Early Chinese Dynasties

From the early second millennium to the third century BCE, a period that corresponds approximately to China's Bronze Age, three dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou) flourished in succession in north-central China's Yellow River valley and environs. Beyond this area, Bronze Age cultures developed in the Yangtze River Valley in the south (Xingang) and southwest (Sanxingdui).

China's Bronze Age civilization developed out of a variety of regional Late Neolithic cultures that are sometimes collectively described as the Longshan horizon (*c.* 3000–2000 BCE).

LATE NEOLITHIC AND XIA

Some of the traits that characterize the culture of the Bronze Age dynasties, such as city building, jade working, bone divination, and ancestor worship, appear already as significant traits of the Chinese late Neolithic. According to historical accounts, the first dynasty to dominate the region of the middle Yellow River valley was Xia (traditionally 2100–1700 BCE). Several archaeologists in China believe that the Erlitou culture (*c.* 1950–1600 BCE), which follows the Longshan horizon in parts of Henan and Shaanxi Provinces, corresponds to the domains of the Xia Dynasty and that the remains of the Erlitou site (Yanshi, Henan) belong to this dynasty's last capital, Zhenxun. The Erlitou site, a large ensemble of palatial and other remains, was discovered in the 1950s when the area was surveyed following some literary accounts that described the location of Xia's Zhenxun. Repeated excavations of the Erlitou area from the 1960s to more recent times have brought to light two large palace foundations, evidence of an emerging bronze metallurgy, as well as ritual jades and ornaments. Aside from a few undecipherable signs carved on some pottery, at Erlitou there is no evidence of writing, a fact which renders difficult the confirmation of the existence of the Xia Dynasty.

THE SHANG DYNASTY

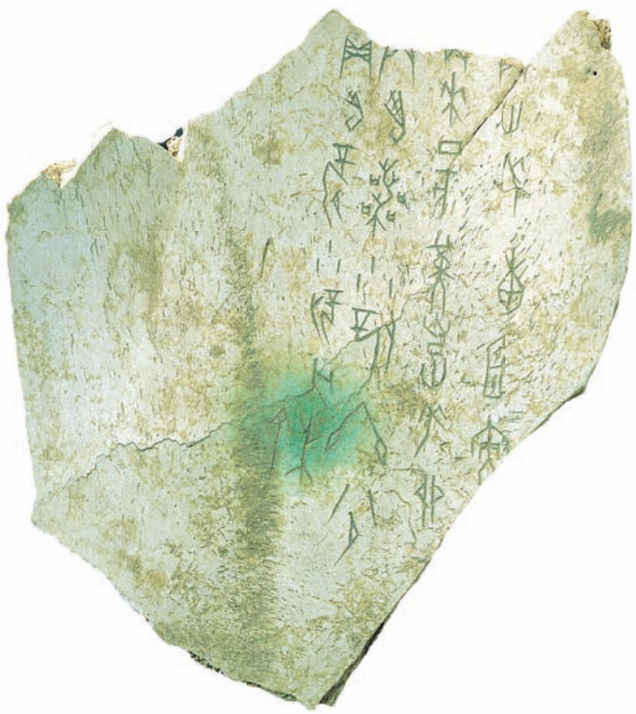
The Shang, who appear to have been eastern neighbors of the Xia, established their rule probably between 1600 and 1550 BCE by replacing their predecessors as the dominant political force in the middle Yellow River and surrounding areas. Various Shang sites (capitals, large settlements, and burial grounds) have been excavated. The best-known city sites are at Yanshi, Zhengzhou, Panglongcheng, and Anyang. These settlements are characterized by the remains of palatial structures, ritual and sacrificial areas, burials, and in some cases defensive walls, and by the presence in fairly large numbers of ceramic artifacts, ceremonial jades, and bronzes (mostly vessels and musical instruments, but also weapons). The Shang are well-known for their mastery of bronze metallurgy, which they employed to manufacture vessels and implements for the ritual libations offered to royal ancestors. During these worship ceremonies Shang kings and ritual specialists carried

RITUAL VESSELS

This pair of bronze tripod food vessels, known as *ding*, are from the Shang Dynasty. These ritual food vessels were often placed in tombs as offerings for the dead. They may have been used in burial rituals of the time.

