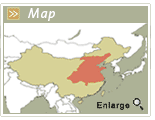
`DIS-Shang-Zhou

# Shang/Zhou dynasty ca. 1600–256 B.C.


The Shang people arose from diverse Neolithic cultures in north China, and from around 1500 B.C., inhabited the area along the Yellow River in present-day Henan province. They belonged to a highly stratified society ruled by an aristocracy where kings were the political, military, and religious leaders. Although the Shang were an agricultural people who principally cultivated millet, they also built large cities, had a well-organized government administration, and often engaged in warfare to ensure territorial boundaries. They practiced human sacrifice, mastered [bronze](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou) technology, domesticated the horse, and introduced the horse-drawn chariot. They were also the first culture in China to have a fully developed writing system. Current knowledge about the Shang dynasty derives from later historical texts, excavations of tombs and other archaeological sites, and Shang divinations inscribed on [oracle bones.](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou) Among the artifacts that survive are bronze vessels, tools, and weapons, elaborate jades and hard stones, as well as high-fired ceramics, carved wood and ivories, and silk textiles. To date, the Shang dynasty is the earliest period in China for which textual and archaeological evidence both exist, although early historical Chinese texts identify the [Xia dynasty](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou) as the first dynasty in China. Art during the Shang dynasty generally had a functional or ritual purpose and was found primarily within tomb and burial contexts.

Religion established the underlying framework of Shang society with an emphasis on ancestor worship and a belief in a pantheon of gods headed by the supreme deity [Di.](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou) The Shang used ritual ceremonies to communicate with their ancestors since the welfare of the living was contingent on the support and good will of ancestral spirits. Ancestors were consulted before any major undertaking. Their responses to the living’s questions about war, hunting, or the harvest were relayed through divinations on oracle bones. Elaborate cast–bronze food and wine vessels likewise were employed in ceremonial offerings and sacrifices. The masklike [*taotie*](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou) motif often decorates the surface of these bronzes, and as some scholars interpret, reinforce the bronzes’ ritual function and connections to the spirit world.

Labor-intensive bronze production was as symbolic of ruling authority as they were representative of Shang ritual ceremonies and burial traditions. As emblems of power and prestige, Shang bronze objects were interred in the tombs of the elite. The quantity and variety of finely created ritual vessels from this period attest to the existence of workshops of bronze production and the Shang people’s ability in large-scale mobilization of material and human resources. Shang bronze casting technology distinguished itself with the [piece-mold casting](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou) method, which differed from the lost-wax process, a procedure that the Chinese did not master until the fifth–century B.C.

While the Shang people ruled parts of central China, contemporaneous cultures existed in areas such as Xin’gan in the southeastern province of Jiangxi and Guanghan in the western province of Sichuan. The use of bronze technology and the appearance of similar decorative motifs from these cultures demonstrate contact with the Shang, revealing ancient China to have multiple centers of culture.

## Zhou Dynasty

The Zhou dynasty is divided into two periods: the Western Zhou (ca. 1100–770 B.C.) with the capital near present-day Xi'an, Shaanxi province, and the Eastern Zhou (770–256 B.C.) when the capital was moved to Luoyang, Henan province. The Eastern Zhou is traditionally divided into the Spring and Autumn period (770–ca. 470 B.C.) and the Warring States period (ca. 470–221 B.C.). After the move of the Zhou court to Luoyang, China was ruled by many smaller contending states until the rise of the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C.

Early on, the Zhou people occupied an area in present-day Shaanxi province to the west of the Shang territories, but around 1100 B.C. conquered the Shang to whom they had at times served as a tributary state. Historical documents demonstrate that the Zhou rulers saw themselves as the cultural and political successors of the Shang state. The Shang production of ["ritual art" *(liqi)*](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou) in bronze and jade continued unabated. Many Zhou inscriptions on ritual bronzes indicate the importance of ancestor worship and veneration. Bronze design motifs were sometimes created with repetitive stamps, pointing to the nascent development of mass production techniques. The reduction of human sacrifices found in tombs is one way Zhou culture departed from its predecessor. This tendency may demonstrate a shift in perceptions of the afterlife, where human assistance for the deceased was now embodied by straw, wooden, or ceramic replicas. Accompanying burial articles placed in tombs also began taking the form of miniature models and simulacra that, along with the funerary architecture, may both have been conceived as ["brilliant artifacts" *(mingqi).*](http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Shang|Zhou)

The Zhou rulers worked to extend their territory and developed a system of governance that gave hereditary power to local leaders, including relatives of the royal family, trusted subordinates, and loyal local chiefs. This decentralization eventually broke down as power and ambition grew in regional centers. In 770 B.C. the Zhou sovereign was killed by an alliance of his vassals and enemies. His son was enthroned and the main capital moved east to Luoyang. This was the beginning of the Eastern Zhou period, but the Zhou rulers never regained their former supremacy.

Constant warfare dominated the Eastern Zhou period. This led to many technological advances made in connection with military matters. By the seventh century B.C., advancements in iron production allowed for new and stronger weapons and farm tools. More peaceful and artistic advances were also made. Bronze coinage was introduced and widely circulated. Lost–wax, inlay, and intricate bronze casting techniques were refined, as seen on mirrors, bells, lamps, and surviving metalware. During this period, relationships between designs and motifs of different media, such as jade and bronze or lacquer and textiles, also raise questions about the transmission of workshop practices and the cultural interaction within and beyond China's borders.

The later Zhou period is best remembered as a time of intellectual adventurism as new philosophical schools, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, flourished in abundance. Perhaps the most famous of these schools was founded by Confucius (551–479 B.C.), whose societal vision called for individuals to understand and accept their position in the social and familial hierarchy. Confucius' transmitted teachings later became the crux of a political system that emphasized the proper relationships between different members of society. Particularly attractive to rulers were the Confucian precepts calling for loyalty and obedience to one's ruler, father, and family. This created a strict hierarchy of ritual and social self-control. As Confucianism spread it became the overarching ethical code throughout much of East Asia, palpable even today.

Another important native school of thought was Daoism, which in the Zhou period was an eclectic group of popular beliefs in which humans were not seen as the dominating entity. Instead they were urged to seek a balance with the natural world. The Zhou dynasty figure Laozi (literally, "Old Master") is usually seen as the founder of Daoism.

## Further readings

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