

The Shang Dynasty:

How to investigate history through art and explore art through history

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The Shang Dynasty of ancient China is a perfect topic to explore history alongside art and design. The only written information that remains from the Shang period is from the inscriptions found on oracle bones or artworks. This information is very limited, either denoting who an object was made for or, in the case of oracle bones, which were used to discover the future or determine the cause of a problem, asking specific questions, such as 'what is causing my toothache?'. Therefore most of what we know about the Shang has been determined from the art they created. By exploring the artworks we can gain a much deeper understanding of the Shang, as well as a greater appreciation of art and craftsmanship.

The Chinese Bronze Age: the origins of Chinese art

During the Shang Dynasty people in China developed new, sophisticated methods to make objects from bronze. This is why the period of the Shang Dynasty (c.1500-1050 BC), along with the period of the Zhou Dynasty (c.1050-221 BC) is known as the Chinese Bronze Age. The Shang developed bronze casting and used the process to make ritual vessels. These vessels were the most highly prized objects made in China and as important to the Chinese as temples and sculptures were to the Egyptians and Greeks. The bronzes made during the Shang period have had a profound influence on Chinese art and culture.

Why were bronzes so important?

Bronze was an expensive and important material in ancient China. Bronze vessels were used in special rituals and ceremonies to honour ancestors. Although other gods and spirits, such as Di (also known as Shang Di), the High God, may have been more powerful, most attention was paid to trying to please ancestors. This is because the Chinese believed that their ancestors lived in the spirit world with the gods and could ask them to bring good fortune. Living people could not communicate with the gods. If you angered your ancestors they could ask the gods to bring bad fortune.

The bronzes were kept in ancestral temples and the Shang made regular, almost daily sacrifices to ancestral spirits. Each ancestor would receive sacrifices on particular days of the week. The Shang week had 10 days. When someone died and became an ancestor they were given a new name that included the day of the week they would receive sacrifices. These new names would be something like 'Father Wednesday.' Some bronzes had inscriptions inside which were dedicated to specific ancestors.

The ancient Chinese were buried with their belongings because they believed they would need them in the after-life just like the Egyptians or Vikings. Bronze vessels would have been among the objects buried in tombs as the Chinese believed they would continue to perform rituals in the after-life. During the Shang period belief in the after-life was so strong that along with bronzes, weapons and ornaments, the deceased were also buried with their dogs, their horses and even with servants and family members. The tomb of Lady Fu Hao, which was explored in Issue 70 (pp. 32-37) of *Primary History*, is the largest undisturbed Shang tomb ever discovered.

Ding, ritual food vessel. Late Shang dynasty
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China timeline

	China	Rest of the world
Before 1500 BC	<p>Earliest Chinese pottery c.18,000 BC</p> <p>Agriculture in China by 7500 BC</p> <p>Jade weapons and tools by 4500 BC</p> <p>Silk in use before 3000 BC</p> <p>Earliest bronze ritual vessels c.1650 BC</p>	<p>Agriculture in the Near East by 9000 BC</p> <p>Sumerian and Egyptian writing by 3000 BC</p> <p>Pyramids at Giza, Egypt begun 2565 BC</p> <p>Indus Valley begun c.2,600 BC</p> <p>Stonehenge begun c.2500 BC</p>
Shang Dynasty c.1500–1050 BC	<p>Bronze casting flourishes at Shang capital Anyang c.1250–1050 BC</p> <p>Chinese writing by 1250 BC</p>	<p>First Celtic settlements in Britain c.1500 BC</p> <p>Tutankhamun, King of Egypt 1336–1327 BC</p> <p>Trojan War c.1190</p>
Zhou Dynasty c.1050–221 BC	<p>Confucius, political counsellor and philosopher, born c.551 BC</p>	<p>Olympic Games founded 776BC</p> <p>Parthenon begun in Athens 447 BC</p> <p>Alexander the Great dies 323 BC</p>
Qin Dynasty 221–207 BC	<p>First Emperor of Qin unites China 221BC</p> <p>Terracotta Warriors c.210 BC</p>	
Han Dynasty 206 BC – AD 220	<p>Early trade along the Silk Road</p> <p>Buddhism arrives in China c.AD 1–100</p>	<p>The Romans take over Egypt during the reign of Cleopatra from 30 BC</p> <p>Augustus crowned 1st Roman Emperor 27 BC</p> <p>Romans invade Britain AD 43</p>
Six Dynasties Period AD 220–581	<p>Widespread practice of Buddhism begins</p>	<p>Last Roman troops leave Britain AD 410</p> <p>Anglo-Saxons arrive in Britain c.AD 410</p>

What were the bronze vessels used for?