FINDING BURIAL SITES

In 2006, construction work on a water diversion project in the Yunxian County of Hubei Province unearthed an ancient tomb. Archaeologists are now painstakingly excavating the area for relics that will shed new light on China's rich archaeological heritage.



CAN YOU FEEL IT IN YOUR BONES?

Dating to the fourteenth to thirteenth centuries BCE, this fragment of a bovine shoulder blade bears a divinatory inscription, warding off danger. It is from the Shang Dynasty. Oracle bones provided divination lists for kings and queens.

out divinations by burning ox shoulder bones and turtle plastrons. While pyroscapulimancy (burning shoulder bones) was practiced also in the Neolithic, the bones began to be inscribed only in the late Shang. Oracle bone inscriptions are one of the earliest forms of writing in China (the other being bronze inscriptions).

THE ZHOU DYNASTY

Originally a subject population in the western part of the Shang domain (the Zhouyuan, where their ancestral temples remained for centuries), the Zhou overthrew the Shang in 1046 BCE and ruled for almost 800 years. The long rule of the Zhou is divided into Western Zhou (1046–770 BCE), when the capital was in the west near present-day Xi'an, and Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE), when the capital was moved east following nomad attacks on the western territories. After the conquest, the Zhou state was organized in a feudal system with relatives or former allies of the Zhou kings being given titles to control parcels of the royal domain. Finds of hoards of bronze vessels with lengthy inscriptions, such as those of Zhuangbai in the Zhouyuan, which record investment ceremonies and family histories, suggest that ritual bronzes played a significant function in the Zhou feudal system. The Eastern Zhou Period, which is traditionally divided into the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period, witnessed the progressive disintegration of the Zhou feudal system and the growth of regional state cultures that eventually annihilated the Zhou Dynasty.

Much of the material evidence that has been excavated at late Zhou archaeological sites, such as the burial place of Count Yi of Zeng at Leigudun (Hubei), or the tomb of the King of Zhongshan at Shijiazhuan (Hebei) confirm the regionalization of both power and Zhou culture.

BRONZE RITUAL VESSELS

Based on their shape, ritual vessels are classified as food, wine, or water containers. Some food vessels (like the *ding* tripod or the *xian* steamer) were used for cooking offerings, others for serving ritual meals. Likewise, some wine containers like the *jue* pitcher were employed to heat grain wine, while others, like the *gu* goblet, were used to serve it. Water vessels were probably for rinsing implements. While the earliest vessels are plain, those of the Shang are decorated with the *taotie* face, sometimes called "ogre mask," and occasionally carry short inscriptions. With the Zhou, bronzes exhibited longer inscriptions and decorations ranging from bird designs to abstract patterns and narrative panels. Bronzes were made by piece-mold casting, a technique that required creating a prototype of the object to be cast, pressing clay molds on the outside and inside of the model, discarding the model, and finally filling the molds with molten bronze.

Zhengzhou, China

The Shang city at Zhengzhou (Zhengzhou Shang Cheng) is a large, walled site situated below the modern city of Zhengzhou in Henan Province. The settlement, excavated in the early 1950s, is thought to be an early Shang capital, possibly either the famed Bo or Ao that are mentioned in historic sources.

The Zhengzhou site consists of the walled city, originally occupied by the Shang kings and the aristocracy, and its surroundings, which were home to the larger population. From the stratigraphic point of view, archaeologists have identified two Shang phases which account for the occupation of Zhengzhou somewhere between 1500 and 1300 BCE. The earliest stratum, lower Erligang, corresponds to the period of construction of the city walls and its most significant remains, the following one, upper Erligang, is contemporaneous with the later use of the site.

