BRONZE INSCRIPTIONS OF THE WESTERN CHOU DYNASTY AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS *

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RELIABLE documents on which to base the history of the Western Chou dynasty (i.e., before 770 B.C.) are very scarce. This is not because written documents were not produced in great numbers at that time. The old theory that books were laboriously scratched with a style and written only on rare occasions after long deliberation is now known to be quite untenable. The Shang oracle bones and the Honan excavations have shown us that the writing brush was already in use and that books and even letters were by no means uncommon even prior to the Chou dynasty. Study of the

* I wish to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation of the kindness of Mr. Liu Chieh, of the Paleographic Section of the National Library of Peiping. Mr. Liu, who is one of the world’s foremost expert’s on bronze inscriptions, has given the writer the benefit of his encyclopedic knowledge in semi-weekly conferences during nearly two years, all without the slightest reward.

1 I prefer to call the dynasty which preceded the Chou Shang rather than Yin, because the oracle bones show that its people called themselves Shang, or at least called their city by that name, while the character “Yin” apparently does not occur. Yin seems to have been a Chou name for them. It is true that the book called “Wei Tsū” of the Shu Ching represents a Shang officer as speaking of the state as Yin, but this book is a palpable forgery of Chou date, and generally acknowledged as such.

2 Cf. Tung Tso-pin, “Chia Ku Wên Tuan Tai Yen Chiu Li,” pp. 417-18, and plates opp. p. 418, Ts’ai Yuan P’ei Sixty-fifth Birthday Anniversary Volume, Academia Sinica, Peiping, 1933. Three pieces of oracle bone, found in situ, written, apparently with a brush, rather than carved, are described and illustrated here. I have also seen a piece of pottery, found in the same excavation, upon which had been written the character 祀 ssū. The character was quite large. In the opinion of the excavators, and in my opinion, it must have been written with a brush.

In addition to this recent archeological evidence, we find even in the I Li reference to writing on silk, which must have been done with a brush and ink of some sort (I Li, “Shih San Ching Chu Su,” Kianghsi ed. of 1815, 35. 9a; Eng. tr. of John Steele, II, 49).

3 The character 篆 t‘seh as meaning “book” is frequent on the Shang oracle bones, and in some cases it evidently refers to letters sent from one place to another to give orders concerning military campaigns, etc.

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bronze inscriptions, especially when these are compared with the _Shang Shu_, the _I Li_, and the _Kuo Yü_, shows clearly that documents were produced, even in very early Chou times, with a frequency and a casualness which has scarcely been appreciated. But most of these documents, being incidental to the business of government and of purely temporary value, have been lost.

In addition to these we have divination formulae and poetry. It was the practice of diviners who used the system of the sixty-four hexagrams to make up their own explanations of the hexagrams, for the occasion, and some of these were put together into the original portions of the _I Ching_; a large part of this material dates from very early in the dynasty, and some of it may even antedate the Chou conquest. Portions of the _Book of Poetry_ are known to date from Western Chou times. But this gives us very scanty material, and aside from this we are dependent almost entirely for our knowledge of the period upon such official and quasi-official documents as have survived.

In the transmitted literature these exist almost exclusively in the _Shu Ching_ or, as the Chinese more commonly call it, the _Shang Shu_. But about one-half of this work, the whole of the so-called

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This character is found among the earliest bones that we know (Cf. Lo Chêng-yü's _Yin Hsü Shu Ch'i Ch'ien Pien_, 7. 19. 1, where the name of the diviner dates the inscription as belonging to the time of Wu Ting). The inscription just referred to is one of those in which 'sé stands for a letter. It is true that Mr. Tung Tso-pin formerly suggested that this character represented the tortoise shells used for divination (_An Yang Fa Chieh Pao Kao_, Academia Sinica, Peiping and Shanghai, 1929-33, pp. 127-29), but he has subsequently altered this opinion and is now firmly convinced that there was a very considerable literature, quite aside from the bone inscriptions, even in Shang times (verbal communication of Feb. 10, 1934).

4 Only a part of even the _chin wen_ text of the _Shang Shu_ or _Shu Ching_ was written in Western Chou times, while we can not be sure that any of the _I Li_ or the _Kuo Yü_ come from that period. Certain sections of them, if studied and criticised carefully, can give us information concerning the period, however.

