

SHANG SOCIETY

The Shang was a period during which the various neolithic cultures of China were coalescing into a coherent and widespread civilization. While the power of the late Shang king appears limited when compared to the autocratic might of later Chinese rulers, it probably represented a quantum leap from far weaker advantages enjoyed by pre-Shang chieftains over much less extensive or cohesive populations and territories.

In this section, we will explore certain features of the late Shang polity to get a broader picture of what Shang society was like. It should be recalled as we do so that our information remains fragmentary in many respects, and is skewed by the fact that the overwhelming majority of our data is derived from the oracle texts, which portray the Shang solely through the interests of the royal house. This being so, it makes sense to begin our survey of Shang social organization with the King.

The King as a religious apex

The king was a political, military, and religious leader. The oracle texts show him determining the building of cities, attending to the welfare of the harvests, communicating with allied chieftains, and leading campaigns against nomad enemies. But above all, they show him communicating with the world of spirits in the assurance that they are prepared to give him guidance.

For the people of the Shang, the King was the axial contact between the worlds of human beings and of the spirits. It is significant that in many of the oracle texts, the King serves as his own divination master, cracking the bones himself, and it is *only* the King who is ever recorded as interpreting the message of the cracks (the “diviners” would more properly be called the “crackers,” only the king divined).

The powers of the King as diviner are illustrated by the following selections from the oracle texts (the King in all cases is Wu-ding²²):

- Crack-making on gui-si day, Que divining: These ten days there shall be no disaster. The King prognosticated saying, “There shall be misfortune.” It was as he said. On jia-wu day the King went hunting a rhinoceros. The horse and chariot of Petty Minister Zai toppled over, and the King's son Yang, who was driving the King's chariot, also fell.
- Crack-making on gui-wei day, Que divining: These ten days there shall be no disaster. The King prognosticated saying, “There shall, however, be misfortune.” On the sixth day thereafter, wu-zi, the King's son X died. In the First Month.
- The King prognosticated saying, “There shall be misfortune.” On the eighth day, geng-xu, clouds in the form of a face covered the sun; a rainbow appeared and drank from the Yellow River.

●Crack-making on gui-si day, Que divining: These ten days there shall be no disaster. The King prognosticated saying, “There shall be misfortune; there will perhaps come ill news thrice over.” On the fifth day thereafter, ding-you, there did indeed come ill news from the West. Guo of Zhi reported saying, “The Tu-fang have attacked my eastern territories; they have ruined two walled towns; also, the X-fang have overrun the fields of my western territories.

The spirits with whom the Shang king consulted were a mixed lot, as we have earlier seen. They included his own ancestors and a variety of nature spirits as well. We did not note in our earlier discussion that there appear also a variety of poorly understood deities, represented by oddly picturesque graphic forms like that of the deity Kui, described in later texts as a one-footed monster, probably a relative of the ape, and also as Emperor Shun's music master. Who was this Kui? How did he and others like him make their way into the Shang pantheon?

Scholars give a variety of responses, but one of the most satisfying of these suggests that these deities represent an incorporation of the gods of tribes which the Shang had, over many years, absorbed into the polity. As part of the process of such tribes aligning themselves with the Shang and surrendering their sovereignty, the Shang “adopted” their gods into the Shang religious system, and the King became, in effect, a high priest, ministering to the needs of these tribal gods or ancestors as he did to his own.

If this model is valid, then the power of the King would have derived in part from his role as a religious center, mediating among the otherworldly members of all the component parts of the greater Shang polity. This religious process, combined with powers derived from success in warfare and the growing influence that Shang urban centers had on patterns of trade and the diffusion of cultural artifacts, would have contributed substantially to the growth and coherence of the Shang state.

The royal family

The King's family is, naturally, a subject of great concern in the oracle texts. The “many princes” were an important part of the Shang power structure, and it appears that they actually had their own religious prerogatives independent of the King. A small but significant percentage of inscriptions appear to have been made by diviners in the service of the princes rather than the king. The King's sons were entrusted with a variety of roles, and were undoubtedly among the most powerful members of the Shang polity.

The brief selection of texts below relate to the role of princes in warfare, their training, and in the last case, to the king's concern for his son's success in the hunt.

- The King's son Lu shall encounter disaster.
- On the next ding-wei day, the King's son Shang shall destroy the Ji-fang.
- The King's son Xiao is ill; shall he capture no Qiang tribesmen?

- The many sons shall proceed to the hall of instruction . . . they shall not encounter a great rain.
- The many sons shall catch deer.

