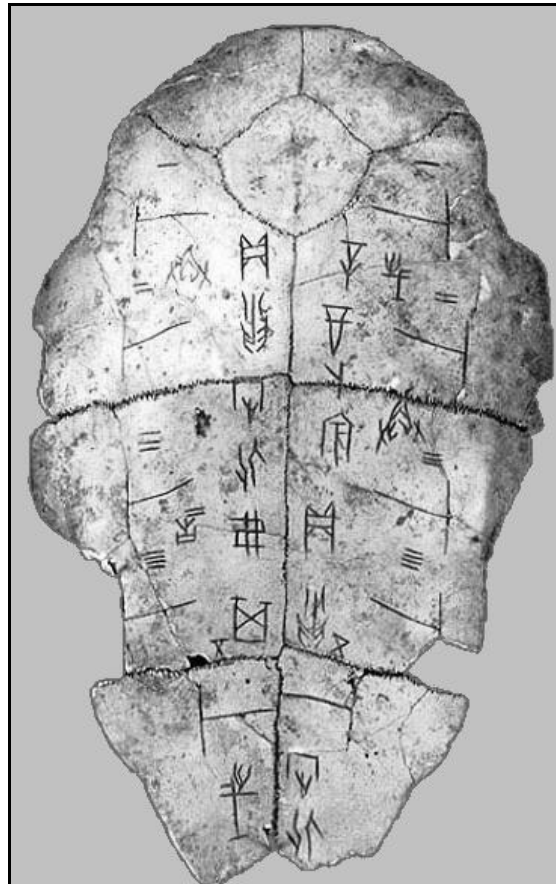


## THE ORACLE TEXTS

The bones that Wang Yi-rong and Liu E discovered in Wang's medicine packet were indeed the records of the kings of the Shang. After the excavations at Xiao-tun had yielded substantial numbers of unbroken inscriptions, progress on deciphering the texts accelerated rapidly. After 1937, archaeological work was halted again, first by the Japanese invasion of China that signaled the start of World War II in Asia, and then by the civil wars that preceded the Communist revolution of 1949. Nevertheless, by this time over 100,000 fragments of inscribed bone had been mined from Xiao-tun and nearby sites, and it is this pre-war collection that remains the heart of the oracle text corpus.

### Shang divination

The fragments that are usually referred to as "oracle bones" are, in fact, made up of two different types of materials. Most of the fragments are portions of the shoulder blades of oxen, called scapulas. The largest and most valuable, however, are not bones at all, but are the lower shells of large turtles: the stomach portion, called the plastron.



*An inscribed turtle plastron from Xiao-tun*

These materials were, as the ancient texts had suggested in their descriptions of Shang practices, employed as media through which human diviners communicated with the spirit world. The bones and shells were first carefully prepared for this. Hollows were scooped out at regular intervals on one side of the bone or shell. Then, at the time when a divination query was addressed to the spirits, a hot poker or some other such item was applied to a hollow, causing the bone to break and a crack to appear on the flat side above the hollow. The diviner, either reading the form of the crack or listening to the sound of the bone as it split, determined the reply of the spirits to the query. Then, next to the crack, the query was recorded according to a standard form that the diviners employed for this purpose.

Almost all of the divination texts we possess were made on behalf of the Shang king, and it is clear that upon occasions it was the king himself who acted as diviner. Some of the longer inscriptions record predictions of the outcome of events that the king made on learning the response of the spirits, and in a limited number of cases, we actually learn what the eventual outcome was (the kings seem never to have been wrong!).

David Keightley, the foremost analyst of oracle texts in the West, has written a brief, imaginative account of the scene of such a divination ritual, based on the text of an actual set of inscriptions. In his description, Keightley tries to do more than simply picture the act of divination; his goal is to evoke the scene and atmosphere of the Shang capital at its most sacred point.

The sun's rays glint first on the mountains to the west, then, moments later, touch the thatched roofs of the temples and pit dwellings that follow the curve of the Huan. The river, still in shadow at the foot of the earthen cliff, winds to the southeast between clearings of sprouting millet, on its way to merge with the powerful Ho, the Yellow River. The year is the eleventh of the reign of Wu-ding<sup>22</sup>, the season spring, the day xin-wei, the eighth of the ten-day week.

