Initially used by ritual practitioners in prehistoric times as tools of divination, the bones of animals, as well as turtle shells, were inscribed with an ancient form of the language the Han use today. More than two hundred thousand of these “oracle bones,” covered with details of daily living, form the foundation of the world’s earliest written historical record.

A sophisticated system of divination called jiaguwen, or oracle bones, was practiced by royalty in the Shang (1766–1045 BCE) and Western Zhou (1045–771 BCE) dynasties. These survive as inscriptions, mainly on animal scapulae and turtle shells, whose function was to predict the future of national affairs, and they were written in an ancient form of the Han language that is used by the majority of Chinese today. The oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang from Anyang, in Henan Province, were discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, and they form the most complete historical record of that period. Their various writing styles are artistic and are appreciated as calligraphy. About 210,000 pieces of Shang oracle bones have been collected. About 80 percent of about forty-five hundred characters used in the oracle bone inscriptions are recognizable, and many are still in use in modern Chinese. In Anyang, nearly twenty-five thousand inscribed pieces were excavated between 1928 and 1937; they include more than twenty-two thousand turtle shells and some twenty-two hundred bones. The excavation of Anyang has been resumed since 1950 and continues now; the largest excavation of inscriptions totaled more than five thousand pieces.

Some three hundred different inscriptions from the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) have been excavated from several places since 1979: the Zhou’s royal center, Zhouyuan, in Shaanxi province; Xingtai in Hebei province; and Fangshan Liulihe in Beijing. The Zhou inscriptions have smaller-sized characters and different representations than the Shang’s, and their nature has not yet been interpreted with certainty; some believe that these Zhou artifacts should be attributed to the Shang peoples. Nevertheless, the knowledge we have now comes mostly from the Shang oracle bones.

Belief System and Astronomy

The materials selected for use as oracle bones were animal scapular bones and turtle shells. Some of the turtle shells came from as far away as the South China Sea. Ritual practitioners, or wu, would heat the dried bones during a ceremony and ask questions of ancestors or the gods. By examining the cracking patterns and listening to the sound of cracks, the wu were supposedly able to hear the divine answer. These questions, answers, and results, as well as the date and the wu’s name were inscribed on the bones and/or shells. The wu of the Shang dynasty were experts in specialized fields such as the medical science, agriculture, and war. It seems that female wu were in charge of reporting forecasts and other changes. Written
language was only accessible to some elites and the wu; the latter were thought capable of communicating with the gods.

The Shang believed that ancestors could protect them but they could also bring disaster. Royal ancestors were worshiped along with gods. The highest god was Di, who led a group of gods of nature, such as wind, rain, storms, individual mountains and rivers, and planets and stars. Royal ancestors could also influence the gods, so a king could perform a ritual wherein he married one of his dead consorts to a god. The king, also named “King Di,” acted as a medium between the divine and the human worlds, and some had even learned the wu’s profession.

From the written records on the oracle bones, much has been learned about the lives of the ancient Shang. The Shang established a mature ritual calendar and had a concept of past and future. Such a calendar is based on the knowledge of the regularity of the sun and moon, which can be reconstructed according to the inscriptions. The inscriptions show the discovery of new stars, comets, the different stages and changes of the sun and the moon, and they also contain the earliest record of an eclipse in history. Big months of 30 days, small months of 29 days, and a year of 353–354 days were recorded. The Shang had also set up a double month and double year to resolve the extra time accumulated, which is unique in the world calendar. The Shang used a decimal system in which 10 days equaled one xun. For each xun one ancestor was worshiped, and 36–37 individual xun were offered reverence, creating a one-year cycle.

### Economy and Technology

Both the Shang and the Zhou were agricultural societies, so the weather was extremely important; the subject of many inscriptions is weather—begging for rain or for the rain to stop. Food, liquor, and blood, along with music and dance, served as offerings to the gods for their favors. Sometimes animal and human sacrifices were necessary. These records show that four-hundred humans were once sacrificed at one time.

The oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang explain group farming methods and the different instruments used in agriculture along with fertilizers and equipment for storing the harvest. The main produce was grain and millet, and the Shang produced a large amount of liquor; the Zhou, on the other hand, forbade drinking. Some bones record that sweet wine and aromatic liquor were offered in rituals—often together in hundreds of pots.

The Shang used sophisticated techniques for the domestication of animals. Cows, sheep, horses, pigs, and dogs were domesticated. Horses and dogs were also used in battle and for hunting. The oracle-bone inscriptions contain categories of terms that describe certain animals according to type, shape, color, character, and sex.

Bronze ritual vessels are the most important artifacts of the Shang and the Western Zhou people; they were considered to serve as mediums to the supernatural world and symbolized royal power. Techniques for casting bronze were kept secret. The oracle-bone inscriptions record that the Shang made blood sacrifices when casting bronze vessels.

More than two hundred characters used on the bones relate to silk production, weaving, silk cloths, and nets, revealing that the Shang had mastered extensive textile
technologies. Sixteen kinds of medical conditions ranging from pregnancy to urinary diseases, children’s diseases, infectious diseases, and facial and teeth problems, including some diseases that are known today, were inscribed on oracle bones. Techniques and medicines used in surgery were recorded, as well as the activities of specialists who took care of royalty. Some of the medicines and medical instruments described are still used in traditional Chinese medicine.

Government and Social Systems

The oracle bones reveal much about the structure of the government and social system of the ancient Shang dynasty. The Shang had established a sophisticated legal system and government, all under the king’s dominant control. A group of titled, high-ranking elites with many consorts lived in the royal court. Both male and female elites had feudal lands, and both genders participated in ritual practice and war. Commoners and slaves were on the lower rungs of this social ladder.

The government included specialized departments that dealt with matters ranging from hunting to war, from salt to ritual calendars. The Shang had established a postal system, and they used shells as currency. The Shang had a well-equipped and well-trained army of about thirty thousand people during peacetime that included foot soldiers, chariots, and cavalry.

The inscriptions on the oracle bones act as a royal journal; they form a three-thousand-year-old window into the daily lives of the Shang people and their rulers.

WANG Ying

Further Reading