Shang & Zhou Dynasties

Lesson Plan

I can describe and compare the early dynasties of China.

**Step 1:** Students will begin with reviewing important information for both the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Each student (or group) needs 4 highlighters. Have students read through the handouts on each of the dynasties, highlighting the ESPN factors for each with 4 different colors to represent each category.

**Step 2:** Give each student a copy of the taskboard assignment. Students should choose one of the options to complete using the information about the dynasties that they learned today. The assignment is worth 30 points.
I can describe and compare the early dynasties of China.

Choose from one of the following activities below to demonstrate your knowledge of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Your final product is worth 30 points and should be indicative of your best quality work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Create a side-by-side picture tableau of the Shang dynasty and Zhou dynasty. Each picture should include the ESPN factors of the dynasty. Your pictures need to be hand drawn and fully colored. Your tableau should be accompanied by two paragraphs describing the ESPN factors of each dynasty.</th>
<th>Create a properly organized essay comparing the ESPN factors of the Shang dynasty and Zhou dynasty. You must have a clear thesis that serves as a blueprint for your essay. Use information from today’s lesson to support your ideas.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Create two “stats sheets” to represent important facts about both the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. Your stats sheets should include the following information (for each dynasty):

- ESPN factors
- Start and end dates
- Reasons for start and end
- Advancements that were developed
- Impact of physical features
- Strengths and weaknesses
Zhou Dynasty: 1000 - 256 BC

Major Accomplishments: Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism are created and spread rapidly through the Chinese culture. Years of war and conflict lead to a demand for a better way and new philosophies of life to compete to offer the Chinese more stability and protection from warlords.

Population: estimated about 30-35 million about 250bc

Zhou Dynasty Overview

The Zhou dynasty was founded by King Wen of the Ji family in 1076 BC, after the Shang dynasty came to an end. The dynasty's east coast borders were to the left of the Pacific Ocean. Zhou Dynasty is defined by a unique social hierarchy, standardized spoken language, and lengthy time of reign. It would prove to be very influential because of the power that it gave to military leaders. The dynasty was also the beginning of China's Iron Age. The Iron Age influenced future leaders to use military force to introduce the Mandate of Heaven. This created a new standard and expectation of future rulers because people thought that the actions of these rulers were very connected (in success and failure) with the gods. This, although it was important to the structure of the Zhou, was another factor in the downfall of the Zhou.

Zhou Dynasty Begins

The Zhou began after the Shang dynasty's decline. King Wu took over in 1076 BC. The dynasty was jump started by the Iron Age that was spreading like wildfire. Their government worked toward centralization during dynasty's reign. The Zhou has a whole had a very large military, and was a force to be reckoned with. They expanded to the Yangtze River and utilized it capabilities to the best of their ability. The Zhou also went through many rulers during the middle of their existence where there were so many different upheavals. All these changes in ruling started to split the Zhou up into regional/feudal states, and because everyone wanted to be the top dog, people started having some tension between one another. Eventually, that tension would escalate far enough to initiate a full out war between all of these regions. This blood bath of a time period is historically known as “The Period of the Warring States” and would prove too much for the Zhou to come back from.

Zhou Mandate of Heaven

One of the early, main themes in ancient China is the Mandate of Heaven. It started during the Zhou when rulers were claiming to be “Sons of Gods”. It was crucial for the Zhou leaders because it struck fear into people. Imagine being a peasant and being raised in a culture that says that the king is a god. It’s interesting how these “gods” were rulers because there were feudal states. Many different groups of people were following many different rulers, and that each of those leaders were considered a god. This is more than likely another reason as to why “The Period of the Warring States” was so complicated.

Zhou Iron Age

The Zhou is very well-known because of it brought the Iron Age to China. It allowed the Zhou to have a sustainable economy while it was still hanging around. Their economy was based on agriculture, so it required many peasants and lots of work, which is convenient because they just so happen to have plenty of both during the Zhou. The important thing though is that with the coming of the Iron Age, which work was able to be done much faster and much better because of the stronger properties of iron compared to wood or iron tools. The other aspect of these new tools is that they can be used for militaristic purposes. While iron tools were handy for farming work, swords and iron armor were much more interesting to use. There’s a drastic change when going from lightweight leather armor. It gave the Zhou military a much needed improvement in their military force and strength. Also, because the regional states that the Zhou had, and because there was a significant amount of proliferation between many of them, the new technology gave these regions enough confidence to go at each other. Many argue that the Iron Age is what led to “The Period of the Warring States” since it created enough of an economic effect to fund a war between all the states and because of this boost of arrogance.

