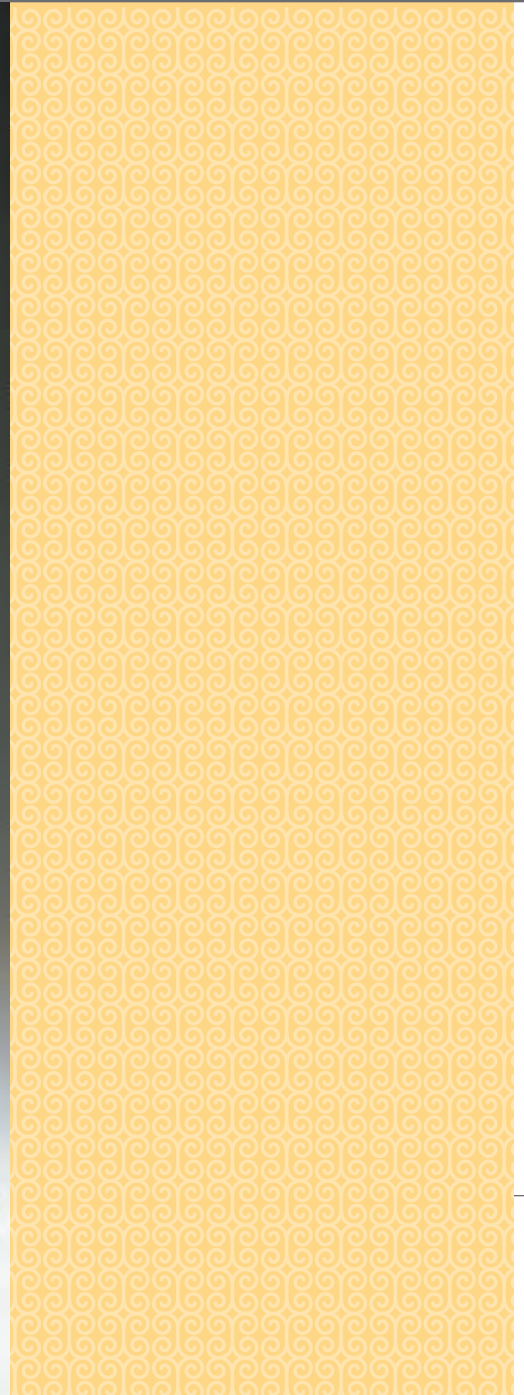


# 5

## Early Society in East Asia



### Political Organization in Early China

Early Agricultural Society and the Xia Dynasty  
The Shang Dynasty  
The Zhou Dynasty

### Society and Family in Ancient China

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**Ancient Chinese legends tell the stories** of heroic figures who invented agriculture, domesticated animals, taught people to marry and live in families, created music, introduced the calendar, and instructed people in the arts and crafts. Most important of these heroes were three sage-kings—Yao, Shun, and Yu—who laid the foundations of Chinese society. King Yao was a towering figure, sometimes associated with a mountain, who was extraordinarily modest, sincere, and respectful. Yao's virtuous influence brought harmony to his family, the larger society, and ultimately all the states of China. King Shun succeeded Yao and continued his work by ordering the four seasons of the year and instituting uniform weights, measures, and units of time.

Most dashing of the sage-kings was Yu, a vigorous and tireless worker who rescued China from the raging waters of the flooding Yellow River. Before Yu, according to the legends, experts tried to control the Yellow River's floods by building dikes to contain its waters. The river was much too large and strong for the dikes, however, and when it broke through them it unleashed massive floods. Yu abandoned the effort to dam the Yellow River and organized two alternative strategies. He dredged the river so as to deepen its channel and minimize the likelihood of overflows, and he dug canals parallel to the river so that flood waters would flow harmlessly to the sea without devastating the countryside.

The legends say that Yu worked on the river for thirteen years without ever returning home. Once he passed by the gate to his home and heard his wife and children crying out of loneliness, but he continued on his way rather than interrupt his flood-control work. Because he tamed the Yellow River and made it possible to cultivate rice and millet, Yu became a popular hero. Poets praised the man who protected fields and villages from deadly and destructive floods. Historians reported that he led the waters to the sea in a manner as orderly as lords proceeding to a formal reception. Eventually Yu succeeded King Shun as leader of the Chinese people. Indeed, he founded the Xia dynasty, the first ruling house of ancient China.

The legends of Yao, Shun, and Yu no doubt exaggerated the virtues and deeds of the sage-kings. Agriculture, arts, crafts, marriage, family, government, and means of water control developed over an extended period of time, and no single individual was responsible for introducing them into China. Yet legends about early heroic figures reflected the interest of a people in the practices and customs that defined their society. At the same time, the moral thinkers who transmitted the legends used them to advocate values they considered beneficial for their society. By exalting Yao, Shun, and Yu as exemplars of virtue, Chinese moralists promoted the values of social harmony and selfless, dedicated work that the sage-kings represented.

**OPPOSITE:** Bronze axe featuring a ferocious human face from the late Shang dynasty.

Human beings appeared in east Asia as early as four hundred thousand years ago. At that early date they used stone tools and relied on a hunting and gathering economy like their counterparts in other regions of the earth. As in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India, however, population pressures in east Asia encouraged communities to experiment with agriculture. Peoples of southern China and southeast Asia domesticated rice after about 7000 B.C.E., and by 5000 B.C.E. neolithic villages throughout the valley of the Yangzi River (Chang Jiang) depended on rice as the staple item in their diet. During the same era, millet came under cultivation farther north, in the valley of the Yellow River (Huang He), where neolithic communities flourished by 5000 B.C.E. In later centuries wheat and barley made their way from Mesopotamia to northern China, and by 2000 B.C.E. they supplemented millet as staple foods of the region.

Agricultural surpluses supported numerous neolithic communities throughout east Asia. During the centuries after 3000 B.C.E., residents of the Yangzi River and Yellow River valleys lived in agricultural villages and communicated and traded with others throughout the region. During the second millennium B.C.E., they began to establish cities, build large states, and construct distinctive social and cultural traditions. Three dynastic states based in the Yellow River valley brought much of China under their authority and forged many local communities into a larger Chinese society. Sharp social distinctions emerged in early Chinese society, and patriarchal family heads exercised authority in both public and private affairs. A distinctive form of writing supported the development of sophisticated cultural traditions. Meanwhile, Chinese cultivators had frequent dealings with peoples from other societies, particularly with nomadic herders inhabiting the grassy steppes of central Asia. Migrating frequently on the steppes, nomadic peoples linked China with lands to the west and brought knowledge of bronze and iron metallurgy, horse-drawn chariots, and wheeled vehicles to east Asia. As in early Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India, then, complex society in east Asia promoted the development of distinctive social and cultural traditions in the context of cross-cultural interaction and exchange.

