BEGINNINGS OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION

Agriculture began in China around 4000 BCE in the Yellow River — the most northern of China’s four great river systems. The Chinese grew first millet, then rice. They were an early Neolithic people organized into villages who were often at war. Their religion seems to have been a worship of ancestral spirits.

Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age China had three dynasties:
- **XIA** (2205-1766 BCE)
- **SHANG** (1766-1050 BCE)
- **Zhou** (1050-256 BCE), but divided into two periods with an intermission

Until archeological evidence proved otherwise, there had been an historical assumption that the Xia and Shang dynasties were legendary. In the 1920s, archeologists found the ruins of a late Shang capital, complete with their archives: thousands of ‘oracle bones’ with archaic Chinese writing. The Shang believed in divination: telling fortunes through heating bones and reading the cracks. The bone writings confirmed the names of the Shang kings of legend. Archaeologists are now looking for evidence of the Xia as well. The Xia period may have been a late Neolithic kingdom; the Shang was an early Bronze Age one.

**SHANG**

Shang Chinese society was organized into city-states, with the capital the largest one. The walled cities apparently belonged to the aristocracy, and were surrounded by a sea of Neolithic-looking villages. The Shang kings were religious and cultural figures as well as political leaders; they were considered high priests of state. Rulers of other city-states acknowledged their authority. The warrior-aristocrats of the Shang period fought using bronze weapons in chariots supported by foot soldiers, and sometimes engaged in huge battles.

**Notable features of the Shang period:**

1. **Writing**. The records of the Shang court were kept on bamboo and haven’t survived. We have their writing due to their carvings on the bones. The Shang asked the bones everything. Everything we know about their religion is based on what they wrote on the bones. They apparently believed in one overall deity, with a plethora of lesser deities under him, who were based on natural forces and who served at his court. Sacrifices were made not to the top deity, but rather to one’s ancestors, who interceded with the gods.

2. **Appearance of Bronze**. Bronze appeared in China around 2000 BCE, about a thousand years later than in Mesopotamia and 500 years later than in India. It probably developed in China independently as their methods of manufacturing it were different and more advanced once they got it. Bronze was used both for war purposes and for ceremonial pieces. As is the case with other Bronze Age societies, it was too rare and expensive to be used for everyday tools.

3. **Appearance of social classes**. As was typical in this stage of development, the Shang developed a rigidly stratified society. The monopoly on weapons, which were made of the hard-to-find bronze, helped the aristocracy control the peasantry. The king and his court lived within the walls, in spacious and opulent houses. The bulk of the populace lived outside the walls, practiced agriculture, and lived meager lives. The low standing of the common people is shown through the frequency of human sacrifice: when a king died, hundreds of servants or slaves were sacrificed and buried with him to serve him in the underworld.

**Zhou Dynasty**

In 1050 BCE, the Shang dynasty was conquered by a group of people to the west of the Yellow River valley from the Wei River Valley, who began the Zhou Dynasty. The Zhou Dynasty was a long and formative period, which was divided into two periods by an intermediate period of turbulence.

1. **Western Zhou or Early Zhou (1050-771 BCE)**

   The people of the Wei valley were a more primitive and more warlike people than those living under the Shang, and were closer to the Neolithic stage of development. Despite being less technologically advanced, the
Zhou leaders overthrew the Shang Dynasty by taking advantage of widespread discontent within the late Shang Kingdom. The Zhou took advantage of this weakness to make alliances with the dissatisfied city-states and swept in. In most respects, patterns of Shang life continued under the Zhou. The Early Zhou period was still a Bronze Age, agrarian society, with a similar social hierarchy.

Characteristics:
1. Kinship-based Aristocracy: The Zhou kings set up kinsmen and allies as rulers in other city-states; and established bloodlines as the essential pattern of the aristocratic order. The ranking of lords in other principalities was based on their degree of close kinship to the king.

2. "Mandate of Heaven": The Zhou needed a reason why they and not the Shang should now be in charge. They found it in the Mandate of Heaven: the idea that the Heavens (the name for the overarching divine force which gradually replaced Deity Above in the Zhou era) had grown disgusted with the immoral rule of Shang and hence allowed them to be overthrown. This idea contained within it the assumption that rulers must be just to maintain legitimacy, and that the successful overthrow of a dynasty was proof of its corruption. It became an important doctrine for Chinese philosophy and history down to the 20th century. *This philosophy of history is cyclic in nature. Dynasties start out with the mandate of heaven, but tend to lose it as their heirs grow more corrupt, until they are overthrown by a new power. This philosophy is why Chinese history is organized around dynastic lines.*

2. EASTERN ZHOU (771-256 BCE)

The Eastern Zhou period was a more unstable era generally. Society was destabilized primarily by the introduction of iron tools and weapons into Chinese society, which brought about significant changes.

The first phase of the Eastern Zhou period is sometimes called the Spring and Autumn Period; during this period, the dynasty managed to hold onto minimal control.

The second phase of Eastern Zhou period is known as the Warring States Period. By this period, all stability was gone. By the end of the 4th century BCE, eight or nine contenders were left, who were warring it out for total control over China.

Four basic changes in Chinese society led to the rise of large territorial states in the Warring States period:

1. By the late 6th century BCE, knowledge of how to manufacture iron was spreading widely. Iron ore was cheaper and more plentiful, and could be made available to commoners.

2. Iron tools allowed plowing in previously unused lands, allowing agricultural surpluses and a population explosion. By the 3rd century BCE, China was the most populous country in the world — as it has been ever since. Local friction increased as borders brushed up against each other.

3. Rise of commerce: roads built for war were also used by merchants. Rich merchant lifestyles came to rival those of the nobility. New outer walls were added to cities to house the merchants. Material and artisan skills were leaping ahead in this period despite the political instability.

4. The rise of a new kind of army doomed the city-state structure of government. Iron weapons and cavalry armed with crossbows could defeat aristocratic bronze weapons and chariots. The early Iron Age was a period of upstart peasant armies, as the new territorial forces used the excess population and the new weaponry to create huge conscript foot armies. The old aristocratic warriors gave way to professional commanders; and the old aristocratic war ethos gave way to ruthless tactics.