

# China in the Bronze Age: The Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties (ca. 1500–771 B.C.E.)

The Geography of the Chinese Subcontinent

The Shang Dynasty (ca. 1500–1045 B.C.E.)

**Material Culture:** Rammed Earth

Developments Outside the Shang Core

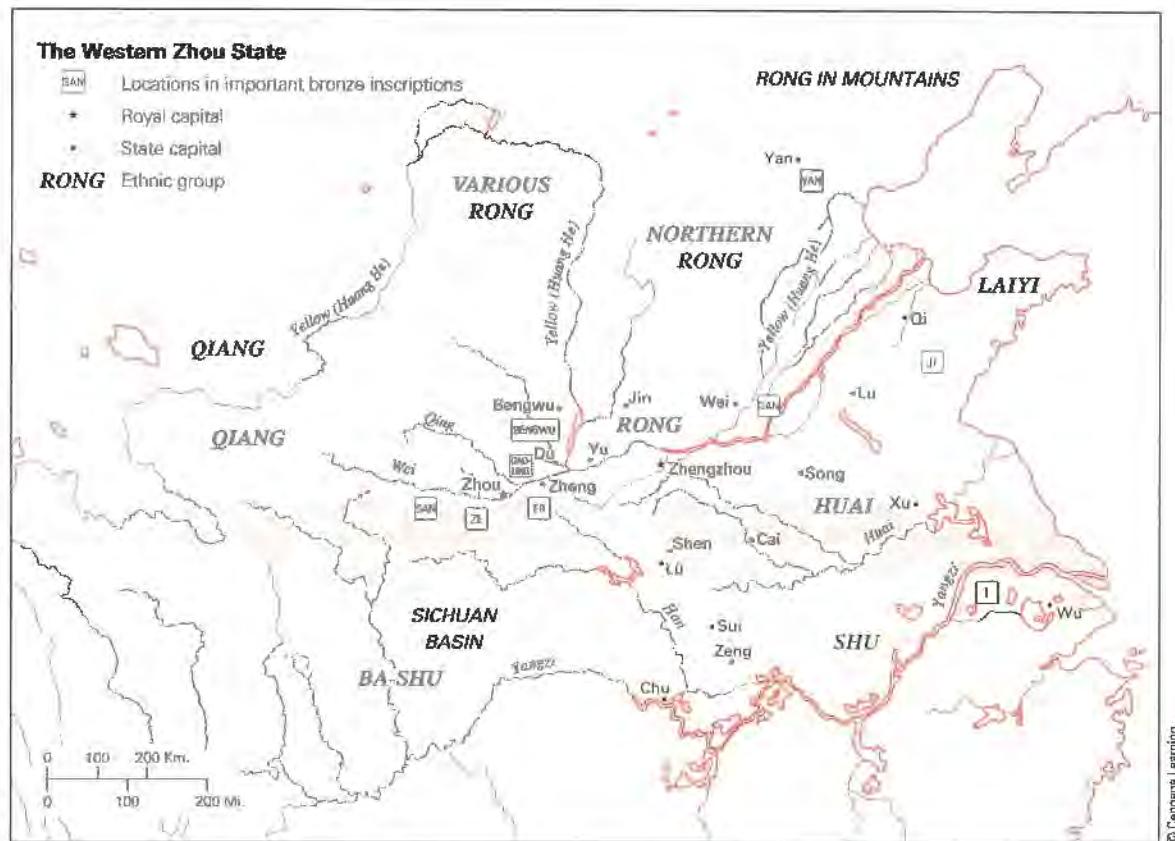
The Western Zhou Dynasty (1045–771 B.C.E.)

**Documents:** The Book of Songs

**C**hina's Bronze Age began soon after 2000 B.C.E., and by 1200 B.C.E. there were bronze-based civilizations in several regions of China. The best known of these was centered on Anyang (ahn-yahng) in north-central China, where the Shang (shahng) Dynasty developed a complex state with writing and large settlements. The inscribed oracle bones found at Anyang confirm traditions about Shang rulers passed down in early texts.

In 1045 B.C.E. the Shang Dynasty was overthrown by an erstwhile ally-vassal, the state of Zhou (joe). The early Zhou Dynasty is known not only from archaeological evidence but also from transmitted texts, which provide the Zhou version of their righteous victory over the decadent Shang. The Zhou rulers sent out vassals to establish settlements in distant regions, creating a feudal-like system.

The issues that engage archaeologists, paleographers, and historians of China's Bronze Age remain the basic ones: Can we reconcile texts that talk of a sequence of dynasties with the archaeological evidence of distinct cultural centers? What were the consequences of the invention of writing? What can be inferred about Shang society and culture from surviving material artifacts such as bronze vessels? Is there any way to tell whether cultures outside the core regions of the Shang and Zhou spoke the same language or considered themselves part of the same culture? How significant in political and cultural terms was the transition from Shang to Zhou? Was anything significant learned from other parts of Eurasia in this period, or were all advances locally generated?



