

Oracle Bones: An Analysis on the Evolution of Ancient Chinese Writing

Kim Seto and Stephanie Kwok

University of British Columbia

MET ETEC 540 66A

July 3, 2018

## **Introduction**

The Chinese written language has a long history, dating back originally to the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE. It originated as, and remains to this day, a logographic writing system, where each written symbol, in phonetic, pictographic format, is representative of a single word or phrase (Hessler, 2006). The earliest existing evidence of ancient Chinese in written form, however, is credited to inscriptions found upon oracle bones, due to the fact that earlier, alternative writing forms perished with time. These would have included inscriptions upon more perishable materials such as wood, bamboo, and silk. Oracle bone script, indicated by archaic Chinese characters carved on tortoise shells and ox scapulae, was used for divination by royal families and for state affairs, and is alternatively known as ‘Shang script’, due to its prevalence during the Shang era (1600-1046 BCE) (Leung, 2012, p. 1). Although Chinese written script has gone through many changes throughout the decades, many modern-day characters show they have retained their logographic orthography, when compared to the characters found on oracle bones (p. 1). These bones hold significance as they provide written records on religion, politics, language and life during the Shang dynasty.

## **Discovery**

Although oracle bones are dated to go back as far as 1250-1046 BCE, it was not until 1899 CE that they were discovered (Mark, 2016). When antiquarian and philologist, Wang Yirong fell sick with malaria, he asked his doctor for some 龙骨 Lóng gǔ or ‘dragon bones’. This was a common medical remedy that was believed to have the same effects as aspirin today. However, when he received his bones, which were usually already pre-ground into powdered form, he recognized ancient Chinese script engraved into the fragments of bones. Upon closer

inspection, scholars and philologists concluded that the inscriptions were the oldest extant documents written in the Chinese language (Mark, 2016). More specifically, they were traced back to the 洹河 Huán hé river located in the city Yin, the capital of Shang dynasty China. Later analysis of the bones showed that the inscriptions were related to divination. The discovery of oracle bones was proven to be a significant game changer as the veracity of China's early historical records were questioned by many scholars. Finally, the accounts given in the traditional histories of the Shang dynasty were validated.

### **Divination Method**

The inscriptions on the oracle bones provided a written record of the religious divination practices of China's Shang elites (Freeman, n.d.). Typically, divination was used on ox shoulder blades, also known as "scapulimancy" or with turtle shells (plastronomy). Diviners carved out rows of small holes and pits into the bone. After uttering an oral question or "charge," usually given by the king, they would apply a hot bronze poker to a bored pit causing the bone to crack. Usually, the heat produced a pattern of two cracks that were roughly at right angles. These cracks were believed to be a specific reaction from the spirits. They were then further interpreted by the diviner to determine whether the charges were auspicious or inauspicious. On the same bone, the inscriber would then record the day, the name of the diviner, the statements and the number of cracks. Initially, divinations were typically carried out by diviners for the kings, however, near the end of the period, the Shang kings took over the role of diviner (Qiu, 2000).

### **Inscriptions**

Given the enormous number of oracle bones found, it is predicted that Shang kings used

oracle bones before making most decisions. The inscriptions were arranged in four parts, although not always complete. These parts included the (1) preface, (2) charge, (3) prognostication, and (4) verification. The **‘preface’** would record the inscription date and diviner, and be followed by the **‘charge’**, which consisted of the question being asked. The **‘prognostication’**, would be the answer’s interpretation, followed lastly by the **‘verification’**, which described the final outcome and accuracy of the divination (Keightley, 1978a, p. 41). The writing was generally written in columns top to bottom, moving left to right - customary of traditional Chinese writing today, but would otherwise have a free and arbitrary orientation depending on the bone’s configuration and direction of the crack. It is this set structure that has aided historians in interpretation and analysis of these ancient inscriptions.

