

3.5 SHANG KINGSHIP AND SHANG KINSHIP

Although the names of the Shang kings may not seem an intrinsically interesting topic, certain problems connected with explaining why they are named as they are have generated a particular theory about the relation of the throne to the kinship and power structure of the royal Zi clan. The theory is a good example of important historical ideas that rest upon small details of documentary evidence.

The succession of the Shang kings

The oracle texts largely confirm the *Shiji*'s account of the line of Shang kings, but certain segments of the royal line are clarified. The *Shiji* lists thirteen “pre-dynastic” Shang kings – that is, Zi-clan rulers who predated Tang the Successful's conquest of the Xia Dynasty. There is some debate as to whether the earliest of these, starting from Xie^a, do appear in the oracle inscriptions (oracle text characters often do not match up well with later characters and this makes identifications of person and place names particularly difficult). However, once we reach the king known as Wei^h, the situation becomes clear. Wei is referred to in some texts as Shang-*jia*, and the distant ancestor who is most often listed first when we encounter long strings of king names in the oracle texts is indeed a king whose name includes the Heavenly Stem sign *jia* (see the section on the sexagenary system).

The following two pages show charts of the Shang kings. The first is based on the *Shiji* and includes superscript letters (for pre-dynastic kings) and numbers (for dynastic kings), as well as indicating by the positioning of the kings how the succession proceeded from older to younger brother or from father to son. The second is a reconstruction of the lineage implied by the oracle texts. The kings who appear in both are identified by the same superscript designation (note that while the *Shiji* says that Tang's son Tai-*ding*^{1a} died before ascending the throne, the oracle texts treat him as though he had ruled as a king).

There are some differences between the two charts. For example, the first character in the names of the kings as they appear in the bones sometimes vary from the *Shiji* names. Thus, for example, the proper dynastic title for Tang the Successful appears in the *Shiji* as Tian-*yi* (Heavenly *Yi*), while the oracle texts list him as Ta-*yi* (Great *Yi*), as well as with the name Tang. A more important difference is that while the *Shiji* records in detail when the throne was passed to a younger brother, when to a son, and when to a nephew, the oracle texts only indicate which kings were part of the “major lineage branch” (that is, whose fathers and sons both ruled as kings) and which were not. Thus on the second chart, this main trunk line occupies the left-hand position, while brothers or uncles whose sons did not succeed to the throne branch to the right; in some cases the order of succession moves from right to left, as notes indicate. There are also some cases where the oracle texts list a king not mentioned in the *Shiji*, and vice-versa. Finally, the last king listed in the oracle texts is obviously not Zhòu, who did not have the opportunity to be honored as an ancestral spirit, but Di-*yi*, whom the oracle texts call “Fu-*yi*” (Father *Yi*), since the only ones in which he appears are those divined during the reign of his son.

The Shang Royal Succession, According to the *Shiji*

Xie^a – Zhao-ming^b – Xiang-tu^c – Chang-ruo^d – Cao-yu^e – Ming^f – Zhen^g –

Wei^h

Bao-*ding*ⁱ

Bao-*yi*^j

Bao-*bing*^k

Zhu-*ren*^l

Zhu-*gui*^m

Tian-*yi*^{n/1} (Tang the Successful)

[Tai-*ding*^{1a}] . . . Wai-*bing*² – Zhong-*ren*³

Tai-*jiā*⁴

Wo-*ding*⁵ – Tai-*geng*⁶

Xiao-*jiā*⁷ – Yong-*ji*⁸ – Tai-*wu*⁹

Zhong-*ding*¹⁰ – Wai-*ren*¹¹

He-dan-*jiā*¹²

Zu-*yi*¹³

Zu-*xin*¹⁴ – Wo-*jiā*¹⁵

Zu-*ding*¹⁶ – Nan-*geng*¹⁷

Yang-*jiā*¹⁸ – Pan-*geng*¹⁹ – Xiao-*xin*²⁰ – Xiao-*yi*²¹

Wu-*ding*²²

Zu-*geng*²³ – Zu-*jiā*²⁴

Lin-*xin*²⁵ – Keng-*ding*²⁶

Wu-*yi*²⁷

Tai-*ding*²⁸

Di-*yi*²⁹

Hsin³⁰ (Zhòu)

