

Is Shang religion shamanistic? Critically assess the scholarly debate on the wu, referring both to the archaeological record and the oracle bone inscriptions.

Introduction

It would be deceptively easy to examine this question against well defined, measurable targets, but few societies or cultures exist within such discrete limits. So this essay will examine the evidence, the material traces (the archaeological record) of the Shang culture, the oracle bone texts, and literature from later dynastic periods. Existing scholarship is referred to throughout the essay, and some ideas are also discussed on aspects of the Shang period which currently seem have been only partly addressed within academia, the tension between orality and literacy in a partly literate society, and the explanatory power of post-modernist complexity theory.

The Shang

Chinese tradition (e.g. discussion in Keightley, 1999:232-249) places the Shang dynasty between 1554 BCE to 1045-1040BCE, prior to the Late Shang dynasty (the Anyang/Yinxu IV period). The extant Late Shang texts (the oracle bone inscriptions) and the archaeological record suggest a society and polity that does not conform to modern ideas of a territorially discrete nation state (Eno, 2009:42), which David Keightley (1983: 556-557) describes as evolving from a chiefdom to a nation state, becoming in the Anyang/Yinxu IV period a “patrimonial proto-bureaucratic mix”. So how do we define the Shang? A ‘state’, a polity, an extended ‘clan’, or a ‘people’, or are we projecting modern concepts back to the Bronze Age? Across some 500/600 years how did Shang state and society evolve politically, culturally, and territorially? What we do know from the archaeological record is that Shang material culture permeated wide parts of northern and central China across the bronze age (Shelach-Lavi, 2015:199-200), and to present an analysis limited to only a part of Shang ‘world’, spatially or chronologically, would not provide a complete answer to the question. However, our textual evidence for Shang culture, the oracle bone inscriptions, come mainly from the Anyang period, so this essay will assess the Shang as a cultural/geographical entity primarily of the Anyang/Yinxu IV period. Previous and succeeding periods will be touched on, as will societies substantially influenced by Shang culture.

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Era and Central Plains Culture Phase	Approximate Dates BC	Contemporaneous Cultures Mentioned in Text
Middle Neolithic (Yangshao)	5000–3000	Fuhe
Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic (Longshan)	3000–2000	Ashan, Qijia
Early Bronze Age		
Erlitou I	1900–1700	Lower Xiajiadian,
Erlitou II	1700–1610	Siba, Luodamiao
Erlitou III	1610–1550	
Early Middle Bronze Age		
Erlitou IV	1550–1450	
Lower Erligang	1510–1425	
Upper Erligang	1425–1300	
Middle Shang	1425–1250	Baijiazhuang, Huanbei
Late Middle Bronze Age		
People's Park	1300–1200	
Late Shang		
Yinxu I–II	1250–1200	Sanxingdui
Yinxu III	1200–1125	
Yinxu IV	1125–1046	
Late Bronze Age		
Western Zhou	1046–771	Wazhadi
Springs and Autumns Period	771–476	
Warring States Period	475–221	Qingyanggong
Qin/Han	221 BC–AD 220	

Fig: 1. Neolithic and Bronze Age Chronology in China

Religion

Whilst defining religion is beyond the scope of this essay, there are issues around religion that relate specifically to China that prompt discussion. Firstly, there is always a tension between the individual and the state institutions, and in China this conflict of structure and agency has historically tended to become increasingly weighted on the side of structure, the 'usefulness' to the state in appropriating Confucianism being an obvious example (Michael, 2015:675). Accordingly, finding a definition, description, word or even a *concept* of religion for China is difficult, so intertwined have state, ceremony, ritual and religion become (Goossaert, 2005:13).

In China in the early 1900s a neologism, *zongjiao*, was formed (adopted from Japanese) to formalise the western concept of 'religion' as a structured system of beliefs and practices, within but separate from wider society, which organizes adherents/believers into institutionalised, church-like organizations (Paper, 1995:2-3, Campany, 2003:307). As *Jiao* can be applied to Buddhism (*fojiao*), Confucianism (*kungjiao*), and Daoism (*daojiao*) it arguably represents institutionalised, non-family or clan-based belief systems, as well as foreign religious institutional systems (discussion in Paper, 1995:2-4). In some ways this establishes the 'other' in opposition to the Chinese tradition of continuity of communal and personal piety, and veneration of ancestral spirits. It is also the demographic of Chinese folk shamanism (Michael, 2015: 652), and any analysis of prevalence of Shamanism within the Shang period would be incomplete without including all parts of the society, as the intrusion of establishment religion into individual lives does not necessarily replace or