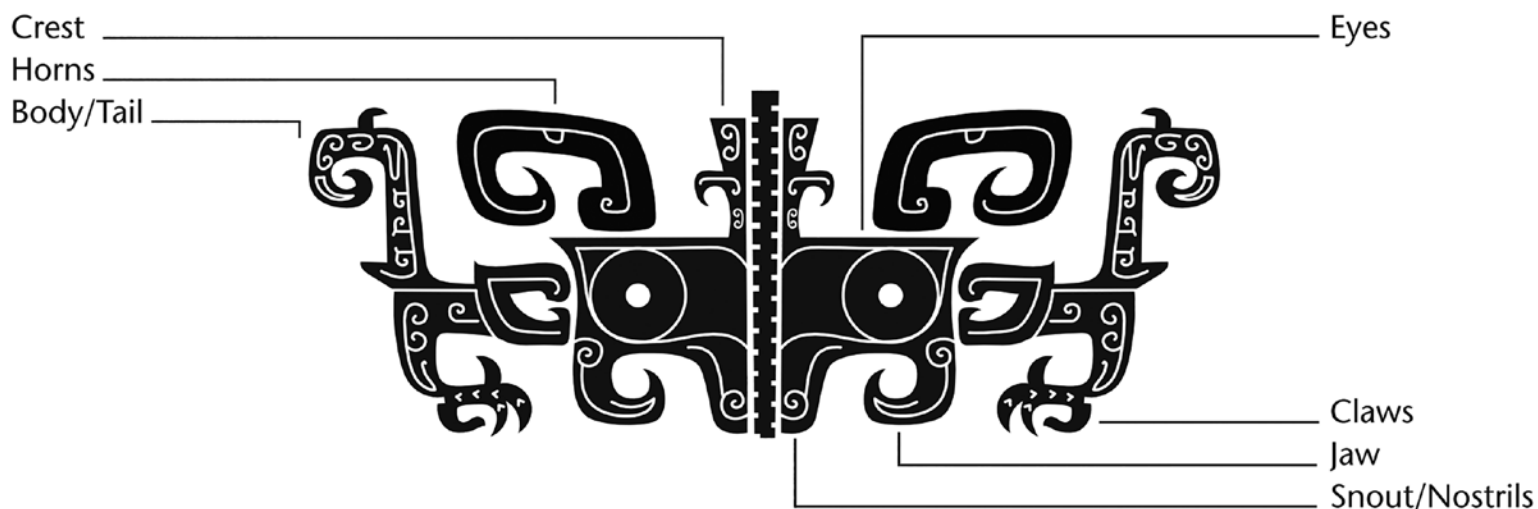
There were many different types of vessel, all with different names. Different vessels were used for different things. Some held wine, some were used for food and some were used to show how important people were. The type of vessel and its use can be identified by its shape.

In Chinese culture no vessel has more symbolic power than the *ding*. The *ding* was used to show political rank. Only members of the nobility would have displayed them in their ancestral temples. The lowest ranking nobles were allowed to display only one while the highest, like the Kings, could display nine or more. The *ding* is the earliest known bronze vessel to be used for food; earlier bronzes were all used for wine.

How were the bronzes made?

Bronze is an alloy made of copper and other metals, usually tin. Chinese bronzes contain at least 70% copper.

Bronze was shaped into vessels by a process called casting. In casting bronze is heated to a very high temperature so that it melts. The liquid bronze is poured into a mould and left to cool and harden. After the bronze has cooled and become solid the mould is broken off to reveal the vessel. Although the exact method the Shang used to make bronzes is not known, most historians agree that a piece mould was used. This is a very technical, lengthy process that required great skill and craftsmanship. The bronze vessels were cast in moulds made up of different, interlocking parts. Simple vessels used moulds with only a few parts, while more complicated shapes needed moulds with many sections.



Ding, late Shang Dynasty, Shanghai Museum



Bronzes were often highly decorated. Animals, both real and imaginary, were the most common form of decoration. Within a single bronze, animals could be incorporated into abstract background decoration; used as the main decoration; or even incorporated into the shape of the vessel itself. The significance of the animals is often unclear.

Although the earliest bronzes were undecorated, once techniques to add decoration were mastered, one of the first features added was a pair of eyes looking out from the side of a vessel. As time went on a variety of horns, snouts, ears, fangs and claws joined the eyes, creating a 'monster' which later came to be associated with a mythical beast called the taotie.

Investigating history through art: the Shang bronzes

Exploring history through art and artefacts is an important and exciting way to engage students with any topic. It is also key to understanding how our knowledge of the past is linked to original sources. Using objects enables children to develop enquiry and thinking skills, learning how to devise and answer questions, which allows for more active learning.

Using open questions to generate enquiry-based, child-led learning is an excellent way to develop an interest in a subject, especially at the start of a new topic.