## Political Organization in Early China

As agricultural populations expanded, villages and towns flourished throughout the Yellow River and Yangzi River valleys. Originally, those settlements looked after their own affairs and organized local states that maintained order in small territories. By the late years of the third millennium B.C.E., however, much larger regional states began to emerge. Among the most important were those of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, which progressively brought much of China under their authority and laid a political foundation for the development of a distinctive Chinese society.

### *Early Agricultural Society and the Xia Dynasty*

#### *The Yellow River*

Like the Indus, the Yellow River is boisterous and unpredictable. It rises in the mountains bordering the high plateau of Tibet, and it courses almost 4,700 kilometers (2,920 miles) before emptying into the Yellow Sea. It takes its name, Huang He, meaning “Yellow River,” from the vast quantities of light-colored loess soil that it picks up along its route. Loess is an extremely fine, powderlike soil that was deposited on the plains of northern China, as well as in several other parts of the world, after the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last ice age, about twelve thousand to fifteen thousand years ago. So much loess becomes suspended in the Yellow River that the water turns yellow and the river takes on the consistency of a soup. The soil gradually builds up, raising the river bed and forcing the water out of its established path. The Yellow River

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Yangzi (YAHNG-zuh)

Xia (SHYAH)

Zhou (JOH)

periodically unleashes a tremendous flood that devastates fields, communities, and anything else in its way. The Yellow River has altered its course many times and has caused so much destruction that it has earned the nickname “China’s Sorrow.”

Yet geographic conditions have also supported the development of complex society in China. During most years, there is enough rainfall for crops, so early cultivators had no need to build complex irrigation systems like those of Mesopotamia. They invested a great deal of labor, however, in dredging the river and building dikes, in a partially successful effort to limit the flood damage. Loess soil is extremely fertile and easy to work, so even before the introduction of metal tools, cultivators using wooden implements could bring in generous harvests.

Abundant harvests in northern China supported the development of several neolithic societies during the centuries after 5000 B.C.E. Each developed its own style of pottery and architecture, and each likely had its own political, social, and cultural traditions. Yangshao society, which flourished from about 5000 to 3000 B.C.E. in the middle region of the Yellow River valley, is especially well known from the discovery in 1952 of an entire neolithic village at Banpo, near modern Xi’an. Excavations at Banpo unearthed a large quantity of fine painted pottery and bone tools used by early cultivators in the sixth and fifth millennia B.C.E.

As human population increased, settlements like that at Banpo cropped up throughout much of China, in the valley of the Yangzi River as well as the Yellow River. In east Asia, as in other parts of the world, the concentration of people in small areas brought a need for recognized authorities who could maintain order, resolve disputes, and organize public works projects. Village-level organization sufficed for purely local affairs, but it did little to prevent or resolve conflicts between villages and did not have the authority to organize large-scale projects in the interests of the larger community.

Chinese legends speak of three ancient dynasties—the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou—that arose before the Qin and Han dynasties brought China under unified rule in the third century B.C.E. The Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties were hereditary states that extended their control over progressively larger regions, although none of them embraced all the territory claimed by later Chinese dynasties. Large numbers of written accounts survive to throw light on the Zhou dynasty, which scholars have long recognized as a historical ruling house. Until recently, however, information about the Xia and Shang dynasties came from legendary accounts that scholars mostly did not trust. As a result, many historians dismissed reports of the Xia and the Shang dynasties as mythical fantasies. Only in the later twentieth century did archaeological excavations turn up evidence that the Xia and the Shang were indeed historical dynasties rather than figments of ancient imaginations.

Archaeological study of the Xia dynasty is still in its early stages. Nevertheless, during the past few decades, archaeological discoveries have suggested that the Xia dynasty made one of the first efforts to organize public life in China on a large scale.

### *Yangshao Society and Banpo Village*



*The Xia Dynasty*

**Pottery bowl from the early Yangshao era excavated at Banpo, near modern Xi’an. The bowl is fine red pottery decorated with masks and fishnets in black.**



**Map 5.1** The Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, 2200–256 B.C.E.

Note that the three dynasties extended their territorial reach through time. How might technological considerations explain the increasing size of early Chinese states?

Although it was not the only early state in China, the Xia was certainly one of the more vigorous states of its time. Most likely the dynasty came into being about 2200 B.C.E. in roughly the same region as the Yangshao society. By extending formal control over this region, the Xia dynasty established a precedent for hereditary monarchical rule in China.

Ancient legends credit the dynasty's founder, the sage-king Yu, with the organization of effective flood-control projects: thus here, as in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the need to organize large-scale public works projects helped to establish recognized authorities and formal political institutions. Although no information survives about the political institutions of the Xia, the dynasty's rulers probably exercised power throughout the middle Yellow River valley by controlling the leaders of individual villages. The dynasty encouraged the founding of cities and the development of metallurgy, since the ruling classes needed administrative centers and bronze weapons to maintain their control. The recently excavated city of Erlitou, near Luoyang, might well have been the capital of the Xia dynasty. Excavations have shown that the city featured a large, palace-type structure as well as more modest houses, pottery workshops, and a bronze foundry.

### *The Shang Dynasty*

According to the legends, the last Xia king was an oppressive despot who lost his realm to the founder of the Shang dynasty. In fact, the Xia state did not entirely collapse and did not disappear so much as it gave way gradually before the Shang, which arose in a region to the south and east of the Xia realm. Tradition assigns the Shang dynasty to the period 1766 to 1122 B.C.E., and archaeological discoveries have largely confirmed those dates. Because the Shang dynasty left written records as well as material remains, the basic features of early Chinese society come into much clearer focus than they did during the Xia.

Technology helps to explain the rise and success of the Shang dynasty. Bronze metallurgy transformed Chinese society during Shang times and indeed may well have enabled Shang rulers to displace the Xia dynasty. Bronze metallurgy went to China from southwest Asia, together with horses, horse-drawn chariots, carts, wagons, and other wheeled vehicles. This collection of related technologies traveled to China as well as India with the early Indo-European migrants (discussed in chapter 2), some of whom made their way to the Tarim Basin (now Xinjiang province in western China) as early as 2000 B.C.E. Early Chinese chariots were close copies of Indo-European chariots from the Iranian plateau, and ancient Chinese words for wheels, spokes, axles, and chariots all derived from Indo-European roots.

Bronze metallurgy reached China before the Shang dynasty, and indeed the Xia dynasty had already made limited use of bronze tools and weapons. But Shang ruling elites managed to monopolize the production of bronze in the Yellow River valley by controlling access to copper and tin ores. They also dramatically expanded production by employing government craftsmen to turn out large quantities of bronze axes, spears,

### *Bronze Metallurgy and Horse-Drawn Chariots*

Xinjiang (sing-jyahng)

knives, and arrowheads exclusively for the Shang rulers and their armies. Control over bronze production strengthened Shang forces against those of the Xia and provided them with arms far superior to stone, wood, and bone weapons wielded by their rivals.