There were a wide range of questions inquired upon using this divination method. Possible subjects would involve everything from the very mundane to ritualistic topics. For instance, predicting rainfall, the success of a harvest, seeking fortune in hunting and war, curing illness, and wisdom of embarking on journeys. Divination charges were often paired and complementary, suggesting that Shang diviners were dualistic in their worldview (Freeman, n.d.). It also suggests an early yin-yang view of the universe, emphasizing balance and interconnectedness of nature (Freeman, n.d.). When it came to the paired or complementary charges, it is believed that the negative mode was weakened in two ways. First, there was an insertion of “may” as in “we *may* not receive millet harvest”; secondly, there was a tendency to record the negative charge in a more abbreviated form. Such strategies suggest that the Shang diviners attempted to accentuate the positive (Flad, 2008). These are some examples of paired divination charges:

“On the next day, it will be sunny / On the next day, it **may** not be sunny”

“Lady Hao will improve from her sickness / Lady Hao **might** not improve from her sickness”

“We should to Qiang Jia perform the exorcism ritual / We **should** not, to Qiang Jia, perform the exorcism ritual”

(Keightley, 2001, p. 159, 166)

From these various inscriptions, a lot of information can be gleaned about the history of the Shang dynasty, the lives of the rulers, and values of the Shang peoples.

### **Political Influences**

Ancestor worship has been and continues to be deeply rooted in the religious and cultural practices of the Chinese people. It originates from the belief of reciprocity between the living and the dead. It was believed that the living had the duty to sustain their ancestors, while the ancestors were able to influence the gods to bring in good fortune (Flad, 2008).

Ancestor veneration traces all the way back to the rituals of the Shang oracle inscriptions. Diviners were believed to be in touch with the spirit world of the ancestors who lived with the gods. While these inscriptions set into motion a theocratic stage for later Chinese traditions and dynasties, they also uncover an orderly ritualistic system of rule. These inscriptions ultimately served as a vehicle to legitimize the rule of the last nine Shang kings. It was believed that only the ancestors of the Shang royal family had the foreknowledge of future events, and thus divination rituals were only commissioned by social leaders or elites. Consequently, when

diviners are formally “attached” to elites, their control over the results of divination is restricted and political influence is substantial (Flad, 2008).

Near the end of the Shang dynasty, divination charges increasingly shifted from dual to singular statements and content slowly degraded to a more artificial process of ritual routine (Freeman, n.d.). This change is reflected in the diminished size of the inscription calligraphy as well as fewer recorded details. Scholars believe that these changes suggest a change in Shang diviners metaphysical thinking (Keightley, 1988).



Calligraphy size differences (Keightley, 1988)

### *Binary Modes in Human Culture*

Binary modes of thinking are widespread in human culture and social organization. Maybury-Lewis argues that societies that make systematic use of binary social classifications are “concerned with the maintenance of cosmic and social equilibrium” (n.d., p. 12). Societies may believe that there is ultimately an immutable order in life, but the cosmic equilibriums offer a small consolation. In the presence of chaos and conflict, their belief in binary systems maintain a balance and give them a sense of control. Even today, the opposition of the two principles Yin

and Yang, female and male, night and day, winter and summer, are heavily present in China.

These yin yang modes of reality are carried through in the metaphysics of Daoist, Confucianist and Buddhist traditions today (Freeman, n.d.). Such beliefs were highly characteristic of the Shang's social and religious ideals as seen in the paired divination charges (Flad, 2008).

### **War and Religion**

In the harsh warring climate of Shang China, the practice of divination using oracle bones aided in reinforcing the spiritual and political authority of the King, uniting the country under a single ruler and government through processes that reinforced state ritual and hierarchy. According to Keightley, "Shang religion was inextricably involved in the genesis and legitimation of the Shang state. The king's ability to determine through divination, and influence through prayer and sacrifice, the will of the ancestral spirits legitimized the concentration of political power in his person. ...It was the king who made fruitful harvest and victories possible by the sacrifices he offered, the rituals he performed, and the divinations he made" (Keightley, 1978b, p. 213).

Although there were originally court diviners involved in the divination process, along with numerous shaman and diviners across the country, the King soon became the sole divination authority (Helle, 2016, p. 86). Already, through interpretation of words found on the bones and shells, the prevailing significance of ancestor worship during the Shang dynasty is clear (p. 86). Reference is made to spirits of nature and weather, but the king himself was ranked only below ancestral spirits and 帝 Dì, the supreme god of the Shang. Moreover, with further examination, scholars believe that a significant number of inscriptions served as a legitimating

function for the king. That is, the charge, prognostication and verification may have all been written at one time--after the event (Keightley, 1988). There are also no existing cases of the king's forecast of misfortunes and a subsequent verification of no misfortunes coming. These wrong forecasts were thus passed over in silence. These filtered records served the king positively. His ability to secure favourable results for his kingdom did not only sanctify him, but it also granted him psychological and ideological endorsement for political dominance (Freeman, n.d.). Being subject to celestial powers also allowed for the Shang dynasty's smooth transition of rule to the Zhou dynasty. Under the Mandate of Heaven, created by the Zhou, it was believed that there could only be one legitimate ruler of China at a time and it was all justified by the blessing of the gods (Allan, 2007).

