
Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions

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When we ask questions about the oldest forms of religious practice in China, the earliest data that we find are ritual objects from China's Neolithic era: objects excavated by archaeologists in graves dating from as early as 7000 B.C.E. Such ritual vessels, weapons, ornaments, and figures, and the organization of the grave and village sites where they are found, give us a great deal of information about early Chinese religion. However, our understanding of Neolithic religion in China is tentative, and the religious imagination of the period is a closed book to us because the evidence of this preliterate era does not "speak."

The earliest written records of religious practice in China are known as the "oracle texts" or "oracle bone inscriptions." They date from the period of the Shang dynasty, a ruling house that presided over an early form of the Chinese polity from the middle of the first millennium to about 1028 B.C.E. The Shang ruling house may not have been the first dynastic line in Chinese history: many scholars believe in the existence of a prior ruling house known as the Xia. But it was during the Shang period that China entered the Bronze Age and developed the written ideographic script that is the ancestor of modern Chinese. When we examine the evidence that archaeologists have unearthed from the distant past, the first voice that we hear is that of the Shang people.

The written records left by the Shang are all religious in nature (unlike the earliest written records of Mesopotamian civilization, which are primarily commercial). During the latter centuries of the Shang period, the Shang kings established a royal ritual center on the banks of the Huan River, near the site of the present-day city of Anyang in North Central China. At this place, surrounded by royal palaces and graves, a small group of diviners in the service of the king employed specialized techniques to communicate with a complex world of spirits. The oracle texts, discovered by archaeologists only within the past century, are the records of these communications.

The Shang diviners were specialists in the art of pyromancy, the use of fire to foretell the future. Shang diviners would carefully drill hollows in turtle shells

and ox shoulder blades and then, by applying red-hot pokers to these hollows, cause these shells and bones to crack. As they applied the pokers, they would call out questions or statements to spirits that had presumably been summoned by preparatory rituals. The cracking of the bones represented the responses of the spirits, and the diviners were trained to interpret the meanings of the cracks.

The subjects of royal divination were diverse. The success of the harvest, the outcomes of battles, the schedule of ritual sacrifices, even the cause of a royal toothache—all were objects of divination.

After the divination was complete, the diviners or their scribes carefully etched beside the cracks, in the earliest form of Chinese script known, the words that they had uttered to the spirits, along with, in many cases, the name of the diviner and the date on which the bone or shell was cracked. These dates were recorded according to a cyclical calendar of sixty days. Each day was named by combining in regular sequence one sign from each of two ordinal sets, the first with ten elements and the second with twelve elements (one trip through the first set constituted the Shang ten-day week). A typical inscription might begin:

On the day jia-zi (the first day of the sixty-day calendar cycle), cracks were made;
So-and-so divined . . .

with the specific question recorded next. Occasionally the diviner was the Shang king himself.

In some instances the inscriptions include a phrase prognosticating the future on the basis of the cracks, and some also record the outcome of events. In these cases, the predictions are attributed to the Shang king. When outcomes are indicated, the king's prediction is never shown to have been in error. This record of perfection indicates that the king's personal powers of spiritual interpretation may have been a central facet of his prestige and political legitimacy. (We may assume that the absence of recorded errors by the king does not reflect his perfect prescience, but rather a respectful silence concerning his failures.)

It is largely this meticulous record keeping that has allowed us to begin to understand Shang culture and religion. Although the primitive form of the inscribed characters makes them difficult to decipher, traditions of Shang culture preserved in later historical texts have provided us with the contextual clues we need to learn to read the oracle inscriptions. Nevertheless, the oracle bones came to light less than a century ago, and we are far from fully understanding the inscriptions. New information and new interpretive ideas regularly force us to reexamine our readings for individual texts.