6 While some of the explanations of hexagrams found in the _Kuo Yü_ and the _Tso Chuan_ are quoted from the _I Ching_, others are quite different from the explanation of the same hexagram found in that work. Compare, for instance, _Kuo Yü_, "Chou Yü hsia," middle of the second discourse, with _Chou I_, Shih San Ching," 1. 1f. and 2. 13bf.

4 It would be desirable to establish the convention of using the term _Shu Ching_ to refer to that work considered as one of the Thirteen Classics
"ku wên" text, is generally recognized to be a forgery, dating from about the third century A.D. Of the remaining half, a considerable portion is forged, and of that which is genuine a part is later than the Western Chou period. Even some of the documents which were actually written in the Western Chou period are forgeries which were composed as a part of the attempt to consolidate the power of the Chou kings, and ascribed to the Shang period. When all of these subtractions have been made, we are left with a total of between nine and twelve documents in the Shu Ching which we are justified in declaring to be indubitably genuine and representative documents of the Western Chou period.7

On the other hand, there are literally hundreds of inscribed bronzes, certified by the concurrent opinion of many experts to be genuine products of the Western Chou dynasty, which are available for study. Kuo Mo-jô has estimated that "At the present time there are more than four thousand Chinese bronzes bearing inscriptions in the hands of collectors; most of these are relics of the Chou dynasty."8

It is true that the majority of these inscriptions are quite brief. But there is current an altogether exaggerated opinion in this respect, which is represented by Karlgren's early statement that "A number of bronzes are preserved, but their inscriptions—where these exist—are meagre and unilluminating."9 This puts the case much too strongly.

of Chinese orthodoxy, while employing the term Shang Shu to denote that small portion of this work which consists of ancient and genuine historical documents. For the term Ching is of comparatively late origin, and is peculiarly appropriate in the context of literary orthodoxy. Shang Shu, on the other hand, is an earlier term, and its original meaning, as I have shown in a manuscript which is not yet published, is "treasured books," that is, "archives."

7 This statement is made on the basis of comparison of these books with the style and content of Western Chou bronze inscriptions, and with the history as contained in other documents. This shows that the "Ta Kao," "K'ang Kao," "Chiu Kao," "Tzû Ts'ài," "Shao Kao," "Lo Kao," "To Shih," "Chün Shih," and "To Fang" are almost certainly of the Western Chou period, "Wên Hou Chih Ming" probably so, and the "Ku Ming" and "Pei Shih" possibly of that period.

Certain other books, such as the "Hsi Po K'an Li," were apparently written in Western Chou times, but they cannot be called representative documents because they are forgeries, attributed to the Shang period.

8 Ku Tai Ming K'ê Hui K'ao l. Appendix Ia, Tokyo, 1933.

For research on the Western Chou period I have used a selected group of two hundred and nineteen bronze inscriptions. It is not, of course, comprehensive, but it does include virtually every inscription of importance, and it has the advantage that every one of these inscriptions is well-known and has withstood general scholarly criticism as to its authenticity. Among these there are very few inscriptions of less than ten or a dozen characters. Most of them consist of between twenty and fifty characters, but a number are much longer. The table which follows has been prepared to show the occurrence of long inscriptions in this group. To give a basis of comparison with the transmitted literature, I have set down the names of some of the shorter books of the chin wen text of the Shu Ching, with the number of characters they contain.

**Western Chou Bronze Inscriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Characters</th>
<th>No. of Inscriptions</th>
<th>No. of Characters</th>
<th>Name of Book</th>
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<tr>
<td>70 to 99</td>
<td>................</td>
<td>10 to 99</td>
<td>Kao Tsung Yung Jih</td>
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<td>100 to 133</td>
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<td>100 to 133</td>
<td>Kan Shih</td>
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<td>151 to 152</td>
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<td>151 to 152</td>
<td>Hsi Po K' an Li</td>
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<td>291</td>
<td>................</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>T'ang Shih</td>
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<td>Wei Tzü</td>
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<td>497</td>
<td>Ch' în Shih</td>
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<td>Mu Shih</td>
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From these facts it may be seen that the bronze inscriptions are by no means negligible from the point of view of the quantity of writing which they contain. But although this be granted, it is