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eliminate personal piety.¹ Robert Campany (2003: 311-316) discusses western attitudes relating to religion; particularly the predisposition to segregate phenomena in a Cartesian fashion, with religions and belief systems becoming individual entities, rather than being viewed as a continuum of experience, whereas the later holistic, materialist approach (Campany, 2003:314-316), might be more relevant to both Chinese culture and the *wu*. Campany (2003:316) also relates institutional religion to the concept of imagined communities as social constructs, mirroring Thomas Michael, who implicitly describes the linking Shamanism to the *wu* as a construct of western scholarship (2015:651-652), to the extent that one academic used the term 'Shaman' instead of *wu* to "avoid alienating his western readership" (Edward Schafer, quoted in Michael, 2015:652). To a certain extent this entire scholarly debate is a construct of western academia, and Jordan Paper (1995:9-12) traces this back to an excessively narrow focus of Jesuit missionaries on ritual practice of the Chinese elite. This narrative rather unwittingly becomes a reflection on western thought and colonial attitudes, and particularly institutional Christianity's aversion to religious pluralism. This is an easily accepted paradigm of Chinese culture, and Western views of Chinese religion have sometimes been hampered by this systemic lack of understanding, as have (by following practices of western scholarship) some views within Chinese institutions, a point made by Vincent Goossaert (2005:16) in relation to a Chinese state conflation of Daoism with superstition.

For this essay religion will be considered in the widest possible sense, including ritual, cult, 'superstition' and personal piety, and across the entire society, as to do anything else would not fully answer the question. This student will also try (and probably fail...) to avoid the western preconceptions noted above.

Shamans and Shamanism

These are also extensive concepts, ranging from religion through to anthropology. Mircea Eliade's comprehensive study of Shamans and Shamanism (1964) covered every continent, spanned the entirety of human history, and established a huge variation of phenomena across cultures and societies. The chapters headings of Eliade's book provide a good checklist of phenomena associated with Shamanism: vocation, hereditary transmission, bestowing of powers, initiation, animal languages and associations, costumes, performances, seances, links with cosmology, ascent and descent to other realms (Eliade, 1964: vii-x). Some academics, K-C Chang, Elizabeth Childs-Johnson for example, suggest Shamanism in Ancient China included the ability to communicate with the spirit world via trance and ritual, supported by the animal familiars prevalent in Shang art. Other observers (Robert Bagley and David Keightley for instance) focus more on physical evidence and are cautious of linking shamanism to the Shang period. However, beyond this brief summary this essay will look at the evidence for indications of shamanism rather than attempt to meet any particular definitions. Additionally, no distinction will be made between the male and female *wu*, as is outlined in some later Chinese literature as well as in ethnographic accounts of Siberian Shamanism (Boileau, 2002:352-354).

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The archaeological record

Material traces possibly indicative of shamanism are present in China from the late neolithic period (5000 BC) onwards (Chang, 1999: 50-53, 60-64). K-C Chang has described remains from the Yangshao, Xinglongwa and Daxi culture employing dragon and tiger images, funerary objects from Longshan cultures (Figs: 4-5) including ritual jades and ceramics with animal and proto-*taotie* imagery, all reminiscent of much later periods and accepted (by K-C Chang at least - 1999: 50-53, 60-64; 1983:63, and in particular 1981:12) as indicative of shamanism. Elizabeth Childs-Johnson sees the *taotie* and other human/animal composites as “helpers” not in shamanistic terms but as *yi*, metamorphic power images, “power symbols with which the king identified and advertised his right as a divinity on earth” (Childs-Johnson, 2019:11, Fig: 2). The use of ritual objects with prominent iconography continues through the Erlitou period and reaches full expression with the ritual bronzes of the Anyang period. Technically extraordinary, cast with a complex ceramic technique, these were performative items made for display and use, a projection of political and ritual authority, power and wealth. Ritual bronze vessels (*jue*, *jia*, and *ding* etc...) were used in divination, ceremonial offerings and sacrifices to the Shang pantheon and ancestors, actions described in later literature as performed by shamans (the *wu*), including the king. Some scholars, Robert Bagley (1999:134-136) in particular, are sceptical of this association, as the vast number of inscribed oracle bones (Fig: 11) give no indication of any symbolic meaning attaching to the vessels, which are quite precisely named. And not all complex imagery contains ritual or religious symbolism, for instance the Celtic interlaced (‘knotwork’) panels which decorate the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow feature complex geometric and anthropogenic designs, quite deliberately including endless lines seemingly symbolic of eternal life, but are not *specifically* religious, instead deriving from common Celtic patterns also seen on Pictish standing stones, iron age shield bosses, and Le Tene carved ivories (amongst others, Bain, 1951:15-19). There is no *contemporaneous* textual evidence to suggest that animal designs in the Shang period on ritual bronze vessels (or bronze axes, jade daggers etc...) are any more than culturally resonant designs, examples of a long-established genre as appearing in the archaeological record.