Filtering through the portal of the ancestral temple, the sunlight wakens the eyes of the monster mask, bulging with life on the garish bronze tripod. At the center of the temple stands the king, at the center of the four quarters, the center of the Shang world. Ripening millet glimpsed through the doorway shows that his harvest rituals have found favor. Bronze cauldrons with their cooked meat offerings invite the presence of his ancestors, their bodies buried deep and safely across the river, but their spirits, some benevolent, some not, still reigning over the royal house and the king's person. One is angry, for the king's jaw ached all the night before and is aching still, on the eve of his departure to follow Zhi Guo on campaign against the Ba-fang.

Five turtle shells lie on the rammed earth altar. The plastrons have been polished like jade, but are scarred on their inner side with rows of oval hollows, some already blackened by fire. Into one of the unburned hollows, on the right side of the shell, the diviner Que is thrusting a brand of flaming thorn. As he does so he cries, “The sick tooth is not due to Father Jia!” Fanned by an assistant to keep the flowing tip intensely hot, the stick flames again against the surface of the shell. Smoke rises. The seconds slowly pass. The stench of scorched bone mingles with the aroma of millet wine scattered in libation. And then, with a sharp, clear, *puk*like sound, the turtle, most silent of creatures, speaks. A crack has formed in the hollow where the plastron was scorched. Once again the brand is thrust, now into the matching hollow on the left side of the shell: “It is due to Father Jia!” More time passes; another crack forms in response. Moving to the next plastron, Que repeats the charges: “It is not due to Father Jia!” *Puk!* “It is due to Father Jia!” He rams the brand into the hollows and cracks the second turtle shell, then the third, the fourth, and the fifth.

The diviners consult. The congregation of kinsmen strains to catch their words, for the curse of a dead father may, in the king’s eyes, be the work of a living son. Que rubs wood ash from the fire into the new set of cracks and scrutinizes them once more. But the shell has given no indication. The charge must be divined again. Two more cracks are made in each of the five plastrons . . . and there is again no sign.

Another brand is plucked from the fire and the new charge cried: “The sick tooth is not due to Father Geng! . . . It is due to Father Geng!” Father Geng--the king’s senior uncle. This time the indications are clear. The sons of Father Geng, the king’s older cousins, turn away in dismay at the diviner’s reading of the cracks. The spirit, their father, has been blamed. But still the work of spiritual identification continues. “It is not due to Father Xin! . . . It is due to Father Xin!” Que moves methodically down the row of five plastrons, reciting the negative and positive charges and cracking each shell twice in this way. No judgment can be made. Once again, as for Father Jia, ten more cracks are burned. “Auspicious!” Que points to two cracks on the second and fourth shells. Father Xin is without blame, his descendants relieved.

Now the king speaks. Assistants drag two victims into the temple. There is the barking and bleating of animals in panic, then silence. Blood stains the earth floor. The king dismembers the victims as Que proposes a new charge: “We sacrifice a dog to Father Geng and butcher a sheep.” The

brand flames . . . *puk . . . puk . . . puk . . .* the plastrons crack in slow and stately sequence. Has the sacrifice mollified the dead uncle? Will the pain in the sick tooth depart? The king, his hands still sticky with blood, scans the cracks . . .\*

Let's explore some of the aspects of Keightley's recreation – he has crafted it as a teaching device to alert us to central issues of oracle studies. First, we can see that divination by bone and shell was a highly *formulaic* process. Not only have the bones been prepared carefully for use, there is a specialist, the diviner, who presides over the divination, which was most likely done, as Keightley indicates, in a ceremonial context. The charges to the bones and the rituals of cracking proceed independent of the issue of getting an answer to the divination – even after the identification of the spirit-culprit in this instance, the entire process must be pursued to the end.