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10 These inscriptions, in the order in which they are listed, are reproduced in: Wu Shih-fên, *Chūn Ku Lu Chìn Wên* (1895), 3 shang. 67, 77, 78, 79, 83, 86, 3 chung. 1, 8, 9, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 33, 35, 37, 51, 52, 56, 58, 67, 3 hsia. 3, 8, 20, 31, 37, 42, 46, 51. Reference is made to this work because it is relatively comprehensive. But since it consists merely of copies of the inscriptions, it is not so useful for actual research as Wu Tach'eng's *Kê Chai Chi Ku Lu*, 1896, which reproduces actual rubbings in facsimile.

11 These figures are based on the chin wen text, which, being reconstituted in slightly different form by various scholars, will sometimes show a difference of a few characters in the length of individual books, depending on the version followed.
sometimes urged that, after all, these inscriptions merely repeat the same formulae over and over again, and tell us very little. It is true that bronze inscriptions, especially the very brief ones, run to formulae. But not all of them do, nor are those which are cast in formulae without great value. The formulae which we find, for instance, for investing a vassal with a fief, or for rewarding a triumphant general who returns with his spoil and his captives and makes his report, are ceremonies concerning which we have little contemporary evidence aside from these bronzes. The inscriptions on bronzes cast for wedding presents hold loosely to a formula, but they tell us much about the social, political, and religious conditions of the times.

Let us consider a few of the occasions for which these bronze vessels were cast. A vassal is enfeoffed by the king, in a court ceremony which may include a moral and religious lecture written for the king in advance by his ministers, and presented with certain ritual gifts; he makes a bronze vessel to record the fact, giving details of the ceremony in the inscription. A vassal, having performed some service for the king, is rewarded with ceremony, and in commemoration of the fact makes a vessel dedicated to his ancestors and designed to be used for sacrifice, to secure for himself blessings and long life without end, and to be used by his descendants forever. On a military raid to "punish" certain barbarians rich spoil of shell money is obtained; the maker of the vessel records that he used his share of the loot to make this vessel. The transfer of lands is recorded, with details of the areas involved. A treaty, cast on bronze, defines the boundaries between states. Two feudal lords dispute over a piece of land; the king settles the quarrel, but he has to send an army to subdue the loser. Complicated commercial transactions involving horses, slaves, silk, and metal used as money are recorded. An instance of acceptance of a fine, in lieu of punishment, is recorded as a case of unusual clemency.

This is no more than a suggestion of the sort of material these inscriptions contain. But it will be seen that when we have so few authentic documents from this period, they hardly deserve the oblivion in which scholarship has left them up to the present time. Careful comparative study of them tells us a great deal which we should otherwise have no way of knowing, and corrects many mistaken impressions. Scholars have depended too much, in the past, upon works such as the *Chou Li*, which present us with the artificial,
idealized schemes of administration and social organization which later scholars read into the early period. The bronzes show us the period as it was, a rough and ready time in which institutions were flexible and growing, not fixed. We can learn the same thing, to be sure, from parts of the Shang Shu, and for an even later period from the Kuo Yü and the Tso Chuan. But the text of the Shang Shu has been so garbled by interpretation that we can hardly understand some passages without reference to the bronze inscriptions as a key, and the Kuo Yü and Tso Chuan were compiled so

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12 Maspero, La Chine Antique, p. 124, says, "Aussi un noble ne devait-il se marier qu’une fois; c’était une règle absolue, aussi bien pour le Fils du Ciel que pour le simple patricien: le mari veuf ne pouvait pas se remarier, et les cas de seconds mariages cités par les historiens sont toujours blâmés." No doubt such an absolute rule did exist in the minds of the late scholars who made up the codes of li which have come down to us, but there was no such rule in actual operation in the early period. From the Kuo Yü and Tso Chuan (cf. Kuo Yü, "Chin Yü," second discourse; Tso Chuan, "Shih San Ching," 15. 16b-17a; etc.) and even the Shih Ching, Legge, p. 55 f, we see clearly that remarriage of men and even of women was by no means uncommon.