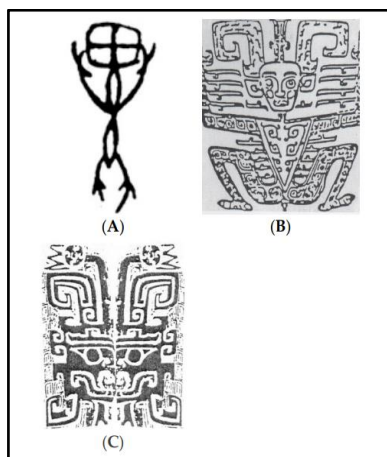


Fig: 2. *Yi*, metamorphic power images. Note the similarity of the headdress in fig: 10.

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Fig. 3: Bronze Hu, taotie relief decoration. Fig. 4: Liangzhu cong showing proto-taotie imagery.



Fig. 5: Liangzhu grave containing Bi and Cong jades.

As well as animal representations, there are also a vanishingly small number of human images on Shang bronzes (K-C Chang, 1981:20). The images are linked by Chang to shamans, both on stylistic grounds and by reference to later literature (Chang, 1981:12-21). The identifications are again disputed by scholars such as Bagley and Keightley who alternatively see a “good bureaucratic order” (Keightley, 1999:262), mirroring the repeated regularity displayed in the contemporaneous oracle

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bone inscriptions, all suggesting a religious tradition (shamanistic practice) that had perhaps been appropriated for social/political messaging.



Fig. 6: The Da He ding. The claws and horns possibly representing an animal/human composite.

Human and composite bronze images of masks, weapons, finials and apotropaic amulets were produced across and outside the Shang cultural orbit, both before and predating the Anyang period, and whilst mostly using complex Shang casting technology, stylistically they do not always belong to Shang culture. Masks are closely associated with shamans by Mircea Eliade, forming essential parts of shaman's costumes for transcendental dance (Eliade, 1964:145-180). Whether these represent shamanism in Shang China again revolves around later literature and perceptions of highly stylised symbolism (Figs: 7-10), but not all masks are made to be worn... (see fig: 7)



Fig: 7. Sanxingdui bronze mask

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Fig: 8: Sanxingdui bronze mask, rear.



Fig: 9. Bronze yue axe.



Fig: 10. Bronze pole finial, Xin'gan.

A wider conceptual point is made by Ladislav Kesner (1991:36) in identifying the taotie as a mythical beast, the end point of a “whole spectrum of mask and face-like motifs executed in all media”, rather than a stylised representation of an actual animal, a shamanic familiar. Robert Bagley (1987, quoted in Kesner, 1991:34) links the development of the *taotie* to Shang bronze technology, seeing the theriomorphic imagery as a product of the unique casting process. As Kesner points out (1991:35) whilst this perspective retrospectively empowers Shang artisans, it possibly underestimates the power of the theocratic Shang state, which projected its symbolism across central China for half a millennium. The Shang deployed enormous resources to ritual, ranging from the import of thousands of turtle shell plastrons from either South China or the Indian Ocean for divination, the ore mining, transport and casting of the magnificent highly stylised performative bronze vessels, and the ceremonial sacrifice of huge numbers of animals and human beings. This was a society revolving around and legitimised by ritual. The exact role of the *wu* in the Anyang rituals is not clear from the archaeological record though, which only shows the material contexts of ritual. The oracle bone inscriptions do make it clear that Anyang hosted a multitude of repeated

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closely inter-related rituals. Evangelos Kyriakidis (2007:14-15) emphasises the cultural importance of continuity in the practice of ritual, observations supported here, and also in the subsequent Zhou Dynasty, where production and use of bronze ritual vessels continued in clan shrines (Fig: 9), and the *wu* continued to practice divination.



Fig: 11. Zhou bronze ritual assemblage with altar.

Literature

Apart from oracle bone inscriptions and a few inscribed vessels (Figs: 12-13) historians are reliant on literature from later periods to analyse accounts of Shang religion/ritual. For example, virtually the entirety of “The Image and Status of Shamans in Ancient China” by F-S Lin (2009) consists of textual analysis of later literary sources, and in his analysis of animal imagery on Shang and Zhou bronzes K-C Chang (1981) justifies almost every single expression of art or representation by recourse to the later texts. None of which diminishes the importance of literature from the Han and Zhou dynasties, indicative as they are of a continuous Chinese ritual and shamanism tradition and supported by extremely well argued and persuasive narratives from the authors mentioned.

