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THE CULTURE OF THE SHANG DYNASTY

BY
JAMES M. MENZIES

FROM THE SMITHSONIAN REPORT FOR 1931, PAGES 549-558



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2. The title here is translated as "The Shang Dynasty" by the order of China, dated 27 B. C. Before that date it was "The Shang Dynasty".

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THE CULTURE OF THE SHANG DYNASTY¹

By JAMES M. MENZIES

THE PERIOD

The Shang Dynasty is the name given by Chinese historians to that line of kings which preceded the Chou.² According to the western equivalents of the dates calculated by Ssü-ma Ch'ien, the author of the Shih Chi or "Historical Record," the Shang Dynasty lasted from 1766 B. C. to 1122 B. C., or, in other words, for 644 years beginning some 12 centuries before Confucius. These traditional calculations are, however, probably incorrect, and I have provisionally adopted two statements made in the ancient "Bamboo Books," excavated about the year 281 A. D. and dating from the fourth or third century B. C. These state that "from the founding of the Shang Dynasty by Ch'êng T'ang until its destruction by the Chou people was a period of 496 years"; and that "from the time of the moving of the capital by P'an Kêng to the present Waste of Yin until the end of the dynasty, 273 years elapsed." According to the "orthodox" dating of the overthrow of the Shang Dynasty, 1122 B. C. (although some would place it as late as 1050 B. C.), its founding would have occurred in 1618 B. C., and the movement of its capital, just mentioned, in 1395 B. C.

In any case, the Shang period corresponds to that of the Late Bronze Age in the Near East. Within it fall the reigns of the religious reformer Akhenaton and his son-in-law Tutankhamon in Egypt; the occupation of Canaan by the Hebrews; the Minoan Period in Crete; and the Heroic Age in Greece. During its course Babylonia was under the sway of the Kassites; and it was perhaps then that the Aryan invasion of India took place. This historical background will aid us to correlate the Shang period in China with the better known history of the Occident.

THE SOURCES

Let us see now upon what evidence an appraisal of the culture of the Shang Dynasty must be based. Our principal and most author-

¹ Lecture delivered before the North China Union Language School, Peiping, China, on Feb. 6, 1931.

² The title which we translate as "emperor" was not assumed by the rulers of China until 221 B. C. Before that date they are properly called kings.

itative source is to be found in the inscribed bones from the Waste of Yin. In 1899 the first of these to attract attention were found 5 li (nearly 2 miles) northwest of the city of Chang-tê Fu, otherwise known as An-yang, in northern Honan. It long remained unknown whence these bones came, although collections of them were made by Chinese antiquarians, among them L'iu T'ieh-yün and Lo Chen-yü. Some specimens, both genuine and forged, were also secured by the Rev. Samuel Couling and Dr. Frank Chalfant, and later by L. C. Hopkins and by Dr. Richard Wilhelm. Certain curio dealers stated that the place of origin of the bones was the tomb of Pi Kan, near Wei-hsien, while others claimed that they came from Yu-li, in T'ang yin, where Wên Wang was imprisoned.³ Again, Lo Chen-yü, the well known antiquarian above mentioned, was informed that they were being found at An-yang. No responsible scientist, however, had personally confirmed the place of their origin, and everyone was dependent upon the hearsay reports of dealers.

I first visited the Waste of Yin in the early spring of 1914. The site has nothing about it to attract particular attention, save for the broken potsherds, which the farmers have carefully gathered from the surface of the ground, and which have become buried along the edges of the fields. From 1914 until the present I have carefully collected the many fragments of inscribed bones which have come in my way. The dealers from the cities would purchase only large specimens; small pieces were not wanted. Of these latter I was fortunate enough, in the course of 15 years, to collect many thousands, some no larger than a bean. These fragments have formed the source material for my study. Broken potsherds and stone and bone implements I also found and kept. It was at no time possible, however, to do any excavating. I could only make observations on exposed sections of the soil along the river bank. Unfortunately all my material was destroyed during the disturbances which took place in 1927.

In the autumn of 1928 the Academia Sinica (the scientific branch of the newly established Chinese Government) sent one of its representatives, Tung Tso-pin, to undertake investigations on the site. Early in the following year he was joined by Dr. C. Li, then on the field staff of the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., which then undertook the entire cost of the excavation. Work was carried on through the greater part of 1929, and the Academia Sinica has since published two reports (in Chinese), which add considerably to the information which we have been able to extract from the inscribed bones themselves and from the surface finds.

³ The date ascribed by the "orthodox" chronology to Wên Wang, the father of the founder of the Chou Dynasty, is 1231-1135 B. C.