The Shang Kings as Recorded in Oracle Text Sacrifice Inscriptions

Shang-*jia*^h

Bao-*yi*ⁱ

Bao-*bing*^k

Bao-*ding*^j

Shi-*ren*^l

Shi-*gui*^m

Da-*yi*^{n/1} (Tang)

Da-*ding*^{1a}

Da-*jia*⁴ – Bu-*bing*²

Da-*geng*⁶ – Xiao-*jia*⁷

Da-*wu*⁹ – Lü-*ji*⁸

Zhong-*ding*¹⁰ – Bu-*ren*¹¹

Zu-*yi*¹³ – Qian-*jia*^{12*}

Zu-*xin*¹⁴ – Qiang-*jia*¹⁵

Zu-*ding*¹⁶ – Nan-*geng*¹⁷

Xiao-*yi*²¹ – Xiao-*xin*²⁰ – Pan-*geng*¹⁹ – Xiang-*jia*^{18**}

Wu-*ding*²²

Zu-*jia*²⁴ – Zu-*geng*^{23***}

Keng-*ding*²⁶

Wu-*yi*²⁷

Wen-wu-*ding*²⁸

Fu-*yi*²⁹

* According to the oracle texts Qian-*jia* preceded Zu-*yi* on the throne.

** According to the bones, this generation ruled in reverse order, that is, Xiang-*jia* first.

*** According to the bone texts, Zu-*geng* reigned before Zu-*jia*. The texts also mention a son of Wu-*ding* called Zu-*ji* who did not ascend the throne, but has a kingly title. Note that he appears in the *Shiji* narrative of Wu-*ding*'s reign.

The nature of the Shang king names

The names of the Shang kings are a puzzle. The Zhou referred to their kings by a set of posthumous names which were supposed to capture an essential quality of each king's reign. For example, King Wen was called "Wen" (pattern/culture) because during his reign, the Zhou people assimilated Shang culture (*wen*); King Wu was called "Wu" (martial) because as the conqueror of the Shang he was recalled for his military exploits.

The title of the Zhou rulers, which we translate as "king," was, in Chinese, "Wang," a term whose original meaning is uncertain. It is possible that in its earliest form, the graph for *wang* (王) depicted a battle axe (blade down), symbolizing the military power of the king. The way in which Zhou royal titles appear in Chinese places *wang* after the posthumous name of the king, hence Wen Wang and Wu Wang are the names of the founding rulers of the Zhou.

The Shang referred to their ancestral kings by a two or three character title of which the last was a Heavenly Stem sign. Prefixing this sign was an element that carried some specific meaning: for example, "Da" means Great, "Zu" means Ancestor, "Xiao" means Small, "Wu" means Martial. While the prefixes are not a puzzle, the Heavenly Stem element is. The traditional interpretation of these names, which were known from the *Shiji* account, was that they were assigned to kings on the basis of their **birthdays**: each king was marked by the day of the ten-day "week" on which he was born. The birthday theory makes good sense, but there are problems with it.

There are ten Heavenly Stems, but among the names of the thirty-four pre-dynastic and dynastic Shang kings recorded in the oracle texts, plus the last king, Zhòu (Di-*xin*), the distribution of the stems is oddly uneven. This is how they line up:

<i>jia</i>	7
<i>yi</i>	6
<i>bing</i>	2
<i>ding</i>	7
<i>wu</i>	1
<i>ji</i>	1
<i>geng</i>	4
<i>xin</i>	3
<i>ren</i>	2
<i>gui</i>	1

While it is not out of the question to have a random distribution like this, it is unusual to have three of the ten elements of a series such as this capture such a large proportion of the total. Some years ago, the most prominent archeologist of ancient China then working in the United States, Kwang-Chih (K.C.) Chang of Harvard, set out to explore the issue of these Heavenly Stem names.