But nonetheless later texts such as the *Ch'un Ts'ew* (4th century BC, Chang, 1981:538), the *Chuang Tzu* (300BC, Chang, 1981:538) are not definite proofs of Shamanism in Shang religion any more than Homer's *Iliad* and *Odessey* are accurate representations of Mycenaean civilisation after a time lapse of over half a millennium. Notably, K-C Chang acknowledges this, referring to the opinions of colleagues such as Max Loehr and David Keightley (both quoted in Chang - 1981:536 & 528), and the need for caution in interpretation. There seems to be in Chinese academia a need to look for ancient origins of their belief systems, in much the same way that western academia seems to need bronze age confirmation of classical Greek myths, or validation of biblical scripture from modern archaeology. Western academics can also carry this trend in Chinese history, Mircea Eliade relating (1964:448-449) that the daughters of the emperor Yo (2258-2208 BC) flew like birds, and generally reading flight as Shamanic ecstasy on an unreferenced basis other than that “Chinese tradition offers many examples” (Eliade, 1964:449). Eliade (1964:450) also links Ancient Chinese shamanism to

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possession and promotes the Dao as inheritors of this Shamanistic tradition of the *wu* from only later literary evidence.

Literature such as the *Li Ji* and the *Shi Ji* are regularly quoted to interpret the role of the *wu* as shamans, Mu-Chou Poo referring to the *nuo* exorcism ritual in the *Hou Hanshu*, and sacrificial rites outlined in the *Shi Ji* (Poo, 2009:283-288). However easy it is to dismiss this textual analysis as unsupported, non-primary material, in societies with a strong continuity of culture tradition such literature does not spring into creation fully formed.² The very traditional, ritualistic nature of Chinese ceremonial observance suggests a substantial communal memory, and for this reason Thomas Michael specifically urges caution when dismissing the *wu* as shamanistic from lack of evidence (alongside the sheer difficulty of actually defining shamans and shamanism). Stephan Bumbacher (2012: 13-31) gives us examples from the *Shi Ji*, demonstrating the belief systems that enabled adepts to complete reciprocal agreements with the spirit world by (metaphorically) joining two halves of a *fu*-tally. Whether in a secular context or a supernatural context, the legitimising effect is the same, an interaction with a Han deity seemingly identical to the contacts of the *wu* with the Shang pantheon.

The oracle bone inscriptions

Oracle bone divination, Pyromancy, was practiced in China from the Erlitou period (1900BC) onwards (Bagley, 1999:159). Our only textual sources from the Shang period itself are the oracle bone inscriptions from the Anyang (Late Shang) period. Serving as records of the state ritual divination during the Anyang period to the end of the dynasty, they illustrate the intentions and preoccupations of the ruling clan, and also neatly chart the development of the Chinese script (Childs-Johnson, 1987:186-192).

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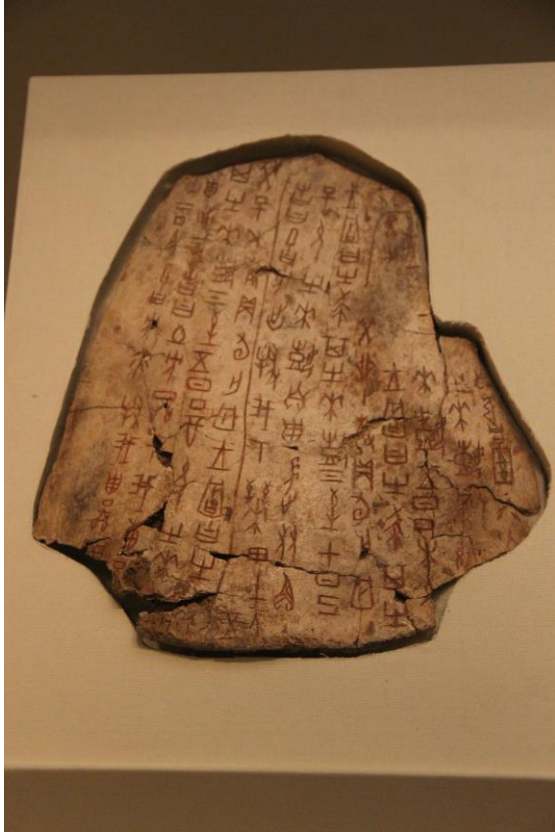


Fig. 12: Oracle Bone, paired charge.

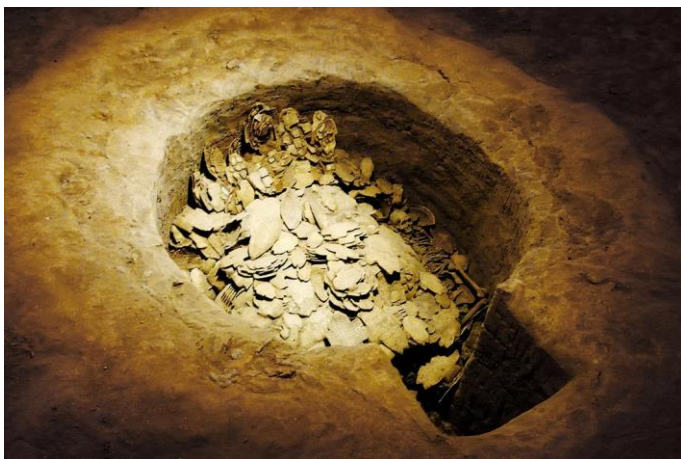


Fig. 13: Oracle bone deposit, Yinxu.

