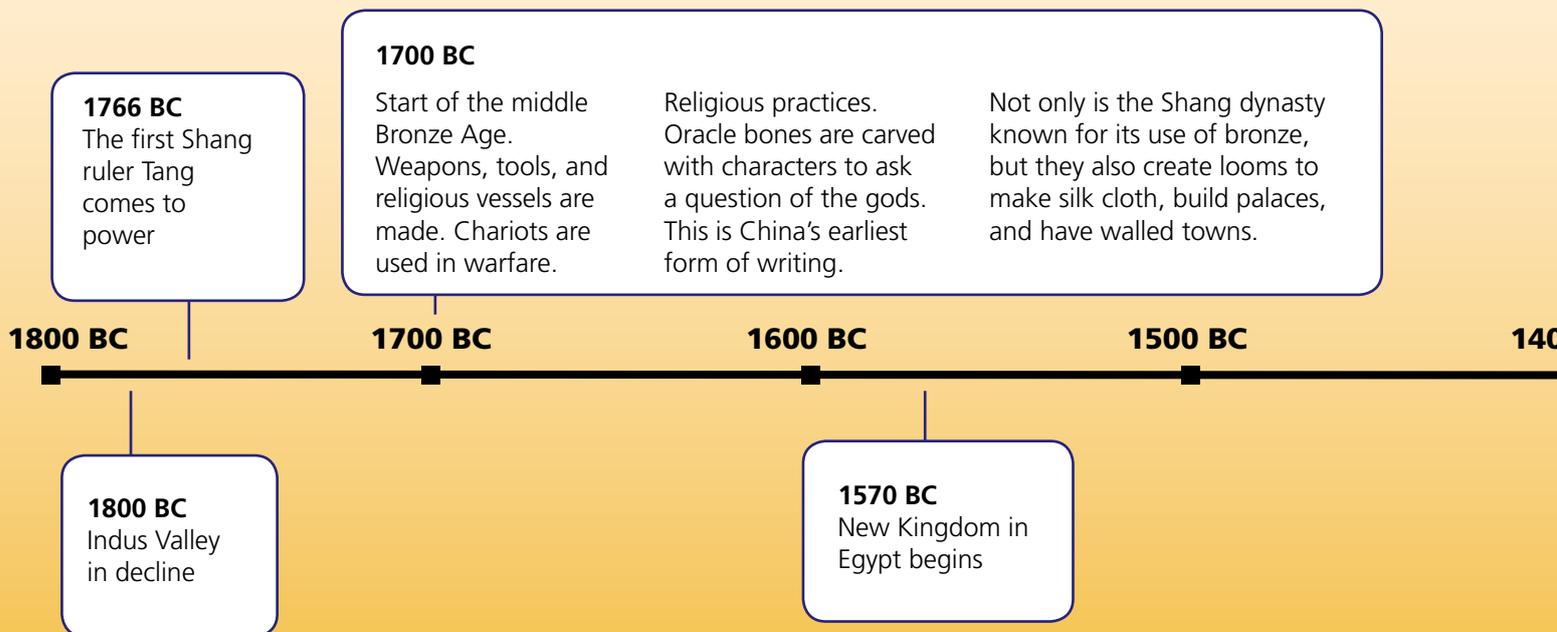


The Shang Dynasty time-line



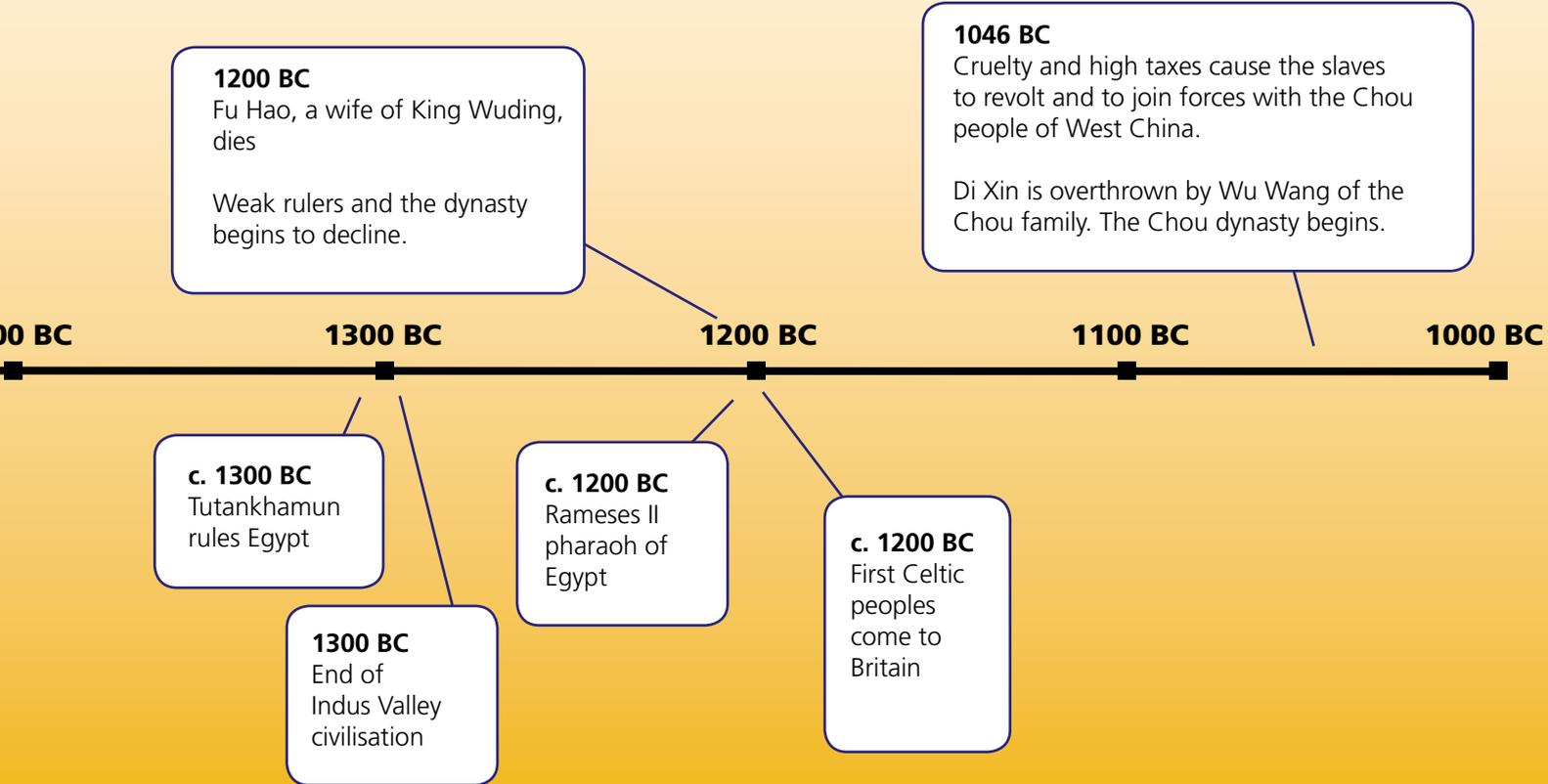
King Tang of Shang Dynasty as imagined by Song Dynasty painter Ma Lin. Painting is located in the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The Shang: What can we tell about an ancient civilisation from one tomb?

Alf Wilkinson

Introduction: When was the Shang Dynasty?

The Shang Dynasty of China, based around the Yellow River area, is regarded as the first Chinese dynasty that we have written evidence for. It was established in around 1760 BC when Tang set up his capital in the city of Bo. Over the next 600 or 700 years the Shang Empire grew and shrank, depending on the strength or weaknesses of the ruler until finally, having moved its capital city four or five times, in 1046 BC, the Shang's very own 'last emperor' was overthrown by the neighbouring Chou (or Zhou) Dynasty. The Shang were contemporaneous with Bronze Age Britain, with Tuthankhamun in Egypt, and with the decline of the Indus Valley civilisation.



