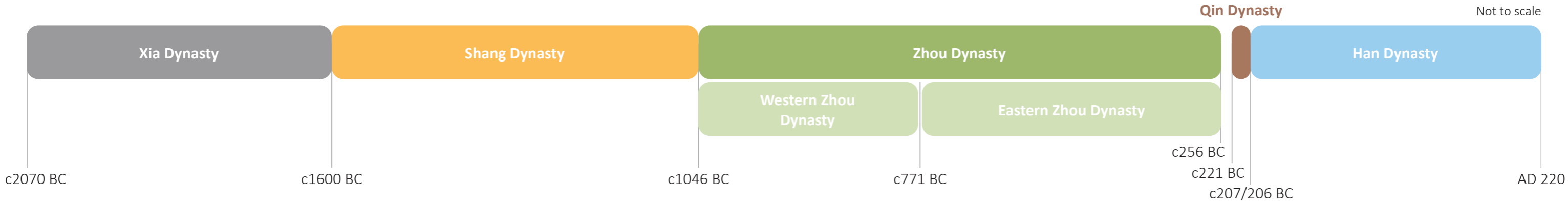


Dynamic Dynasties

A dynasty is a system of rule where the throne passes from one member of a ruling family to another. Dynasties have ruled China for 4000 years, from c2070 BC until 1912. During that time, around 15 different dynasties have held power. Each dynasty made important changes to the country, but many aspects of life in China started during the first five dynasties.



Shang Dynasty

The Shang Dynasty is the earliest ruling dynasty in the recorded history of China. The Xia Dynasty is thought to have gone before, however there is no recorded evidence to support this. The Shang Dynasty reigned during China’s Bronze Age, from c1600 to c1046 BC, and were known for their advances in bronzework, silk manufacture, jade carving and military technology.

Yinxu

Scholar, Wang Yirong, discovered evidence of the Shang Dynasty in 1899, when he found ancient Chinese writing on bones that he had been given to treat malaria. He traced the bones to the modern day city of Anyang. The Shang Dynasty capital of Yin was discovered in Anyang in 1928. Excavations at the site, known as ‘Yinxu’, or ‘Yin ruins’, uncovered the remains of palaces, temples and tombs. Archaeologists also found many bronze and jade objects, as well as thousands of oracle bones. These finds provided a wealth of information about how people lived and worshipped.

Oracle bones

Oracle bones are pieces of sheep or cow bone, or turtle shell. Shamans or kings wrote questions on these bones to ask for guidance from the deities. Holes in the bones were then heated until they fractured. The patterns of fractures were interpreted as the answers to the questions. In this way, Shang Dynasty kings consulted the deities about the outcome of harvests, droughts, health issues and military strategies.



Religion

People in the Shang Dynasty worshipped the king of the gods, Shangdi. They also prayed to lesser gods who controlled aspects of the world, such as the sun, wind, rain and moon. People made offerings and sacrifices to please their deceased ancestors. They believed that the soul lived after death, so they buried objects, including ritual vessels containing food and drink, for the dead to use in the afterlife.



Shangdi surrounded by attendants

Bronze

Bronzeworking skills were a major advance during the Shang Dynasty. People learned to smelt copper, tin and lead to make bronze. Skilled craftspeople created vessels that were used for rituals and offerings to the gods. Bronze weapons, such as daggers and spearheads, also gave the Shang Dynasty warriors an advantage over their enemies.



Houmuwu ding from Yinxu

Jade

Jade is a hard and rare stone, made from the mineral nephrite, which is difficult to shape and carve. Jade was used for jewellery, ornaments, weapons, tools and ritual objects. It was precious and a symbol of purity and virtue.