A very large portion of the inscriptions concern the performance of ritual sacrifices to royal ancestors and other spirits. Few oracle texts have been discovered outside the ritual center at Anyang, and the divinations should be viewed as one portion of a greater sphere of religious activity focused there. The Shang kings nourished their forebears with a variety of sacrificial offerings on a regular schedule. As ancestors proliferated over time, the schedule became packed: by the end of the dynasty, major sacrificial ceremonies were mounted to individual ancestors

every day of the year. Each ancestor received scheduled sacrifices on a specific day of the ten-day week, and ancestors were generally denoted according to the cyclical day on which they were regularly honored. In addition, sacrifices were offered on occasions where the undertaking of important royal activities led the king to seek ancestral goodwill, or where unforeseen disasters suggested the need to propitiate ancestors. The oracle texts suggest that it was obligatory to seek spirit approval prior to mounting any significant sacrificial ritual. Here is an example of a typical divination concerning ritual plans:

1. On the day *bing-wu*, cracks were made; Xing divined: On the coming day *ding-wei*, if we sacrifice to Father Ding will there be no misfortune? (*Lin [Kikkō]* 1.21.5)

“Father Ding” was an ancestral king. His posthumous name, Ding, denotes the day of the Shang week on which he received regular sacrifices. In this case, Diviner Xing is checking to make sure that the sacrifice due to Father Ding on the next *ding-day* will be well received.

The sacrificial activities of the Shang represent an area of religious practice distinct from divination per se. Sacrifices to spirits were directed by figures we refer to loosely as “priests” or “shamans,” and it is not clear to what degree these people were distinct from the diviners. The Shang texts themselves say little about these figures. Some inscriptions seem to refer to a ritual practice of burning a shamaness, but our understanding of these inscriptions is not yet clear.

The oracle texts reveal that sacrificial rituals could be extremely complex. They could involve music and dance performances or offerings to a series of spirits, and they often called for the slaughter of large numbers of animals or even human beings, as the following texts indicate:

2. Shall we perform a rain dance to the [Yellow] River and to Yue Peak? (*Cuibian* 51)
3. Shall we pray for rain by offering up one ram each to the ten royal spirits: High Ancestor Shang-jia, Great Ancestors Yi, Ding, Geng, and Wu, Middle Ancestor Ding, and Grandfathers Yi, Xin, and Ding? (*Yicun* 986)
4. Shall we sacrifice one hundred Qiang people (a nomadic enemy tribe) and one hundred sets of sheep and pigs to [High King] Tang, Great Ancestors Jian and Ding, and Grandfather Yi? (*Yicun* 873)
5. Shall we sacrifice two elders of the Qiang tribe to Grandfather Ding and Father Jia? (*Jingjin* 4034)

In many cases, the inscriptions are terse and seem routine, as if the diviners were merely going through empty rituals of spiritual consultation required before ritual events. For example, a great number of oracle texts from the last years of the Shang do little more than announce the impending performance of scheduled sacrifices to royal ancestors. This has suggested to some scholars that the last Shang rulers had ceased to view divination as an effective means of spirit com-

munication. But detailed divinations from earlier generations clearly show the seriousness of divinatory prognostication.

6. On the day *gui-si*, cracks were made; *Que* divined: In the coming week will there be no disaster? The king prognosticated, saying, "There shall be misfortune." It was as he said. The next day the king went rhinoceros hunting. The horse and chariot of Petty Minister *Cai* toppled over, and the king's son *Yang*, who was driving the king's chariot, also fell. (*Jinghua* 1)

This detailed inscription was undoubtedly recorded to demonstrate the divinatory powers of the king, but it is also of interest because it records the Shang king attentively reviewing what would appear to be a routine divination.

Many aspects of Shang society are revealed to us only through the bone records, but none so completely as religious practice. Every divination record, regardless of subject, enhances our understanding of Shang religion, either because it names deities, because it specifies rituals associated with religious practice, or simply because it tells us which events the Shang people believed fell under the control of the spirits.

