

their diviners articulated many of the concerns that were to be central to the classical Chinese tradition. In many cases they appear to have provided solutions that proved seminal.

Approximately 150,000 fragments of inscribed Shang oracle bones have now been recovered from near Anyang, in the northern Henan panhandle. This was evidently the site of a major cult center where the Late Shang (ca. 1200–1045 B.C.E.) worshiped their ancestors and buried their last nine kings in large cruciform pit burials in the royal cemetery situated at Xibeigang. The inscriptions, written in an early Chinese script that scholars have been laboring to decipher since the importance of the oracle bones was first recognized a century ago, reveal the existence of an incipient state whose elites dominated a highly stratified society and whose king was able to exercise sovereignty as he issued orders to the officers and populations of various territories under his control. Benefiting from highly developed craft specialization and relying upon an administrative hierarchy, the king and his supporters extracted the agricultural surplus from the dependent peasants and mobilized them for large public works and for warfare.

The dynasty was centered on the royal lineage in which the title of king (*wang*; the graph — i.e., Chinese character — represented the frontal view of a “big man”) was often passed from brother to brother before descending to the next generation, though increasingly toward the end of the dynasty, it was passed directly from father to son. Various other powerful groups were attached to this lineage by ties of kinship, real or fictive, and by political interest. Assisted by a core of officers at the capital, the king was able to mobilize his laborers and foot soldiers in groups of thousands, direct them in the construction of royal tombs, send his armies into battle against numerous regional powers on the periphery of the Shang homeland, and, like the rest of the Shang elite, enjoy the products of a sophisticated bronze-casting industry of almost industrial proportions, whose most important products were thousands of glistening ritual bronze vessels. The living used these bronzes in their sacrifices to the ancestors and then placed them in burials, evidently in the belief that the dead could thereby continue to perform cultic practices in the next world, still participating in what may be regarded as “a great chain of ancestral being.”

The cult offerings to the ancestors involved the shedding of much blood — of both animal victims and human captives. That a Shang king, when he died, was buried with numerous retainers from all levels of society who accompanied him in death indicates the degree to which the fate of the living was tied to that of their rulers and the degree to which status in this life was continued into the next. Such ties of hierarchical dependency — sanctified by religious belief and reinforced by, as they reinforced, political linkages — were among the great emotional resources of the evolving state, in which religion and kin were inseparable from secular and political activities.

THE ORACLE-BONE INSCRIPTIONS

Although archaeological discoveries are now suggesting the existence of written characters scratched on Neolithic pots as early as 5000 B.C.E., the earliest corpus of Chinese writing consists of the oracle-bone inscriptions of the Late Shang. These inscriptions record the pyromantic divinations performed at the court of the last nine Shang kings. In this kind of divination, the king or his diviners would address an oral “charge,” such as “We will receive millet harvest,”² to a specially prepared turtle plastron or cattle scapula while applying a hot poker or brand to produce a series of heat cracks in the shell or bone. They then interpreted these cracks as auspicious or inauspicious, and the king would deliver a prognostication, such as “Auspicious. We will receive harvest.”³ After the divination had taken place, engravers carved the subject of the charge, and (sometimes) the king’s forecast, and (less frequently) the result, into the surface of the shell or bone — hence the modern Chinese term *jǐagwén*, “writings on shell and bone.” The diviners themselves — whose names, like Chu, Gu, Bin, Que, and Xing, appear in the inscriptions translated below — were apparently members of groups capable of casting their own ritual bronzes, groups whose social and political power was at the service of the king.

Because the twenty-first Shang king, Wu Ding (fl. 1200–1181 B.C.E.), in particular, divined about a wide range of matters — including sacrifices and rituals, divine assistance or approval, requests to ancestral or Nature Powers, sickness, childbirth, the good fortune of the night, the day, or the coming ten-day week, disaster, distress, trouble, dreams, troop mobilizations, military campaigns, meteorological and celestial phenomena, agriculture, settlement building, administrative orders, hunting expeditions and excursions — the inscriptions, carved on bones that the king himself must frequently have seen and handled, provide us with a direct and vivid sense of his daily activities and his religious beliefs.

