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VIOLENCE, KINSHIP AND THE EARLY CHINESE STATE

Situated between myth and history, the Shang have been hailed both as China's first historical dynasty and as one of the world's primary civilizations. This book is an up-to-date synthesis of the archaeological, palaeographic and transmitted textual evidence for the Shang polity at Anyang (ca. 1250–1050 BCE). Roderick Campbell argues that violence was *not* the antithesis of civilization at Shang Anyang, but rather its foundation in war and sacrifice. He explores the social economy of practices and beliefs that produced the ancestral order of the Shang polity. From the authority of posthumously deified kings, to the animalization of human sacrificial victims, the ancestral ritual complex structured the Shang world through its key institutions of war, sacrifice and burial. Mediated by hierarchical lineages, participation in these practices was basic to being Shang. This volume, which is based on the most up-to-date evidence, offers comprehensive and cutting-edge insight into the Chinese Bronze Age civilization.

Roderick Campbell is Associate Professor of East Asian Archaeology and History at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University. He has received numerous fellowships, awards and grants for his work from institutions such as the Luce Archaeology Initiative, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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The Shang and their World

RODERICK CAMPBELL

New York University



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*To my father,
What I am I owe to you. Though gone, you are with me still.*

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Preface

In 1978, the great archaeologist of China K.C. Chang prefaced his monumental work *Shang Civilization* with the following three reasons for writing it: 1) a *synthetic* work of Shang history was needed; 2) archaeological discoveries of the previous decade had forced a reevaluation of the then current understanding of the Shang; 3) research on Shang civilization had reached a point of maturity such that world-comparative analysis could be undertaken. If this was true of the late seventies, it is even truer of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Not only have the decades since Chang wrote his opus seen an ever-increasing flood of archaeological work published in Chinese, but his call for a multi-disciplinary approach to the Shang has remained more of an ideal than a reality, despite some notable efforts¹ and the fact that the Chinese Bronze Age, although increasingly discussed in comparative contexts (e.g. Trigger 2003, Yoffee 2005), has generally been discussed by those whose primary research area is not the Shang. Now as then,

Shang scholars have been traditionally trained within individual disciplines that focus on particular sources – texts, oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, or archaeological data. All of these sources are important, but each discipline tends to emphasize only some particular aspect or aspects of the Shang civilization. There is need for a study that is to be based on all of these sources, resulting, it is hoped, in a more

¹ In a display of remarkable humility, Chang felt he could not fully undertake this task, “although I advocate a comprehensive – instead of a disciplinary – approach, I myself, like the rest of us, was trained within a single discipline – archaeology – and the book will undoubtedly reflect that fact” (1980: xiv). In addition to Chang’s own work, Keightley (2000) and Thorp (2006), an inscription-based historian and art historian respectively, present attempts at more or less synthetic approaches.

complete picture of the Shang history than can be achieved within each single discipline. (Chang 1980: xiii)

I would argue, however, that a truly multi-disciplinary approach should not only aim to gain “a more complete picture” through the combination of sources, but also generate and debate new ways of looking at the past through a combination of disciplines and bodies of theory. For, as Morris (2000: 27) writes, “we need different intellectual tools to analyze pottery than poetry, but we should analyze both correlatively, within the same cultural framework.” That is to say, in using received texts, oracle-bones, bronze inscriptions and archaeological data, in addition to the methodological and theoretical issues associated with each source, the potential exists to put disparate disciplines into productive dialog. If social-cultural anthropology is classically based on ethnographic research and generally limited in its scope to the synchronic, or perhaps, in Braudellian terms, the short duration of individual time,² then history has been characterized by textual research, perhaps best symbolized by the archive. In terms of temporal scope historians have tended to focus on the medium and short durations of institutional and individual time (although obviously Braudel’s own work is an exception to this) while archaeology takes material culture as its object, the excavation as its representative methodology, and, frequently, the long duration of centuries as its scope. If each discipline has its characteristic strengths, then each also has its particular weaknesses and blind spots. Social-cultural anthropology, despite its supposed rapprochement with history (Dirks et al. 1994), tends toward relativism and particularism, while historians, with some notable exceptions, generally do not concern themselves with material culture, or long-term processes. Archaeologists on the other hand, often “evade individual time by taking refuge in evolutionism or burying it in abstract theorizing” (Morris 2000: 5). What I am advocating, then, is a multi-disciplinary approach, synthesizing not only properly contextualized sources, but also bodies of theory, contributing not only a more comprehensive picture of Shang society, but also an approach to studying human societies through time. As Morris (2000: 28–29) states,

it is asking a lot for one person to control so many fields, but ... the whole premise of historical archaeology lies in combining approaches,