THE WALLED CITY

Zhengzhou's walls take a roughly rectangular shape with a perimeter reaching almost 4 miles (7 km). The sloping walls, made of pounded earth layers *(hangtu)*, were originally of a massive width—measuring between 105 ft (32 m) and 72 ft (22 m) at the base and 35 ft (10 m) at the summit. Today, they are mostly underground, but in the areas where they are still visible they stand at a height of 16 ft (5 m). The enclosure is interrupted by a number of gaps, which are probably the remnants of the city gates.

Within the walls are the remains of temples and ritual areas as well as of what were once royal and aristocratic palaces. Over 20 pounded earth platform-foundations are concentrated in an elevated section in the northeastern quarters of the city. One of these is remarkably large (213 ft by 44 ft [65 m by 13.5 m]) and was subdivided into nine separate rooms and a corridor. Another, denominated Palace n. 16, measures 102 ft by 125 ft (31 m by 38 m). While some of these foundations may have been dwellings, others were probably temples or ritual structures, as in their vicinity there is evidence of human and animal sacrifice. From one pit alone, archaeologists have retrieved the skulls of nearly 100 young men. Some of these skulls were sawn in half and otherwise worked, perhaps to manufacture ritual objects of human bone. The skeletons of 92 sacrificed dogs were discovered in nearby pits. Sacrifices of enslaved prisoners and animals (usually dogs, pigs, oxen, and sheep) were a fundamental part of the rituals in honor of Shang gods and royal ancestors.

In addition to these larger remains, some houses have been discovered in the northeastern and northwestern corners of the city, as well as in the central area, and a few simple burials, possibly belonging to commoners, have been identified along the inside of the city walls. Still, there is a good portion of Zhengzhou that remains unexcavated as it lies below the modern city.

SACRIFICIAL SKULLS

These skeletons are part of an archaeological display of a Shang Dynasty Period sacrificial site, located at the Henan Provincial Research Institute and Archaeological Field Station, Zhengzhou. Human sacrifice was possibly used as a means to consecrate a temple's foundations.

BEYOND THE WALLS

In the vicinity of the walled enclosure, the larger Zhengzhou site includes cemeteries, commoners' houses, workshops, and other remains. Four burial grounds have been discovered on three sides of the city (one on the west, one on the south, and two on the east). Overall these tombs are not particularly large or lavish and clearly do not belong to the kings that ruled at Zhengzhou. The richest of these, Tomb n. 3 at Baijiazhuang, is a moderate-sized burial site furnished with nine ritual bronzes, two jades, and few other artifacts: too little for a king.

BEAUTIFUL BRONZE

This rounded, bronze ritual vessel, a *pou*, was probably used for wine. It is 10⅝ in (27 cm) high and has the typical Shang *taotie* ogre mask with bulging eyes, a nose, and horns on either side.

Several areas dedicated to craft productions surround the city, suggesting that at Zhengzhou there was specialized large-scale production of luxury goods, probably under government control. These work areas range from bone workshops (north), to pottery workshop and kilns (east), to bronze foundries (north and south of the city).

Bronze played an important role at Zhengzhou. Three large hoards of bronzes buried in pits have also been excavated outside the Zhengzhou walls. The largest at Nanshuncheng Street yielded nine ritual vessels and three weapons. Another at Duling included two very large square *ding* tripods. Further away, about 12 miles (20 km) northwest of the walled city, one palace complex with sacrificial evidence has been discovered at Xiashuangqiao.

YELLOW RIVER HISTORY

The second-longest river in China, the Yellow River is often referred to as the cradle of ancient Chinese culture. The city of Zhengzhou, birthplace of the Shang Dynasty, sits just south of the river.

