

Who Answered the Shang Diviner?: The Nature of Shang Divination

BACK Youngsun

Abstract

Generally speaking, Shang divination has been interpreted as a divine communication between human beings and spirits. Through crack-making, Shang kings and diviners, acting as intermediaries between the human realm and the spiritual realm, sought knowledge about issues that are beyond human control and comprehension. The cracks on the bones were thus deciphered as the spirits' responses to the diviners. However, within the oracle-bone inscriptions we cannot find any clear evidence that Shang kings communicated with spirits. The question of who actually answered Shang diviners is the focus of this paper. I try to track down the identity of the one addressed in divination by investigating the nature of the Shang pantheon. In the first section, I propose three possible divinees: Di as a representative of the Shang pantheon, *di* as a collective body of all the spirits, and different spirits for different divinations. However, none of these possibilities seems to match the nature of the Shang pantheon. In the second section, I introduce another hypothesis by Sarah Allan that Shang divination was not a two-party communication between human beings and spirits, but a one-party interpretive act on the part of humans. This means that Shang diviners were not communicating with spirits but reading the cosmic signs revealed on oracle-bones. In the final section, I argue that the major reason scholars have regarded Shang divination as a divine communication is that they viewed the Shang cosmos based on a strict binary conception of the sacred and the profane, principally informed by Mircea Eliade. If we divest ourselves of this binary lens, a new hypothesis renders a different cosmological model of the Shang dynasty; that is, both spirits and human beings are parts of the Shang cosmos.

Keywords: Shang, divination, oracle-bone, *Di/di*, sacred, profane

* BACK Youngsun: Assistant Professor, College of Confucian Studies and Eastern Philosophy, Sungkyunkwan University, Korea (youngsunback@gmail.com).

** I am grateful to David N. Keightley for sending his unpublished paper "In the Bone: Divination, Theology, and Political Culture in Late Shang China" by post.

1. Introduction

Oracle-bones during the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BCE) are commonly understood as a medium of communication between the human realm and the spiritual realm. By using turtle shells or ox scapula, Shang kings and diviners sought knowledge about issues that are beyond human control and comprehension. The cracks on oracle-bones, produced in the process of divination, are regarded by a majority of modern scholars as the spirits' responses to the charges that diviners put to them.¹ David Keightley, the seminal figure of Shang research, supports this assumption and makes a further claim that the Shang kings communicated with their "ancestors" through divination.²

Curiously, however, within the corpus of oracle-bone inscriptions we cannot find any clear evidence that the Shang kings communicated with either spirits or their deceased ancestors. What is lacking is any reference to or information on the "divinee": the being with whom diviners communicated. Why then, despite the absence of an identifiable divinee, do scholars assume that oracle-bone divination is a "two-party communication" between human beings and spirits? Who actually answered Shang diviners?

In this paper, I argue that Shang divination was not a form of communication between human beings and spirits and thus no one was being addressed in Shang divination. In order to support this claim, in the first section of this paper, I point out several aspects of Shang divination records that challenge the assumption that Shang divination is a communication between humans and spirits. In the second section, based on the above analysis and Sarah Allan's study, I explore the possibility of a new hypothesis that Shang divination is not a "two-party communication" that requires an addressee, but a "one-party interpretive act" of human beings. I agree with Allan's proposal that Shang divination was a way of understanding the intentions of spirits not through "communicating with them," but through "reading signs revealed in the cosmos."³

¹ Charge refers to the topic of the divination. What is noteworthy is that Shang divination charges may not have been questions, but rather wishes, predictions, or statements of intent. For a detailed explanation of the noninterrogative nature of the Shang charges, see Keightley, *Sources of Shang History*, 29 and 33. In addition, Sarah Allan further argues that the charges were not intended to communicate to the spirits. I will support Allan's hypothesis in the second section of this paper. Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, 114.

² Keightley, "Shamanism, Death, and the Ancestors," 797-802; Keightley, "In the Bone," 1-28.

³ Sarah Allan argues that Shang divination is more like reading omens rather than communicating with spirits. Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, 112-114.

In the last section, I argue that the accepted understanding of Shang divination as human-to-spirit communication was the result of assuming a strict binary conception of the sacred and the profane, principally informed by the work of Mircea Eliade.⁴ Instead of this binary system, the new hypothesis presents a different cosmological model of the Shang: spirits and human beings both are parts of the Shang cosmos.

My primary aim is, through a close investigation of the specific question of who was being addressed in Shang divination, to expose a hidden assumption behind pre-existing scholarship: a binary conception of the world as the sacred (spirit) and the profane (humans). Furthermore, by divesting ourselves of the lens of this binary system, we are able to see alternative ways of understanding the nature of Shang divination and Shang cosmology.

2. Did Shang Diviners Communicate with Spirits?

What makes it almost impossible to identify the divinee of Shang divination is the absence of any reference to or information on the targeted recipient of divination charges in oracle-bones. Despite the rich corpus of oracle-bones available, anyone who closely examines Shang oracle-bone inscriptions will realize that except for cracks, most of the information on the bones concerns humans. Let's look at one of the Shang divination records:

	Left side	Right side
Preface	Crack-making on <i>jimao</i> (day 16), Que divined: (己卯卜, 設貞)	Crack-making on <i>jimao</i> (day 16), Que divined: (己卯卜, 設貞)
Charges	“It will rain.” (雨)	“It will not [perhaps] rain.” (不其雨)
Prognostication	The king read the cracks and said: “It will rain; it will be [perhaps] a <i>ren</i> day.” (王占曰, 其雨惟壬)	
Verification	On <i>renwu</i> (day 19) it really did rain. (壬午允雨)	

Table 1: *Heji* 902f⁵

⁴ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

⁵ This table is from Keightley, *Sources of Shang History*, 43. *Heji* refers to *Jiaguwen heji*.