Chang first observed that further information on the use of these signs could be obtained from another source: many Shang ritual bronzes had inscribed upon them the name of an ancestor whom they were cast to honor. These fathers, mothers, and grandparents, were, like the Shang

kings, referred to with a cyclical sign. Chang did a statistical analysis of the frequency of occurrence of these signs in almost 1300 bronze inscriptions. His results indicated a distribution pattern entirely inconsistent with the random patterns of birthdays. With regard to these non-royal ancestors, the “birthday theory” does not seem to require revision.

Chang then observed that in the oracle texts, sacrifices to the former kings and queens were generally offered on the cyclical day corresponding to their Heavenly Stem designation. He also noted that it was always the case that the stem sign of ancestral queens was different from that of their royal spouses. This led him to wonder whether these signs were in any way related to issues of kinship and rules of exogamy – that is, the rule that men and women of the same clan may not marry.

Finally, Chang noted an interesting specific case in the oracle texts. In the *Shiji* account of the founding of the Shang, Tang was successful in conquering the Xia largely because of the aid provided by his chief minister, a man called Yi Yin. Yi Yin outlived Tang and, according to the narrative, eventually came into conflict with the young king Tai-*jia*⁴, whom he banished, taking the reins of government into his own hands.

Yi Yin is not a fictional character. He appears in the oracle texts. Of course, the texts narrate no history, but Yi Yin appears there because he is treated like an ancestor: he is offered sacrifices in precisely the way that a royal Shang ancestor might be. Thus the bones suggest that Yi Yin was actually a member of the royal Zi clan. His sacrifices were offered on the day *ding*, and he is only sacrificed to during the reigns of Shang kings whose cyclical designation was *ding*.

From these observations, Chang has developed an elaborate and fascinating theory of Shang kingship and kinship rules. He speculates that the stem signs actually designate branches of the Zi-clan lineage, and that the Shang throne was circulated among these branches in a way that ensured continued clan solidarity through power sharing. Chang pictures the ten lineage branches as divided into two major halves, or “moieties.” Each moiety was dominated by one or two powerful clan sub-lineages: one moiety was dominated by the *Yi* and *Jia* branches, the other by the *Ding* branch. The dynasty was founded by Tang, or Ta-*yi*, whose home lineage was the *Yi-jia* moiety. His minister Yi Yin was indispensable to him principally because he was the leader of the *Ding* moiety. By joining their efforts, they were able to ensure the support of the entire ramified Zi clan population. Tang was succeeded, according to the *Shiji*, by kings whose designations were *ping* and *ren*, and this could mean that power was already circulating among the lineage moieties – Chang’s full model places both the *Bing* and the *Ren* branches within the *Ding* moiety. Then the throne circulated back to the other side, with the accession of Tai-*jia*.

This model could explain a very puzzling element often associated with the story of Yi Yin. The *Shiji* says that after seizing power, Yi Yin, like the Duke of Zhou in later times, eventually resigned his regency and returned the government to Tai-*jia* after the young king had reformed. But alternative accounts say that civil war ensued and that Yi Yin was killed by Tai-*jia*, and *that his son was appointed to succeed him*. That Yi Yin’s power should be granted by Tai-*jia* to the son of the man who exiled him seems bizarre. However, if Yi Yin’s son represented the new head of the *Ding* moiety, this act could be viewed not as the arbitrary assignation of power to one individual, but as

a necessary restoration of balanced power sharing without which the entire Shang royal clan could have split permanently, endangering the security of the throne and the polity.

Unfortunately, the full bearing of oracle text evidence on Chang's model reveals that there are many points at which it is in conflict with the data. It is hard to know whether this is because the model is basically flawed, or whether it is because we do not yet understand how to interpret all aspects of the data. But if Chang's model is eventually shown to be valid, it would introduce an entirely new dimension to our understanding of the institutions of kingship and kinship in ancient China.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1. What is the significance of the final character in Shang royal names and why is it difficult to account for the way that those names repeat or vary from king to king?*
- 2. How does K.C. Chang's theory of royal names provide models for the politics of Shang power and for Shang royal kinship relationships?*

Sources and Further Readings

K.C. Chang's theory is presented in his *Shang Civilization* (Yale, 1980), 175-89. Certain aspects of Chang's original argumentation have been invalidated by later analyses of oracle text dating, but the core model remains plausible.