

Sources of Chinese Tradition

SECOND EDITION

VOLUME I

INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS

Chapter 1

THE ORACLE-BONE INSCRIPTIONS OF THE LATE SHANG DYNASTY

THE SHANG DYNASTY

Traditional accounts of early China present the Shang as the second historical dynasty (ca. 1554–1045/1040 B.C.E.),¹ succeeding to the Xia and succeeded by the Zhou (1045/1040–256 B.C.E.). Because no written records of the Xia have yet been discovered, the Shang, with its inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze vessels, may currently be regarded as China's first historical dynasty. Archaeology now reveals that other incipient Bronze Age states were emerging from the chiefdom stage toward the end of the second millennium B.C.E. It was the Shang, however, that literati of the Zhou and Han (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) came to regard as one of the dynastic models upon which later versions of the Chinese polity were founded. Modern research generally confirms that judgment. The oracle-bone inscriptions indicate the degree to which the Late Shang kings and

1. The traditional dating of the Shang and Zhou dynasties has been revised in recent years on the basis of modern studies of archaeological and astronomical evidence. Chinese historians once dated the Shang dynasty from the eighteenth century to the late twelfth century B.C.E.; the revised dating places Shang rule slightly later on the time line, from the sixteenth century to the middle of the eleventh century B.C.E. Experts still disagree about the precise dating of the Zhou conquest, some favoring 1045 and others 1040 B.C.E.

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 3000 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 *jiguwen*, “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, *Jiguwen 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*)—*ji*, *yi*, *bing*, *ding*, etc.—combined with the twelve "earthly branches" (*dizhi*)—*zi*, *chou*, *yin*, *mao*, etc. This sixty-day sequence—*jiazi* (day 1), *yichou* (day 2), *bingyan* (day 3), and so on⁸—was important in practical terms because it was the only firm calendrical frame the

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."¹¹

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."¹²

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."

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 also *Yi* 31-32.

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. *Tumam* 81. *Tumam* is an abbreviation for *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo*, *Xiaochun nianli huan*.

- 7B. Divined: "The king should not dance (for rain, for if he does, there will not be approval)."¹⁴

THE POWER OF THE DEAD

The Shang oracle-bone inscriptions document the fear and respect that the living king showed his dead ascendants. This might manifest itself in general concerns about nonspecific harm:

8. Crack-making on *yinwei* (day 32), Gu divined: "Father Yi (the twentieth Shang king, Xiao Yi, the father of Wu Ding) is harming the king."¹⁵
 9A. Divined: "Grandfather Ding (the fifteenth king, father of Xiao Yi) is harming the king."
 9B. Divined: "It is not Grandfather Ding who is harming the king."¹⁶

Many of these divinations involved the king's health, as in:

10. Divined: "There is a sick tooth; it is not Father Yi (= Xiao Yi, as above) who is harming (it/him)."¹⁷

In addition to their ability to harm the king personally, the senior ancestors, like some of the Nature Powers, had the ability to influence both the weather and the harvests upon which the fate of the dynasty as a whole depended:

11. Crack-making on *dingchou* (day 14), Bin divined: "In praying for harvest to Shang Jia (the predynastic founder of the royal lineage) we offer in holocaust three small penned lambs and split open three cattle."¹⁸
 12A. "It is Shang Jia who is harming the rain."
 12B. "It is not Shang Jia who is harming the rain."¹⁹

One of the ways by which the king showed his concern for his people, in fact, was expressed in his divinatory prayers for harvest in his domains, as in the late inscription:

- 13A. On *jisi* (day 6), the king cracked and divined: "[T]his season, Shang will receive [harvest]." The king read the cracks and said: "Auspicious."
 13B. "The Eastern Lands will receive harvest."

14. *HJ* 11006 front.
 15. *HJ* 2231.
 16. *HJ* 1901 front.
 17. *HJ* 13636 front.
 18. *HJ* 10109.
 19. *HJ* 11648.

