China: Shang Dynasty

Emergence of Civilizations / Anthro 341: Class 21

The Three Dynasties (Hsia, Shang, Chou) 2100-770 BC
- in the centuries after 2000 BC, the first evidence of
  - real cities (urbanism) - although with differences
  - states
  - writing
- the Three Dynasties are known a little from documents written a bit later that describe them as history
  - but Hsia and Shang were once thought to be mythological
  - now archaeology has proved that the written records refer to real places and societies
- a few existing texts from the first millennium BC tell us mostly about Shang and later dynasties
  - they describe a society that was already up to 1000 years in the past
    - but they would have been based on written documents no longer available to us, so they may be reasonably accurate
  - these historical documents imply that that:
    - Shang China was composed of yi, or walled towns
    - the yi were organized hierarchically into kuo, or states
    - the kuo were ruled by the head of a clan, whose clan in turn was ranked relative to others in the same kuo
      - dynasties were simply the families of rulers (clan heads) of unusually successful kuo (states)
      - initially there were several hundred kuo
      - constantly at war, conquering and losing control of each other
    - this description based on texts corresponds well to what we know of the archaeological Lung-shan horizon
      - since there is evidence of warfare, walled towns, clan-based status and burial, etc. back into the Lung-shan horizon
      - so it seems fair to think that the situation in Lung-shan and Hsia times was similar to what is documented historically for Shang
  - relationship of the three dynasties
    - although it is not shown in the dates we use here, there was considerable overlap in time, some in space
    - the "dynasties" also refer to styles of ceramics and bronzes, probably really ethnic or regional groups as well as just a line of leaders
    - rather than a simple sequence of rulers, the dynasties represent geographical centers or competing lineages which gained political and military preeminence at different times
    - so even though the "Hsia dynasty" is traditionally earliest, the first manifestations of the Shang style and culture were contemporary with Erh-li-t’ou (historical Hsia), but were further downriver
and the “subsequent” western Chou dynasty (1100-770 BC) was contemporary with later Shang, but was upriver

since the Shang dynasty was clearly "civilized", we won't go on to the western Chou here

Erh-li-t’ou (site and culture) 2100-1800 BC (shown as Hsia area on the map)

debate about how to connect the archaeological evidence with the historical references

KC Chang: archaeological Erh-li-t’ou = historical Hsia dynasty?
Barnes: archaeological Erh-li-t’ou = historical Early Shang?

there are dozens of Erh-li-t’ou sites

The biggest one, Erh-li-t'ou itself, is a huge site, 1.5 x 2.5 km (375 hectares)

up to 3 m deep: long, dense occupation in some places

no city walls! (at least, not yet found)

this seems unusual for this period; why no defenses?

maybe the “elephant” defense: too big to attack, even without defenses?

or the walls just have not been found yet?

or there was a peaceful interlude?

two enormous platforms for “palace” structures

rammed earth platforms, 1-2 m thick

containing burials, possibly sacrificed

platforms were built in foundation pits, so they projected only 80 cm above ground

the larger one was 100 x 108 m (325 x 350 feet)

that is a square as wide as the two wings and courtyard of Stevenson Hall

with an additional 36 x 25 m low platform set on top of the “back” of the main platform

with postholes for a rectangular hall 11 x 30 m

wattle and daub, gabled roof?

surrounded by a narrow (50-110 cm) rammed-earth wall at the edge of the platform

forming a veranda facing inside, indicated by rows of postholes

this layout, with the gate to south and the building to north, is typical of later buildings known to be palaces

pottery drainpipes

subsidiary buildings

wide variation in burials

some have nothing

all the way up to others that have evidence of lacquered coffins, even more elaborate than Lung-shan types

bronze

a characteristic vessel type: chüeh cup, of which seven have been found

weapons: knives and halberds (dagger or axe on a long shaft)

jades, turquoise inlays, lacquered wood, other wealth items

oracle bones

Shang Dynasty 1700-1100 BC

According to later histories

the Shang dynasty was founded by T’ang, who conquered the last of the Hsia kings
and founded a royal capital at a place the texts called Po.