Even though Shang divination had undergone considerable changes over the course of time, this example can serve as a template of Shang divination records. First, the preface records on what day and by whom the divination was performed. Second, there are charges in negative and positive forms, which serve as the topic of the divination; this constitutes what the diviners sought to know. Third, the prognostication, largely done by Shang kings, is the interpretation of the cracks. Last, a verification of what actually happened is recorded after the divination was performed.⁶

Interestingly, all the written inscriptions which consist of preface, charge, prognostication, and verification are concerned with human activities. None of them record information on the actual recipient of the divination charges. The cracks on the bones may be the traces of spirits, if we accept the view that oracle-bone inscriptions are indeed records of spiritual communication between humans and spirits. Moreover, if we accept Keightley's proposal that the king's prognostications may have been based on the sound of cracks being made and not the shape of the cracks, then there is virtually nothing left in oracle-bone inscriptions except the records created by humans.⁷

The complete absence of any specific reference to a divinee may imply a shared consensus among Shang diviners on whom they were addressing; since they all knew with whom they communicated, they did not need to specify or mention the addressee. Nevertheless, it is at least obvious that we cannot discover the identity of the divinee through a reliance on the inscription itself. Therefore, in order to track down the divinee, we need to analyze and interpret the implications underlying divination records on the one hand, and investigate and delineate the characteristics of the Shang pantheon on the other.

Before going further, there are three preliminary points we should keep in mind concerning Shang divination practices: the storage of oracle-bones, the absence of the second person pronoun in divination records, and the capriciousness of the Shang spirits. First, the way that oracle-bones were stored is rather intriguing. It is reported that some oracle-bones were stored in tombs, but most of them were thrown into pits with other debris. Oracle-bones and shells seem to have been kept for a certain period of time

⁶ For a general introduction of the Shang Divination inscription, see Keightley, *Sources of Shang History*, 28-56.

⁷ David Keightley suggests that the king might have prognosticated from the sounds of the cracks, which he considers might be the voices of the ancestors. I will discuss this hypothesis later in this paper. See Keightley, "In the Bone," 1-28.

and then discarded. To take into account the view that divination was a communication between humans and spirits, it is somewhat puzzling that the oracle-bones used in divine communication were thrown away. Discarded oracles-bones baffle us even more when we imagine the considerable labor and time the Shang people spent on preparing bones and shells and inscribing divination records on them. In any case, it is apparent that oracle-bones were not regarded as treasures to be kept for long periods of time. This suggests that the divine aspects of Shang divination might not have been particularly great or solid but instead more limited and conditional, which raises the need for a probe into the divine nature of Shang divination.⁸

The second point concerning oracle-bone inscriptions is the rare appearances of the second person pronoun “you,” compared to first person pronouns such as “I” and “we.” In most cases, first person pronouns found in divination records refer to the king or the Shang people as a whole. For example,

Crack-making on *gengyin* (day 27), the king [divined:] “I will perform the *liao* (burnt-offering) ritual to his mate.”⁹

Crack-making on *guichou* (day 50), Zheng divined: “We will take up residence in this settlement and conduct the great *bin* (entertainment) ritual, [for if we do this] Di will approve.”¹⁰

The graph *yu* 余 in the first example refers to the king himself, and the graph *wo* 我 in the second example refers to the Shang state or the Shang people as a whole.¹¹ In contrast to the frequent occurrence of the first person pronouns, the second person pronoun “you” rarely appears in the inscriptions. Two of the graphs that are employed as a referent to the second person are *nü* 女 and *nai* 乃. However, these second person pronouns are not used as a referent to one being addressed in the divination.

⁸ An anonymous reviewer points out that in many religious traditions, certain items that are regarded sacred in one context are not regarded as such in another context. Once religious items have served their purpose, they are not necessarily treated as sacred. Accordingly, the limited sanctitude of Shang oracle-bones need not be a serious consideration when investigating the nature of Shang divination.

⁹ *Yingguo* 1864: “庚寅卜，王余燎于其配。” *Yingguo* refers to *Yingguo suocang jiaguji*.

¹⁰ *Bingbian* 147: “癸丑卜，爭貞，我宅茲邑大賓帝若。” *Bingbian* refers to *Yinxu wenzi bingbian*.

¹¹ The other first person pronoun appearing in the inscriptions is *zhen* 朕. Therefore, three graphs seem to have been employed as a referent to “I” or “we.” For a more detailed discussion of the first person pronouns, namely *wo* 我, *yu* 余, and *zhen* 朕, see Yu, *Jiajin yuyan wenzi yanjiu lunji*, 22-40.

Crack-making on *jihai* (day 36), Que divined: “The Lord of Tiger [tribe]!
I will destroy your emissary.”¹²

Here “your” does not refer to the intended recipient of the divination charge, but to the Lord of Tiger tribe mentioned in the charge. There are no cases in which the diviners called the divinee “you” in the oracle-bone record.

However, if we take into consideration a distinctive feature of the Chinese language, the absence of the second person pronoun in divinatory inscriptions appears more natural than unusual. In classical Chinese, people often address the other party using the person’s title as an honorific rather than using the second person pronoun. For example, if the other party is the king, he is referred to as *wang* 王, “your majesty.”¹³ Therefore, in communications with spirits, it would be natural for Shang diviners to call them by their title or their ritual name instead of the second person pronoun. Nonetheless, most of the names of natural spirits or the ritual names of ancestors appearing in divination charges are not references to the one being addressed. All things considered, no clear evidence proves that divination charges were put to spirits.

The last point concerns the capriciousness of spirits.¹⁴ According to Michael Puett, spirits in the Shang pantheon appear to be so fickle and unstable that they need to be placated and coaxed through sacrificial offerings. Even though the Shang people endlessly tried to control these spirits through sacrifice and divination, their attempts seem often to have failed because spirits were capricious and far more powerful than the ritual offerings by which humans intended to control them.¹⁵ In that case, how could Shang diviners appeal to these capricious spirits and rely on their answers? These spirits were not merely capricious but often so hostile to the Shang people that they could put an end to the Shang settlement. In light of this, the reliability of a spiritual answer from Shang spirits appears to be questionable as well.