Interestingly, while the divination charges appeared to have been primarily used as inquiries for the future, it is believed that some singular charges served as ritual incantations to ward off misfortune and possible trouble as well (Flad, 2008). Some examples of these charges are: "this night there will be no disaster", "the whole day it will not rain". They were always unpaired and always expressed the results desired. These incantations were not primarily inquiries into the unknown; they also served as attempts to make sure that disasters would not occur (Keightley, 1988).

It was also the Shang kings who initiated the use of engravings during the divination process, developing strict protocol and rituals by the peak period of usage during King Wu Ding's rule. The preparation process itself required up to fifty hours per day during which the animal bones were sawed, cleaned, scraped, and smoothed, before having small holes hollowed



out (Chinavine, 2012). Sacrificial ceremonies were also held, to provide ritual offerings to various gods and ancestors. It is estimated that more than 13,000 humans - often captives of war, and countless more animals were sacrificed as part of the religious process (Cheung, 2018, p. 133). Some inscriptions documenting this ritual are as follows:

“We will offer to Shang Jia ten cows”

“We will perform the *you*-cutting sacrifice to the Yellow River Power with fifty cows”

"We will offer to the Yellow River Power a woman of Wo”

“In performing the exorcism to Father Yi, we cleave three cows, pledge thirty dismembered victims, thirty penned sheep.”

(Keightley, 2001, p. 171)

These shows of royal power solidified the Shang regime by bolstering the king’s presence as the highest political, military, spiritual, and legal authority (Helle, 2016, p. 86).

### **Language and Literacy**

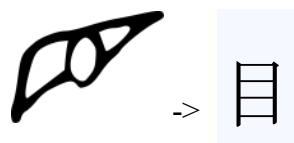
“The study of oracle bone script is an important source for understanding the development of present-day Chinese writing and remains an academic discipline in its own right” (New World Encyclopedia, 2015). Roughly 6,000 different characters have been identified and recorded from the inscriptions, and of these, 2,000 can be linked to their modern-day counterparts (Chinasage, 2012). The remainders are more difficult to translate as they correspond to personal and place names.

However, as mentioned earlier, it is not representative of the earliest attempts at pictographic writing. Historical linguists have determined that the script is a fully functional

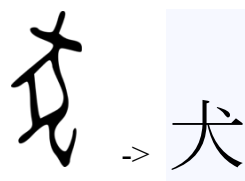
writing system capable of recording language (2015). It encompasses advanced principles of character construction, sentence structure, as well as grammar, indicating that the Chinese language itself had already undergone a lengthy period of development even prior to oracle bone inscription (National Palace Museum, Taipei, n.d.). Although many of the inscribed characters appear simplified compared to those seen on bronzes in later years during the middle Shang to early Western Zhou period, it was the result of the difficulties faced engraving on the hard, bone materials. “Inscriptions indicate that the Shang were already writing with brush and ink on books made of bamboo slats”; the identified character for ‘book’ 冊 shows cords binding bamboo strips together (New World Encyclopedia, 2015; Chinasage, 2012).

In the following examples, we can observe the evolution that took place with the individual characters. Originally the characters were closer to pictures in form, and slowly became more abstract, stylized symbols.

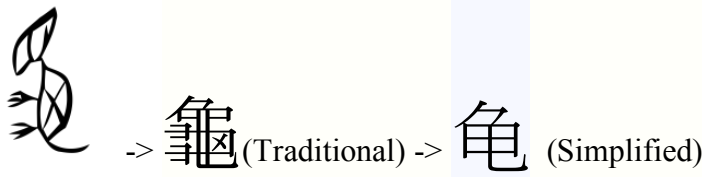
(1) Here, the character for ‘eye’ has been rotated, and the pupil is defined by two straight lines rather than curved.



(2) Similarly, the character for ‘dog’ has now been rotated to stand on its feet, with the dot representing its tongue.



(3) In this final example, the oracle bone character for ‘tortoise’ is still visible in the traditional Chinese form of writing still currently used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. It however loses its legs in the simplified Chinese form used in China and Singapore.