Shang nobles also used bronze to make fittings for their horse-drawn chariots, which began to appear in China between about 1500 and 1200 B.C.E. Like the Aryans in India, Shang warriors used these vehicles to devastating effect against adversaries who lacked horses and chariots. With their arsenal of bronze weapons, Shang armies had little difficulty imposing their rule on agricultural villages and extending their influence throughout much of the Yellow River valley. Meanwhile, because the ruling elites did not permit free production of bronze, potential rebels or competitors had little hope of resisting Shang forces and even less possibility of displacing the dynasty.

Shang kings extended their rule to a large portion of northeastern China centered on the modern-day province of Henan. Like state builders in other parts of the world, the kings claimed a generous portion of the surplus agricultural production from the regions they controlled and then used that surplus to support military forces, political allies, and others who could help them maintain their rule. Shang rulers clearly had abundant military force at their disposal. Surviving records mention armies of 3,000, 5,000, 10,000, and even 13,000 troops, and one report mentions the capture of 30,000 enemy troops. Although those numbers are probably somewhat inflated, they still suggest that Shang rulers maintained a powerful military machine.

Like their Xia predecessors, Shang rulers also relied on a large corps of political allies. They did not rule a centralized state. Rather, their authority rested on a vast network of walled towns whose local rulers recognized the authority of the Shang kings. During the course of the dynasty, Shang kings may have controlled one thousand or more towns. Apart from local rulers of those towns, others who shared the agricultural surplus of Shang China included advisors, ministers, craftsmen, and metalsmiths, who in their various ways helped Shang rulers shape policy or spread their influence throughout their realm.

Shang society revolved around several large cities. According to tradition, the Shang capital moved six times during the course of the dynasty. Though originally chosen for political and military reasons, in each case the capital also became an important social, economic, and cultural center—the site not only of administration and military command but also of bronze foundries, arts, crafts, trade, and religious observances.



**A tomb from the early Zhou dynasty containing the remains of horses and war chariots, which transformed military affairs in ancient China.**

### *Shang Political Organization*



Jade figurines excavated at Anyang from the tomb of Fu Hao, who was one of the consorts of the Shang king Wu Ding. The carvings represent servants who would tend to Fu Hao's needs after death.

### *The Shang Capital at Ao*

Excavations at two sites have revealed much about the workings of the Shang dynasty. The Shang named one of its earliest capitals Ao, and archaeologists have found its remains near modern Zhengzhou. The most remarkable feature of this site is the city wall, which originally stood at least 10 meters (33 feet) high, with a base some 20 meters (66 feet) thick. The wall consisted of layer upon layer of pounded earth—soil packed firmly between wooden forms and then pounded with mallets until it reached rocklike hardness before the addition of a new layer of soil on top. This building technique, still used in the countryside of northern China, can produce structures of tremendous durability. Even today, for example, parts of the wall of Ao survive to a height of 3 to 4 meters (10 to 13 feet). The investment in labor required to build this wall testifies to Shang power and a high degree of centralized rule: modern estimates suggest that the wall required the services of some ten thousand laborers working almost twenty years.

### *The Shang Capital at Yin*

Even more impressive than Ao is the site of Yin, near modern Anyang, which was the capital during the last two or three centuries of the Shang dynasty. Archaeologists working at Yin have identified a complex of royal palaces, archives with written documents, several residential neighborhoods, two large bronze foundries, several workshops used by potters, woodworkers, bone carvers, and other craftsmen, and scattered burial grounds.

Eleven large and lavish tombs constructed for Shang kings, as well as other, more modest, tombs, have received particular attention. Like the resting places of the Egyptian pharaohs, most of these tombs attracted grave robbers soon after their construction. Enough remains, however, to show that the later Shang kings continued to command the high respect enjoyed by their predecessors at Ao. The graves included thousands of objects—chariots, weapons, bronze goods, pottery, carvings of jade and ivory, cowry shells (which served both as money and as exotic ornamentation), and sacrificial victims, including dogs, horses, and scores of human beings intended to serve the deceased royals in another existence. One tomb alone contained skeletons of more than three hundred

sacrificial victims—probably wives, servants, friends, and hunting companions—who joined the Shang king in death.

Most important of the tombs at Yin is the sepulcher of Fu Hao, one of sixty-four consorts (wives) of the Shang king Wu Ding, who ruled in the thirteenth century B.C.E. Fu Hao's resting place is the only tomb at Yin to escape the notice of grave robbers—perhaps because it was located in the Shang palace rather than in the cemetery that held other royal tombs. In any case, after her burial about 1250 B.C.E., Fu Hao's tomb remained undisturbed for more than three thousand years until Chinese archaeologists discovered it and excavated it in 1976.

Fu Hao was King Wu Ding's favorite consort, and her tomb reflected her status. It contained 468 bronze objects, including 130 weapons, 23 bells, and 4 mirrors. In combination, the bronze items in her tomb weighed about 1,600 kilograms (3,500 pounds). Metalsmiths would have required some 11 tons of ore to produce these objects. In an age when bronze was extremely expensive and hence rare, Fu Hao and the Shang royal family were conspicuous consumers of that valuable commodity. Quite apart from bronzewares, Fu Hao's tomb contained 755 jade carvings, 564 bone carvings, 5 finely carved ivory cups, 11 pottery objects, and 6,900 cowry shells. Moreover, the tomb held the remains of six dogs and the skeletons of sixteen human beings—sacrificial victims buried with Fu Hao to guard her and attend to her needs after death. Fu Hao's unlooted tomb has thrown valuable light on the Shang dynasty and the resources that were available to residents of the royal court.

Like the Xia state, the Shang realm was only one of many that organized public life in ancient China. Legendary and historical accounts paid special attention to the Xia and Shang dynasties because of their location in the Yellow River valley, where the first Chinese imperial states rose in later times. But archaeological excavations are making it clear that similar states dominated other regions at the same time the Xia and Shang ruled the Yellow River valley. Recent excavations, for example, have unearthed evidence of a very large city at Sanxingdui in modern-day Sichuan province (southwestern China). Occupied about 1700 to 1000 B.C.E., the city was roughly contemporaneous with the Shang dynasty, and it probably served as capital of a regional kingdom. Like their Xia and Shang counterparts, tombs at Sanxingdui held large quantities of bronze, jade, stone, and pottery objects, as well as cowry shells and elephant tusks, that indicate close relationships with societies in the valleys of both the Yangzi River and the Yellow River.

