



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1998 Volume III: Art and Artifacts: the Cultural Meaning of Objects

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## **Shang Bronzes: A Window into Ancient Chinese Culture (1523 B.C.-1028 B.C.)**

Curriculum Unit 98.03.01

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This unit will introduce students to the Shang dynasty of Chinese Neolithic culture. It is believed that this unique culture originated circa 1523 B.C. and thrived in the Huang He Valley until 1028 B.C. At the culmination of this ten day unit, students will be able to:

1. identify connections between modern Chinese culture and Shang culture
2. explain the hierarchical class structure of Shang society
3. describe how the king played a pivotal role in Shang government and religion
4. construct a "balance sheet" or chart describing the different social roles of the Shang nobleman and the Shang peasantry.
5. plan a museum exhibit of Shang archaeological artifacts
6. analyze Shang artifacts methodically, mindful that they are historical events with "bundled messages" from the past

The Shang: A Brief History Today, China is the most populous country in the world, home to more than 1.1 billion people or more than 20% of the world's population. This great mass of people causes tremendous population pressure, land shortages and environmental strain in modern China. China is poised to be an economic juggernaut on the world market in the coming century, yet many Chinese farmers and villagers remain poor and disenfranchised despite the economic reforms that are now taking place. President Clinton's July 1998 China visit brought to the table the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Beijing government on dissidents. Human rights abuses have been an ongoing problem in China and this problem indicates how intolerant the Chinese Communist government is in squelching the free speech of dissenting opinions. The conditions in modern Communist China have been shaped by a rich cultural and political history. To understand the nuances of modern China, we must examine the foundations of their illustrious history.

The earliest records of Chinese civilization comes from the Shang dynasty. Some archaeologists believe the Shang period extended from approximately 1523 B.C. to 1028 B.C. Despite their early development, other civilizations preceded the Shang and these civilizations may have influenced Shang development, at various times. The Sumerian emerged as one of the first groups to form a civilization. By 3000 B.C., the Sumerians had built a number of cities on the plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers flooded the Mesopotamian plains annually. The rich silt deposits left by the river created a rich soil in which farmers could plant and harvest enormous quantities of wheat and barley. As a direct result of surplus grain, village populations grew and gradually spread.

The Sumerian civilization and the Shang civilization both developed along the flood plain of major rivers. The Shang people chose to settle in the Huang He River Valley of North China because of its arable land. The land was enriched by the silt left behind by floodwater. Northern China is geographically isolated and the land surrounding the valley is hemmed in by mountain ranges, The Gobi Desert and the Yellow Sea. Mountain ranges and deserts dominate about two thirds of China's land mass. The Huang He (Yellow River) played a vital role in the lives of the people. The river had both positive and negative impacts on their lives. For example, the river provided drinking water, irrigation for their crops and accessibility to transportation but it also flooded frequently, causing terrible destruction to farmland and property.

The Shang used their creativity to build the first Chinese cities. These early people were able to organize the manpower and raw materials to accomplish this logistical feat. Most cities were organized similarly, at the center stood a palace and a temple. Public buildings and the homes of high government officials were built around the palace. The city's outer perimeter housed workshops, burial grounds and the homes of the workers.

When the Communists took over China in 1949, they took drastic steps to eradicate inequality. A commune system was adopted and the equality of all commune members was emphasized. The communes forced land reform and wrenched property ownership out of the hands of a privileged few. In contrast, class boundaries were distinct in Shang culture. The city was the home of the rich, the learned and the skilled. Poorer people lived on the city outskirts or countryside. These peasants or farmers grew grains such as millet, wheat, and rice. The peasants tilled the land for their overlords using primitive tools such as wooden digging sticks, hoes and sickles made of stone. Peasants lived in primitive semi-subterranean shelters. Their burials were extremely simple and contained only the most meager displays of possessions.

The king and his royal lineage dominated the highest class rank. The nobles sharpened their horsemanship and military skills by conducting hunts. The cavalry was drawn from the aristocratic ranks and noblemen charged into battle on horse drawn chariots while infantrymen ran afoot. In battle the cavalry wore bronze helmets and armor made of buffalo or rhinoceros hide. Nobles were skilled in the use of bow and arrow.