Inscribed onto either bovine scapula or turtle shells (plastrons) the texts record ritual offerings often including sacrifices (both animal and human) and libations of wine, directed to the Shang pantheon of ancestors and deities, “forces whose future intentional actions were topics of divination” (Eno, 2009:54). This was divination and prediction, the ruler interceding with the deities and ancestors to foresee a course of action. The practitioners were the *wu*, the King himself towards the very end of

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the Shang period (Keightley, 1999:243-245), and further down the social hierarchy various clan and family kinship groups. The ruler was regarded as a *wu* (with reference to Mircea Eliade, K-C Chang translates this as shaman - 1981:543) with Zhou and Han literature providing retrospective narrative details.

However, translation of the oracle bone inscriptions is inherently uncertain, and misinterpretation of subtle changes of meaning can completely change the meaning of a whole inscription (Serruys, 1974:15-25). An example quoted by Serruys (Figs: 14-15) demonstrates how the glyph for uprooted corn can be read as mutating across time to represent 'avert'. When incorporated into a compound expression with the glyphs for 'sacrificial rites' and *fang* (enemy/danger), 'uproot' reads as 'displace', the whole phrase combining as 'avert danger'. And as glyphs progressively simplified into formal characters as the written script developed, and with meanings changing across time, a modern reading does not necessarily approximate to the original Shang meanings.



Fig. 14: uproot...

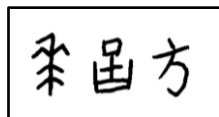


Fig. 15: avoid danger...

The formulation and scope of the questions/requests shown in the inscriptions changes across time. The earliest inscriptions often present as a paired question (the charge), one positive and one negative (Keightley, 1999:243-247) and as the Anyang period progressed the charges increasingly became affirmative only or negative only, which can plausibly be interpreted as reducing the scope for incorrect outcomes (Keightley, 1999:243-345). Supporting this interpretation is the increasingly precise preparation and polishing of the plastrons and scapulae, and the increasing number and precision of drillings as the Anyang period progressed, all of which would have reduced the possibility of 'inauspicious' cracks forming. David Keightley (1999:243-245) and Lisa Raphals (2013:181) note an increasing trend towards highlighting successful requests/oracles, with accurate prognostications often highlighted in vermilion pigment, which can reasonably be assumed to be for display. Together this can be interpreted as an increasing bureaucratisation of the divination process, to enhance political messaging and further legitimize the ruler. But at the same time negative predictions were still recorded, with the diviners and readers/officials still named on the bones, implying that however much importance was placed on political messaging there was still a fundamental core of respect within the *wu* for the answers provided by the pantheon of deities and ancestors. The content – the purpose of – the divinations also changed towards the end of the dynasty, with more prosaic questions being asked (Keightley, 1999:243-245), when to hunt, curing toothache, for example, with infrequent questions over warfare, harvests etc... The Shang may have

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though differently though, for ritual concerns around a royal hunt (for example) may have assumed an importance that for them transcended other concerns. The elements of the pantheon consulted also changed significantly, with the high deity Di almost disappearing from the records with a focus more on royal ancestors (Keightley, 1999:243-245). David Keightley points out that in some cases, for example an absence of divination surrounding raising armies, may be simply because this was no longer an issue where command and coercion within the developing Shang state had replaced the negotiated arrangements of earlier periods (Keightley, 1983:34). A more subtle question around Shang divination is whether the intention was to predict the future or to influence it (a question posed by Lisa Raphals, 2013:181), which across a period of some three thousand years is almost unanswerable. Perhaps both?

The pairing of a question (the charge) with an outcome is sometimes interpreted as demonstrating literacy, or more particularly writing, was more widespread than might appear from the archaeological record (Shelach-Lavi, 2015:218). The argument follows that when the result of a prognostication is recorded on the oracle bones, then this must have been first recorded on a perishable medium and subsequently be transferred to the plastron/scapulae (Shelach-Lavi, 2015:218). However, this theory lacks evidence, possibly because perishable materials may have been used, and secondly because events in question were often time limited within the Shang ten-day ritual calendar (Raphals, 2013:181), and so whilst there was often a time delay before a 'result', for many questions the result was virtually immediate and the transfer of information onto the bone surface *could* have been equally immediate. Possibly also writing – and in the wider sense literacy – was restricted within Shang society or required ritual performance. Possibly the argument itself reflects the academic's stance, who might prefer to emphasise increasing bureaucracy rather than the continuity of traditional practice. Nonetheless, however restricted, writing was extant on other materials (e.g. bronze vessels, Fig:13), and wood tablets (*dian* - Keightley, 1999:287) and on perishable materials, which forces the accuracy of predictions – they could be recorded - and therefore the authority of the *wu*, into a practical, results-orientated situation.

