Shared Reading Session 3

**WALT: understand the social hierarchy of an ancient civilisation**

Shang Dynasty Society and Hierarchy

**The Aristocracy and the Military**

Members of the aristocracy were the most respected social class, and were responsible for governing smaller areas of the dynasty.

The aristocracy were centred around Anyang, the Shang capital, and conducted governmental affairs for the surrounding areas. Regional territories farther from the capital were also controlled by the wealthy.

The Shang military were next in social status, and who were respected and honoured for their skill. There were two subdivisions of the military: the infantry (foot soldiers) and the chariot warriors. The latter were noted for their great skill in warfare and hunting. Archaeological evidence has supported the use of horses and other cavalry during the late Shang period, c. 1250 BCE.



**Bronze battle-axe:** A bronze battle-axe dated to the Shang Dynasty.

**Artisans and Craftsmen**

The Shang “middle class” were artisans and craftsmen, who mainly worked with bronze. Their largest contribution was their work with bronze, which the Chinese developed as early as 1500 BCE. Their work with bronze was a very important aspect of society. Bronze weapons and pottery were commonly made, but the most prominent creations included ritual vessels and treasures, many of which were discovered via archaeological findings in the 1920s and 1930s. Shang aristocrats and the royalty were likely buried with large numbers of bronze valuables, particularly wine vessels and other ornate structures.



**Houmuwu Ding:** The “Houmuwu Ding” is the heaviest piece of bronze work found in China so far.

**Peasants**

The poorest class in Shang society were the peasants, who were mostly farmers. Some scholars believe they functioned as slaves; others believe they were more like serfs. They were the poorest of Chinese citizens. They comprised the majority of the population, and were limited to farming and selling crops for profit. Archaeological findings have shown that masses of peasants were buried with aristocrats, leading some scholars to believe that they were the equivalent of slaves. However, other scholars have countered that they may have been similar to serfs. Peasants were governed directly by local aristocrats.