One aspect of Shang religion revealed with great directness by the oracle texts is the Shang pantheon. Although the texts that have survived are not adequate to provide a complete picture, the central membership of the pantheon emerges clearly. The spirits with whom the royal diviners communicated seem to have belonged to four types. Most numerous are the spirits of the royal ancestors: the father and mother, uncles and aunts, grandparents and remote forebears of the ruling king. Because the royal ancestors were, in many cases, the former rulers of the state and their consorts, we can see in the communication with these spirits not only the centrality of ancestral spirit action to living members of a clan—the basis of ancestor worship, the most widespread form of religious practice in traditional China—but also the political importance of the spirit world to the well-being of the state. When the king's ancestors influenced the course of worldly events, all of Shang China felt the result.

A second, less prominent, group of spirits seems to be composed of a diverse variety of "culture heroes," legendary or semilegendary figures who played a role in tales of the distant past. Some of these spirits may have belonged to predynastic Shang ancestors; others may have been deities worshipped by smaller tribal groups that joined the Shang polity in the course of its political expansion. Incorporation of the tribe within the Shang state may have been linked to incorporation of its leading deities in the Shang pantheon.

A third group of spirits is composed of nature deities, such as river, mountain, or weather spirits. While nature deities play a minor role in the inscriptions, their very presence signals for us the complexity of Shang religious thought and may suggest an earlier, pantheistic phase of religious practice.

Finally, a single spirit of great power and abstractness seems to function as the apex of the Shang pantheon. This spirit is referred to by the name "Di" or "Shang Di" ("Di Above," sometimes translated as "Lord on High"—the word Shang is not

the same as the dynastic title). The specific qualities of Di are difficult to ascertain. Modern scholars argue whether Di was conceived as a particular high ancestor, as a collective body of high ancestors, as a single force of nature, or as Nature itself. Unlike other spirits, Di received no sacrificial offerings, yet no other spirit could match the range and force of its powers. We do not even know whether the word *di* meant god or was the name of a god. The Chinese character itself is of uncertain origin. It also appears in the oracle texts as a generic title for some deceased kings and perhaps also for some nature spirits, as in passage 27 below. Later, after the Shang house was conquered by the Zhou people, the highest spirit power was referred to both as Di and as “Tian,” a term that also denoted the sky and which is sometimes translated as “Heaven.” We do not know whether Tian represented a non-Shang high deity whom the Zhou introduced as an equivalent of the Shang deity Di, but most interpreters agree that Tian does not appear in the oracle texts.

It is always important to bear in mind that the oracle texts, while touching on many aspects of Shang life, can only represent the concerns of the royal house and the religious skills of the pyromantic diviners. The Shang was a rich society that may have included many types of religious practice about which no literary record remains. It is, for example, very difficult to see the relationship between our oracle texts and the shamanic artistry embellishing another major relic of Shang religious practice: the bronze vessels employed in ceremonies of sacrifice. Although the examples below let us listen to the voices of China’s religious past, we must bear in mind that we hear only the words of a select few.

The selection of texts that follows here represents only a tiny fraction of the thousands that have been recovered. They raise many questions, some of which can be answered through a fuller exploration of the oracle inscriptions. Other questions remain beyond our ability to answer. The selection begins with a group of inscriptions that concern the deity Di. These texts are followed by smaller groups concerning natural and ancestral deities. Last, there is a group of texts selected to illustrate the diverse concerns of Shang divination and the range of cultural features seen as relevant to the world of spirits. For simplicity, all texts are rendered as questions, and introductory dating formulas and diviner names are generally omitted. Undecipherable proper names are noted by an X.

All references in parentheses are to standard oracle text collections. Abbreviations follow Shima Kunio, *Inkyo bokuji sōrui* (Tokyo, 1967), with bracketed alternative abbreviations in some cases.