Divinations concerning royal women are largely confined to questions concerning childbirth, and more particularly to issues of whether the expected child will be “fortunate” (in other words, a boy) or “unfortunate.” But we will see further below that there are cases that go beyond this narrow range of concern.

- The consort of the King's son Shang, Yu, shall give birth shall it not be fortunate?
- On jia-yin day the birth will not be fortunate: it shall be a girl.
- The boy child of Consort Ning shall be called Zhi.

Group structures in Shang society

One of the features of Shang society that we can discern both in bone texts and in the terse inscriptions on some bronze vessels is the existence of clan structures tied to specialized social roles.

There are two Chinese characters that were used to refer to lineage groups in the Shang texts. One of these graphs, zong, pictures a “spirit-tablet,” or symbolic temple image of the dead, within the structure of a shrine building. This word expresses the religious essence in clan membership. It points at once to the nature of a clan as a large common descent group and to its primary integrating activity: ancestral sacrifice.



The second graph, zu, refers to smaller lineage sub-groups, cadet branches of the clan, which formed socially independent units of Shang society, but were still ritually tied to the larger descent group. The graph of zu pictures an arrow underneath the waving banners of a battle flag. Here, the symbol of the group is not related to its internal cohesiveness based on descent and ritual, but to its external function in society, pictured in terms of the key activity of military participation.



The population of the Shang may be conceived of as a conglomeration of zu, or “corporate lineage groups”: that is, familial organizations that shared a single occupation in contributing to Shang society. A zu might be a clan of bronze casters, of horse breeders, of bow makers, butchers, shepherds, and so forth. Occupations were probably inherited, and the geography of the Shang city probably organized the population simultaneously according to lineage and social function in this way.

One particularly direct expression of this form of social organization is the pattern of clan signs that we find on Shang bronzes. These pictorial representations in many cases represent with great clarity the professional nature of the clan, as in the following examples:



The basic concept of Shang society as a collection of groups rather than of individuals is reinforced in the oracle texts. The inscriptions in that corpus frequently refer to people in groups, signalled by affixing a prefix-pluralizer meaning “the many” before the group name. For example, the royal family is referred to in terms of “the many princes” (the younger members of the royal house) or “the many wives”; allied chiefs and Shang nobles with semi-independent estate lands are called “the many elders” or “the many lords”; supervising personnel are called “the many officers” or “the many field foremen”; military officials are “the many horsemen”; craft groups are “the many arrowsmiths” or “the many shieldsmiths.” Earlier, we encountered this manner of speaking extended to the spirit world in the term “the many grandmothers.”

The thrust of this model can be captured by the sense of the character zu, picturing the clan as a military company. It suggests a metaphor of all Shang society as a cohesive battalion composed of consanguineal (blood-related) “companies” of specialists in all the arts of value to the state. And this notion may not be far distant from the way in which Shang civilization viewed itself, at least in its geographical core regions.

The extended polity

Ruling from the Shang capital near present day An-yang, north of the Yellow River on the North China Plain, the King had little means of directly protecting the most vulnerable regions of his polity, those western areas north of the bend in the Yellow River where the nomadic enemies of the Shang wandered. Even within the heartlands of Shang, given the primitive conditions of transportation it would be difficult for the King to keep track of all of the lands and people nominally under his control.

To deal with such issues, the Shang seem to have initiated the political strategies that culminated in the system of patrician estates developed fully in the Western Zhou, and often referred to as Zhou feudalism. In the Shang case, we can discuss this with regard to two different classes of semi-independent “estate holder”: those who were either members of the royal lineage or part of the core of Shang society, and those who were allied chieftains whose loyalties were less certain.

The oracle texts mention the names of “princes” or “wives” who seem to have possessed lands, or at least been responsible for control over them. As we will see later on, it was not impossible during the Shang for royal women to play a military role, and it may be that all of the royal family members so named were jointly nobles enjoying the income of designated lands and leaders of potential regional regiments in a central Shang military structure. In the case of the royal wives, it could be that these were women who had married into the royal house already in possession of territorial holdings derived from their birth clan.

We also see in the texts a group of men endowed with titles of “nobility”: hou, meaning “archer-lord” (rendered Marquis for later Zhou contexts); bo, meaning “elder” (sometimes rendered Earl); dian, meaning “field foreman” (or Baron). It is unclear in many cases whether these people were members of the royal Zi clan, or to what degree their dominion over their lands was personal, rather than contingent upon royal grace. But in some cases, the lands over which these individuals presided are referred to by the names of their lords, indicating the likelihood of a personal connection. Nevertheless, in many cases the King also refers to such territories as “our lands,” suggesting that these domains were understood to be the ultimate possessions of the Shang house.