- 13C. "The Southern Lands will receive harvest." (The king read the cracks and said:) "Auspicious."
 13D. "The Western Lands will receive harvest." (The king read the cracks and said:) "Auspicious."
 13E. "The Northern Lands will receive harvest." (The king read the cracks and said:) "Auspicious."²⁰

Ancestresses were less powerful than ancestors but appear to have had special jurisdiction in matters of childbearing:

14. On *xinsi* (day 18) divined: "(We) will pray for a child to Mother Geng and Mother Bing and offer a bull, a ram, and a white boar."²¹

The great importance that the Shang kings attached to male progeny is well revealed by the following charge, prognostication, and verification:

- 15A. Crack-making on *jia Shen* (day 21), Que divined: "Lady Hao's (a consort of Wu Ding's) childbearing will be good." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "If it be on a *ding*-day that she give birth, there will be prolonged luck." (Verification:) (After) thirty-one days, on *jia yin* (day 51), she gave birth; it was not good; it was a girl.²²
 15B. (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "If it be a *ding*-(day) childbearing, it will be good; if (it be) a *geng*-day (childbearing), there will be prolonged luck; if it be a *renxu* (day 59) (childbearing), it will not be lucky."²³

Ancestresses played at least one other important role: they served to identify, by their presence in the cult of the five-ritual cycle, those kings who were subsequently treated by the Han historian Sima Qian (145? B.C.E.—86? B.C.E.) as members of the main line of descent, the *dazong* or "great lineage." This designation was reserved for kings who were both the sons and the fathers of other kings. The consorts of none of the collateral kings received such cultic attention; only the consorts of the main-line kings were so honored:

16. Crack-making on *renyin* (day 39), Xing divined: "The king hosts Da Geng's (the fifth king's) consort, Mother Ren, and performs the xie-ritual; there will be no trouble."²⁴

20. *HJ* 36975.
 21. *HJ* 34082.
 22. *HJ* 14002 front.
 23. *HJ* 14002 back.
 24. *HJ* 23314.

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 shadowy, and relatively "empty," predynastic 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 Predynastic 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, predynastic, 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. *IT* 1, 100 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 conjuration, 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 conjurations 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* 1438.

31. *HJ* 10124 front.

32. *HJ* 39912.

33. *HJ* 6746.

35. *Turnan* 2438.

36. *HJ* 29093.

37. *HJ* 29234.

38. *HJ* 12853.

39. *HJ* 24016.

REGULARITY OF THE ANCESTRAL CULT

The Shang treated their ancestors with the kind of ritual regularity and order that they were unable to apply either to the Nature Powers or to Di himself. As ex-humans, the ancestors were approachable and comprehensible in ways that the other Powers were not. This regularity is seen most clearly in the use of the temple names that the Shang ritualists assigned to their dead kings, offering them cult or pyromantic attention on the days whose names they bore. One sees this strict ritual regularity, which became increasingly the rule after the reign of Wu Ding, in the following inscriptions, in which the day of cult matches the temple name of the cult recipient:

- 31a. Crack-making on *jiawu* (day 3), *Que* divined: "On the next day, *yiwai* (day 32), (we) should make offering to Ancestor Yi (the twelfth king)."
 - 31b. "On the next day, *yiwai*, (we) [should not] make offering to Ancestor Yi."⁴⁰
 - 32a. Crack-making on *guinwei* (day 20), *Que* divined: "On the next day, *jiashen* (day 21), the king should host Shang Jia (the predynastic founder) and offer the (*ji*-) day cult." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "Auspicious. We should host (Shang Jia)." (Verification:) "(We) really did host (Shang Jia)."
 - 32b. Divined: "On the next day, *jiashen*, the king should not host Shang Jia and offer the (*ji*-) day cult."⁴¹
- Thus in 31a–B the diviner contemplated offering cult to Ancestor Yi on an *yi*-day; in 32a–B, the cult was to be offered to Shang Jia on a *ji*-day. During the reign of Wu Ding, however, the identity of day name and temple name was still a topic for divination, as these two pairs of inscriptions indicate; similar uncertainty is shown in 5AB, where *ji*-day cult was being proposed for an Yi ancestor. During and after the reign of Ancestor Jia, the twenty-third king, however, such matching of cult name and cult day was rigorously observed:
33. Crack-making on *yihai* (day 12), Xing divined: "The king hosts Xiao Yi (the twentieth king) and performs the *xie*-ritual; he will have no fault." Eleven-month moon.⁴²
 34. Crack-making on *dingsi* (day 54), divined: "The king hosts the fourth Ancestor Ding (the fifteenth king) and performs the *xie*-day ritual; he will have no fault."⁴³

