Bronze Age China

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Xia Dynasty

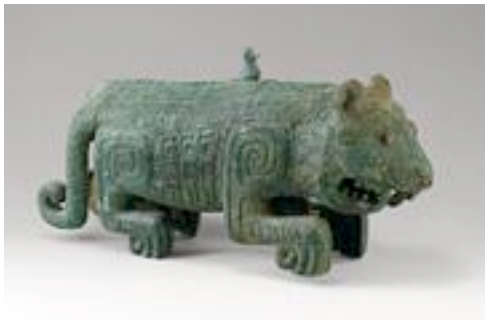
The bronze age in China refers to the period between about 2000 and 771 B.C., when bronze was produced on a massive scale for weapons and ritual objects used by the ruling elite. Traditional Chinese histories, written in later centuries, speak of a series of ancient rulers who invented agriculture, writing, and the arts of government. The last of these legendary rulers, Yu, is credited with controlling floods and founding the Xia dynasty. Yu also cast nine sacred bronze vessels that became symbolic of the right to rule, and these were passed on to subsequent dynasties. While the account in the traditional histories is linear, with states following one another in a logical progression, the archaeological record reveals a more complicated picture of Bronze Age China.

Archaeological investigation has confirmed much of the legendary history of the dynasty following the Xia -- the Shang -- but the existence of Xia itself is still debated. Today, Chinese scholars generally identify Xia with the Erlitou culture, but debate continues on whether Erlitou represents an early stage of the Shang dynasty, or whether it is entirely unique. In any event, new prototypes emerged at Erlitou -- in architecture, bronze vessels, tomb structures, and weapons -- that greatly influenced material culture in the Shang and subsequent Zhou dynasties.

Shang Dynasty

Archaeological evidence about the Shang comes mainly from excavations at Zhengzhou and Anyang, both in Henan province. Zhengzhou (the type site of what is called Erligang culture) is assigned to the period 1500 to 1300 B.C. and Anyang (ancient Yinxu) to the period of roughly 1200 to 1050 B.C.

Remains at Zhengzhou include the foundations of city walls, large buildings, bronze foundries, and bone and pottery workshops, as well as a number of burial sites. By 1500 B.C., Shang burial traditions were becoming well defined. The deceased lay in a wooden coffin at the bottom of a shaft. Below the coffin chamber was a sacrificial pit (yaokeng) containing the body of a sacrificed man or dog (probably a guard). Surrounding the chamber was a platform (ercengtai) that held grave goods and more human sacrifices. Sacrifices of humans and animals were also placed beneath the foundations of buildings at this time. Bronze vessels included in burials were much larger than those created previously, and more varied in shape.



Bronze tiger from Dayangzhou, c. 1200-1050 B.C., Jiangxi Provincial Museum, Nanchang.

Archaeology has now revealed that important regional centers existed alongside the Shang, including those centered around the site of Dayangzhou, south of the Yangzi River basin in Jiangxi province, and the site of Sanxingdui (see More About The Finds at Sanxingdui), just north of the modern city of Chengdu in Sichuan province.

Dayangzhou produced a large burial chamber filled with hundreds of ceramics, bronzes (both weapons and vessels), and jades. Some of the bronzes could be related to types found at Erligang, but others, such as the meat-cooking vessels and bronze bells, were unique to Dayangzhou. Dayangzhou was also distinctive for its use of human heads, ram heads, deer, and especially tigers in design.

More about Excavations at the Tomb of Fu Hao

In 1976, near Anyang, the last Shang capital, archaeologists uncovered a Shang tomb, the only one that has been found intact. Tomb 5 contained the burial of Fu Hao, referred to in the oracle bones as one of the consorts of Wu Ding, twenty-first king of the Shang. The tomb, though modest in size, contained more than fifteen hundred objects. In addition to Fu Hao's own lacquered coffin were the skeletal remains of sixteen humans and six dogs. Among the more than seven hundred jades were examples that date from the Liangzhu culture (see Jade cong), which must have been collected as antiquities. Many bronze vessels were found, some of which were probably used by Fu Hao during her life. Others, which bear her posthumous name (Si Mu Xin), were probably cast as burial goods. Six or seven thousand cowrie shells (which the Shang used as currency) had also been buried with her.