IDENTIFYING AN ANCIENT CAPITAL

Archaeological evidence indicates that Zhengzhou was an early Shang city which predated Yin, the last Shang capital at Anyang, and was in use for hundreds of years. Its large size suggests that it was probably a capital. However, to this day archaeologists and historians are unsure of the exact identity of the Zhengzhou remains. According to some, Zhengzhou could be the ancient Bo, the first Shang capital established by the Shang founder, King Tang. Others think it may instead be Ao (or Xiao), the second Shang capital, which was founded by King Zhongding. Records support the second theory, because Ao and not Bo is said to have been in the Zhengzhou area. However, historic sources say that Ao was the capital for only 26 years, too few years compared with the long occupation of the Zhengzhou site, which seems to be more in line with the 183 years of occupation at Bo.

Anyang, China

A large area near modern Anyang in Henan Province is the location of the ruins of Yin (Yinxu), the Shang Dynasty's last capital. Yinxu was known for centuries as a historic Shang center. Antique bronzes have been excavated there since at least the eleventh century CE, and inscribed divination bones were retrieved in the late nineteenth century.

HAND OF DESTINY

The Shang Dynasty is known for its bronze works, many of which had ritual functions. No one knows what significance this bronze hand had. It was found in the tomb of a Shang officer at Anyang.

In fact, it was to investigate oracle bones that the Anyang excavations began in 1928. The ruins of Yin are found north of the Yellow River straddling the Huan River. According to traditional records, Yin was the ritual–political center of the Shang Dynasty for 12 kings who ruled for about 250 years from *c.* 1300 to 1050 BCE.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

Excavated inscriptions on oracular bones confirm the presence at Yin of the last nine of these kings (from Wuding to Dixin), and archaeologists have identified four phases of occupation of the site: Yinxu I–IV. The site is very extensive (*c.* 11½ sq miles [30 sq km]), and most of it appears to have been outside the recently discovered defensive walls that date to the earliest phase. This suggests that the Shang may have conceived of this city more as a uniting ritual center rather than a political capital with definite borders. Nonetheless, at Yinxu there is a very clear center (the Anyang core) with ritual centers and cemeteries, and a periphery made up of numerous contemporaneous sites spread in the surroundings. The two key parts of the Anyang core are the Xiaotun palatial site south of the Huan River and the Xibeigang royal cemetery north of the river.

XIAOTUN PALATIAL SITE

In the vicinity of the modern Xiaotun village, an elevated area surrounded on two sides by a moat and defended on the remaining sides by the Huan River contains over 50 palace or temple foundations as well as large deposits of oracle bones, human sacrifices, and workshops. The buildings appear to have been arranged into three groups known as Group A (north), Group B (west), and Group C (south). The northern group of palaces (Group A) may have been primarily a residential zone, as there is no evidence of ritual activities. The remaining two palatial zones are instead interspersed with sacrificial burials of animals, humans, and even chariots, an indication that ceremonies were performed there.

Southwest of the palatial area, just outside the moat, is the tomb of Fuhao (Lady Hao). This is a small tomb with no ramps, but it is the only undisturbed aristocratic burial of Anyang. At the bottom of the burial pit was the lacquered funerary chamber within which were nestled the wooden coffins. The pit held a number of sacrificial victims: 16 persons (four males, two females, two children, plus eight people of undetermined sex and age) and six dogs followed Fuhao in death. The offerings were lavish including 460 bronze vessels, bells and weapons, as well as jades, cowrie shells, pottery, bone, ivory, and stone objects. Fuhao's tomb is dated to Yinxu phase II, which corresponds to the reign of King Wuding. This is consistent because Fuhao is thought to have been one of Wuding's wives. Her name, inscribed on vessels and weapons retrieved from the burial, is also mentioned in oracle bone texts. In divination records the king inquired about Fuhao's pregnancy, in others there is evidence that she was in charge of military operations and rituals.

