



Fu Hao

Read the information about Fu Hao and the discovery of her tomb, then answer the comprehension questions in as much detail as you can.

An Exciting Discovery

In 1976, a team of archaeologists led by Zheng Zhenxiang – the ‘First Lady of Chinese Archaeology’ - made a remarkable discovery at the site of the ancient Shang capital, Yinxu, in modern day Anyang: the tomb of the Shang military general and high priestess Fu Hao.

Fu Hao's tomb is the only intact Shang tomb discovered to date. Many other tombs have also been found but all have been previously ransacked by looters meaning limited evidence remains. The contents of Fu Hao's tomb along with inscriptions on oracle bones have allowed historians to learn a great deal about this special lady and her significance to the Shang people.

Lady Fu Hao

Fu Hao was one of King Wu Ding's sixty wives who worked as a military general and high priestess. She was obviously held in very high regard by King Wu Ding as records reveal that he requested her to lead ritual ceremonies, including the presentation of sacrifices and oracle bone divining. This was very unusual for a woman at the time and demonstrated how powerful Fu Hao was.

In her role as a military general, Fu Hao was responsible for leading thirteen thousand soldiers into battle and important generals such as Zhi and Hu Gao worked under her direction. Under Fu Hao's command, the Shang fought campaigns against a number of different tribes and in one single battle they were finally able to defeat the Tu-Fang tribe, who had fought against the Shang for many years. This marked out Fu Hao as not only the first known female military leader, but also the most influential military leader of her time, male or female.

Fu Hao had a son called Prince Jie and oracle bones have been found which express concern for Fu Hao's safety during childbirth.

The Tomb

Fu Hao's tomb is dated to around 1200 BC. It was smaller than other royal tombs and it was outside the main royal cemetery. It consisted of a large pit with a wooden chamber inside and in the centre of the chamber was Fu Hao's lacquered coffin. Evidence was found above ground of a building structure where memorial ceremonies and rituals were probably held in honour of Fu Hao. Fu Hao's tomb was opened to the public in 1999 and a memorial hall has been constructed above it to replicate the one which might have been built for Fu Hao on her death.

Contents

A staggering number of items were discovered inside Fu Hao's tomb, proving how influential, powerful and respected she was. There were over four hundred and fifty bronze items weighing a hefty one and a half metric tonnes, which included: one hundred and thirty weapons, twenty-seven knives, twenty-three bells, four tigers and four mirrors. In addition to this there were over seven hundred and fifty items made from jade; five hundred and fifty items made from bone, including many hair pins and arrow-heads; sixty-three stone items; eleven pottery items and five ivory items. There were also almost seven thousand cowrie shells which demonstrated her family's wealth and importance.

Many of the jade items were from an earlier period in history indicating that Fu Hao was a collector of antiquities.

Inside the tomb were also the skeletons of six dogs which were located in their own small pit below Fu Hao's coffin. It is likely that these were Fu Hao's pets sacrificed at the time of her burial to accompany her into the afterlife. Around the perimeter of the tomb were the skeletons of sixteen humans who were probably Fu Hao's advisers, also sacrificed so that they could continue to serve her after death just as they had done in life.

Historical Significance

The discovery and excavation of Fu Hao's tomb has provided us with a privileged knowledge of not only Fu Hao herself but also how Shang society was organised, their traditions and customs and the significance of the artefacts that were preserved inside. It is quite remarkable that we have been given such a clear view into this fascinating ancient civilisation and some of the extraordinary people who lived at the time.