

# The Shang Dynasty

The Shang dynasty was the first recorded Chinese dynasty. Historians, who have studied both written and archaeological evidence, believe that the Shang ruled from 1600 to 1046 BC. The Shang dynasty ruled part of China in the North East, centred around the Yellow River.

A dynasty is a line of rulers that all come from the same family and rule one after another for a long time. Throughout the Shang dynasty, there were 30 kings. When a king died, their brother, son or, sometimes, nephew would become the next king. Women could not rule as queens.

The kings owned all of the land and made all of the important decisions about how their empire was run. They employed priests and government officials to help them. The Shang king's ambition was to expand their rule. They were often at war with neighbouring settlements.

The king's army was very powerful and well-organised. They were usually made up of 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers. During the largest battles, the army could reach up to 13,000 soldiers! The Shang armies were well-equipped with weapons and armour. Compared with their enemies, their weapons were much more superior. They were experts at using bronze and used it to create lethal spear tips and axe heads.

Another advantage that they had was their use of chariots. Chariots were pulled by horses and they helped the soldiers to charge into battle without exhausting themselves.



When they were victorious in battle, they would take metals, food and livestock from the enemy. They would also take enemy soldiers as prisoners and make them work.

Like many other ancient cultures, the Shang created a social pyramid, with the king and the royal family at the top. Government officials and priests were below the king and they were the most respected social class. They all had a very comfortable life and lived in the cities. Next in social status were the Shang military. The Shang “middle class” were traders and craftsmen, who mainly worked with bronze. They lived a simpler life outside of the city walls but they were still respected. The majority of the people who lived under the Shang dynasty were farmers and they were the poorest class.

Life for the farmers was tough. They farmed the land that was owned by the king. Almost everything that they produced went to the king and they could only keep just enough for them to survive. The land that they farmed was very fertile and they irrigated it with water from the yellow river. The crops grew extremely well and this was one of the reasons why the Shang dynasty was so rich and powerful. The main crops that they harvested were millet, wheat, barley and rice. Farmers also kept sheep, pigs and chickens to provide meat and eggs for the aristocracy (the highest class).



# Questions

03

- 1 How many kings were there throughout the Shang dynasty?
- 

- 2 What fact is true about all of the kings of the Shang dynasty? (tick)

- ☐ They all ruled at the same time.
- ☐ They were all closely related.
- ☐ Some of the kings were women.
- ☐ They were the oldest kings in China.

- 3 'The Shang king's ambition was to expand their rule.'

How could the Shang kings do this? (tick)

- ☐ Rule for longer.
- ☐ Grow more crops.
- ☐ Build higher buildings in the cities.
- ☐ Fight their neighbours and take over their land.

- 4 Who rode on the chariots? (tick)

- ☐ The royal family
- ☐ Government officials and priests
- ☐ Soldiers
- ☐ Traders

- 5 What happened to the enemy soldiers who were captured? (tick)

- ☐ They became prisoners and were made to work.
- ☐ They were killed.
- ☐ They were forced to join the Shang army.
- ☐ They were set free, but they had to obey the Shang king.

- 6 Draw five lines to match the people to their place on the social pyramid.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5

Traders and craftsman  
Government officials and priests  
The military  
Farmers  
The King and the royal family

- 7 'The majority of the people who lived under the Shang Dynasty were farmers'

What does this mean? (tick)

- ☐ Everyone was a farmer.  
☐ Most people were farmers.  
☐ Only some people were farmers.  
☐ There were not many farmers.

- 8 What helped the farmers to irrigate the land? (tick)

- ☐ The fertile soil  
☐ Their animals  
☐ The Yellow River  
☐ The Yellow Sea

- 9 Who owned the crops that were harvested? (tick)

- ☐ The King  
☐ The farmers  
☐ The chief farmer  
☐ The army

- 10 Why did the farmers keep sheep? (tick)

- ☐ To graze the lands.  
☐ To protect the crops from predators.  
☐ To provide meat for the rich people.  
☐ To help keep the farmers warm.

Score:

# Answers

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- 1 How many kings were there throughout the Shang dynasty? 30
- 2 What fact is true about all of the kings of the Shang dynasty? ☒ They were all closely related.
- 3 'The Shang king's ambition was to expand their rule.'  
How could the Shang kings do this? ☒ Fight their neighbours and take over their land.
- 4 Who rode on the chariots? ☒ Soldiers
- 5 What happened to the enemy soldiers who were captured? ☒ They became prisoners and were made to work.
- 6 Draw five lines to match the people to their place on the social pyramid.  
1 - The King and the royal family  
2 - Government officials and priests  
3 - The military  
4 - Traders and craftsmen  
5 - Farmers
- 7 'The majority of the people who lived under the Shang Dynasty were farmers'  
What does this mean? ☒ Most people were farmers.
- 8 What helped the farmers to irrigate the land? ☒ The Yellow River
- 9 Who owned the crops that were harvested? ☒ The King
- 10 Why did the farmers keep sheep? ☒ To provide meat for the rich people.