In fact even 礼 li, down to a very late date, specifically provided for the remarriage of patricians, both men and women. The very late "Chuan" of the I Li prescribes that, in case of the death of a woman who has a son, "The father must wait three years before remarrying, in respect to his son’s feelings" (Shih San Ching, I Li 30. 6a; Steele’s tr. II. 15-16). And the text of the I Li prescribes the mourning to be worn in cases where "the father dies, and the stepmother remarries" (op. cit. 30. 7b; tr. II. 16).

If, as Maspero says, historians in referring to cases of remarriage do so with censure, they do so from the point of view of the code of a later day. But we can not write history by reading these later prohibitions and elaborate schemes of social and political organization back into a time when they did not operate if they even existed.

13 A good instance of this is the use of the character 祭 hsien as it occurs in the “Chiu Kao” p. 13 (Legge, Shoo-King, p. 410) and the “Lo Kao” p. 23 (ibid. p. 447). In both cases it refers to the Yin people, under Chou rule after the conquest. In one case they are spoken of as “Yin hsien 臣 chén” and in the other as “Yin hsien 民 min.”

The commentators, looking back on the events to which these books refer through a haze of orthodox philosophy and the orthodox romanticizing of history, could not understand the use of hsien in this place. The character commonly means “to sacrifice” or “to give to a superior”; in its earlier form it is a pictograph of a 鼎 li surmounted by a colander-like upper portion, forming the “steamer” which the character denotes, as a noun (a dog was later added to the character, because dog meat was frequently offered in such vessels). But the commentators could find no way to make
late and contain so much that is of dubious origin that they cannot compete with the bronze inscriptions as authentic touchstones by which to test the institutions of the early period.

But the importance of the bronze inscriptions as providing standards of comparison for other literature is at least as great as their importance as primary source materials. For the most part we have had to content ourselves with what were, after all, very subjective criteria. The chin wên text of the Shu Ching has been pointed out as “more difficult to read” than the ku wên text, and therefore older. But this judgment depends partly upon the subsequent fashions in Chinese literary style. Scholars who learned to recite the Four Books as children sometimes consider intrinsically difficult pasages in the Mencius or the Analects simple, merely because they are familiar. But we have had very little of which we could say: “This is an original, unaltered document of the Western Chou period, the style of which we may study and use as a standard

this square with the text of the Shu; they pronounced it to be equivalent to the character 彼 hsien, and in accordance with this Legge translates “the worthy ministers of Yin” and “the good and wise men of Yin.” But this is quite out of place in the circumstances, where the Yin people are the conquered population with whom they are having a good deal of trouble. If it be said that this was flattery, why does this not show itself in the “To Shih” and “To Fang,” proclamations made directly to these people? Instead, the tone of these proclamations is distinctly stiff.

From the use on bronze inscriptions of this term hsien as an adjective referring to men (cf. Chün Ku Lu Chin Wên 3 hsia. 31; Lo Chên-yü, Chên Sung T'ang Chi Ku I Wên 6, 12; etc.) we know its meaning. It was the custom to sacrifice captives of war; human sacrifice was common during Yin and early Chou times. Hsien min, or “people of the hsien,” were people dedicated to sacrifice, men whose lives, since they had been captured, were forfeit. That the Chou rulers felt thus toward the Yin people is shown in the addresses made directly to them, as “The king says, ‘I declare to you, ye numerous officers of Yin—now I have not put you to death.’” (To Shih, Legge, p. 462), and the threat held over them that “I will proceed to severe punishments and put you to death” (To Fang, Legge, p. 504). The meaning, then, of hsien min or hsien ch'ên is “captive slaves,” i.e., men who might be put to death but are allowed to live as slaves instead (the original meaning of ch'ên is not “minister” but “captive”; the trace of this may be found even in the Shuo Wên, which is mistaken, however, as to the etymology of the character). It occurs in this sense repeatedly on the bronzes, where such persons are given to vassals, as rewards for service, by the hundreds. It is used with this same meaning, but in a somewhat figuratively sense, of the conquered Yin people in the passages in the Shang Shu cited above.
by which to test other documents which are claimed to be from that time." But we do have just this in a large number of bronze inscriptions.

