

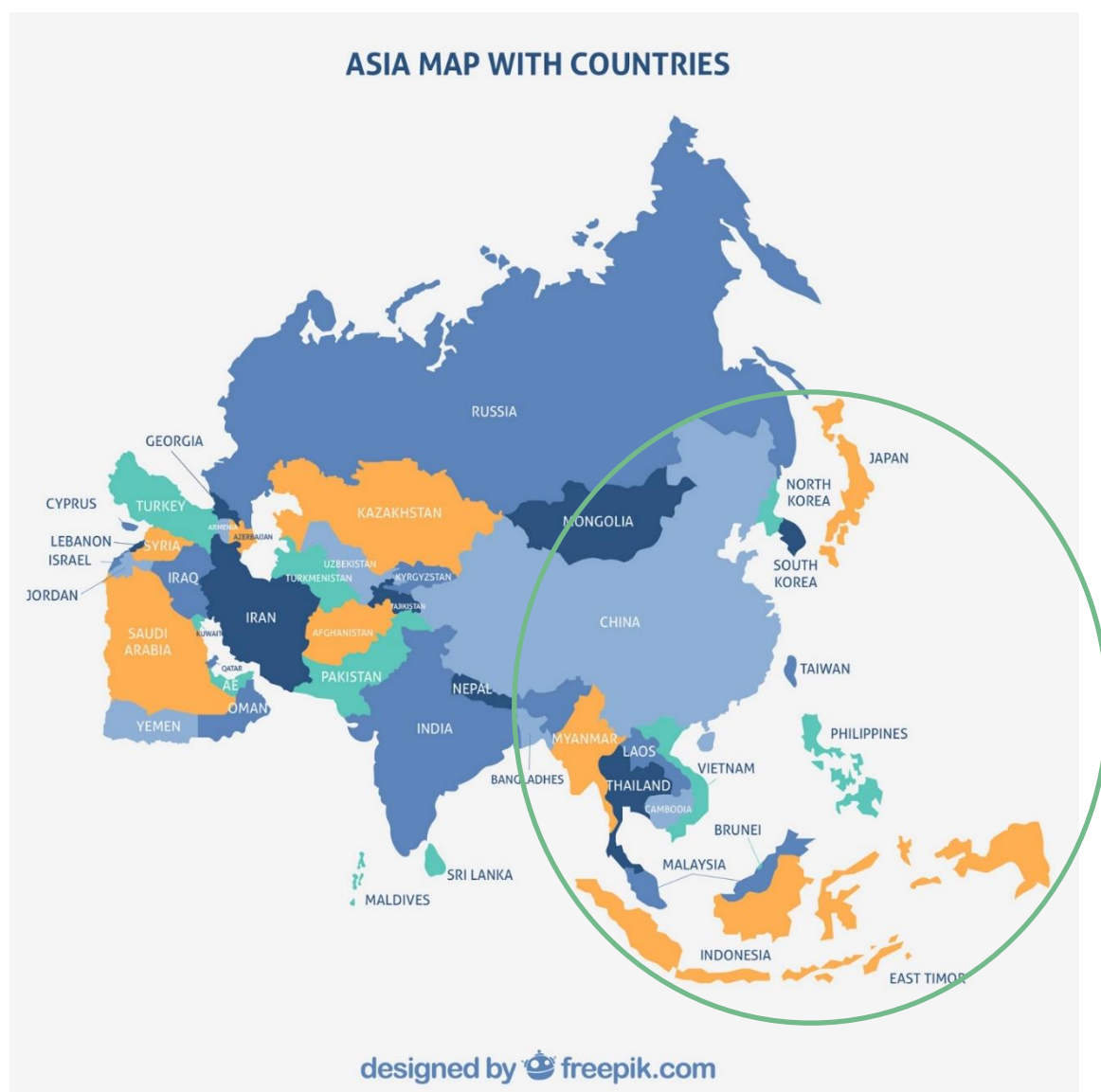
RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

These activities are inspired by the Shang Dynasty as well as objects from the Museum collection. The Shang Dynasty is part of the KS2 History curriculum, and we hope you enjoy these activities as an introduction or reinforcement of this topic. Please contact us by emailing learning@meaa.org.uk if you have any questions or want to send us pictures of your work.

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Find links in green

Which regions are in East and South East Asia? Look inside the circle!



The Shang Dynasty: The ancients

The Shang Dynasty (商) was in power in the second millennium BC, during China's Bronze Age around 4,000 years ago! The Shang ruled in the area of the Yellow River Valley. The last capital of the Shang Dynasty was Yin, near the modern Chinese city of Anyang in Henan Province.