Such “estate” holdings were focused, as in later eras, around a walled urban node. There are many examples of the King consulting the oracle to determine what date would be propitious for commencing work on walling such a city. It seems possible, then, that the benefits provided by the King to such estates included the provision of labor teams for public works and, as we learn in other inscriptions, troops in the event of attack. In return, the estate holder presumably shared a portion of his or her harvest income with the King, kept the regions belonging to the estate loyal to the Shang, and supplied warriors when they were needed in other parts of the polity.

We see also cases of more distant Shang allies who do not appear to have had any blood relationship with the Shang ruling house. These lords appear quite often in the oracle texts, most frequently in connection with large campaigns against one or another of the major “fang,” or non-Shang tribes at the periphery of the Shang regions, or in some pocket of unconquered land more centrally located. Chieftains like this, such as Zhi of Guo, mentioned in one of the inscriptions translated earlier, were truly the key protectors of the Shang; in the event their loyalties changed, the security of the Shang state could be irreparably damaged.

A selection of oracle inscriptions will illustrate the variety of ways in which we encounter domain chieftains of various types in these texts:

- Divining: . . . follow Hu, the Hou of Cang, in attacking the X-fang; we shall receive [spirit] support.
- Crack-making on gui-wei day, Yong divining: Qin will be able to lead the many Bo.

- Shall we perhaps follow the many Dian and the many Bo and campaign against Yan, the Bo of the Yu-fang?
- On jia-wu day the King made cracks and divined: We will perform a rong-sacrifice. On the next rong-sacrifice day we shall go up to follow the Hou X to campaign against the Ren-fang. The ancestors above and below will provide support and not visit disaster upon us. We will report at the Great City Shang [that there has been] no disaster. The King prognosticated saying, “It is greatly auspicious.” In the Ninth Month upon the day of the shi-sacrifice to Shang-jia, in the tenth sacrificial cycle (year).
- We will sacrifice two Bo of the Qiang-fang to Grandfather Ding and Father Jia.

This last example is of particular interest because it bestows the honor of the “feudal” designation Bo (Elder) on leaders of an adversarial fang-tribe, and follows this polite reference with news of their imminent sacrificial beheading. Clearly, the lordly titles of the Shang have a wider range of significance than we might expect.

One tribe allied with the Shang was the Zhou, the eventual conquerors of the Shang. While we do not know nearly as much about the pre-conquest Zhou people as we would wish, summarizing some of the data of Shang-Zhou relations can suggest the nature of Shang diplomacy within the polity.

There are a considerable number of inscriptions bearing on the Zhou people dating from the reign of Wu-ding, about 1200 B.C. One text refers to the Zhou as “Zhou-fang,” indicating that the Zhou could be pictured as an adversarial or alien people, all other instances drop the fang suffix. Perhaps at this time, the Zhou were relatively new members of the Shang polity. It is believed that during this period, the Zhou people inhabited an area in the Fen River Valley, northeast of the bend of the Yellow River. The Shang were in regular, but not close contact with them. The Shang king issued orders to the Zhou, divined about the welfare of the Zhou troops and commanders, inquired about the likely success of the Zhou hunts, and bestowed the title Hou upon their leader.

On the other hand, the King never visited the realm of the Zhou to tour or to hunt, nor called upon Zhou manpower to aid Shang public works. The king was concerned for the health of the Zhou ruler, but never divined about the success of the Zhou harvests.

According to legend, the ruler of the Zhou about this time, the Old Duke, removed the Zhou capital to the Wei River Valley, west of the Yellow River elbow and far more distant from the Shang (this is discussed in Coursepack #1). In fact, the Zhou people do disappear entirely from the oracle records after the reign of Wu-ding, and reappear only at the close of the Shang, during the reign of Zhòu, again, as an allied people. The fact that the Zhou people could make so large a physical move without regard to the Shang indicates their essential integrity as a sovereign tribe. Their reemergence in the oracle record suggests that the influence of the Shang state had grown geographically, reaching during the last years of the dynasty to the formerly isolated new Zhou homeland.

It is disappointing to find no record in the oracle texts of the impending Shang-Zhou conflict (nor, for that matter, any hint that something was awry in the kingship of Zhòu). But the basic facts recorded in legend make good sense. The later texts recount the coming of the Zhou conquest as a process in which the semi-independent chieftains to the west of the Shang center became disaffected with the Shang, eventually joining with the Zhou in its military conquest. This is certainly consistent with the evidence that the further away from the Shang center one travelled, the more likely it would be that the local lord would be the inheritor of both a Shang “feudal” title and also of an ethnically distinct tribal chieftainship. It would be on the basis of the latter that there would be a sense of freedom to abandon the Shang and ally one's people with a new overlord.