### *The Zhou Dynasty*

Little information survives to illustrate the principles of law, justice, and administration by which Shang rulers maintained order. They did not promulgate law codes such as those issued in Mesopotamia but, rather, ruled by proclamation or decree, trusting



*The Tomb of Fu Hao*

**A life-size bronze statue, produced about 1200 to 1000 B.C.E., from a tomb at Sanxingdui in southwestern China. Recent archaeological discoveries have turned up plentiful evidence of early political and social organization outside the Yellow River valley.**

*Beyond the Yellow River Valley*



their military forces and political allies to enforce their will. The principles of ancient Chinese politics and statecraft become more clear in the practices of the Zhou dynasty, which succeeded the Shang as the preeminent political authority in northern China. Dwelling in the Wei River valley of northwestern China (modern Shaanxi province), the Zhou were a tough and sinewy people who battled Shang forces in the east and nomadic raiders from the steppes in the west. Eventually the Zhou allied with the Shang and won recognition as kings of the western regions. Because they organized their allies more effectively than the Shang, however, they gradually eclipsed the Shang dynasty and ultimately displaced it altogether.

### *Rise of the Zhou*

Shang and Zhou ambitions collided in the late twelfth century B.C.E. According to Zhou accounts, the last Shang king was a criminal fool who gave himself over to wine, women, tyranny, and greed. As a result, many of the towns and political districts subject to the Shang transferred their loyalties to the Zhou. After several unsuccessful attempts to discipline the Shang king, Zhou forces seized the Shang capital of Yin, beheaded the king, and replaced his administration with their own state in 1122 B.C.E. The new rulers allowed Shang heirs to continue governing small districts but reserved for themselves the right to oversee affairs throughout the realm. The new dynasty ruled most of northern and central China, at least nominally, until 256 B.C.E.

### *The Mandate of Heaven*

In justifying the deposition of the Shang, spokesmen for the Zhou dynasty articulated a set of principles that have influenced Chinese thinking about government and political legitimacy over the long term. The Zhou theory of politics rested on the assumption that earthly events were closely related to heavenly affairs. More specifically, heavenly powers granted the right to govern—the “mandate of heaven”—to an especially deserving individual known as the son of heaven. The ruler then served as a link between heaven and earth. He had the duty to govern conscientiously, observe high standards of honor and justice, and maintain order and harmony within his realm. As long as he did so, the heavenly powers would approve of his work, the cosmos would enjoy a harmonious and well-balanced stability, and the ruling dynasty would retain its mandate to govern. If a ruler failed in his duties, however, chaos and suffering would afflict his realm, the cosmos would fall out of balance, and the displeased heavenly powers would withdraw the mandate to rule and transfer it to a more deserving candidate. On the basis of that reasoning, spokesmen for the new dynasty explained the fall of the Shang and the transfer of the mandate of heaven to the Zhou. Until the twentieth century, Chinese ruling houses emulated the Zhou dynasty by claiming the mandate of heaven for their rule, and emperors took the title “son of heaven.”

### *Political Organization*

The Zhou state was much larger than the Shang. In fact, it was so extensive that a single central court could not rule the entire land effectively, at least not with the transportation and communication technologies available during the second and first millennia B.C.E. As a result, Zhou rulers relied on a decentralized administration: they entrusted power, authority, and responsibility to subordinates who in return owed allegiance, tribute, and military support to the central government.

During the early days of the dynasty, that system worked reasonably well. The conquerors continued to rule the Zhou ancestral homeland from their capital at Hao, near modern Xi'an, but they allotted possessions in conquered territories to relatives and other allies. The subordinates ruled their territories with limited supervision from the central government. In return for their political rights, they visited the Zhou royal court on specified occasions to demonstrate their continued loyalty to the dynasty, they delivered taxes and tribute that accounted for the major part of Zhou finances, and they provided military forces that the kings deployed in the interests of the Zhou

state as a whole. When not already related to their subordinates, the Zhou rulers sought to arrange marriages that would strengthen their ties to their political allies.

Despite their best efforts, however, the Zhou kings could not maintain control indefinitely over this decentralized political system. Subordinates gradually established their own bases of power: they ruled their territories not only as allies of the Zhou kings but also as long-established and traditional governors. They set up regional bureaucracies, armies, and tax systems, which allowed them to consolidate their rule and exercise their authority. They promulgated law codes and enforced them with their own forces. As they became more secure in their rule, they also became more independent of the Zhou dynasty itself. Subordinates sometimes ignored their obligations to appear at the royal court or deliver tax proceeds. Occasionally, they refused to provide military support or even turned their forces against the dynasty in an effort to build up their regional states.

Technological developments also worked in favor of subordinate rulers. The Zhou kings were not able to control the production of bronze as closely as their Shang predecessors had, and subordinates built up stockpiles of weapons. Moreover, during the first millennium B.C.E., the technology of iron metallurgy spread to China, and the production of iron expanded rapidly. Because iron ores are both cheaper and more abundant than copper and tin, the Zhou kings were simply unable to monopolize iron production. As a result, subordinates outfitted their forces with iron weapons that enabled them to resist the central government and pursue their interests.

In the early eighth century B.C.E., the Zhou rulers faced severe problems that brought the dynasty to the point of collapse. In 771 B.C.E. nomadic peoples invaded China from the west. They came during the rule of a particularly ineffective king who did not enjoy the respect of his political allies. When subordinates refused to support the king, the invaders overwhelmed the Zhou capital at Hao. Following that disaster, the royal court moved east to Luoyang in the Yellow River valley, which served as the Zhou capital until the end of the dynasty.

In fact, the political initiative had passed from the Zhou kings to their subordinates, and the royal court never regained its authority. By the fifth century B.C.E., territorial princes ignored the central government and used their resources to build, strengthen, and expand their states. They fought ferociously with one another in hopes of establishing themselves as leaders of

### *Weakening of the Zhou*

### *Iron Metallurgy*



**The Zhou dynasty saw a development of sword design that resulted in longer, stronger, and more lethal weapons. The iron swords depicted here reflect the political instability and chronic warfare of the late Zhou dynasty.**



**Map 5.2** China during the Period of the Warring States, 403–221 B.C.E. Early Zhou rulers used iron tools and weapons to create a sizable kingdom. As knowledge of iron production spread, however, political and military leaders were able to establish several regional states that competed for power and territory.

a new political order. So violent were the last centuries of the Zhou dynasty that they are known as the Period of the Warring States (403–221 B.C.E.). In 256 B.C.E. the Zhou dynasty ended when the last king abdicated his position under pressure from his ambitious subordinate the king of Qin. Only with the establishment of the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C.E. did effective central government return to China.

## Society and Family in Ancient China

In China, as in other parts of the ancient world, the introduction of agriculture enabled individuals to accumulate wealth and preserve it within their families. Social distinctions began to appear during neolithic times, and after the establishment of the

Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties the distinctions became even sharper. Throughout China the patriarchal family emerged as the institution that most directly influenced individuals' lives and their roles in the larger society.