Although historians are not sure of the exact dates of this dynasty, it is considered to be the first dynasty to have left behind written records and archaeological evidence; however, the origins of the Shang are legendary.

In the *Annals of Yin*, the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) historian Sima Qian describes how Xia, the pre-dynastic founder of the Shang Dynasty, was born when the Empress Jiandu accidentally swallowed an egg which had been dropped by a black bird. Thirteen generations later, Cheng Tang overthrew the last ruler of the legendary Xia Dynasty (c. 2070 – c. 1600 BC).

The Shang Dynasty lasted for around 600 years and was ruled by a series of approximately 30 kings. In 1050 BC, the last king of the Shang was overthrown by the Zhou. With a reputation for partying instead of caring for his people, this king was so despised that when the Zhou came to take over the throne, very few people came to defend him. Upon his defeat, he burnt his own palace to the ground.



Jade Tiger Plaque, Shang Dynasty, made during the Anyang Phase c.1400- 1100 BC

Explore: What are the Shang famous for?

- **Oracle Bones:** The word 'oracle' means a message or messenger believed to come from gods or spirits; **Oracle Bones** were used to understand and write down these messages. The pictographs (writing based on images instead of words or letters) used on these bones developed into modern Chinese, making it the oldest system of writing still in use. They were used by the king's priest in divination rituals to get valuable information about harvests, weather, military campaigns or the best dates for weddings and births. During these rituals, a hot metal rod would be inserted into small holes drilled into the bones, which were usually those of a turtle or an ox. When the heat made the bone crack, the king or his diviner would interpret the shape of the cracks, and on the other side of the bone scribes would then carve the question, along with its answer. Some of the characters were pictograms which still appear in Chinese writing.

Although you can't handle an actual oracle bone, you can explore [this one](#) in 3D from the British Library.

- **Tombs:** The Shang believed in *Shang Di*, the supreme sky god of ancient China, as well as other spirits under his influence. For the Shang, these gods were represented by nature symbols such as the sun, moon and wind. They also celebrated their ancestors – family members who had passed away - with whom they communicated through rituals and sacrifices conducted by oracles. Failure to worship their ancestors was believed to bring great misfortune. Because of these beliefs, the Shang people had strong faith in their ancestors and the afterlife. They constructed elaborate royal tombs where rulers were buried along with all the objects necessary for daily life. Weapons and artefacts needed in the afterlife were also included. It is interesting to note that Shang tombs in Anyang look like upside-down pyramids.

One tomb belonged to Fu Hao (妇好), wife of the King Wu Ding. Fu Hao may have been a priestess, politician, and military general – which was very unusual for a woman at the time. Her tomb was filled with many treasures, including 400 bronze objects and over 500 jade items. More gruesomely, she was also buried with 16 servants to accompany her in the afterlife.

Would you like to see what an excavated Shang Dynasty tomb looks like? [Watch this video.](#)

Learn more about Fu Hao with [this video](#) from BBC Bitesize.

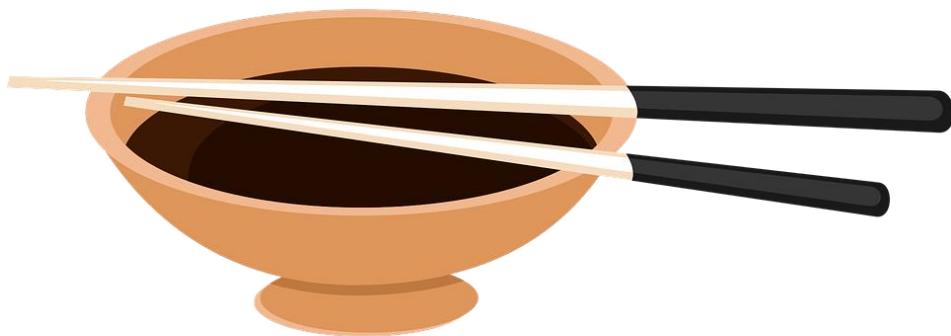
- **Bronze (weapons and vessels):** The Shang perfected a metal casting technique using moulds which was quite unique at the time.



What do you think these objects were used for? Click on the image to learn more.



- **Chopsticks!** It is believed that chopsticks were invented during the Shang Dynasty. Don't know how to use chopsticks? Learn [here](#).



Create

Can you recreate an oracle bone message? Copy the characters below onto the bone outline. If you want to have a go at creating your own message you can use pictographs from the table you will find on [this page](#).

Most inscriptions follow the same type order, from left to right and each column is read downwards. They usually start with the date and then the question, the one below could be translated as: On this date, cracks were made. The King asked will it rain today? The king read the cracks and said heavy rain, good fortune.