It is earnestly to be hoped that the An-yang site will be carefully and scientifically excavated in accordance with the most approved modern methods; for it is the only one thus far known which gives us datable material for a study of the Shang Dynasty. To fail to treat it with the same exactness and care that are being exercised, for example, in the excavations at Ur or Kish in Mesopotamia, or in those of Megiddo or Bethshean in Palestine, would be one of the greatest archeological losses possible, not only to China but to the entire civilized world.

In addition to the inscribed bones, there are certain other literary sources for our interpretation of the culture of the Shang Dynasty. These are to be found, in part, in the very few authentic sections of the earlier part of the *Shu Ching*, or "Book of History." The *P'an K'eng P'ien* and the "Day of Supplementary Sacrifice" are the principal ones. These were re-edited during the Confucian period, and thus are not entirely in their original form. But the most important literary sources that link up with the information yielded by the inscribed bones are the traditions preserved in the ancient "Bamboo Books"; in the "Spring and Autumn Annals" of Lu Pu Wei; in the *T'ien Wên P'ien* of the *Ch'u Elegies*; and also in that fabulous wonder-book, the *Shan Hai Ching*, or "Mountain and Sea Classic."

In our study of the culture of the Shang Dynasty we must always bear in mind that the entire literary history of the period was written under the strict editorial censorship of scholars of the orthodox Confucian school. Many statements in the ancient records not in harmony with their politico-ethical interpretation of life were deleted, as spurious interpolations, and an imaginary Golden Age conforming to their own conception of history was thus manufactured. It is this medley of the true and the false which has created in the minds of all serious students the feeling of the unreliability of early Chinese history. But now that we have available in collections, both those published and others as yet unpublished but accessible to investigators, more than 10,000 readable bone inscriptions, all antedating the Chou dynasty, we have a reliable means of testing the literary and folklore source material.

THE LANGUAGE

Let us now turn to the language as we find it in these documents, which date in the main from the period between P'an K'eng's removal of his capital to the Waste of Yin in 1395 B. C. and a time not long before the overthrow of the Shang Dynasty in 1122 B. C. Within this period of 273 years the forms of the characters show some definite change or development; but we may say that on the whole they remained pictographic throughout; that is, a horse was indicated by the drawing of a horse, a stuck pig by that of a pig pierced a

spear; and so on. But ideographs were also used; thus wei, "to do," is represented by a drawing of a hand guiding an elephant, just as the "mali" guides the elephants piling teak in Rangoon to-day; and nien, "harvest" or "year," is pictured by a farmer bringing in sheaves of grain on his back.

How do we determine the modern equivalents of this ancient script? We have no Rosetta stone such as provided the clue to the ancient hieroglyphics of Egypt. We must restrict ourselves to the Chinese writing itself and trace the development of its characters down through the various periods with the aid of actual archeological evidence. Literary sources can not be trusted except when authenticated by actual remains. Hence we are restricted to the inscriptions on the bones themselves, on bronze vessels, and on stone. Those on the bronzes are very important, and when we have eliminated the forgeries we have a valuable body of source material, such as the San Shih P'an, now in the Old Palace in Peiping and dating from about 860 B. C. Following the bronzes, we have the Han stone monuments, mainly in the official or li script, which show that the characters were first written with a brush and then carved in the stone. From these we may trace the evolution of the Chinese writing down to its present form, which has altered comparatively little since the beginning of the Christian Era. This development during the period from about 1400 B. C. down to the time of Christ has to do mainly with the form of character. But what of its meaning and of its sound? At present I have catalogued all the characters in my own collection of bones and in most of those published by others. For purposes of comparison I am arranging in order all the sentences in which a given character appears, whether on the bones, the bronzes, the early stone monuments, or in the classical literary sources. From such an arrangement of these groups of sentences, sometimes containing a hundred or more examples, it is possible through comparison and a study of the context, largely to fix the meaning of an individual character. In this task the reliance has been very largely on the bone inscriptions, which have thus been used to interpret themselves.

As for the sound attached to the characters in the Shang Dynasty, to my mind this problem is to be attacked by means of the "borrowed characters" (chia chieh), where two characters having the same sound are used interchangeably. In the Shang period it was not uncommon for a simpler character to be substituted for a more intricate one having the same sound. During the official examination period, when the so-called eight-legged essay was in vogue, a man would have been "plucked" for using a character in this way. Starting with this use of homophones and with the rhymes found on the ancient bronze bells and in the Shih Ching or "Book of Odes,"

we have a fruitful source of information regarding the sounds of the ancient Shang Dynasty language.

