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## A HISTORY OF CHINA TO 1800

Second Edition

VALERIE HANSEN



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The need to use as few Chinese characters as possible on oracle bones meant there was a division between terse literary language and the more prolix vernacular. This difference between the written and spoken languages persists today. Today's Chinese texts use concise language with none of the repetitive patterns so characteristic of modern spoken Chinese.

### How Chinese Characters Work

Most people using an alphabetic language have an exaggerated sense of the difficulties of the Chinese language, fueled by the daunting number of characters claimed necessary for literacy. American university students, who learn between six hundred and seven hundred characters in first-year Chinese, approach the three thousand they need to read a newspaper in third-year Chinese. A newspaper font holds seven thousand characters, and a recent dictionary lists over eighty thousand. This astounding number looks more intimidating than it is, for many of the entries record variants of the same character, while other entries list rare characters whose pronunciation and meaning are both unknown. Children take ten years to learn to read and write Chinese characters, only slightly longer than it takes students to master written English.

In fact, identifying individual characters differs little from the recognition of individual words or phrases, which is how most people read alphabetic languages. The most well-known examples of Chinese characters are those that resemble the word they depict, but one still has to study the characters before one can recognize them. Human 人 and wood 木 are examples. Many of these basic characters appear on the oracle bones. Sometimes the Chinese combined two elements to make one character: a pig 豕 under a roof 宀, say, meaning "family" or "home" 家.

The vast majority of characters, though, were not formed in this way, but of two elements: a radical, which indicated the general topic of the word, and a phonetic element, which indicated the sound. In the most ancient writing system, many characters had the same sound but different meanings. The character *xiang* 象 could mean elephant or image; if one adds the radical for person, then *xiang* 像 means image, not elephant. It seems likely that the ancient Chinese added radicals to make it easier to distinguish among different words with the same pronunciation.

Admittedly, an alphabetic language makes it easier to look up words in a dictionary, but these two elements (the radical and the phonetic marker) permitted an educated guess at the meaning and pronunciation of an individual character. Chinese is famous for its many words with the same pronunciation but different tones, or pitches. The character for "place or

direction," *fang* 方, is pronounced in a high, flat tone in Mandarin, the dialect most widely spoken in north China that is the official language of both China and Taiwan. When the flower radical is added 芳, it takes on the meaning of "fragrance," with the same pronunciation and tone. When one adds the speech radical 讠, it means "visit," and is pronounced in a low tone. When a native speaker encounters an unfamiliar word, he or she can guess at the pronunciation and then try to think of a word with that sound and a meaning related to the radical, much as we might ascertain an English word's meaning by analyzing its roots.

Today we judge writing systems by how efficient or cumbersome they are, and most English speakers tend to think of characters as an impediment to literacy. Indeed, China's literacy rate remains low. But Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan all use Chinese characters, and they have attained a higher literacy rate than the United States. Personal computers also facilitate teaching children large numbers of characters. Almost all inputting systems require users to type the pinyin romanization for the character they want. The user selects the desired character from a small group of possibilities with that pronunciation. Most people find it simpler to choose a character in this way than to remember all the different strokes in a given character. Because of the convenience of computers, many middle-aged people find themselves forgetting characters they once knew how to write, and many students do not even see the point of learning how to write characters by hand when they can so easily consult their phones and computers.

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### The Advantages of the Chinese Script

The early Chinese writing system offered the people of Shang certain benefits. Only a few scribes had to be able to read and write, and they could afford the time to learn the existing set of characters. Whenever the Shang conquered a new people who spoke Chinese or a related language, little adjustment was required. But if the subject people spoke a

