

LESSON PLAN

Making Sense of the Future: The “Oracle Bone” and Shang Dynasty Divination



Subjects: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Grade Level: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: Three 50-minute sessions

Dynasty: Shang (ca. 1600–1050 BCE)

Object Type: Natural material

Themes: Traditions and Belief Systems; Power and Privilege

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Inscribed tortoiseshell (oracle bone)

China

Anyang period, Late Shang dynasty, ca. 1300–1050 BCE

Tortoiseshell

2 9/16 x 4 1/4 x 7/8 in

The Dr. Paul Singer Collection of Chinese Art of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; a joint gift of the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, Paul Singer, the AMS Foundation for the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities, and the Children of Arthur M. Sackler. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, S2012.9.445

Objective

Students will identify and interpret Shang dynasty values through the visual imagery of Shang dynasty divination.

Essential Questions

- What can be learned about an ancient society by studying artifacts?
- What makes humans want to predict the future?
- How can attributing special abilities to various community members impact power structures in a society?

Background Information

The Shang dynasty (1600–1050 BCE) saw advancements made in mathematics, astronomy, and bronze casting technology. It is considered the first historical dynasty of China, meaning it left behind written records. These records are preserved as engravings cut into the so-called oracle bones.

The term “oracle bone” refers to ox scapulae (or shoulder blade bones) and tortoiseshells used by Shang rulers for divination. Oracle bones were said to offer a conduit to the spirits of royal ancestors, legendary figures from the past, nature deities, and other powerful spirits. Shang kings asked about natural events, illnesses, dreams, and forecasts for hunting and military endeavors.

Under the direction of the king and his diviner, the bones of cattle and water buffalo and the shells of tortoises were scraped clean, polished, and perhaps soaked. When dry, the bones or shells were chiseled to produce rows of grooves and pits. During the ritual, a diviner would insert a heated rod into the bottom of the grooves and pits to produce hair-line cracks on the opposite side of the bone or shell. The diviner requested information and guidance from the spirit of a royal ancestor and then interpreted the direction of the cracks to provide answers to the king’s question. To record the king’s question, a scribe would then carve it onto the bone or shell surface relative to the cracks.

Later, the scribe would carve the outcome onto the surface of the bones or shells. The tortoiseshell fragment from the collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, for instance, has three groups of finely engraved inscriptions. Two of them relate to the question of rain; the third reports on the outcome of a successful deer hunt. Most oracle bone inscriptions contain four parts: an introduction, a charge (the topic), the prognostication (interpretation of cracks), and verification (the actual outcome). For example, one oracle bone outside the museum collection reads:

Introduction: “On *renzi* (day 49), [the king] made cracks and divined:

Charge: ‘We will hunt at Wu; going and coming back there will be no disasters.’”

Prognostication: The king read the crack and said: “Auspicious.” This was inscribed.

Verification: “[We] caught one wild buffalo, one tiger, seven foxes.”

Vocabulary

charge: the topic of the oracle-bone inscription.

divination: the act of foretelling future events or revealing hidden information with the aid of supernatural powers.

oracle bones: ox bones or tortoiseshells used by shamans of the Shang dynasty to write requests on them to royal ancestor spirits, asking for guidance on important events or information about the future.

prognostication: the interpretation of the cracks produced on the oracle bone during the divining process.

Shang dynasty: the earliest Chinese dynasty verified by original surviving written records, ruling from circa 1600 to 1050 BCE.

verification: the actual outcome of the oracle bone inscription topic.

Procedure

Day 1

1. Project image of inscribed tortoiseshell. Ask several of the **Describe** and **Analyze** questions.
2. Present background information on oracle bones and the Shang dynasty.
3. Assign students to groups corresponding to the questions below:
 - a. How were oracle bones used?
 - b. Who were oracle bones said to communicate with?
 - c. What types of questions were asked?
 - d. Who was considered an oracle? Who was asking the questions?
 - e. What kind of writing system was used?
4. Allow groups to research and share their findings to the class.

Day 2

1. Prepare natural materials (get creative!). These can be leaves, hard-boiled eggs, cork, wood, etc.
2. Group students based on number of stations of materials prepared.
3. Have students develop a method of using their natural object to predict the future.
4. Have students fill out the Divination Method worksheet, answering the following questions:
 - a. What will your method of divination be?
 - b. What kinds of questions will you ask?
 - c. Where are your answers coming from?
 - d. Who has access to this process?
 - e. Does this process give legitimacy to any group or person in your imagined society?

Day 3

1. Groups will demonstrate their future-predicting method to the class.
2. Engage the students with the **Inquire** questions.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What do you see?
- What do you think this is made of?
- Do you notice any human alteration? What do you notice?
- Now that you understand the use of the oracle bone, what markings do you see on the oracle bone?
- Can you tell us what those markings (lines or cracks) look like?
- What types of cracks and potential burn marks do you see on the inscribed tortoiseshell?

Analyze

- How do you think carvings were made in the hard tortoiseshell?
- What could be the function of this object?

Interpret

- What kinds of topics could this oracle bone be predicting?

Inquire

- Why do you think members of the Shang dynasty felt the need to predict the future?
- Are there any methods you or your peers use today to cope with uncertainty?
- Do you ever look for signs in the natural world to make decisions?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Modify and decorate a material of your choice for “divination.” Emphasize aesthetic quality of your divination method alongside its connections to Shang practices.

English Language Arts

- Write a diary entry of a day in the life of a Shang dynasty oracle bone reader.

Social Studies

- Research other methods of divination across cultures and time periods.

Resources

The Art and Archeology of Ancient China. A Teacher's Guide. Smithsonian Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2003, pp. 7–9, 41, 90–93. <http://archive.asia.si.edu/explore/teacherResources/chinapacket/chinacover.pdf>

de Bary, W. T., and I. Bloom. *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600.* Vol 1, p. 17. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Smithsonian Learning Lab—Emergence of Civilization in China: Oracle Bones.

<https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/emergence-of-civilization-in-china-oracle-bones/GK8HqcjPNomKgwJx>

Eno, R. “Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions.” In *Religions of China in Practice*, 41–51. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. <http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s5804.pdf>

Khan Academy: Oracle Bone video (Shanghai Museum).

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/imperial-china/shang-dynasty/v/oracle-bone-shang-dynasty>

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/S2012.9.445/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>