Below the aristocracy was a specialist group composed of craftsmen, especially artisans skilled in bronze work. Artisan groups had a lifestyle which distinguished them from the peasantry. They lived in above ground stamped earth buildings, each containing two rooms and sometimes provided with a window. These homes were superior to the dwellings of the peasants who stood at the bottom of the pyramid. Some scholars have argued that Shang society was a slave society. Other writers suggest that the peasants were not slaves but serfs. In any event, there was a great gulf between the aristocracy and the peasants.. This intra-societal friction caused polarization and among the Shang people. In 1028 B.C. a people called the Zhou invaded Shang territory but the Shang could not mount a proper defense because of disunity.

The spirits were an important part of Shang life. The Shang worshipped spirits, or supernatural beings which

they believed lived in mountains, rivers and seas. The people believed they had to please the spirits. If the spirits became angry or unhappy, the people might suffer poor harvest or lose a battle.

The Shang also believed their ancestors influenced their destiny. They offered their ancestors food, wine and special prayers which they believed would help them in time of need and bring them good fortune. The respect for ancestors forged strong family ties amongst the Shang people. They had specific rules about how family members should act toward one another. Children were taught to obey their parents and to honor older people. Wives were socialized to obey their husbands. Traditional Chinese values regarding family, duty and honor originated in this period and later Confucian teachings.

The central focus of the Shang civilization was the king. It was believed that the kings received their power from the spirits of nature and their wisdom from their ancestors. This belief forged a strong link between religion and government. There was no separation of church and state as we have in modern America. The following quote from David N. Kneightley, a leading scholar on the Shang political culture, briefly explains the situation:

"Shang religion was inextricably involved in the genesis and legitimacy of the Shang state. It was believed that Ti , the high god, conferred fruitful harvest and divine assistance in battle, that the king's ancestors were able to intercede with Ti, and that the king would communicate with his fore-fathers. Worship of the Shang ancestors, therefore, provided powerful psychological and ideological support for the political dominance of the kings. The king's ability to determine through divination, and influence through prayer and sacrifice, the will of the ancestral spirits legitimized the concentration of political power in his person. All power emanated from the theocrat because he was the channel, "the one man", who could appeal for ancestral blessings, or dissipate the ancestral curses, ... It was the king who made fruitful harvest and victories possible by the sacrifices he offered, the rituals he performed, and the divination's he made. If, as seems likely, the divination's involved some degree of magic making, of spell casting, the king's ability to actually create a good harvest or a victory by divining about it rendered him still more potent politically." (Chang, p.202)

This passage is indicative of how the connection to divine wisdom legitimized the power and authority of the king. This special link to the supernatural gave the king exclusive license to conduct religious rituals. The kings asked for special advice from the ancestors before making important decisions. To communicate with the ancestors, the kings had questions scratched on a flat polished piece of bone. A hole was then drilled into it and a hot bar put in the hole. Heat from the bar produced cracks on the bone which were believed to be the ancestors' replies to a king's questions. A special interpreter gave the king the meaning of the ancestors' replies. These bones are known as oracle bones and the writing on them is the oldest known form of Chinese writing. The king was important because of what he represented, a connection to the unseen world of ancestors and spirits.

The Shang state was a form of theocracy ruled by a series of kings whose main functions were probably ritual rather than political. The throne was passed from elder to younger brother as well as from father to son in a succession of thirty rulers. Although Shang culture spread over a large area of northern China, it is unlikely that the control of the Shang kings extended nearly as far. Chinese scholars such as J.A.G. Roberts, speculate that authority was exercised by aristocratic leaders who accepted to some extent Shang leadership, but who ruled in their own areas. This "feudalistic system" worked well and it provided an organizational framework over a large area. Feudal leaders defended the frontiers of Shang territory, supplied the manpower required for both military and construction projects and collected tribute for the royal court. Near the area of established and permanent Shang authority was an outer zone ruled by tribal chieftains friendly to the Shang.