What was special about the Shang?

The Shang were a highly-organised society, with clear hierarchical structures and specialised functions – the Emperor, nobles, landlords, peasants all had specific roles to play and a station in life. They were able to mobilise huge armies, often of 15,000 troops or more, and frequently used thousands of peasants to build walls and banks to control the rivers that were prone to flooding. They were great inventors. Their writing had over 3,000 characters and symbols. It is said that they invented chopsticks, the calendar, glazed pottery and the chariot. Their power was based on military might – their bronze weapons, including spears, knives, daggers, arrows and possibly swords made them a power to be feared and respected. Chariots were the tanks of their day, bludgeoning their way through the enemy and causing havoc wherever they went.

Most of what we know about the Shang comes from the Oracle Bones discovered around the end of the nineteenth century. They were used to ask the gods for help in making



decisions. Tortoise- or ox-bones would be written on, with specific questions – should we harvest the crops now or wait? Is the Yellow River going to flood this year? Should I attack my neighbour? Heat would then be applied to the bones until cracks appeared and the priest – usually the Emperor – would interpret the results. We also have a complete list of Shang Emperors from oracle bones.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Shang was in bronze casting. They used clay moulds to cast their bronzes, some of which were huge – the biggest one found so far weighs around 2,000 lbs (907 kg). It was not uncommon for 200 or more of these bronze vessels to be found in one royal tomb! Shang bronzes are mostly weapons or vessels used in ancestor worship. They are so good that the period of the Shang Dynasty is often known as the Chinese Bronze Age.

The other great skill of the Shang was in carving jade (similar to the Maya in Central America.) These were used as sacrificial offerings to the gods and ancestors, in burial rites and as symbols of kingship. Jade had to be brought long distances, sometimes from Inner Mongolia and to have it was a sign of great wealth. They used cowrie shells for money – evidence of long-distance trade because cowrie shells came from the south coast of China, many miles away.

Houmuwu Ding, also known as Simuwu Ding (wine vessel) is the heaviest piece of bronze work found in China. Late Shang Dynasty at Anyang (c. 1300 – 1046 BC).



Jade buffalo, late Shang dynasty, 13th-11th century b.c., in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Bronze Battle Axe Shang Dynasty, excavated at Yidu, Shandong Province.

Teaching the Shang Dynasty

In 1976 archaeologists in China were digging up what they thought was a royal Tomb. Most tombs previously excavated were empty, having been emptied by grave-robbers many years before. This time the tomb was stuffed with amazing objects. It was the tomb of Fu Hao, the wife of the Emperor, who is thought to have died around 1200 BC. Fu Hao was obviously a very rich and powerful person – unusually so for a woman in Shang times. She is said to have been a famous army leader who defended the country from invasion, as well as helping her husband to rule the country. Buried with Fu Hao were the remains of at least six dogs, and the skeletons of 16 men were arranged around the periphery of the tomb.

Found inside the tomb were:

- 468 bronze objects
- 755 jade objects
- 63 stone objects
- 5 ivory objects
- 564 bone objects
- 11 pottery objects
- 6,900 pieces of cowrie shell



Tomb of Lady Fu Hao, Yinxu, Henan, China.

1. Ask the children the following questions:

- Which aspects of life can we find out about by using the artefacts in the tomb?
- Which aspects of life can we not find out about?
- What else do we need to know? Where might we find out?
- What can we tell about Fu Hao from the artefacts in her grave?

Workers excavating the tomb of Fu Hao in 1976.



It is important for children to realise that sometimes in history we cannot answer the questions we want to, simply because there is not enough evidence to be certain, even in this society where there is written evidence as well as archaeological evidence.

2. Ask the children to decide if they think Fu Hao was or is a significant individual. This will link back to work they have done in Key Stage 1, and also lay a foundation for further development in the future. Remind the children about Ian Dawson's criteria for *significance*:

Reasons for a person being significant. If she:

- **changed events** at the time they lived
- **improved lots of people's lives** – or made them worse
- **changed people's ideas**
- **had a long-lasting impact** on their country or the world
- **had been a really good or a very bad example** to other people of how to live or behave.