It is precisely this ambiguity as to ethnic loyalty which seems to rapidly disappear in northern China during the early Zhou, and in all of China by the Spring and Autumn period. By that date, even though the structures of the Zhou empire have been shattered into a multi-state polity, the differences between the states seem conceived as *political* rather than *ethnic* ones, and even such tangential states as Qin, Chu, Wu, and Yue assert loyalty to the (powerless) Zhou royal house. However, prior to the 11th century civil wars that followed the Zhou conquest, the principal state of China, the Shang, seems much more like a confederacy of intrinsically sovereign tribes than as a unified civilization, built upon a foundation of shared cultural identity.

The Shang government

The King presided over a range of civil and military officers at the capital and beyond that provided him with the essential leverage needed to exercise political power. It is our presumption, based on the trends evident in the Western Zhou and later, that these governmental offices were hereditarily determined, but we do not have direct evidence that this is so.

While we see a wealth of data concerning the various officers of the Shang in the oracle texts, I know of no study that has yet organized this data into a coherent reconstruction of the structures of Shang government. The passages that are collected in categories below represent a selection of relevant information; however, the translations of official titles are all very speculative.

1. Ministers

“Minister” and “Petty Minister” were important Shang titles of uncertain scope which carry on over into the subsequent Zhou Dynasty. We learn the range of duties of ministers from the inscriptions.

- We shall order the Petty Minister to bang-sacrifice a lamb and fowl.
- The King will go out to chase rhinoceros; Petty Minister Zi will provide horse and chariot.

- Petty Minister X will appear in audience.
- Perhaps [we shall] call upon Petty Minister Ce to follow [in battle].
- We shall not call upon our many Ministers to attack the Qiong-fang.
- We should call upon our many Ministers to follow Guo of Zhi.
- Divined: the Petty Ministers should order the multitudes to plant grain.
- Our former senior Ministers will not make misfortune for us.

This last text is interesting in that it suggests that the power of ministers to influence events persists after death. This evidence would help support a claim that high officers of state would have been members of the royal clan.

2. Some Military Officials

- We shall call upon our many Archers and Infantry leaders.
- Call upon Guardmasters Ran and Ning to mobilize (?) the multitudes.
- The Guardmasters of the five lineages should not mobilize (?) the King's multitudes.
- Master of Hounds Yu has reported deer; should the King follow, he will perhaps make a catch.
- The many Masters of Horses will pursue and catch deer.
- The many Masters of Horses and Commissary Officers (?) shall perhaps encounter disaster.
- The King shall order the Commissary Officers to follow the Bo of Fou and attack the fang.
- Order the many Commissary Officers: Officer Ni shall meet with Officer Yong to survey Yi-lin to the lands of the Hou of Cang, and they shall follow the River Song in the company of the Hou of X.

3. Some Civil Officials

The roles of civil officials are harder to discern than those of military ones. Below are inscriptions touching on the duties of a court recorder, a court scribe-priest, governors (perhaps, loyal leaders of groups of common people), and craftsmen (who may have been music masters).

- The King will requite Small Minister X: the Recorder shall reward . . . and the King shall have no regrets.
- On ding-you day the scribe-priest shall rong-sacrifice, making a report at the Southern Shrine.
- The Three Governors shall go to the West.
- Order the Governor to open up large areas of fields.
- The King shall order Shan to supervise our craftsmen.
- On yi-wei day, the many craftsmen shall perform (?) “She-X.”

Common people

As you should expect, we do not know a great deal about the lives of commoners during the Shang. We can see that certain artisan groups, such as bronze casters, probably enjoyed certain privileges, and the very fact that there are clan emblems that seem to record and even celebrate a clan identity as butchers or shepherds indicates that such well defined occupational groups stood out from the common mass.

The common mass, of course, were farmers. Our understanding of the peasants and of commoners in general is derived from the appearances of a single word in the oracle texts, a word signifying “the multitudes.”

The graph used to designate the multitudes was written by drawing three persons underneath the sun. The graph itself suggests the image of the peasant outdoors in the fields. There are inscriptions when the term clearly refers to the peasants, but there are other inscriptions where the multitudes constitute a military force, presumably drafted from the peasantry.



