In the 1920’s and 1930’s Chinese archeologists began unearthing relics from their distant past. Over 100,000 inscribed fragments were discovered and the once mythical Shang dynasty became historical. But even as scholars look back on the Shang, they realize that the Shang had been gazing into the future.

“In the next ten days, there will be no disasters.”

“If we raise 3,000 men and call upon them to attack Gongfang, we will receive abundant assistance.”

“Lady Hao’s childbearing will be good.”

The bones speak of war and harvest, disease and childbirth; their subjects range from the toothaches of kings to potential harm befalling the capital. They are heavy with descriptions of sacrifices, both human and animal. Natural forces are both feared and respected. Foreign tribes can be allies or enemies. Statements are brief and to the point. And yet, some inscriptions ring across the centuries with a haunting beauty and mystery: “In the afternoon a rainbow came out of the north and drank from the yellow river.”

Dr. David Keightley explained the the process by which Shang diviners or priests, used Oracle Bones to predict the future. The key materials were turtle shells or the shoulder bones of cattle. These were carefully cleaned and treated. Both of these materials provided a flat surface on which to write. The materials were thinned by drilling notches into the back. The diviners would then inscribe or carve a statement about the future and use the Oracle Bone to verify the statement.

The diviners would then apply hot objects to the bone until they cracked - a moment that the Shang believed represented a voice from another world. “When it cracked, the ancestors were responding to the diviners statement”, Dr. Keightley said.

The interpretation of the cracks, a task handled by the king himself, was often carved into the object itself along with the original divination statement. Sometimes the court engravers even recorded whether the predictions came true. One memorable inscription reads: “After 31 days, Lady Hao gave birth; it was not good; it was a girl.”

In the 1930’s archeologists uncovered hundreds of thousands of tombs including nine massive tombs thought to belong to the final Shang kings. All the tombs had been looted but they still provided evidence of bloody sacrifices. One tomb contained 74 beheaded skeletons. Thirty-seven horses were found in another. The Shang spirits - ancestors as well as deities - demanded blood on a regular basis. One scholar has calculated that the Shang sacrificed more than 13,000 humans in the last 250 years of their rule.

The most distinctive relics of Shang culture, along with the Oracle Bones, are bronze vessels. Ancient China’s Bronze Age started later than in some other parts of the world - roughly 2000 B.C. in China compared to about 3,000 B.C. in Europe and the Middle East. But craftsmen of the Yellow River quickly made up for lost time. By adding lead to the mixture of copper and tin and developing a sophisticated casting process they were able to create enormous bronze objects.

The largest bronze container ever discovered weighs 1,900 pounds. But size wasn’t the critical characteristic for the Shang whose artistic style set the tone for centuries of Chinese art. Most of the bronze containers are decorated with a “taotie” - a stylized face that stares back at you. This style of art was reproduced across much of eastern China.

Shang Dynasty Quiz

Answer the following questions using the article “The New Story of China’s Ancient Past”. The quiz is open article and you make work with a partner. The quiz will be graded and it is worth 6 points.

1. What metals did the Shang mix to create bronze?
   a. iron, gold and silver
   b. gold silver and copper
   c. copper, tin and lead
   d. tin, lead and iron
   e. bronze is found naturally in the earth

2. According to the article, who interpreted the cracks in the Oracle Bones?
   a. the queen
   b. the king
   c. the priest
   d. the army general
   e. Mrs. Ryan

3. What did the Shang Spirits demand on a regular basis?
   a. blood
   b. gold
   c. bronze
   d. oil
   e. bones

4. What were the Oracle Bones used for?
   a. to look into the past
   b. to look into the future
   c. to elect the next king
   d. to decorate the royal palace

5. How many Oracle Bones fragments have been found in China?
   a. over 100
   b. over 1,000
   c. over 10,000
   d. over 100,000

6. The distinctive decoration of the Shang bronzes could be described as
   a. vibrant swirling colors
   b. a face that stares back at you
   c. a beautiful landscape
   d. a scene from everyday life