² This generalization obviously excludes work in the sub-field of historical anthropology by such anthropologists as Marsall Salhins, Michael Tausig, Michael Hertzfeld to name just a few. My point is rather that despite an at least superficial recognition of the importance of diachronic processes, most social-cultural anthropologists deal with the short-term and the local.

Inscriptions

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potentially transforming both text-based historiography and archaeology. Our educational institutions may not encourage people to feel equally comfortable with Chaucer, abandoned fourteenth century villages, and Bourdieu; but that is no reason not to try.

This work then, is my attempt to combine oracle-bones, an abandoned eleventh-century (BCE) city and Bourdieu. My hope is that what is gained in synthetic juxtaposition and the perspective thus derived outweighs what is lost in lack of specialization.

Sources

This book combines two major contemporaneous sources of information concerning the Shang and, to a lesser extent, later textual sources of information. These major sources are inscriptions (mostly in the form of oracle-bones and bronze inscriptions) and archaeological data, ranging from survey results through excavations to technical studies of Shang period artifacts.

Inscriptions

By far the most abundant inscriptional materials for the Anyang period (ca. 1250–1050 BCE) are the oracle-bones.³ Some 200,000 fragments have been found to date of which over 50,000 have been published (Keightley 1978a). The vast majority of these fragments of turtle plastron or cattle scapula are the remains of divinatory charges inscribed after royal divination⁴ in which heat was applied to a prepared (chiseled or drilled) depression on the back of the bone to create a crack on the front surface which was then “read.” Although a small number of Anyang period oracle-bones have been discovered in the Zhouyuan in Shaanxi province and at Daxingzhuang in Shandong province, the vast majority of the inscribed oracle-bones known from the period come from Anyang. As historical sources the oracle-bone inscriptions have many advantages as well as disadvantages. While their

³ Since excellent English language introductions to the oracle-bone inscriptions are available (Keightley 1978a, 1997) I will only briefly note their importance and limitations as sources.

⁴ A minority of the inscriptions are the divinatory records of high elites other than the king, notably the Huayuanzhuang inscriptions. In addition to divinatory charges, prognostications are sometimes recorded and, even more rarely, verifications. There are also a handful of examples of non-divinatory “trophy inscriptions” inscribed on deer, tiger or human skulls as well as inventory inscriptions on the margins of the oracle-bones.

sheer numbers make oracle-bones a rich source of information, the pithy and formulaic nature of their inscriptions frequently limits their usefulness. Perhaps their greatest limitation, however, lies in their context as royal or high elite divinatory inscriptions, representing an unknown subset of subjects divined about. Thus, they tell us something about those concerns of the highest stratum of society which custom and significance assigned a status worthy of record. This tradition of inscribing oracle-bones, moreover, changed over time, emerging quite suddenly with King Wu Ding⁵ and gradually declining in the early Western Zhou period. At Anyang itself, there was a trend toward an increasingly narrow scope of divinatory inscriptions, with all topics except for war, ritual, hunting and routine fortune dropping from the later period divinations. Keightley (1997), for instance, lists seventeen divination topics: sacrifices and rituals, mobilizations, military campaigns, meteorological and celestial phenomena, agriculture, sickness, childbirth, disasters/distress/trouble, dreams, settlement building, orders, tribute payments, divine assistance/approval, requests to ancestral or nature powers, the night or the day, hunting expeditions and the ten-day week. Not only do most of these topics disappear by period v, but the nature of those that remain also changes. The simplest way to characterize the trend might be to say that ad-hoc divinations tend to be replaced with routine divinations concerned largely with generalized good fortune as opposed to the more specific concerns of period i inscriptions. The period i inscriptions then are not only the most plentiful (accounting for over half of the fragments published) but also in content and range are by far the richest source of information. In practical terms, this means that most oracle-bone derived descriptions of the Shang world are essentially depictions of King Wu Ding's reign as seen through the lens of the King's ritual concerns and divinatory practice and determined by the vagaries of preservation and discovery.

