

# Chinese Bronze Age

## Shang and Zhou Dynasties

Chinese civilization grew rapidly in the Bronze Age with the development of urban culture, a stratified social structure, and a system of writing. There were probably a number of early centers of bronze technology, but the area along the Yellow River (see map of China and exhibition room 2) in present-day Henan Province emerged as the center of the most advanced and literate cultures of the time and became the seat of the political and military power of the Shang (shahng) dynasty (1600-1046 BCE), the earliest archaeologically recorded dynasty in Chinese history.

The Shang dynasty was conquered by the people of Zhou (jo), who came from farther up the Yellow River in present-day Shaanxi Province. In the first years of the Zhou dynasty, known as the Western Zhou (about 1046-771 BCE), the ruling house exercised a certain degree of power over most of central China. With the move of the capital to Luoyang in 771 BCE, however, the power of the Zhou rulers declined and the country divided into a number of nearly autonomous feudal states with nominal allegiance to the king. The second phase of the Zhou dynasty, known as the Eastern Zhou (770-256 BCE), is subdivided into two periods, the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE) and the Warring States (475-221 BCE). During the Warring States period, seven major states contended for supreme control of the country, ending with the unification of China in 221 BCE under the first emperor, Shihuangdi, of the Qin (chin) dynasty. He was buried in a massive tomb with an army of more than 8,000 terra-cotta soldiers and horses.

(Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art)

### Key Ideas

- The Shang dynasty marks the beginning of an uninterrupted period of more than 3000 years of dynastic rule in China.
- The era of the Shang and Zhou dynasties is generally known as the Bronze Age of China, mainly because bronze played an important role in the ritual ceremonies, political life and material culture of the time.
- Bronze was cast to make ritual weapons as well as vessels used for offerings to ancestral spirits during ritual ceremonies. Bronze was also used to make weapons for military purposes. The piece-mold process was used for casting (see diagram). The *tao-tie* (tow t-yeh) mask was a common motif used on Shang bronze vessels (see more information below).
- The ancient pictographic script of the Shang dynasty is directly related to modern, written Chinese characters.

- Early ritual and burial practices included human and animal sacrifice. These practices signaled a belief in the afterlife and respect for ancestors.
- The Zhou dynasty absorbed many aspects of Shang culture, including the casting of bronze vessels. The complex designs of the tao-tie mask became increasingly abstract and less connected to a tradition of using animal motifs. Other motifs, such as phoenixes and large birds, became more popular from the mid-Western Zhou onward. The phoenix was likened to the Zhou king, causing a proliferation of the motif on bronze objects during his reign. Human and animal sacrifice declined and stand-ins made of ceramic began to be used instead.
- An era of unrest in the late Zhou dynasty fostered the development of the Chinese philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism.
- Iron appeared in China toward the end of the period, during the Eastern Zhou dynasty.

### **Tao-tie mask**

The *tao-tie* is an animal mask that appears on almost every Shang bronze vessel. The meaning and significance of the mask remain unknown. The term was coined in the later Song (Song) Dynasty (12th century CE) based on writings from the late Zhou dynasty that referred to a monster (from several hundred years later) with no relationship to the Shang dynasty image.

The mask contains an optical trick. At first glance you can see the elements of a face, such as eyes, fangs, and snout. However, when you cover half the image, you see two dragons that meet in profile at the center. The body stretches out to include the claws and tail of the dragon.

### **Tomb Objects from China**

When formerly buried Chinese tomb objects are taken from graves and brought to museums, are they still considered to be sacred?

Here's a summary of a conversation I had with Yang about this. Some of the objects and what they represent are considered "sacred" but in a different way from, say, a Native American peace pipe, which is still used today in religious practices. Since so many of the objects are ancient, they are not used in current practices and therefore there isn't a current religious or sacred connotation. It's more of a historical/intellectual attachment, which is why the Chinese want to preserve them in museums. Only kings and aristocrats possessed and used such objects in ancestral temples and would still need them in the afterlife to honor their ancestors. Many of these objects were obtained by American museums when China didn't have strict laws about cultural property. In 1949 the government established the first laws that forbade the export of artifacts of cultural/historical importance. Alfred Pillsbury probably acquired the ancient bronzes prior to this law--and then gave them to Mia in 1950.

