

## CHINESE CULTURAL HISTORY –Ancient Period ( to 500 CE )

Paul Clark, Ph.D.

### Culture

**Early Religion.** Our knowledge of early Bronze Age culture is largely limited to that which archaeologists have been able to reveal through excavations. In particular, our knowledge of the religion practiced in early Bronze Age China is limited to the existence of bone divination. It is believed that a holy man or shaman wrote on animal bones, heated them and interpreted them based on how they responded to heat. He acted as something of an oracle in this rather elaborate ritual. Other vestiges of “civil religion” from the late Bronze Age remain in the form of the Jade Emperor and the concept of heaven, earth and the underworld. The Jade Emperor ruled over the heavenly court. The ruler of earth was known as the Son of Heaven. In this way, the concept of the “Mandate of Heaven” began to emerge to describe the divine right of monarchs to rule in the Zhou period (1046 BCE-771 BCE). Part of the job of the monarch was to maintain harmony between heaven and earth. It is interesting to note that monarchs could and very often did lose the “Mandate of Heaven.” In practice, this could happen if a monarch ruled poorly, taxed the people too heavily or otherwise engaged in behavior inappropriate for the Son of Heaven. Earthly harmony was then lost.

**The Arts.** Bronze Age art forms were also in evidence in China. Craftsmen, potters and sculptors were generally well advanced for the time, particularly in bronze metallurgy. Craftsmen fired colorfully-decorated pottery. Motifs sometimes consisted of geometric patterns and/or human and animal designs. Pottery ran the gamut between richly adorned, ceremonial items to those used in everyday life. Bronze itself, being very, very expensive is not as ubiquitous as pottery in the archaeological record. It is believed that only the elites were able to possess it. Nonetheless, bronze castings reveal a very high level of sophistication and artistry. Some items that have been discovered are very large, thick and heavy. This indicates that the craftsmen were able to maintain consistent temperatures in the casting and cooling processes.

**Literature.** In the late Bronze Age, some of the first recorded literary works emerged in China. The most famous is the *Shijing* (Book of Poetry). This work is a compilation of 311 poems gathered between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. It is believed that some were handed down as ritual songs from the Shang period and other poems are attributed to the Duke of Zhou, who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Given the mention of the Duke of Zhou, it is easy to understand that Confucius is given credit for compiling this work, although there is no way to verify this claim. Nonetheless, this book is one of five in the Confucian cannon. It is important to note that the religion espoused by Confucius did not exist in an organized form before he himself began teaching in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. However, many of the ideals he promoted are believed to have existed in China long before he was born. Other ancient works include the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) and the *Shujing* (Book of Documents).