Let us now turn from the technical interpretation of the latter to some of the more obvious results of its study. First, let us not be misled by the notion that because its script was pictorial, it was therefore in its infancy. That this was not the case is shown at once by the most common characters which it possesses, viz., the numerals and the 22 cyclical characters. These are already conventionalized in many cases. Thus while it is possible to see the reason for the use of the symbols for 1, 2, 3, 4, and 10, I think I am safe in saying that the meaning of the remaining numerals and of the cyclical characters is not obvious, nor is it clear what they portray. This fact indicates that the script was already old and conventionalized and that it had already undergone a long process of development before the fourteenth century B. C.

Secondly, let us not allow ourselves to be carried away with the idea that Chinese writing, simply because of its age, had its origin in Sumeria. In 1929 I visited the sites of Ur and of Kish, in Mesopotamia, and can assure you that the most pictographic scripts found in those two places, dating from before 3000 B. C., are far more conventionalized than is our Chinese script of about 1400 B. C. It is inconceivable that a form of writing already well conventionalized before 3000 B. C. should have retrograded into a more primitive pictographic form 16 centuries later. Such similarities as exist are to be explained by the fact that the minds of the Shang Dynasty Chinese and those of the ancient Sumerians worked in similar ways. Such a book, for example, as C. J. Ball's "Chinese and Sumerian" is so defective on the side of the ancient Chinese script as to be valueless for purposes of comparison.

THE CHINESE PEOPLE BEFORE THE SHANG DYNASTY

As to the origin of the Chinese people and the relationship of the Shang Dynasty culture to the older prehistoric finds from northern China, all that our present knowledge justifies us in saying is that the interval between the Paleolithic Period and the fourteenth century B. C. is so enormous that the two fall into two entirely different and widely separated epochs. We are, however, sure of two very important points. One is, that man did exist in North China in very remote times, so that there is no necessity of introducing him from the West within the historical period. The other point is, that by 1400 B. C. the Chinese people had already developed a very high indigenous culture on the great plain of North China.

Now Dr. J. G. Andersson has found numerous examples of a "painted pottery" ware in various parts of northwestern China,

from Kansu as far east as the village of Yang Shao, in the Province of Honan, just south of the Yellow River. He has dated this material as preceding the culture of the Shang Dynasty, perhaps by as much as a thousand years. And Dr. C. Li reports the finding of a single fragment of this painted ware in a pit which also yielded inscribed bones, at the An-yang site, the "Waste of Yin." On this evidence, he also considers that the "painted pottery" period had its beginning, at least, before the founding of the Shang Dynasty. The pottery of the latter, as found at An-yang, is mainly either of red or gray monochrome or else of that fine incised white ware regarded as especially distinctive of that period. It is to be hoped that a complete excavation of this important site will throw further light on this and other points.

SHANG DYNASTY HISTORY

Over half of the inscriptions on the oracle bones are records of divinations or inquiries by means of the bones themselves, regarding the ancestral sacrifices. In them we find recorded the names of the ancestors to whom sacrifices were to be offered. Often a sacrifice was offered to a number of ancestors in common. On one bone we have mention of a sacrifice to Kao Tsu ("Exalted Ancestor") Wang Hai. Then follow in order three ancestors whose personal name was the cyclical character I: T'ai I, called T'ien I or Ch'êng T'ang (the founder of the dynasty); then Tsu I; and lastly Hsiao I. After these follows Father Ting, by whom is meant Wu Ting, the father of Tsu Kêng. From such oracular records as this we can work out the whole ancestral line of the Shang Dynasty. Not only are the names of its kings given, but so also are those of its queens through whom the succession was passed on to the following generation. It may be asked whether this indicates the existence of a matriarchate. Nothing in the line of descent seems to show this. Women were honored in their character of mothers, just as the matron of Honan to-day is most often referred to as "the mother of So-and-so." Several mothers are often associated with one king's name. Whether these were consecutive or concurrent wives does not appear, although there is no reason to suppose that the Shang Dynasty kings were monogamous. In one respect alone does the mother seem to take precedence in the ancestral sacrifice offered to her by her descendants; when a deceased king and queen receive a sacrifice in common, the rite is always performed on the cyclical birthday of the queen and not of the king.