Using these criteria, can they decide how significant Fu Hao was in Shang times, and today? Is the answer the same to both questions? Is it possible to be significant at one time and not at another? Remember there is no correct answer to these questions – the answer will depend on the emphasis children place on each of the criteria.

3. Finally, get the children to design a statue or monument to Fu Hao. We have no image of her, so there is no clear picture to go by. You will find many images on the internet, but they are all, to one extent or another, made up or what historians *think* she would have looked like. The design they come up with will depend, of course, on their answer to question 2. You could make a class exhibition of the designs, and ask parents, visitors or another class to judge the best one. Remember, this is a history activity, not an art competition, so the winning design ought to be based on what we know about her, what was found in her grave, and how significant we think she was!

And don't forget – even if you do not intend to study the Shang Dynasty at Key Stage 2 then there is absolutely no reason why you couldn't use Fu Hao as one of your Significant Individuals at Key Stage 1. Many of the activities suggested here could be easily adapted to that level. You could then also use Fu Hao as a way in to Bronze Age Britain at the start of Key Stage 2.

Alf Wilkinson is former Historical Association CPD manager, a member of the Primary History editorial board and an educational consultant.



Resources

Historical Association scheme of work

www.history.org.uk/resources/primary_resource_7538_221.html

Chinese Oracle Bones

www.lib.cam.ac.uk/mulu/oracle.html

Fu Hao's Tomb <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/archae/2fuhmain.htm>

British Museum briefing sheet

www.ancientchina.co.uk/staff/resources/background/bg7/bg7pdf.pdf

Shang UNESCO World Heritage Site

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1114>

The Shang Dynasty: China's First Recorded History www.ushistory.org/civ/9b.asp

BBC Primary History site – Ancient Voices – forthcoming

The History Detective investigates the Shang Dynasty of China, Wayland, Geoffrey Barker, *The History Detective Investigates: the Shang Dynasty of Ancient China* (Wayland, 2014)

Tracey Kelley, *Great Civilisations: Shang Dynasty China* (Franklin Watts, 2014).

Lost Lands – The Shang Empire

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02m87kp



Key ideas

Links to other history topics in the National Curriculum:

Stone Age to Iron Age Britain – bronze weapons
The Maya – Jade ornaments and sacrificial objects
Benin – ceremonial bronzes, although made in a very different way



Places to visit

British Museum, London

Compton Verney, Warwickshire – China Gallery

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge

Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford

Durham University Oriental Museum

National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

Notes for subject leaders

The Shang Dynasty

As this article shows, the Shang dynasty provides an exciting opportunity to teach something different but very relevant to today's world in which China's influence is huge. It can help give pupils the idea that China's importance is not a recent phenomenon but that this is a country with a long and proud past.

There is so much that can be covered but there are probably a few key ideas that the subject leader would want all pupils to grasp. This might include:

- This was a powerful society at the same time as the Bronze Age here but which lasted some 700 years during which there were some 30 emperors.
- It was largely an agricultural society although there were many specialist tradespeople. They had particular skills in bronze and jade work.
- The Shang were the first Chinese dynasty to develop a form of writing – using pictograms
- They were strong militarily having bronze weapons, fighters drawn from the nobility and common people. They also used horse-drawn chariots.
- There were rich and many poor. The emperor was at the top. Palaces and royal tombs have been found. Many of the ordinary people lived in wood or mud houses.
- The oracle bones, referred to in this article, give real clues to many aspects of life such as politics, religion and medicine. So far over 80,000 have been found.

A number of good activities are provided in the main body of this article. These not only help provide knowledge of the Shang dynasty but help develop understanding of key skills and concepts such as how we use evidence and significance. Further useful overview questions that might be used either to inform teaching or to monitor understanding at the end of the unit of work could include:

- What made the Shang dynasty great?
- What was different about the Shang?
- What was their greatest achievement?
- Why were they able to achieve what they did?
- How pleasant was life for different people during the Shang dynasty?

Tim Lomas