If the oracle-bone inscriptions are a limited source of historical information, Shang bronze inscriptions – cast (generally) on the inside of bronze ritual vessels or vessel lids – are even more so. Limited both in terms of the quantity of inscribed bronzes and the length of the inscriptions, these brief texts from the last reigns of the Anyang period generally record the receipt of a reward of cowry shells from the King or other elites to a lower ranking individual for some service rendered and the dedication of the vessel to an

⁵ There has been some attempt to assign some of the oracle-bone inscriptions to the Kings before Wu Ding (e.g. Li and Peng 1996, Cao 2006), but these remain shrouded in controversy and, frankly, lack convincing evidence.

Archaeological Evidence

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ancestor. As such, they can be useful sources of information on elite gifting and ancestor veneration as well as the names of people and places.

Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological evidence available for the Shang comes from a number of sources and also has a number of limitations. Perhaps the greatest issue is the nationalist, culture-historical, evolutionist and traditional historiographic frameworks and assumptions of most Chinese archaeological practice (von Falkenhausen 1993, Cohen 2001, Liu and Chen 2012, Campbell 2014a). In practical terms this means that Chinese Bronze Age archaeology has been largely a discourse of political and ethnic narratives written with formal ceramic typology. While the inappropriate conflation of potting styles with peoples and dynasties is easy enough to avoid when drawing conclusions from Chinese language archaeological works, it nevertheless means that the arduous task of tracing the tangled pathways of production, distribution and consumption of artifacts which might actually reveal something concrete about social, economic and even political relationships has not been undertaken. This, in effect, means that what we know about the culture history of Bronze Age China is largely, as Walter Taylor said about American archaeology more than sixty years ago,

the ordering of cultural materials in temporal sequence together with an attempt to demonstrate their derivations and cross-cultural relationships ... They have categorized events and items, tagged them, but not investigated them in their contexts or in their dynamic aspects. (Taylor 1948: 94)

This fact renders the concurrent use of multiple sources of information all the more important and the period before Anyang all the more inaccessible for its lack of texts. This is not to say that material culture has only a subsidiary role to play in the understanding of the Chinese Bronze Age, only that its full potential remains untapped and the assumptions and conclusions of much of the Chinese language archaeological literature (on which any broad scope study of Chinese archaeology must be based) must be critically evaluated.

Another glaring limitation found especially in older site reports is the lack of even a basic quantitative perspective. Thus, what appears in archaeological reports is frequently an unknown sample of what was excavated with the inclusion or exclusion of artifacts or features based on criteria that are

generally not discussed. When quantificational information is given, it frequently takes impressionistic forms such as “the most common vessel type was X,” or the “red pottery was relatively abundant.” The net effect of this quantificational vagueness is that for much of the archaeological record, statistical analysis is either impossible or highly problematic and further research based on published materials is frequently difficult.

Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of information that is available for the Shang capital at Anyang largely ameliorates the shortcomings of published Chinese archaeological sources. Excavated since the late 1920s, and not lacking its own problems (notably the increasing encroachment of development, the previous narrow focus on elite remains and the piecemeal nature of its excavations and their publication), Anyang is without a doubt the most extensively excavated site in China.⁶ It is not only the site of the discovery of the vast majority of the inscribed oracle-bones, but over 15,000 Late Shang tombs have been excavated to date (Tang 2004) including the only uncontroversial “royal tombs” known for the Chinese Bronze Age. Although early excavations by the fledgling *Academia Sinica* destroyed much of the architecture in the palace-temple area and made its reconstruction all but impossible (although see Du 2005 for attempts), subsequent work on workshops and, more recently, residential areas, make Anyang a uniquely crucial site for the study of the Chinese Bronze Age in general, and Shang civilization in particular.