40. HJ 9504 front.

41. HJ 1248 front.

42. HJ 23120.

43. HJ 35713.

In these cases the divinations and the cult to the Yi- and Ding-named ancestors were both performed on the *yi*- and *ding*-days, respectively. The regularity of the ritual schedule was so marked, in fact, that by the end of the dynasty, the rituals themselves were being employed to fix particular divinations in the calendar of royal cult. Divination time was frequently cultic time, as the following postface indicates:

35. On *guinwei* (day 20) the king made cracks in the Hui encampment and divined: "In the (next) ten days, there will be no disasters." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "Auspicious." (Postface:) It was in the fifth moon, (for the week starting on the) *jiashen* (day 21) (on which we) offered the *ji*-ritual to Ancestor Jia (the twenty-third king) and the *xie*-day ritual to Xiang Jia (the seventeenth king).⁴⁴

Although the king, the diviner of record in this case, was traveling, he evidently kept track of the *ji*- and *xie*-day rituals, which he used to situate the divination in the ritual calendar. The king may even have offered the *ji*- and *xie*-rituals while on the road. It is a striking fact, however, that the king never divined about performing such rituals or about hosting his ancestors when he was traveling; the ancestors, whose "hosting" was contemplated in numerous inscriptions like 32A–B, 33, and 34, could evidently not be contacted when the king put a distance between himself and the ancestral temples and royal burial grounds of the cult center at Anyang.

That the consorts of the main-line kings received cult on their own name days rather than those of their husbands—as in 16 and 17—indicates that these royal women preserved their own ritual identity after death. Indeed, the distribution of the temple names, in which the kings tended to be awarded names that fell during the first half of the week (*ji*, *ding*, *yi*, *geng*) and the consorts tended to be awarded names that fell during the second half of the week (*wu*, *ji*, *xin*, *gui*), indicates the degree to which kings and consorts were part of separate yet related ritual systems.

DIVINATION AND THE ANCESTORS

A number of divinations were actually performed in the ancestral temple, as in 6 and 36:

36. On *dingwei* (day 44) divined: "It should be tonight that (we) perform the *you*-cutting sacrifice and perform an exorcism." Cracked in the temple of Father Ding (i.e., Wu Ding).⁴⁵

44. HJ 35886.

45. HJ 32330.

This suggests that the Powers to whom many of the divination charges were addressed may well have been the ancestors who, through the cracks, were speaking to their royal descendant, known in the bones as "I, the one man" (*yu yi ren*), at least partly because of his unique ability to communicate with his ascendants in this way. Other divinations specifically invoke an ancestor as the object of the prayer being divined:

37. Divined: "(We) pray for Lady Hao (one of Wu Ding's consorts) to Father Yi (the twentieth king and Wu Ding's father)."⁴⁶
 38. Crack-making on *guinyou* (day 10): "To Father Jia (the seventeenth king), we pray for (good) hunting."⁴⁷

In such cases, the Powers who were responding through the bone cracks were, in all likelihood, the ancestors, like Father Yi and Father Jia, to whom the prayers were explicitly directed.

Many Shang divinations, however, appear to have involved general prayers for assistance that did not specify the particular Power whose blessings were being invoked. Whether the record was simply abbreviated in such cases or the Shang diviners themselves were being deliberately vague about the "divine" is hard to tell.

