

DRAGON BONES AND HIDDEN TREASURES

THE SHANG COURT

In 1976, archaeologists working in the royal cemetery near Anyang in central North China uncovered the tomb of Lady Hao, one of the wives of King Wuding, a powerful king of the Shang dynasty. Lady Hao, who died about 1200 BCE, was buried with a priceless collection of objects, including 7,000 cowry shells, 200 bronze vessels, 23 bronze bells, 44 bronze tools (mostly knives), over 130 weapons, 4 bronze tigers, 590 jade objects, more than 100 jade and opal beads, 70 stone sculptures and stone objects, 490 bone hairpins, and even more. The best stroke of luck for the archaeologists was that the grave had not been looted by robbers looking for treasure.

Just the existence of these objects in the tomb tells historians two important facts about the powerful nobles of the Shang dynasty: they were enormously wealthy, and they believed that their possessions would be useful after death. When historians study the finds more closely, they learn even more about Lady Hao and her society. For example, they have learned more about how war was waged in ancient China.

Scholars gained some insight into warfare, including the surprising role that women might have sometimes played in battles. Some people might assume that women in that society were not warriors, but archaeologists found knives and other weapons in Lady Hao's tomb. Her weapons were not just ornaments, but were usable, and one inscription says that Lady Hao led the members of the Zi clan into battle.

“ TOMB OF LADY HAO
NEAR ANYANG AND
RECORD OF THE
HISTORIAN



“ Ivory cup, Anyang, about 1200 BCE

This cup from Lady Hao's tomb is made of ivory from an elephant's tusk and inlaid with turquoise. In ancient times elephants lived in China's Yellow River valley, which is now too cold and dry for them.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE STARS

Nobody is sure why these rulers called themselves “Shang,” since their family name was Zi. It’s also not exactly clear what years they were in power, but it was probably around 1500 BCE to 1046 BCE. How have historians figured out the end-date so precisely? They knew from other sources that the Shang rule came to the end sometime in the mid-eleventh century BCE, but the science of archaeoastronomy helped them pinpoint it more exactly.

Since the earth’s position in relation to the stars and planets changes, people’s view of the night sky has gradually shifted in the more than 3,000 years since the Shang rule came to an end. According to the *Bamboo Annals* of the third century BCE, when the Shang fell, five planets formed a regular five-sided shape in the sky: “Five stars assembled in the constellation Fang (House).”

Astronomers have figured out from this information that the change from the Shang dynasty to the next family of rulers (the Zhou) took place in 1046.

Nobody likes to lose a battle, but in ancient China losing a fight could mean losing your life—another fact that Lady Hao’s tomb has confirmed. Of the 16 people buried with her, some were her servants who were killed so that they could continue to wait on her in the afterlife. But many inscriptions speak of beheading war captives, so it appears that others were sacrifices, probably prisoners of war offered to the gods as a gift. Most war captives were men from the upper classes in their home states. However, when they were taken prisoner, not only did they lose their high social standing and all their rights, but some also lost their lives when they were used as human sacrifices.

Women of high rank like Lady Hao very rarely participated in battles, but it was even more unusual for women to run a state in ancient China. In most modern societies, the leader of the government is a political figure who makes policies and runs the country in peace and in war. But this isn’t always been the case. In ancient China, as in many other societies, the king was mostly a military leader. If he didn’t prove his skill and bravery by leading his soldiers into war, people’s confidence in him would drop. The king would soon lose the support of his allies and even his own subjects, and someone else might take over. So instead of staying outside of dangerous conflicts, the king had to be directly involved, often even leading the charge against the enemy. This was risky, and sometimes the king was killed.

The men fighting alongside the king were members of the nobility, people related to the king but not in his immediate family. Only the wealthy could afford chariots and expensive bronze weapons. It takes more than one person to drive a chariot, as the driver is too busy controlling the horses to fight actively. In addition to the driver, an archer and a soldier carrying a long lance manned each chariot. Men fighting on foot used a dagger-axe and a dagger or short sword.

The rulers of other states allied with the Shang also had close ties with the king. Many of these rulers were related to the Zi clan (the Shang’s extended family). Sometimes it was hard to tell which of these rulers were friends and



It took dozens of archaeologists working together to excavate the tomb of Lady Hao. Little did they know they would eventually reveal to the world the long-hidden remains of China's first female military commander.

which were enemies, as loyalties could shift quickly. To stay in the king's favor, these rulers would send him gifts. Nobody knows much about these gifts, although some oracle bones mention special presents such as turtle shells, and written sources from the next dynasty mention that the Shang received this kind of tribute. It's likely that some of the treasures in Lady Hao's tomb were presents given to her or her husband. In return, the king sometimes used his connection with his powerful royal ancestors to ask them questions and seek their blessing for his followers and allies. He also offered military advice and assistance when states that were loyal to him were in danger.

Below the nobility came other men who had a little less power, and who were probably distant relatives of the king. They were sometimes the younger sons of local chiefs. Family ties were an important source of the king's power, since only direct descendants (sons, grandsons, great grandsons, and so on) of earlier rulers could sacrifice to the spirits of the ancestors.