Among the grave goods were bone and jade hairpins, as well as objects normally associated with male burials, including more than ninety dagger axes and dozens of arrowheads. Oracle texts, which specifically refer to Fu Hao as a general, indicate that she participated in several military campaigns, including one in which she led 13,000 troops against the Qiang. It also appears that she was responsible for important rituals and controlled her own estate.

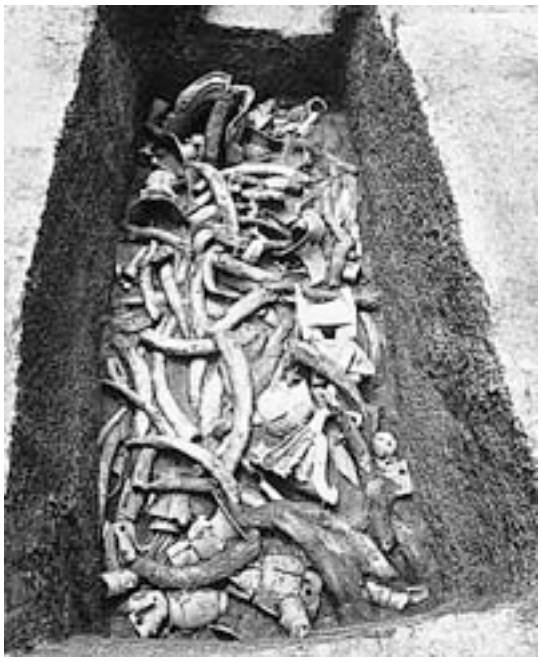
The tomb was a single large rectangular pit, oriented north-south, sunk to a depth of 7.5 meters. Burial niches in the east and west walls held sacrificial victims. Above ground was a large rectangular building, whose purpose is unclear but that may have been used as an ancestral hall where continued memorials and sacrifices could be made to Fu Hao.

The excavations at Anyang and the evidence on the oracle bones have confirmed the existence of the Shang dynasty. It had been recorded in the legendary histories written many centuries later, but in the early part of the twentieth century Chinese scholars had doubted that it had actually existed.

More about The Finds at Sanxingdui

The two pits excavated at Sanxingdui in Sichuan province are among the most fascinating of recent finds in Chinese archaeology. They were discovered by

workers at a local brick factory in the summer of 1986, just outside a walled settlement that had already been excavated. The two pits were filled with bronze objects, jades, and elephant tusks that had been buried (probably as offerings). The objects in Pit 1 had been burned before burial. The finds in Pit 2 (right) were in three distinct layers: on top were some sixty elephant tusks, next came large bronze objects (including Bronze standing figure and Bronze human head with gold leaf), and below were jade and stone implements, animal masks, and some smaller bronzes.



Pit 2 at Sanxingdui held more than sixty tusks. The layer below was filled with bronze heads and masks.

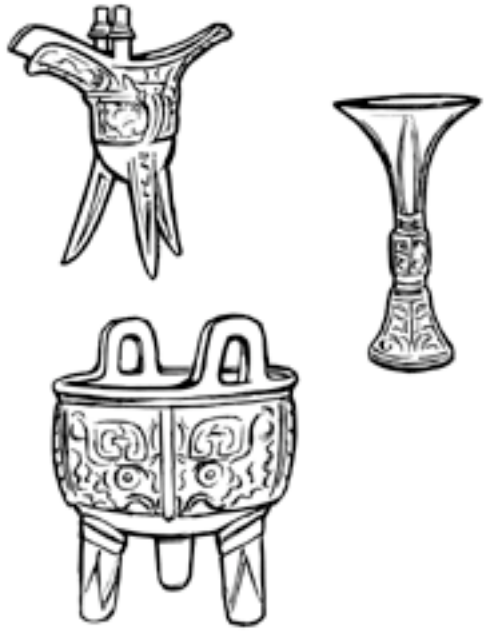
While the site, which is roughly contemporary with the tomb of Fu Hao (late Shang), needs further study, the objects clearly indicate the presence of a strong regional culture with sophisticated religious practices and advanced bronze-casting technology (see see More About Excavations at the Tomb of Fu Hao, Ivory goblet inlaid with turquoise, and Bronze owl-shaped vessel). In contrast to Shang burials, these offering pits show no evidence of human sacrifice, but they do reveal a marked interest in the human form, especially the face.