DIVINATION AND LEGITIMATION

The power of the Shang elites depended, in part, upon their control of superior armaments like bronze dagger-axes and horse-and-chariot teams, but the true authority of the dynasty — like that of the Neolithic chieftains who had preceded them — was psychological. Their material power had to be sanctified and legitimated. Much of the elites' legitimacy derived from their ability — through divination — to define, explain, and control reality, a reality that, in a Bronze Age theocracy, was primarily conceived in religious and familial terms.

The virtual absence of divinatory records that clearly contradict the king's forecasts suggests that the process of divination and record-keeping was generally designed to validate the king's powers as a seer or spiritual intermediary who could forecast and perhaps influence the future, as in:

- 39A. Crack-making on *jimao* (day 16), *Que* divined: "It will not rain."
 39B. Crack-making on *jimao*, *Que* divined: "It will rain." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks (and said): "If it rains, it will be on a *ren*-day." (Verification:) On *renwu* (day 19), it really did rain.⁴⁸

In this case, the king had forecast rain on a *ren*-day, and the record proved that he had been right. Verifications, in fact, frequently confirmed royal prognostications where divinations about the weather were concerned, as already seen in 21C–D.

Wu Ding, moreover, appears to have validated his role as prognosticator and king by anticipating impending trouble:

40. Crack-making on *guisi* (day 30), *Que* divined: "In the (next) ten days there will be no disasters." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "There will be calamities; there will be (someone) bringing alarming news." (Verification:) When it came to the fifth day, *dingyou* (day 34), there really was (someone) bringing alarming news from the west. Zhi Guo reported and said: "The Tufang have attacked in our eastern borders and have seized two settlements. The Gongfang likewise invaded the fields of our western borders."⁴⁹

The king's forecast of calamities had been confirmed by events. This inscription, furthermore, like many others from the reign of Wu Ding, has certain striking features — the large, bold calligraphy, the use of red pigment to beautify the inscribed characters, and the inscribing of the charge, prognostication, and verification as a single continuous unit — which suggest that such validating records had been made for display. Perhaps they were intended to impress the king's supporters.

By the end of the dynasty, divinations about hunting were also increasingly represented as records of successful prognostication:

41. On *renzi* (day 49), (the king) made cracks and divined: "(We) will hunt at Wu; going and coming back there will be no disasters." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "Auspicious." This was used. (Verification:) (We) caught one wild buffalo; one tiger; seven foxes.⁵⁰

THE ORIGINS OF HISTORICAL RECTITUDE: FALLIBILITY AND ACCURACY IN THE SHANG DIVINATION RECORDS

Given the validating role that divination played in the court's general activities, the king, one may suppose, would not have been likely to employ engravers who recorded on scapula or plastron what could be regarded as royal forecasts that had failed. This would explain why, as in 39A–B and 40, the vast majority

46. HJ 2634 front.

47. HJ 282-78.

48. HJ 002 front.

49. HJ 6057 front.

50. HJ 3736a.

of the verifications confirm the king's forecasts. It may also help explain why, in many other cases, forecasts and results were not recorded at all.

Shang verifications, however, particularly during the reign of Wu Ding, were not simply royal propaganda that recorded the king's divinatory successes. A small number of them reveal, on the part of the king's servitors, a pre-Zhou commitment to truthful record-keeping; they betray the possible existence of early tensions between the king, on the one hand, anxious to maintain his prestige, and his record keepers, on the other, anxious to record the truth.

Most of the cases that lead to this conclusion involve scenarios in which the king's forecast was not confirmed by the results recorded. One of the most typical involved the king's forecasts about childbirth, as in 15A-B. In that case, the king forecast that Lady Hao's childbearing would be auspicious if it occurred on a *ding*-day or a *geng*-day. In fact, she gave birth on a *jia*-day and, since she gave birth to a girl, the birth was "not good"—a verification recorded in 15A. The king's accuracy as a forecaster was not, strictly speaking, invalidated by the inauspiciousness of the result, for the actual birth occurred on neither of the two days for which he had made auspicious forecast. In effect, the king had said, "I can only tell you about births on two days, *ding* and *geng*; I have no information about the other eight days (of the ten-day week)." In the event, the results took place on one of those eight days. Such forecasts seem to have been modest in their expectations, and, in fact, such disjunctions between the forecast and the verification were relatively common. That the engravers recorded that the king had "missed" the day indicates the degree to which these inscriptions were kept not merely for propaganda purposes.