Map 1.1 Western Zhou China

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CHINESE SUBCONTINENT

The term *China* as it is used in this book does not refer to the same geographical entity at all points in history. The historical China, also called China proper, was smaller than present-day China and changed in size over time. It can be thought of as the area settled by Chinese speakers or controlled by a Chinese state, or both. (To radically simplify complex issues of identity, references here to “the Chinese” can be taken to mean speakers of the Chinese language, a group that can also be referred to as the Han Chinese.) The contemporary People’s Republic of China includes territories like Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Turkestan, and Manchuria that were the traditional homes of other peoples and were not incorporated into Chinese states until relatively late in their histories. In this book, to indicate the location of historically significant places

within China, modern province names are used for convenience (see frontispiece map).

The geographical context in which Chinese civilization developed changed slowly over time: rivers and coastlines have shifted, forests have been cleared, and climates have warmed and cooled. The human geography has undergone even more extensive changes as the area occupied by speakers of Chinese has expanded and they have faced different neighbors.

China proper, by the nineteenth century about a thousand miles north to south and east to west, occupies much of the temperate zone of East Asia. The northern part, drained by the Yellow River, is colder, flatter, and more arid than the south. Rainfall in many northern areas is less than 20 inches a year, making it best suited to crops like wheat and millet. The dominant soil is loess—fine wind-driven earth that is fertile and easy to work even with primitive tools. Much of the loess soil ends up as silt in the Yellow River, causing the riverbed to rise

over time. Once people began to dike the river, it became flood prone, since when the dikes break, huge floods result. Drought is another perennial problem for farmers in the north.

The Yangzi River is the dominant feature of the warmer, wetter, and more lush south, a region well suited to rice cultivation and to growing two crops a year. The Yangzi and many of its tributaries are navigable, so boats were traditionally the preferred means of transportation in the south.

Mountains, deserts, and grasslands separated China proper from the sites of other early civilizations. Between China and India lay Tibet, with its vast mountain ranges and high plateaus. North of Tibet are great expanses of desert, where nothing grows except in rare oases; north of the desert, grasslands stretch from Ukraine to eastern Siberia. Until modern times, Chinese civilization did not spread into these Inner Asian regions because they were not suited to crop agriculture. The northern grasslands, where raising animals is a more productive use of land than is planting crops, were the hearland of China's traditional enemies, such as the Xiongnu and the Mongols.

## THE SHANG DYNASTY (ca. 1500–1045 B.C.E.)

China's Neolithic Age is discussed in *Connections: The Prehistory of East Asia*. China had agriculture from about 10,000 B.C.E.; by 4000 B.C.E. distinct regional cultures are evident; by 2500 B.C.E. settlements were sometimes walled, and burials give evidence of increasing social differentiation. It was from these roots that China's first civilization emerged soon after 2000 B.C.E.

Early Chinese texts refer to the first dynasty as the Xia (shya) Dynasty and give the names of its kings. The earliest Bronze Age sites may have some connection to Xia, but they contain no texts to prove or disprove this supposition. The Shang Dynasty, however, is documented in both excavated and transmitted texts, and no one today doubts that it existed. The key excavated texts are the oracle bone inscriptions found in and near the Shang settlement at Anyang, in modern Henan province. Although these inscribed cattle bones and turtle shells had been unearthed from time to time, it was only after 1898 that scholars connected them to Shang kings. Since then, rubbings of some forty-eight thousand bone fragments have been published, giving paleographers much to study.

According to tradition, Shang kings ruled from five successive cities. The best known is the last, Anyang, first excavated between 1928 and 1937. The Shang kings ruled there from approximately 1200 B.C.E. to 1045 B.C.E. At the center of Anyang were large palaces, temples, and altars that were constructed on rammed earth foundations (see *Material Culture: Rammed Earth*).

The Shang kings were military chieftains who regularly sent out armies of three thousand to five thousand men on campaigns; when not at war, they would go on hunts that lasted for months. Their armies fought rebellious vassals and foreign tribes, but the situation constantly changed as vassals became enemies and enemies accepted offers of alliance. War booty, especially the war captives who could be enslaved or sacrificed, was an important source of the king's revenue.

Bronze technology gave Shang warriors superior weapons: bronze-tipped spears and dagger-axes, used for hacking and stabbing. Bronze was also used for the fittings of the spoke-wheeled chariots that came into use around 1200 B.C.E. There is no evidence of animal traction in China before the chariot or of the use of wheels, spoked or solid disk, leading to the conclusion that the chariot was introduced to China by diffusion across Asia. Shang chariots were pulled by two or four horses and provided commanders with mobile stations from which they could supervise their troops; chariots also gave archers and soldiers armed with battle-axes increased mobility.