### *The Social Order*

#### *Ruling Elites*

Already during the Xia dynasty, but especially under the Shang and the early Zhou, the royal family and allied noble families occupied the most honored positions in Chinese society. They resided in large, palatial compounds made of pounded earth, and they lived on the agricultural surplus and taxes delivered by their subjects. Because of the high cost of copper and tin, bronze implements were beyond the means of all but the wealthy, so the conspicuous consumption of bronze by ruling elites clearly set them apart from less privileged classes. Ruling elites possessed much of the bronze weaponry that ensured military strength and political hegemony, and through their subordinates and retainers they controlled most of the remaining bronze weapons available in northern China. They also supplied their households with cast-bronze utensils—pots, jars, wine cups, plates, serving dishes, mirrors, bells, drums, and vessels used in ritual ceremonies—which were beyond the means of less privileged people. These utensils often featured elaborate, detailed decorations that indicated remarkable skill on the part of

the artisans who built the molds and cast the metal. Expensive bronze utensils bore steamed rice and rich dishes of fish, pheasant, poultry, pork, mutton, and rabbit to royal and aristocratic tables, whereas less privileged classes relied on clay pots and consumed much simpler fare, such as vegetables and porridges made of millet, wheat, or rice. Ruling elites consumed bronze in staggering quantities: the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, a provincial governor of the late Zhou dynasty, contained a collection of bronze weapons and decorative objects that weighed almost 11 tons.

A privileged class of hereditary aristocrats rose from the military allies of Shang and Zhou rulers. Aristocrats possessed extensive land holdings, and they worked at administrative and military tasks. By Zhou times many of them lived in cities where they obtained at least an elementary education, and their standard of living was much more refined than that of the commoners and slaves who worked their fields and served their needs.

Manuals of etiquette from Zhou times instructed the privileged classes in decorous behavior and outlined the proper way to carry out rituals. When dining in polite company, for example, the cultivated aristocrat should show honor to the host and refrain from gulping down food, swilling wine, making unpleasant noises, picking teeth at the table, and playing with food by rolling it into a ball.

A small class of free artisans and craftsmen plied their trades in the cities of ancient China. Some, who worked almost exclusively for the privileged classes, enjoyed a reasonably comfortable existence. During the Shang dynasty, for example, bronzesmiths often lived in houses built of pounded earth. Although their dwellings were modest, they were also sturdy and relatively expensive to build because of the amount of labor required for pounded-earth construction. Jewelers, jade workers, embroiderers, and manufacturers of silk textiles also benefited socially because of their importance to the ruling elites.

There is little information about merchants and trade in ancient China until the latter part of the Zhou dynasty, but archaeological discoveries show that long-distance trade routes reached China during Shang and probably Xia times as well. Despite the high mountain ranges and forbidding deserts that stood between China and complex societies in India and southwest Asia, trade networks linked China with lands to the west and south early in the third millennium B.C.E. Jade in Shang tombs came from central Asia, and military technology involving horse-drawn chariots came through central Asia from Mesopotamia. Shang bronzesmiths worked with tin that came from the Malay peninsula in southeast Asia, and cowry shells came through southeast Asia from Burma and the Maldiv Islands in the Indian Ocean. The identity



**The delicate design of this bronze wine vessel displays the high level of craftsmanship during the late Shang dynasty.**

### *Specialized Labor*

### *Merchants and Trade*

## Sources from the Past

### Peasants' Protest

*Peasants in ancient China mostly did not own land. Instead, they worked as tenants on plots allotted to them by royal or aristocratic owners, who took sizable portions of the harvest. In the following poem from the Book of Songs, a collection of verses dating from Zhou times, peasants liken their lords to rodents, protest the bite lords take from the peasants' agricultural production, and threaten to abandon the lords' lands for a neighboring state where conditions were better.*

Large rats! Large rats!  
Do not eat our millet.  
Three years have we had to do with you.  
And you have not been willing to show any regard for  
us.  
We will leave you,  
And go to that happy land.  
Happy land! Happy land!  
There shall we find our place.  
Large rats! Large rats!  
Do not eat our wheat.  
Three years have we had to do with you.  
And you have not been willing to show any kindness  
to us.  
We will leave you,  
And go to that happy state.

Happy state! Happy state!  
There shall we find ourselves aright.  
Large rats! Large rats!  
Do not eat our springing grain!  
Three years have we had to do with you,  
And you have not been willing to think of  
our toil.  
We will leave you,  
And go to those happy borders.  
Happy borders! Happy borders!  
Who will there make us always to groan?

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How might you go about judging the extent to which these verses throw reliable light on class relations in ancient China?

SOURCE: James Legge, trans. *The Chinese Classics*, 5 vols. London: Henry Frowde, 1893, 4:171–72.

of the most important trade items that went from China to other lands is not clear, but archaeologists have unearthed a few pieces of Shang pottery from Mohenjo-daro and other Harappan sites.

Meanwhile, Chinese mariners began to probe nearby waters for profitable sea routes. Legendary accounts credit King Yu, the supposed founder of the Xia dynasty, with the invention of sails. There is no archaeological indication of Chinese sails before about 500 B.C.E., but there is abundant evidence that Chinese mariners used large oar-propelled vessels before 2000 B.C.E. These watercraft supported fishing and trade with offshore islands even before the emergence of the Xia dynasty. By the time of the Shang dynasty, Chinese ships were traveling across the Yellow Sea to Korea. During the Zhou dynasty, shipbuilding emerged as a prominent business all along coastal China, and mariners had discovered how to navigate their vessels by the stars and other heavenly bodies.

#### Peasants

Back on the land, a large class of semiservile peasants populated the Chinese countryside. They owned no land but provided agricultural, military, and labor services for their lords in exchange for plots to cultivate, security, and a portion of the harvest. They lived like their neolithic predecessors in small subterranean houses excavated to a depth of about 1 meter (3 feet) and protected from the elements by thatched walls and roofs. Women's duties included mostly indoor activities such

as wine making, weaving, and cultivation of silkworms, whereas men spent most of their time outside working in the fields, hunting, and fishing.

Few effective tools were available to cultivators until the late Zhou dynasty. They mostly relied on wooden digging sticks and spades with bone or stone tips, which were strong enough to cultivate the powdery loess soil of northern China; bronze tools were too expensive for peasant cultivators. Beginning about the sixth century B.C.E., however, iron production increased dramatically in China, and iron plows, picks, spades, hoes, sickles, knives, and rakes all came into daily use in the countryside.

There was also a sizable class of slaves, most of whom were enemy warriors captured during battles between the many competing states of ancient China. Slaves performed hard labor, such as the clearing of new fields or the building of city walls, that required a large workforce. During the Shang dynasty, but rarely thereafter, hundreds of slaves also figured among the victims sacrificed during funerary, religious, and other ritual observances.