Forecasts in which the king "missed" the day were not limited to divinations about birth. One set of rainfall inscriptions, in which forecast and verification did not match, implies more clearly than any other case a royal divinatory "failure." These verifications, once again, neither confirmed nor contradicted the forecast, but the detailed record suggests a sustained (and eventually unsuccessful) effort to escape the wrongness of the king's prognostication.

42A. Crack-making on *guisi* (day 30), Zheng divined: "In the present first moon, it will rain." (Prognostication:) The king read the cracks and said: "... on the *bing*-day it will rain."

42B. Crack-making on *guisi*, Zheng divined: "In the present first moon, it will not rain."

42C. (Verification:) "In the (next) ten-day week, on *renyin* (day 39), it rained; on *jiachen* (day 41), it also rained."⁵¹

42D. (Verification:) "On *jiyou* (day 46), it rained; on *xinhai* (day 48), it also rained."⁵²

In divination 42A the king forecast on day 30 that it would rain on a *bing*-day (i.e., days 33, 43, 53, and so on); the two verifications—42C on the front of the plastron and 42D on the back—record that it rained on four other days—days 39, 41, 46, and 48. There is no record, however, that rain fell on the *bing*-day as forecast.

For the diviners of 42A-D to have recorded rainfall in this way over an eighteen-day period is unusual, particularly during the first moon, a month when little if any rain falls today in North China. (The existence of such inscriptions, incidentally, is one indication that the Late Shang climate was warmer and wetter, and the growing season longer, than it is today.) It seems likely that in 42C-D the verification process was being "kept open"—even to the extent of continuing to record the verifications on the back of the plastron in 42D in hopes that rain would eventually fall on a *bing*-day, as forecast in 42A. Having waited in vain through at least two full ten-day weeks, the diviners finally closed the case.

Such a record, once again, did not entirely delegitimize the king. Rain, after all, did fall on four separate occasions, thus confirming that the king, as the general tester of the spiritual "climate," had been sufficiently right in this case—a lot of rain fell—even though he had been wrong about the precise day. "Well, it did rain a lot" might have sufficed to save some royal face. In no other Shang oracle-bone inscription, however, does the verification so nearly give the lie to the king's forecast as in the 42A-D inscriptions.

DIVINATORY "FAILURE" AND THE ORIGINS OF HISTORY

This discussion of forecasts and verifications suggests two conclusions. First, the king himself made no exaggerated claims to infallibility; many of his recorded forecasts specified a number of possible days, as in 15A-B and 21C, rather than a single one; he was frequently not specific about what would (as opposed to what would not) happen; he did not, for example, claim to have forecast lunar eclipses in advance, and so on. Second, Wu Ding's staff of pyromantic experts did infrequently incise records that revealed, obliquely to be sure, the king's limitations as seer and, by implication, the limitations of the entire pyromantic process. In these cases, the king had not been formally wrong, but he certainly had not been right.

That Wu Ding and his diviners did not adopt the simplest expedient for dealing with oracular failure—that of dispensing with recorded forecasts and verifications entirely—testifies to the commitment that must have existed in his

reign to both genuine divinatory acts and genuine historical records. Certain potentially delegitimizing divinations were incised into the bones and shells. These were delegitimizing to the king, but they served to legitimate the process of divination itself by stressing, even at some cost to the ruler, the importance of recording the divinations accurately. And it was, of course, precisely the belief in the authenticity of royal divination that made it such a valuable institution for legitimizing royal power. The frequent balancing of positive and negative charges, placed in matching opposition on the bone itself,⁵³ reflected the workings of a world whose metaphysical balances were changeable and uncertain. So long as the divinator record showed a strong balance of successful forecasts, so long as it demonstrated a continual and realistic attempt to understand and shape spiritual and mundane realities, then the king was fulfilling his role as "I, the one man" who, better than others, could foresee and influence what was likely to happen.

