

allies of the Zhou, invaded China from the west. They came during the rule of a particularly ineffective king who did not enjoy the respect of his political allies. When subordinates refused to support the king, the invaders overwhelmed the capital at Hao. Following that disaster, the royal court moved east to Luoyang in the Yellow River valley, which served as the Zhou capital until the end of the dynasty.

In fact, the political initiative had passed from the Zhou kings to their subordinates, and the royal court never regained its authority. By the fifth century B.C.E., territorial princes ignored the central government and used their resources to build, strengthen, and expand their states. They fought ferociously with one another in hopes of establishing themselves as leaders of a new political order. So violent were the last centuries of the Zhou dynasty that they are known as the **Period of the Warring States** (403–221 B.C.E.). In 256 B.C.E. the Zhou dynasty ended when the last king abdicated his position under pressure from his ambitious subordinate the king of Qin. Only with the establishment of the Qin dynasty in 221 B.C.E. did effective central government return to China.

## SOCIETY AND FAMILY IN ANCIENT CHINA

In China, as in other parts of the ancient world, the introduction of agriculture enabled individuals to accumulate wealth and preserve it within their families. Social distinctions began to appear during neolithic times, and after the establishment of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties the distinctions became even sharper. Throughout China the patriarchal family emerged as the institution that most directly influenced individuals' lives and their roles in the larger society.

### The Social Order

**Ruling Elites** Already during the Xia dynasty, but especially under the Shang and the early Zhou, the royal family and allied noble families occupied the most honored positions in Chinese society. They resided in large, palatial compounds made of pounded earth, and they lived on the agricultural surplus and taxes delivered by their subjects. Because of the



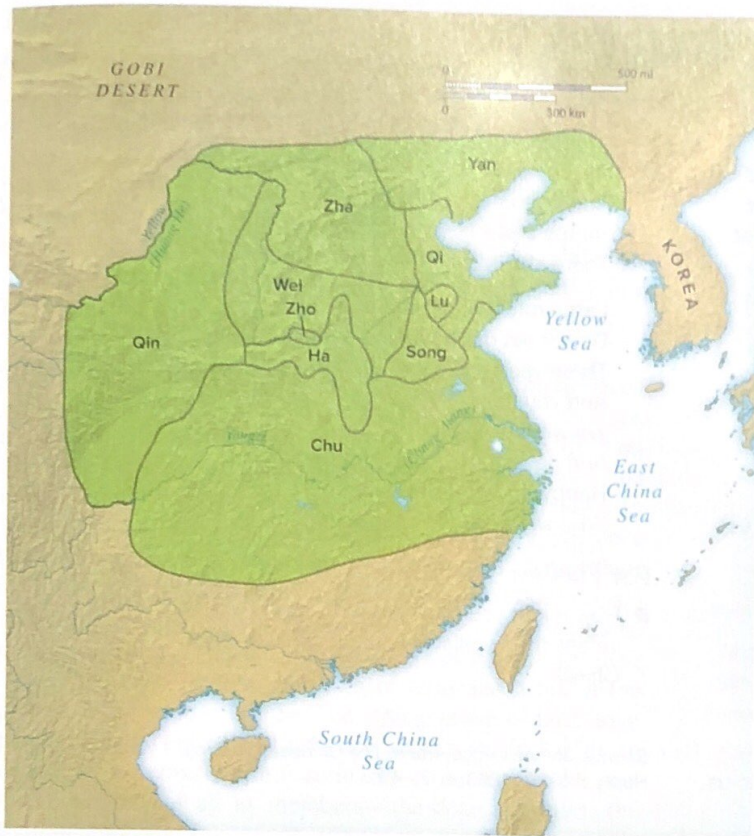
The Eastern Zhou dynasty saw the development of weapons technology that resulted in stronger and more lethal weapons. Bronze weapons such as those depicted here contributed to political instability and chronic warfare during the late Zhou dynasty.