It may be objected that the bronze inscriptions can not be used as a standard of the literary style of the time which produced them, because we have no way of knowing that they do not represent a special type of composition in a peculiar style. But this is not quite true. It was the custom, when the king or, in some cases, other rulers gave land or other gifts to their vassals, to accompany the gift with a speech of presentation. Although this might be spoken, it was usually (in the case of presentations important enough to be commemorated by the casting of a vessel) written in advance by an official, and read aloud at the order of the ruler. At the conclusion of the ceremony this written document was handed to the recipient of the gift, who thrust it in his girdle and withdrew.\(^\text{14}\) The same ceremony is described in the \textit{I Li}.\(^\text{15}\) When the recipient cast a bronze he copied this document, \textit{verbatim}, into its inscription, in a number of cases.

In these inscriptions, then, we have permanently and unalterably recorded the text of ordinary, representative state documents of the Western Chou period. Contained within the 219 Western Chou inscriptions mentioned above there are twenty-nine such documents. A few are very brief, but twelve of them contain more than fifty characters. One has one hundred characters,\(^\text{16}\) another one hundred forty-eight,\(^\text{17}\) and another four hundred seventy-six.\(^\text{18}\) When the style and vocabulary of these sections are compared with other portions of the inscriptions, and with bronze inscriptions generally, they do not appear to differ in any essential particular. We are therefore justified in considering the Western Chou bronze inscriptions generally to represent the ordinary documentary style of the period, only making allowances for the peculiarities of formula naturally to be expected.

\(^{14}\) Cf. \textit{Chün Ku Lu Chin Wên}, 3 hsia. 4b, and elsewhere.

\(^{15}\) "Shih San Ching," \textit{I Li} 27. 5ab; Steele tr. II. 5-6. In this case, however, the official who reads the document aloud does not hand it to the recipient, but lays it on the presented clothing, achieving the same end.

\(^{16}\) \textit{Chün Ku Lu Chin Wên} 3 hsia. 8.

\(^{17}\) \textit{Li Tai Chung Ting I Ch'i Ku'an Shih Fa T'ieh} (Liu Shih ed., Wuchang, 1903) chüan 14, next to last inscription, "Mu Tun."

\(^{18}\) \textit{Chün Ku Lu Chin Wên}, 3 hsia. 51.
When these inscriptions are compared with other literature of the time, and especially with those books of the Shu Ching or Shang Shu which we have most reason to believe genuine, a number of remarkable similarities appear. The vocabulary and the grammar are, generally speaking, almost the same. I have checked a number of phrases of three or four characters which are used habitually both on bronzes and in the literature of the Western Chou period, but are rare or lacking in later materials. Official titles, and political, religious, and philosophical ideas show surprising correspondences. Part of the inscription on the Ta Yü Ting 19 deals with the same subject matter as part of the "Chiu Kao" of the Shu Ching. 20 The document in the Shu called "Wên Hou Chih Ming" 21 is so like the bronze inscriptions that it might have been copied from one. In content it is essentially similar to the "Mao Kung Ting," 22 but it is worthy of note that in this case the document preserved on bronze is two and one-quarter times as long as that transmitted in the Shu Ching.

I have compared each book of the chin wên section of the Shu Ching with the style of the bronzes, with results which are new in a few instances, but which chiefly serve to confirm judgments already arrived at on the basis of other evidence. Quite a little of this type of criticism is being done at the present time by qualified Chinese scholars. But analysis of the style and vocabulary of the bronzes has not yet advanced to the point where we have much in the way of objective criteria. There is a great deal of opportunity for valuable future work in the discovery and use of such criteria. Let us consider a single instance.

The book of the Shu Ching called "P’an Kêng" 23 has been accepted as a genuine product of the Shang dynasty even by those who would allow no date so early for any other document in that work. Ku Chieh-kang so accepted it, for instance, in the first volume of the Ku Shih Pien. 24 But if it is compared with the Shang oracle bones wide differences are at once apparent, in content as well as in style. 25 The style of the work is, in fact, too smooth

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19 Chun Chin Wen Ku Lu 3 hsia. 31. 20 Legge, p. 399 ff.
21 Legge, p. 613.
22 Chun Ku Lu Chun Wen 3 hsia. 51.
23 Legge, p. 220.
24 (1926), p. 201.
25 For instance the city is spoken of as Yin rather than Shang, and the idea of 天命 T’ien ming is fully developed, although the very character T’ien does not seem to appear in the published bone inscriptions. The
and flowing even for the Western Chou period. But when we examine minutely we find even greater discrepancies.