Succession under the Shang Dynasty was fraternal; that is, the kingly office passed from elder brother to younger brother, and only

after the members of one generation had thus had their turn did it devolve upon a member of the next. What rule was followed in passing from one generation to another, we are not in a position to say. Sometimes the succession went to the son of the eldest brother, and at others to that of the youngest; but in no instance does it appear to have gone to a son of one of the intervening brothers. This type of succession is in marked contrast to that of the succeeding dynasty, that of the Chou, which was from father to son. In the main we may say that the line of descent worked out from the bone inscriptions confirms that recorded for the Shang Dynasty by the Chinese historical books.

THE ORACLE BONES AND THE CLASSICS

The inscribed bones further enable us to interpret certain significant portions of the ancient classics, such, for example, as the genuine document known as "The Day of Supplementary Sacrifice." The orthodox view concerning this was that Tsu Chi was a minister of Kao Tsu Wu Ting, who was offering the supplementary sacrifice to Ch'êng T'ang, the founder of the Dynasty. Now, however, we know from the oracle records that Tsu Chi and Tsu Kêng were brothers, the former being the elder. It was the younger, however, who was offering the supplementary sacrifice to their father Kao Tsu Wu Ting. How is this to be explained? From the bones as well as from tradition preserved in the literary sources, we learn the following story. King Wu Ting had three wives, named respectively Pi Hsin, Pi Wu, and Pi Kuei. By these he had three sons, known to later generations as Tsu Chi, Tsu Kêng, and Tsu Chia. The eldest, Tsu Chi, was a good man; but his mother died young. The mother of Tsu Kêng held the affections of the king, and prevailed on him to pass over Tsu Chi in the succession and place her son Tsu Kêng on the throne. Tsu Chi made no effort to assert his rights, although he was a favorite among the people. Tsu Kêng, feeling insecure on the throne, endeavored to ensure his hold upon it by offering excessive sacrifices to his father Wu Ting. Of all the oracle bones which record the sacrifices of sons to their fathers, those referring to the ones offered by Tsu Kêng to Wu Ting far outnumber all the rest; there are a hundred or more of them.

During one of Tsu Kêng's sacrifices to his father a wild pheasant flew into the ancestral temple, and, attracted by the seething grain in the bronze tripod cauldron, perched on its handle and crowed at the king. The latter was much frightened at this evil omen, and his sage elder brother, whose place on the throne he had usurped, entered and read him a lesson as follows:

The former successful kings
 Were upright, and served the people.
 Heaven mirrors the people below,
 Their laws and their just rights,
 And sends down harvests in perpetuity,
 Or not in perpetuity.
 It is not that Heaven oppresses the people,
 Cutting off its divine decree in the middle,
 But that people will not follow goodness,
 Will not listen to their faults.
 Heaven has sent forth its decree
 For uprightness and good conduct.
 What will you do in regard to it?
 You, O King, must work reverently at caring for your people
 And not oppose Heaven,
 Putting at naught the laws of succession and of sacrifice
 By excessive rites at the shrine of our father.

Tsu Chi apparently never ascended the throne. He may have died before Tsu Kêng, who was in any case succeeded by the youngest brother, Tsu Chia. The latter sacrificed to his two older brothers together, putting Tsu Chi in his rightful place of honor above Tsu Kêng. The succession passed not through Tsu Kêng, who was so anxious to hold the throne, but through the son of Tsu Chia, K'ang Tsu Ting, who maintained the old tradition of sacrificing to his two deceased uncles, Tsu Chi and Tsu Kêng, as fathers, according to one bone inscription. In another we have Tsu Chi referred to as Hsiao Wang, "Little King," a title which so far as I know does not occur in the literary sources.

Another erroneous orthodox Confucian interpretation of an incident recorded in the Book of History is that of P'an Kêng's moving his capital. This was not from the north to the south of the river, as hitherto believed. Instead, it was from the east, near the birth-place of Confucius in Shantung, across the marshy river system to the Waste of Yin, west of the Yellow River, which then flowed almost due north, a few miles east of the present Peiping-Hankow Railway. This is apparently the reason why he was called P'an Kêng—because he "moved house" (pan chia); for the character for "P'an" is connected with that for pan, a picture of a man poling a boat along a river.

We can not here do more than mention the wars of Wu Ting, and his struggle against the land of Kuei Fang referred to in the I Ching or "Book of Changes"; or to the intermarriage of the daughter of Ti I into the House of Chou. We must also pass over the untangling of many of the cryptic historical references in the I Ching, merely stating that the latter work, the material of which dates back to times long before Wên Wang,⁴ seems to be one of

⁴ For the date of Wên Wang, or "King Wên," cf. footnote, 3, p. 550.

reference—a sort of key to the type of divination based on the oracle bones. A similar book, recording the historical fulfillment of auguries, was compiled during the Third Dynasty of Ur, in Mesopotamia, about 2500 B. C. There is no reference in the bone inscriptions to that later philosophical concept of the Yin and Yang (the Female and Male Principles in Nature), which appears to form the backbone of the I Ching as we have it to-day. There does seem, however, to be a definite relationship between the six successive divinations, each covering ten consecutive days in the cycle of sixty, and the six continuous and broken lines of the hexagrams. For in both bones and hexagrams, the order is from bottom to top and not the reverse, as one would expect.

