, with approximately 1,500 recorded characters, directly influenced the Chinese script in use today. Militarily, the Shang were formidable, deploying chariots, bronze-tipped weapons and organised infantry. The dynasty eventually fell to the Zhou people in 1046 BC, but its legacy shaped Chinese civilisation profoundly.

Questions

1. What dates mark the beginning and end of the Shang Dynasty?
2. How did the Shang Dynasty grow wealthy?
3. Why was silk particularly valuable?
4. What does the word “hierarchical” mean in the context of Shang society?
5. Describe the king's role in both politics and religion.
6. What were oracle bones and how were they used?
7. What subjects might oracle bones be consulted about?
8. What made Shang bronze objects so impressive?
9. How many characters did the Shang writing system contain, and why is it historically significant?
10. Why do you think the Zhou people's defeat of the Shang in 1046 BC did not mean the end of Shang culture and influence?



Text D Quiz



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