It was hard, perhaps impossible, for people to shift position in Shang society. The anonymous farmers, workers,

IT DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU CALL "LUCKY"

One oracle bone gives the king's interpretation of the cracks that were made on the bone. The question inscribed on the bone was "When Lady Hao [the king's wife] gives birth to a child, will it be lucky?" Later, the comment "It was not lucky, it was a girl" was inscribed on the same bone.

A warrior buried with horses and a chariot would be prepared to carry on his life as a soldier in the world of the dead.

FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS

Often, archaeologists find more than one body in the tomb of an important person. Sometimes the bodies were those of war captives who were beheaded and left under the coffin as sacrifices to the earth, and sometimes they were those of servants.

Most of these servants were probably minor nobles who felt it was an honor to work closely with the important person. They might have felt that it was also an honor to accompany their master or mistress to the other world. Perhaps they thought that life in the other world was bound to be better than life in this one, and they were eager to go there. In any case, some of them were buried alive, along with the weapons or tools that they needed to carry on their work. It appears that most (if not all) of them went to their deaths willingly. Modern scholars call this custom “following in death.”



and laborers at the bottom made up the largest group. They had no education and no way of moving up in life. The king also had no choice in his occupation—although he probably didn’t see this as a bad thing. He was always the oldest living son in the main line of the ruling family. This meant that when he died, the throne did not automatically pass to his own son, but to his next-oldest brother, if he had one. When there were no brothers left, the oldest son of the oldest brother became the next king. Although only men could be king, royal women such as Lady Hao possessed both wealth and power. Many historians, looking at her rich grave goods and knowing that she sometimes led troops into battle, think that royal women had more power in the Shang dynasty than women have held in China at other times.

Archaeologists have been searching in different parts of the area that the Shang controlled, trying to find out more evidence about their lives. They are starting to put together the evidence they have uncovered to figure out what life was like. One thing that is clear is that craftspeople flourished. Fortunately for modern archaeologists, one of the crafts at which the Shang were expert was bronze working. Bronze is durable—as long as nobody melts it down—so many bronze objects from the Shang dynasty have survived in tombs such as that of Lady Hao. Expert artisans made weapons, armor, pots, stoves, musical instruments, and many other items from this metal. The ability to work bronze into objects was so important that modern historians call the whole time period of 1500 to 400 BCE in China the Bronze Age.

In the second millennium BCE Chinese bronze workers developed a bronze-production method (the “piece-mold process”) that enabled them to make hollow pieces such as pots and urns. First, a craftsman made a clay model of the finished product. Once the model dried, a worker pressed wet clay around it, and when the clay had dried, he carefully removed the outer layer in sections, preserving the shape of the model on its inside surface.

These pieces were baked until hard and then reassembled into a mold. Then a very skillful and very careful craftsman poured in the hot liquid bronze. When it cooled, the finished piece could be removed from the mold. The same model could be used over and over again.

Historians have also relied on written accounts as well as artifacts such as bronze vessels for details about the Shang dynasty. The writings say that although the first Shang king was a good ruler,



The artist who created this wine vessel more than 3,000 years ago was more interested in decoration than in showing a realistic elephant.



The grinning demon on this axe blade might have been the last thing some people would see. The axe was used for beheading sacrificial victims.

“ Sima Qian, “Basic Annals,”
Record of the Historian, about
100 BCE

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not all of the kings who came after him governed wisely. The last king of the dynasty, Di Xin, was especially bad. For one thing, according to Sima Qian’s “Basic Annals” of about 100 BCE, he supposedly killed his uncle by having his heart cut out while he was alive.

The author of this account

says that instead of spending his time governing his people, that king “made a lake filled with wine and hung slabs of meat to make a forest, and then had men and women chase each other through the forest, partying all night long.”

The problem with relying on these descriptions of Shang court life is that they were written by people working for the next rulers, who wanted to show that the Shang kings were so evil that people should be thankful they were gone. It’s possible that the accounts are basically true, but it’s also possible that the writers either made up the negative stories, or at least exaggerated the worst parts.

In any case, because of evil rulers or for some other reason, it appeared that the Shangs’ days were numbered. Out of nowhere, according to the *Bamboo Annals*, “A red bird perched on the Zhou altar of the soil.” Red birds are rare, and to see one standing on a place holy to the rival Zhou state would be a cause of worry for the Shang. Were the heavens trying to tell them something?

ANIMAL YEARS

The Shang divided each day into 12 blocks of 2 hours each. Weeks were ten days long. Years went in cycles of 12. Instead of having a number, each year was associated with an animal. The Shang believed that people resembled the animal linked with the year in which they were born. For instance, dragons are the luckiest; tigers are powerful, strong-willed, and outspoken; and snakes are wise but don't talk much.

Horse	1990, 2002	Rat	1996, 2008
Goat	1991, 2003	Cow	1997, 2009
Monkey	1992, 2004	Tiger	1998, 2010
Chicken	1993, 2005	Rabbit	1999, 2011
Pig	1994, 2006	Dragon	2000, 2012
Dog	1995, 2007	Snake	2001, 2013

To find a year not on this list, add or subtract multiples of 12 to the years listed here.