Despite these enigmatic features of Shang divination practice, if we still insist that Shang divination is a communication between the human and spiritual realms, we need to probe into the nature of the Shang pantheon in order to identify the divinee. The Shang pantheon was swarming with

¹² *Heji* 3301: “己亥卜，馘貞，侯虎余其敗女史。”

¹³ Pulleyblank, *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*, 76-78.

¹⁴ Due to the difficulty of defining the essential nature of the supernatural forces of the Shang, I call them “spirits” in a broad sense.

¹⁵ Puett, *To Become a God*, 44-50.

various spirits roughly divided into three categories: natural spirits, ancestors, and Di 帝 (or Shang Di 上帝, Lord on High). Those belonging to the group of natural spirits are spirits of rivers, mountains, the sun, the four directions, etc. These are not abstract concepts but are connected to concrete objects in nature. For instance, the two main river spirits were that of the He 河 (the Yellow river) and the Huan 洹.¹⁶ Those belonging to ancestors are the ancestors of the Shang royal family and they are subdivided into three groups: pre-dynastic kings (*xiangong* 先公), dynastic kings (*xianwang* 先王), and their consorts (*xianbi* 先妣).¹⁷ The last, Di, is the most incomprehensible being in the Shang pantheon.

Unlike natural spirits and ancestors, Di is quite anomalous in that only Di did not receive any sacrificial offerings from humans. In light of this, Robert Eno suggests that Di might not be a single supreme deity. He proposes that the term *di* 帝 might be a “generic” term for denoting “gods,” including natural spirits and ancestral spirits altogether.¹⁸ In other words, *di* did not exist in the Shang pantheon as a single deity and just refers to the collective body of the spirits.¹⁹ Contrary to Eno’s suggestion, most scholars consider Di a single entity reigning at the apex of the Shang pantheon. Di is the single most influential being among the spirits of the Shang in terms of power and function. For example, natural spirits had power over natural phenomena, but they do not seem to have been closely involved in human affairs. Dissimilar to natural spirits, Di and the ancestors had influence over both natural and human events, and among them Di seems to have had stronger power than any other ancestral spirits. Di, either as a generic name for spirits or as the highest deity in the Shang pantheon, is certain to have the strongest and the most comprehensive influence over the natural and the human worlds.

Then, among these three types of spirits, who actually answered the Shang diviner? In my judgment, three possible explanations can be offered to sustain the assumption that Shang divination was a communication between humans and spirits. The first is that among various spirits, there is one

¹⁶ According to Robert Eno, Shang kings established a royal ritual center on the banks of the Huan river. Eno, “Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions,” 41.

¹⁷ David Keightley subdivides the dynastic ancestors into four groups: Former Lords, the pre-dynastic ancestors, the dynastic ancestors, and the consorts of those kings on the main line of descent. Keightley, “The Making of the Ancestors,” 5-6.

¹⁸ Robert Eno also suggests that in specific contexts, the generic term *di* was employed as a referent to a specific member of the pantheon. Eno, “Was There a High God *Ti* in Shang Religion?,” 1-26.

¹⁹ When Di is used as a generic title, I use *di* instead of Di.

representative to respond to divination charges, and in this case it is most likely the highest deity, Di. The second hypothesis is that even though there were many spirits in the Shang pantheon, they functioned as a collective body, and thus it was this collective body that communicated with diviners when divination was performed. This collective body may be considered *di*, a generic name for spirits. The third case is that different spirits took part in different divinations. In other words, a particular spirit was in charge of a particular topic of divination, or all the divinations performed in a particular period were answered by the spirit in charge of that particular period.

In the following section, by investigating the Shang pantheon, I will assess the plausibility of three hypotheses: whether the existence of one representative is possible, whether the existence of a collective body of the spirits is possible, and whether we can discern the logic underlying the selection of particular spirits for particular divinations. I first look into examples of rain-related divination, in which all the three types of spirits, namely Di, natural spirits, and ancestors, were involved.

Crack-making on *xin hai* (day 48), Nei divined: “This first month, Di will order rain.” On the evening of the fourth day, *jiayin* (day 51), [it really rained].²⁰

“If [we] perform the *you* ritual to the Huan river, then there will be rain.”²¹

“If [we] perform the *liao* (burnt-offering) ritual to the Snow, then there will be great rain.”²²

“[We will] pray for rain to Shang Jia (pre-dynastic ancestor, P1) with a penned sheep.”²³

“In praying for rain from Shang Jia (P1) to Da Yi (K1), Da Ding (K2), Da Geng (K5), Da Wu (K7), Zhong Ding (K9), Zu Yi (K12), Zu Xin (K13), and to Zu Ding (K15), the ten ancestors, [we will] sacrifice a bull to all.”²⁴

²⁰ *Heji* 14295: “辛亥内貞，今一日帝令雨，四甲寅夕[雨].”

²¹ *Heji* 28182: “其又于洹，又雨.”

²² *Yingguo* 2566: “其燎于雪，有大雨.”

²³ *Heji* 672f: “求雨于上甲牢.”

²⁴ *Heji* 32385: “禱雨，自上甲大乙大丁大更大戊仲丁祖乙祖辛祖丁，十示率社.” P refers to pre-dynastic kings (*xiangong* 先公), and K refers to dynastic kings (*xianwang* 先王), and the numbers following P and K refer to their generation. For the table of the Shang Royal Genealogy, see Keightley, *Sources of Shang History*, 185-187.

