The Xia and Shang Dynasties Questions

Answer the questions below with complete sentences and when asked give appropriate evidence (quote) from the text.

1. What were the first two dynasties? (2 pts.)

2. For how long did dynasties continue to rule China? (3 pts.)

3. Why has no one ever found books written during the Shang period? (4 pts.)

4. What was the most important of all Shang advances? (3 pts.)

5. What evidence of Shang writing still exists today? (3 pts.)

6. How is Shang writing different from the writing of the English alphabet? Explain. Then lead into and quote from the text. (5 pts.)
The Xia and Shang Dynasties

By about 2000 B.C. there were hundreds of settlements near the Chang Jiang and the Huang He. As in other civilizations, some of these settlements grew into towns. Later these towns developed into powerful kingdoms that competed for resources. This competition often led to fights between kingdoms.

According to early legends, Yu the Great ruled a number of kingdoms after he found a way to control the floods. The stories say that when he died, his son took over as ruler. In this way Yu and his family created the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia. Before this time ancient Chinese rulers would pick a trusted person from the kingdom to be the next ruler.

After the Xia dynasty, many different families ruled China through the centuries. Dynasties continued to rule China for almost 4,000 years.

Early legends tell us that the Xia dynasty ruled for many years. However by about 1600 B.C., another kingdom had gained power. Its king, Tang the Successful, conquered the Xia and began a new ruling dynasty. This dynasty is remembered in Chinese history as the Shang. The Shang used war chariots and weapons made of bronze—a metal made by combining copper, lead and tin. This technology may have helped them to take control from the Xia.

Over the years the Shang added land to their kingdom. As the size of the Shang kingdom grew, its rulers moved the Shang capital farther north. The Shang may have had as many as five different capitals during their rule. At one of these capitals, Zhengzhou, workers built enormous walls around the city. They made the walls by pounding thin layers of earth together inside a moveable frame. After this was done several times, the frame was removed. Using this method, the Shang created walls as hard as cement. The walls were 60 feet (18.3m) wide, 30 feet (9.1m) tall, and 2,385 feet (727m) long. The last Shang capital was near the present-day city of Anyang, not very far from the Huang He.

Bronze Vessels and Oracle Bones

Most people during the Shang dynasty lived in small farming villages. The farmers grew grain, kept chickens and pigs, and raised silkworms for silk cloth. Craftworkers made bronze tools, weapons, and beautiful vessels used for rituals. A ritual is a set way of conducting a ceremony.

The Shang people used bronze ritual vessels in ceremonies to honor their ancestors who had died. Ancestors are relatives further back than grandparents. Because of the importance of rituals, the Shang devoted much skill, energy, and time to making bronze ritual vessels. Sometimes the maker of a bronze vessel would carve an inscription into it that told who had made it and which ancestor it honored. Such inscriptions are among the earliest examples of Chinese writing.

The ancient Chinese worshipped their ancestors and several gods. Ancestors were worshipped because they were thought to be very wise and able to guide the lives of the living. Most of the gods Shang people worshipped were the nature gods. The Shang prayed to the gods of wind, rain, and fire, as well as the gods of directions—north, south, east, and west. The chief god of the Shang was called Shang Di, which means “God-on-High.” This god’s name suggests that the people believed he lived in the sky and oversaw everything they did.

The ancient Shang thought that their ancestors could communicate with the gods. Ancestors were asked to encourage the powerful gods of nature to be kind to humankind. The Shang feared that angry gods might bring disasters, diseases, or enemy attacks.

Shang kings would often ask their ancestors for advice on a wide variety of subjects. To learn the answers to his questions, the king needed the help of the diviner. A diviner was a person who, it was believed, could communicate with the spirits of the dead.
The diviner would lay out animal bones or turtle shells. Then, the diviner would touch the bones or shells with hot metal sticks. The heat caused cracks to form on the bones and shells. He diviner then gave the bones and shells to the king. The Shang king "read" the cracks to find out the answer to his questions.

After the Shang king received answers from his ancestors, a scribe wrote the answers on the bones or shells. Like the inscriptions in Shang bronze vessels, these inscriptions on bones and shells are among the earliest known examples of Chinese writing.

About 100 years ago farmers near Anyang began to find the animal bones and turtle shells the Shang had used long ago. The farmers could not read the writing on them. They mistakenly believed the bones were dragon bones. They sold these "dragon bones" to local drugstores, where they were used to make medicines.

In time, archeologists heard about the farmers' discoveries. Only then were the "dragon bones" correctly identified. The world learned that the bones show answers to questions that the ancient Shang kings asked their ancestors. Today scholars who study ancient China call the shells and bones oracle bones. An oracle is a person who gives wise advice.

Oracle bones give important clues to the way of life of the Shang people. They help give an idea of the problems the Shang people faced and how they sought solutions to their problems. Oracle bones also show what daily life was like in ancient China.

**Chinese Writing**

The Shang dynasty contributed many inventions to early Chinese civilization. Bronze ritual vessels, bronze weapons, chariots, and walled cities were just a few of their innovations. Of all the Shang advances, the most important was the development of Chinese writing.

Legend says that people of the Shang period wrote in books made of bamboo and wood. Yet none of these have ever been found. Books made of such materials would not have lasted through the centuries.

The only evidence of Shang writing can be found on oracle bones and bronze ritual vessels. These artifacts make it clear that the Shang were the earliest people east of the Indus Valley to read and write. Writing would have allowed the Shang government to keep records and to work better.

The writing system created by the Shang was adopted by later Chinese dynasties. It forms the base of all later Chinese writing. Shang writing is different from the writing of many other peoples in one important way. The characters, or symbols, used in Shang writing represent whole words. They are not like the letters of the English alphabet, which represent parts of words. Shang characters are more like Egyptian hieroglyphs, which also stand for whole words. Like hieroglyphs, many Shang characters began as drawings of the things they name.

Oracle bones and bronze vessels show that the Shang people used a very large number of characters. Only about 1,000 of these have been figured out.

Chinese writing has changed over the years. Chinese civilization developed many new ideas and came into closer contact with other peoples and traditions. Because of these changes, some old characters have changed in meaning and new ones have been added. However, present-day Chinese writing has strong roots in Shang characters.