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Lesson Plan: The King, the Bones, and the Bronze

Life Inside a Shang Dynasty Society

Materials Needed

- The playdough map of the Huang-He Valley settlement created in the previous lesson
- Playdough in various colors (brown, grey, or gold are useful additions)
- Large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers
- Pencils (one with a slightly dull point is perfect for 'carving')
- Notebook or paper for writing/drawing

Learning Objectives

Building on our understanding of *where* the Shang people lived, by the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe the social structure of the Shang Dynasty by creating a simple social pyramid.
- Explain the purpose of oracle bones and simulate how they were used.
- Identify the importance of bronze-making and design a symbolic bronze vessel.

Lesson Plan

1. Introduction & Review (10 minutes)

- Review Previous Lesson: "Let's pull out the fantastic map you made of your Shang settlement. Looking at it, can you remind me why the Shang people chose to live right next to the Huang-He river? What was the 'gift' the river gave them? (Fertile loess soil). And what was the great 'challenge' or danger? (Destructive floods)."
- Hook: "Now, imagine you are the king living in that walled city. A massive flood is coming. Your people are looking to you for answers and protection. What do you do? The Shang kings believed they needed help from the spirits of their ancestors. But how could they talk to them? Today, we're going to uncover the secret tools the king used to communicate with the spirit world and

show his power."

- Stating Objectives: "Now that we know the 'where,' we're going to explore the 'who' and 'how.' Our goals are to understand how their society was organized, learn about their mysterious oracle bones, and discover the amazing bronze objects they created."

2. Body: Content & Practice (30 minutes)

We'll continue our 'I do, We do, You do' model to explore what life was like inside those city walls.

Part A: I Do - Modeling the Social Pyramid (5-7 mins)

- The educator draws a large pyramid on the whiteboard or paper. "A Shang city wasn't a free-for-all; everyone had a specific place and job. This is called a social structure."
- The educator labels the pyramid from top to bottom while explaining:
 - **King:** "At the very top was the king, who was the political and religious leader."
 - **Nobles & Warriors:** "Below him were his relatives and powerful warriors who helped him rule and defend the city."
 - **Artisans & Craftpeople:** "Next were the skilled workers—the people who carved jade, made pottery, and, most importantly, the masters who created amazing things out of bronze."
 - **Farmers:** "The largest group was at the bottom. The farmers lived outside the city walls, grew the food for everyone, and could be called to fight in wars or work on big building projects."

Part B: We Do - Creating an Oracle Bone (10 mins)

- Connect to the Hook: "So, back to our king worrying about the flood. To ask his ancestors for advice, he used a special object. Let's make one together."
- Guide the creation of a shared model:
 1. "Take some brown or tan playdough and flatten it into a shape like a turtle shell or a large, flat animal bone. This is our 'oracle bone'."
 2. "Now, let's think of a yes/no question a Shang king would ask. For example, 'Will the harvest be good this year?' or 'Should we attack our enemies to the west?' Let's choose one."
 3. "A special person called a diviner would carefully carve the question onto the bone. Let's use our pencil tip to gently carve a simple symbol or word representing our question onto the playdough."
 4. "Next, they would apply a hot poker to the bone until it cracked. Let's use our pencil or a marker to draw some cracks spreading from a point on the bone."
 5. "The diviner would then 'read' the pattern of the cracks to find the ancestor's answer! This was a major source of the king's power—it proved he could communicate with the gods."

Part C: You Do - Design a Royal Bronze Vessel (10-15 mins)

- The Challenge: "The Shang artisans created the most advanced bronze work in the ancient world. These bronze vessels weren't for everyday eating; they were precious objects used by the king and nobles in special ceremonies to honor their ancestors. You are now the king's master bronze artisan. Your task is to design a ritual vessel that is powerful and impressive."
- Instructions: "Using the playdough (grey, brown, or gold works well), create your own bronze

vessel. It could be a cup for wine or a cauldron for food offerings. Most importantly, decorate it with symbols you think a Shang king would want." (e.g., animal faces, monster masks called 'taotie', geometric patterns).

- **Success Criteria:** You'll have succeeded when you can show me your vessel and explain: 1. What it might be used for (e.g., an offering to the ancestors). 2. Who in the social pyramid would get to use it (the king/nobles). 3. Why you chose your specific decorations.

3. Conclusion (5-10 minutes)

- **Show and Tell (Summative Assessment):** "Present your work! Tell me about the bronze vessel you created. What question might the king ask using an oracle bone before a ceremony with your vessel?"
- **Recap & Connect:** "Excellent work! We've seen today that a Shang city was much more than just walls and farms. How did the king use oracle bones and fancy bronze vessels to prove he belonged at the top of the social pyramid? (Showed he could talk to gods and had great wealth/power). How do the different jobs in the pyramid (artisan, farmer) depend on each other?"
- **Bridge to Next Lesson:** "The Shang kings ruled for over 500 years, using their military power, religious rituals, and incredible bronze technology. But no dynasty lasts forever. Next time, we will investigate how the Shang Dynasty fell and discover who came next, bringing with them a powerful new idea about who deserved to be the ruler."

Assessment

- **Formative (During the lesson):** Listening to the learner's answers during the review and their contributions to the social pyramid discussion. Observing their thought process while creating the oracle bone.
- **Summative (End of lesson):** The learner's completed bronze vessel and their verbal explanation of its purpose, user, and symbolism, which demonstrates their understanding of Shang social structure and material culture.

Differentiation & Extension

- **For Scaffolding (If extra support is needed):** Provide a printed picture of a Shang social pyramid to label. Offer a list of sample questions a king might ask on an oracle bone. Show images of real Shang bronze vessels to use as inspiration for their playdough model.
- **For Extension (To go deeper):** Challenge the learner to add new playdough buildings to their original map from last lesson: a palace for the king and a workshop for the bronze artisans. They could also write a short diary entry from the perspective of an artisan explaining the process of making the vessel they designed for the king.