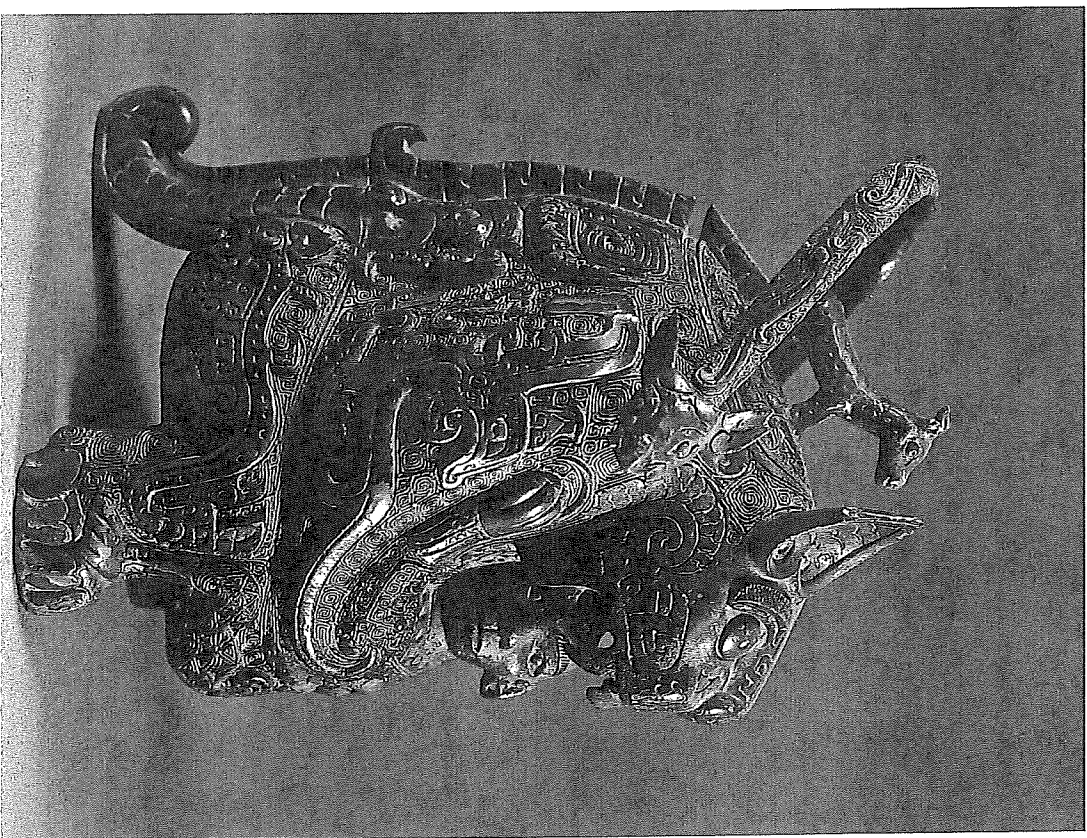
different language, they could continue to speak their native tongue, while their scribes could assign Chinese characters to preexisting words in the conquered people's language.

Because characters resembled modern numbers and could be *read* by anyone regardless of native dialect, a people could adopt characters even if they did not *speak* a related language. Speakers of all languages, whether Americans, French, or Chinese, pronounce numerals differently, but everyone knows the meaning of 1, 2, and 3. The same held true for Chinese characters. Because the subjugated people did not have to learn the Shang dialect, China remained home to many dialects even as the use of Chinese script spread. We do not know what languages the subject peoples spoke, but we do know that in more recent times, the Chinese expanded into new territory by conquering speakers of non-Chinese languages in southwest and south China. Linguistic analysis of loanwords into ancient Chinese suggests that some of the peoples subdued by the Shang spoke languages in the Austro-Asiatic family, which includes modern Khmer and Vietnamese. Even so, Chinese characters proved so useful they could even be borrowed by speakers of languages in other language groups, like the Japanese, whose word order differs completely from that of Chinese—which is why Japanese can be so difficult to learn! Although writing clearly had many uses, and the Shang may have written characters on wood or cloth, the only materials to survive over three thousand years of burial are the oracle bones and bronzes with inscriptions on them.

### *The Content of the Oracle Bones*

A 1936 find of more than seventeen thousand turtle shells and eight pieces of scapula confirmed what archaeologists had suspected since the first bones and shells from Anyang had surfaced: the local diggers were marketing records that had been intentionally placed in the ground by the people of the Shang as an archive, but we do not know who used it or why.

In one sense, the oracle bones can be classed as religious documents because they recorded communications with ancestral spirits and nature gods that some scholars see as similar to the communications of a shaman with spirits of the other world. Many of the oracle bones touch on questions relating to sacrifice: Would a certain ritual succeed? What animals or humans should be sacrificed? In what quantities? To which ancestors? Some divinations, like those asked by people in other ancient societies, sought to ensure that the coming day or night, or the coming ten-day unit, would occur unmarred by disaster.