### *Family and Patriarchy*

Throughout human history the family has served as the principal institution for the socialization of children and the preservation of cultural traditions. In China the extended family emerged as a particularly influential institution during neolithic times, and it continued to play a prominent role in the shaping of both private and public affairs after the appearance of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou states. Indeed, the early dynasties ruled their territories largely through family and kinship groups.

One reason for the pronounced influence of the Chinese family is the veneration of ancestors, a practice with roots in neolithic times. In those early days agricultural peoples in China diligently tended the graves and memories of their departed ancestors. They believed that spirits of their ancestors passed into another realm of existence from which they had the power to support and protect their surviving families if the descendants displayed proper respect and ministered to the spirits' needs. Survivors buried tools, weapons, jewelry, and other material goods along with their dead. They also offered sacrifices of food and drink at the graves of departed relatives. The strong sense of ancestors' presence and continuing influence in the world led to an equally strong ethic of family solidarity. A family could expect to prosper only if all its members—the dead as well as the living—worked cooperatively toward common interests. The family became an institution linking departed generations to the living and even to those yet unborn—an institution that wielded enormous influence over both the private and the public lives of its members.



**A wooden digging stick with two prongs was the agricultural tool most commonly used for cultivation of loess soils in the Yellow River valley.**

*Slaves*

*Veneration of Ancestors*

## Sources from the Past

### Family Solidarity in Ancient China

*A poem from the Book of Songs illustrates clearly the importance of family connections in ancient China.*

The flowers of the cherry tree—  
Are they not gorgeously displayed?  
Of all the men in the world  
There are none equal to brothers.

On the dreaded occasions of death and burial,  
It is brothers who greatly sympathize.  
When fugitives are collected on the heights and low  
grounds,

They are brothers who will seek one another out.

There is the wagtail on the level height—  
When brothers are in urgent difficulties,  
Friends, though they may be good  
Will only heave long sighs.

Brothers may quarrel inside the walls [of their own  
home],

But they will oppose insult from without,  
When friends, however good they may be,  
Will not afford help.

When death and disorder are past,  
And there are tranquillity and rest,

Although they have brothers,  
Some reckon them not equal to friends.

Your dishes may be set in array,  
And you may drink to satiety.  
But it is when your brothers are all present  
That you are harmonious and happy, with  
child-like joy.

Loving union with wife and children  
Is like the music of lutes.

But it is the accord of brothers  
That makes the harmony and happiness lasting.

For the ordering of your family,  
For the joy in your wife and children,  
Examine this and study it—  
Will you not find that it is truly so?

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

To what extent does other archaeological and historical evidence corroborate the views expressed in these verses about the importance of family in ancient China?

SOURCE: James Legge, trans. *The Chinese Classics*, 5 vols. London: Henry Frowde, 1893, 4:250–53. (Translation slightly modified.)

### Patriarchal Society

In the absence of organized religion or official priesthood in ancient China, the patriarchal head of the family presided at rites and ceremonies honoring ancestors' spirits. As mediator between the family's living members and its departed relatives, the family patriarch possessed tremendous authority. He officiated not only at ceremonies honoring ancestors of his household but also at memorials for collateral and subordinate family branches that might include hundreds of individuals.

Chinese society vested authority principally in elderly males who headed their households. Like its counterparts in other regions, Chinese society took on a strongly patriarchal character—one that intensified with the emergence of large states. During neolithic times Chinese men wielded public authority, but they won their rights to it by virtue of the female line of their descent. Even if it did not vest power and authority in women, this system provided solid reasons for a family to honor its female members. As late as Shang times, two queens posthumously received the high honor of having temples dedicated to their memories.

Women occasionally played prominent roles in public life during Shang times. Fu Hao, for example, the consort of King Wu Ding whose tomb has thrown important light on Shang royal society, ventured beyond the corridors of the Shang palace to play



When burying their departed kin, survivors placed bronze ritual vessels with food and drink in the tombs. In the tombs of wealthy individuals, those vessels sometimes took elaborate shapes.

prominent roles in public life. Documents from her tomb indicate Fu Hao supervised her estate and presided over sacrificial ceremonies that were usually the responsibility of men who were heads of their households. She even served as general on several military campaigns and once led thirteen thousand troops in a successful operation against a neighboring state.

During the later Shang and Zhou dynasties, however, women came to live increasingly in the shadow of men. Large states brought the military and political contributions of men into sharp focus. The ruling classes performed elaborate ceremonies publicly honoring the spirits of departed ancestors, particularly males who had guided their families and led especially notable lives. Gradually, the emphasis on men became so intense that Chinese society lost its matrilineal character. After the Shang dynasty, not even queens and empresses merited temples dedicated exclusively to their memories: at most, they had the honor of being remembered in association with their illustrious husbands.

## Early Chinese Writing and Cultural Development

Organized religion did not play as important a role in ancient China as it did in other early societies. Early Chinese myths and legends explained the origins of the world, the human race, agriculture, and the various arts and crafts. But Chinese thinkers saw no need to organize those ideas into systematic religious traditions. They often spoke of an impersonal heavenly power—*tian* (“heaven”), the agent responsible for bestowing



and removing the mandate of heaven on rulers—but they did not recognize a personal supreme deity who intervened in human affairs or took special interest in human behavior. Nor did ancient China support a large class of priests like those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India who mediated between human beings and the gods. A few priests conducted ritual observances in honor of royal ancestors at royal courts, but for the most part family patriarchs represented the interests of living generations to the spirits of departed ancestors.

In that environment, then, writing served as the foundation for a distinctive secular cultural tradition in ancient China. Chinese scribes may have used written symbols to keep simple records during Xia times, but surviving evidence suggests that writing came into extensive use only during the Shang dynasty. As in other lands, writing in east Asia quickly became an indispensable tool of government as well as a means of expressing ideas and offering reflections on human beings and their world.

### *Oracle Bones and Early Chinese Writing*

In Mesopotamia and India merchants pioneered the use of writing. In China, however, the earliest known writing served the interests of rulers rather than traders. Writing in China goes back at least to the early part of the second millennium B.C.E. Surviving records indicate that scribes at the Shang royal court kept written accounts of important events on strips of bamboo or pieces of silk. Unfortunately, almost all those materials have perished, along with their messages. Yet one medium employed by ancient Chinese scribes has survived the ravages of time to prove beyond doubt that writing figured prominently in the political life of the Shang dynasty. Recognized just over a century ago, inscriptions on so-called oracle bones have thrown tremendous light both on the Shang dynasty and on the early stages of Chinese writing.

Oracle bones were the principal instruments used by fortune-tellers in ancient China. In other early societies, specialists forecast the future by examining the entrails of sacrificed animals, divining the meaning of omens or celestial events such as eclipses, studying the flight of birds, or interpreting weather patterns. In China, diviners used specially prepared broad bones, such as the shoulder blades of sheep or turtle shells. They inscribed a question on the bone and then subjected it to heat, either by placing it into a fire or by scorching it with an extremely hot tool. When heated, the bone developed networks of splits and cracks. The fortune-teller then studied the patterns and determined the answer to the question inscribed on the bone. Often the diviner recorded the answer on the bone, and later scribes occasionally added further information about the events that actually came to pass.