The Sanxingdui finds are exciting, but they remain enigmatic. No texts have been found, nor is there any mention of this culture in the records of other

states, either during or after the late Shang period. Analysis of lead and other elements in the bronzes indicates sources similar to those of other cultures along the Lower Yangzi river basin. Some Chinese archaeologists and historians have attempted to link this culture with the later Shu culture, which was also centered in Sichuan. At this point, however, the unique culture that produced these artifacts remains a mystery.

More about Bronze Vessels

Bronze vessels were used during the Shang and Zhou periods in ancestral rituals. Ancestors, it was believed, could intercede on behalf of the living, provided they were honored and respected. The bronze vessels were kept in ancestral halls and used during a variety of feasts and banquets. Most bronze vessels were used for food or to heat or cool a millet-based wine. Others served as water basins or jugs. Wine vessels dominated during the Shang, but ritual changes in the middle of the Western Zhou period resulted in a shift toward food vessels.



Three ritual vessel shapes. The gu and jue are wine vessels. Both are very ancient forms that were in use from the Erlitou period (see Part 2). The ding tripod was used for cooked food.

These Shang and Zhou bronze vessels were the most highly esteemed objects of their time, usurping the position held by jade in the late Neolithic period. In addition to their functional and symbolic role in support of lineage rites, bronzes also exemplified the latest technical and artistic developments. Early bronze vessels, including the jue, gu, and ding (above), were based on Neolithic pottery prototypes. But as bronze technology improved, vessels took on shapes and decorative schemes that were unique to the medium.

Diagram of piece-molds

In the center, upside down, is the model for a wine vessel. The two sections of the mold, made of soft clay, are pressed against it to transfer the vessel's shape and decoration. The model is then trimmed away to form a core. The mold-pieces are reassembled around the core, leaving a space, which is filled with molten bronze.

Bronzes were made in ceramic piece-molds (right). The process began with a model, to which soft clay was applied. These clay pieces were removed in sections to form molds, which were reassembled around a core, whereupon molten bronze was poured into the space between the mold and the core. After cooling, the mold pieces were removed. Pre-cast sections of a bronze could be attachedan infinite number of variations could be created on the basis of a few standard shapes. Originally these bronzes were bright and shiny (their present dark patina is a result of burial and age).

Surface decoration could be made by carving into the mold (for raised relief) or into the model (for recessed designs). The narrow bands that characterized early bronze designs gave way to more expansive decorations, which by the late Shang period covered the whole vessel. A common Shang motif is the taotie. Other zoomorphic designs consisted of various animal parts flowing into one another. By the end of the Western Zhou period, this imagery had begun to turn into purely abstract patterns, the meaning of which will probably never be known. They may have been symbolic of the spirits of the ancestors, protective devices, clan or lineage motifs, or perhaps they were associated with mythical beasts or supernatural entities.

More about The Western Zhou

Traditional histories speak of the Zhou conquering the Shang and proclaiming a mandate of heaven. The Zhou justified their conquest by citing the moral depravity and excesses of the last Shang king. They set up a network of kin relationships (zongfai) in various regions, which formed the basis of a new unified state. The Western Zhou mandate was seen as a model for future generations to emulate.

