

Shang People

Information Print Out

The King and Ruling Family

Right at the top of the social hierarchy was the king and his royal family, who lived a life of sheer luxury. They lived in the capital city in ornately decorated palaces made from wood and clay bricks, containing beautiful tiles and intricately carved bronze and jade sculptures. They also grew flowers and spices in walled gardens.

Their clothes were made of the finest silk with beautiful, complex embroidery patterns and they were served exquisitely prepared meals consisting of a wide range of delicacies, including a large number of meats like horse, beef, chicken, pork, mutton and deer.

The king and ruling family made all the important decisions on how the kingdom was run. They employed priests and government workers to help them organise and control society and they owned all the land.

The Priests and Government Officials

The priests and government officials were of paramount importance to the king and ruling family and because of this they also enjoyed a very comfortable lifestyle nestled safe within the walls of the city.

The priests, who were skilled writers, worked as scribes for the king. They would carve the king's questions onto 'oracle bones' and then heat the bones up during a special ceremony. The king would ask his dead ancestors to provide the answers and then he would interpret the heat cracks which appeared in the bones as divine messages from them.

The government officials did important administrative work for the king. They recorded events like the reclaiming of land and strategies for war and they also documented the names of people who had committed crimes and the tribute payments the king received. These records were written on bamboo using ink and a brush and were crucial in helping the king to run an organised society.

Noble Warriors

The noble warriors were also held in high regard. Although they lived outside the main city walls, they often lived in luxurious palaces. The noble warriors spent their time hunting and managing the land which they 'rented' from the king.

Peasant farmers paid taxes to the noble warriors to be allowed to live and work on the land. The farmers were allowed to keep some of the produce themselves, but most went to the noble warriors who, in turn, paid much of it in tribute to the king.

The noble warriors also had the very important job of providing protection for the king and ruling family. They were skilled fighters and defended the capital city from external attacks.

Craftsmen and Merchants

The craftsmen lived outside the city walls in mud huts. It was their job to produce products for the king, the warriors and for trade. They lived a simple life, passing on their skills to each new generation that was born. Bronze workers were particularly sought after and they are the people responsible for creating the intricate bronze sculptures which survived in Shang tombs to this day. Other craftsmen worked with jade, pottery, wood, stone or bone.

The merchants also lived outside the city in mud huts. They travelled the land trading goods with people from other lands. Cowrie shells were also used by the merchants as a form of currency. The shells were considered to be very valuable because they came from far away and were difficult to obtain. Craftsmen and merchants were paid with simple foods like grains and vegetables.

Peasant Farmers

Most of the people living during the Shang dynasty belonged to this class. They lived out in the countryside, farming areas of land which were controlled by the noble warriors. Life as a farmer was very labour intensive and the farmers lived in harsh conditions, often in holes dug out of the ground and covered with make-shift roofs.

The farmers were allowed to keep a small amount of the crops they produced, and if they were found to be keeping more than their share they were severely punished. Some of the crops they harvested included millet, wheat, barley and rice. They used oxen to plough the land and chickens were kept for their eggs and to provide meat for the aristocracy. The only meat the peasant farmers would get to eat was fish they caught themselves.

The peasant farmers wore tunics and trousers made of rough linen.

Slaves

Slaves were usually prisoners of war and sometimes convicted criminals. They were made to undertake hard labour, often building tombs and palaces.

Shang slaves were treated very harshly and were sometimes sacrificed to the gods. They were also frequently buried alive with their masters as it was thought they could then continue to serve them in the afterlife.