later Shang kings moved the capital to other cities several times

29 kings followed T’ang in the Shang dynasty

Early or Middle Shang (roughly 1700 - 1400 BC)

this is a subdivision of the Shang period; also called the Cheng-chou phase (Zhengzhou in the reader), or the Erligang or Ehr-li-kang phase

exemplified by the site of Cheng-chou

May date very early in Shang dynasty: the site of Cheng-chou may be the first Shang capital, the historical “Po”

Barnes dates it to the middle of the historical Shang dynasty

she thinks Cheng-chou is one of the later Shang capitals

Cheng-chou was the largest site of this time, 3.5 square kilometers (350 hectares)

surrounded by a rammed-earth wall

wall seen as enclosing ritual space, rather than literally for defense?

palace structures on rammed-earth platforms

bronze hairpins found in palace structures suggest high-status people lived there (no surprise)

large bronze, bone, and pottery shops outside the walls

at the bronze workshops, they

– cast bronze arrowheads and spearheads, some in molds that formed numerous points at once, which were then sawn apart
– forged knives for use and display
– cast the elaborate bronze vessels for which the Shang period is famous

at the ceramic workshops, they made
– fine ceramics for use and display
– also "proto-porcelain", or ceramics of a specific composition, fired at a very high temperature that began to develop a glassy texture

at the bone workshops, they made
– many ordinary bone implements, like combs
– using bones from cattle
– but at one bone workshop, there was a ditch that contained human crania, many with the tops sawn off

– apparently to make bowls or cups that would be obviously from human remains…
– indicates that the elite who supported or commissioned this work had an absolute control of life
– and wanted to convey that to people that they entertained

at least three other sites of this period also had walls, suggesting warfare

chariots in burials also suggest the importance of warfare

but this period (early to middle Shang) did NOT yet have other Shang traits:

– writing
– royal mausoleums (yet)
Late Shang (the "Yin phase"): An-yang, the Shang capital in the last 200-300 years of the dynasty (roughly 1400 - 1100 BC)
- excavation at An-yang, starting in 1928, turned the Shang dynasty from legend into history
- we can identify this site as the historical An-yang because oracle bones were found there that describe the names and travels of a series of eleven kings
- the list of kings that can be reconstructed from these bones closely matches later historical lists of Shang kings
- An-yang was a huge city
  - 24 square kilometers (2,400 hectares)
  - but not walled (as far as we know)
  - widely scattered sectors with distinct functions
    - not a single dense urban core
    - sectors of the site now have names of the different modern villages near them
      - this suggests how loose the “city’s” plan was
      - and how different it was from the western or Mesopotamian concept of a city
- Sector with palaces
  - 1 ha complex, clearly central to the site
  - 53 high-status rectangular structures on rammed-earth platforms
    - divided into a residential area, a royal temple area, and a ceremonial area
      - although the areas may not have all been in use at the same time, meaning that the total size of the complex at any given time could have been somewhat smaller than it looks now
    - lots of human sacrifices associated with construction of platforms
    - wattle-and-daub walls, stone bases for probably wooden pillars, gabled roofs
    - underground water ditches under foundations
    - high-status goods found in this area, like fancy cast bronze vessels
    - lots of oracle bones in the palace sector, confirming that oracle bones were clearly associated with royalty
    - high-status burials nearby, some with chariots and their horses
      - indicating that warfare and weaponry were associated with the palace and royalty
      - although the royal burials themselves were in a separate cemetery
    - round semi-subterranean houses surround the rammed-earth foundations, presumably for servants
    - that palace sector was surrounded by other sectors with habitation clusters, workshops, tombs
    - workshops include
      - pottery kilns
      - two bone working areas
      - two large bronze foundries
      - clay molds for casting bronze vessels and bone-working materials were found in one of the palaces
      - not finished goods, but production debris; what were they doing at the palace?
they suggest that the palace had a direct connection to the craftspeople making bone and bronze goods
- presumably supporting and directing them
- that is, they were attached specialists
- not surprising, since some of the bone artifacts were made from people -- which requires a lot of power to enforce
- and since bronze was closely associated with royalty in written accounts, residential debris, and burials
- a separate huge cemetery, with royal burials, burials of nobles, and many hundreds of sacrificial victims
- 11 large tombs, presumably of the 11 historical rulers of An-yang
  - all looted long ago
  - over 1000 small graves
  - large graves
    - at least 7000 person-days just to dig each pit
    - cross-shaped, with ramps
    - wooden chamber built in the center
    - human sacrifices all around
      - some in coffins - presumably higher status
      - some decapitated - presumably not so high status
      - some just heads or other parts
    - lots of bronze, jade, shell, bone, pottery, etc.
  - Tomb Number 5, of Fu Hao, consort to King Wu Ting
  - much smaller than the 11 kings' burials, but never looted
  - over 1,600 items in total, plus 7,000 cowry shells
  - over 440 bronzes, over 590 jades, over 560 bone objects, over 70 stone objects
  - Anyang was clearly home to fabulously wealthy royalty -- and we don’t even have the contents of the really big tombs to judge by