Zhou Language
The Zhou agreed on a standardized spoken language, which was considered a huge advancement in Chinese history. This spoken language was used throughout many Chinese dynasties, and is one of the most well known accomplishments of the Zhou Dynasty. This language is sometimes known as Old Chinese, or Archaic Chinese. Language helps hold a society together, and may be one contributing factor to the Zhou’s enduring rule. Because they spoke one, central language, it’s much easier for historians to discover and depict what happened during the Zhou Dynasty, and Dynasties to follow.

**Confucian Social Hierarchy**

The Zhou Dynasty ruled with a Confucian Social Hierarchy. Confucianism came to popularity during the Zhou Dynasty and the kings expected their citizens to follow the rules and values of Confucianism. The social structure of the Confucian beliefs starts with emperors above all, with scholars following at a close second, farmers before merchants, and merchants before slaves and women. This is atypical because a typical social hierarchy (TPS), begins with the emperor as well, but follows with merchants, then scholars and farmers, and again, slaves last. Maybe they were able to maintain a strong government for so long due to their unique social structure.

**The Decline of the Zhou**

Through all of their trials, tribulations, and wealth, they managed to last for 800+ years. However, all dynasties eventually come to an end, and the Zhou saw their end slowly. The Zhou Dynasty slowly diminished, because the power did not lie with the king, instead, the power was in the hands of the nobles. The conclusion of the Zhou Dynasty came about when an independent noble named Qin Shi Huang united China into the Qin Dynasty.

**Zhou (Chou) Dynasty (1076-221 BC) (pronounced Jo)**

**POLITICS**

- Regional feudal states similar to Shang
- Ruled as coordinators rather than as a central govt.
- military force determined strength of rulers
- Conflict led to decline into the “Period of the Warring States” (403-221 B.C.).
- Introduced Mandate of Heaven

  - Mandate of Heaven Principles:
    - right to rule is granted by Heaven.
    - only one Heaven so only one ruler in China.
    - right to rule depends on the virtue of the ruler.
      - Advantages:
        - It gives the ruler supreme power politically and religiously
        - power kept in check by virtue.
        - The Mandate of Heaven justifies rebellion as long as the rebellion is successful.

**ECONOMY**

- Iron age
- Iron was stronger and cheaper than bronze
- weapons strengthened Zhou army
- catapult used in China for first time
• creation of China’s first cavalry
• 90% of peasants lived on farms in family compounds
• new iron tools increased harvest, food surpluses
• which led to Population growth under Zhou
• Silk was their most important product
• New Roads, canals allowed better transportation, communication
• Introduced coins, use of chopsticks
• Cities grew in size

RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

• At the end of the Zhou (403 BC-221BC), China disintegrated into “the Warring States period” as Zhou leaders lost control and states fought each other
• 100 Schools Movement tried to bring stability to China
• Confucianism
• Taoism
• Legalism
• All are philosophies of life and govt
• Basic beliefs
• Dualism – everything relates to everything else and works best when in balance (Yin/Yang)
• Harmony, cooperation, submission to the larger group while allowing for individuality
• Heaven controls life on Earth and life passes from parent to child. Because each child receives life from its parents it makes sense that the child should “worship” his or her parents

SOCIETY

• SOCIAL HIERARCHY
• Emperor in charge
• Regional rulers and wealthy landowners
• Farmers
• Slaves
• BUT,
• Confucian ideals changed this social hierarchy near the end of the Zhou

INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENTS

• Iron
• Military improvements
• Better infrastructure of roads, canals, bridges because of larger military

ART

• Bronze work for vases, cups, and other household items
• Tombs decorated elaborately for wealthy
The Shang Dynasty, 1600 to 1050 BCE

The Shang Dynasty marked the middle of China’s Bronze Age and was a dynasty that made great contributions to Chinese civilization. Scholars do not fully agree on the dates and details of the earliest Chinese dynasties, but most accept that the Shang Dynasty is the first one to have left behind written records and solid archaeological evidence of its existence. The Shang is the second dynasty of the Three Dynasties Period. Legends speak of the earlier Xia dynasty, but no written records from that time have been found to confirm this. Even though texts written later than the Shang Dynasty mention the Xia Dynasty, Western scholars argue that they are not enough to prove it truly existed. Therefore, most Western scholars regard the legendary Xia as an early civilization that existed between the Neolithic and Shang cultures. But many Chinese scholars firmly believe that the Xia did indeed exist even if written records have never been found.