During the nineteenth century C.E., peasants working in the fields around Anyang discovered many oracle bones bearing inscriptions in archaic Chinese writing. They did not recognize the writing, but they knew they had found an unusual and valuable commodity. They called their finds “dragon bones” and sold them to druggists, who ground them into powder that they resold as an especially potent medicine. Thus an untold number of oracle bones went to the relief of aches, pains, and ills before scholars recognized their true nature. During the late 1890s dragon bones came to the attention of historians and literary scholars, who soon determined that the inscriptions represented an early and previously unknown form of Chinese writing. Since then, more than one hundred thousand oracle bones have come to light.

Most of the oracle bones have come from royal archives, and the questions posed on them clearly reveal the day-to-day concerns of the Shang royal court. Will the season’s harvest be abundant or poor? Should the king attack his enemy or not? Will the queen bear a son or a daughter? Would it please the royal ancestors to receive a sacrifice



Oracle bone from Shang times with an inscribed question and cracks caused by exposure of the bone to heat.

of animals—or perhaps of human slaves? Taken together, bits of information preserved on the oracle bones have allowed historians to piece together an understanding of the political and social order of Shang times.













Even more important, the oracle bones offer the earliest glimpse into the tradition of Chinese writing. The earliest form of Chinese writing, like Sumerian and Egyptian writing, was the pictograph—a conventional or stylized representation of an object. To represent complex or abstract notions, the written language often combined various pictographs into an ideograph. Thus, for example, the combined pictographs of a mother and child mean “good” in written Chinese. Unlike most other languages, written Chinese did not include an alphabetic or phonetic component.

The characters used in contemporary Chinese writing are direct descendants of those used in Shang times. Scholars have identified more than two thousand characters inscribed on oracle bones, most of which have a modern counterpart. (Contemporary Chinese writing regularly uses about five thousand characters, although thousands of additional characters are also used for technical and specialized purposes.) Over the centuries written Chinese characters have undergone considerable modification: generally speaking, they have become more stylized, conventional, and abstract. Yet the affinities between Shang and later Chinese written characters are apparent at a glance.

### *Thought and Literature in Ancient China*

The political interests of the Shang kings may have accounted for the origin of Chinese writing, but once established, the technology was available for other uses. Because Shang writing survives only on oracle bones and a small number of bronze inscriptions—all products that reflected the interests of the ruling elite that commissioned

### *Early Chinese Writing*

	Turtle	Horse
Oracle-bone script of the Shang dynasty (16th century–11th century B.C.E.)		
Zhou dynasty script (11th century–3rd century B.C.E.)		
Qin dynasty script (221–207 B.C.E.)		
Han dynasty script (207 B.C.E.–220 C.E.)		
Modern script (3rd century C.E.–present)		
Contemporary script, People's Republic of China (1950–the present)		

**The evolution of Chinese characters from the Shang dynasty to the present.**

### Zhou Literature

### The Book of Songs

them—evidence for the expanded uses of writing comes only from the Zhou dynasty and later times.

A few oracle bones survive from Zhou times, along with a large number of inscriptions on bronze ceremonial utensils that the ruling classes used during rituals venerating their ancestors. Apart from those texts, the Zhou dynasty also produced books of poetry and history, manuals of divination and ritual, and essays dealing with moral, religious, philosophical, and political themes. Best known of these works are the reflections of Confucius and other late Zhou thinkers (discussed in chapter 8), which served as the intellectual foundation of classical Chinese society. But many other less famous works show that Zhou writers, mostly anonymous, were keen observers of the world and subtle commentators on human affairs.

Several writings of the Zhou dynasty won recognition as works of high

authority, and they exercised deep influence because they served as textbooks in Chinese schools. Among the most popular of these works in ancient times was the *Book of Changes*, which was a manual instructing diviners in the art of foretelling the future. Zhou ruling elites also placed great emphasis on the *Book of History*, a collection of documents that justified the Zhou state and called for subjects to obey their overlords. Zhou aristocrats learned the art of polite behavior and the proper way to conduct rituals from the *Book of Etiquette*, also known as the *Book of Rites*.

Most notable of the classic works, however, was the *Book of Songs*, also known as the *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of Odes*, a collection of verses on themes both light and serious. Though compiled and edited after 600 B.C.E., many of the 311 poems in the collection date from a much earlier period and reflect conditions of the early Zhou dynasty. Some of the poems had political implications because they recorded the illustrious deeds of heroic figures and ancient sage-kings, and others were hymns sung at ritual observances. Yet many of them are charming verses about life, love, family,

friendship, eating, drinking, work, play, nature, and daily life that offer reflections on human affairs without particular concern for political or social conditions. One poem, for example, described a bride about to join the household of her husband:

The peach tree is young and elegant;  
Brilliant are its flowers.  
This young lady is going to her future home,  
And will order well her chamber and house.

The peach tree is young and elegant;  
Abundant will be its fruit.  
This young lady is going to her future home,  
And will order well her house and chamber.

The peach tree is young and elegant;  
Luxuriant are its leaves.  
This young lady is going to her future home,  
And will order well her family.

The *Book of Songs* and other writings of the Zhou dynasty offer only a small sample of China's earliest literary tradition, for most Zhou writings have perished. Those written on delicate bamboo strips and silk fabrics have deteriorated: records indicate that the tomb of one Zhou king contained hundreds of books written on bamboo strips, but none of them survive. Other books fell victim to human enemies. When the imperial house of Qin ended the chaos of the Period of the Warring States and brought all of China under tightly centralized rule in 221 B.C.E., the victorious emperor ordered the destruction of all writings that did not have some immediate utilitarian value. He spared works on divination, agriculture, and medicine, but he condemned those on poetry, history, and philosophy, which he feared might inspire doubts about his government or encourage an independence of mind. Only a few items escaped, hidden away for a decade or more until scholars and writers could once again work without fear of persecution. These few survivors represent the earliest development of Chinese literature and moral thought.

*Destruction of Early Chinese Literature*

## Ancient China and the Larger World

High mountain ranges, forbidding deserts, and turbulent seas stood between China and other early societies of the eastern hemisphere. These geographic features did not entirely prevent communication between China and other lands, but they hindered the establishment of direct long-distance trade relations such as those linking Mesopotamia with Harappan India or those between the Phoenicians and other peoples of the Mediterranean basin. Nevertheless, like other early societies, ancient China developed in the context of a larger world of interaction and exchange. Trade, migration, and the expansion of Chinese agricultural society all ensured that peoples of the various east Asian and central Asian societies would have regular dealings with one another. Chinese cultivators had particularly intense relations—sometimes friendly and sometimes hostile—with their neighbors to the north, the west, and the south.