In the first case, Di orders rain; in the next two cases, natural spirits make it rain; the last two cases show that rain is caused by ancestral spirits. Di ordering rain is common in oracle-bone inscriptions, along with other meteorological phenomena such as thunder and wind. What is noteworthy is that only Di “ordered” (*ling* 令) rain while other spirits did not, implying that Di commanded lesser spirits to carry out his will.²⁵ This is one of the reasons Di has been regarded as the highest deity in the Shang pantheon.²⁶ Another prominent feature of Di is that Di can order rain without receiving any sacrificial offerings, whereas other spirits make it rain through rituals offered by human beings. Furthermore, an interesting ritual difference between natural spirits and ancestors is that on occasion several ancestors received sacrifice as a group, whereas natural spirits tended to receive sacrificial offerings individually. This difference implies that ancestors were considered relatively weaker than natural spirits in terms of their ability to control natural phenomena, and thus ritual specialists needed to combine the power of several ancestors in order to achieve their aims.²⁷

Even though the question of the contexts in which Shang diviners appealed to Di, natural spirits, or ancestors is impossible to answer with certainty, it appears that spirits in the Shang pantheon possessed differing levels of strength and scope in their power. Consequently, a major task for Shang diviners must have been to manipulate these spiritual powers in the most effective and efficient ways.²⁸ Suppose the He river spirit holds ten units of spiritual power, the Snow spirit holds seven, and Shang Jia (a pre-dynastic ancestor) holds two, and each of the junior ancestors hold less than one unit of power. In a very dry season, Shang diviners might think that in order to make it rain they need roughly ten units of spiritual power

²⁵ The graph *ling* 令 means “to command.” Except for Di, *ling* generally relates to the king (*wangling* 王令).

²⁶ David Keightley’s theory on the proto-bureaucratic aspect of Shang religiosity is also based on this type of evidence. However, Robert Eno suspects that it is uncertain whether Di orders natural phenomena or natural spirits. Eno, “Was There a High God *Ti* in Shang Religion?” 5.

²⁷ This assumption is not conclusive because some records challenge it. For example, a natural spirit (Sun) and an ancestor (Shang Jia) received the *bin* ritual together: “Crack-making on *guiwei* (day 20), Que divined: ‘On the next day, the king will host Shang Jia and *Ri* (Sun).’ The king prognosticated and said, ‘It will be auspicious.’ They really were entertained.” *Heji* 1248f: “癸未卜，敲貞，翌甲申王賓上甲日，王占曰，吉，賓允賓。” Nevertheless, it seems that collective rituals were most often performed for ancestors, particularly for junior ones.

²⁸ By “efficient” I mean concerning resources used in sacrificial offerings, such as human victims, animals, and wine. Given the enormous amount of material spent for ritual sacrifices, I think the economic aspects of the ritual should be taken into account when investigating the nature of Shang divination.

and therefore a ritual offering to the He river is required. On a cloudy day, Shang diviners might deduce that they need only three units of spiritual power to realize their aim. They then divine that a ritual offering to Shang Jia and several junior ancestors is sufficient for rain. In this way, by extrapolating the most suitable spiritual power and without wasting extra resources, they can achieve their desired results.

Differences in strength and scope of influence existed among ancestors as well. It was believed that the older the ancestors, the stronger their power; that the older the ancestors, the broader the scope of their influence. For example, pre-dynastic ancestors including Shang Jia tended to be involved in harvests or wars, whereas junior ancestors, who had died recently, tended to be involved in the present-day king's sicknesses or dreams. Michael Puett argues that this attests to a hierarchy of power among spirits. He further argues that the *bin* 賓 (entertainment/hosting) ritual served as a way for Shang diviners to maintain the hierarchical relationships among ancestors.²⁹ For example,

Crack-making on *jiachen* (day 41), Que divined: "The next *yisi* day we will perform the *you* ritual to Father Yi with a penned sheep." Use.

Divined: "Cheng (K1) will be a guest to Di."³⁰

Divined: "Cheng (K1) will not be a guest to Di."

Divined: "Da Jia (K3) will be a guest to Cheng (K1)."

Divined: "Da Jia (K3) will not be a guest to Cheng (K1)."

Crack-making on *jiachen* (day 41), Que divined: "Xia Yi (K20) will be a guest to [Cheng (K1)]."

Divined: "Xia Yi (K20) will not be a guest to Cheng (K1)."

Divined: "Xia Yi (K20) ... to Di."

Divined: "Xia Yi (K20) will not be a guest to Di."

Divined: "Da Jia (K3) will be a guest to Di."

Divined: "Da [Jia (K3)] will not be a guest to Di."³¹

²⁹ Puett, *To Become a God*, 48. On the other hand, David Keightley presents the *bin* ritual as evidence of the bureaucratic nature of Shang religious mediation. In addition, Elizabeth Childs-Johnson translates *bin* not as "to entertain," but as "to come into contact with a spirit through invocation." Keightley, "Shamanism, Death, and the Ancestors," 808-815; Childs-Johnson, "Fu Zi," 641-650.

³⁰ Cheng refers to King Tang 湯, the founder of Shang dynasty, and he is also referred as Da Yi 大乙 in divination records.

³¹ *Heji* 1402f: "甲辰卜, 般貞, 翌乙巳侑于父乙牢. 用. 貞, 成賓于帝. 貞, 成不賓于帝. 貞, 大甲賓于成. 貞, 大甲不賓于成. 甲辰卜, 般貞, 下乙賓于[成]. 貞, 下乙不賓于成. 貞, 下乙 ... 于帝. 貞,

From this divination record, Puett conjectures that the purpose of the *bin* ritual was to maintain a proper hierarchy among ancestors by prompting junior ancestors to host and mollify senior ancestors all the way up to Di. However, in my view, there is not enough evidence to support the idea that the *bin* ritual was performed to preserve a hierarchical order among ancestors. First of all, we do not have a clear picture of the nature of the *bin* ritual. In addition, contrary to Puett's contention, the above example seems to indicate that it was senior members who entertained junior members. Moreover, it appears that the *bin* ritual was not just a one-way ritual through which senior ancestors entertained juniors, but also a two-way ritual between seniors and juniors. For instance, in the above example, the word *bin* 賓 is used with *yu* 于: "A賓于B" (A is a guest and B is a host). However, in other cases, *bin* is used without *yu* 于: "A賓B" (A is a host and B is a guest).