THE ROYAL CEMETERY AT XIBEIGANG

The Xibeigang cemetery is located across the river from the Xiaotun palatial area and to the north of the modern villages of Houjiazhuan and

SHANG WEAPONRY
A bronze axhead from the Anyang Period shows a terrifying face. Weighing 10 lb 5 oz (4.7 kg), the ax was used to decapitate the sacrificed humans found in a royal tomb.

Wuguangcun. Here there are 11 extremely large tombs oriented north–south and arranged in two clusters. On the west side are seven burials and an unfinished pit, while to the east there are four burials and one pit. Eight tombs have access ramps on four sides and appear cross-shaped, while three have only one or two ramps. The burials range in length from 65½ to 260 ft (20 m to 80 m), with the shaft reaching a depth of 32 ft to 50 ft (10 m to 15 m).

Surrounding the large tombs there are over 1,400 sacrificial victims—some formally buried, others brutally killed. While all these tombs have been looted long ago and it is difficult to identify their owners, the number, size, shape, and large sacrifices of these burials suggest that they belonged to the kings and queens that ruled at Anyang. One of these (No. 1001) could be King Wuding's tomb, while one of the unfinished pits may have been meant for Zhouxin, the last Shang king.

SHANG RELIGION AND BONE DIVINATION

Shang religion centered on the cult of ancestors, nature deities (river and mountain gods), and Shangdi or God in High. Evidence of these cults is found in records of bone divinations performed for the Shang royal house. Divination, which involved burning ox shoulder bones or turtle plastrons in order to read the cracks provoked by the heat, was necessary to communicate with ancestors or deities and understand their needs or wishes. Divinations also provided information on future events, such as weather, hunting, or battles. Bronze vessels and musical instruments were important ritual tools: the libations requested by ancestors or deities were served in special bronze containers while chime bells provided the ceremonial music.

Oracle bones, *such as this turtle shell and ox bone, were used by royalty to divine the future. The inscriptions on oracle bones embody the earliest forms of writing in China.*

Sanxingdui, China

Sanxingdui, a Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement in China's southwestern Sichuan Province, first came to archaeologists' attention in 1929 when a farmer accidentally unearthed some ancient jades. It was excavated more extensively from the 1980s onward after two sacrificial pits filled with bronzes, jades, and elephant tusks were discovered.

The Sanxingdui site spans an area between 4½–6½ sq miles (12–17 sq km) with remains dating from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age (*c.* 2800–1000 BCE). The most significant finds relate to the Bronze Age and comprise a large walled city and two sacrificial pits.

The city walls, made of compressed earth, enclose an area of 1½ miles (2½ km) and at present stand at 13 ft (4 m) high. Their foundations are massive, ranging in width from 65–130 ft (20–40 m). The city's construction and occupation (*c.* 1700–1000 BCE) appears to have been roughly contemporaneous with the period of the Shang Dynasty in northern China, and the cities share some characteristics. Within this enclosure, in addition to the sacrificial pits, bronze, jade, gold, and stone objects were discovered as well as an elevated north–south axis and a number of building foundations.

SACRIFICIAL PITS

Along the north–south elevated central axis of the walled city were several sacrificial pits. Two significant ones were discovered in 1986. Pit 1 contained about 300 items: elephant tusks, gold, jades, stone objects, pottery, and bronzes (including vessels and heads of statues). These offerings appear to have been burned, thrown in the pit, and ritually buried. Pit 2 is a similar but more lavish sacrificial receptacle. In it were found over 400 objects, which, like those in Pit 1, had been burned before transfer. As well as 60 elephant tusks and numerous jades, shells, and smaller objects, the most impressive find was a number of large bronze sculptures. These include a life-size statue of a standing man (possibly a ritual specialist), 41 heads that may originally have been attached to wooden bodies, 15 masklike objects (some of massive proportions and with protruding eyes), as well as a spirit tree, an auspicious plant decorated with birds and dragons.