### *Chinese Cultivators and Nomadic Peoples of Central Asia*

From the valley of the Yellow River, Chinese agriculture spread to the north and west. The dry environment of the steppes limited expansion in these directions, however, since harvests progressively diminished to the point that agriculture became impractical.

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Qin (chihh)

*Steppe Nomads*

During the Zhou dynasty, the zone of agriculture extended about 300 kilometers (186 miles) west of Xi'an, to the eastern region of modern Gansu province.

As they expanded to the north and west, Chinese cultivators encountered nomadic peoples who had built pastoral societies in the grassy steppe lands of central Asia. These lands were too arid to sustain large agricultural societies, but their grasses supported large herds of horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and yaks. After Indo-European peoples in the western steppes began to ride domesticated horses, about 4000 B.C.E., they were able to herd their other animals more effectively and push deeper into the steppes. By 2900 B.C.E., after learning the techniques of bronze metallurgy, they had introduced heavy wagons into the steppes, and by 2200 B.C.E. their wagons were increasingly prominent in the steppe lands east of the Ural Mountains. After about 1000 B.C.E. several clusters of nomadic peoples organized powerful herding societies on the Eurasian steppes.

*Nomadic Society*

Nomadic peoples did little farming, since the arid steppe did not reward efforts at cultivation. Instead, the nomads concentrated on herding their animals, driving them to regions where they could find food and water. The herds provided meat and milk as well as skins and bones from which the nomads fashioned clothes and tools. Because nomadic peoples ranged widely over the grassy steppes of central Asia, they served as links between agricultural societies to the east and west. They were prominent intermediaries in trade networks spanning central Asia. They also brought knowledge of bronze metallurgy and horse-drawn chariots from southwest Asia. Nomadic peoples depended on agricultural societies for grains and finished products, such as textiles and metal goods, which they could not readily produce for themselves. In exchange for these products, they offered horses, which flourished on the steppes, and their services as links to other societies.

Despite this somewhat symbiotic arrangement, Chinese and nomadic peoples always had tense relations. Indeed, they often engaged in bitter wars, since the relatively poor but hardy nomads frequently fell upon the rich agricultural society at their doorstep and sought to seize its wealth. At least from the time of the Shang dynasty, and probably from the Xia as well, nomadic raids posed a constant threat to the northern and western regions of China. The Zhou state grew strong enough to overcome the Shang partly because Zhou military forces honed their skills waging campaigns against nomadic peoples to the west. Later, however, the Zhou state almost crumbled under the pressure of nomadic incursions compounded by disaffection among Zhou allies and subordinates.

Nomadic peoples did not imitate Chinese ways. The environment of the steppe prevented them from cultivating crops, and the need to herd their animals made it impossible for them to settle permanently in towns or to build cities. Nomadic peoples did not adopt Chinese political or social traditions but, rather, organized themselves into clans under the leadership of charismatic warrior-chiefs. Nor did they use writing until about the seventh century C.E. Yet pastoral nomadism was an economic and social adaptation to agricultural society: the grains and manufactured goods available from agricultural lands enabled nomadic peoples to take advantage of the steppe environment by herding animals.

*The Southern Expansion of Chinese Society**The Yangzi Valley*

Chinese influence spread to the south as well as to the north and west. There was no immediate barrier to cultivation in the south: indeed, the valley of the Yangzi River supports even more intensive agriculture than is possible in the Yellow River basin. Known in China as the Chang Jiang ("Long River"), the Yangzi carries enormous



**Terraced rice paddies in the river valleys of southern China have long produced abundant harvests.**

volumes of water 6,300 kilometers (3,915 miles) from its headwaters in the lofty Qinghai mountains of Tibet to its mouth near the modern Chinese cities of Nanjing and Shanghai, where it empties into the East China Sea. The moist, subtropical climate of southern China lent itself readily to the cultivation of rice: ancient cultivators sometimes raised two crops of rice per year.

There was no need for King Yu to tame the Yangzi River, which does not bring devastating floods like those of the Yellow River. But intensive cultivation of rice depended on the construction and maintenance of an elaborate irrigation system that allowed cultivators to flood their paddies and release the waters at the appropriate time. The Shang and Zhou states provided sources of authority that could supervise a complex irrigation system, and harvests in southern China increased rapidly during the second and first millennia B.C.E. The populations of cultivators' communities surged along with their harvests.

As their counterparts did in lands to the north and west of the Yellow River valley, the indigenous peoples of southern China responded in two ways to the increasing prominence of agriculture in the Yangzi River valley. Many became cultivators themselves and joined Chinese agricultural society. Others continued to live by hunting and gathering: some moved into the hills and mountains, where conditions did

*The State of Chu*

not favor agriculture, and others migrated to Taiwan or southeast Asian lands such as Vietnam and Thailand, where agriculture was less common.

Agricultural surpluses and growing populations led to the emergence of cities, states, and complex societies in the Yangzi as well as the Yellow River valley. During the late Zhou dynasty, the powerful state of Chu, situated in the central region of the Yangzi, governed its affairs autonomously and challenged the Zhou for supremacy. By the end of the Zhou dynasty, Chu and other states in southern China were in regular communication with their counterparts in the Yellow River valley. They adopted Chinese political and social traditions as well as Chinese writing, and they built societies closely resembling those of the Yellow River valley. Although only the northern portions of the Yangzi River valley fell under the authority of the Shang and Zhou states, by the end of the Zhou dynasty all of southern China formed part of an emerging larger Chinese society.

**A**gricultural peoples in east Asia built complex societies that in broad outline were much like those to the west. Particularly in the valleys of the Yellow River and the Yangzi River, early Chinese cultivators organized powerful states, developed social distinctions, and established sophisticated cultural traditions. Their language, writing, beliefs, and values differed considerably from those of their contemporaries in other societies, and these cultural elements lent a distinctiveness to Chinese society. In spite of formidable geographic obstacles in the form of deserts, mountain ranges, and extensive bodies of water, inhabitants of ancient China managed to trade and communicate with peoples of other societies. As a result, wheat cultivation, bronze and iron metallurgy, horse-drawn chariots, and wheeled vehicles all made their way from southwest Asia to China in ancient times. Thus in east Asia as in other parts of the eastern hemisphere, agriculture demonstrated its potential to provide a foundation for large-scale social organization and to support interaction and exchange between peoples of different societies.

**CHRONOLOGY**

5000–3000 B.C.E.	Yangshao society
2200–1766 B.C.E.	Xia dynasty
1766–1122 B.C.E.	Shang dynasty
1122–256 B.C.E.	Zhou dynasty
403–221 B.C.E.	Period of the Warring States

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