Crack-making on *guiyou* (day 10), the king divined: "On the next day, *jiayu* (day 11), the king will host Da Jia (K3) and perform the *zai* ritual."³²

Unlike the aforementioned example, in which senior ancestors entertained juniors, here the king becomes a host and entertains a guest spirit, Da Jia. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that the *bin* ritual might not have been a one-way ritual to sustain the hierarchy but a reciprocal ritual between junior and senior members.

More importantly, another reason I argue against Puett's view is that we cannot establish the exact hierarchical relationship amongst the ancestors. For instance, Cheng (K1) can be a guest to Di, but lower ancestors such as Da Jia (K3) and Xia Yi (K20) can be guests to Di as well. It seems that regardless of their hierarchical status, all the ancestors can be a guest to Di. What I seek to demonstrate here is that the Shang pantheon may not have a strict hierarchical system. We can discern the different strength and scope of power among spirits, but this is not equivalent to a system of hierarchy. Even if some spirits are more powerful and influential than others, stronger spirits do not seem to be able to control or order weaker spirits. Of course, some records go against this assertion: Di ordering the wind spirit and the Shang people sacrificing to Di's emissary, Wind.³³ However, these

下乙不賓帝. 貞, 大甲賓于帝. 貞, 大[甲]賓于帝."

³² *Heji* 22779: "癸酉卜王貞, 翌甲戌王其賓大甲賓."

³³ For instance, "[We] make the *liao* sacrifice to Di's emissary, Wind, one bovine." *Heji* 29236: "燎帝史風一牛."

anomalies exist only in reference to Di; we cannot find any records of other stronger spirits controlling or commanding weaker ones. In addition, it is obvious that there existed a system of seniority among ancestors, but it is also doubtful that this system was equivalent to a strict hierarchy. Despite a genealogical order among ancestors, we cannot find clear hierarchical relationships among them. Contrary to Puett's claim, the relationship among ancestors was not clearly hierarchical from the junior to the senior all the way up to Di. Rather, the ancestors' different gradations of power seem to be relevant mostly in relation to living descendants.

Taking all the above discussions into consideration, we reach a conclusion: we cannot confirm a strictly hierarchical system within the Shang pantheon. Only Di has a special status in this pantheon, but the pantheon itself is neither systematically ordered nor hierarchically structured. Therefore, we can say that Di was indeed the most powerful and influential of the spirits, but we cannot say that Di had complete control over all other spirits and reigned at the apex of the pantheon. This conclusion undermines the credibility of the first hypothesis: Di, as the representative of the Shang pantheon, answered the Shang diviner.

The second hypothesis may work in this kind of pantheon. If we assume that Di was a generic term referring to a collective body of spirits, then *di* could serve as the one being addressed in Shang divination. In other words, all the spirits together answered Shang diviners. However, the records below call the second hypothesis into question:

Crack-making on *jimao* (day 16), Que divined: "It will rain."
The king read the cracks and said: "The raining will be on a *ren* day."
On *renwu* (day 19), it really did rain.³⁴

Crack-making on *jimao* (day 16), divined: "Today, it will rain a lot."³⁵

"There may be rain coming from the west."³⁶

These examples are of great import because they suggest another dimension to the Shang cosmos. The Shang people considered rain a natural phenomenon, which means it could rain naturally without any spiritual assistance. In the above examples, the diviners' intention was simply to know whether it will

³⁴ *Heji* 902f: "己卯卜，般貞，雨。王占曰，其雨惟壬。午允雨。"

³⁵ *Yingguo* 2588: "己卯卜貞，今日多雨。"

³⁶ *Heji* 33871: "其自西來雨。"

rain or not, how much it will rain, and from which direction it will rain. It should be noted that this kind of divination charge was not infrequent in oracle-bone records. Moreover, divination charges that do not involve spiritual assistance are also found on other topics like harvest, wind, and hunting. This suggests that the Shang people did not believe that all natural phenomena or human affairs are under spiritual control. Spirits, to be sure, have power to affect the natural and the human worlds, but they do not control every aspect of the course of natural events and human affairs.

Another supporting example is the rain-dance (*wuyu* 舞雨) of the Shang people.

Crack-making on *gengyin* (day 27): “On the *jiawu* (day 31), we will perform the rain-dance.”³⁷

Even though we do not know by whom and in what way this rain-dance was performed, this shows that humans themselves can exert direct influence on rain-making without any input from the spirits. To summarize, in the Shang people’s view, many factors can affect rain: spirits including Di, natural spirits and ancestors, and even humans themselves. In addition, it can rain naturally without any external influence. Di may have had the strongest power, but the Shang cosmos was not under the exclusive control of Di. Furthermore, even if Di was all-powerful in influencing the course of the cosmos, no divination record indicates that Di was omniscient. As a result, it becomes unlikely that Di was able to affect every occurrence within the Shang cosmos.

Consequently, the most plausible hypothesis is the third one: given the multifarious and unstructured nature of the Shang pantheon, different spirits answered different divinations. This is in accordance with David Keightley’s proposal. On the assumption that the divinees of Shang divination were ancestral spirits, Keightley suggests that specific ancestors responded to specific divinations. He presents three types of evidence:

Various kinds of evidence can throw light on the identity of the divinee: in particular, (i) that some charges were about the meaning of sounds that, I believe, were produced by the crack-making; (ii) that some of these sounds were thought to originate with the ancestors; and (iii) that some charges were actually divined in an ancestral temple.³⁸

³⁷ Heji 12819: “庚寅卜，甲午奏舞雨。”

³⁸ Keightley, “In the Bone,” 15-16.