An analysis of one hundred and thirty-eight of the longer Western Chou bronze inscriptions, made by my assistant, showed a total of only fourteen occurrences of the common character 之 chih. But similar analysis of one hundred and fourteen Eastern Chou inscriptions showed eighty-one occurrences of this character. Furthermore, the use of chih in the Western Chou period is limited and narrow, compared with later practice.26 The older books of the Shu are in general sparing in their use of chih, and universally narrow in the range of uses to which it is applied.

But in the “P'an Kêng” of the Shu we find chih no less than twenty-two times. And it is used with a freedom which is not typical of the early Chou period, and gives to the whole style a cast which is foreign to that time; in some cases it is used in a manner which seems to be definitely absent from early Western Chou prose.27 Such frequent use of this character, and the use of it in this way, are even less characteristic of the Shang oracle bones. Judging from these various criteria, I believe that there is no doubt that the “P'an Kêng” is a forgery, written not during the Shang period but in the Chou, and not even at the beginning of the Chou dynasty. Upon comparing notes with Ku Chieh-kang I have found that he no longer considers the “P'an Kêng” a Shang work.

The difficulty of dating bronze inscriptions with accuracy hampers such use of them. A few, like that of the “Hsiao Ch'ên Chih” 28 definitely date themselves by references to names and events as well as by the form of their characters and their content generally. But these are rare. Yet this difficulty is not so great as it may seem at first. The style of formation of the characters changed rapidly. It is possible for one who is accustomed to working with these

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instances, somewhat less than ten, in which T'ien is said to appear on the oracle bones, are very doubtful, and for the most part unquestionably mistaken; in any case all appear to date from the closing period of the dynasty, while the P'an Kêng is supposed to be from the middle.

26 In these fourteen cases, chih is used seven times as a pronoun, four times to connect a preceding adjectival phrase with the following noun it modifies, and three times to connect two nouns as a simple genitive particle.

27 As in the phrase 火之燎子原 (Legge, p. 229).

28 王后反克商在成帥周公錫小臣單貝十朋 Chên Sung T'ang Chi Ku I Wên 9. 29a.
inscriptions to take a list of the different forms of a single character as it appears on fifty bronzes and, from the form of the single character, distinguish those of early and those of late Chou date with virtually no error. When there is added to this the inscription as a whole, with its style and content, there is little difficulty in dating within an error of a century or thereabouts. From the standpoint of the study of political history such an error is tremendous, of course, but for the study of the literary style of a period and for the history of culture it is not very serious. Forged inscriptions have also presented a problem. But clever as Chinese forgers are, I believe that very little in the way of forged bronze inscriptions of importance passes through the keen, cooperative examination of the present generation of Chinese paleographers.

Chinese scholars have been collecting, studying, and publishing bronze inscriptions, and doing something with their translation, ever since the Sung dynasty. But the important work which makes them really available as material for research has come, for the most part, in recent decades, largely as a result of the renewed interest in paleography and the new material for its study given by recent discoveries, including that of the Shang oracle bones in 1899. At the present time there are some half dozen Chinese scholars, nearly all comparatively young, who are doing research of the first importance in this field, and initiating a younger generation of disciples. Their publications appear as books and as articles scattered throughout various journals. A society for this type of research was inaugurated in Peiping in 1934; it publishes a semiannual report of research, which may in time lead to the publication of a journal.29

Western scholarship can present little to compare with the work of these Chinese investigators. Wieger, in his Caractères Chinois,30 in the section called “Graphies Antiques,” gives facsimiles, and essays translation of a large number of bronze inscriptions. These are referred to by scholars of reputation in such manner as to cause the unwary to suppose them to be reliable. Karlgren refers to them without criticism,31 and Maspero mentions three of the translations with only the caution that they are “un peu trop libre.”32

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29 This bulletin, published in Peiping, is called 考古学社 社刊.
30 My references to this work are all to the third edition, 1916.
32 La Chine Antique, p. 86, n. 1.
It is true that the specific translations to which he refers are among the most correct in the work. But as to the translations as a group, something more requires to be said.

