The International Scene

Exquisite Art and Precious Archives: China's Records in Bronze

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Translator's Note: First, I apologize to Zhao Aiguo and Chang Tong for my poor translation, which cannot possibly do justice to their essay. I commend them for bringing to the attention of American historians the importance to Chinese history of these precious bronze inscriptions. Undoubtedly, they are essential to any historical understanding of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Shang dynasty bronzes have been the principal means of corroboration of some essential details of Shang dynasty history that were known previously only in written sources that had passed through so many editorial changes and glosses over the centuries that modern scholars had come to suspect them as unreliable. The durable bronze inscriptions that survive directly from that era are clearly more reliable evidence.

The authors also raise a rather fine archival point. Many of the inscriptions were incised to commemorate events that had already occurred, so they are retrospective reports rather than documents employed in the immediate business of the contemporary society. Others were identification tokens or certificates of major official appointments, and they come much closer to being true archives.

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BRONZE CASTING APPEARED EARLY in mankind's long history of production, wars, and development of material culture, and many nations recorded events on bronze utensils. Chinese archeologists have recently unearthed Shang and Zhou bronze utensils that not only provide detailed data about China's ancient metallurgy, but also have inscriptions that are archival in nature.[1] This contention is grounded in the inscription contents, for not all bronze utensils are archival. Only those having *shu-shi* characteristics are archives.[2]

Bronze inscriptions developed in different stages. The earliest were of the *fu-yong* or *mei-quan* sort, carved with numerous inscribed decorative patterns.[3] At the base of the decorative patterns are inscribed names. As society developed, bronze inscriptions multiplied and their record content grew richer, giving them the *shu-shi* quality of records of the spoken word and events, and thereby leaving in bronze implements some unique archival information.

Western Zhou utensils record the defeat of the Yin Shang, and the data inscribed is of great historical value.[4] Shortly after Zhou defeated Shang, large batches of bronze utensils suddenly appeared bearing long inscriptions whose purposes were directly related to the political events of the times.[5] The Zhou began to flourish only in the late decades of the Yin, and as they had no rich cultural accumulation of their own, they were in many ways students of the Yin. The ruins of the original Zhou palace at Qishan in Shaanxi Province have revealed many oracle bones, among them *bu-ci* from the reign of Wen Wang.[6] The Zhou not only learned from the Yin, but they improved upon them by producing great quantities of ritual bronze implements with long inscriptions. The Zhou seem to have used the bronze utensils for ritual worship and carved on them inscriptions that praised the virtues, military campaigns, and victories of Wen Wang and Wu Wang.[7] There are two levels of significance to these inscriptions. One is that the inscriptions record those appointed as commanders and new nobility and that these people used them as tokens or credentials of their place and position at court. The other is that the in-

[1]The Shang dynasty, in which Chinese civilization began to emerge from village-dwelling neolithic and pottery cultures to city-dwelling bronze-age cultures, lasted from about the eighteenth century to about the twelfth century B.C. The Zhou dynasty, from about the twelfth century to the middle of the third century B.C., was characterized by feudal states owing nominal allegiance to a central emperor and vying among themselves for hegemony, particularly during the latter centuries. It was during the late Zhou dynasty that the great philosophers of antiquity lived—Confucius, Mencius, Lao-se, who were roughly contemporaries of Socrates.

[2]The character for *shu* means "writings" or "books" and the character for *shi* means "history." Together they carry the meaning of "clerical" or "stenographic" in the sense of a formal record in a court.

[3]*Fu-yong*—for use in funeral rites and ritual remembrances of the dead. *Mei-quan* means, literally, "beautiful to look at" or "aesthetically pleasing." "Decorative" is perhaps too weak a translation.

[4]The first half of the Zhou dynasty, in which the center of power (in various sites or capital cities) was near present-day Xian in Shaanxi Province, is known as the Western Zhou. After a disastrous defeat in 771 B.C., in which the king was killed and the capital sacked, the dynasty was reconstituted in a new capital near present-day Loyang in Honan Province, and is known as the Eastern Zhou. From about the fourteenth century until its fall in the twelfth century B.C., the Shang dynasty is also named the Yin dynasty by many archeologists.