If published archaeological sources in China are often problematic for one reason or another, Chinese archaeological practice is nonetheless undergoing rapid changes and some of the new work being undertaken will undoubtedly greatly raise the quality of information available. One such case is the work that has been undertaken by the Anyang workstation under the directorship of Tang Jigen and in collaboration with Jing Zhicun. Taking advantage of his position as director of the workstation, Tang created a database of 2,000 Anyang period tombs, the quality of which is unprecedented. This database, and Tang’s work based upon it (Tang 2004, 2005a) have been crucial sources of information for a number of analyses and arguments throughout this book. Additionally, over the last ten years, as a frequent visitor of the workstation and one-time resident of Anyang, I have benefitted greatly from the generosity of the archaeologists at the workstation – both for my privilege to work there and for our many hours

⁶ This “excavation” includes tomb looting which probably began with the fall of the Shang, continued through Imperial times and is very much alive and well today.

The Argument

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of fruitful conversation. Archaeological practice in China is fast changing and the pace of discovery is breathtaking. Revisions, even total revisions, of our understanding of the archaeology of the Chinese Bronze Age are not only possible but likely in the decades to come.

Post-Shang Textual Sources

Although transmitted texts, most written many centuries after the Zhou conquest of the Shang, were important sources for K.C. Chang's major works on Shang civilization (Chang 1980, 1983) and fundamentally inform many Chinese scholars' interpretations of the period, I have only used them sparingly in this work and then only as secondary sources of information. My reasoning is that if history and archaeology are concerned with change as well as continuity then we cannot assume the continuity of Chinese tradition in advance, or, indeed, in the face of all we know concerning the dramatic changes that took place between the end of the second millennium and the end of the first millennium BCE. Nor, in the case of later, purportedly transmitted, records of Shang events, can we be sure of accuracy without the rare corroboration of contemporaneous sources (such as the oracle-bone corroboration of the much of the royal genealogy recorded in the *Shiji*). Moreover, given their preoccupation with elite political narrative and the dearth of information concerning the actual workings of contemporaneous society, transmitted texts are of limited utility for the present study.

The Argument

This book has many goals. Firstly it is intended as an updated and revisionist version of K.C. Chang's great synthetic work *Shang Civilization*. Secondly it is meant to be both case study and theoretical contribution to the anthropological archaeological debates concerning early complex polities. Finally, this study aims to impact the field of Early China studies – by providing not only a substantive re-interpretation of the Shang polity at Anyang based on up-to-date research, but also a call to Sinologists to re-examine some of their historiographic assumptions and theoretical positions (conscious or unconscious).

The argument begins with a presentation of the consensus view of the Shang, a deconstruction of its theoretical assumptions and the outlines of the “inter-ontic” approach that the rest of the book will substantiate.

More precisely, Chapter 1 is a critical appraisal of the consensus that sees the Shang polity as based on religious monopolies and its civilization on Bronze Age mentalities. I will instead argue that the categories and historical frameworks used to describe the Shang have imported unacknowledged Enlightenment and Modernist baggage which has obscured more than elucidated. Instead I will present a more anthropologically and historiographically nuanced approach combining contemporary theory on relational ontology, practice theory and social violence. I propose to study the relationships between practices of social violence, hierarchies of being and caring, and moral economies on the one hand, and between ontologies, socio-physical technologies, and historical institutions and developments on the other. Extending the general theoretical critique of Chapter 1, Chapter 2 moves to more specific problems with the uses of the concepts of “cities,” “states” and “civilizations” in both anthropological archaeology and, especially, their deployment in the literature concerning ancient China.

In Chapter 3, in consonance with the critical approaches laid in Chapters 1 and 2, a sketch of Central Plains civilization and its neighbors over the second millennium BCE is drawn. Tracing out the developmental pathways of population centers, polities and the contemporaneous socio-political foci of burial, sacrifice and war, Chapter 3 provides a *longue durée* contextualization of the Great Settlement Shang, its polity and its civilization. In Chapter 4, the focus narrows from the second millennium BCE to the Great Settlement Shang and its polity – re-envisioned as a series of networks producing at once the bases for royal power, the patterning practices providing its justifications, and the nested and potentially contradictory boundaries of political identity. Expanding on my “networks and boundaries” approach to early complex polities (Campbell 2009), I outline Shang discursive hierarchies of authority, structuring practices of power and networks of capital. In the process of mapping out Shang networks of power and boundaries of identity, I give a preliminary reconstruction of the Anyang polity in space and an updated reanalysis of Keightley’s (1983) famous “state-score” study.