high cost of copper and tin, bronze implements were beyond the means of all but the wealthy, so the conspicuous consumption of bronze by ruling elites clearly set them apart from less privileged classes. Ruling elites possessed much of the bronze weaponry that ensured military strength and political hegemony, and through their subordinates and retainers they controlled most of the remaining bronze weapons available in northern China. They also supplied their households with cast-bronze utensils—pots, jars, wine cups, plates, serving dishes, mirrors, bells, drums, and vessels used in ritual ceremonies—which were beyond the means of less privileged people. These utensils often featured elaborate, detailed decorations that indicated remarkable skill on the part of the artisans who built the molds and cast the metal. Expensive bronze utensils bore steamed rice and rich dishes of fish, pheasant, poultry, pork, mutton, and rabbit to royal and aristocratic tables, whereas less privileged classes relied on clay pots and consumed much simpler fare, such as vegetables and porridges made of millet, wheat, or rice. Ruling elites consumed bronze in staggering quantities: the tomb of

Marquis Yi of Zeng, a provincial governor of the late Zhou dynasty, contained a collection of bronze weapons and decorative objects that weighed almost 11 tons.

A privileged class of hereditary aristocrats rose from the military allies of Shang and Zhou rulers. Aristocrats possessed extensive landholdings, and they worked at administrative and military tasks. By Zhou times many of them lived in cities where they obtained at least an elementary education, and their standard of living was much more refined than that of the commoners and slaves who worked their fields and served their needs. Manuals of etiquette from Zhou times instructed the privileged classes in decorous behavior and outlined the proper way to carry out rituals. When dining in polite company, for example, the cultivated aristocrat should show honor to the host and refrain from gulping down food, swilling wine, making unpleasant noises, picking teeth at the table, and playing with food by rolling it into a ball.

**Specialized Labor** A small class of free artisans and craftsmen plied their trades in the cities of ancient China. Some, who worked almost exclusively for the privileged classes, enjoyed a reasonably comfortable existence. During

**MAP 5.2****China during the Period of the Warring States, 403–221 B.C.E.**

Early Zhou rulers used iron tools and weapons to create a sizable kingdom. As knowledge of iron production spread, however, political and military leaders were able to establish several regional states that competed for power and territory.



the Shang dynasty, for example, bronzesmiths often lived in houses built of pounded earth. Although their dwellings were modest, they were also sturdy and relatively expensive to build because of the amount of labor required for pounded-earth construction. Jewelers, jade workers, embroiderers, and manufacturers of silk textiles also benefited socially because of their importance to the ruling elites.

**Merchants and Trade** There is little information about merchants and trade in ancient China until the latter part of the Zhou dynasty, but archaeological discoveries show that long-distance trade routes may have reached China during the Shang dynasty. Despite the high mountain ranges and forbidding deserts that stood between China and complex societies in India and southwest Asia, small-scale trade networks linked China with lands to the west and south early in the third millennium B.C.E. Jade in Shang tombs came from central Asia, while Shang bronzesmiths worked with tin that came from the Malay peninsula in southeast Asia, and cowry shells came through southeast Asia from Burma and the Maldiv Islands in the Indian Ocean. The identity of the most important trade items that went from China to other lands is not clear, but archaeologists have unearthed a few pieces of Shang pottery from Mohenjo-daro and other Harappan sites.



The delicate design of this bronze wine vessel displays the high level of craftsmanship during the late Shang dynasty. Why would objects like this appeal particularly to elite classes?

## Sources from the Past

### Peasants' Protest

Peasants in ancient China mostly did not own land. Instead, they worked as tenants on plots allotted to them by royal or aristocratic owners, who took sizable portions of the harvest. In the following poem from the *Book of Songs*, a collection of verses dating from Zhou times, peasants liken their lords to rodents, protest the bite lords take from the peasants' agricultural production, and threaten to abandon the lords' lands for a neighboring state where conditions were better.

Large rats! Large rats!  
Do not eat our millet.  
Three years have we had to do with you.  
And you have not been willing to show any regard for us.  
We will leave you,  
And go to that happy land.  
Happy land! Happy land!  
There shall we find our place.

Large rats! Large rats!  
Do not eat our wheat.  
Three years have we had to do with you.  
And you have not been willing to show any kindness to us.

We will leave you,  
And go to that happy state.  
Happy state! Happy state!  
There shall we find ourselves aright.