[5]At the battle of Mu-ye, the Zhou forces defeated Shang forces and beheaded the last Shang emperor, Zhou Xin.

[6]*Bu-ci*—A special category of oracle bone inscription. Wen Wang was ruler of Zhou before it conquered Shang. He was captured by Shang and imprisoned, and he died before the Shang were overthrown. *Wang* means "king" or "prince," as in the chief of a principality, and in Chinese usage, the title follows the name. The usual translation of *wang* is "king"; but in this text we'll stick to the Chinese word, *wang*, because a little further on we have the fourth king in the line, whose name is Kang, and "King Kang" evokes a frivolous image of a motion picture character for American readers.

[7]Wu Wang, son of Wen Wang, and his brother, the Duke of Zhou, defeated the Shang and established the Zhou dynasty. After the death of Wu Wang, the Duke of Zhou ruled as regent until crown prince Cheng came of age.

釋文

隹(唯)王初𠂤(遷)宅于成周，復𢦚
珷(武)王豐福，自天。才(在)四月丙戌，
王真(徝)宗小子于京室曰，昔才
尔考公𠬜克逨(速)𢦏(文)玟(文)王，肆玟
王受茲大令。隹珷王既克大
邑商，則廷告于天曰，余其
宅此中或(國)，自之𠂤民。烏
虖(呼)！尔有唯小子亡戠，哉(識)于
公氏有爵(烈)于天，𢦚(敶)令(命)，敬
享哉(𢦏)！裹王𢦏(恭)德谷(裕)天，順
(訓)我
不每(敏)。王咸𠂤。何易(賜)貝卅朋，
用乍(作)
口公寶尊𣪘。隹王五祀。

Figure 1. Dedicatory vessel from the reign of Cheng Wang, eleventh century B.C.

scriptions are honors to ancestors and an attempt to connect with them, the Zhou people's way of confirming, safeguarding, and strengthening their rule. Many of the bronze inscriptions carry the sense of *shen-zhong zhui-da*.[8]

From the perspective of the extant Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, we can see that their content is wide-ranging, including appointments, grants of authority and rewards, annals, records of wars, law suits, and other similar things.

Figure 1 shows a dedicatory vessel from the fifth year of the reign of Cheng Wang of the Western Zhou bearing 122 characters.[9] They record the utterances of Cheng Wang. The gist of the contents is Cheng Wang's explanation of how Wu Wang and two generations of the patriarchal clan subdued the Shang and established the merit and achievement of Zhou, his respects for the contributions his patriarchal clan made to the meritorious achievement of the throne, and his consequent dedication of the utensil to them. The bronze vessel was cast to be used in memorial services and sacrifices to the patriarchal clan. Figure 2 is of a large *yu-ding* from the twenty-third year of the

[8]An ancient proverbial injunction to "carefully attend to funeral rites and to follow them when gone with due sacrifices to the dead."

[9]*Zun*—a utensil designed for use in rituals commemorating the dead.