Origins and context of writing in China
- earliest evidence of Chinese writing dates to the later Shang dynasty, around 1400 BC; well established by 1200 BC
- many of the characters can be read, since they are recognizably versions of early Chinese writing, directly ancestral to modern Chinese writing
- written on oracle bones and bronze vessels
  - the early examples, especially on bronzes, are generally just one or two characters, probably the name of the person who had the piece made
  - according to an early surviving text (but long after Shang dynasty), a lot was written on bamboo strips and silk -- which would not survive in the ground
  - also, the character that looks like and refers to bound "books" of bamboo strips is found in late Shang inscriptions on bronzes and oracle bones, so these bamboo strip books were probably in use then
- unfortunately, the founding emperor of the Ch'in Dynasty, around 100 BC, had all old books except those on medicine, divination, and agriculture burned
- fortunately, a handful of books escaped
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- so there may have been a lot of early development of writing that has just not survived
- The major early use of writing that we know of was scapulamancy (cattle scapulae) and plastromancy (on turtle plastron (shell))
  - continuation of the scapulamancy tradition of the Lung-shan horizon
  - cracked by applying heat to the back of a hollow bored in the piece
  - the cracks were numbered, then read in unknown manner
- In Shang times, the cracks begin to have notations by them, showing the question and the answer
- turtle shells were added in late Shang times
- over 150,000 oracle bone fragments now known
  - based on the names and dates mentioned, it looks like we have some 10% of all the bones that were written
  - content
    - they record prophesies relating to royal entourage, events, etc., so they provide a lot of history
    - writing was later used for political activities, gifts, mortuary activities, edicts...
    - oracle bones are labeled with the question; prophecy; verification
      - often the king made the prophecy
      - surprisingly, the verification almost always shows him to have been correct...
- Shang oracle bone c. 1200 - 1180 BC (from Keightley, in Senner 1989)
  - “Crack-making on chia-shen (day 21). Ch’ueh divined:” Charge: “Fu Hao’s childbearing will be good.” Prognostication: “The king, reading the cracks, said: ‘If it be a ting day childbearing, it will be good. If it be a keng day childbearing, it will be extremely auspicious.’”
  - ting and keng are analogous to days of the week (Tuesday, Wednesday)
  - Verification: “On the 31st day, she gave birth. It was not good. It was a girl.”
  - The baby was born on a chia day, thus the prophecy was correct.
  - Note: Fu Hao is the name of the “consort” in the unlooted large tomb at An-yang; the dates are right for this to refer to the same person!
- other royal divinations involved groups of thousands of people for military and economic tasks
  - bureaucratic approach to scapulamancy
    - regular placement of holes
    - cracks numbered
    - divinations paired in positive and negative forms
    - divinations dated and followed up with verification
    - certain bones and shells were reserved for repeated use on the same subject, up to 170 days apart, suggesting a filing system of some sort
    - bones are often found in neat stacks, as if they had been archived in tied bundles or resting on shelves
      - implying specialist recordkeepers and some bureaucracy
    - NOT associated with business or record-keeping (at least what is preserved is not)
- nature of the Chinese writing system
  - some signs relatively pictographic
– mostly logographic
  – similar sounding words could be indicated by the same symbol