According to Keightley, diviners addressed their charges to a specific ancestor, on a specific day, in a specific temple. It is particularly noteworthy that all the Shang ancestors were given a ritual name according to the ten-day week system. Nevertheless, as Keightley admits, this may not explain other divination cases that were not performed in ancestral temples. For example, when the king was away from the temple to attack other tribes, divinations took place in the encampment.³⁹ Even if we limit our scope only to the cases that were performed in ancestral temples, the evidence that Keightley presents is still more speculative than decisive. First, we are unable to pinpoint whether the kings actually heard the sounds of the cracks or read their shape. The following examples are the cases that Keightley provides as evidence that the king heard the voices of the ancestors:⁴⁰

Crack-making on *yiwei* (day 32): “[What the king heard] was not Ancestor Yi (K12).”; Crack-making on *yiwei* (day 32): “What the king heard was Ancestor Yi.”⁴¹

Crack-making on *wuzi* (day 25), Bin divined: “What the king heard was Ancestor Yi (K12) punishing us.”⁴²

However compelling and suggestive these examples are, we do not know exactly in what context these divinations were performed. Keightley speculates that these charges could have been auxiliary, made to confirm who answered the initial charges. However, the same oracle-bone where these charges were inscribed (*Heji* 1633 and *Heji* 1632) does not show other charges that could have served as initial charges. Unless the diviners recorded the initial charges on other oracle-bones, it is unlikely that these charges were supplementary. Furthermore, if we accept that these were supplemental charges, it proves, ironically enough, that Shang diviners were uncertain about whom they communicated with.⁴³ We may thus infer that diviners

³⁹ We may conjecture that in this kind of situation, Shang kings divined to the ancestor falling on that particular day of divination.

⁴⁰ David Keightley suggests that the orality of the charges further supports the importance of the sounds of the cracks in Shang divination. In addition, he mentions that the graph *zhan* 占, which denotes “to read the cracks,” has two mouths and thus could signify that the king heard two voices. This may have been related to *ergao* 二告, the meaning of which has yet to be clarified. Keightley, “In the Bone,” 16.

⁴¹ *Heji* 1633: “乙未卜, [王聽]不惟祖乙. 乙未卜, 王聽惟祖乙.”

⁴² *Heji* 1632f: “戊子卜賓貞, 王聽惟祖乙孽我.”

⁴³ In addition, I find out that most of the charges stating that the king heard the voices of some ancestors are concerned with calamity, misfortune, and harming. Therefore, the graph *ting* 聽 could not just mean “to hear” the voice, but may have a particular meaning in

did not address their charges to a particular spirit in divination.⁴⁴

A further piece of evidence Keightley presents is that the crack-making took place in the temple of ancestors. He argues that the location of the performance of divination was determined not by the topic of the charge, but by the day of divination. For example, on a *jia*-day crack-making was performed in the temple of Da Jia, and on a *yi*-day in the temple of Father Yi. Even if they performed divination in a particular ancestral temple, Shang diviners do not seem to have known to whom they were appealing since they also divined the identity of the being residing in the temple.

“[The one who] comes today will be Father [Yi] (K20, Wu Ding’s father).”; “[The one who] comes today will not be Father Yi.”⁴⁵

“Nao (Pre-dynastic lord) arrives at the temple.”⁴⁶

“The He spirit (the Yellow river power) arrives at the temple.”⁴⁷

Of course, it is uncertain on what occasion the diviners put these charges, but it indicates at least that ancestral spirits did not reside permanently in their temples, but only visited on certain occasions. Overall, Keightley’s hypothesis is stimulating and informative, but many parts of his theory remain highly speculative; Keightley offers evidence that the Shang divinees were ancestor spirits, but we can find as many counter-examples to what he presents. Unless we discover a clear logic behind the selection of different divinees for different divinations, the third hypothesis is as hard to support as the other two.

3. Alternative Hypothesis of Shang Divination

In the previous section, I have demonstrated that there exists no clear evidence that Shang diviners communicated with spirits. First of all, oracle-bone inscriptions do not provide any information about an identifiable divinee. Second, the divine nature of spiritual communication is dubious

this context.

⁴⁴ This entails the fourth hypothesis: there was no logic behind particular divinees answering particular divination. In other words, any spirits could answer the divination charge. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is also only a matter of conjecture.

⁴⁵ *Heji* 7427f: “今日來惟父[乙], 今日來不惟父乙.”

⁴⁶ *Heji* 28207: “夔即宗.”

⁴⁷ *Heji* 28207: “河即宗.”

given the way that the oracle-bones were stored. Third, the complete absence of a reference to “you” in divination inscriptions is puzzling, albeit understandable. Fourth, given the capricious nature of Shang spirits, it is all the more difficult to believe that Shang diviners tried to communicate with them. In addition, I have tested three hypotheses concerning the possible divinee: *Di* as a representative of the Shang pantheon, *di* as a generic term for a collective body of spirits, and particular spirits for particular divinations. None of the three hypotheses appear plausible.

Then, despite all these uncertainties and countervailing evidence, why do many scholars assume that Shang divination was a communication between humans and spirits? In my view, all the ambiguities and doubts highlighted earlier lead us to conclude that “no divinee” existed in Shang divination. This explains why there is virtually no recorded information about the divinee. Then, an alternative hypothesis would be that Shang divination was not a two-party communication between humans and spirits; what is certain in Shang divination is only that crack-makings, divination charges, prognostications, and verifications were all conducted by humans, and the divination inscriptions are the records of these human activities.