Shang power did not rest solely on military supremacy. The oracle bone texts show that the Shang king also acted as the high priest, the person best qualified to offer sacrifices to the royal ancestors and the high god, Di (dee), who could command rain, thunder, and wind. The king also made offerings to an array of nature gods, such as the spirits of the sun and moon, the Yellow River, the winds of the four directions, and specific mountains.

Royal ancestors were viewed as able to intervene with the remote Di. They also could send curses, produce dreams, assist the king in battle, and more. The king addressed his ancestors in prayers and made offerings of millet, wine, cattle, sheep, grain, and human victims to them. He discerned his ancestors' wishes and responses by interpreting the cracks made on heated cattle or turtle bones. King Wu Ding (woo ding) (ca. 1200 B.C.E.) had his diviner ask the high god Di or his ancestors about rain, the harvest, military expeditions, dreams, floods, tribute payments, sacrifices, and even a toothache.



## MATERIAL CULTURE

### Rammed Earth

From the late Neolithic period on, pounded or rammed earth was used in north China to build foundations and walls. In fact, in areas of loess soil, rammed earth is still used as a building material, primarily for the walls around houses and farmyards. The method used today begins with dumping loose soil into wooden frames, then pounding it into thin layers with wooden logs. At archaeological sites, the impressions of the pounders are often still visible on the top layer of the wall. Ancient rammed earth can be nearly as hard as concrete.

The most massive rammed earth structure from the Shang period excavated so far is the wall surrounding the city of Zhengzhou (juhng-joe) in Henan (huh-nahn) province. It is about 1,800 meters on each side and about 9 meters tall. The base of the wall was as much as 20 meters thick. Chinese archaeologists have estimated that it contained 870,000 cubic meters of rammed earth, which would have required a labor force of ten thousand men working for eight years to dig the soil, transport it to the site, and pound it into a wall.



Courtesy G. Knapp

**Earthen Walls.** Walls are still constructed of rammed earth today. A frame of logs is built, the earth is pounded into place, and after it is dry, the frame is removed.

Shang palaces were undoubtedly splendid, but they were constructed of perishable material like wood, and nothing remains of them today. What has survived are the lavish underground tombs built for Shang kings and their consorts. The one royal tomb not to have been robbed before it was excavated was for Lady Hao, one of the many wives of King Wu

Ding. Although it was one of the smaller royal tombs (about 13 feet by 18 feet at the mouth and about 25 feet deep) and not in the main royal cemetery, it was nonetheless filled with an extraordinary array of valuable goods. The hundreds of bronze objects in the tomb weighed 1.6 metric tons. About 60 of the bronze vessels had Lady Hao's name inscribed

on them. The 130 weapons found in this tomb show that Lady Hao took an interest in military affairs. There were also 755 jade objects, 63 stone ones, and 564 made of bone. From inscribed bones found elsewhere at Anyang, we know that Lady Hao led several military campaigns, once with thirteen thousand troops against the Qiang (chyahng) tribes to the west. Some of the objects in her tomb appear to be tributes sent to Anyang from distant places. These include both bronze vessels from the south and knives and mirrors from the Northern Zone (occupied by non-Han peoples, discussed below).

In addition to objects of symbolic value or practical use, the Shang interred human beings, sometimes dozens of them, in royal tombs. Why did they do this? From oracle bone texts, it seems that captives not needed as slaves often ended up as sacrificial victims. Other people buried with the king had chosen their fate; that is, his spouses, retainers, or servants could decide to accompany him in death. Those who voluntarily followed their king to the grave generally had their own ornaments and might also have coffins and grave goods such as weapons. Early Shang graves rarely had more than three victims or followers accompanying the main occupant, but the practice grew over time. A late Shang king's tomb contained the remains of ninety followers plus seventy-four human sacrifices (not to mention the twelve horses and eleven dogs). Archaeologists often can identify sacrificial victims because they were decapitated or cut in two at the waist.

Human sacrifice was not confined to burials. Divination texts refer to ceremonies where from three to four hundred captives were sacrificed. In 1976, twelve hundred victims were found in 191 pits near the royal tombs, apparently representing successive sacrifices of a few dozen victims each. Animals were also frequently offered in sacrifice. Divinations proposed the sacrifice of one hundred, two hundred, or three hundred cattle, sheep, pigs, or dogs.

What about those in Shang society who were not buried in well-furnished tombs? The Shang nobility lived in large houses built on platforms of rammed earth. Those lower down on the social scale often lived in homes built partly below ground level, probably as a way to conserve heat.

In the urban centers, substantial numbers of craftsmen worked in stone, bone, bronze, and clay. Their workshops, concentrated in certain sections of the city, were often quite specialized. Some workshops specialized in hairpins, others in arrowheads, and

others in ritual vessels. Another important product was silk made from the cocoons of the silkworm, which fed on the leaves of mulberry trees. Silk from Shang China has recently been discovered in an Egyptian tomb, evidence that its importance as an item of east-west trade began very early.

