**The Shang Dynasty**

***Background Notes for Teachers***

The Shang Dynasty was the earliest well-documented dynasty in China and it ruled from

about 1600-1046 BC. A dynasty is a society ruled by a line of kings from the same family. There

was probably another dynasty, called the Xia, before the Shang, but archaeologists do not have

very much information about it yet.

However, there is a wealth of evidence that can tell us about the Shang Dynasty. We know

that they had a system of writing in symbols because we have found bones with writing carved

into them from this time. These ‘oracle bones’ were used to ask questions to the gods about things

that might happen or about decisions that needed to be made. They provide very useful

information about what the Shang Dynasty was like.

There are also many surviving artefacts from the period, most of which have been

discovered in tombs. People in the Shang Dynasty used to be buried with their possessions,

believing that they could take their goods with them to the afterlife. Weapons, cooking vessels,

jewellery, chariots and even human skeletons have been found buried alongside the bodies of

rich people from Shang times. From these artefacts, archaeologists have been able to piece

together a picture of what life was like in the Shang Dynasty.

We can split the history of the Shang Dynasty into three general periods.

**Period of Settlement**

Historians believe that the Shang Dynasty was founded when King Tang rose up and

overthrew the evil King Jie of the Xia Dynasty. Tang was a good and compassionate king and was

well supported by his people. He lowered taxes and he taught people how to manage animals

well. Because of his wisdom, the dynasty began to expand. People built settlements around the

Yellow River valley and farmers grew crops to feed the people. Richer people, like priests,

warriors and kings, would dwell in huge cities protected by earthen walls.

**Period of Prosperity**

Soon, the Shang Dynasty was thriving and successful, increasing in wealth and power over

the next few hundred years. People learned how to make bronze and this period was part of what

historians call China’s ‘Bronze Age’. Bronze production helped the people of the Shang Dynasty

increase their wealth and it provided the army with powerful weapons that they could use to

conquer enemies and expand the Shang territory.

People would built dirt roads to connect the cities and would trade in bronze and other

high quality goods like jade. They also used tiny shells called cowrie shells as a form of currency.

Rich people, like the famous Lady Fu Hao, would be buried with a tomb filled with treasures ready

to take on to the afterlife.

The Shang people believed in a high god called Shangdi, who ruled over the nature gods

like the gods of the sun, moon and rivers. They also worshipped their ancestors, believing that

their dead relatives could intercede to Shangdi on their behalf and directly influence what

happened in their daily lives. People would hold special festivals to honour their ancestors and

would make sacrifices of food, wine, animals and even humans.

**Period of Decline**

When the final king of the Shang Dynasty, King Di Xin ruled, people became very unhappy.

He was a cruel king who tortured people for fun. King Di Xin raised taxes to fund his own

extravagant lifestyle and this made people very poor and resentful.

Around the same time, a tribe called the Zhou decided to attack the Shang Dynasty. The

Shang army was away fighting another battle and King Di Xin called together an army from slaves,

prisoners and peasants. However, his people were so resentful that many of them chose not to

fight for him but to join the Zhou warriors instead. The Zhou king, King Wu, stormed the palace

and declared the Shang Dynasty over, establishing the reign of the Zhou Dynasty instead.