Overall, across the Anyang period the divination process became more regulated, more oriented towards good, auspicious results and legitimization of the ruling dynasty. Another point is that although the king can be described as “dancing for rain”, there is no specific mention of any shamanistic trances or seances. The ancestors/deity had answered, and the results were noted and recorded. As is discussed at length by several academics (Kyriakidis, 2007; Renfrew, 2007) the material traces of physical performance can be difficult enough to identify, and to further distinguish between secular ceremony, religious observation and cultic reverence/activity even more so, let alone the nature of the performance.

Pyromancy was widespread within and outside the central Chinese plain (Flad, 2008:411), for example in clan rituals in Zhongba (Rafals, 2013:182) and Huayuanzhuang (Eno, 2009:77), and continued to be used officials in the succeeding Zhou and Chu dynasties addressing very private concerns (marriage, progeny...) indicative of a degree of personal belief, rather than a legitimizing role. That mantic experts - the *wu* - were consulted demonstrates a continuity of belief, and when

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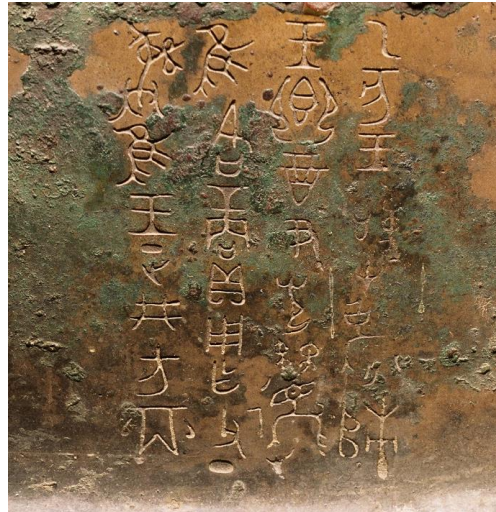
the addendum of Chu Shaosun in the *Shi Ji* (Late Han period, quoted in Raphals, 2013:182) lists suitable questions for turtle shell divination it also shows a continuing belief in the abilities of the *wu* to resolve the systemic uncertainties endemic in the pre-modern societies.

As the legitimisation of authority in the late Shang Anyang period revolved around ritual, and was encoded in the oracle bone inscriptions, it leads us to question exactly how the relationship between literacy, power and the *wu* functioned.

Literacy and Power

Shang culture and society sits on the cusp of the transition of China from oral tradition to written culture. K-C Chang (1999:81-83) starts to address the importance of this transition, but his narrative approach focusses on a historical timeline without delving deeper into the subject other than broad observations. The importance of consulting classics as repositories of wisdom is stressed, "What we know about the association of writing and power in ancient China seems, actually, to bear out this expectation. The power of the written word came from its association with knowledge - knowledge from the ancestors, with whom the living communicated through writing; which is to say, knowledge from the past, whose wisdom was revealed through its medium." (Chang: 1999:88). So oracle bones needed to be inscribed with the question (Keightley, 1999:243-247) – the charge – and also the *results* to record the success of the king's communications and intercessions with the pantheon, enhancing his authority and power. For the Shang elite writing enhanced their authority and power, and for the *wu* it advertised their prowess. David Keightley (1999:237) describes how the last nine Shang kings had over 120 diviners, often named individuals, from known lineages and communities. Vast quantities of turtle plastrons, the time spent on preparation and ritual purification, all suggest important, significant ritual, a "central dynastic institution" (Keightley, 1999:236). That by the end of the dynasty the only named diviner was the king himself, with routinely optimistic prognostications often based on numerical manipulation (Keightley, 1999:245), this could represent the final stages of the appropriation of the pyromantic divination by the ruling elite, and replacement of the reputation of the *wu* with royal authority.

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Figs: 16-17. Fang Ding showing double-bodied snake relief, and interior inscription.

During the Anyang period the divination question or request (and sometimes results) was inscribed, it was given in writing. The texts became permanent examples of ruling authority, an exercise in legitimacy. Why did writing matter so much? The importance of the medium matters as much as the message (McLuhan, quoted by Jane Hirshfield, 1997:189), here a transit from the visibility of performance to the authority of text. Of itself written media has no intrinsic meaning, just the value a society places on it as a social construct, but like a lightbulb illuminating a room (McLuhan, 1964:9) the written word illuminates the past, it solidifies and enhances memory. But this does not address the deeper question around literacy, why *should* the performance and repetition of oral memory be superseded by written memory, with results so deeply affecting society and culture? Walter Ong (1982) likens the process in partially literate societies as akin to learning new technology, with power accruing from acquisition of a more advanced skill set. The poet Jane Hirshfield (1997:176-196) sees a more subtle progression away from repetition, cadence, rhythm, and performance – the stream of unselfconscious recital - towards the finely honed, repeated logic of writing, where the word is identified, objectified, held away from the self. For the literate, once read an object, word or text does not have to enter memory or vanish, instead it can be read and re-read infinitely. It is liberated from the patterns of memory, the cycle of repetition and rhythms of an oral projection of memory, a point made by Thomas Michael (2015:661), who notes anthropological descriptions of how shamans become actors in a performance, utilising the cadences of orality recitation to interact with their ‘audience’. Reading interrupts the stream of consciousness itself. As in other bronze age societies, for the Shang writing could have constituted a carefully cultivated skill creating cultural and social power, as well as the possibility of freedom of expression (above discussion summarised from Hirshfield 1997:188-192). Literacy was (still is) an effective tool to police society/culture (Bowman and Woolf, 1994:6). Nonetheless the oral, performative nature of social events is never totally replaced by writing (Knappett, 2005:135-9) or as Walter Ong puts it “orality could linger in the presence of writing” (1982:95). The powerful iconography of the Anyang bronzes, the taotie