At the level of technology, the life of Shang farmers was not very different from that of their Neolithic ancestors. They lived in small, compact villages, surrounded by fields that they worked with stone tools. Millet continued to be the basic grain, but some new crops became common in Shang times, most notably wheat, which had spread from West Asia. Sheep, cattle, and pigs were all raised.

The primary difference between Shang farmers and their Neolithic predecessors is the huge gulf that separated them from the most powerful in their society. Shang rulers could command the labor of thousands of men for long periods of time. Huge work forces were mobilized to build the rammed earth city walls, dig the great tombs, open new lands, and fight in wars. Some scholars assume that those laboring for the king were slaves, perhaps acquired through warfare. Others speculate that these laborers also included conscripts called up as needed from among the serf-like farmers. Whatever the status of the workers, coercion, backed by violence, was an essential element of the Shang state.

### Writing

The inscribed oracle bones demonstrate that writing was already a major element in Chinese culture by 1200 B.C.E. Writing must have been invented earlier, but the early stages of its development cannot be traced, probably because it was done on perishable materials like wood, bamboo, or silk.

What impact did writing have? Literacy is an ally of political control, facilitating communication across an expanding realm. From the oracle bones, we know that Shang kept records of enemies slain, booty taken, animals bagged in hunts, and other information, using lunar months and ten-day and sixty-day cycles to record dates.

Although only about 40 percent of the five thousand or so characters used on Shang divination texts have been deciphered, there is no longer any doubt that the language and the writing system of the Shang are directly ancestral to both the language and the writing systems of later Chinese. This script was logographic, similar to ancient Egyptian and



The Granger Collection, New York

**Oracle Bone.** The thousands of inscribed bones that survive from Shang sites are our best source for early Chinese writing. The questions they record were usually addressed to the king's ancestors.

Sumerian, meaning that each word was represented by a single graph (character). In the Chinese case, some of these graphs began as pictures, but other methods were adopted to represent the names of abstract concepts. Sometimes the graph for a different word was borrowed because the two words were pronounced alike. As in later times, sometimes two different graphs were combined; for instance, to represent different types of trees, the graph for tree could be combined with the graph for another word that sounded like the name of a kind of tree. More than half of the characters found on oracle bones combine components in these ways.

In western Eurasia, logographic scripts were eventually modified or replaced by phonetic scripts, but that never happened in China (though, because of changes in the spoken language, many words today are represented by two or three characters rather than a single one). Basic literacy requires knowing the characters for two or three thousand common words, and well-educated people learn a couple of thousand more. Because characters are composed of a few hundred components, this task is not as daunting as it may seem at first, but it still takes much

longer than learning to read a phonetic script. Thus, because China retained its logographic writing system, it takes many years of study for a person to master reading and writing.

Why did China retain a logographic writing system even after encounters with phonetic systems? Although phonetic systems make learning to read easier, there are costs to abandoning a logographic system. Those who learned to read Chinese could communicate with a wider range of people than those who read scripts based on speech. Because Chinese characters remained recognizable after the passage of many centuries, despite phonological change, educated Chinese could read texts written centuries earlier without needing them to be translated. Moreover, as the Chinese language developed mutually unintelligible regional variants, readers of Chinese could read books and letters by contemporaries whose oral language they could not comprehend. Thus, the Chinese script played a large role in holding China together and fostering a sense of connection with the past. For the history of East Asia, the Chinese script has a further significance. Korea, Japan, and Vietnam all began writing by adopting the Chinese script.

### Metalworking

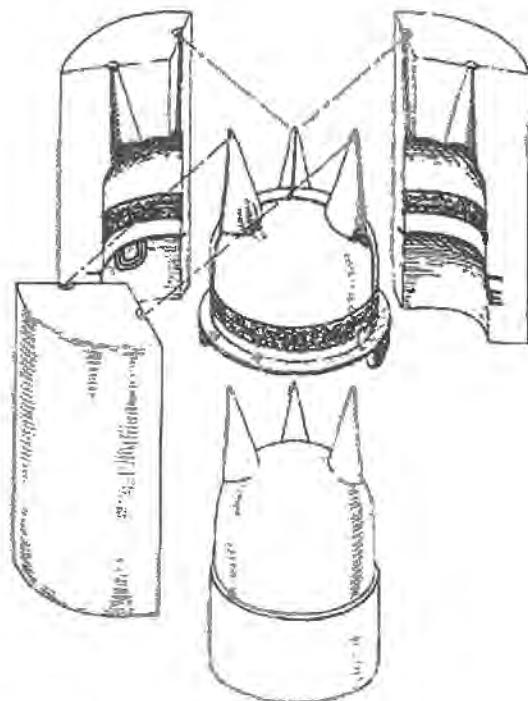
As in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India, the development of more complex forms of social organization in Shang China coincided with the mastery of metalworking, specifically bronze. Beginning about 2000 B.C.E., people learned to prospect metals, remove them from their ores, and fashion them into tools or ornaments. The next stage, reached by about 1500 B.C.E., involved large-scale production.