Further Readings

Kwang-chih Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), is a readable collection of adventuresome essays on Shang religion and society. Chang employs the dramatic

iconography of ritual bronzes to explore Shang shamanism. His methodology shows how we may go beyond oracle text evidence to enrich our portrait of Shang religion. Many of Chang's ideas remain speculative rather than firmly demonstrated, but they are always informed by his extraordinary scholarship. His *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) is the most complete cultural account of the Shang people and the best English-language resource for viewing Shang religion in social context. Chang pays due attention to the nature of archaeological and textual sources and problems of interpretation. David N. Keightley, "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture," *History of Religions* 17.3–4 (February–May 1978): 211–25, offers a clear account of the Shang pantheon that attempts to show how it may reveal continuities between the political cultures of the Shang and later Chinese eras. Keightley is the foremost Western specialist on oracle inscriptions. Even beginners will find it exciting to survey the text and illustrations of his technical handbook, *Sources of Shang History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

THE POWERS OF DI

7. Will Di perhaps send down drought upon us? (*Qianbian* 3.24.4)

Shang society was agricultural. No subject concerned the king more than the success of the crops.

8. Will Di order rain sufficient for harvest? Will Di not order rain sufficient for the harvest? (*Qianbian* 1.50.1)

Many texts are paired, one positive and one negative. Diviners seem to have prompted the spirits by adding the word "perhaps" to the less preferred option.

9. Will Di bring disaster to our harvest? Will Di not bring disaster to our harvest? The king prognosticated, saying, "Di shall not bring disaster." (*Yibian* 7456)

10. Will Di order rain in the fourth month? Will Di perhaps not order rain in the fourth month? The king prognosticated, saying, "It will rain on the coming ding-day and probably not on the coming xin-day." On the day ding-you it did, in fact, rain. (*Yibian* 3090)

11. Will Di perhaps, upon reaching the [intercalary] thirteenth lunar month, order a thunderstorm? (*Yibian* 3282)

12. It has not rained [for a long time]. Is Di harming this city [at Anyang]; does Di not approve [of our actions]? The king prognosticated saying, "It is Di who is harming the city; [Di] does not approve." (*Yizhu* 620)

13. Will Di perhaps order wind? (*Hebian* 195)

14. As for attacking the Qiong tribe, will Di provide us support? (*Lin [Kikkō]* 1.11.13)

The Shang polity was surrounded and pitted with tribes unfriendly to the Shang king and his allies. Warfare and military tours of inspection were a central part of royal life and spirit influence.

15. If the king surveys the border lands this spring, will Di provide him with support (protection)? (*Xubian* 5.14.4)

16. If the king joined with Guo of Zhi (a military ally) in attacking the (non-Shang) tribe of X, would Di provide support? (*Yibian* 3787)

17. The outer tribes attack and destroy: has Di ordered that disaster be inflicted upon us? (*Jinzhang* 496)

18. Will Di perhaps bring an end to this city? (*Bingbian* 66)

Some interpreters have argued that the fact that Di could conceivably bring an end to the Shang ritual center in this way proves that Di was not conceived as a Shang ancestor. For a spirit to so destroy its own descendants would be to cut itself off from all further reverence and sustenance provided through sacrificial offerings.

19. If the king establishes a walled town, will Di show approval? (*Bingbian* 86)

20. Will Di not harm the king? (*Yibian* 4525)

21. Will Di perhaps not bless the king? (*Tieyun* 191.4)

22. [If we sacrifice] to Di's minister, will there be rain? (*Jiabian* 779)

Bureaucratic structures are so pervasive in later Chinese images of the spirit world that interpreters have searched the oracle texts for signs of such imagery. Texts 22–24 are among a small group that seem to support the notion of the Shang pantheon as possessing some bureaucratic features.

23. Shall we sacrifice two hounds to Di's envoy Wind? (*Yizhu* 935)

The winds were of interest to Shang diviners, although their precise role is unclear. One oracle text is simply a record of the winds of the four directions, each wind designated by a proper name.