The Shang's social organization had a strong military orientation. Shang rulers had ample military force at their command. Artifacts and records mention military campaigns involving the use of three thousand, five thousand or even thirteen thousand troops. The taking of prisoners of war mounted into the thousands, according to some archaeological evidence. The ritualistic sacrifice of war prisoners was commonplace. Oracle records mention the sacrifice of as many as three hundred Ch'iang for a ritual of ancestral worship. Other evidence indicates that as many as 600 human victims were put to death at Hsiao-t'un for the construction of a single house. The king wielded absolute power over his people, and brutal force was often used to coerce cooperation.

Near the ancient Shang capital of Anyang is the site of Xibeigang. Archaeologists describe this site as the royal cemetery of the Shang monarchs. At the site eleven very large cruciform graves and 1,222 small graves were unearthed. It is possible that these are the graves of the eleven Shang kings recorded as having ruled from Anyang over a 273 year span. The evidence recovered from these grave sites have provided the most dramatic evidence of the nature of Shang kingship. The burials were accompanied by a large number of human sacrifices, the bodies, frequently with heads and torsos separated. Body parts were found around the central chamber and on the ramp leading down to it. Everything in and around these burial chambers suggests that the deceased were people of power, wealth and honor. The tombs contained a rich selection of Shang art. In one particular tomb was found an outstanding collection of stone sculptures and bronze pieces.

@PH:Shang Bronzes The Shang venerated their ancestors. They believed people continued to exist after death. Ancestors who "died" still needed food and they exercised a degree of power over the living. Offerings of grains, wine, animals and humans were buried with the dead in order to satisfy the hunger of the ancestors. Many human sacrifices were captured in war or offered as tribute by vassal states. Tombs of the royal ancestors were filled with the bodies of human and animal victims along with many ritual objects. Shang rulers sacrificed to their ancestors more than they sacrificed to the spirits.

The most sacred objects were the bronze vessels which held ritual offerings. The Shang manufactured wonderful works of art made from bronze. Art experts believe these are the finest works of bronze ever created. Archaeological evidence indicates that bronze making was a major industry during the Shang period. Where did they gather the copper and tin ores to create these works? Scholars have discovered that copper and tin were amply available in all parts of Northern China. Ting Wen-chiang stated, in An Outline of Mineral Industries in China, that "copper ores were widely deposited in China and mining of them began early " Over time, innovations in technique and casting were honed to a fine detail by the skilled craftsmen. There is little doubt that the art of bronze was born in China. In his work, Ancient China- From the Beginnings to the Empire, Jacques Gernet emphasizes:

"bronze techniques originated in China itself; but it does not necessarily follow that this birth was entirely spontaneous. Remote influences must have played some part in the appearance of the technique in Yellow River China. From the Neolithic period onwards, the painted pottery of Yang Shao brings proof of relations between this region and countries near the Caspian Sea. The Middle Yellow River region was situated at a crossroads and was always open to remote influences from Siberia and the oases of Central Asia..."

The bronze ritual vessels represent the highest aesthetic and technological achievement of the Shang culture. Shang artisans devoted themselves to refining the artistry and technology required to manufacture these pieces. Three main categories of bronze artifacts exist: ritual vessels, luxury items sometimes placed in tombs and weapons. Production quality peaked in the late Shang period. One characteristic form was the jue, a ritual vessel standing on three legs, apparently intended for the warming of wine. The surfaces of most ritual