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designs and masks, was communicated directly through the visuality of the objects, a pure, non-textual meaning deriving from symbolism resonant in the culture (Kesner, 1991:51).

If literacy – writing – could enhance power, then its practice could (predictably) be restricted within partly literate societies, as happened in Pharaonic Egypt (Frankfurter, 1998:204-264) where priestly literacy, ritual expertise and provision of oracular magic was a source of influence in society. Accession to such levers of power would have been a powerful incentive for the *wu*, enhancing their authority. This possibly represents a careful, conscious manipulation of the power of literacy to achieve the aims of the ruling dynasty and reinforce the authority of the *wu*. Thomas Michael (2015:667-673) provides an extensive analysis of the relationship between Shamanism and centralised authority, pointedly noting that the *wu* have never gone away, “not even in Maoist China”. As the Shang ruler eventually aggregated the entire ritual and divination process to himself by the end of dynasty, this implies performance and textual recording of ritual may have become a prime legitimizing ritual for the dynasty, for their use only.

In this rapidly changing culture, transitioning from oral, performative history to writing and literacy, how did the *wu* position themselves? How did they survive and adapt to become the accepted diviners of Zhou officials, the adepts of the *Shi Ji*?

Complexity

Without necessarily meaning to, Robert Campany contributes to the debate around complexity when he states that “religions do not exist” (Campany, 2003:319), and in a narrow animate sense this is true. However, if an object can affect onlookers, in the same way a religion, almost the archetypal social construct, can have a diffuse, inanimate agency that affects adherents, delimits their world views, and inspires them to action. And this would apply also to the experience of shamanism, the deliberate seeking and witnessing of contact with the spirit world. Shamans also hold agency within their societies, not only by providing transcendental, ecstatic experience, a contact with the spirit world, but also as healers and teachers (discussion in Boileau, 2002:359-375), all in the context of their specific culture.

Implicitly opposed to western, Cartesian paradigms of discrete entities/systems/objects etc... Cultural Complexity theory distinguishes between ‘complex’ and ‘complicated’ (detailed) systems. Complex systems are of a magnitude that they produce outputs not predictable by reference to parts of the system, which can only be understood by looking at interactions of a system with its environment (Cilliers, 1998:112-140). These systems are bound to hold and sustain multiple, conflicting narratives. The relevance to the place of the *wu* in Shang society is not that it provides explanation, rather it alerts us to the certainty, not just possibility, of the presence of numerous explanations, so moving us away from the need for the *passe-partout* of a singular interpretation. To quote Paul Cilliers, who has a lot to say about society and language, “If we model complexity in terms of a network, any given narrative will form a path, or trajectory, through the network. There are a great diversity of such paths. The network is not only complex, but also dynamic. As we trace various narrative paths through it, it changes” (Cilliers, 1998). Looked at this

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way, we can see the *wu* maintaining their authority, the practice of their mantic expertise, in multiple niches within their society as natural options in a changing culture, an outcome explicitly noted and described in later Chinese literature. The *wu* could offer divination, contact with the spirits, contact with the ancestors, healing, and could alleviate natural disasters (Boileau, 2002:359-375). The *wu* were valued.

Some discussion

Evangelos Kyriakidis (2007:1) observes that ritual is a social activity, and to understand it properly it cannot be divorced from its context, the society that produced it. Existence of repeated ritual within a place also “crystallises the ritual location” accordingly attracting more rituals (Kyriakidis, 2007:15-17) and contributing to the shaping of individual and collective identities (Kyriakides, 2007:2-9). Rituals as performance often leave ambiguous traces (Kyriakidis, 2007:9) in the archaeological record, as with the relief decoration on Shang ritual bronzes which can equally be interpreted as highly symbolic, objects specific to ancestor cult, or simply visually attractive objects resonating within an established cultural genre. And is the repeated ritual performance a secular ceremony, a religious event, or cult activity? Were shamans present? Within academic discourse this question is often resolved, understandably, by reference to anthropological research into shamanism in modern (or within living memory) hunter-gatherer societies. However, the cultural milieu of Shang society would differ from that of Siberian hunter-gatherers, and any conclusions drawn from the Tungus ultimately can only be valid for their specific context (discussion in Boileau, 2002:352-354).