Because the Three Dynasties’ civilization occupied the Yellow River valley, this geographic area is often called the birthplace or cradle of Chinese civilization. While this is true in some regard, one must keep in mind that the Shang was but one of several contemporary civilizations in China. It may have been the only one with written records, but that does not mean it was the only one in existence. More recently discovered archaeological sites far away from the Yellow River valley reveal distinctly different cultures from the Shang, and scholars are now trying to determine how much these cultures influenced each other.

Oracle Bones

Before the discovery of the Shang oracle bones and the interpretation of their inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, scholars had no firm proof that the Shang Dynasty existed. Up to that point, Shang history had been based heavily on historical accounts written long after the Shang period ended. Shang bronze inscriptions were usually very short. With so little information, scholars questioned whether the dynasty even existed. The information and details inscribed onto oracle bones matched what was recorded in texts written centuries later, thereby providing the evidence scholars needed. The oracle bone inscriptions and the bronze inscriptions mark the beginning of written Chinese history.

The king or professional diviners hired by the king used oracle bones to make predictions about the future or to answer questions such as, “Will the king have a son?”, “Will it rain tomorrow?”, “If we send 3,000 men into battle, will we succeed?”, or even “Is the long drought caused by ancestor X?” The scribe carved the question onto a bone (most often the shoulder bones of water buffalo or other cattle) or a tortoise plastron. On the other side of the bone or plastron he would carve a number of small pits. He then inserted a hot metal rod into these pits until the bone cracked; and the king or diviner interpreted the cracks. Then, on the other side of the bone, the scribe carved the answer and the eventual outcome.

By analyzing oracle bone inscriptions, other artifacts, and archaeological sites such as tombs and ancient cities, scholars have been able to piece together many details of Shang civilization. They have confirmed the names of its kings, its style of government, its military history, its religious beliefs and rituals, and its society.

The Kingdom

According to legend, the Shang Dynasty was founded sometime around 1600 BCE by a virtuous man named Cheng Tang, who overthrew the evil king of the legendary Xia. The Shang Dynasty was a monarchy governed by a series of kings, 29 or 30 in total, over the course of almost 600 years. The king was served by officials who held specialized positions of authority and function; and the officials belonged to a hereditary class of aristocrats, usually related to the king himself.
While the king lived in and ruled from a capital city, it wasn’t always the same city. Although historical records mention many different Shang capitals, only a few have actually been confirmed with archaeological evidence. No one knows exactly why a king would move the capital but some scholars think it had to do with internal power struggles within the royal family.

Cheng Tang is said to have established the dynasty’s first capital at a town called Shang (near modern-day Zhengzhou), but later kings moved the capital many more times, the last being a place called Yin (near modern-day Anyang). Archaeological evidence suggests that the town of Shang was the ancestral capital of the dynasty that remained in a fixed location throughout the dynasty. It was where the Shang kings kept their most sacred ancestral temples, tablets, and regalia. The political capital was where the kings lived and ruled from. While the political capital moved many times during the dynasty, the ancestral capital never moved.

The core of the dynasty was located in the northern part of modern-day Henan province, in a triangular area between the cities of Anyang, Luoyang, and Zhengzhou, the latter two of which are on the Yellow River. In addition to uncovering the remains of several Shang cities, archaeologists have found huge tombs of many Shang kings and their families. Even though the dynasty was centered in this area, its culture reached places much farther away.

As the oracle bones and other artifacts and records revealed, the Shang kings were constantly at war with outsiders near and far. Many of the oracle bones bore questions related to battles, such as the outcome of a future battle or how many men to send into battle. The king sent out armies of as many as 13,000 men to fight battles on behalf of the kingdom. Victorious armies brought back prisoners of war—as many as 30,000 at a time—who either became laborers or ritual sacrifices. The armies also helped gain new territories and bring back precious resources for the kingdom.

