

ETEC 540 – Video Script
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Historical Context

It is believed that the Oracle bones date back to the 1300 BCE during the Shang Dynasty. The remnants of the Shang dynasty were found in Anyang, in northern Henan province at the turn of the 19th century, however the largest quantity of oracle bones discovered came from excavation campaigns beginning in the 1920's (Thorp 2005). The oracle bones represent the first examples of well developed writing systems in China.

What are Oracle Bones?

The oracle bones represent the earliest written records of archaic Chinese characters carved into the plastron of a tortoise or the scapulae of oxen. According to Liqing Tao and Gaoyin Qian, "These carvings were mainly used in divination for royal families and for state affairs". The divining technique required first the diviner carving a question into the smooth surface of the bone or shell. The diviner would then expose the shell to heat until cracks formed on the surface, these cracks would then be interpreted by the diviner and the oracle would assess would assess if the response from the ancestors was favourable or not (Chou 1979). They contained inscriptions – modern scholars use the term to refer to inscriptions on both the bone (mainly cattle scapulas) and shell (from turtles) and contained vocabulary of 4,500 – 5,000 individual graphs.

Ancestor Worship (According to Keightley)

In order to examine whether or not the technology involved in creating oracle bones facilitated literacy in early dynastic China, one must also understand the nature of ancestor worship, since it was from this exigency that the technology emerges. According to Meyer Fortes, for the Chinese, ancestor worship was not merely a belief in the dead, but rather a belief that the dead possessed certain powers which came through successive generations, and which could also be passed on

Depersonalization

In early Chinese mortuary rituals, the difference between the living and the dead were regarded with different value. The process by which the dead were transformed into ancestors involved the disassociation with the personalities of the deceased.

Empowerment

The second feature of Ancestor Worship was the belief in the power of the ancestors. Keightley claims that ancestor worship did not involve the commemoration of the total personality of the deceased, but rather it appealed to the powers the ancestors possessed.

Succession

The third feature ties into the second, in that the Chinese believed that successive generations would benefit from positive interactions between the living and the deceased ancestor.

In what ways did it facilitate or extend the process of reading and writing?

Venture (2002) argues that main function of the inscriptions on both the Shang and Western Zhou artefacts were to serve as markers as opposed to documents. The key distinction between a marker and a document was that human consultation was needed, however the marker serves as record – evidence that supports the divinity of the King.

Did this technology advance or retard progress toward mass literacy in any way?

Since the written script on oracle bones were believed to be for the purpose of mysticism as it related to rulers during the Late Shang period, the technology did not encourage the mass literacy of the peasant class, but rather remained a tool for the nobility.

How the acquisition or training in the written language was conducted is still largely contested, as no historical documents from that time period have been found which would indicate how education was conducted. However, Chen notes that cultural conventions were dependant on the writing on the oracle bones, and therefore, literacy acquisition during the Shang dynasty must have been limited

to clerics and diviners who were responsible for recording the divinations (Chen 1985).

In this regard, Oracle bones as a technology perpetuated literacy amongst the servants of the kings court, but hindered the general population at that time from learning how to read and write. At this time, oracle bone technology was used to keep power in the hands of a select few, and so overall, mass literacy was not encouraged in any way.

Did it threaten any existing political or religious institutions?

Scholars are split as to whether oracle bones represent a primary or secondary source of ancient Chinese writing. Some argue that the diviners (people that interpreted the messages of ancestors on the bones) were different than the engravers, which would suggest that the information was not recorded on the bones directly, but were recorded at a later date (Keightley 2014). Either way, it is evident that the inscriptions recorded on the oracle bones legitimized the status of kings.

The use of oracle bones were thus a political tool in which Kings could justify their rule, and legitimize their kingship, which would thereby enable them to gain support of the masses through divine right. As Keightley notes, the process of carving a record in bone was labour intensive and costly. The process required a large staff of workers, who were sponsored by the King to complete the work. Keightley also emphasizes that divination inscriptions, though funded by the

King, were not necessarily read by the king, which would suggest that literacy at this time remained limited to a select few working in the Kings court.

So to answer the question, oracle bones as a technology did not threaten political or religious institutions, but rather were used as tools to support and legitimize power. Oracle bones provided a medium by which ancestor worship could perpetuate, and thus, reinforced both the political and religious powers in that era.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite the oracle bones containing evidence of developed written language, I do not believe they represent a major development for literacy of the masses in China. If we define literacy as the ability to read and write, then some may argue that the oracle bones cultivated only a specific type of literacy – one which involved interpreting the cracks caused by the heating of the bones supposedly denoting the will of the ancestors, and a second type of literacy, one which required written graphs in order to record the message of the ancestors. It was this secondary literacy, which was given lesser importance, as it took special qualifications of the royal diviners to read the signs for their true meaning (Keightley 2014).

In a society that highly regarded filial piety, oracle bones represented a technology which met the cultural, as well as political demands of the time. The

oracle bones served the needs of the ruling class, and enforced the bureaucratic structures which held society together.

The truth of the matter is that the oracle bones represent only a small segment of what could broadly be defined as literary evidence from the Shang period.

Scholars, such as Adam Smith, argue that it is impossible to construct a complete picture of early Chinese literacy, as entire genres of text are missing, and only the oracle bones due to their composition remain (Smith 2008).

What would be needed in order to have a more holistic understanding of literacy in China during the Shang period would be a discovery of writing on perishable media, but given the nature of this media it would be difficult to acquire. What we can conclude from the oracle bones however, is that precursors for writing came from a context in which costly and sacrificial routines were being regularly conducted on behalf of the royal court, and these required the use of records which served as valuable documents for Chinese royalty.

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