In the first place, Wieger's dating of inscriptions is more than doubtful. He gives two inscriptions which he says are "certainement" from the Hsia dynasty. I know of no qualified scholar, Chinese or foreign, who speaks of inscribed bronzes from the Hsia dynasty. Recent research seems to indicate that the casting of inscriptions containing more than two or three characters was probably an innovation of the last century of the Shang period.\(^3\)

The form of the characters of these supposed Hsia inscriptions is exactly like that of late Chou times. Some of Wieger's so-called Shang inscriptions may be correctly ascribed, but the second one cannot be earlier than late Chou; the highly ornate, elongated, spidery characters, the arrangement of the inscription, and the phraseology are typically late.\(^4\)

As to his translations, let us consider the following inscription: \(^5\)

Author's transcription:

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\(^{33}\) The old theory of Western museum experts that there were no Shang bronzes has long since been exploded by the scientific excavation of ore, slag, and hundreds of pieces of moulds for bronze vessels on the site of the Shang capital at Anyang, in strata dated by the oracle bone inscriptions, and dozens of vessels in Shang tombs. And we have hundreds of bronze vessels which are undoubtedly Shang, of which a large proportion are inscribed.

But almost all of these inscriptions are from one to three characters long. It has been estimated that Shang bronzes with long inscriptions do not number as many as ten. Furthermore, we now have a chronological series of the forms of the characters used on the oracle bones at various periods, and when this is compared with bronzes the forms seem to tally with peculiar forms found on the bones only for the very end of the Shang period. (For a part of this evidence, cf. Chia Ku Wên Tuan Tai Yen Chiu, p. 410.)

\(^{34}\) Cf. Caractères Chinois, p. 454.

\(^{35}\) Inscription copied after Wieger, Caractères Chinois, p. 433.
In this inscription the columns read from right to left; this is not always the case on bronzes.

Wieger translates the first character as "Moi fils encore armé du couteau—" But this is really a proper name for which we have no modern equivalent. It is a man holding a knife, but in the context he is a grandson rather than a son.

He renders the second character as "en présence de l'ancêtre." This is the most remarkable and persistent error in Wieger's translations. He says "La présence de l'ancêtre à qui l'offrande est faite, est figurée le plus souvent par [cf. inscription, second character] le talon de son pied." This is apparently an original idea of Wieger's, based on the resemblance of this character to 耳, for Chinese scholars since the Sung dynasty have been translating it as 作 tso, "make," and from its use in hundreds of inscriptions there is no question that this is correct; we can learn this even from the Shuo Wên Chieh Tzŭ if the jên element, a late addition, is subtracted.

The third character Wieger translates as "j'offre viande crue." Elsewhere he explains: "le fils offre la viande crue découpée, disposée sur les rayons d'un dressoir, maintenant 耳." Obviously he has confused this character with 耳 tsu, with which it does have some etymological connection. But thousands of the Shang oracle bones, scores of bronze inscriptions, and the universal testimony of Chinese scholarship show this character to be 祖 tsu, "grandfather," "ancestor," and in fact Wieger himself so translates it elsewhere.

The fourth character he translates as (we must repeat "j'offre") "libation." He explains this as "un ... sorte de larme, symbole du liquide répandu à terre, en libation." But this is really only the second of the ten stems, 乙 i. The calendric tables on the Shang oracle bones, the dating formulae of many bronzes, the Shuo Wên Chieh Tzŭ, the universal testimony of Chinese scholarship, and Wieger's own translation when it appears in dating formulae concur to prove this.

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38 Loc. cit.
39 Cf. Li Tai Chung Ting I Ch'i K'uan Shih Fa T'ieh, chüan 10, first inscription, and passim.
39 Caractères Chinois, p. 428. 40 Ibid., pp. 465, 467. 41 Ibid., p. 425.
41 Cf. Yin Hsü Shu Ch'i Ch'ien Pien 3. 4. 2, etc.
42 Caractères Chinois, pp. 453, 492, and 506.
He translates the fifth character as ("j’offre") "objets précieux." It is true that it represents jade, cowries, etc., but they are contained, not as he says in a coffer, but in a building, a treasury; all oracle bone and bronze forms and the Shuo Wên Chieh Tzü agree on this. This is, as Wieger knew, the common character 寶 pao, but here it functions not as a plural noun but as an adjective, "precious" or "valuable," modifying the last character.