vessels were commonly covered with stylized surface decoration. The most common motif was a mythical creature lacking a lower jaw known as the taotie mask. Many vessels carried inscriptions indicating why they had been cast and explaining their intended use. Sarah Allan in her book, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*, writes that if we are to understand the art of the Shang we must recognize that the fantastic quality of their art is not accidental but meaningful. She points out that the forms are not simply decorative, nor are they depictions of a reality to which a symbolic meaning has been assigned. The artistic form portrayed in the bronzes deliberately contradicts the reality of the material world. The bronze motifs suggest another order beyond our logical comprehension. Practically the vessels had a singular purpose, to feed the spirits. They were thus decorated in the language of the spirit world so that the boundary between the living and the dead might be crossed and the sacrifice be received by those for whom it was intended. The motifs which are not from this world signify the crossing of this boundary. Allan observes that the language of the Shang bronzes is characterized by disjunction, double images and transformations. There is often a joining together of unrelated animals to form one composite. Double images, such as the two bodied snake, the taotie, which may be seen either as a single animal with two bodies or as two dragons facing one another, create a complex sense of illusion. In this art medium, nothing is ever quite what it seems. Application of these techniques created a sense of the other worldly, unfettered by physical limitations. Bronze motifs were constantly in a state of metamorphosis. Despite this emphasis on change, only a few distinctive styles were used. The taotie and the kui dragon were replicated in many different forms. The artist was not designing freely, but referring again and again to the same things.

#### @PH:Lesson Plans Lesson 1

- Objective:
1. Students will be able to locate the Huang He Valley of China on a world map.
  2. Students will be able to explain how geographic barriers influenced the development of the Shang people.
  3. Students will analyze a legend addressing the origin of Chinese people. Careful inferences will be made based on the style, content and tone of the legend.

Materials: World Map, Human Heritage text (p 88-89)

Vocabulary: Huang He (Yellow) River, Gobi Desert, Yellow Sea, dynasty, legend

Homework: Define each vocabulary term and create factual sentences utilizing three of them.

#### Procedures:

1. Minilecture- Students will be introduced to the Shang dynasty of ancient China. The Shang people were the first Chinese to leave records. The Shang rose to power circa 1523 B.C. They used resources, labor and organization to build the first Chinese cities.
2. Read pp 88-89 together

A World Map will be displayed to the class and students will be shown where the Huang He (Yellow River) River valley is located.

3. A guided discussion will follow the reading. Questions will be explored such as:
  - A. Why did the Shang decide to settle in this isolated river valley?

- B. Can you predict how the geography of the region affected their lifestyle?
- C. What is a legend?
- D. What can we deduce about the early settlers of China by reading the legend of the man-god Yu the Great?

Closure:

We learned about the Shang dynasty today. What effect did the geography of the region have on the Shang lifestyle?

Lesson 2 (2 days)

Objective: 1. Students will be able to describe the social hierarchy in Shang society.

- 2. Students will be able to locate where different groups lived relative to the city
- 3. Students will create a diary entry depicting a typical day in the life of a Shang king, high ranking official, artisan or farmer.

Materials: Graphic organizer, Human Heritage (pp. 89-91), colored markers

Vocabulary: artisan, hierarchy, tsu, specialization, social mobility Homework: Using facts from your graphic organizer, your notes and your text create a three paragraph diary entry about a typical day in the life of a \_\_\_\_\_.

Methods: 1. To read about the class differentiation in Shang society

- 2. To apply the facts learned in creation of a three paragraph diary about a day in the life of .....
- 3. To discuss the implications the great gap between the rich and the poor had on the cohesiveness of the society.

Procedures: 1. Discussion Question - Are there social classes in America?

How are these classes determined?

- 2. Minilecture -(Note taking encouraged)

Shang society was divided along class lines. There was no social mobility. The king occupied the highest rung on the social ladder. The people believed he was directly connected to the spirit world. The nobles or high ranking officials were next in social rank. They spent much of their time hunting or in preparation for war. Artisans were esteemed because of their expertise in crafting ritualistic bronze vessels, weapons and armament. At the bottom of the social ladder were the peasants. They specialized in farming and lived on the outskirts of the city.

- 3. Read pp. 89-91 aloud
- 4. Classwork : Create a crossword puzzle using four of our six vocabulary words. Create an answer key and exchange puzzles with your neighbor upon completion.
- 5. Classwork: Complete the graphic organizer and city layout portion of the handout.

## Closure:

Four students will be picked randomly. Each student will be given an oral clue describing one aspect of a particular Shang social class. The student will correctly name social class (ex. King, High Ranking Officials, Artisans, Peasants)

## Lesson 3 (2 days)

Objective: 1. Students will be able to discuss the role ancestor worship and rituals played in Shang religious life.