We have a an incomplete knowledge of Shang institutional practice from the oracle bone texts, and whilst compelling from a point of view of cultural continuity, the literary evidence from later Chinese periods is time distanced and often systemically unreliable (Childs-Johnson, 1987:173). Literary analysis is also quite conceptually suspect as a backwards looking “search for the rise of *Chinese* civilisation”, and risks losing sight of earlier cultural diversity (Bagley, 1999:135). Also, personal belief and piety, together with the pervasive Chinese reverence for the ancestors is described in literature but lacks definitive corroboration as the precise details of transient performances are difficult to identify in the archaeological record (Kyriakidis, 2007:9). Nonetheless the arguments for the *wu* being inherently ‘shamanistic’ within later literature can be compelling. Firstly, and perhaps not as intended by K C Chang himself, if we move away rigid definitions (or lack of?) of Shamanism to a more inclusive, holistic view of the phenomena across the Shang period, then we could reasonably regard the *wu* as performing rituals/rites that could be interpreted as Shamanistic in a wider sense (extensive discussion in Michael, 2015:673-680). Secondly, another dimension of the *wu* is their presence straddling and adapting to the transition of an oral culture to literacy, mirroring the simultaneous development to a highly stratified society. It is possible parts of the *wu* occupied a niche in this changing society that accepted an appropriation of their role to enhance elite authority via performative ritual and the political messaging of literacy. Obliquely, that this may be the case is illustrated by the succeeding dynasty, the Zhou, who gradually discarded most elite Shang rituals (Childs-Johnson, 2019:2). The very dismantling of the established theocratic and political status quo, however leisurely, confirms its existence in the first place. That the *wu* continued to practice

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divination under the Zhou perhaps demonstrates the *wu* adapting to complex changes in society further underlines the point, and the value of the *wu*.

But direct, unequivocal evidence of Shamanism is absent from the archaeological record, so we are ultimately dependent on texts from later period for their subjective interpretation of the evidence, and our own equally subjective interpretations both of that same literature and an incomplete archaeological record. It would be easy to agree with the views of David Keightley and Robert Bagley, who see little concrete evidence for Shamanism, and when the evidence we do have seems to point to a bureaucracy increasingly interested in the legitimisation of existing power structures in a stratified society. But in a complex evolving society where state, bureaucracy, ritual and religion are often the same thing, and embodied in the same ruler, why should we expect any different of the *wu* and their experiences and manifestation of Shamanism? So thirdly, perhaps the nature of Shang 'shamanistic' experience, practice and ritual, their personal belief systems of transcendental connections with the spirit world of their gods and ancestors, was as formalised and institutionalised as their wider society?

Summary

On balance the question is too reductive to be answered in an equally reductive fashion. The evidence shows established Shang ritual/religion becoming more and more bureaucratized across the life of the dynasty, but this does not mean that there was no religious belief in the wider society, within the *wu* themselves, or for the king and the elite of Shang society. Other polities culturally influenced by the Shang performed similar rituals, the nature of which also changed across time. And in a society right on the cusp of the transition from oral memory to written literacy understanding of the world around them was changing. Rituals changed, writing appeared and enhanced power and authority, the materiality of bronze altered perceptions of the real and spirit worlds, authority and ritual.

All this really reflects elements of complex systems analysis, which proposes that complexity can not only produce multiple outcomes, but that these are inevitable. From this perspective the fragmentary, disputed evidence from over three thousand years ago can be reconciled, together with the multiple interpretations. There is no necessity to look for a singular cause and effect, a *passe-partout* which provides a definitive answer to our questions. We already know that in the modern world a ruler can be a Christian and also represent the political power structure of a secular nation-state during significant ceremonial events. In the world of the Shang the *wu* could have been state officials engaged in repeated legitimizing rituals for state authority, and also the inheritors and practitioners of shamanistic practice in a culture transitioning from orality to literacy. The king could be both *wang* and *wu* (Boileau, 2002:1). All are possible, probable, at the same time. Ultimately, the world of Shang ritual and religion cannot conform to any academic labels the modern world might try to impose. The *wu* do not fit in to modern concepts of shamanism any more than the Shang polity and Minoan Crete fit in to modern, post-Treaty of Westphalia concepts of nation states.

Footnotes:

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1. As was apparent in Egypt between 300 and 450BC, when Pharaonic religion was progressively disestablished as a state religion, and communities reverted to traditional local and personal belief systems such oracles and divination (Frankfurter 1998:199-201).
2. The Aeneid being an obvious exception.

Wordcount:

5992

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