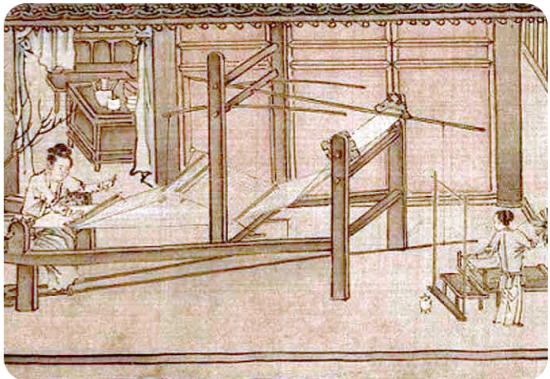
jade plaque, c3500–c2000 BC



jade bi

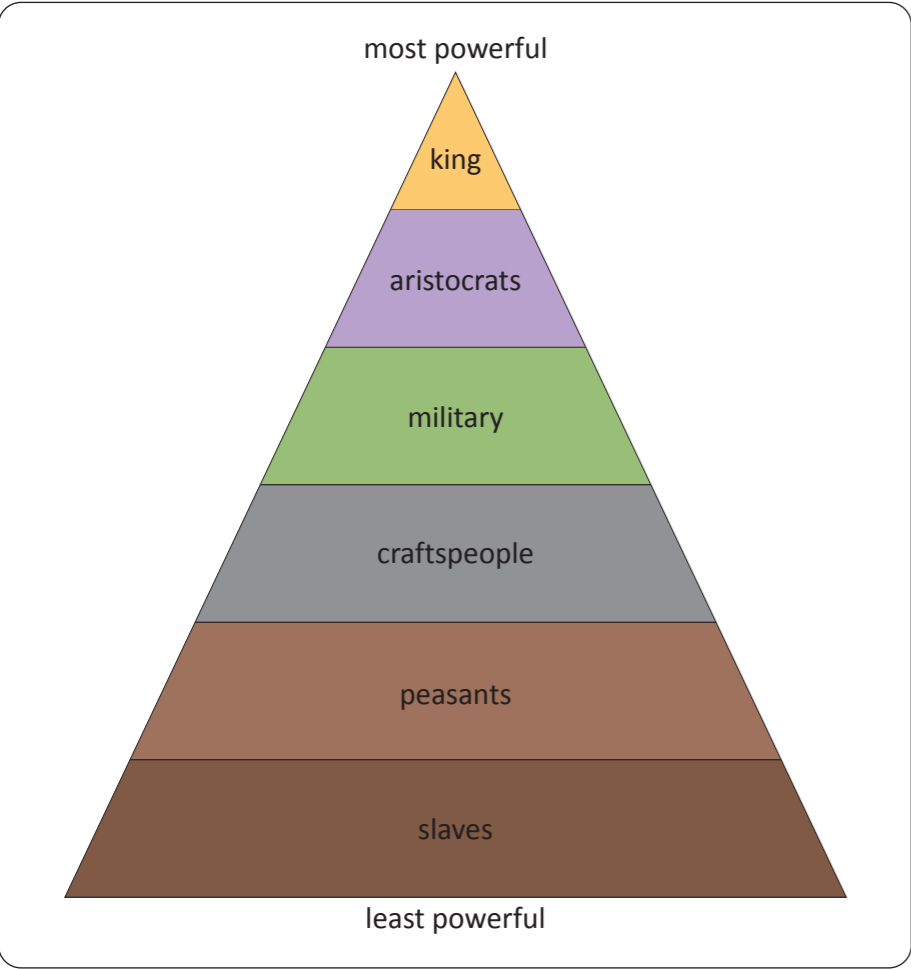
Silk

Silk was a popular and highly desirable fabric. It was made from threads produced by silkworms. Exquisite fabric was made for clothes and luxury goods, which were worn by the nobility and traded.



Power and hierarchy

There was a strict social hierarchy in the Shang Dynasty, with the king at the top and peasants and slaves at the bottom.



Warfare

Warfare was a way of life in the Shang Dynasty. The king led the army. Foot soldiers were armed with bronze daggers and axes, and archers used powerful composite bows made from layers of animal bone, tendons and wood. Two-wheeled chariots, pulled by a pair of horses, carried an archer, a spearman and a charioteer. The chariots allowed the soldiers to travel quickly over long distances. Soldiers wore protective armour and bronze helmets.



bronze dagger-axe

Fu Hao

Fu Hao was a wife of the Shang king, King Wu Ding. She became the Shang Dynasty’s most influential military leader and commanded an army of 13,000 men. She was buried in her own tomb, surrounded by important objects including ritual vessels and weapons.

Everyday life

People in the Shang Dynasty lived in cities, towns and villages. Wealthy people lived in large houses made from wattle and daub, while poorer people lived in small houses made by digging into soft rock. The oldest man in each household was the head of his family. People had a wide variety of jobs, such as farmers, miners, bronzeworkers, craftspeople, soldiers and government officials. A person’s social class determined the job that he or she was allowed to do. People ate rice, millet and fish and drank beer and yellow rice wine. Wealthy people ate a lot of meat.



Comparisons with other Bronze Age civilisations

In China, the Bronze Age started slightly later than in other parts of the world, c1600 BC. However, the techniques used by metalworkers in the Shang Dynasty were unknown in other Bronze Age civilisations. Religion also differed, with worship and offerings to the ancestors being an important part of their belief system. Consulting the oracle bones was also unique to the Shang Dynasty.

End of the Dynasty

The last Shang Dynasty king, *Di Xin*, was a cruel dictator. He was known as the ‘tyrant.’ *Di Xin* was an indulgent and boastful man, and very unpopular with his people. Finally, c1046 BC, an army from the neighbouring Zhou state invaded and defeated *Di Xin*. The Shang Dynasty was over, and the Zhou Dynasty had begun.

Other dynasties

During the Zhou Dynasty, power moved from the king to the feudal lords of individual states. Iron began to replace bronze, and warfare advanced with crossbows and horses. Confucius also created his influential philosophy of Confucianism. Seven states fought for power during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. The Qin Dynasty united the warring states and introduced the first emperor of the whole of China, as well as a new government structure. Building also began on the Great Wall of China, and the Terracotta Army was made. The Han Dynasty developed an advanced system of government and opened the Silk Road trade route, which connected China with the western world.



Great Wall of China

Legacy of ancient China

The legacy of ancient China can be seen today. Ancient Chinese beliefs, such as Confucianism, are still followed and the imperial system lasted for over 2000 years. Silk and jade objects are still luxury items. The characters used in Chinese writing are over 5000 years old. The Great Wall of China is one of the New Seven Wonders of the World and ancient Chinese inventions, such as the magnetic compass and paper are used all over the world.



Chinese calligraphy

Glossary

ancestor	A person from whom someone is descended.
Confucianism	A philosophy based on the ideas of the philosopher, Confucius.
composite	A new material that is made up of more than one existing material.
deity	A god or goddess.
imperial	Relating to an empire.
oracle bones	Bones used to communicate with ancestors and gods.
ritual	A ceremony that involves a series of actions performed in a fixed order.
sacrifice	To kill an animal or a person and offer them to the gods.
shaman	A priest who is believed to communicate with spirits.
smelt	To melt metals at a high temperature.
tyrant	A ruler who has unlimited power over other people and uses it unfairly or cruelly.
virtue	The quality of being morally good.