24. Shall we, in autumn, [sacrifice] to Di's Five Meritorious Ministers? [We made these divination] cracks in the temple of Grandfather Yi. (*Cuibian* 12)

25. Shall [High King] Cheng be a guest to Di? Shall Great Ancestor Jia be a guest to Cheng? (*Bingbian* 36)

This text, which is part of a larger set on a single bone fragment, seems to refer to a ritual performance in which one spirit is worshipped in the shrine of another. In this set, Di acts only in the role of "host"; all the others mentioned are Shang ancestral kings.

NATURAL DEITIES

26. Shall we call for Que to sacrifice a sheep and a goat to the rising sun and the setting sun? (*Hebian* 178)

The grammar of the oracle inscriptions often fails to make clear whether offerings are being made to anthropomorphically conceived nature deities or simply in the direction of astral, meteorological, or geographical features.

27. Shall we make a burnt offering to Cloud Di? (*Xubian* 2.4.11)

This text appears to use "Di" as a generic title, applied here to a nature spirit.

28. Shall we call upon Que to sacrifice a hound by fire to Cloud? (*Yibian* 5317)

29. If we, perhaps, perform a fire sacrifice to Snow, will there will be a great rain? (*Jinzhang* 189)

30. On the day *bing-shen*, cracks were made; Que divined: On *yi-si* [nine days from now] should we offer wine libations to [royal ancestor] the Latter Yi? The king prognosticated, saying, "When we offer the libation there will be misfortune. There will perhaps be thunder." On *yi-si* day we offered wine libations. In the early morning it rained. After the sacrifice was performed the rain ceased. At the sacrifice to Xian it also rained. We offered two sacrifices to the Bird Star. That evening it thundered in the west. (*Yibian* 6664)

This intriguing inscription, recorded on the front and back of a single turtle shell, places sacrifices to the Bird Star, important in traditional Chinese astrology, in series with sacrifices to ancestral figures: the Latter Yi, the twelfth Shang king, and Xian, tentatively identified as the first Shang king. Does the series imply a linkage among these ancestral and nonancestral figures?

31. The king prognosticated, saying, "There shall be misfortune." On the eighth day, clouds in the form of a face covered the sun; a rainbow appeared and drank from the Yellow River. (*Jinghua* 4)

Rainbows were considered inauspicious. The inscribed graph seems to picture a two-headed, snakelike creature.

32. Shall we pray for harvest to [the Yellow] River? (*Yicun* 376)

33. Will the [Yellow] River not order rain? The king prognosticated, saying, "The River will order rain." (*Yibian* 3121)

34. Shall we pray for harvest to Yue Peak with a burnt offering of three sheep and three pigs and the decapitation of three oxen? (*Nanming* [*Nanbei*] 457)

35. Shall we, by means of an offering of wine, pray for harvest to Yue Peak, [the Yellow] River, and Kui? (*Qianbian* 7.5.2)

The third object of this sacrifice is not the spirit of a geographical feature, as the first two are, but a distant ancestor or culture hero. Some interpreters take him to be the founder of the Shang lineage.

36. Will the Huan River not bring disaster to this city? (*Xubian* 4.28.4)

37. Is it the [Yellow] River that is harming the king? (*Yibian* 5265)

ANCESTRAL SPIRITS

38. Does this eclipse of the sun mean not disaster but approval? Should we report this eclipse of the sun to the [Yellow] River? Should we perhaps report this eclipse of the sun to Father Ding, sacrificing nine oxen? (*Cuibian* 55)

Although the patterns of sacrifice are in many ways different, the functions of ancestral and nature deities overlap, as the diviner's questions here indicate.