### **Implications**

Because the Shang kings divined about such a wide range of matters, the inscriptions have proven invaluable to historians by providing a wealth of information about the Shang dynasty. This information has led us to understand how advanced a civilization they were through the content of the inscriptions as well as the advanced nature of the writing itself. The detailed information recorded on the date, diviner, prognostication and outcome infers data about specific military campaigns, dynastic lineage, and cultural practices (Keightley, 1978a). There is also documentation of stars and constellations, the Chinese calendar system that was used, solstices and eclipses accurately observed, and planetary observations, which speak to the astrological knowledge held at that time (Chinasage, 2012). This data has been crucial in determining historical, linguistic, and cultural markers of Ancient China, and even today, have served to aid NASA astrologists in proving that the earth’s rotation has slowed throughout the ages, by determining that the length of a day is one-twentieth of a second longer now than it used to be in Shang times (Browne, 1989).

Divination rituals influenced much of the social, political and religious systems in the

Shang dynasty. Spiritual communication between the ancestral gods and the diviners demonstrated the early emergence of ancestor veneration in Chinese culture. The inscribed complementary charges marked the early yin and yang of the world. The reservation of divination rituals to the domain of elite circles played a significant role in maintaining hierarchy and state control. Alterations in the wording of inscriptions and inconsistent recordings were made under the discretion of the elite to legitimize and accentuate the image and power of the king. Oracle bones are not simply bones; they unearth a world of information about the social, religious, literary and political histories of the Shang dynasty.

References

- Allan, S. (2007). On the Identity of Shang Di 上帝 and the Origin of the Concept of a Celestial Mandate (Tian Ming 天命). *Early China*, 31, 1-46.
- Browne, M. W. (1989). 'Oracle Bones' Testify to an Ancient Eclipse. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/04/science/oracle-bones-testify-to-an-ancient-eclipse.html>
- Cheung, C. (2018). The Chinese History that is Written in Bone: The Bones of 3,000-year-old Sacrificial Victims in China are Revealing Unexpected New Twists. *American Scientist*, 106(3), 133.
- Chinasage. (2012). *Early Chinese Writing - Shang Oracle Bones*. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.chinasage.info/oraclebones.htm>.
- Chinavine. (2012). *Oracle Bones*. Retrieved from: <https://chinavine.uoregon.edu/subject/oracle-bones/>
- Flad, R. (2008). Divination and Power: A Multiregional View of the Development of Oracle Bone Divination in Early China. *Current Anthropology*, 49(3), 403-437.  
doi:10.1086/588495
- Freeman, C. (n.d.) *Shang Divination: A Theocratic Stage for Emerging Chinese Religious Thought and Practice*. Retrieved from: <http://cameronfreeman.com/socio-cultural/anthropology-religion-asian-traditions/theocratic-stage-emerging-chinese-religious-thought-practice/>

Helle, H. J. (2016). *Oracle-Bones: The Mandate of Heaven*. (pp. 82) BRILL.

doi:10.1163/jctt1w8h29s.13

Hessler, P. (2006) *Oracle Bones*. New York: Harper Collins.

Keightley, D. N. (1978a). *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Keightley, D. N. (1978b). The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture. *History of Religions*, 17(3/4), 211-225. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062429>

Keightley, D. N. (1988). Shang Divination and Metaphysics. *Philosophy East and West*, 38(4), 367-397. doi:10.2307/1399117

Keightley, D. N. (2001). The 'Science' of the Ancestors: Divination, Curing, and Bronze-Casting in Late Shang China. *Asia Major: Third Series*, 14(2), 143-187.

Leung, C., Ruan, J. (2012). *Perspectives on Teaching and Learning Chinese Literacy in China*. (2012 ed.). New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-4822-4

Mark, E. (2016). *Oracle Bones*. Retrieved from: [https://www.ancient.eu/Oracle\\_Bones](https://www.ancient.eu/Oracle_Bones)

National Palace Museum, Taipei. (n.d.). *Ancient Writing from the Ruins of Yin: Special Exhibition of Oracle Bone Inscriptions from the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*. Retrived from: <http://www.npm.gov.tw/english/exhbition/eyin0701/intro.htm>

New World Encyclopedia. (2015). *Oracle Bone Script*. Retrieved from: [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Oracle\\_Bone\\_Script](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Oracle_Bone_Script)

Qiu, X. (2000). *Chinese Writing*. Berkley.