In reality, the formation of the Zhou state was a much more difficult undertaking. The defeat of the Shang by King Wu of Zhou around 1045 B.C. was

actually the second of two campaigns into Shang territory. King Wu died two years later, and a power struggle erupted into a brief civil war. This conflict extended Zhou rule into the northern and eastern regions, where relatives were dispatched to strategic points to defend the Zhou heartland along the Wei River valley. Two capitals were built, a western capital at Zongzhou, and an eastern capital at Chengzhou (present-day Luoyang).

The archaeological record suggests that the Zhou were cultural opportunists. They were quick to adopt the material culture of the Shang, perhaps as a way to establish their legitimacy. Zhou art also borrowed heavily from the Shang, and the Zhou practice of casting inscriptions in bronze vessels, as well as the design of the vessels themselves, suggests a direct Shang influence.

Part of the success of the Western Zhou may have rested with their ability to use ritual traditions to unite far-flung regions. These customs underwent a significant change in direction around the early ninth century B.C. Wine vessels were used less than sets of ding and food basins called gui. Changes also began to take place in divination, shifting from the use of oracle bones to the observation of change in nature, codified in the Zhou yi (better known in the West as the Yijing or I Ching). A century had already passed since the start of the dynasty and it is possible that the Zhou wished to set new standards of ritual practice as a way of exercising control over a changing political landscape.

These changes coincided with a time of military instability, and inscriptions on ninth-century B.C. vessels sometimes mention conflicts in the south and east. Having a core state surrounded by alliances may have contributed to a feeling among the Zhou that the outside world was filled with barbarians. Notions of what constituted "Chinese-ness" were beginning to develop, and are reflected in poetry of the time. Fear of barbarians with different customs became even more entrenched after 771 B.C., when the Zhou court fled to their eastern capital, under pressure from enemies to the west.

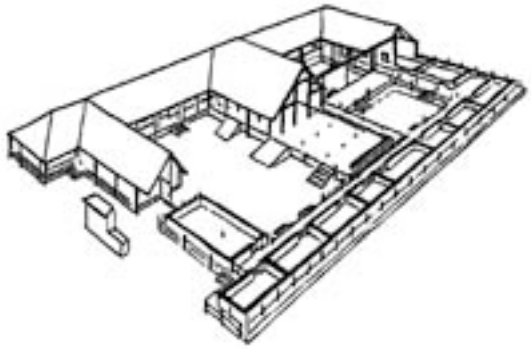
Rites

The Book of Rites (Li ji) and related texts were composed during the late Bronze Age by ritual specialists. The word li has a broader meaning than the English "rites," encompassing social conventions as well as ceremonies and practices:

"Of all things by which men live, li is the greatest. Without li, there would be no means of regulating the services paid to the spirits of heaven and earth; without li there would be no means of distinguishing the positions of ruler and subject, superior and inferior, old and young; without li there would be no means of maintaining the separate relations between men and women, father and son, elder and younger brothers....

Thus [in our sacrifices] the dark liquor is offered in the inner chamber [of the temple]; the vessels containing it are placed near the entrance; the reddish liquor is offered in the main hall; and the clear, in a place below. Animal victims are displayed, and the tripods and stands are prepared. The lutes and citherns are arranged in rows, with the flutes, sonorous stones, bells and drums. The prayers and benedictions are framed. All of these aim to bring down the Lord on High, as well as ancestral deities from above.

The relation between the ruler and ministers is then rectified; generous feeling between father and son is maintained; elder and younger brothers are harmonized; the high and low find their own positions; and the proper relationships between husband and wife are established. This is what is called securing the blessings of Heaven." [from The Book of Rites, trans. Legge, 1967]



Proposed reconstruction of a Zhou temple

Passages from texts dating as far back as the Zhou dynasty refer to the importance of building the ancestral temple (zongmiao) (above) as the first step in the establishment of a city, and the ancestral temples that the Zhou constructed set a pattern that was followed in subsequent periods. The temple housed ancestral tablets that linked past and present generations. The tablets would be organized with the founding ancestor in the rear and more recent ancestors in front, encapsulating the Zhou conception of the past as the foundation on which the present stands.