KINGS AS SHAMANS

This intriguing bronze statue of a man with his head under the jaws of a beast is still the focus of a debate in Shang-dynasty studies. His calm facial expression shows that he is not being hurt. Is he a king communicating with the spirit world through the body of the beast? If so, then the early Shang kings may have been shamans. Others argue that this bronze, found in a Hunan hillside (and not in a tomb), sheds light on belief in an unrelated kingdom farther south, not in the Shang kingdom.

metals, they varied their proportions depending on the item to be produced. Mirrors had to be shined to a high gloss, so they contained up to one-quarter tin, while weapons used little lead, which would have made them too soft. The 468 bronzes from Lady Hao's tomb weighed over 1,625 kilograms (3,500 pounds) and would have required nearly 10 metric tons (11 tons) of ore.<sup>10</sup>

The artists covered the surface of the bronzes with dense interwoven motifs that remain curiously abstract. One can make out individual animals the artists depicted, often dragons and birds, and complex animal masks, but the artists' choice of patterns remains unexplained. Curiously, no two Shang bronzes are identical.

### *The Antecedents of Modern Chinese Cuisine at Anyang*

The people at Anyang produced many different types of bronze vessels. They used vessels of a certain shape to cook meat, to hold cooked grain, to pour wine, and to drink from, at elaborate rituals they performed for their ancestors. They, like Chinese today, distinguished between the staple starches and the accompanying cooked meat dishes. This division between cooked dishes and starches goes very far back in Chinese history but it cannot predate the agricultural revolution, which occurred sometime around 8000 B.C.E. in China. At Anyang, the main starch consisted of steamed grain, usually millet. All the starches were cultivated crops, while many of the ingredients in accompanying cooked dishes were gathered wild plants or hunted animals. Although the now omnipresent technique of stir-frying had not yet been developed, most cooked dishes were meat stew.

Like their descendants, the residents of Anyang believed that their ancestors retained their desire for food, even when dead. Modern Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong frequently offer food to their deceased kin; only when the dead have partaken of the offerings do the living partake. The oracle bones say nothing of what the ancestors ate, but a later poem, dating to the third century B.C.E., provides an elaborate description of the food offered to them.

The kin of the deceased addressed this poem to the newly dead in the hope of persuading them to partake of the joys of life, which included food:

O soul come back! Why should you go far away?  
All your household have come to do you honor; all kinds of good food are ready:  
Rice, broom-corn, early wheat, mixed all with yellow millet;

Bitter, salt, sour, hot and sweet: there are dishes of all flavors.

Ribs of the fattened ox cooked tender and succulent;

Sour and bitter blended in the soup of Wu;

Stewed turtle and roast kid, served up with yam sauce;

Geese cooked in sour sauce, casserole duck, dried flesh of the great crane;

Braised chicken, seethed tortoise, high-seasoned, but not to spoil the taste;

Fried honey-cakes of rice flour and malt-sugar sweetmeats;

Jadelike wine, honey-flavored, fills the winged cups;

Ice-cooled liquor, strained of impurities, clear wine, cool and refreshing;

Here are laid out the patterned ladles, and here is sparkling wine.<sup>11</sup>

What spirit could resist such an invitation?

Although the individual dishes mentioned in this poem were eaten in the south, the poem's anonymous author divides food into the two categories used by those casting the Anyang bronzes. He starts with a brief mention of the starches—rice, broom-corn, wheat, and millet—but quickly proceeds to the heart of the meal, the dishes. Even today all Chinese food consists of two components: starches, often rice, and cooked dishes of mixed meat and vegetables. The people of the Shang offered food and wine to a host of deities whom they thought of in a hierarchy, with some ranking above others and some taking orders only from those above them.

### *The Pyramid of Shang Society*

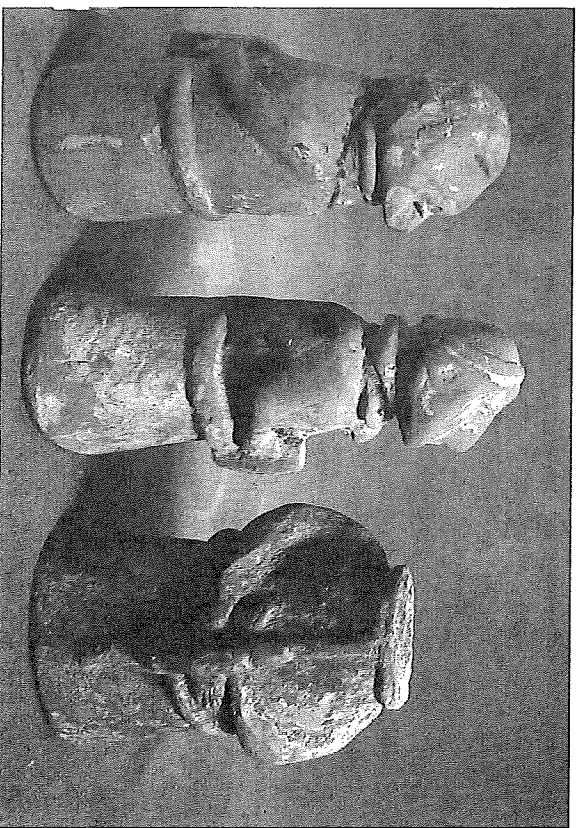
The oracle bones refer to a divine hierarchy. Important gods controlled the outcome of battles and were often named for rivers or mountains. Underneath the nature gods stood the ancestors of the royal family. The long-dead outranked the more recently dead, who in turn outranked the Shang king. Because the Shang believed one could communicate more easily with those in nearby tiers, the king and the recently dead had a reciprocal relationship. The king needed their help to rule, but they needed his offerings, sometimes numbering several hundred cattle, to stay powerful. The king made offerings to his ancestors in a specific ceremony. Because the junior and senior ancestral spirits also had a similar relationship, the newly dead ancestors were then thought to perform the same ceremony for their more senior kin. This divine hierarchy possessed certain bureaucratic characteristics. The ancestors were expected to perform a certain task for a fixed sacrificial fee.

