# 5-1 Earliest China: The Shang Dynasty (1700–1045 B.C.E.)

Of all the ancient civilizations, China was the most isolated from outside influences—even more so than Egypt. However, Chinese civilization had features that were typical of other early civilizations we have encountered: it rested on an agrarian foundation; it produced a long series of dynastic monarchies; and, bordered by deserts and steppe lands, it endured episodic warfare and invasion from nomadic Turco-Mongolian tribes who inhabited the dry steppe lands to the west and northwest.

The Chinese heartland was divided between the dry Yellow River plain, the western steppe lands, and the better-watered southern valleys. Late Paleolithic Chinese roamed the grasslands of the great Northern Plain, gathering wild varieties of millet. Around 7000–6000 B.C.E. they began creating a village culture along the Yellow River, elevating their villages above the floodplain, often enclosing them with ditches or wooden palisades. They developed terracing and irrigation techniques to grow millet, barley, soy, and hemp in the yellow, wind-blown soils called *loess* (LOW-us). Several centers of Neolithic culture would later coalesce to become what we know as Chinese civilization.

Another river basin would play almost as important a role in China's later history: the Yangzi (yahng-tsuh). This great river is much tamer than the Yellow River and runs far to the south, through a warmer and wetter landscape. The exact time and place in which agriculture first appeared in the Far East is disputable, agriculture seems to have appeared earliest in a vast region that spanned most of southern China and Southeast Asia; both agriculture and metalworking apparently originated independently in China. There, non-Chinese peoples hunted pigs and gathered wild varieties of rice that grew in swamplands along the Yangzi and the other rivers that drained the region. Between 10,000 and 7000 B.C.E., settled farm life appeared, and it became the center of wet rice culture in southern China and Southeast Asia. Eventually, the northern Chinese (called the *Han*) conquered the south, and the rice grown along the Yangzi became even more important to their food supply than the millet cultivated in the areas drained by the Yellow River.

Much as in Mesopotamia and the Indus River Valley, the Yellow River's floods were tremendously damaging and had to be controlled by extensive levees, painstakingly erected and maintained. Perhaps, as in these other early civilizations, it was this need to control the floods and to coordinate the labor of thousands in vast construction projects that contributed most toward political unification.

The worship of clan ancestors and nature spirits seems to have been an early feature of Chinese religion. It was this—particularly the need for the ritual appeasement of the ancestors of landowning senior lineages—that ensured that unification and dynastic rule went hand in hand in Neolithic and Bronze Age China. Around 2200 B.C.E., several of the

Neolithic cultures along the central course of the Yellow River were drawn into an organized state for the first time (see the inset in Map 5.1). This state was the product of both military conquest and convergence through trade among Bronze Age peoples who came to be ruled by a dynastic monarchy called the *Xia* (shah), about whom little is known.

**Map 5.1**

## Ancient China

The smaller map shows China during the Shang Dynasty, with the chief areas of Shang civilization located in the North China plain, on either side of the Yellow River. The larger map shows China in the Era of the Warring States. By the 500s B.C.E., the domain of the Zhou Dynasty had become only a minor state surrounded by autonomous principalities.

### Thinking About This Map

Trace the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers and comment on agriculture in the area defined by these waterways.


Following the Xia, around 1700 B.C.E., the **Shang (shahng) Dynasty** ((shahng) The first historical rulers of China; ruled from c. 1500 to c. 1100 B.C.E.) replaced the villagers' previous political overseers, and its emergence gave rise to two important innovations: more sophisticated bronze casting and the development of writing. Most of what we know of ancient China comes from archaeology rather than from history because Shang writings were limited. Since the 1920s, Chinese and foreign archaeologists have been excavating many rich gravesites. From the elaborate order found among the tomb remains and their contents, we can infer that Shang society was strictly hierarchical. At the top was a powerful king with his warrior court. War was commonplace, and warriors were favored in every way, much as in feudal Europe. Below the warriors were many skilled artisans and a growing class of small traders in the towns. In the countryside lived the great majority—the peasants in their villages.

The early Chinese believed in deities and ancestor spirits who controlled natural forces. Scholars know precious little about the actual gods in whom the peasant classes believed and about their religious activities, but most believed that nature was controllable by the ruler's royal ancestors. Therefore, the key to everyone's welfare was the king's ability to discern his ancestors' will and appease them. To accomplish this, they used *oracle bones*, which provide us with some of the earliest examples of Chinese writing. Questions were written on tortoise shells or the shoulder blades of cattle, and then a heated rod was applied to produce cracks. Ritual specialists known as diviners interpreted their patterns as answers.