The object of the divination questions\*\* was the realm of the spirits, and the relevant spirits were most often royal ancestors. It was they, above all others, who exerted influence upon the person of the king and the body of the state – the two often seem to have been viewed as inseparable, which is why a royal toothache would have generated a scene such as Keightley describes.

Finally, Keightley illustrates how the process of divination was one step in a larger program of ritual observances. The opulent bronze vessels of sacrifice that decorate the scene suggest the focal importance of sacrificial rites to the noble clans of the Shang polity. An enormous concentration of wealth and labor was invested in the objects of the ritual industries. This fact is underscored in another way in Keightley's tale: the fact that it cost the Shang court one sheep and one dog to pacify Father Geng and cure the king's tooth. The oracle texts have made it clear that the Shang court mounted major sacrifices to ancestors every day of the year (and often several on one day), another way in which the income of the Shang state was disposed in ritual pursuits. When we examine the divinations recorded in the 100,000 existing oracle texts, we should always be aware of the expense and ceremony that surrounded the generation of each one.

### The structure of an oracle inscription

A very large percentage of the oracle texts are structured on the basis of a simple divination form. This form included several items: the date, the diviner, and the “charge,” which was the statement or question that was offered to the spirit world for response.

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\* This passage is taken from Keightley's *Sources of Shang History* (Berkeley: 1977).

\*\* The grammar of oracle texts does not indicate that the words were intended as questions, rather than as statements. Most scholars take them to be statements, which the spirits may confirm or fail to confirm. In these readings, I phrase the translations as clerical records.

A simple, typical inscription might look like this:

○ 𠄎 亅 𠄎 𠄎 王 𠄎 𠄎 ○ 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎

Transcribing character by character, first into modern Chinese and then into word-for-word English we get:

丁巳 卜 尹 貞 王 𠄎 父 丁  
Ding-si crack Yin divine King guest-ritual Father Ding

升 伐 羌 三十 劉 五 牢 亡 尤  
 offer-up behead Qiang thirty butcher five penned-sheep no fault

Translating this into ordinary English we would get:

On the day ding-si we made cracks and Yin divined about whether if the King were to perform a guest ritual for Father Ding and offer to him thirty captives from the Qiang nomad tribe as well as five penned sheep these actions would be without fault.

“The day ding-si” refers to the sixty day calendar cycle of the Shang, which is explained in the previous section. Yin was the name of a prominent diviner during the reign of Zu-geng (c. 1180-1170), a son of the king Wu-ding (“Father Ding”) whom we met in Keightley’s reconstruction. In this inscription, the king, probably Zu-geng, is considering pleasing his father through assorted decapitations, including a substantial number of captives from a prominent tribe of Shang adversaries. An attractive feature of Shang culture was the dutiful slaughter of surplus captives for the pleasure of natural and ancestral spirits.

More elaborate inscriptions do exist, and some of these include features entirely absent from the example given above. In some cases, after the “charge” to the spirits, we encounter a section that begins, “The King divined,” and records the interpretation of the crack that the king made at the time of the divination. Since we are ourselves unable to understand how the cracks related to the divination, this is a very helpful gloss for us to have. In addition, in some of the cases where the king’s divination is recorded, the text will also provide an account of what actually transpired relative to the divination. It may come as a shock to some to learn that the king was always right (others will find no surprise in this).

### Diviner names, ancestral titles, and the dating of inscriptions

One of the causes of the slow progress of scholars who initially undertook to decipher the oracle inscriptions was the puzzling meaning of the characters that we recognize today as diviner names.

Once these were understood, not only did reading the texts become vastly easier, but a key tool to dating the texts was provided. Diviners, despite their contacts with the world of spirits, did not live longer than other men. All the inscriptions that include the name of a single diviner may thus be assumed to date from a single period of a few decades. This was the first clue that allowed scholars to begin to sort the inscriptions chronologically.

The second clue concerned the royal ancestors. A very large proportion of the oracle texts are devoted to issues concerning ancestral sacrifice. Shang kings were reluctant to mount expensive sacrificial ceremonies without first alerting the spirits through divination of the date of the sacrifice and the menu. “On the day gui-you we made cracks, He divining about whether on the coming jia day we should offer steamed grains to Father Jia”: no type of inscription is more common than this sort (we can almost hear Father Jia groan, “Not millet again!”).