Narrowing focus again, this time from the framework of the Shang polity to a crucial network of power, Chapter 5 analyzes the role of kinship in the production of authority. Taking up the widely accepted view that kinship is crucial to understanding Shang social and political organization, I question and unpack the term “kinship” itself, examining the ways in which genealogy, marriage, cohabitation and obligation were figured

The Argument

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in Anyang period Shang social practice. This position is taken explicitly against the use of reified notions of kinship as markers of particular social evolutionary stages found in much of the literature on Early Chinese polities. I compare influential accounts of Shang kinship organization by breaking it down into particular practices and institutions. Considering practical genealogy as a network of social power and genealogically based identity and co-residence as an element mutually constituting practices of war, marriage and burial, I argue that kinship-based groups were the basis of both Shang identity and socio-political action. Finally, I argue that given the importance of genealogical place, the practice of ancestor construction and veneration must count among the most central of Shang social, political and religious practices.

Having outlined the discursive, practical and material bases of Shang authority in Chapter 4, and discussed the most important basic organizing principle of Shang society in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 focuses on two of the most crucial Shang practices of authority: warfare and sacrifice. Based on inscription and archaeological evidence, I argue that warfare and sacrifice must both be seen as pacifying practices key to the maintenance of Shang civilizational and ontological order. I also demonstrate how changes in sacrifice and war over the Anyang period relate to larger social and political developments.

In Chapter 7, kinship, violence and authority are linked in a study of Shang burial practices. Through a comparison of the spatial layout of Shang tombs at Anyang – their diachronic context and cross-class homologies in grave goods – I argue that structural homologies exist between elite and common tombs, suggesting a shared ideology and practice of burial and wide but unequal participation in the ancestral-ritual complex. This participation both generated a common *habitus* and, at the same time, gave it a radically inegalitarian structure, which was not merely economic but existential, shaping local notions of the human with its hierarchy of being, instantiated in the frequent practice of retainer sacrifice as well as the large-scale immolation of captives in royal and high-elite burials and cemeteries.

In the final chapter the diverse studies presented in previous chapters are brought together into a holistic vision of Shang civilization. I argue that rather than the products of Bronze Age superstition and barbarity, Shang warfare, sacrifice and burial should be seen as technologies of pacification producing and maintaining the order of Shang civilization much as our own economic, military, social, political and scientific institutions are put

in the service of the imperfect production of stable domestic and world orders. Drawing on discussions in earlier chapters I provide an inter-ontic description of Shang society and civilization in terms of the constitution of being and world at the “Great Settlement Shang” through interrelated practices of kinship and violence.

Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time coming. It began as a problem discovered by accident while writing a paper for an undergraduate Chinese literature course on the *Shijing*. I was perplexed by the violence intimated in the earliest dynastic hymns, and the jarring sense that something was wrong with the narrative I had absorbed through the secondary literature. This was essentially the naïve Orientalist claim that ancient China lacked epic poetry because it was a civilization of harmony. In this narrative, ritual, music and self-cultivation were China's deep, mythopoetic foundations, not individual heroism, military prowess, or victory in agonistic contest. Given this, my first introduction to the Shang dynasty in K.C. Chang's *The Archaeology of Ancient China* came as shock – especially the existence of human sacrifice. How did a society that practiced the mass ritual killing of other human beings become a civilization that produced humanistic philosophers only a few centuries later? How could the Shang dynasty have existed a mere six centuries before Confucius? This suggested to me, even then, that there must be a problem somewhere in the grand narratives of ancient China, the story of civilization's development from superstitious violence to reason, or both. The fruit of the first stage of this intellectual journey – inspired by K.C. Chang and his “five doors to the Shang” holistic approach – is this book, embarrassingly twenty years on from my initial departure.

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