Some of the objects excavated from these pits are similar to those produced in association with Shang culture (for instance some jades and bronze vessels), others (like the large statuary) are radically different. Since at Sanxingdui there is no evidence of writing that could explain the significance of these objects, the cults with which they were associated are not entirely clear. Nonetheless, material remains suggest that the rituals and beliefs of Sanxingdui were different from those documented in Shang Dynasty contexts. It thus appears that Sanxingdui was the center of an independent Bronze Age culture, which had contacts with the Yellow River valley, but maintained unique ritual and artistic traits.

ALL EYES!

This gilded bronze head, with its large, protruding eyes, was found at Sanxingdui and was probably a totem to a god or king. The bronzes found at Sanxingdui are among the most outstanding bronzes unearthed in China.

HISTORY REMEMBERED

A man rides past a tablet marking the ancient ruins of Sanxingdui in Guanghan City, Sichuan Province. Archaeologists have been working on the site for almost 80 years, yet the civilization that lived there remains largely unknown.

Zhouyuan, China

The Zhouyuan, Plain of Zhou, is in the counties of Qishan and Fufeng (Shaanxi Province) and has a high concentration of predynastic and early dynastic Zhou remains. In the twelfth to eleventh century BCE, before they overthrew the Shang, this was the political center of the Zhou people; later it remained their ritual heart. Here were palaces, temples, large aristocratic tombs, and royal workshops.

While scientific excavations only began at the site in the 1950s, Zhouyuan has long been known as a source of ancient bronzes. Several, like the famed Mao Gong Ding, were excavated during the last dynasty (Qing, 1644–1911), others were retrieved recently. Most significant is the Zhuangbai hoard, which consists of 103 Western Zhou ritual bronzes belonging to the aristocratic Wei family. Seventy-three of these bronzes are inscribed, and one of them, the Shi Qiang *Pan*, carries a 284-character text recounting the historical relations between the Wei family and members of the Zhou monarchy.

THE FENGCHU PALACE AT QISHAN

At Fengchu (Qishan county) archaeologists have brought to light the pounded earth foundation of a walled compound attributable to the predynastic Zhou. The rectangular pillared structure was organized symmetrically along a central axis. It was fully enclosed by buildings and covered corridors. These structures had thatched and tiled roofs, plastered walls and floors, and even a drainage system. To the east of the compound were the remains of walls and to its west another foundation that may have been residential. Access to the interior of the compound was gained through a central gate that led to the front courtyard and the main hall, places where investiture ceremonies and ancestral rites took place. From the main hall a covered passageway led to the rear yards and halls that were probably used for more private activities such as dressing and cooking.

The ritual significance of the compound is made clear by both its structure, which fits the descriptions of Zhou ritual halls found in classic texts, and the discovery below the palace foundations of 17,000 oracle bones. Close to 300 of these bones were inscribed and document the ceremonies performed by the Zhou aristocracy in accordance with the rules of Shang ritualism.

FUFENG: THE ZHAOCHENG COMPLEX AND THE LIJIA FOUNDRY

A ceremonial complex datable to the mid- to late Zhou Period was unearthed at Zhaocheng in Fufeng county. The Zhaocheng complex featured numerous ritual halls, including one that stood on an elevated platform. Postholes filled with stones indicate that massive pillars were used to support a heavy and possibly double-eaved roof. Also at Fufeng, near the village of Lijia, archaeologists have recently excavated evidence of a large bronze workshop, including thousands of pottery molds used to make Western Zhou ritual bronzes.

FINAL RESTING PLACE
These human remains and some pottery vessels were unearthed in 2006 from a tomb found during construction of public works at Zhouyuan. The ancient relics are believed to belong to the Chu Kingdom during the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period (770–221 BCE).

BURROWING INTO THE PAST
Laborers work at the excavation site of a Zhou Dynasty tomb (below right) in Qishan. Large-scale excavation work has been carried out in the Zhouyuan area since the 1950s.