2. Students will be able to explain why religion and government were tied closely together.

Vocabulary: oracle bones, ancestors, rituals, Ti, theocracy

## Methods:

1. To reinforce the lesson by working in cooperative learning groups
2. To read and record facts about the Shang belief system
3. To actively listen to the minilecture highlighting significant principles

## Procedures:

### 1. Discussion Question-

A major guiding principle or tradition in our country is the separation of church and state. Why did the founding fathers adopt this idea?

### 2. Minilecture-

The Shang believed that their kings received power from the spirits of nature and their wisdom from their ancestors. The king had a dual role, he was head of the government and the head of their religion. As a result, religion and government were tied closely together. An important duty of kings was to contact the spirits of nature to make sure they provided enough water for farming. The king also consulted the ancestors before making important decisions. To reach the ancestors the king had questions scratched on a flat, polished piece of bone. The bone had a hole drilled in it, and a hot bar was put in the hole. Heat from the bar produced a pattern of cracks on the bone.

The cracks were believed to be the ancestors' replies to the king's questions. An interpreter gave the king the meaning of the ancestors' replies. These bones were called oracle bones. The writing on these bones are the earliest forms of Chinese writing.

### 3. Students will take notes on p 89-90 of their text - Spirits, Ancestors and Kings

### 4. Worksheet Exercise

a. Students discuss will meet in questions cooperative and triads. A complete roundtable the format will exercise be used to questions.

Closure:

A reporter from each cooperative group will present his/her findings to the class.

Lesson 4 (2 days)

Objective:

1. Students will learn a process to formally critique art and artifacts.
2. Students will systematically observe slides of Shang bronzes and based on their observations they will make deductions about Shang culture.

Materials: Slides

Vocabulary: motif, artisans, kui, taotie, jue, bronze, artifact, aesthetic, zoomorphic

Methods:

1. To read about Shang bronzes.
2. To apply a systematic approach to observing artifacts.
3. To make deductions about Shang aesthetics and values.

Procedures:

1. Students will be introduced to a process to formally critique art and artifacts.
2. Students will be invited to look at a common object using the formal process.
3. Students will read about Shang bronzes in their textbook or from a handout
4. Students will observe slides of Shang bronzes and based on their insights deductions will be made about Shang aesthetics and values.

Closure: Students will be encouraged to “put on their thinking caps” and make deductions about Shang

culture based upon the Shang bronze they observe (depicted in either slides or handouts)

## Lesson 5

Objective:

1. Students will demonstrate their comprehension of the material on a unit examination.
2. Students will be given the opportunity to earn extra credit by completing independent research on Shang culture.

Materials: Examination, Poster Paper

Procedure: Student understanding about Shang culture will be tested using a variety of questions. An exam will be distributed to each student and collected at the end of class.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Shang Unit Exam

Instructions: Read each question carefully before answering.

1. Explain two possible reasons why the Shang settled in the Huang He River Valley.
2. Identify one effect the geography of the region had on the Shang lifestyle.

Define the following terms:

3. dynasty =

4. artisan =

5. oracle bone =

6. ancestor =

7. The Shang people built the first Chinese \_\_\_\_\_.

8. The Shang people worshipped \_\_\_\_\_ or supernatural beings, which they believed lived in mountains, rivers and seas.

List in descending order the different social classes in Shang society.

9. \_\_\_\_\_

10. \_\_\_\_\_

11. \_\_\_\_\_

12. \_\_\_\_\_

## ESSAY

Instructions: Choose two of the following questions and write a well organized essay, thoroughly explaining your ideas.

13. How did the Shang people feel about nature spirits? About their ancestors? What did they do to show their feelings?

14. Carefully examine the copy of the bronze artifact attached. Using the analytical approach we learned, write a detailed descriptive analysis of the object.