Members of the royal lineage, and the women from families who could marry with them, constituted the aristocracy of the Shang. Also privileged, though less so, were the court officials and landed lords.

Additionally, the oracle bones refer to “the multitude,” who cleared and cultivated the land.

Scholars could only guess at the extent of the king’s power before Anyang was excavated, when they uncovered the number of corpses buried with the Shang kings. Hierarchy defined the relationships even among corpses. Noble-born companions-in-death,<sup>12</sup> who were probably killed at the time of the king’s death, ranked first. With their bodies, which were buried intact near their ruler, they had their own coffins and grave goods. The bodies of the tomb guards, also intact, lay near their weapons. At the base of the Shang hierarchy came the prisoners of war, whose heads and limbs were cut off and then buried. Like many ancient peoples, the Shang believed the dead king would occupy his tomb after his death, and because he needed the services of all those who worked for him while alive, they had to perish when he died. The prisoners of war, sentenced to perish in the greatest numbers, outnumbered the companions-in-death by more than twenty to one.

Many of these prisoners came from the Qiang people, who lived to the west of the Shang and may have been speakers of a different language



ANCIENT P. O. W.'s

These clay figures depict prisoners of war from the Qiang people who were captured by the Shang and served as laborers and even sacrificial victims. A wooden shackle around their waists binds their wrists and connects to a wooden neck brace.

belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. The captives constituted a large workforce the king could call on to clear land or from which he could cull his sacrificial victims. One chilling oracle bone inscription mentions a ritual in which different numbers—ten, twenty, or thirty—of Qiang victims can be sacrificed.<sup>13</sup> The total number of Qiang proposed as victims in all the oracle bones reaches over seven thousand. Lady Hao’s husband, the Shang king Wu Ding, conducted a sacrifice at which five hundred Qiang were killed on a single occasion.

### *The Nature of the Shang Polity*

The Qiang was one of over thirty non-Shang states mentioned in the oracle bone inscriptions. Scholars have struggled to determine the nature of Shang relations with these alien states and to draw the borders of the Shang polity—both knotty problems. Anyang was the site of the royal tombs and the Shang capital. According to the great Chinese historian Sima Qian (145–ca. 86 B.C.E.) in his important book, *Records of the Grand Historian*, completed during the first century B.C.E., the Shang constituted a dynasty that preceded the Zhou, who preceded the Qin and the Han, his own dynasty. The historian Sima had access to some books now lost to us, but because he did not have any archeological evidence available to him, he exaggerated the sense in which the Shang resembled the powerful dynasties of his own time.

*Records of the Grand Historian* states that the Shang capital shifted many times, probably to various sites north of the Yellow River. Frequently on the move, the Shang king met with his subordinates, hunted, and led military campaigns—all means of asserting his power. Scholars have attempted to map the movements of the Shang kings by linking place names appearing on the oracle bones with known historical place names. Although individual identifications may remain uncertain, one can still get a rough sense of the king’s routes. The Shang king traveled frequently within a circle 400 kilometers (250 miles) in diameter; he took some longer trips of 650 kilometers (400 miles) to the northwest and the southeast. His men rounded up livestock from the residents of the places the royal entourage visited, but his officials did not collect taxes on a regular basis from a set territory. The king’s camp served as a shifting base of operations rather than as a fixed capital with all the trimmings of a state. A recent reassessment of the evidence concerning Shang geography concludes that the area under its direct control stretched from Anyang to a point only 200 kilometers (125 miles) west.<sup>14</sup>

In what sense, then, did the Shang constitute a state? The Shang kings could mobilize thousands of people to carry out large-scale projects, like



clearing land and building tombs, and they could order the mass killings of Qiang slaves. Some people who belonged to the king's personal entourage worked for the king as full-time metallurgists, diviners, or scribes. If the Shang formed a state, it was a soft state, whose stability hinged on the king's frequent visits to his subordinates and their domains, and whose bureaucracy remained divine rather than human.