The sixth character is translated as ("j’offre") "vin." He explains it as "une amphore de vin, soutenue par deux mains, avec un instrument pour brasser ou pour poiser." This is an ancient form of the character 酒 tsun or 酒 tsun, which now means "a wine vessel." But it originally denoted a sacrifice of wine, "a vessel of wine being lifted up (before the spirits) by two hands." The element on the left is not a stirrer, but a set of stair-steps, emphasizing the idea of "lifting up"; we find it in the bronze forms of many characters meaning to ascend, and descend, etc., as in 陟 chih, 崖 chiang, etc. Tsun is commonly used in bronze inscriptions as an adjective meaning "sacrificial," and this is its sense here.

The final character is rendered by Wieger as ("j’offre") "filasse." But this character, 種 i, denotes a sacrificial vessel, possibly in the form of, or perhaps decorated with, a bird, not a bunch of fibers. It is the metamorphosis of the bird’s tail, in the transition from the Shang to the Chou form, which has led Wieger astray. For details, see my paper on this character in the JAOS 52. 22-34.

Wieger’s full translation of this inscription is: "Moi fils encore armé du couteau, en présence de l’ancêtre, j’offre viande crue, libation, objets précieux, vin, filasse." A correct translation would be: "So-and-so (untranslatable proper name) makes for (i.e. dedicates to) Grandfather (or a more remote ancestor) I a precious sacrificial vessel."

This is one of the most common of all types of inscriptions. It will be noted that Wieger fails to render a single character correctly. This is the more remarkable when we consider that the Chinese have been publishing substantially correct interpretations of such inscriptions, in books which are commonly current, since the Sung dynasty.

43 Ibid., p. 429.
44 Cf. Yin Hsü Shu Ch’i Hou Pien hsia 18. 3, and Jung Kêng, Chin Wên Pien (1925) 7. 15-17.
45 Cf. Chin Wên Pien 14, 8b.
47 Caractères Chinois, p. 433.
Apparently Wieger considered it unnecessary to consult the previous work of Chinese scholars; such neglect is always dangerous. This is not the only inscription of which his translation is totally wrong. In the second inscription on p. 518 he has mistaken the proper order of the columns, though this again follows a common formula. In his translation of longer inscriptions the percentage of error is less, though he is sometimes led into mistakes through insufficient understanding of the ceremonies described.48

The importance of the history of the Chou dynasty from the time of Confucius, as the foundation of all Chinese history, is generally recognized. But the importance of understanding the early Chou dynasty, as prerequisite to understanding all the later history, is widely ignored in practice if not in theory. We shall never understand the Western Chou period properly until we have thoroughly studied and utilized the bronze inscriptions.

Up to the present time the study of bronze inscriptions has been almost entirely concerned with the decipherment and study of characters. A very few Chinese and still fewer Western scholars have used them for the study of history and the history of culture. It is still true that in almost every long inscription there are one or more characters or even passages of whose meaning we can not be certain, and it may be that this will always be the case. But the great body, and in most cases the most important parts, of the inscriptions are perfectly clear. And it is time that this material was utilized to throw additional light upon the Western Chou period—an epoch, of prime importance, when Chinese institutions were in the making, but on which we shall never have any too much illumination. The late Wang Kuo-wei, who might almost be called the father of the study of bronze inscriptions in this generation, has said that they are mistaken who would try to force a meaning on every part of an inscription, even though some of it may really be incomprehensible in the present state of our knowledge. But they are also wrong, he continues, who refuse to make use of the vast riches which the bronze inscriptions lay before us merely because there are parts of them which we can not fully understand.

48 For instance on p. 511 he takes 睛 睛 t'sê ming to mean "to write down an order." But this is a common expression, meaning "to command by means of a document," i.e., to read aloud an order which had previously been written.