In Shang times, bronze was used more for ritual than for war. Most surviving Shang bronze objects are vessels such as cups, goblets, steamers, and cauldrons, which originally would have been used to hold food and wine offered to the ancestors or gods during sacrificial ceremonies. Both kings and nobles owned bronze vessels, but the kings had many more.

When compared to bronze objects made in other early societies, Chinese bronzes stand out for their quantity, their decoration, and the ways they were manufactured. Shang bronze-making required a large labor force to mine, refine, and transport copper, tin, and lead ores and to produce and transport charcoal. To achieve the high degree of precision and standardization evident from surviving bronze

vessels, there must have been considerable division of labor. Technically skilled artisans were needed to make clay models, construct ceramic piece molds, and assemble and finish each vessel. There also would have had to be managers overseeing the entire process. It has been estimated that two to three hundred craftsmen were needed to make the largest surviving Shang bronze vessel, which weighs 875 kilograms.

Scholars have not reached a consensus on the meaning of the decoration on Shang bronzes. In the art of ancient Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia, images of domesticated plants and animals match our understanding of the importance of agriculture in those societies, much as depictions of social hierarchy (kings, priests, scribes, and slaves) match our understandings of their social and political development. Why then did images of wild animals predominate in Shang China? The symbolic meaning of some animals is easy to guess. Cicadas, which spend years underground before emerging, probably evoked rebirth in the realm of ancestral spirits. Birds similarly suggest the idea of messengers who can reach realms



**Figure 1.1 Mold for Bronze Casting.** Shang bronze vessels were made with ceramic molds. After the molten bronze hardened, the pieces of the mold could be removed. (© Cengage Learning)



Final Galley of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Purchase 1928.1

**Bronze Sacrificial Vessel.** This small bronze ewer is shaped like an elephant, with an even smaller baby elephant on the lid. Dating to the eleventh century B.C.E., it reflects the style common in the middle Yangzi region.

in the sky. More problematic is the most common image, the stylized animal face called the *taotie* (tow-tyeh). To some it is a monster—a fearsome image that would scare away evil forces. Some hypothesize that it reflects masks used in rituals. Others associate it with animal sacrifices, totemism, or shamanism. Still others see these images as hardly more than designs. Scholars' inability to reach a consensus on something so basic as the meaning of the decoration on Shang bronzes reminds us of the huge gaps in our understanding of Shang culture.

## DEVELOPMENTS OUTSIDE THE SHANG CORE

The Shang were constantly at war with other groups, tribes, or states, and the area in which the Shang king could safely travel was confined to northern Henan and western Shandong provinces. Key elements of their culture, however, such as their bronze technology, spread well beyond the area they controlled. In the middle Yangzi region, many bronzes have been found that share Shang technology but differ in design, some even using human faces in place of the *taotie*. Bells are particularly common in the Yangzi region, and at one site they were buried in groups in the side of a mountain. The profusion of objects in some

tombs in Jiangxi province shows that the elites of this region were able to amass wealth on a scale similar to that of Shang elites. Their bronze vessels often have tigers on their handles, a style distinctive to the region. Whether this region should be considered a provincial version of Shang civilization or a different culture that borrowed extensively from Shang technology is still not certain. Without written documents like the divination texts of Anyang, there is no way to know if Chinese was the language used in this region.

As discussed in *Connections: The Prehistory of East Asia*, a more independent bronze culture existed north of the Shang core, where people grew millet and raised pigs, sheep, and cattle. Knives, axes, and mirrors are common finds there, but their bronze technology resembles that of Central Asia and Siberia more than that of the Shang core. Their practice of oracle bone divination, however, links them to Shang civilization. These finds could be evidence of the people who brought chariots to the Shang.

Another strong case for a distinct culture can be made for the civilization discovered at Sanxingdui (sahn-shing-dway) in the western province of Sichuan. In 1986 two pits of Shang date were found, packed with objects never found in Shang sites, including elephant tusks and huge masks, some covered in gold foil (see the table). Both pits were filled in layers, with small objects on the bottom, then the larger ones, then the elephant tusks, then rammed earth. (See Color Plate 1.)

Why were these objects placed in the pits? Many of those in pit 1 had been burned before being deposited, and others had been purposely broken. Thus, one possibility is that these objects are the remnants of a huge sacrifice. Unlike major Shang sacrifices, however,

there was no sign of human sacrifice. Some scholars speculate that the bronze figures of humans were being used to replace humans in a sacrificial ceremony. The heads most likely were originally attached to wood or clay statues and could have represented gods or ancestors. Thus, it is also possible that the statues with the bronze heads represented gods and that the local people had for some reason decided that those gods or their representations had to be burned and buried.