Many of the divination charges were about what the king should do; he sought the guidance of the cracks in making up his mind. In other cases, the king informed the bone or shell of his intended plans, seeking spiritual reassurance and validation. Many of these charges may be regarded as wishful predictions, demonstrating that Shang divination served as a form of royal prayer, conjuration, and legitimization. In yet other cases the king sought to discover the symbolic, spiritual meaning of events — such as crop failures, illnesses, and dreams — that had already happened. In all these instances, the Shang diviners were searching for hidden meanings — in the cracks themselves

2. *HJ* 9950 front. *HJ* is an abbreviation for the standard collection of oracle-bone rubbings: Guo and Hu, *Jiagwén heji* (hereafter *HJ*).

3. *HJ* 9950 back.

and also in the mundane but spiritually charged phenomena of their daily lives. Because the inscriptions document the king's continual attempts to contact the spiritual Powers that shaped his universe, they throw much light on the concerns of the Shang elite at a time when the earliest Chinese state was being created. The sample inscriptions translated below will indicate how the Shang diviners worked.⁴

SHANG CONCEPTIONS OF TIME

To the Shang diviner, who meticulously dated the great majority of his divination charges, time was as portentous as place and direction. Observed, shaped, and regulated, it, like space, was an indispensable dimension of religious cosmology, an integral part of all religious observance and divinatory prognostication. Human time—concerned with the hours of the day, the agricultural cycles of the year, the birth of royal sons, the timing of royal hunts, the mobilization of conscripts for fighting, agriculture, or other public work—was inextricably mixed with and conceived in terms of religious time—concerned with the schedule of rituals and sacrifices, the luck of a particular day or week, the portentous significance of particular events.

The days and the nights, moreover, together with the ten-day week (as in inscription 35 below), were the primary units in which both humans and the Powers were thought to act.

1. Crack-making on *bingxu* (day 23), (we) divined: "Today it will not rain."⁵
2. Crack-making on *renwu* (day 19), Chu (the diviner) divined: "Today there will not be the coming of bad news from the border regions."⁶
3. Crack-making on *yichou* (day 2): "Today, *yichou*, we offer one penned sheep to Ancestor Xin, promise five cattle."⁷

The constantly repeated and rigid cycle of the sixty day names was formed by what in later times became known as the ten "heavenly stems" (*tiangan*)—*jiā, yī, bīng, dīng*, etc.—combined with the twelve "earthly branches" (*dizhi*)—*zǐ, chǒu, yīn, mǎo*, etc. This sixty-day sequence—*jiāzǐ* (day 1), *yīchǒu* (day 2), *bīngyīn* (day 3), and so on⁸—was important in practical terms because it was the only firm calendrical frame the

4. As with all texts, the meaning of particular divinations needs to be considered in context; other inscriptions on the same bone or shell or about the same topic on another bone or shell, for example, may sometimes provide more information than the brief presentation of one divination by itself can do.

5. *HJ* 2446.

6. *HJ* 2449.

7. *HJ* 1732.

8. See ch. 10, pp. 351–52.

Shang possessed. In religious terms, the temple name of an ancestor or ancestress (like Ancestor Yi, Father Jia, or Mother Bing), conferred after death, employed the "heavenly stem" of the day on which he or she received cult or ritual attention. Thus every ancestor and ancestress was associated with one of the ten suns that rose in turn over the course of the ritual ten-day week.⁹ The identity between day name and ancestral cult would have given a strongly religious, ancestral overtone to all activities scheduled for these days, just as a still active cult to the Norse Woden, occurring every Wednesday, might remind us of his existence and power at every mention of his day name.

DIVINATION AND ADMINISTRATION

Some of the Shang divinations involved routine administrative choices, as in:

- 4A. Crack-making on *gengzi* (day 37): "(We) order Fu to inspect Lin."¹⁰
- 4B. "It should be Qin whom we order to inspect Lin."¹¹
- 4C. "It should be Bing whom we order to inspect Lin."¹²

Other divinations involved choices about ritual activity, involving the number and type of victims to be offered, the timing or desirability of the offering, or the recipient of the cult:

- 5A. Divined: "On the next day, *jiawu* (day 31), (we) should not make offering to Ancestor [Yi] (the twelfth king)."
- 5B. Divined: "On the next day, *jiawu*, (we) should make offering to Ancestor Yi."¹³

The king also divined about his own participation in matters both secular and ritual:

6. On *dingmao* (day 4) divined: "If the king joins with Zhi [Guo] (an important Shang general) to attack the Shaofang, he will receive [assistance]." Cracked in the temple of Ancestor Yi (the twelfth king). Fifth moon.¹³
- 7A. Divined: "If the king dances (for rain), there will be approval."

