The Shang Dynasty came to power in the Huang He River Valley sometime between 1750 B.C.E. and 1500 B.C.E. The Shang were farmers. Their most important crop was millet, which is a type of grain. However, Shang farmers also grew rice, barley, wheat and vegetables and they raised cows, sheep, pigs and chicken. Plows had not yet been invented so fieldwork had to be done by hand with stone tools. However, the Shang did introduce simple methods of irrigation and flood-control so that they could prosper along the banks of the Huang He River.

The Shang are considered to be China's first dynasty. A Shang king ruled the kingdom with absolute authority. At it's height, the Shang Dynasty controlled over 40,000 square miles of territory. The dynasty was so large that they had to create a complex bureaucracy - a government organized into different levels and tasks - in order to rule the entire territory. In fact, the Shang had to move their capital city several times, probably to defend against both rivals as well as floods.

The Shang religion was a mixture of two beliefs - animism and veneration of ancestors. Animism is the belief that spirits inhabit all of the objects in the natural world. Veneration of ancestors is the belief that the spirits of family members who had died continued to surround the family and that these relatives were still able to affect the world of the living.

The Shang did not believe in just one god. However, the Chinese did believe in a powerful dragon that lived in the rivers, lakes and seas. Over time this dragon became the symbol for Chinese rulers. The Chinese also worshiped the gods of wind, sun, clouds and moon. The Shang also worshiped Shangdi, a great god who controlled both human destiny and the forces of nature. Shang rulers often offered sacrifices and called upon their ancestors to plead on their behalf to Shangdi. The Shang honored these gods with public festivals. Villagers held festivals in the spring to ask for healthy crops and held another in the fall to thank the gods for a plentiful harvest.

Priests played an important role in Shang religion. Some tried to predict the future by interpreting divine messages from the spirits of ancestors. To do this they used oracle bones. Oracle bones were the shoulder of a cow or a turtle shell. The priests heated the bones and then brought them to the king from him to interpret the cracks that had formed. Often, the king's interpretation was recorded on the oracle bone along with the question. Some also think that the name of the ruler was included as well. Thus the bones have helped historians to learn more about the Shang.