Religion

The Shang worshipped the “Shang Di,” who was the supreme god that ruled over the lesser gods of the sun, the moon, the wind, the rain, and other natural forces and places. They also worshiped their ancestors because they believed that although their ancestors lived in heaven after their death, they were still actively involved in the affairs of family and descendants. The kings communicated with their ancestors using oracle bones and made frequent sacrifices to them. As in many other societies, they sacrificed animals to royal ancestors and to various nature gods, using sacrifices to ask the ancestors or gods for help and to feed the ancestors or gods to keep them strong. They believed that if they failed to properly worship their ancestors, their family and the kingdom would experience many disasters.

Because the Shang believed in the afterlife and ancestor worship, they thought very seriously about burial and what to accompany the deceased to his or her grave. The vast and elaborate tombs of the Shang royal family are signs of their strong beliefs. Among the many treasures buried in important people’s tombs were the remains of many other people. Some were nameless individuals who had been captured during battle and used as human sacrifices at burials. Others were relatives or lower-ranking dependents of the deceased. This practice of burying lower-ranking people reflected the Shang’s belief that those related to a king or lord by blood or service in life were expected to continue that relationship in death.

Shang Contributions to Chinese Civilization

The Shang made many contributions to Chinese civilization, but four in particular define the dynasty: the invention of writing; the development of a stratified government; the advancement of bronze technology; and the use of the chariot and bronze weapons in warfare.

*The Invention of Writing*

The oracle bone inscriptions are the oldest known form of Chinese writing. By comparing and equating
the inscriptions to modern Chinese characters, scholars have shown that the Shang had already developed all the principles of the modern writing system used today. In fact, Chinese writing has undergone relatively few changes since it was first developed 3,500 years ago.

A Stratified Government and Society
The Shang political system was organized into a hierarchy, meaning that it had many levels of rank and many specialized functions and jobs, all passed down within a noble family. Shang society was also hierarchical with many different levels of social rank.

The invention of writing had a profound effect on Shang government and its ability to rule. It increased the government’s ability to organize on a large scale, whether it be to oversee a hierarchical administration; rule the state’s many territories; organize the mining of large quantities of ore for bronzework; wage large military campaigns; construct city walls and palaces; or build elaborate tombs for themselves.

Bronze Technology
The Shang Dynasty existed during China’s bronze age. At that time, bronze represented power, wealth, and luxury. By looking at the way bronze was used by the Shang, it is clear that only those with any degree of power in the kingdom had access to using bronze objects. Shang bronzes fall into two categories: weapons or ceremonial vessels for food and wine. By far, most of the pieces are ceremonial vessels and speak of a society and culture that valued rituals, such as rituals for burial, celebration, and worshipping gods and ancestors. Bronze was not used for common tools, such as hammers or hoes.

Archaeologists have dug up thousands of Shang bronze pieces, ranging from small objects to huge food and wine vessels weighing as much as 2,000 pounds. The artistry and workmanship of the bronze pieces reveal the Shang’s mastery of bronze technology. The Shang perfected a technique known as piece-mold casting, a complicated process that involved creating a mold out of clay; carving a design into it; pouring molten bronze into the mold; cracking the mold away; and adding handles as a final step. The actual shape, design, and decoration of ritual vessels changed over time according to changing importance of rituals and belief systems.

The Use of the Chariot and Bronze Weapons in Warfare
The advancement of bronze technology and the use of bronze weapons gave the Shang military great advantage over their enemies and completely changed the way they fought wars. They used newly-developed weapons like the bronze-tipped halberd and spear, the compound bow; and most importantly, they used horse-drawn chariots.

The chariot, which had most likely been introduced from western Asia, completely changed the way battles were fought. Chariots allowed commanders to supervise their troops efficiently and across great distances. They also gave soldiers a significant edge over their opponents by making them highly mobile and fast. Since war was central to life during the Shang Dynasty, these developments in weapons were very important in allowing the Shang to maintain its military supremacy.

The End of the Shang
The Shang Dynasty ended in about 1050 BCE, when conquerors from the state of Zhou invaded the capital and successfully toppled the Shang Dynasty. The Zhou conquerors claimed to overthrow the Shang Dynasty for moral reasons. They said that the Shang king was evil and that heaven no longer wanted him to rule. They blamed the Shang’s downfall on its king’s excessive drinking, indulgent lifestyle, and immoral behavior. The downfall remained a cautionary tale to kings and emperors for years to come.