15. Why was religion and the government so closely tied together in Shang culture?

Voluntary Extra Credit Assignment:

Use your imagination to organize a museum exhibit about Shang culture. Use a combination of pictures, drawings or photocopies to illustrate each category of Shang culture. You must write a detailed caption for each item you display.

These are the categories for your exhibit:

- a. Shang Religion
- b. Shang Art
- c. Government
- d. Shang Life-Styles
- e. Geography

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Chang, Kwang-Chih, *Shang Civilization*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980 Gernet, Jacques, *Ancient China From The Beginnings To The Empire*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1968 Keightley, David, *The Origins of Chinese Civilization*. London, England: University of California Press, 1983 Lin, Chao, *The Socio-Political Systems of the Shang Dynasty*. Institute of the Three Principles of the People, 1982 Roberts, J.A.G., *A History of China-Volume I*. United Kingdom: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1996 Te-K'un, Cheng, *New Light on Shang China*. Cambridge, England: Antiquity Publication Limited, 1973

## STUDENT READING LIST

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(All, except #4, at the New Haven Public Library) 1. Appel, Benjamin. Why the Chinese are the Way they Are. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1968, pp. 29-32 2. Li, Dun. The Ageless China. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1971, pp. 37-42 This text may look intimidating but it has an excellent section on Shang culture. The author examines the two major developments of their civilization: the evolution of oracle bone inscriptions into a writing system and the technological advancement of bronze metallurgy.

3. Meskill, John. An Introduction to Chinese Civilization. New York: Columbia University press, 1973, pp. 6-11 In this book the author delves into four aspects of Shang civilization- The Emergence of History: The Shang Dynasty, Rulership, The People and Shang Religion. The sections are concise. Chapter XIV is filled with illustrations that depict a range of bronze artifacts. Facts are well presented and allow connections between the different Chinese dynasties.

4. Neill, Mary. Communion of Scholars Chinese Art at Yale. New York: China House Gallery, 1982, pp. 20-41 This book has great full color photographs of Chinese art at the Yale University Art Gallery. The photographs help the reader appreciate the bronzes, ceramics, sculptures and paintings in the Yale collection. Each artifact is accompanied with an informative synopsis about the origin, style and history of the piece.

5. Yap, Young & Cotterel, Arthur. The Early Civilization of China. New York: G.P. Putnam Sons, 1975, pp. 24-29 This book gives a detailed explanation about the Kingship role in Shang religion and government. The text clearly explains Shang archaeological finds, funeral ceremonies and oracle bone inscriptions. Oracle bone inscriptions are illustrated and analyzed for the readers. A very informative work.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Cooperative Group Assignment

Lesson 3(B)

Instructions: Working in groups of three, students will organize facts about religion and religious rituals in Shang society.

Fact: The Shang worshipped spirits which they believed lived in nature. The Shang also believed that ancestors shaped their fortunes.

Question: How were oracle bones used by the king?

( Fill in the sequence on this flowchart )

1 2. 3. 4.

Discussion Question: Do we try things to predict our future? Why?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Cooperative Group Assignment

Lesson 3

Instructions: Working in groups of three, students will organize facts about religion and religious rituals in Shang society.

Fact: The Shang believed that their king was divinely inspired. The king received his power from the spirits and his wisdom from the ancestors.

Graphic Organizer: What role did Shang kings play in the religious traditions?

SHANG

KINGS

Discussion:

Why was the king well respected and honored?

Why was religion and the government so closely linked in Shang culture?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Graphic Organizer (Lesson 2)

Instructions: Create a birds eye view map of a Shang city.

Map Key:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Graphic Organizer (lesson 2 continued)

Instructions: Create a three paragraph diary entry describing a typical day in the life of a \_\_\_\_\_. Choose one of the following characters: King, High Ranking official, Artisan, Peasant. Write your diary in the first person.

Roberts, JAG. A History of China-Volume I. Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996, p.6

Ibid, p.7

Chang, Kwang-Chih. Shang Civilization. Yale University ,1980, p 153

Gernet, Jacques. Ancient China. University of California, 1968, p. 36-37

Allan, Sarah. The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art and Cosmos ..., p.130