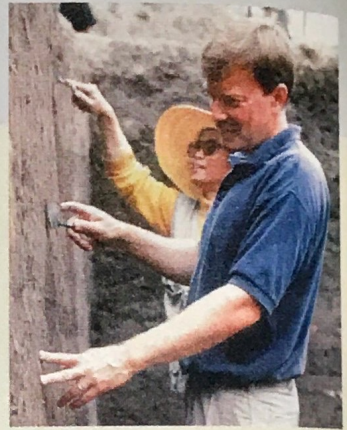
The Chinese used this calendar until 1911. Chinese people still use it to determine the date of the New Year and other important events. New Year's Day is always on a new moon, but its exact date on the Western calendar varies from late January to early March.

Is the tiger devouring this man or protecting him? Is the man a human or a demon? Or is this a single creature, part human and part tiger? This bronze vessel from the Shang dynasty probably held some type of religious significance, but scholars disagree about its meaning.



**ARCHAEOLOGIST AT WORK:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
ROBERT MUROWCHICK**

Robert Murowchick is a research associate professor at Boston University's College of Arts and Sciences East Asian Archaeology Center. He has been part of an international archaeological team excavating in the North China Plain since 1991, when the Chinese government passed a law allowing foreign archaeologists to collaborate on digs in their country.



Where in China do you work?

A few hundred miles south of Beijing, in the far eastern part of Henan Province. This project was started by my teacher, K. C. Chang.

Do archaeologists from different countries work together there?

Yes, we have Chinese participants, and American participants, and Canadian participants—it's a lot of fun.

What's the North China Plain like?

It's flat. It's boring, physically. It's mostly wheat fields, some corn.

It's a fun project because it's mostly based on some ancient texts that talk about this capital city, Da Yi Shang, which literally means "Great City Shang."

That's pretty clear!

They didn't mess around with any romantic names for their cities! The texts talk about the importance of the city as the ritual center and the political center of the Shang state before it became the Shang dynasty, so this is a period that we call the predynastic Shang (about 1800–1700 BCE to 1500 BCE). After

the Shang dynasty becomes the real power in the area, it moves the capital city someplace else, but the ritual center supposedly stayed for many, many hundreds of years at Great City Shang. When the Zhou people overthrow the Shang dynasty, they burn the last capital city to the ground but they allow members of the Shang royal family to return to the site of Great City Shang to continue to make offerings to the Shang ancestors. This was real sacred space for some reason. And so, during the Western Zhou dynasty, according to the texts, the Shang leaders established a new city on the ruins of this old city, and this new city was called Song. And then the city Song was vastly expanded during the Eastern Zhou period and became quite a powerful city-state, and a new city was built on top of it in the Han dynasty, and then in later dynasties more cities were built on top of these other cities. For some reason they kept returning to this one spot and kept building on the ruins of these earlier cities.

Does that make it hard to excavate?

Well, this whole area is covered by these flood deposits from the river, so archaeology

is very difficult for any kind of project because of these very thick deposits from the Yellow River.

So why did you choose that particular area?

K. C. was so convinced that the early texts, which were written in the seventh or sixth century BCE, were accurate and precise in their descriptions that he really used the texts as a map.

In 1996 a team hit something really hard in the earth and as they dug through it, it turned out that this was the rammed-earth wall of one of these early cities. By the end of the next year we had this massive wall located on the map. It's something like nine times larger than the modern city that sits on it today.

We were very excited, but the local people knew all along that it was there. This was local history, and nobody doubted it.

The problem is that the earliest city that we're looking for, Great City Shang—we have no doubts that it's under there, but it's so deep, 35 feet below the surface, and the water table is only about 15 feet below the surface, so once you go deeper than the water table, the water runs into the hole and your walls collapse, and it's quite a dangerous situation.

So when you say you find a city what exactly do you find?

These aren't beautiful marble buildings. These are foundations of buildings and walls made of rammed earth. The city is surrounded by a massive rammed-earth wall that originally probably measured 40 feet thick by 40 feet high. Within that wall you would

probably have streets and avenues, and there would be a governmental district, and residential districts, and workshops of various kinds. So it's not that different from cities of any ancient culture.

Have you found anything that changed how people thought about this time period?

Actually we have. Part of our team was excavating a late Neolithic (3000–2000 BCE) village site in the area, of a culture called the Longshan, and this village site actually provided some real surprises. One season the archaeologists were digging and they hit a cattle skull and as they excavated it, it turns out it was a sacrificial pit that contains nine intact cattle and one deer skull. This is the largest cattle sacrifice that's ever been found in Neolithic China.

And it's really neat to us because the Shang is the culture that follows this late Neolithic culture and the Shang made a lot of sacrifices of cattle to their ancestors. So here we have the late Neolithic people, just a few hundred years before the Shang, also putting great importance on this large-scale slaughter of cattle, so it gives us sort of a continuity through time. That was very unexpected.

So basically this project is going in two different directions. One is we're trying to find this predynastic period of Shang, but more broadly we're trying to get a sense of the cultures that precede it because this era is relatively little known archaeologically.

It ought to be a spectacular site, once we find it.