At this point, we gain an important insight from Sarah Allan’s influential book, *The Shape of the Turtle*. In the chapter on Shang divination and sacrifice, she introduces two kinds of divination, as distinguished by Plato and Cicero: one is an inductive art which involves the study of omens, and the other is an intuitive art by virtue of divine possession or ecstatic trance. However, she parts company with major scholarship in her argument that Shang divination did not involve trance or divine possession as some scholars believe. In her view, the turtle shell used in Shang divination functioned as a model of the cosmos; she argues that the shape of the turtle stands for the “shape of the cosmos.”⁴⁸ Suppose that the turtle shell provides a cosmological pattern, a type of map, for diviners. It is then much more plausible, albeit still speculative, to take at face value that Shang diviners regarded the shells as surrogates revealing cosmological signs. If we follow this hypothesis, Shang divination was a one-party interpretation on the part of human beings rather than a two-party communication between humans and spirits: those who posed charges and those who made cracks on the cosmos (i.e., turtle shell) were all humans, and those who interpreted the signs were also humans.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ In light of this, Sarah Allan also argues that Shang divination was not an attempt to foretell the future but an attempt to control it by replicating the forces of nature. Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, 113.

This hypothesis is also impossible to prove with certainty as Allan acknowledges, yet it accords well with the distinctive characteristics of the Shang pantheon and oracle-bone inscriptions. As I pointed out, it is unlikely that in the Shang pantheon, Di, the highest deity reigned over all other spirits. Furthermore, even if we admit that *di* was a generic name for all spirits, the Shang cosmos was not fully under spiritual control. For example, meteorological phenomena like rain and drought could be affected by causes other than spirits. Moreover, we cannot discern any clear logic behind the selection of particular spirits with regard to diverse divination topics.

This hypothesis that Shang diviners were reading the cosmological signs revealed on the bones matches well with the wide range of topics that divination inscription covered. I have illustrated that not only do spirits have power to control the course of the cosmos but human beings also can affect the cosmic flow. In addition, natural phenomena often occur by themselves without any influence from spirits or humans. If we accept that Shang diviners were reading the cosmological signs revealed on the bones, then all constituents of the cosmos, i.e., spirits, humans, and nature, can naturally reveal themselves on bones in the form of cracks. Hence, the cracks could inform the Shang diviners of the intentions of spirits and ancestors, the possible results of human actions, or upcoming natural phenomena that would occur by themselves.

This cosmological interpretation of Shang divination is also in tune with later divination practices. Divination has been an important part of the Chinese tradition, and with the passage of time, divination practices have developed into more sophisticated and complicated systems. However, if we suppose that the basic premise underlying divination practice remained much the same throughout time, we can approach Shang divination through a reliance on later divination practices such as milfoil divination of the Zhou. According to Stephen Field, the basic format of Shang oracle inscriptions was maintained throughout the Zhou and Warring States period.⁵⁰ In addition, divination

⁴⁹ Sarah Allan points out that diviners had some amount of control over crack-makings whereby they made sure that no unusual cracks were produced. As time went by, most of the cracks were simply declared “auspicious” and negative prognostications started to disappear from oracle-bone inscriptions. This observation implies that as their crack-making skills progressed, diviners gained more and more control over the cracks on the bones. She further claims that the divination cracks were not naturally produced omens but artificially produced omens. This also contradicts David Keightley’s hypothesis that the king may have prognosticated by the sounds of the cracks. Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, 75 and 121.

⁵⁰ Field, “Who Told the Fortunes?,” 1-3.

records on bamboo slips excavated from the Baoshan 包山 tomb show a similar format of preface, charge, and prognostication, and they also do not mention any specific recipient of divination charges. Nor do divination records in the *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States) and *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Commentary of Zuo) mention any divinee. Even more noteworthy is that in the *Zuo zhuan* divination records, diviners interpret cracks on the turtle-shell by analogy with natural objects. For example, one of the prognostications refers to “a crack [which] looks like a mountain overhanging.”⁵¹ There exists the danger of anachronism in reading Shang divination through later divination practices. However, it at least demonstrates that the interpretation of Shang divination as spiritual communication is rather aberrant in the history of Chinese divinatory practice.⁵²

Proving this new hypothesis with any level of certainty is as difficult as proving the prevailing interpretation of Shang divination. However, it does offer an interesting alternative to the standard depiction: Shang divination may not have been a communication between humans and spirits but in fact an interpretive act singularly performed by humans.

4. Conclusion

Despite many uncertainties and differences of opinion, prominent scholars such as Kwang-chih Chang, David Keightley, and Michael Puett all interpret Shang divination as communication between humans and spirits.⁵³ In my view, this is largely because they assume a rather conjectural dichotomy between sacred and profane when discussing the Shang cosmos; they see it as being composed of the spiritual realm and the human realm.

However, as Puett nicely points out, these scholars have important differences as well. K. C. Chang holds that the Shang kings were shamans who, through ritual and divination, served as intermediaries between the human and the spiritual realms.⁵⁴ David Keightley, on the other hand, argues against Chang’s view by claiming that the Shang kings served as conduits in the proto-bureaucratic system of dead ancestors.⁵⁵ Puett makes a further

⁵¹ *Zuo zhuan*, Tenth year of Duke Xiang (Xiang Gong 襄公): “兆如山陵。”

⁵² I do not believe that the history developed in a linear way. There could be drastic changes, and vastly different cultures could exist at the same time in different regions. However, by the same token, there could be commonality across space and time.

⁵³ Puett, *To Become a God*, 1-79.

⁵⁴ Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, 44-55.

point that despite this crucial difference between Chang and Keightley, both regard the Shang cosmology to be basically harmonious. The most important task of the Shang kings was, either through mysterious shamanistic union or a regularized bureaucratic system, to maintain the harmonious relationship between the human and spiritual realms. However, Puett claims that the relationship between humans and spirits in the Shang was not as harmonious as these two scholars presuppose, but in fact rather antagonistic and discordant. According to Puett, the spirits were unmanageable and even hostile to humans and therefore had to be ceaselessly mollified, coaxed, appeased, and coerced through rituals.