The bronze vessels can be used to explore many aspects of life during the Shang dynasty, including beliefs and religion, significant accomplishments, food and drink, and arts and culture.

In the classroom an image can be used in place of a real object. Show the children an image of a Shang bronze and ask them what they can tell you about the object. This works best in small groups or as a whole class so that children can feed off each other's ideas. It is important to limit the information you provide about the bronze to allow the children to draw their own conclusions, just like an archaeologist uncovering the object for the first time. You can use simple questions to help stimulate their ideas, e.g. What does it look like? What colours can you see? The observations given can be used to generate a list of questions about

the object. These questions create lines of enquiry through which the Shang Dynasty can be explored.

For example, if the activity was based around the *fangjia*, a ritual wine vessel, pictured the children might tell you the following:

- It's green.
- It looks old.
- It looks dirty or mouldy.
- It has legs.
- It's square.
- It's got lots of patterns.
- It has birds on it.
- It's made of stone or metal.

At this point it doesn't matter if the children's observations are correct, they should just be encouraged to explore the object. The observations can then be used to generate questions.

- Why is it green?
- Why does it have legs?
- How old is it?
- Why does it have patterns?
- Why are there birds on it?
- What is it made from?

Each of these initial questions is the starting-point for a line of enquiry that can be used to teach different aspects of Shang life. The simple question 'Why is it green?' is a perfect starting-point for exploring Shang beliefs.

To make this enquiry-led approach successful and allow children to develop their historical skills it is important to use open questions. Open questions encourage children to offer answers without being right or wrong. They include phrases such as 'what do you think?'. To explore why the *fangjia* is green we would ask 'why do you think it is green?' or 'what do you think has made it green?'. Children can easily offer answers to these questions, it's made of stone, it's been painted, it's old. As with the first observations, any suggestion a child offers is valid, whether they are right or wrong, as long as they are looking at the object, drawing on what they see to provide an answer.

To explore how likely each suggestion is encourage children to look closely at the object. To see if the artwork has been painted they could look for brush marks or other signs of paint. They could compare

Fangjia, wine vessel and cover. Late Shang dynasty
© Compton Verney, photo by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd



the *fangjia* with other painted objects, either through images or by your giving them objects to handle. The images could be of other painted sculptures, such as Yayoi Kusama's *Pumpkins 2009* or Ai Weiwei's *Coloured Vases*. The objects could be everyday items such as a painted toy. Again, enquiry questions can be used to stimulate discussion. Because you want them to look at something particular, however, the questions will need to be more specific. For example, instead of asking 'Does the *fangjia* look the same as the object you are comparing it to?', ask, 'Is the surface of the two objects the same or different?'

This stage of the enquiry could be undertaken in groups, giving each group a different possibility to explore, providing prompt questions, images or objects to aid their investigation. Separating the different stages of enquiry (generating questions, suggesting

answers and investigating how likely the suggestions are) allows you to prepare resources and incorporate further activities. To investigate if the *fangjia* was painted, children could explore types of paint, application methods, mark making and how that affects the appearance of an object or artwork.

Once each group has explored how likely a suggestion is, they can share their findings and explore the correct answer together. Again, questions can be used to steer them towards the most likely answer and limited information can be confirmed or introduced to allow further ideas to be generated. To understand why the *fangjia* is green, children must know that it is made of bronze. A reaction between oxygen and the copper in bronze causes a green substance called verdigris to form on the *fangjia*, just in the same way that iron goes rusty.

Once the children discover that the colour is caused by a change to the material, they can explore what has happened to the bronze for the reaction to occur and what that tells us about beliefs and after-life in Shang China. At this stage of enquiry, children will no longer just be able to use the object to draw conclusions but will need additional knowledge. Teachers may need to offer their own suggestions to steer the group. As with the open questions it is important to phrase suggestions as possibilities rather than facts. Once the children have deduced that the *fangjia* has been outside they can explore why the Shang would put their most highly prized objects outside. This will lead them to discovering that Shang people were buried with their belongings. Children can then explore what else Shang people buried in their tombs and what this tells us about life in ancient China.

Tips for successful enquiry-based learning

- Limit the amount of information that you provide about the object before showing it to the students. This allows them to draw their own conclusions.
- Use open questions that encourage students to offer answers and don't have a right or wrong answer. Open questions will include phrases such as 'what do you think, e.g. 'what do you think the object is made of?' as opposed to 'what is the object made of?'
- Allow children to offer several answers to a question even if the correct answer has already been given. To develop self-led learning and enquiry skills it is important for students to learn to question and offer alternative possibilities.
- Use your own observations to help guide the students.
- Use images of artworks or objects to provide comparisons to stimulate discussions.
- As children begin to develop questions, limited information can be confirmed or introduced if needed e.g. the object is made of bronze.