The object of this sacrifice, Father Jia, would have been the father of the reigning king. We also note that, during the time that the Ho in this inscription was a diviner, sacrifices were offered to “Mother Wu.” Other inscriptions pair together a “Grandfather Jia” and a “Grandmother Wu,” and from this we can deduce that these date from the reign of the grandson of this couple, a former king and queen of the Shang. Throughout the inscriptions, the titles of departed royal spirits are referred to in this way, with their generational marker titles changing as they recede into the past. By correlating the ancestor titles with the diviner names, it became possible to sort a very large proportion of the texts into chronological periods, and, since the individuals who inscribed the bones tended to write in distinct styles, additional texts could be attached to the sorted groups according to “handwriting” criteria.

As you may have observed in the Shi-ji account of the Shang royal house, the Shang moved the site of their capital city with some regularity during most of their history. The last of these moves seems to have taken place under the rule of King Pan-geng<sup>19</sup>, who moved the Shang capital to the Xiao-tun site where the oracle texts were recovered. Thus we assume that all the texts we have recovered date from the period of Pan-geng’s reign and after. In fact, detailed research has now indicated that none of the inscribed bones so far recovered date from before the reign of Wu-ding<sup>22</sup>, who ruled approximately 1200-1180. Therefore, the oracle texts that we now possess were generated over a period of about 150 years, from c. 1200 until the fall of the Shang in 1045.

Once the texts had been sorted into groups, it became possible, by relating king titles to the account in the Shi-ji, to see that the Shi-ji record of the Shang kings was remarkably close to that indicated by the bones. At that point, scholars were finally able to order most of the inscriptions in chronological sequence.

## The “Five Periods”

Once the oracle texts had been sorted chronologically, scholars observed that there were certain differences in the practices and apparent attitudes of the kings and diviners during different periods of the late Shang. For example, the inscriptions dating from the era of Wu-ding include a very broad range of topics and give every indication that those divining are deeply interested in the responses that the spirits may offer. We have already seen that Wu-ding troubled the spirits to explain the root causes of his toothaches. In addition, he queried them concerning the following topics: warfare, harvests, hunting, the weather, royal childbirth, whether he should issue certain commands, his headaches, the safety of the upcoming night or ten-day week, and issues of sacrifice.

All indications are that Wu-ding was a particularly charismatic leader: only he and Pan-geng stand out as effective rulers in the Shi-ji's descriptions of the late Shang kings, and it appears to have been Wu-ding, rather than Pan-geng, who established at least the great ceremonial complex at Xiao-tun that included the massive tombs of the late Shang kings and queens. In addition, it is in the inscriptions from Wu-ding's period that we see the greatest number of records of Shang conquests in war, and the decapitation of thousands of captives in honor of the ancestors. Wu-ding was, most likely, one of the great rulers of ancient China. And like most of these great rulers, he appears to have been highly religious (we might prefer the term superstitious). During his reign, oracle inscriptions are at their most detailed and colorful.

After Wu-ding's death, his successors adopted varying attitudes towards the function of divination. Wu-ding's son, Zu-geng<sup>23</sup>, continued to place emphasis upon bone and shell oracles, but after his time, the practice began to change from a lively form of communication with the spirits to a far more routine ritual associated with a set schedule of ritual sacrifices. The gradual process of change can be traced through five significantly different stages of royal divination practices reflected in the inscriptions, each stage lasting about three decades.

By the time we reach the last of the Shang kings, Di-xin<sup>30</sup>, also known as Zhòu, the oracle texts have become a voluminous but not very interesting record of the basic sacrificial calendar of the Shang. (That calendar itself, however, is of considerable interest, and we will discuss it further in a later reading concerning Shang religion.)