Large rats! Large rats!  
Do not eat our springing grain!  
Three years have we had to do with you,  
And you have not been willing to think of our toil.  
We will leave you,  
And go to those happy borders.  
Happy borders! Happy borders!  
Who will there make us always to groan?

### For Further Reflection

- How might you go about judging the extent to which these verses throw reliable light on class relations in ancient China?

Source: James Legge, trans. *The Chinese Classics*, 5 vols. London: Henry Frowde, 1893, 4:171–72.

Meanwhile, Chinese mariners began to probe nearby waters for profitable sea routes. Legendary accounts credit King Yu, the supposed founder of the Xia dynasty, with the invention of sails. There is no archaeological indication of Chinese sails before about 500 B.C.E., but there is abundant evidence that Chinese mariners used large oar-propelled vessels before 2000 B.C.E. These watercraft supported fishing and trade with offshore islands even before the emergence of the first dynasties. By the time of the Shang dynasty, Chinese ships were traveling across the Yellow Sea to Korea. During the Zhou dynasty, shipbuilding emerged as a prominent business all along coastal China, and mariners had discovered how to navigate their vessels by the stars and other heavenly bodies.

**Peasants** Back on the land, a large class of semiservile peasants populated the Chinese countryside. They owned no land but provided agricultural, military, and labor services for their lords in exchange for plots to cultivate, security, and a portion of the harvest. They lived like their neolithic predecessors in small subterranean houses excavated to a depth of about 1 meter (3 feet) and protected from the elements by

thatched walls and roofs. Women's duties included mostly indoor activities such as wine making, weaving, and cultivation of silkworms, whereas men spent most of their time outside working in the fields, hunting, and fishing.

Few effective tools were available to cultivators until the late Zhou dynasty. They mostly relied on wooden digging sticks and spades with bone or stone tips, which were strong enough to cultivate the powdery loess soil of northern China; bronze tools were too expensive for peasant cultivators. Beginning about the sixth century B.C.E., however, iron production increased dramatically in China, and iron plows, picks, spades, hoes, sickles, knives, and rakes all came into daily use in the countryside.

**Slaves** There was also a sizable class of slaves, most of whom were enemy warriors captured during battles between the many competing states of ancient China. Slaves performed hard labor, such as the clearing of new fields or the building of city walls, that required a large workforce. During the Shang dynasty, but rarely thereafter, hundreds of slaves also figured among the victims sacrificed during funerary, religious, and other ritual observances.

## Family and Patriarchy

Throughout human history the family has served as the principal institution for the socialization of children and the preservation of cultural traditions. In China the extended family emerged as a particularly influential institution during neolithic times, and it continued to play a prominent role in the shaping of both private and public affairs after the appearance of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou states. Indeed, the early dynasties ruled their territories largely through family and kinship groups.

**Veneration of Ancestors** One reason for the pronounced influence of the Chinese family is the veneration of ancestors, a practice with roots in neolithic times. In those early days agricultural peoples in China diligently tended the graves and memories of their departed ancestors. They believed that spirits of their ancestors passed into another realm of existence from which they had the power to support and protect their surviving families if the descendants displayed proper respect and ministered to the spirits' needs. Survivors buried tools, weapons, jewelry, and other material goods along with their dead. They also offered sacrifices of food and drink at the graves of departed relatives. The strong sense of ancestors' presence and continuing influence in the world led to an equally strong ethic of family solidarity. A family could expect to prosper only if all its members—the dead as well as the living—worked cooperatively toward common interests. The family became an institution linking departed generations to the living and even to those yet unborn—an institution that wielded enormous influence over both the private and the public lives of its members.

In the absence of organized religion or official priesthood in ancient China, the patriarchal head of the family presided at rites and ceremonies honoring ancestors' spirits. As mediator between the family's living members and its departed relatives, the family patriarch possessed tremendous authority. He officiated not only at ceremonies honoring ancestors of his household but also at memorials for collateral and subordinate family branches that might include hundreds of individuals.

## Reverberations of Urbanization and the Creation of Patriarchy

Recall that scholars debate the reasons why urbanization and the creation of large states seem to have led to patriarchy in diverse regions of the world. In light of what you have read about early Chinese societies, do any of the explanations—agricultural, military, or the protection of resources—seem to fit best in this instance?



