

Family and Ancestor Worship

Family was the most important thing in Shang culture, as it is in most Chinese cultures to this day. In fact, it was so important to the Shang that they worshipped their ancestors after they died, believing that their spirits needed to be looked after and provided for as if they were still alive. This is known as **ancestor worship**.

The practice of ancestor worship tells us a lot about the Shang peoples' beliefs on afterlife.

Ceremonies

Many religious ceremonies were held by the Shang. These were led by a priest or sometimes a king. In the ceremonies, offerings of wine or bronze objects might be made to the ancestors, as the people could not directly worship Shang Di himself.

Sacrifices

Sometimes animals or people were sacrificed during these ceremonies which were conducted to achieve something, such as to bring luck, make it rain or even be blessed with a child.



Shang Gods

The Shang supreme god was called Shang Di.

The Shang people also believed in and worshipped lots of other spirits or lesser gods. Many of these were connected to the natural world and the Shang people believed the spirits were all around controlling different elements of nature.

Some of the nature gods included a sun god, a moon god and a rain god.



The Shang king was the most important person in Shang society. He was responsible for making all the important decisions, like how much tax to charge and when to go to war. The people believed and trusted in the king to rule fairly as they believed that he was the person chosen by god to be their leader.

Thirty kings ruled during the Shang dynasty. Cheng Tang was the first Shang king and Di Xin was the last.

The Shang kingship did not always pass down to the next generation in the way you might expect. Instead of the kingship always passing from father to son, it sometimes also passed from brother to brother or brother to nephew.

The way the king ruled was closely linked to the Shang religion. It was believed that the king was the only person who could talk to his dead royal ancestors. These ancestors, in turn, were believed to be able to talk to Shang Di – the Shang supreme god. This meant that the Shang king was the closest human being to the gods.



Tombs and Burial Customs

The way in which a person living during the Shang dynasty was buried varied according to their social status.

Kings and other important people at the top of the social class structure received elaborate burials. They could expect to be buried in large tombs (sometimes containing a number of rooms) alongside their slaves, animals and objects - it was thought that they would need these in the afterlife.

Poor people were buried in rows in group graves. It is thought that some of the poorest Shang were even simply tossed down wells when they died.

