

The Development of Ancient Texts and its uses in Ancient China

The Shang Dynasty

The Shang contributes greatly to early Chinese culture because during this dynasty they had a writing system. They regularly inscribed the turtle shells and bones for divination. The oracle bones were excavated from sites of the late Shang near present-day village of Anyang. These inscriptions of Chinese characters were well developed and is closely related to the characters still used today. This system of writing seems perfected during the Anyang period.

1700BC - 1100BC

Oracle bones

China alike other ancient cultures would attempt to predict the future using bones, however the Chinese would be unique in its use of oracle bones as they would drill the hollows of said bones as well as using hot brands to crack them. Practitioners would use the cracks to interpret wishes sent from spirits, to predict outcomes to events, and courses of action. There were many practices the Shang used from the eastern Neolithic culture such as scapulimancy. The earliest evidence for divination through burning bones was found in the province of Liaoning, it dates from the fourth millennium BC, and this method became widely used within eastern Neolithic cultures.

During the end of the Shang period, several important modifications of technique were made, these have been investigated in detail by David Keightley. Firstly, the hollows which during the early Shang and Neolithic had apparently been drilled at random (39), and were arranged in orderly rows. Also, during the Zhengzhou period, turtle shells and plastrons were used instead of scapulae. And lastly it became a custom to inscribe many of these plastrons or bones used for divination.

The Zhou Dynasty

A complex of buildings were found, thought to be the royal palace, which is thought to have been homeland of the Zhou. Also, most importantly, fragments of a large group of oracle bones were found. Some of them inscribed and have been excavated within a storage cellar beneath part of the main buildings. After their conquest of the Shang, archaeologists were surprised that inscribing oracle bones didn't get continued by the Zhou. During this earlier period, they must have been strongly under the influence of the Shang to follow this practice current at Anyang. Reports indicate that the divination topics on the bones included familiar finds that were found in Shang sites such as good fortune, sacrifices, expeditions, warfare, hunting and harvest.

1046BC – 771BC

Bronze vessels



This is an example of a *ding*-type tripod with inscriptions inside. This was discovered in Yngjiacun, Meixian and Shaanxi the second set of tripods found in these areas. This vessel is called *sishi'er nian lai ding* 四十二年逯鼎. From Shaanxi Kaogu Yanjiusuo (1993)

Stone-Drum inscriptions

During the Zhou dynasty, calligraphy works engraved on stones had appeared, which became popular in the Qin dynasty. These works on stone calligraphy were highly praised because of the forceful strokes and structure. An inscription carved on the 10 Stone Drums were among one of the famous works, it's called *Shiguwen* 石鼓文. The inscription praises the Qin emperor. *Shiguwen* can be seen now in the Palace Museum, Beijing.

16th Century BC - 221BC

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