All three scholars disagree with one another on the specific characteristics of Shang religiosity and cosmology. Nevertheless, all agree on the point that the Shang cosmos was composed of the human realm and the spiritual realm, i.e., the profane and the sacred. However, as we have seen, parts of the Shang cosmos do not fit neatly into this binary scheme of the human and spiritual realms. The divination inscriptions suggest that Di and other spirits had the power to influence natural phenomena as well as human affairs but did not control every aspect of either natural or human events. As I have shown in the process of identifying the divinee in Shang divination, the Shang cosmos appears to be more complicated than a binary system of human and spiritual realms.

My view is that spirits as well as human beings existed as parts of the Shang cosmos. Spiritual power may have been much stronger than that of human beings, but the Shang people, as part of the cosmos, were also able to affect its flow. Critically, the cosmos often seems to function by itself without any influence from spirits or humans. This leads to the conclusion that the Shang cosmos does not exclusively consist of spirits and humans but is in fact composed of more than just these two elements. Hence, the two most important constituents of the Shang cosmos, namely spirits and human beings, should be understood within the much broader context of the

⁵⁵ Keightley, "Shamanism, Death, and the Ancestors," 813. In this article, David Keightley defies the theory that the Shang kings were shamans because they were neither dancing nor entering into a trance. However, to my understanding, Chang seems to employ the concept of "shaman" in a broader sense as "an intermediary between the human and the divine realms," and this view seems to have been influenced by the latter concept of "the union between heaven and men" (*tianren heyi* 天人合一). However, this kind of broader usage of the term "shaman" does not play a significant role in comparative studies. In addition, I also do not agree with Keightley's interpretation of Shang diviners and kings. He seems to overemphasize the rationally ordered and systematic structure of Shang religiosity, and as a result he neglects the other mysterious elements of Shang religiosity.

Shang cosmos. As a consequence, Shang divination may not have been a human attempt to communicate with spirits in pursuit of knowledge about the unknowable, but rather an attempt to understand the cosmos itself.

■ Submitted: 2016.09.25 / Reviewed: 2016.10.03-2016.11.30 / Confirmed for publication: 2016.12.03

REFERENCES

- Allan, Sarah. 1991. *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Chang, Kwang-chih. 1983. *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Childs-Johnson, Elizabeth. 2003. "Fu Zi: The Shang Woman Warrior." In *The Fourth International Conference on Chinese Paleography [ICCP] Proceedings*, 619-651. The Chinese University of Hong Kong, October 15-17.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Eno, Robert. 1990. "Was There a High God *Ti* in Shang Religion?" *Early China* 15: 1-26.
- _____. 1996. "Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions." In *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Field, Stephen L. 2000. "Who Told the Fortunes? The Speaker in Early Chinese Divination Records." *Asia Major* 13.2: 1-14.
- Guo, Moruo 郭沫若, and Hu Houxuan 胡厚宣. 1982. *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 (Complete Collection of Oracle-Bone Inscriptions). Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J., and David S. Nivison. 1996. *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Keightley, David N. 1978. *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- _____. 1994. "In the Bone: Divination, Theology, and Political Culture in Late Shang China." Unpublished manuscript.
- _____. 1998. "Shamanism, Death, and the Ancestors: Religious Mediation in Neolithic and Shang China (ca. 5000-1000 B.C.)." *Asiatische Studien* 52.3: 763-831.
- _____. 2004. "The Making of the Ancestors: Late Shang Religion and Its Legacy." In vol. 1 of *Religion and Chinese Society*, edited by John Lagerwey. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Li, Xueqin 李學勤, et al., eds. 1985-1991. *Yingguo suocang jiaguji* 英國所藏甲骨集 (Oracle-Bone Collections in Great Britain). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Puett, Michael J. 2002. *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1995. *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Yu, Suisheng 喻遂生. 2002. *Jiajin yuyan wenzi yanjiu lunji* 甲金語言文字研究論集 (Collected Essays on the Language and Script of Oracle-Bones and Bronze Inscriptions). Chengdu: Bashu shushe.
- Zhang, Bingquan 張秉權. 1957-1972. *Yinxu wenzi bingbian* 殷墟文字丙編 (Studies of Fascicle Three of Inscriptions from the Yin Ruins). Taipei: Academia Sinica.

誰答覆商代的占卜？——商代占卜的性質

白英宣

中文摘要

商朝人的占卜一般理解為人和神之間的溝通。商代的君主以及巫師用龜甲獸骨進行占卜，追求人間難題的答案。占卜者以甲骨上的裂隙為神靈的答覆。但是，甲骨文無法證明占卜者和神靈之間的對話。此論文首先分析一下的占卜對象的說法：1) 代表諸神的“帝”，2) 指稱所有神靈的帝，3) 具有特定作用的個別神靈。此文通過仔細的分析而否定以上三個對象的妥當性，並提出關於商朝占卜對象的全新的可能性。此文論證商朝的占卜不是人和神之間的溝通，而是人們單獨的解釋活動。再說，商朝的占卜者沒有跟神靈實施對話，而他們只是對於甲骨裂隙裡表現出來的宇宙的徵兆進行了單獨的解釋。此文的結尾還討論商朝的占卜被看為人和神之間的溝通的原因，主張這一看法可能受到埃里亞德(Mircea Eliade)的二分法的影響。西方著名的宗教研究專家埃里亞德以“聖”和“俗”的概念來分解這一世界。我們若能夠脫離埃里亞德的二分而理解商朝的占卜，我們不難看出商朝的世界不是由人間和神間兩個部分來構成，而人和神靈只是商代宇宙的組成部分之一。

關鍵詞：商代的占卜，甲骨，帝，聖，俗