When burying their departed kin, survivors placed bronze ritual vessels with food and drink in the tombs. In the tombs of wealthy individuals, those vessels sometimes took elaborate shapes.

**Patriarchal Society** Chinese society vested authority principally in elderly males who headed their households. Like its counterparts in other regions, Chinese society took on a strongly patriarchal character—one that intensified with the emergence of large states. During neolithic times Chinese men wielded public authority, but they won their rights to it by virtue of the female line of their descent. Even if it did not vest power and authority in women, this system provided solid reasons for a family to honor its female members. As late as Shang times, two queens posthumously received the high honor of having temples dedicated to their memories.

**Women's Influence** Women occasionally played prominent roles in public life during Shang times. Fu Hao, for example, the consort of King Wu Ding whose tomb has thrown important light on Shang royal society, ventured beyond the corridors of the Shang palace to play prominent roles in public life. Documents from her tomb indicate Fu Hao supervised her estate and presided over sacrificial ceremonies that were usually the responsibility of men who were heads of their households. She even served as general on several military campaigns and once

# Sources from the Past

## Family Solidarity in Ancient China

A poem from the Book of Songs illustrates clearly the importance of family connections in ancient China.

The flowers of the cherry tree—  
Are they not gorgeously displayed?  
Of all the men in the world  
There are none equal to brothers.

On the dreaded occasions of death and burial,  
It is brothers who greatly sympathize.  
When fugitives are collected on the heights and low grounds,  
They are brothers who will seek one another out.

There is the wagtail on the level height—  
When brothers are in urgent difficulties,  
Friends, though they may be good  
Will only heave long sighs.

Brothers may quarrel inside the walls [of their own home],  
But they will oppose insult from without,  
When friends, however good they may be,  
Will not afford help.

When death and disorder are past,  
And there are tranquillity and rest,  
Although they have brothers,  
Some reckon them not equal to friends.

Your dishes may be set in array,  
And you may drink to satiety.  
But it is when your brothers are all present  
That you are harmonious and happy, with child-like joy.

Loving union with wife and children  
Is like the music of lutes.  
But it is the accord of brothers  
That makes the harmony and happiness lasting.

For the ordering of your family,  
For the joy in your wife and children,  
Examine this and study it—  
Will you not find that it is truly so?

### For Further Reflection

- Which family relationships does this poem portray as most important? What does it tell us about the values of patriarchal society in ancient China?

Source: James Legge, trans. *The Chinese Classics*, 5 vols. London: Henry Frowde, 1893, 4:250–53. (Translation slightly modified.)

led thirteen thousand troops in a successful operation against a neighboring state.

During the later Shang and Zhou dynasties, however, women came to live increasingly in the shadow of men. Large states brought the military and political contributions of men into sharp focus. The ruling classes performed elaborate ceremonies publicly honoring the spirits of departed ancestors, particularly males who had guided their families and led especially notable lives. Gradually, the emphasis on men became so intense that Chinese society lost its matrilineal character. After the Shang dynasty, not even queens and empresses merited temples dedicated exclusively to their memories: at most, they had the honor of being remembered in association with their illustrious husbands.

## EARLY CHINESE WRITING AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Organized religion did not play as important a role in ancient China as it did in other early societies. Early Chinese myths and legends explained the origins of the world, the human

race, agriculture, and the various arts and crafts. But Chinese thinkers saw no need to organize those ideas into systematic religious traditions. They often spoke of an impersonal heavenly power—*tian* (“heaven”), the agent responsible for bestowing and removing the mandate of heaven on rulers—but they did not recognize a personal supreme deity who intervened in human affairs or took special interest in human behavior. Nor did ancient China support a large class of priests like those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India who mediated between humans and the gods. A few priests conducted ritual observances in honor of royal ancestors at royal courts, but for the most part family patriarchs represented the interests of living generations to the spirits of departed ancestors.

In that environment, then, writing served as the foundation for a distinctive secular cultural tradition in ancient China. Chinese scribes may have used written symbols to keep simple records during Xia times, but surviving evidence suggests that writing came into extensive use only during the Shang dynasty. As in other lands, writing in east Asia quickly became an indispensable tool of government as well as a means of expressing ideas and offering reflections on humans and their world.