  – ambiguities were resolved by adding determinatives, that is, marks that provided
    clues to which of several possible words was meant
  – the earliest oracle bones already have half their symbols marked with a
determinative
    – this suggests that the system was already well developed by that time
    – so we really may be missing the early part of the development sequence
– generalizations about the Three Dynasties
– subsistence
  – all were primarily millet farmers
    – based on textual evidence, Shang and Chou also used soybeans, wheat, some rice
    – all used dogs, pigs, cattle, sheep
  – NO notable functional change in technology from the Lung-shan horizon
  – no major irrigation projects known
  – no plows
– bronze: an exception, or not?
  – used primarily for ritual (vessels) and war (weapons, chariot parts, and tools to make
    chariots)
  – no significant quantity or use of bronze tools for agriculture or other purposes
  – sophisticated bronze casting mostly for ritual vessels, using piece molds
    – these vessels were highly decorated versions of otherwise identical ceramic forms
    – mostly used for holding, heating, and serving alcoholic drinks
– capitals
  – not dense urban settlements, but rather networks of high and low status residential areas,
    administrative and ritual areas, workshop areas, cemeteries, etc.
  – rammed earth walls at some sites, maybe not at others
  – high-status buildings on raised rammed-earth platforms, with timber posts on stone
    foundations
  – semi-subterranean, wattle-and-daub low-status housing
– warfare
  – Earlier Shang capital of Cheng-chou was walled, but An-Yang was apparently not
    – a fair number of bronze weapons
    – chariots in Shang and Chou
    – written evidence of warring kuo
– continuity of clan organization from Lung-shan horizon and earlier
  – based on inscriptions, layout of cemeteries, emblems on vessels in graves that say who
    they were made for
  – i.e. rank was based on ancestry?
  – organized as nested hierarchy, with most direct relatives of ancestral leaders closest to
    the top
  – burial practices: extreme stratification
  – power of the elite
tremendous control of labor and resources
– yet no obvious evidence of centralized storage or redistribution
– although there must have been some sort of tribute or taxation to support the elite and the state
– and written accounts of warfare and statecraft suggest that tribute extraction was an important purpose of it
– apparent control of life and death, as well
– elites apparently had a monopoly on shaman's paraphernalia
  – jades with animal faces (like ts'ung tubes) associated with shamanic powers
  – oracle bones (and turtle shells in Shang and Chou)
– in historical documents, the power of rulers was attributed to their control of bronzes
  – necessary for weapons
  – but also for ritual
  – for a ruler in the Chou Dynasty to be legitimate, he had to possess “the nine bronze tripods”; maybe something similar was true in earlier Shang times?
– this would have given the elite control of supernatural matters, and legitimacy as rulers
  – elites could have arisen from ritual specialists
  – or could have employed them

– When would you first call it “civilization”?
  – Regional Neolithic?
  – Lung-shan horizon?
  – Ehr-li-t’ou / Hsia?
  – Early Shang? Late Shang?

– In what ways was complex society in China similar to, and different from, other cases?

– In what ways might the processes that led to Shang civilization have been similar to the other cases we have look at, and in what ways different?
  – roles of urbanism; ritual; warfare
  – origin and nature of elites
  – nature and purposes of monumental structures
  – nature and role of clan (descent group) organization