39. Shall we pray for a good harvest to Wang-hai (a predynastic Shang ruler) by offering up a hound, a sheep, a pig, with a burnt offering of three sets of sheep and pig, and the slaughtering of nine oxen, three piglets, and three Qiang people? (*Jing* [*Jinbun*] 609)

40. Is it High Ancestor Shang-jia who is hindering the rain? (*Yibian* 6299)

41. Should we protect the king's eyes against Grandmother Ji? (*Yibian* 4720)

42. Is it Father Yi who is hurting the king's tooth? (*Yibian* 7183)

43. Has Prince Yu encountered disaster on account of Mother Geng? (*Kufang* 481)

44. Should we perhaps pray for a child to High Grandmother Bing? (*Qianbian* 1.33.3)

Childbirth was a central issue for the royal clan. The Shang throne generally passed from elder to younger brothers, and then ideally to the male children of the eldest brother of the preceding generation. The birth of male heirs was crucial, and Shang royalty practiced a form of polygamy to ensure that the succession would proceed. The inscriptions reveal the close connection between the spirit world and childbirth.

45. When Yu, the consort of the king's son Shang, gives birth, shall it not be fortunate (a boy)? (*Cuibian* 1239)

46. When Fu Hao gives birth, shall it not be fortunate? (*Hebian* 405)

Fu Hao was a powerful consort of the twenty-first Shang king, Wuding, whose forceful reign can be dated circa 1200 B.C.E. While most royal consorts may have served primarily to provide heirs, the oracle texts reveal that Fu Hao acted as a military leader, and her grave, excavated in 1976, was appointed with a lavishness rivaling those of the Shang kings. The following inscriptions reveal the royal diviners' concern for her welfare, both in childbirth and otherwise.

47. Shall Fu Hao have a fortunate birth? The king prognosticated, saying, "If she gives birth on a jia day there will be misfortune." (*Xubian* 4.29.3)

48. Shall Fu Hao have a fortunate birth? The king prognosticated, saying, "If she gives birth on a ding day it shall be fortunate; if on a geng day, it shall be greatly auspicious." On the thirty-third day thereafter, on jia-yin, Fu Hao gave birth. It was not fortunate; it was a girl. (*Yibian* 7731)

49. Should Fu Hao follow Guo of Zhi and attack the X tribe, with the king attacking Zhonglu from the east toward the place where Fu Hao shall be? (*Yibian* 2948)

50. If the king does not order Fu Hao to follow Guo of Zhi and attack the X tribe, will we not perhaps receive support? (*Yibian* 961)

51. Fu Hao is ill; is there some evil influence? (*Yibian* 4098)

52. Should we perform a sacrifice to Father Yi on behalf of Fu Hao, and sacrifice a lamb, decapitate a boar, and sacrifice ten sets of sheep and pig? (*Yibian* 3383)

MILITARY AFFAIRS, HUNTING, AGRICULTURE, AND THE KING'S RITUAL LEADERSHIP

53. The king made cracks and divined: Should we perform a sacrifice and, on the following sacrifice day, follow the Lord X and campaign against the Ren tribe? Will the ancestors above and below provide support and not visit disaster upon us? Will we report at the Great City Shang [that there has been] no disaster? The king prognosticated, saying, "It is greatly auspicious." (*Tongcuan* 592)

54. Que divined: These ten days shall there be no disaster? The king prognosticated, saying, "There shall be misfortune; there will perhaps come ill news thrice over." On the fifth day thereafter there did indeed come ill news from the west. Guo of Zhi reported saying, "The Tu tribe has attacked my eastern territories; they have ruined two walled towns; also, the X tribe has overrun the fields of my western territories." (*Jinghua* 4)

55. The king made cracks and divined: We shall hunt at Ji; coming and going there shall be no disaster. The king prognosticated, saying, "It is extremely auspicious." Acting on this we captured forty-one foxes and eight hornless deer. (*Qianbian* 2.27.1)

56. If the king issues a great order to the multitudes saying, "Cultivate the fields," shall we receive a harvest? (*Xubian* 2.28.5)

57. The king shall go and lead the multitudes in planting grain at Qiong. (*Qianbian* 5.20.5)

During later periods of Chinese history, the planting season was initiated by the king, who would ceremonially plough the first furrow so as to bring his virtue to bear on the success of the harvest. Texts such as these reveal the early origins of the ritual.