## **Ancestor Reverence/Worship**

Reverence for parents and other family elders does not end with their death. It is the duty of the son to continue to honor his parents when they die. For long periods of Chinese history, funerals were as elaborate as family resources would allow. Precious objects, including jades, bronzes, and porcelains, as well as ceramic figures of men, animals, and spirits, were placed in tombs of the deceased, both to accompany the ancestor into the next world and as a show of respect.

For many Chinese, ancestors are considered part of the family. It is believed that their spirits are concerned with family affairs, and able to influence matters in this world. Offerings are made to the ancestors; formerly their spirits were represented by wooden tablets with the names of the dead written on them. Food and wine are presented to the ancestors on ritual occasions. Members of the family respect and revere the spirits of those departed. Candles may be lit and incense burned. Important events are reported and advice is sought from them. It is important to please one's ancestors as well as one's living elders. Ancestors are honored to earn their protection and blessings.

## **Religious Philosophies/Belief Systems**

The Chinese do not have one religion that is monotheistic (belief in one god). In the earliest days of their civilization, they practiced *animism*, worshiping many different nature deities. Everything in nature, such as mountains and rivers, had spirits in them. While people continued to believe in nature spirits, the major philosophies that shaped later beliefs in China were Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism and Daoism developed in the late Bronze Age around 500 BCE. Buddhism was introduced from India in the 1st century CE. Today none of these is practiced exclusively; most Chinese practice elements of all three.

**Note:** The philosophies described below were not practiced during the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties, the time period for most of the bronzes in the exhibition. We wanted you to have these summaries in case you were asked questions about them.

### **Confucianism**

Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BCE). Confucius did not teach the existence of a god or an afterlife, but concentrated on humankind and life on earth. His teachings stressed a code of moral behavior, based on *li* (discussed below) and recommended good government based on duty and virtue. The main rule he encouraged people to live by was, "What you do not want done to you, do not do to others." This principle is the foundation for his ideas about good behavior, respectful relationships between people, and the importance of the government setting an example. Confucius's concern was for human relationships that manifested themselves in a harmonious society when people honored one another with respect and virtue. He described human moral responsibility in terms of five relationships: ruler to subject, father to son, elder brother to younger brother, husband to wife, and friend to friend.

## **Li, or Propriety**

The influence of *li* guided public expectations, such as loyalty to superiors and respect for elders in the community. *Li* covered every aspect of society and relationships. Such proper conduct emphasized purity, sincerity, and harmony. If people were virtuous and conducted themselves properly, Heaven would bestow good fortune upon everyone.

*Li* originally meant religious rituals (such as ancestral worship), but during the Western Zhou dynasty, with the ruler's regulation, came to encompass multiple concepts such as ritual, decorum, rules of propriety, and more, and has even been equated with natural law. It could be understood to mean ethical norms, social etiquette, and even internal moral impulses. *Li* was present across the entire spectrum of society, from military exercise to dressing and eating to one's relationships with parents, children, and the ruler. At the heart of *li*, however, was a moral and social code maintaining the order and hierarchy that emerged during this period. The purpose of *li* was to promote the continuation of the ruler's lineage by ensuring that no one could disrupt the hierarchy.

(Source: *Orientalism* 54:2, "Eternal Offerings: A Show of Chinese Bronze at Mia Unfolds with Drama," by Yang Liu)

## **Daoism**

Daoism is a second major philosophy that developed at about the same time as Confucianism. Whereas Confucianism stresses duty, public service, and a well-ordered society, Daoism reflects disillusion with human society and fascination with nature. The ideal is to be in harmony with the fundamental laws of the universe by living a simple, spontaneous and meditative life close to nature. The Daoist guideline "Do nothing" means take no action that tries to control; let events take their course as they do in nature. Confucianism is rational, pragmatic, and disciplined; Daoism is romantic, escapist, and contemplative. The two strains tend to complement one another. A Chinese scholar would have been trained in both traditions.

Daoist philosophy had a great influence on Chinese literature and art. Sensitivity to the beauty of nature and the Daoist quest for longevity and immortality are themes which have long been reflected in Chinese poetry, painting, sculpture, and decorative arts.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhism is not native to China. It was introduced along the trade routes from India in the 1st century CE. It became an important force in Chinese life because it dealt with the problem of human suffering and the yearning for salvation. The central teachings of Buddhism focus on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which outline a path towards liberation from suffering and the attainment of enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths teach that life is inherently unsatisfactory due to our cravings and attachments, but that it is possible to overcome this suffering by eliminating its causes. The Eightfold Path provides guidance for how to eliminate these causes by following a set of ethical and spiritual practices.