## What we can learn from the bones (and what we can't)

The Shang oracle texts constitute a spectacularly rich mine of information about a period of ancient China that has traditionally been shrouded in mystery, and the information they provide is contemporary and unedited – a stark contrast to the problems we have with the data for the Classical period. The field of oracle text studies is so alluring and rewarding that for generations some of the finest scholars in China, Japan, and the West have devoted all their energies to sorting out its many puzzles. However, the window on the Shang that the bones provide is actually quite narrow. These texts picture events entirely through the perspective of divinatory significance. For

all the apparent breadth of the divinations of the more religiously obsessed rulers, such as Wu-ding, most of the questions we would like to pose to these ossified oracles are left unanswered.

What follow are a list of a few topics with a brief description of the ways in which the oracle texts relate to them.

Religion. The oracle texts give us an enormous amount of data concerning the royal religion of the Shang, but interpreting that information is often difficult. We meet scores of deities in the texts, but who they are and what they are believed to do is often unclear. We encounter perhaps a hundred forms of sacrificial ritual, but it is very difficult to know how they differed and how they formed a system. The difficulties of interpretation of this richest of all areas of oracle information can be captured simply by saying that we still do not know whether the Shang conceived of a high deity with subsidiary gods or only of a world of spirits acting independently. We do not know the organizational structure of the Shang supernatural.

The Royal House. The texts introduce us to all the significant members of the Shang royal house once they are dead, but tell us very little about the living. They refer at times to living queens and concubines and to the princes of the Shang, but the information they provide is limited. Nevertheless, we are able to piece together some structured information, such as the career of the queen Fu Hao, which we will examine later, that give us important insight into the royal family and its behavior. In addition, as we will see, the structure of the royal ancestors may provide important information concerning Shang kinship.

Warfare and the state. The oracle texts deal extensively with issues of warfare. We learn from these texts that the Shang royal house could call on many regional rulers to serve as allies in warfare, and we see many cases of the Shang king contemplating whether or not he will campaign along with this or that regional lord, or whether he should send his troops off to aid them when they were subjected to attack. From inscriptions that were apparently divined during the course of the king's tours or hunting expeditions in friendly lands, and which often record distances between places (in terms of travel days), we have even been able to construct rudimentary maps of the Shang "state" (which, in light of its loose political and geographical structure, we will generally refer to as the Shang "polity").

We also learn about the enemies of the Shang. Tribes who were Shang adversaries are generally marked in the texts by a suffix, "fang," meaning "region" or "outer region." This makes the Shang adversaries easy to identify. In some cases, we see the same nomad tribes that were later to harry the Chou people. Other times, new tribes previously unknown are introduced. Overall, the military activities the bones describe confirm that the Shang was indeed a warlike polity. Warfare was a major activity of the royal house: launching major expeditions and responding to raids and territorial incursions was one of the central functions of the kingship.

Agriculture, the economy, and social structure. The oracle texts provide some relevant information in this regard. Their queries or tentative statements to the spirits indicate the state of the harvests, the types of grain being offered, and their expectations of natural disasters. But the information tends to be indirect and sparse. We hear about types of tribute gifts that arrive at the

capital because the king will occasionally wonder whether they will arrive, but there is little systematic information on trade. (The most obvious information is in the form of the large number of turtle shells which were procured from the southeastern coast areas for the purposes of divination.) We learn something about animal husbandry by the inventories of sacrificial animals offered to the ancestors, and queries about the royal hunt and its catch give us information about wild animals and the diet of the Shang privileged classes.

Perhaps the most important type of information we encounter concerning social organization involves the evidence of the king's power to mobilize labor, particularly for two massive types of undertakings: warfare and the construction of city walls. The texts frequently refer to the "masses," and while we are unclear precisely to whom this refers and under whose control these people were (were they peasants or permanent armies? under the control of the Shang king or of regional allied lords?), these masses of people were certainly viewed principally as a manpower resource, without high social standing.

In sum, by confirming the basic historicity of the Shi-ji accounts of the Shang, the oracle texts have provided us with our first real factual knowledge of this long period. However, the nature of the data they provide is so selective and skewed to our own interests as historians that the image of the Shang that they project remains oddly distorted and analytically challenging.