Further archaeological exploration has revealed that the pits lay within a large walled city nearly 2 kilometers square. Foundations of fifty or so buildings have been found, most rectangular but some round. Five other pits have been found, but they contained no bronze artifacts, only jade and stone ones. Perhaps because of flooding, the city was abandoned around 1000 B.C.E. No sites for later stages of this culture have been found, and there are no nearby sites from succeeding centuries that give evidence of comparable wealth. Perhaps whatever led to the abandonment of Sanxingdui also led to the collapse of the civilization.

The existence of sites like Sanxingdui has forced archaeologists to reconsider the political landscape during the centuries when the Shang ruled at Anyang. Shang rulers wished to see their own polity as the central one, but because we lack written records from sites of other cultures, there is no reason to assume that elites in other places had less self-centered notions of themselves.

## THE WESTERN ZHOU DYNASTY (1045–771 B.C.E.)

Outside the Shang domains were the domains of allied and rival polities. To the west were the fierce Qiang, who probably spoke an early form of Tibetan. Between the Shang capital and the Qiang was a frontier state called Zhou, which shared most of the material culture of the Shang. In 1045 B.C.E., this state rose against the Shang and defeated it. The first part of the Zhou Dynasty is called the Western Zhou period (1045–771 B.C.E.) because its capital was in the west near modern Xi'an (shee-ahn) in Shaanxi (shahn-shee) province (to distinguish it from the Eastern Zhou, after the capital was moved near modern Luoyang [law-yahng] in Henan [hub-nahn] province); see Map 1.1.

In early written traditions, three Zhou rulers are given credit for the Zhou conquest of the Shang. They are King Wen (wuhn) (*wen* means “cultured” or “lettered”), who expanded the Zhou domain; his son King Wu

### Contents of the Pits at Sanxingdui, ca.

1200 B.C.E.

Pit 1	Pit 2
13 elephant tusks	67 elephant tusks
107 bronze rings	20 bronze masks
13 bronze heads	40 bronze heads
44 bronze dagger-axe blades	bronze statue
4 gold items	bronze trees
60 stone tools	4,600 cowrie shells
70 stone or jade blades	almost 500 small beads or tubes of jade, stone, or ivory
10 pottery vessels	burned animal bones
burned animal bones	

## DOCUMENTS

### The Book of Songs

*The 305 poems preserved in the Book of Songs are the earliest surviving Chinese poetry. They offer glimpses of what life was like at various social levels in the Western Zhou period. Some are sacrificial hymns used in court ceremonies; others praise the rulers. Many began as folksongs. Tradition allowed for the allegorical reading of these poems, so that poems that seem on the surface to be complaints of neglected lovers could be read as the complaints of officials not properly appreciated by their lords. There are also poems with a critical edge, such as the last one below, in which the ancestors are rebuked for not providing aid to their descendants in distress.*

#### Poem 1

"Guan, guan" [cry] the ospreys  
on the isle in the river.  
The reclusive, modest girl  
is a good mate for the noble man.

Long and short is the duckweed  
To the left and to the right we look for it.  
The reclusive, modest girl—  
waking and sleeping he seeks her.  
He seeks her and does not obtain her.  
Waking and sleeping he pines and yearns  
for her.  
Oh, anxious! Oh, anxious!  
He tosses and twists and turns onto  
his side

Long and short is the duckweed.  
To the left and to the right we gather it.  
The reclusive, modest girl—  
among lutes and citherns, he shows her  
his friendship.

Long and short is the duckweed.  
To the left and to the right we pick it.  
The reclusive, modest girl—  
as a bell to a drum, he delights in her.

#### Poem 23

In the field there is a dead roe.  
With white grass we wrap it.  
There is a girl who longs for spring  
A fine fellow seduces her.

In the forest there is the *pusu* tree.  
In the field there is a dead deer.  
With white grass we bind it.  
There is a girl like jade.  
Oh, undress me slowly.  
Oh, do not upset my kerchief.  
Do not make the shaggy dog bark.

#### Poem 159

The fish in the nine-meshed net  
are rudd and bream.

(*wu* means "martial"), who conquered the Shang; and Wu's brother, the duke of Zhou, who consolidated the conquest and served as regent for Wu's heir.

These rulers and their age are portrayed in the earliest transmitted text, the *Book of Documents*. The speeches, pronouncements, and reports in this book depict the Zhou conquest as the victory of just and noble warriors, supported by Heaven, over the decadent Shang court led by an evil king. Bronze inscriptions provide another important source for the early Zhou period. Court scribes would prepare written documents on bamboo or wooden strips to specify appointments to offices or fiefs. Later, during a court ceremony, an official would read the document on behalf of the king. A copy of the document would be handed over

to the grantee, who later had it reproduced in bronze so that it could be passed down in his family.