### SHANG RELATIONS WITH OTHER STATES

One of many peoples vying for power in China at the time, the Shang commanded forces numbering in the thousands—as many as thirteen thousand in one campaign, according to some sources—and they took prisoners in even larger numbers, one oracle bone claiming thirty thousand.<sup>15</sup> The seemingly innocent queries about clearing land in the oracle bones may actually refer to Shang conquest of peoples who did not farm their own lands. The oracle bones further record that other peoples submitted tribute to the Shang king in the form of horses, dogs, and cattle. Indeed, many of the scapulas and turtle shells the Shang used for prognostication came from outside Shang territory. Even a whale scapula has been found at Anyang, a hint that the people who originally found it lived beyond the landlocked Shang territory. Other rare animals found at Anyang include elephants, monkeys, and rhinoceri, evidence that the climate in ancient times was both warmer and wetter than today. Their presence reminds us that the people of the Shang lived along the Yellow River in a small but fertile band of wetlands near green forests inhabited by these tropical animals.

North China was particularly well suited for early agriculture because a layer of fine yellow clay soil, called loess, covers the entire Yellow River valley, where few trees grow. The Yellow River is one of China's two largest rivers (the Yangzi is the other). Its course runs 4,300 kilometers (2,700 miles) long, starting in the high mountains to the west and traversing the yellow loess plains of north China as it makes its way to the sea. The river carries large quantities of loess from the west and each year deposits new layers along the last 900 kilometers (500 miles) before it enters the sea. As a result, the riverbed is constantly rising, often to a level higher than the surrounding fields. Sometimes called "China's River of Sorrow," the Yellow River has been subject to dangerous flooding.

Three major climatic zones extend east and west across China. Less than 50 centimeters (20 inches) of rain falls each year on the region north of the Hwai River; about 1 meter (40 inches) per year drops on the middle band along the Yangzi River; and over 2 meters (80 inches) a year drenches

the southernmost band of China and modern Hong Kong. The monsoon winds off the ocean produce this differential pattern of rainfall. The water-laden winds first cross south China, where they drop much of their water, by the time they reach the north, they are carrying much less moisture.

### *The Illiterate Contemporaries of the Shang in Sichuan*

The discovery of the Sanxingdui site in Sichuan (on the outskirts of Chengdu, some 640 kilometers, or 400 miles, southwest of present-day Xi'an) dramatically illustrates the cultural variety of Bronze Age China during the age of the Shang. The residents of this ancient city pounded dirt between wooden forms to make giant earthworks. At its base their city wall was 47 meters (150 feet) wide, and one side ran 1 kilometer (three-fifths of a mile) long. The residents of Sanxingdui could not read or write, but they mobilized labor to make large public works.

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province, one of China's breadbasket regions; Sichuan forms an agricultural basin in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River where it is surrounded by mountains. Benefiting from ample rainfall, local farming thrived at the time of the Sanxingdui civilization. Located on a tributary of the Yangzi River, the Sanxingdui residents easily traveled downriver and from there in an eastward direction toward the coast.

Although the presence of certain artifacts in specific layers of soil dates the site to the same period as the Shang, 1300 to 1100 B.C.E., some of the artifacts differ dramatically from anything at Anyang. Two sacrificial pits found in 1986 held many splendid items, including jades, rare blades, and bronzes. The bottom layer of pit number 2 contained over fifty enormous bronze masks, some stretching 120 centimeters (4 feet) wide. Completely unlike the few bronze masks found at Anyang, these masks have sharply angled features with large protruding eyes. No one knows how the masks were used, but evidently they were made locally, since the clay cores inside matched the clay in the burial pit itself. Investigators speculate that the masks were cast on the site of the pit, in preparation for the ceremony to be held there. Interestingly, the placement of jades, bronzes, and other objects reveals that they were first broken and burned before being placed in the pit, suggesting that some type of ritual took place before the pits were filled.

The most striking artifact from the pit is a bronze statue 182 centimeters (6 feet) tall, on a base 80 centimeters (2.5 feet) high. The figure wears clothing of several layers consisting of an undershirt of different

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