**The New Story of China's Ancient Past**

By Peter Hessler



At the archaeological site called Huanbei Shang City, a young girl peeks at the excavation of the largest building ever discovered from the Shang dynasty, which ruled on China's Yellow River plain from about 1600 to 1045 b.c. The structure might have been a palace, suggesting that this area once served as the Shang capital. According to the late K. C. Chang, a preeminent authority on early China, "The Shang civilization . . . not only became a society of great sophistication, but was also the first of the great Chinese political 'kingdoms.' "

Directly beneath the Japanese airstrip, an entire city had waited for over 3,000 years to be rediscovered. When I first visited in September 2000, the underground city was poised to reappear as one of China's most significant archaeological discoveries. But Zhichun Jing wasn't in a hurry. The 36-year-old, who has degrees in archaeology and geology from universities in China and the United States, moved to his own rhythms.

Jing and the others called this site Huanbei Shang City. Since 1996, when a systematic survey revealed evidence of a buried settlement, they had been mapping it with Luoyang spades, and by 1999 they had traced the city wall, which encloses an area of nearly two square miles (five square kilometers). The site dates from roughly the 14th century b.c., during the peak of the Shang culture that flourished on the Yellow River plain from about 1600 to 1045 b.c. Because Huanbei might be the area's first urban settlement, archaeologists see it as a rare opportunity to trace the early stages of civilization in China.

Huanbei also represents the latest chapter in the rediscovery of the Shang and other Bronze Age cultures. A hundred years ago the Shang dynasty was as lost as this ancient city, existing only in historical texts that dated from the Zhou dynasty—hundreds of years after the Shang fell. While most Chinese scholars traditionally accepted such sources, Westerners often dismissed them as mythical.

But over the course of the 20th century, the Shang steadily reappeared, the myths replaced by tangible artifacts: massive bronzes, eloquent oracle bones, burial complexes where thousands of people had been sacrificed to a hungry faith. China's recorded history starts with the Shang: Their writing is the earliest known script in East Asia. And history always seems to return to the Shang, because the search for this ancient culture has been shaped in part by the trials of modern China. Archaeologists like Jing uncover not only artifacts but also the subtle interplay between past and present.

The rediscovery of the Shang began with malaria. That, at least, is the legend. In 1899 a sick member of Wang Yirong's family sent out to a pharmacist for turtle plastrons—the ventral shells—that could be used to make traditional Chinese medicine. Before the shells were ground up, somebody in the family noticed that they were inscribed with strange characters that resembled written Chinese.

Ever since, historians have argued about whether the tale is true. But there's no doubt that Wang Yirong, an expert in ancient Chinese texts, became the first major collector of the inscribed shells, called oracle bones, which he purchased from pharmacies. To the average literate Chinese, the oracle bone characters were at first glance unintelligible, but classical scholars like Wang immediately recognized them as an early form of the Chinese script. Wang's scholarship came to an abrupt end in 1900, when the Boxer Uprising raged across the nation in protest of foreign occupation of Chinese territories. Wang, who was a Qing dynasty government official, reluctantly accepted the command of some of the Boxer forces. On August 14, when European, U.S., and Japanese troops entered Beijing to put down the Boxers, Wang committed suicide by drinking poison and jumping down a well.

For years after Wang's death it seemed as if the objects—which were described by pharmacists as "dragon bones"—were anything but healing. Scholars bickered over their authenticity, and dealers tried to maintain a monopoly by lying about the source, which was a small village outside Anyang called Xiaotun. Villagers in Xiaotun became so obsessed by the dragon bone trade that they engaged in fights and lawsuits. Forgeries flooded the antiquities markets in Beijing and Shanghai.

But behind the chaos, the Chinese intellectual climate was undergoing revolutionary changes that allowed the oracle bones to be viewed in a new light. After the Qing fell at the end of 1911, intellectuals began calling for China to embrace Western science and philosophy. Realizing that archaeology could provide a fresh perspective of the past, the newly established Academia Sinica sent an excavation team to Xiaotun in 1928—a project that trained a generation of Chinese archaeologists.

The earliest digs, which followed in the tracks of looters and dealers, focused on retrieving oracle bones. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, as more than 100,000 inscribed fragments came to light, the once mythical Shang dynasty became historical.

The bones speak of war and harvest, disease and childbirth; their subjects range from the toothaches of kings to potential harm befalling the capital.

"These were magical moments," said David N. Keightley of the University of California at Berkeley, who is an expert on the oracle bones. He explained the process by which Shang diviners, having made a statement about the future, used the bones to verify whether or not the event would occur. The key materials were turtle plastrons or cattle scapulas, carefully cleaned and treated (both materials provide a flat surface for writing) and thinned by drilling notches into the back. The diviners then applied a hot object until the surface cracked—a moment that, to the Shang, represented a voice from another world.

"When it cracked, the ancestors were responding to the diviner's statement," Keightley said. "The diviners wanted to capture this moment— "The ancestors say it with a crack in the bone, and we'll say it with the logographs.'"

The interpretation of the cracks, a task handled by the king himself, was often carved into the object, along with the original divination statement. Sometimes the court engravers later recorded whether the prediction held true. One memorable epilogue reads: "After 31 days . . . [Lady Hao] gave birth; it was not good; it was a girl."

Before the 20th century, historians had been unaware of both the elaborate Shang divination system and the ancient culture's sacrificial rituals. The 1928-1937 Xiaotun excavations uncovered thousands of graves, including nine massive tombs thought to be those of the final Shang kings. All of the big tombs had been looted centuries ago, but they still provided evidence of bloody sacrifices. One tomb complex contained 74 beheaded or otherwise mutilated skeletons. Thirty-seven horses were found in one grave. Other burials included cattle, dogs, monkeys, and birds.

The Shang spirits—ancestors as well as deities of the natural world—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.

In the decades since the Xiaotun excavations, the Shang has often been described as a cruel dynasty that depended on slavery for its sacrifices. Yet none of the excavated oracle bones refer to the purchase of people, and slavery may be an anachronistic description. "You can't use our current standards to evaluate an ancient society," Jing explained to me.

The view of the Shang has always been manipulated by historians. Scholars during the Han dynasty portrayed the last Shang kings as corrupt rulers who were replaced by the virtuous Zhou, who provided a model for the Han. Under the communist government, archaeologists emphasized Shang "slavery" because it was an essential developmental stage of the Marxist social progression that led, like some Darwinian beast rising from the muck, to feudalism, capitalism, and finally the pinnacle of communism.

This sort of political agenda often bleeds into archaeology. In the West, European archaeology first flourished during the 19th century, inspired largely by the ascendant middle classes. In part, the bourgeoisie became interested in tracing the development of ancient societies—stone to bronze to iron—because this path implicitly justified their own faith in material progress.

In early 20th-century China, there was an even more critical link between the Shang and the present, because the relics appeared just as the modern nation came under attack. In 1937, as the Japanese invasion of China pressed inland, the Academia Sinica was forced to abandon its Xiaotun site. Objects like the oracle bones symbolized China's survival. For the next decade, archaeologists became nomads, transporting their relics across a chain of southwestern Chinese cities that hadn't yet been occupied. Just before the communist revolution gained control of China in 1949, the Academia Sinica fled one final time, to Taiwan. It transported more than 1,300 crates—including the bulk of China's archaeological treasures.