

The Shang Dynasty: The Birth of Chinese Civilization

Characters

KAO, a nobleman of the Xia

TANG, future first king

of the Shang Dynasty

CHUN, a nobleman of the Xia

WO, a royal Shang official

JIANG, a Shang noblewoman

ZENG, a Shang nobleman

LI, a Shang royal writer

HUI, a Shang teacher of

Chinese writing

SOONG, an overseer of the

Shang royal bronze foundry

Scene I: Shang territory, ancient China, c. 1600 B.C.

- KAO:** Greetings, great Lord of Shang.
- TANG:** Welcome, visitors. How may I serve you?
- CHUN:** Do you know about King Jie?
- TANG:** He is of your Xia dynasty.
- KAO:** We are very concerned about him. He is certain to forfeit the Mandate of Heaven. If something is not done, our people will suffer greatly.
- TANG:** What has King Jie done?
- CHUN:** He has become an absolute tyrant.
- KAO:** His personal behavior dishonors our sacred ancestors.
- CHUN:** He and his consort engage in unspeakable amusements.
- TANG:** In private quarters?



- KAO:** No, no. He made his servants build a lake filled with wine. He forces hundreds of his subjects to dive into the wine until they all become sickly drunk.
- TANG:** If the king has become so corrupt and abusive, why journey so far to see me? Someone in the royal court should deal with this matter.
- CHUN:** They, too, are corrupt.
- KAO:** Or afraid to act.
- CHUN:** We know you are a strong and honorable leader . . .
- KAO:** Who will not humiliate his subjects or disgrace our sacred ancestors . . .
- CHUN:** Whose behavior merits the Mandate of Heaven
- TANG:** Are you asking me to challenge the king? To begin a new dynasty?
- CHUN:** We are! A civilized and honorable one!
- TANG:** But many will defend the old king. Do you have war chariots and bronze weapons?
- KAO:** What are they?
- TANG:** I'm glad you don't know. I will not ask the Shang people to fight without a heavenly sign.
- CHUN:** You have our complete support. The oracles will tell you this is right. Then you will fight with your war chariots and bronze to victory!
- KAO:** And boldly claim the Mandate of Heaven!
- CHUN:** And begin your just rule . . . as first king of the Shang Dynasty!



**Scene II: Aristocrat's home, Anyang,
c. 1200 B.C.**

WO: I am an official of King Wu Ding's Royal Court. I wish to speak with Zeng about his son, Li.

JIANG: I am Li's mother. Tell me your business.

WO: I . . . I . . . will not speak to a woman regarding this official matter.

(Enter ZENG.)

ZENG: I have overheard this conversation. Show the proper respect for Li's mother, and speak to her about our son.

WO: But . . . but . . .

ZENG: But nothing! Are you from so far away that you do not know of the high status that women of the nobility have in Shang society? State your business, please.

WO: Very well. Please forgive me. I was born far from here, and I am new to this position.

JIANG: We forgive you.

WO: Your son has shown himself to be quick of mind, keen of speech, and very skilled with his hands. The Royal Court wants Li to immediately begin training in our written language.

ZENG: There are over a thousand different characters!

WO: The teachers are confident he can master this challenge.

JIANG: Does this mean Li will one day become a diviner of the oracle bones?

WO: What do you mean?



- ZENG: You are new.
- JIANG: If the king wants to know the answer to an important question, such as where and when he should hunt, the question is written on a special animal bone. Later, great heat is applied, causing cracks.
- ZENG: The diviner then reads these cracks as answers from our ancestors' spirits.
- WO: Of course . . . I just didn't hear you clearly.
- JIANG: Our son will not be a diviner.
- WO: No, now I remember . . . Li is to begin training in writing history.
- ZENG: We are pleased. I will get my son.

***Scene III: Royal writing school,
Anyang, years later.***

- LI: I have finished recording the king's hunt.
- HUI: Let me see . . . Excellent, excellent work.
- LI: You are a patient and gifted teacher.
- HUI: And you, Li, are a most remarkable student. You have mastered all the basic pictograms and complex ideograms. And no student is more skilled in writing the difficult homophones than you.
- LI: Writing our language gives me great pleasure.
- HUI: Yes, I can see that. Now, I have a new challenge for you. Instead of writing on bones, bamboo, or silk, you will learn to make inscriptions on bronze.
- LI: Bronze? Here? Who will be my teacher?



- HUI:** Slow down. You will study at the royal foundry. Soong, the master caster and foundry overseer, will be your teacher and guide.
- LI:** When do I begin?
- HUI:** Tomorrow. They have an important project starting, and need your hand right away.
- LI:** Thank you for all you've taught me. I will work hard and well to make you proud.
- HUI:** I know you will. I will escort you myself to the foundry. We'll leave at dawn.

***Scene IV: Royal bronze foundry,
Anyang, next day.***

- SOONG:** Welcome Hui, my old friend. This must be Li, your prize student.
- HUI:** Yes. It's good to see you again, my friend. May we have a tour of the foundry?
- SOONG:** Of course. Li, do you realize how important bronze making has been to the Shang Dynasty?
- LI:** I think so.
- SOONG:** By having a royal monopoly, the kings have become powerful and wealthy.
- LI:** I see. What do you make here?
- SOONG:** Everything from small goblets and pitchers to giant cauldrons.
- LI:** How large is a "giant" cauldron?
- SOONG:** Come with me and I'll show you These workers are about to cast one that will weigh nearly a ton.



- LI:** A ton! How could they possibly do that?
- SOONG:** Over the years we've become very sophisticated in metallurgy. Experience has enabled us to coordinate the efforts of several hundred skilled workers.
- HUI:** It looks like quite a few are involved in this particular casting.
- SOONG:** That's right. This is an especially tricky cast, besides being a very heavy one. A wrong move at any step in the process and we could have a complete disaster.
- LI:** What's this cauldron going to be used for?
- SOONG:** Special religious ceremonies at the palace.
- HUI:** What's the project Li will be working on?
- SOONG:** Inscribing a dragon-figure vessel.
- LI:** For the king?
- SOONG:** In a way. Fu Hou, the king's consort, has died, and many valuable articles will be buried with her.
- LI:** For instance . . .
- SOONG:** Many bronze vessels, bells, chimes, and drums, possibly even a chariot as well.
- LI:** When do I start?
- SOONG:** After you've mastered mold-making. We'll get started on that right away.
- LI:** I'm ready. I just hope I can take the heat.
- SOONG:** Of the furnaces, or of the job's high expectations?



LI: Both, I guess.

HUI: Let me relieve your anxiety. You'll find my friend Soong to be an expert craftsman, and a patient and understanding teacher.

LI: As you have been.

HUI: All he expects is your full cooperation and obedience.

LI: Of course. Isn't that our way?

