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## Daily Life During the Shang & Zhou (Chou) Dynasties

The Bronze Age

About 1700 B.C.E. to 250 B.C.E.

These two ruling families controlled much of ancient China for about 1,500 years!  
Daily life was much the same during both dynasties.

**Shang & Zhou Introduction:** Shang and Zhou (pronounced “Joe”) times are known for their use of jade, bronze, horse-drawn chariots, ancestor worship, highly organized armies, and human sacrifice. Protective walls surrounded cities. One city was surrounded by a wall 30 feet high, 65 feet thick, and 4 1/2 miles long! Inside these walled cities lived the rulers, priests, and warriors. Merchants and craftsmen lived in mud houses built up against the outside walls of the cities. Farmers lived in nearby villages. Chopsticks were invented, which changed the way people ate their food.

**Family:** For both the rich and the poor, the family was all-important. The oldest male was the head of the family. If one member of a family did something wrong, the entire family was in disgrace. Among the nobles, marriages were arranged to strengthen or to create a union between two clans or families. The young obeyed their parents without a fuss. This was an important part of ancestor worship. Even a wealthy noble with many servants might patch his father's robe with his own hands. Children looked forward to the day when they would be parents, and their children would honor them. The role of the woman was to be gentle, calm, respectful, and to obey her husband. In ancient China, home and family were so important that they were nearly sacred.

**Ancestor Worship:** *Ancestor worship* was very important to the early Shang kings and nobles. It was a way of life. When a man died, the ancient Chinese believed his spirit lived on in the afterworld. They believed their ancestors had magical powers that could punish them or could help them make wise decisions. To keep their ancestors happy, they brought gifts of food and wine to special places or temples. They held many celebrations to honor their ancestors.

**Oracle Bones:** To communicate with their ancestors, the Shang kings used *oracle bones*. (Sometimes called dragon bones). Here's how it worked: The king or emperor would ask a question, for example, will it rain tomorrow? The priest would carve the king's question on an oracle bone, which was just an animal bone or turtle shell. (Will it rain tomorrow?) Then, the priest would heat a bronze pin and hold the hot pin to the bone. This created a pattern of cracks over the bone. The priest (who was usually a woman) would study the cracks to find the answer to the question.