THE SHANG RACE BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF THE DYNASTY

The Shang race naturally claimed descent from a long line of ancestors. Allowing 25 years to a generation, we are able to trace the existence of the family back to a period around 2200 B. C. There were undoubtedly other ancestors in the line, and in fact about most of them we have some historical statement in addition to the mere recording of their names. We have no space here to tell of Wang Hai and his troubles with the Yu I, or Ti as they were called in later times.⁵ The story is given in part in a verse or two of the T'ien Wên P'ien of the Elegies of Ch'u, as well as in passages in the Shan Hai Ching, and is confirmed by the inscribed bones. Nor can we pause to speak of Hsiang T'u, or of Ti K'u, whose personal name was Chün. It is of interest, however, to note that the name Chün of his Exalted Ancestor (called Kao Tsu Chün) is interpreted in the Shuo Wên dictionary as Mu Hou, or "Mother Monkey," as the character graphically pictures.

THE ART AND MATERIAL CIVILIZATION OF THE SHANG DYNASTY

Let us now turn from the history to the art of the Shang Dynasty. It is a common mistake to confuse the long development of the human race with the period of historic time, or to suppose that the art of Egypt and Mesopotamia, or Crete and India and China, must have been very rude at the time when the written record begins. Nothing is further from the truth. This is shown, in the present connection, by the sculpture of the Shang Dynasty, as exemplified by the torso which Dr. C. Li found at An-yang, and by a broken piece of ivory representing a coiled dragon in my own collection. These are superb in their execution. The jade carvings and bronze castings were magnificent, much excelling the work of any succeeding dynasty down to the present. The incised white pottery already

⁵ A group of "barbarian" tribes on the north of the ancient Chinese feudal states which was not thoroughly subdued by the latter until well along in the first millennium, B. C.

mentioned, of which we have now several hundred fragments,⁶ has never been excelled in design. And from the bits of shell, ivory, and semiprecious stone evidently once inlaid on wooden objects which have disappeared, as well as from a few examples of bronze and bone where the turquoise still remains, we know that the artists of the Shang period were no less skilled in this type of decorative work. On a plain pottery bowl we find a quality of line hardly later surpassed. So we do also on a bronze vessel, almost certainly of the Shang Dynasty, now in the Museum of Fine Arts at Boston. This, a beautiful wine pail or yin, found 30 years ago near I-chou, the ancient capital of Yen, has an excellence both of design and of material (the latter evidenced by its patination) which is not often exceeded. Last year (1930), while engaged in making rubbings of nearly all the inscribed early bronze vessels in America, I identified this specimen, which was valued only for its intrinsic beauty and not for its historical importance. This vessel and likewise the inscribed bronze halberds found near the Lai Shui⁷ suggest that the Shang culture extended as far north as I-chou, not far from Peiping.

Now in contrast note the crude design of the most important bronze of the Chou Dynasty which followed the Shang, that known as the Mao Kung Ting. Its inscription is so significant that had Confucius known of it, declares the scholar Wang Kuo-wei, he would have included it in that compilation of official records known as the Shu Ching, or "Book of History." Surely the recording of such an important inscription on a vessel of so poor a design marks a distinct decline in the art appreciation of the early rulers of the Chou Dynasty in comparison with those of the Shang who preceded them.

Occidental museums and authorities unite in refusing to allow any bronzes to be labeled "Shang," and unfortunately the Palace Museum here in Peiping has followed suit. But the Shang Dynasty was, we know, prolific in its art; and I am convinced that many of our existing bronzes belong to that period. On a fragment of inscribed bone which dates from the time of Tsu Kêng are two important statements: One which mentions the honorable (or valuable) tripod of Wu Ting; and another which speaks of writing on bamboo tablets. Here we have proof that not only were costly sacrificial vessels in existence in the time of King Wu Ting, but also that at that period, in addition to the oracle records on bone, there were also other writings, on slips of bamboo, which, however, have unfortunately not been preserved.

⁶ No entire vessel appears ever to have been found.

⁷ A small stream in the province of Hopel (that in which Peiping is situated).

