

Xia Dynasty

Xià Cháo 夏朝

2100?–1766? BCE

The Xia was the earliest Chinese dynasty (going back some two thousand years, although scholars debate the dates). Knowledge of the Xia comes from oral tradition, ancient historical records, and archaeological research. Scholars also debate the veracity of the legends of the founding of the dynasty.

The quasi-legendary Xia, or Hsia, dynasty of China is the oldest dynasty described in ancient historical records including the *Records of the Grand Historian* (covering the period c. 2600–91 BCE and written 109–91 BCE) and *Bamboo Annals* (documenting the period from legendary times, 2497–221 BCE). Mythologically, Chinese civilization began with Pan Gu, the creator of the universe, and a succession of legendary sage-emperors and culture heroes who instructed the ancient Chinese in communication and enabled them to find sustenance and to fabricate clothing and shelter. The name *Xia* was embodied in early oral traditions but also was documented in archaeological sites and artifacts discovered in 1928. Western and Chinese scholars debate the veracity of the legends of the founding of the dynasty, particularly the accuracies of the chronologies expressed in written records such as the *Records* and *Annals*, which were composed 2,500 years after the supposed creation of the dynasty. In addition, the existing archaeological evidence does not appear to correlate with the historical records.

The Xia had villages and urban centers but were an agrarian people whose pottery and bronze implements have

assisted prehistorians in developing more finite chronologies. During the Xia dynasty the major crafts included jade carving and casting bronze vessels, some of which were embellished with jade. The Xia also devised a calendar system that incorporated lunar and solar movements.

The Xia period—dating, as explained below, from the twenty-first to the sixteenth century BCE—defined a cultural stage between late neolithic cultures and the urban civilization of the Shang dynasty. Excavations in the city of Yanshi, Henan Province, uncovered what appears to have been a capital of the Xia dynasty. Although archaeological evidence (including radiocarbon dating) demonstrated that the inhabitants were the direct ancestors of the Longshan and were predecessors of the Shang, some Western scholars contend that the Xia were not a true dynasty. The two earliest of the three ancient dynasties of ancient China (Xia and Shang) are not directly known from contemporary written records, hence some scholars contend that these are mythical; however, there is agreement that the existence of the subsequent Zhou dynasty is based on historic documentation.

Xia Dates

A traditional chronology based on calculations by Liu Xin (c. 46 BCE–23 CE), an astronomer and historian, suggests that the Xia ruled from 2205 to 1766 BCE, but a chronology based on the *Bamboo Annals* dates the Xia dynasty from 1989 to 1558 BCE. The Skeptical School of early Chinese history, founded by Gu Jiegang in the 1920s, seriously questioned the traditional history, noting that through



Statue at the Yellow River Visitor's Center depicting the legendary Yu, the first ruler of the Xia Dynasty. Yu earned his title through his merit as a civil servant; he was esteemed by his people for eliminating devastating annual flooding by organizing the construction of canals and dikes along all the major rivers. PHOTO BY PAUL AND BERNICE NOLL.

time the oral history had been embellished with elements added to the earlier periods. The Xia Shang Zhou Chronology Project, a multidisciplinary effort commissioned by the People's Republic of China in 1996, involved two hundred scholars whose task was to determine precisely the chronology and geographic locations of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. The report, published in 2000, determined that the Xia dynasty dated from 2070 to 1600 BCE. Scholars such as Sarah Allen contend that aspects of the Xia are the opposite of traits emblematic of the Shang, and she argues that the Zhou dynasty justified their conquest of the Shang by pointing out that the Shang had supplanted the Xia.

Xia Rulers

Traditional Chinese histories contend that the Xia dynasty was founded by Yu and ultimately had seventeen rulers. (See table 1.) According to the traditional history, the dynasty was founded when Shun, following the abdication system (which chose leaders according to their ability) ceded his throne to his minister Yu, whom Shun viewed as the "perfect civil servant." Yu was esteemed by his people for eliminating devastating annual flooding by organizing the construction of canals and dikes along all the major rivers. But before his death Yu passed power to his son, Qi, setting the precedent for dynastic rule, or the hereditary system, which began a period of family and clan political and economic control. The rulers often performed as shamans, communicating with spirits for guidance, and the ruling families employed elaborate and dramatic rituals to confirm their political power.

Continuing with the hereditary system, fifteen descendants of Qi succeeded him after his death. Several,

TABLE 1 The Xia emperors in order of succession

EMPEROR	RELATIONSHIP	REIGN (in years)
Xiayu	or Dayu; family name: Si; given name: Wenming	45
Qi	son of Xiayu; established the hereditary system	29
Taikang	son of Qi	29
Zhongkang	younger brother of Taikang	13
Xiang	son of Zhongkang	28
Shaokang	posthumous child of Xiang	21
Zhu	son of Shaokang	17
Huai	son of Zhy	44
Mang	son of Huai	18
Xie	son of Mang	21
Bujiang	son of Xie	59
Jiong	younger brother of Bujiang	21
Jin	son of Jiong	21
Kongjia	son of Bujiang	31
Gao	son of Kongjia	11
Fa	son of Gao	11
Jie	son of Fa	52

such as Shaokang and Huai, made important contributions to Chinese society, but three were tyrannical emperors: Taikang, Kongjia, and Jie. The Xia dynasty ended under the reign of Jie, whose dictatorial and extravagant ways caused a popular revolt under the leadership of T'ang (the leader of the Shang tribe), who overthrew the Xia and established the Shang dynasty. Liu Xin's calculations give the Shang dynasty a reign of 1766–1122 BCE; the chronology from the *Bamboo Annals* dates it 1556–1046 BCE; and the Xia Shang Zhou Chronology Project places it 1600–1046 BCE.

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