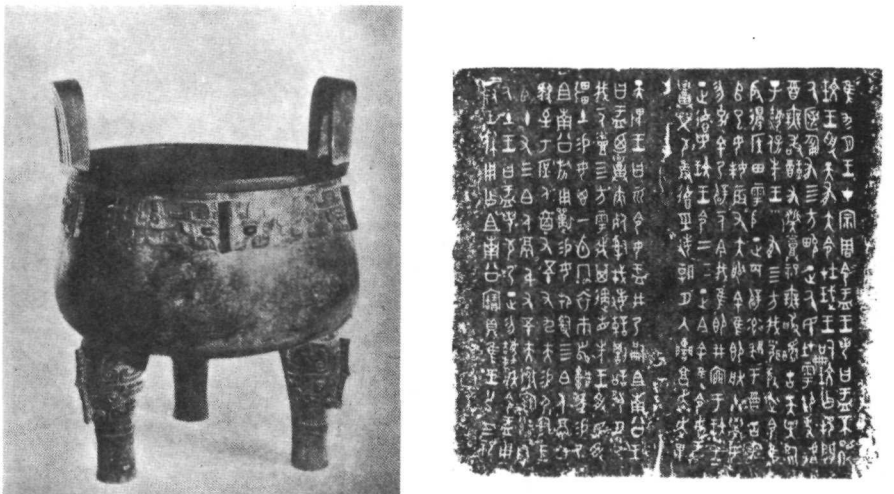

Figure 2. Ceremonial utensil from the reign of Kang Wang, tenth century B.C.

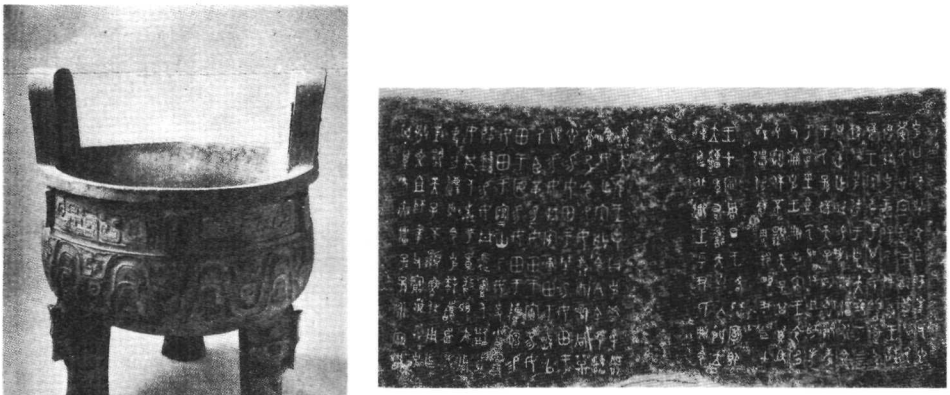

Figure 3. Ceremonial utensil from the reign of Xiao Wang, ninth century B.C.

reign of Kang Wang, inscribed with 291 characters.[10] From the very beginning, Kang Wang extolled the glorious virtues of Wen

[10]*Yu-ding*—a ceremonial utensil with a broad mouth, looped handles, and three or four legs. Kang Wang was the fourth ruler of Zhou (but the third emperor of the Zhou dynasty).

Wang of Zhou, praising his meritorious achievement in vanquishing the Shang and establishing the state, and also said that he must receive instruction from Wen Wang because he defeated the Shang. Kang Wang treasured this utensil. For this reason, the vessel was inscribed with praise of his ancestors. Figure 3 shows a large *ke-ding* of the reign of Xiao Wang inscribed with 290 characters.[11] The inscription commends his forefathers' virtuous character and meritorious service in the reign of Gong Wang.[12]

In short, all military and political activities of the Zhou dynasty, all sacrifices to their ancestors, and all punishments or admonitions had to be inscribed on bronze utensils to be passed down to later generations as testimonial commemorations. These inscriptions, some as long as 500 characters, are copious narratives whose *shu-shi* nature is absolutely obvious. They are second to none as documents of that era and are thus valuable archival materials.

The ancient bronze inscriptions are all important Shang and Zhou dynasty records. The Zhou court and feudal princes all regarded them as important and precious things to be stored in the ancestral temples, so this further extends the potential range of their research use. Moreover, the bronze inscription records are primary materials recording every aspect of the society of those times, giving them very high historical value, and making them worthy of the esteem and importance accorded them by historians. Up to now, more than four thousand bronze utensils have been excavated in China. That these precious archives have been preserved to the present day is, from the point of view of Chinese archives and history, worth bragging about.

[11]*Ke-ding*—a large three-legged ceremonial utensil. Xiao Wang was the eighth Zhou emperor.

[12]Gong Wang was the sixth Zhou emperor.