

The Ancient Dynasties: China's Prehistory

Like in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus River valley, civilization in China developed around a great river. The Yellow River carried floodwater and sediment to the land around it, making the area incredibly fertile, and thus an excellent place for the Stone Age inhabitants of the area to experiment with agriculture. While the Yellow River was the main cradle of Chinese civilization, people also settled around other rivers, such as the Huai and the Yangtze. By around 4000 BC, villages began to appear. They cultivated a number of crops, but most important was a grain called millet (two types of millet: proso and foxtail millet). The Chinese, even up to modern times, revere the *Wu*, the Five Sacred Grains, which are traditionally considered soybeans, wheat, hemp, and the two types of millet. Rice was also cultivated in this period, but it was not yet the important staple that it would later become in the Chinese diet. The Neolithic Chinese domesticated animals such as pigs, dogs, and chickens. Silk production, through the domestication of silk worms, probably also began in this early period.

During the Neolithic period in China, there were multiple groups of people, mostly around the Yellow River, with separate emerging cultures. Some of these various cultures include the Yangshao culture (ca. 4800 – ca. 3000 BC), the Majiayao culture (ca. 3800 – ca. 2000 BC), the Dawenkou culture (ca. 4300 – ca. 2400 BC), the Qijia culture (ca. 2200 – ca. 1800 BC), and the Longshan culture (ca. 2600 – ca. 2000 BC). Over time, they influenced each other more and more, and pottery, art, and artifacts recovered by archaeologists show greater homogenization as time went on. By 2000 BC a more unified Chinese culture was developing, and there is also evidence of urbanism and the use of early writing among the Chinese. All of this took place about a thousand years later than in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus River valley.

Chinese mythology tells a different story. It holds that the universe was created by Pangu, after which the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, a series of legendary sage emperors and heroes (such as the Yellow Emperor), helped create man and taught the ancient Chinese to speak, use fire, build houses, farm, and make clothing. While these events are mythological, at the root of them may be ancient memories of very early kings and rulers who emerged among the prehistoric Chinese.

According to these myths, the last of the great Five Emperors left his throne to Yu the Great, who founded China's first dynasty, the Xia (or Hsia) dynasty. Yu supposedly began the practice of passing power from father to son, which was the necessary step for the creation of a dynasty. According to mythology, his ancestors ruled China for nearly five hundred years, until the last Xia king became corrupt and cruel. This led to his overthrow by Tang, who founded a new dynasty, the Shang dynasty.

There is much debate among scholars about how much of this mythology is true. Many argue that the Zhou (Chou) dynasty, which ruled China much later, invented the idea of the Xia dynasty. It was necessary because the Zhou created the idea of the Mandate of Heaven, which states that there could only be one legitimate ruler of China at one time. This meant that the various small states that comprised Neolithic and Bronze Age China, and which had probably been forgotten, were not useful for their

concept of history. They had to create the idea that China had always had one ruler, and thus they created the idea of an ancient Xia dynasty. Also, since the Zhou had overthrown the legitimate Shang dynasty, they wanted to connect themselves to a more ancient line of kings, so they invented the Xia and gave them a history of ruling the country before the Shang.

Nonetheless, the Xia dynasty may not be a complete fabrication. Archaeologists have discovered advanced Bronze Age culture in China, which they call the Erlitou culture. Its capital, Erlitou, was a huge city around 2000 BC, with two possible palaces, a drainage system, and what seems to have been a very high population. This may be the people referred to in Chinese mythology as the Xia. In addition, for a long time it was believed that the later Shang dynasty may also have been purely mythological, until archaeology proved that it had been real.

Indeed, while the existence of the Shang dynasty was still in doubt, at the start of the twentieth century scholars realized that objects being sold by Chinese merchants as “dragon bones,” which were crushed to make a traditional Chinese medicine consumed to treat a variety of ailments, were actually important pieces of historical evidence called oracle bones. Oracle bones are pieces of bone or turtle shell used by the ancient Chinese, especially Chinese kings, in attempts to predict the future. The ancient kings would inscribe their name and the date on the bone, along with a question. They would then heat the bone until it cracked, and then interpret the shape of the crack, which was believed to provide an answer to their question. Shang rulers long thought to be merely mythological figures had carved their names onto such oracle bones, attesting to their actual existence.

Archaeologists have also found ancient cities that correspond with the Shang dynasty. A city at Zhengzhou appears to have been a Shang capital, and it contained palaces, workshops, and city walls. Another important but slightly later Shang city that has been excavated is Anyang. This site yielded large numbers of oracle bones, which describe the travels of eleven named kings, and the names of these kings and the order of their reigns match traditional lists of Shang kings.

In the end, we know that by 1600 BC, China was ruled by its first historically attested dynasty, the Shang dynasty. It is hard to separate fact from myth when it comes to the Shang, but archaeological evidence, as well as a careful reading of historical sources, can give us a good picture of what life was like under the Shang. This was the decisive period when a truly Chinese culture emerged, a culture that would continue to thrive and evolve, and which considers itself continuous up to the modern day.

Summary

- Chinese civilization developed around major rivers, especially the Yellow River. Like in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus River valley, the people of the Neolithic period who lived there domesticated plants and animals.
- By 2000 BC, cities developed in China, and the various cultures of the area began to merge into a larger, more unified Chinese culture.
- We know a great deal about prehistoric China through Chinese mythology, but we cannot tell how much of this is true and how much is fiction.

- The first two Chinese dynasties were the Xia (Hsia) and the Shang. At one point these were both believed to be purely mythological, but discoveries have revealed that the Shang really did exist. It is still unknown if the Xia were real.