The early Zhou period did not mark an abrupt break with Shang culture, but some Shang practices declined. Divining by heating oracle bones became less common, as did sacrifices of human victims. Interring followers in tombs continued, though their numbers gradually declined.

### The Mandate of Heaven

Like the Shang kings, the Zhou kings sacrificed to their ancestors, but they also sacrificed to the divine force called Sky or Heaven. The *Book of Documents* assumes a close relationship between Heaven and the king, who

I see this young man  
in regal robes and embroidered  
skirt.

The wild geese fly along the sandbar.  
When the Duke goes back, there will be  
no place [for us].  
I will stay with you one more time.

The wild geese fly along the hill  
The Duke is going back and will  
not return.  
I will lodge with you one more time.  
Oh, here we had the regal robes.  
Oh, do not go back with our Duke.  
Oh, do not make my heart grieve

#### Poem 189

A male child is born.  
He is made to sleep on a bed.  
He is made to wear a skirt.  
He is made to play with a scepter.  
His crying is loud.  
His red knee-covers are august.  
He is the hall and household's  
lord and king.

A female child is born  
She is made to sleep on the floor  
She is made to wear a wrap-cloth  
She is made to play with pottery  
She has no wrong and right.

Only wine and food are for her to talk  
about.  
May she not send her father and mother  
any troubles.

#### Poem 258

The drought has become so severe  
That it cannot be stopped.  
Glowing and burning,  
We have no place. The great mandate is  
about at an end,  
Nothing to look ahead to or back upon.  
The host of dukes and past rulers  
Does not help us. As for father and  
mother and the ancestors,  
How can they bear to treat us so?

#### Questions for Analysis

1. Which of the poems probably began as love songs?
2. Can you see more than one way to interpret any of these songs?

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was called the "Son of Heaven." Heaven gives the king a mandate to rule only as long as he rules in the interests of the people. Because the theory of the Mandate of Heaven does not seem to have had any place in Shang cosmology, some scholars think it was elaborated by the early Zhou rulers as propaganda to win over the conquered subjects of the Shang. It promoted the ideal of political unity for "all under Heaven" and legitimized many subsequent changes of dynasty.

#### The Zhou Political Structure

At the center of the Western Zhou political structure was the Zhou king, who was simultaneously ritual head of the royal lineage and supreme lord

of the nobility. Rather than attempting to rule all their territories directly, the early Zhou rulers sent out relatives and trusted subordinates to establish walled garrisons in the conquered territories, creating a decentralized, quasi-feudal system. The king's authority was maintained by rituals of ancestor worship and court visits. For instance, in 806 B.C.E., a younger son of King You (you) was made a duke and sent east to establish the state of Zheng (juhng) in a swampy area that needed to be drained. This duke and his successors nevertheless spent much of their time at the Zhou court, serving as high ministers.

A Zhou vassal was generally able to pass his position on to a son, so that in time the domains became hereditary fiefs. By 800 B.C.E., there were about

two hundred lords with domains large and small, of which only about twenty-five were large enough to matter much in interstate politics. Each lord appointed officers to serve him in ritual, administrative, or military capacities. These posts and their associated titles tended to become hereditary as well. Each domain thus came to have noble families with patrimonies in offices and associated lands.

Some Zhou bronzes record benefactions from the king and mention the services that had earned the king's favor. One inscription, for instance, recorded the rewards given to Yu (yew) for obeying the king's command to repel attacks of the Southern Huai barbarians. After his successful return, the king brought Yu into the ancestral temple and conferred on him two bronze ritual vessels, fifty strands of cowrie shells, and one hundred fields as reward for bringing back one hundred heads and forty manacled prisoners. The inscription concludes, "Yu dares in response to extol the Son of Heaven's beneficence, herewith making this offertory tureen; may Yu for 10,000 years have sons' sons and grandsons' grandsons eternally treasure and use it."

As in Shang times, there continued to be groups viewed as alien living in the same general region as the Zhou states as well as beyond the borders. Various groups of Yi ("eastern barbarians"), for instance, lived interspersed throughout the east, as did different groups of Rong ("northern barbarians") in the north and west. These groups spoke distinct languages, though they were not necessarily more primitive than the Zhou people in technology. Over the course of the nearly three centuries of Western Zhou rule, the Zhou kings drew many of these groups into the Zhou political order by recognizing their chiefs as the lords of their domains. To participate in this order, they had to use the Chinese writing system for matters of state.

Ties of loyalty and kinship linking the Zhou vassals to the king weakened over time, and in 771 B.C.E. the Zhou king was killed by an alliance of Rong tribesmen and Zhou vassals. Zhou nobles fleeing this attack buried their bronze vessels, expecting to unearth them after they returned. One such hoard, discovered in 1976, contained 103 vessels belonging to Earl Xing of Wei and cast by several generations of his family. Instead of returning, however, the Zhou royal house and nobles moved east to the area of modern Luoyang, just south of the Yellow River in the heart of the central plains. Eastern Zhou never fully regained control over its vassals, and China entered a prolonged period without a strong central authority, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.