Websites

Information on Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park's Chinese Collection
www.comptonverney.org.uk/art/collections/chinese/

How bronzes were made, Princeton University Art Museum
<https://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/interactives/bronze/bronze.html#>

Teaching History with 100 Objects, The British Museum
www.teachinghistory100.org/objects/shang_bowl

The Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art
www.asia.si.edu/explore/china/bronzes/default.asp

The Story of China, Michael Wood for the BBC (2016)
Clips from Episode 1, *Ancestors*, provides contextual information relating to the Shang
www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03fhdr9

The Shang: How the early Chinese made bronzes
Primary History – The Story of China. Michael Wood, BBC Teach
www.youtube.com/watch?v=llLq8n_8_wo

Pangolin Editions, Sculpture Foundry, explore bronze casting through films about the moulding workshop and the lost wax department.
www.pangolin-editions.com/departments

How different questions can be used to explore the Shang Dynasty

Why does the vessel have legs?

This question relates to the use of the object and its specific vessel shape. The *fangjia* is a ritual wine vessel and the ancient Chinese used it to heat their wine. It has legs so that it could stand over a fire. From this question children could explore other vessel types and investigate how their shapes are related to their use.



Why does it have patterns?

Objects that are very decorative are expensive because they need the best craftsmen and artists to make them. The more decoration an object has, the more time it would take and often the more material it would require. The decoration is a sign of how important the object is. It could be suggested that the amount of decoration on a bronze was linked to the importance of the ancestor it was made for.

Why does it have birds on?

This question could be used to explore the culture of the Shang and their strong links to the natural world. Exploring other animal imagery found on the bronzes, such as the taotie, would create a starting point for exploring Shang legends, for example the story of Xie (also called Qi), founder of the clan from which the Shang kings were descended. It is said that he was conceived when his mother swallowed a miraculous egg dropped by a black bird.

How was it made?

By exploring how the bronzes were made, children will gain knowledge of one of the Shang's greatest

accomplishments, the development of bronze casting. Through this they can also explore art of the Shang Dynasty and how this compares to other civilisations. The Shang Dynasty was one of many Bronze Age civilisations that developed across the world, including the Mesopotamian civilisation of Ancient Sumer, the Minoan civilisation and Bronze Age Britain. Children could explore how civilisations used the material and how they processed it differently. This would provide an excellent opportunity to explore art through history, providing scope to learn different techniques and understand the historical and cultural developments of art.

Exploring art through history

Bronze casting

The process of casting that the Shang Dynasty developed still forms the basis of the lost wax casting method, a process that has been used throughout history, to create pieces such as the *Benin Bronzes* and Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. Bronze casting has many stages.

Houmuwu Ding, also known as Simuwu Ding, is the heaviest piece of bronze work found in China. Late Shang Dynasty, National Museum of China.



Stage One: creating the model

Before a mould can be made, the object has to be designed and a model of it has to be created. This can be done in many ways, including creating a model using clay or carving into a material like wax. It is most likely that the ancient Chinese would have made their models out of clay. Children could explore this part of the process through soap carving, using a simple bar of household soap and plastic or wooden tools. Each child could create a design for a three-dimensional object, thinking about surface pattern as well as the

entire form. Carving is a difficult process to master so children could be challenged to all make the same three-dimensional shape before creating their own designs.

Stage two: Making the mould

The models the children create can use a simple form of mould making and casting. The children can press objects into a thick slab of clay and remove them to leave an impression. Children can use tools to develop their mould after they have created an initial impression. This activity can also be done using ready-made, three-dimensional objects.

Stage three: Casting

Plaster can be poured into the moulds and left to cool. When the plaster is fully cooled the clay can be removed and the plaster cleaned. The object may need to be sanded to remove rough edges. The plaster objects can also be painted once fully dry.

Design, imagery and culture

Like many civilisations the Shang dynasty reflected their culture and beliefs in the imagery they used in their decorative objects and artworks. Design elements such as the taotie provide excellent inspiration for many forms of artistic exploration. Children could explore the myth of the taotie and use this to create their own mythical beast. They could use photographs of different animals and make a collage of their taotie, create a three-dimensional model or use their design to create a traditional Chinese mask. Children could compare how other cultures have used myths or animals in art, for example, through the vases of ancient Greece.

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Alice Kirk is a learning programmer at Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park.



HA Resources

Bracey, P. (2013) 'So was everyone an ancient Egyptian? Developing an understanding of the world in ancient times' in *Primary History*, 73, pp. 12–17.

Wilkinson, A. (2015) 'The Shang: What can we tell about an ancient civilisation from one tomb?' in *Primary History*, 70, pp. 32–38.



Places to visit

Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park,
Warwickshire

The British Museum, London

**Ashmolean Museum of Art and
Archaeology**, Oxford

Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art,
Manchester