Several fundamental aspects of Chinese life were already visible in the Shang Epoch. Some of these resemble traits that are typical of all early agrarian societies (Chapter 1):

- *The supreme importance of the family; the reverence shown to ancestors and the aged by the young*. The Chinese believe that experience is far more important than theory and that the young must learn from the aged if harmony is to be preserved and progress achieved.

- *The salient responsibility for ensuring general prosperity belongs to the ruler and his household*. The ruler enacts this by performing critical functions of both a secular and a religious nature that are essential to prosperity. On the other hand, the legitimacy of the ruler and the ruling dynasty is tied to their effectiveness in performing these duties.

- *The emphasis on this world*. No other civilization of the ancient world was so secular as China in that the earthly, practical tasks performed by the kings and their government were at least as important as their religious roles.

- *The importance of education, particularly literacy*. No other culture has made the ability to read and write so critical for success. The ancient Chinese written language was extremely complex (it has since been simplified). Years of hard study were required to master it, but once acquired, the skill qualified one for service in the royal state bureaucracy. The production and maintenance of written records gave officials

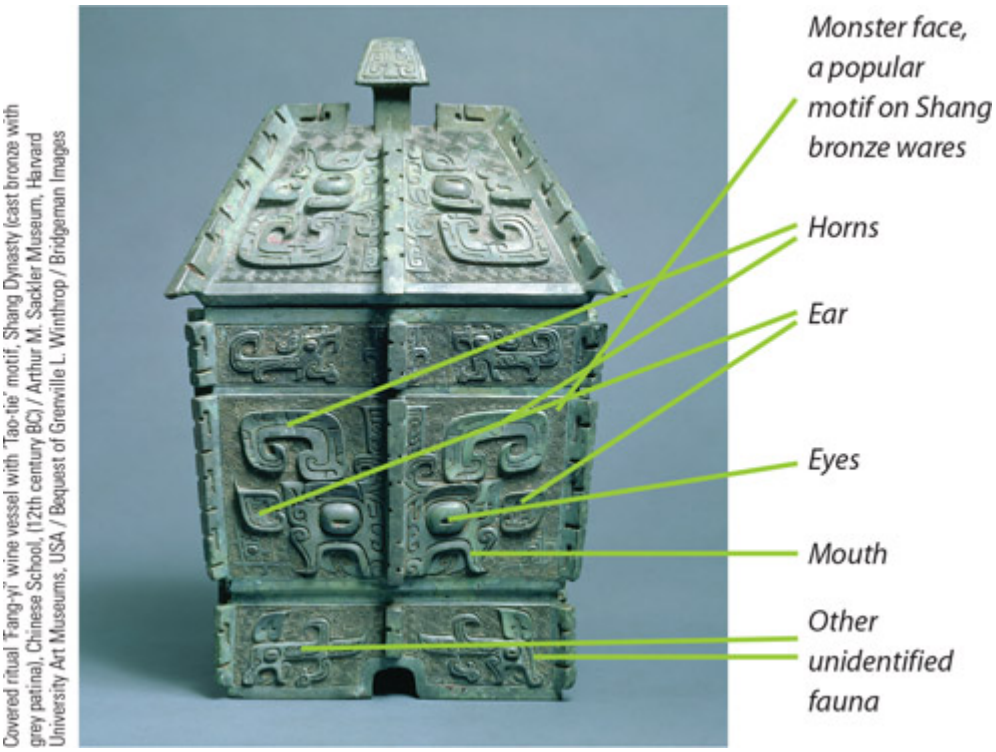
influence through their knowledge of past events and precedents. This would eventually make them both powerful and wealthy.

In the eleventh century B.C.E. the Shang rulers seem to have faced internal conflicts that weakened the dynasty. Somewhat later, they fell to the **Zhou (joh) Dynasty** ((joh) The second historical Chinese dynasty; ruled from c. 1100 to c. 400 B.C.E.) , a related but alien group from farther west. The Zhou would be the longest lasting of all the Chinese ruling dynasties.

Images of History

**Early Bronze Ceremonial Ware**

This covered “Fangyi” wine vessel from the Shang era (twelfth century B.C.E.) is in several respects typical of articles that were manufactured for ceremonial use. First, such vessels were cast from bronze, and at the time it was made, the metal and the technology needed to make it were both rare and precious. As such, they were made exclusively for the king and members of the royal household, and only for ceremonial or military purposes. Although bronze was made in western and southern Asia, Chinese techniques were considerably more advanced, and articles like this one were of a much higher level of workmanship. There were also certain motifs that were typical of ceremonial containers. This one uses the “taotie,” or mask, motif.




Covered ritual ‘Fang-yi’ wine vessel with ‘Tao-tie’ motif, Shang Dynasty (cast bronze with grey patina), Chinese School, (12th century BC) / Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, USA / Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop / Bridgeman Images

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