

Chapter 5: Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.: 5-2b Culture and Daily Life Under the Zhou

Book Title: World Civilizations

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The greatest artistic achievement of the ancient Chinese was undoubtedly their bronze work. Craftsmen in the late Shang and early Zhou periods turned out a vast array of ritual vessels for use in royal divinations, along with drinking cups, vases, wine vessels, brooches, and medallions, whose technical excellence and artistic grace were stunning. Metal technology in general was advanced in early China. Besides bronze, cast iron and copper were widely used for both tools and weaponry.

The Shang buildings that have been partially unearthed by modern archaeologists are impressive in both size and design. The upper class built large palaces and strong forts around towns such as Anyang and Zhengzhou (juhng-joh), in the middle reaches of the Yellow River plain. The distinctive Chinese architectural style, with tiled, pagoda-type roof lines and diminishing upper stories, was developed at this time, although it was applied much more elaborately later on. Most modern Chinese art forms have their roots in very early times.

The Zhou era also saw great advances in every area of arts and crafts. Silkworm cultivation and silk weaving have been demonstrated to be an important part of Shang and Zhou culture and trade with foreign states. The famous Silk Road (the caravan route to the Near East and the Black Sea; see [Chapter 4](#)) did not yet exist, but regional trade did, and goods flowed between China and its western neighbors. Along China's borders there was great demand for products such as metal and jade wares, salt, and above all, silk that issued from the shops of China's artisans. In exchange for these the Chinese rulers prized the sturdy horses supplied by nomads who wandered the Central Asian steppes.

With China's incessant need to defend itself against the nomads along its borders, the importation of the war chariot from Western Asia led to a technical breakthrough of the first rank: a harness or collar that allowed a horse to pull with the full strength of its shoulders and body without choking. This type of harness transformed the value of horses, not only in warfare but also as beasts of burden. Only much later did other civilizations recognize and copy this fundamental breakthrough.

As for living standards in Zhou China, the evidence we have suggests that peasants were moderately prosperous and rarely enslaved at this time. Although their life was undoubtedly difficult, it was not miserable. Zhou peasants were in more or less the same economic situation as Egyptian peasants: they were sharecropping tenants on the elite's land, with some rights, and at least in the early Zhou years were usually protected from the worst excesses of grasping landlords by a powerful and respected government. In the literary arts, many of the classics that have been taught to Chinese children through the centuries originated in the Zhou era. The earliest surviving books stem from the 800s B.C.E., much

earlier than any from other civilized centers. They were written either on strips of specially prepared bamboo strung together with silken cord or on silk scrolls. Professional historians, employed by the court, wrote chronicles of the rulers and their achievements. Poetry made its first appearance in Chinese letters during the early Zhou period, beginning a tradition of sensitive, perceptive nature poetry that continues to the present day. The revered collection called "The Book of Songs" was produced by one or several people during this period and has remained a mainstay of Chinese education ever since. Calligraphy also began at this time, and officials were expected to master this art form as a qualification for office.

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