THE ROLE OF THE KING

The king played a central role in Shang divination. Many of the charges were about his plans, his activities, and his health. Many involved his choice of officers. He was virtually the only human who could read the cracks and make forecasts. By the end of the dynasty, moreover, the king had become virtually the sole diviner of record. That the king also participated directly in the royal cult is further evidence of the great value that religious activities of this sort played in the functioning of the Shang state; there can, indeed, have been little distinction between cult and divination, between prayer and administration. The king presided over a theocratic,⁵⁴ patrimonial state; as the living head of the royal lineage who had the sole ability to communicate with the dead ancestors upon whose blessings the continued success of the dynasty depended, the king focused religious, political, and social power in his royal person.

THE EVOLUTION OF SHANG DIVINATION

Finally, it must be stressed that the form and content of Shang divination were continually evolving. By the reigns of the last two Shang kings, Di Yi and Di Xin (first half of the eleventh century B.C.E.), recorded prognostications were

53. As in 5A-B; 7A-B; 9A-B; 12A-B; 18A-B; C-D; E-F; 19A-B; 20A-B; 21A-B; 22A-B; 31A-B; and so on.

54. In describing Shang political culture, *theocratic* refers to the rule of a king whose undifferentiated political and religious authority derived from his status as the descendant and representative of his ancestors, the spiritual powers most directly concerned with the fortunes of their

always auspicious, and they tended to be clustered on particular oracle bones. Moreover, by contrast with the frequently elaborate prognostications of Wu Ding's period,⁵⁵ those of the last two rulers, Di Yi and Di Xin,⁵⁶ were invariably brief and nonspecific. Similarly, the verifications of the closing reigns were far tenuous than those of Wu Ding's time and were generally limited to divinations about averting disasters, about the weather, and about the hunt.

When considered in the light of other changes involving the reduced scope of the divination charges, the disappearance of the complementary, positive-negative charge pairs, and the markedly reduced size of the late-period calligraphy, it is clear that the vital divinator scenarios of Wu Ding, in which the king submitted virtually all aspects of his life to the pyromantic shell or bone for spiritual guidance, had become a thing of the past. Since the Shang diviners sometimes consulted clumps of numerals, piled on top of one another and carved into the oracle bones, that can be converted into trigrams and hexagrams like those used in the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*),⁵⁷ it is possible that the Late Shang diviners employed both *Yijing*-like achilomancy (which involved the manipulation of milfoil stalks or counting rods) and pyromancy in conjunction and that the diminished scope of the pyromantic record may have been due in part to the growing popularity of the alternative system. That system has left few Shang records of its use, but the combination of pyromancy and achilomancy was certainly routine in the ensuing Zhou period.

THE LEGACY OF SHANG

There can be little doubt that the cultural assumptions of the Late Shang predated the way for many of the more elaborate articulations of Zhou and later times. The divinator impulse itself, for example, which sought to uncover the hidden meanings of events, may be regarded as ancestral to the "new text" (*jīnwén*) interpretations of the Han,⁵⁸ whose political history, like that of the Zhou, was marked by an enduring concern with divination and portents. The concern with timeliness and good order that was so central to Shang divination⁵⁹ was also to prove central to many of the schools of Eastern Zhou (771-256 B.C.E.) thought; the Shang would have fully appreciated, for example, the underlying assumptions of the "Monthly Ordinances" of the *Record of Rites* (*Lǐjì*).⁶⁰ The hierarchical conception of the Shang ancestors, in which the more