The multitude are not always pictured as under the control of the King; the multitudes of Shang allies were also of concern to the King, whether because their welfare was important to keep the allied state strong or because they were mobilized as soldiers fighting with Shang armies. It is unclear whether these multitudes are the peasants of an essentially alien ally, or Shang commoners attached to a royal estate holder at the time that individual traveled to his or her domain to oversee it and guarantee its order for the Shang. If it is the latter case, the King's concern could have rested on both political and cultural bases.

There has been much debate about the status of the multitudes. Should they be seen as lower class but politically significant actors? As slaves – Shang people with no independent rights as people? As captives – essentially non-Shang slaves? The evidence is ambiguous. The late text recording the supposed speech of Pan-geng to his people pictures him trying to *persuade* the

multitudes to move with him: hardly the stance a ruler takes towards slaves, but the text may not be authentic. As far as the issues of slaves and captives go, there is abundant evidence that the Shang brought great numbers of captives to their capital. The inscriptions record their slaughter in huge sacrificial ceremonies. But whether such captives provided the source of the Shang peasant class or a significant portion of it seems doubtful. For now, the status and livelihood of the commoners in Shang China and the nature of the “multitudes” we meet in the inscriptions remains fundamentally unclear.

Following are a group of inscriptions relating to the multitudes:

- Divined: We should report by means of burnt offerings that the multitudes have marched to Ding. Eighth month.
- The King shall issue a great order to the multitudes saying, “Cultivate the fields”; we shall receive a harvest.
- Divined: X should call upon the Petty Minister of the Multitudes.
- Crack-making on wu-yin day, Bin divining: The King shall go and lead the multitudes in planting grain at Jiong.
- We shall not call upon the multitudes to precede [us] to Qian.
- The Commissary Officers (?) should lead the multitudes to march.
- The King should perhaps take the multitudes, attack X, and so obtain (capture) people; then the people of the border territories will encounter disaster.
- Shall [our ally] Bi not lose his multitude?
- Call out at the altar to attack and defend against the Qiang-fang, the men shall destroy the Qiang and not lose the multitude.

The role of women: the case of Fu-hao

We know very little about the role of women during the Shang. It is presumed that their status was low and their occupations constrained to those pictured in the Zhou Book of Poetry, which began to be composed not long after the fall of the Shang. There is, however, one case of a royal woman whose role, as recorded in the oracle texts, was so remarkable as to demonstrate that during the Shang women were not, at least, conceived as inherently incapable of social, political, and even military participation.

Fu-hao was a consort of King Wu-ding, whose great power she clearly helped to secure. The oracle texts concerning her deal with issues common to other consorts, such as childbearing, but also reveal that she played an important political and military role. In two of the inscriptions, Fu-hao appears as a general in charge of troops, carrying out an essential mission to link her forces to those of Wu-ding's chief independent ally, Guo of Zhi, and coordinate a rendezvous with the troops under the king's direct command.

Fu-hao's eminence has been confirmed in another way. In 1976, archaeologists excavated the richest intact tomb ever located at the Xiao-tun site. Found within it were well over 400 ritual bronze vessels and almost 600 carved jade ornaments, as well as 7,000 cowrie shells, the cash of Shang commerce. Inscriptions on the bronzes confirmed that this was the grave of Fu-hao, who was clearly honored in death in a manner consistent with her role in life.

- Crack-making on yi-chou day, Que divining: On the next geng-yin day, Fu Hao shall give birth.
- Crack-making on wu-chen day, Que divining: When Fu Hao gives birth, shall it not be fortunate?
- Crack-making on ding-you day, Pin divining: Fu Hao shall have a fortunate birth. The King prognosticated saying, if she gives birth on a jia day there will be misfortune . . .
- Crack-making on jia-shen day, Que divining: Fu Hao shall have a fortunate birth. The King prognosticated saying, if she gives birth on a ding day it shall be fortunate; if on a geng day, it shall be greatly auspicious. On the thirty-third day thereafter, on jia-yin, Fu Hao gave birth. It was not fortunate; it was a girl.
- Crack-making on xin-wei day, Cheng divining: Fu Hao shall follow Guo of Zhi and attack the X-fang. The King shall attack Zhong-lu from the East to where Fu Hao shall be.
- Divined: The King shall not order Fu Hao to follow Guo of Zhi and attack the X-fang; will we not perhaps receive support?
- Divined: Fu Hao is ill; is there some evil influence?
- Crack-making on ji-mao day, Que divining: We shall perform an yu-sacrifice to Father Yi on behalf of Fu Hao. We shall x-sacrifice a lamb, decapitate a boar, and ce-sacrifice ten sets of sheep and pigs.