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**Chariot Burial.** The type of chariot found in this Western Zhou burial pit, with large, many-spoked wheels, spread across Asia around 1100 B.C.E.

### Western Zhou Society and Culture

Western Zhou society was highly aristocratic. Inherited ranks placed people in a hierarchy ranging from the king, to the rulers of states with titles like duke and marquis, the hereditary great officials of these lords, and the lower ranks of the aristocracy called *shi* (shih), men who could serve in either military or civil capacities. At the bottom were ordinary subjects. Patrilineal family ties were very important throughout this society, and at the upper reaches, at least, sacrifices to ancestors were one of the key rituals used to forge social ties.

Land in this system was held on feudal tenures, and the economy was a manorial one. When the Zhou king bestowed land on a relative or subordinate, he generally also gave him people to work it. These farmers were treated as serfs, obliged to provide food and labor for the lord, who was expected in turn to look after their welfare.

Glimpses of what life was like at various social levels in the early Zhou period can be found in the *Book of Songs* (see Documents: The Books of Songs). Many depict the farming life, which involved not

merely cultivating crops like millet, hemp (for cloth), beans, and vegetables, but also hunting small animals and collecting grasses and rushes to make rope and baskets. The seasons set the pace for rural life, and poems contain many references to seasonal changes such as the appearance of grasshoppers and crickets.

## SUMMARY

Chinese civilization emerged in the north China plain where the fertile loess soil was well suited to growing wheat and millet. This heartland of Chinese civilization was far from the centers of other early Eurasian civilizations. Consequently, most of the key elements of Chinese civilization originated in China and were not spread from elsewhere.

Archaeologists, paleographers, and historians have contributed to our understanding of China in the Bronze Age (ca. 1500–771 B.C.E.). The Shang Dynasty developed a complex state with writing, metalworking, and large settlements. Paleographers have deciphered more than two thousand words used on inscribed oracle bones found at the Shang capital, Anyang. These texts confirm the sequence of Shang rulers that had been listed in early texts. The oracle bone texts tell us much about Shang religious practice. The huge tombs of rulers and the human sacrifices and bronze vessels placed in them offer other important evidence of Shang society. Shang kings served as priests who made offerings to the god Di. They ruled over large settlements that contained palaces, temples, and altars built on rammed-earth foundations. These settlements were ringed by industrial areas where artisans and craftsmen lived. The invention of writing helped the Shang extend its political control—writing facilitates sending orders and keeping records. War booty, including slaves who were often sacrificed to the gods, provided the king with revenue. Large armies were routinely sent out on military campaigns. Their bronze-tipped weapons and chariots gave them technological superiority over their neighbors.

In 1045 B.C.E. the Shang Dynasty was overthrown by a state on its western border, the state of Zhou. Rather than try to rule the entire territory they acquired, the early Zhou kings parceled out territory to relatives and allies. This was the first stage in the creation of hereditary domains whose lords formed

an aristocratic elite. In addition to archaeological finds, transmitted books enrich our understanding of the early Zhou period. The *Book of Songs* offers glimpses into what life was like for elites and ordinary people alike. The *Book of Documents* is an excellent source for ideas about Heaven's connections to the ruler, called the Son of Heaven. If a king did not rule in the interests of the people, Heaven could take away the king's mandate and confer it on a worthier person (this is referred to as the Mandate of Heaven).

Although the major elements of ancient Chinese civilization originated in China, the civilization was not cut off entirely from advances elsewhere in Eurasia. During the Bronze Age, the domestication of the horse, the use of horse-drawn chariots, and the cultivation of wheat all reached China from further west.

Archaeologists have found settlements outside the core regions of the Shang and Zhou states that used bronze technology. These regional cultures seem to have shared some of the material culture of the royal center, but differences in their religious practices and artistic styles suggest that their cultures were distinct. It is certainly possible that the languages they spoke were different from the language of the center on which written Chinese was based.

How much did China change in the centuries between 1500 and 771 B.C.E.? Differences in technology were pervasive. At the beginning of this period, China was just beginning to fashion objects of metal; by the end, bronze workers had centuries of experience in casting all sorts of objects, and bronze was used not only for ritual vessels but also for helmets, swords, knives, axes, and other tools. Horses had been domesticated and trained to pull chariots. Writing had become a central feature in the life of the political elite, and a substantial body of literature was in circulation. Some elements of culture and organization had already undergone major transformations. Divination by oracle bones had largely disappeared, as had the practice of making offerings of human victims, except at the burial of rulers, where it continued somewhat sporadically. Previously alien groups were incorporated into the Zhou political order, and more and more of them participated in the culture associated with the Chinese written language. Thus, in all likelihood there were more people we can call Chinese by the end of this period.