55. Represented by 15A-B, 21C, 39B, and 40.

56. Represented by 13A-E, 35, and 41.

57. See ch. 2 and ch. 10, pp. 318-25.

58. See ch. 10, pp. 314-16.

59. Such as those about cult, for example, in 5A-B, 31A-B, 32A-B, 33, 34.

60. See ch. 10, pp. 329-44.

senior ancestors appear to have grown more powerful as they moved up the genealogical ladder with the passage of time, must also have provided a strong emotional basis for, as it may have been reinforced by, similar hierarchies of organization and ritual among the living. The rigid scheduling of the cult to the ancestors, the use of a limited number of day-name categories to classify them, and the willingness to give them ordinal temple names, such as "fourth Ancestor Ding," all indicate a preference in the religious world for the kind of orderly and impersonal arrangements that can be associated with the development of the imperial bureaucracy in Zhou and Han. That kin connections were frequently to play a key role in the operations of that bureaucracy only confirms the closeness of the link to the earlier ancestral cult. The historians' commitment to keeping a true record of what the ruler did and said also appears to have its roots in Shang divinatory record-keeping.⁶¹

The Shang king's concern for good harvests and rainfall⁶² was also continued in a variety of Zhou and Han rituals, such as the ploughing of the sacred field at the start of the agricultural year (referred to in the *Classic of Odes* and the *Record of Rites*), all of which assumed the ruler's responsibility for encouraging Heaven's benevolence toward the state and its people. The general assumption that the ancestors, when properly treated, continued to smile on their living descendants is again central to much of the religion of Zhou and Han. The preference for male children — so marked in later Chinese culture and entirely comprehensible in a dynastic system in which descent passed through the male line — was already present in the Shang divinatory record. The central value of *xiao* or "filiality" must surely have had its origins in the great reverence that the Shang paid to their ancestors — in divinatory inquiry, in cultic offerings, and in the rich furnishing of their graves.

And, not least, the Zhou conception of a supreme being, *T'ian* (Heaven), presiding over the universe,⁶³ was analogous to the Shang conception of Di, who not only stood above the ancestors⁶⁴ and Nature Powers but might on occasion command other groups to attack the Shang⁶⁵ in a way that appears, at least in its mechanism, to have anticipated the Zhou "Mandate of Heaven." Unlike *T'ian*, however, Di as he is recorded in the oracle-bone inscriptions seems not to have been a force for moral good; he was evidently inscrutable in his actions, an impartial and mysterious figure whose existence may have been invoked to explain the Shang ancestors' inability to answer their descendants' prayers. The Zhou claim that Di (or *T'ian*) had ordered the Zhou rulers to conquer the Shang would thus have been not a new invention of Zhou political

theory but a logical extension from the religious belief of Shang times. The readiness with which the Shang are said to have accepted their conquerors' explanation for the Zhou victory lends some support to the view that a "Mandate of Di" was part of Late Shang political culture.

The intensely religious nature of Shang political culture — in which virtually all aspects of the king's activities were subject to the approval and scrutiny of the Powers — suggests the considerable humanization that the philosophers of the Eastern Zhou, most notably Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.),⁶⁶ were to undertake in articulating their concerns. Ancestor worship, by its very interest in honoring and replicating the deeds and beliefs of the ancestors, is bound to be a powerful force for conservatism in any theocratic political culture. That the magico-religious assumptions of Shang divinatory culture still played a large role in the elite culture of Zhou and Han further suggests the degree to which these assumptions must have satisfied social and psychological needs. Whether or not the Shang diviners forecast or shaped the future with notable accuracy — and it is worth reflecting on the record of modern economic forecasters before reaching too harsh a judgment — Shang divination worked so well to satisfy the cultural demands of those who used it that many of its underlying assumptions were to endure for a millennium and more.

[—DNK]

61. See the discussion above of 15A–B and 42A–D.

62. As in 7A–B, 12A–B, 13A–E.

63. See ch. 2.

64. As in 18A–F.

65. As in 24B; see also 21A–B for another instance in which Di issues commands.

66. See ch. 3.