9. See the inscriptions numbered below as 3A–B to 35.

10. The designations 4A, 4B, and so on mean that inscriptions A and B are found on the same bone.

11. *HJ* 3327.

12. *HJ* 6167.

13. *Turnan* 8. *Turnan* is an abbreviation for *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo, Xiaotun nandi jiguo*.

17. Crack-making on *xinsi* (day 18), divined: "The king hosts Wu Ding's (the twenty-first king's) consort, Mother Xin, and performs the *zai*-ritual; there will be no trouble."²⁵

The ancestors apparently served as mediators with Di, God — occasionally referred to as Shangdi, the High God. Just as the Shang kings frequently divined about hosting (*bin*) their ancestors with ritual and cult, so too did the kings divine, although less frequently, to determine which of the ancestors would be hosted by increasingly senior ancestors who, in turn, would be hosted by, and thus be in communication with, the High God, Di, as the following inscriptions selected from a large turtle plastron reveal:

- 18a. Divined: "Cheng (= Da Yi, the first king) will be hosted by Di."
 18b. Divined: "Cheng will not be hosted by Di."
 18c. Divined: "Da Jia (the third king) will be hosted by Cheng."
 18d. Divined: "Da Jia will not be hosted by Cheng."
 18e. Divined: "Da Jia will be hosted by Di."
 18f. Divined: "Da Jia will not be hosted by Di."²⁶

THE HIGH GOD (DI) AND OTHER POWERS

The Shang kings lived in a world that was dominated by a complex pantheon of Powers that included: Di, the High God; Nature Powers, like the (Yellow) River, the Mountain, and Ri, the Sun; Former Lords, like Wang Hai, who were apparently ex-humans whom the cultists now associated with the dynasty; pre-dynastic ancestors, like Shang Jia; dynastic ancestors, whose cult started with Da Yi and ended with the deceased father of the reigning king; and the dynastic ancestresses, the consorts of those kings on the main line of descent, who likewise received cult in the order of their husbands' accession. The worship of the nondynastic Powers, whether natural or human (a distinction that was not sharp), strengthened the king's position by enlarging the scope of his influence in the spiritual world. Such worship may be regarded as a form of "spiritual imperialism" in which the powers worshiped by local populations were co-opted into the Shang pantheon, frequently being placed in the shadow, and relatively "empty," pre-dynastic space in the ritual genealogy before the time of Da Yi, the founder. The jurisdictional distinctions within the pantheon, particularly those between the Nature Powers, Former Lords, and Pre-dynastic Ancestors at the head of the hierarchy, were by no means rigid; the Shang ritualists conceived of these Powers as sharing many essential features, applying names like High Ancestor to some of them.

The original meaning of the word *di*, the name or title by which the Shang kings addressed their High God and, occasionally, their royal ancestors, remains hard to determine. It is equally hard to determine if the Shang kings regarded Di as their distant ancestor, but the lack of cult addressed to Di suggests that the ancestral tie, if it ever existed, had been greatly muted. If Di had once been an ancestor, the Late Shang kings treated him with uncharacteristic parsimony. The contrast with the generous way in which the kings treated their ancestors is so notable that it implies a difference in kind.

Di's jurisdictions were not always exclusive. The ancestors and Nature Powers could, like Di, also affect harvest, weather, campaigns, and the king's health.²⁷ It is clear, however, that Di stood at the peak of the ultra-human, ultra-natural hierarchy, giving orders, which no ancestor could do, to the various natural phenomena and responding to the intercessions of the Shang ancestors who were acting on behalf of their living descendants below. That Di was virtually the only Power who could directly order (*ling*) rain or thunder, as well as the only Power who had the winds under his control, sets him apart from all the other Powers, natural, pre-dynastic, or ancestral. His ability to act in this commanding way helps to establish his unique role as the sky god of the Shang pantheon, foreshadowing the role of Heaven in the Zhou period that followed.

Although Di's wishes were not easy to divine, his approval was important to the Shang:

- 19a. Crack-making on *renzi* (day 49), Zheng divined: "If we build a settlement, Di will not obstruct (but) approve." Third moon.
 19b. Crack-making on *guichou* (day 50), Zheng divined: "If we do not build a settlement, Di will approve."²⁸
 20a. Crack-making on *xinchou* (day 38), Que divined: "Di approves the king (doing something?)."
 20b. Divined: "Di does not approve the king (doing something?)."²⁹

Di was also a provider of rain. The king evidently took pride in his ability to forecast Di's meteorological intentions:

- 21a. Crack-making on *wuzi* (day 25), Que divined: "Di, when it comes to the fourth moon, will order the rain."
 21b. Divined: "Di will not, when it comes to the present fourth moon, order the rain."
 21c. (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "On the *ding*-day

²⁵ HJ 36268.

²⁶ HJ 1402 front.

²⁷ As, for example, in 11, 12A-B, 26A-B, 29, and 30.

²⁸ HJ 14206.

²⁹ HJ 14198.

(e.g., *dingyou* [day 34]) it will rain; if not, it will be a *xin-day* (e.g., *xinchou* [day 38] (that it rains))."

21D. (Verification:) "(After) ten days, on *dingyou* (day 34), it really did rain."³⁰

And, like the ancestors, Di was also capable of causing harm to the Shang:

22A. Divined: "It is Di who is harming our harvest." Second moon.

22B. Divined: "It is not Di who is harming our harvest."³¹

Di's role as a sender of difficulties, moreover, was not limited to the floods, droughts, and crop failures of the natural world; he could also, on occasion, stimulate an enemy attack:

23. [Divined:] "The Fang (enemy) are harming and attacking (us); it is Di who orders (them) to make disaster for us." Third moon.³²

24A. Divined: "(Because) the Fang are harming and attacking (us, we) will raise men."

24B. Divined: "It is not Di who orders (the Fang) to make disaster for us."³³

Di was in part a god of battle. Some twenty divinations end with the incantatory formula "Di will confer assistance on us," and, when the context was specified, Di's assistance always involved warfare, as in:

25. Crack-making on *jiachen* (day 41), Zheng divined: "If we attack the Ma-fang (another enemy group), Di will confer assistance on us." First moon.³⁴

Di's great distance from the Shang, evident in the lack of cult and in his readiness to order enemy attacks (as in 23 and 24A-B) suggests that Di was accessible to various groups, Shang and non-Shang, and probably enigmatic to all. Di at best was an uncertain ally. The Shang prayed for his assistance (as in 25) but divined no ritual or sacrificial procedures for obtaining it in a routine, institutionalized way. After the reign of Wu Ding, in fact, they ceased to divine about Di's assistance at all. Di, in short, does not appear to have been a Jehovah-like figure, watching over his chosen Shang people. That the divination inscriptions record virtually no cult to Di was perhaps because his allegiance was so uncertain that no attempt to influence his intentions

was worth pursuing or, at least, divining. The Shang placated their ancestors through the offering of cult; it was evidently the ancestors who were expected to intercede with Di, as suggested by 18A-F.

Harm might also come from the Nature Powers.

26A. Crack-making on *bingwu* (day 43) divined: "It is the Mountain Power that is harming the rain."

26B. "It is the (Yellow) River Power that is harming the rain."³⁵

One of the most common of all Shang divinations, in fact, involved the apotropaic conjunction, divined on the last day of the Shang week, that "in the next ten days (i.e., the next week), there will be no disasters" (as in 35). It was the king's constant concern to forestall harm and disasters of various types by identifying and mollifying the Powers that might be causing them. The king was particularly exposed to harm (frequently conceived in terms of bad weather) when he left the confines of the cult center on campaign or hunt, as the following conjunctions suggest:

27. "On the present *xin-day*, if the king hunts, the whole day (he) will have no disasters and it will not rain."³⁶

28. "If the king goes to hunt, the whole day he will not encounter the Great Winds."³⁷

Other inscriptions reveal that the Winds were not simply meteorological phenomena but were conceived as Powers of great spiritual significance. It is evident, indeed, that the Shang kings lived in and traveled through a landscape that was pregnant with spiritual meaning. They offered cult and prayer to a variety of these non-Shang Powers:

29. Crack-making on *renwu* (day 19): "To the (Yellow) River Power (we) pray for rain and offer a holocaust."³⁸

30. Crack-making on *xinwei* (day 8): "To the Mountain Power, (we) pray for rain."³⁹

The considerable overlap in the jurisdictions of the ancestors and other Powers where the weather and harvests were concerned suggests, in fact, that the Shang had not yet developed orderly and consistent religious explanations for such large and strategically capricious phenomena.

30. *HJ* 4438.

31. *HJ* 1024 front.

32. *HJ* 39912.

33. *HJ* 6746.

34. *HJ* 6664 front.

35. *Tumam* 2438.

36. *HJ* 29093.

37. *HJ* 29234.

38. *HJ* 12853.

39. *HJ* 34916.