

CHAPTER TWO

Patterns of Thought in the Chinese Bronze Age

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DEFINING THE BRONZE AGE: SOURCES AND LIMITATIONS

The Chinese Bronze Age corresponds roughly to two dynasties, Shang 商 (*c.* 1600–*c.* 1045 BCE) and Western Zhou 西周 (*c.* 1045–771 BCE). (Dates this early being inevitably uncertain, herein I shall follow Loewe and Shaughnessy 1999: 25.) The name Bronze Age is defensible because these were bronze-using societies whose artifacts evince a high degree of metallurgical skill, and who left behind some of their most important documents as inscriptions on bronze vessels. It can serve, moreover, to distinguish this era from the preceding Stone Age, which is effectively closed to historians of philosophy because writing had not been invented yet. In fact, it is only the final stage of the Shang Dynasty, when the capital was located near the modern city of Anyang 安陽 (*i.e.*, *c.* 1250–1045 BCE), that concerns us here, because there are no written sources before this. (Other bronze-using societies, such as the ones represented by the impressive finds from Erlitou 二里頭 and Sanxingdui 三星堆, may be of great interest to prehistorians, but likewise cannot be considered in this chapter.) There must have been philosophy in the Stone Age and Early Bronze Age; we simply cannot recover it. Nontextual artifacts such as jade *cong* 琮, which are meticulously carved, tube-like ritual objects (Mou 1997 and Liu 2019: 152–85), attest to beliefs that must have been very important to Stone Age populations; otherwise, one could not explain why so many hours of labor were diverted from farming, weaving, construction, etc. to the manufacture of items with no utilitarian application. But we are at a loss to specify these beliefs.

Even for the period from Anyang onward, the paucity of written sources limits the possibilities of inquiry. There are essentially two categories of texts, conventionally called palaeographical and transmitted. The former consist primarily of oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions. Oracle-bone inscriptions are records of scapulimantic divination. There are diverse historically attested methods of scapulimancy around the world, but at the Shang court, the procedure was to prepare the scapula of an ox or plastron of a specific species of turtle (hence the modern Chinese term *jiagu* 甲骨, “shell and bone”) by carefully boring hollows, then to insert a glowing metal brand into one of the hollows until it popped (Keightley 1978: 3–27). A properly prepared bone or shell could be used for multiple oracles, until the hollows were exhausted. After the rite, an account (perhaps

copied from a draft on a perishable material) might be written directly onto the bone or shell, documenting the question that was asked and the oracular response, often with a verification confirming that the prognostication was correct.

Bronze inscriptions were usually cast into ritual vessels as they were being produced. (Occasionally, they were incised into preexisting vessels.) They, too, relied on, and occasionally quoted, documents on perishable materials such as bamboo (Škrabal 2019 and 2022). In the Shang, bronze inscriptions were usually short and disclosed no more than that a vessel belonged to a certain lineage or was dedicated to a certain ancestor. Over time, bronze inscriptions became more informative; by the Zhou, they were often used to commemorate significant events such as battles and prestigious appointments, to preserve agreements about land, and so on (e.g., Li 2011). They could also blatantly misrepresent inconvenient facts (Shaughnessy 1991: 175–6; Falkenhausen 2006: 258–67). There are inscriptions on media other than bronze, such as jade and stone (Wang 2013), but these are relatively rare, and, at least for the Shang, almost always indicative of some ritual purpose.

Transmitted sources are also scarce, and confined to three major collections: the *Documents* (*Shu* 書), *Lost Documents of Zhou* (*Yi Zhoushu* 逸周書), and *Odes* (*Shi* 詩). Perhaps some of the oldest statements in the *Changes* (*Yi* 易) date to the Bronze Age as well (Rutt 2002: 30–3). As they all contain material from later periods, a considerable amount of scholarship has been devoted, over the centuries, to dating each section. The details are too complex to be rehearsed here, but most researchers now agree that these texts contain *some* Bronze Age documents, though with significant later redaction; the confidence with which any of the *Odes* can be placed in a Bronze Age milieu is a matter of particular controversy (e.g., Cook 2017: 22ff.; Shim 2012: 476–9; Kern 2009: 164–82; Liu 2004: 156–67). Most of the relevant chapters in the *Documents* and *Lost Documents of Zhou* deal with the Zhou conquest of Shang in the mid-eleventh century BCE and the accompanying political theory and rhetoric.

Before proceeding to a more focused discussion of these sources, some general observations are in order. Most conspicuously, they all derive from the world of the elite, if not the very apex of power in the form of the king and his closest ministers (diviners, in the case of oracle-bone inscriptions, and advisors, in the case of the *Documents*). Several unanswerable questions thus immediately present themselves. Did members of the lower classes perform scapulimancy as well? Even if the answer is yes, they did not write down the results and dispose of the bones in a manner that would permit discovery by modern archaeologists. It is likely that people practiced other forms of divination as well (Shaughnessy 2014: 12ff.). Nor can we tell how enthusiastically commoners accepted political doctrines like that of Heaven’s Mandate (*tianming* 天命, to be discussed below). We can say next to nothing about their intellectual and spiritual life.

Even for the elite, one of the major questions about this period is the extent to which they believed what they wrote and transmitted. How much confidence did they have in their oracles? Did the king believe that Heaven would reward him for virtue and punish him for vice, as the *Documents* solemnly—one might say tirelessly—declare? If anyone in the Bronze Age harbored misgivings about these convictions, no such record has survived. Accordingly, the Bronze Age may seem barren to philosophers, for I do not think there can be “philosophy” without *doubt*: the awareness that there can be other perspectives, that a moral life requires thinking for oneself and not simply living up to the expectations of some unquestioned authority. Doubts about received ideas are precisely what fueled

the great philosophical awakening of the Eastern Zhou (Hu 1963)—in other words, *after* the period covered in this chapter.

ORACLE-BONE INSCRIPTIONS: FALLIBILITY AND INTERPRETATION

Oracle-bone inscriptions shed light on the king's dual role as patriarch of his family and ruler of his state, akin to the “two bodies” of the king known from late medieval Europe (Kantorowicz 1957: 7–23). For example, there were repeated divinations about the sex of his consort's unborn child:

甲申卜，設貞：婦好媿，嘉？王占曰：其惟丁媿，嘉；其惟庚媿，弘吉。三旬又一日甲寅媿，不嘉，惟女。

甲申卜，設貞：婦好媿，不其嘉？三旬又一日甲寅媿身，不嘉，惟女。（*Jiaguwen heji* #14002 *recto*）

Scapulimancy on *jiashen* day (i.e., #21 in the sexagenary cycle), Que divined: “When Lady Hao gives birth, will it be auspicious?” The King prognosticated, saying: “If she should give birth on a *ding* day, it would be auspicious; if she should give birth on a *geng* day, it would be greatly auspicious.” On the thirty-first day [thereafter], on *jiayin* (i.e., #51), she gave birth. It was not auspicious; it was a girl.

Scapulimancy on *jiashen* day, Que divined: “When Lady Hao gives birth, perhaps it will not be auspicious?” On the thirty-first day [thereafter], on *jiayin*, she gave birth. It was not auspicious; it was a girl.

Coincidentally or not, the name of the diviner, Que, means “shell,” the very material used in the divination. (For a different interpretation, see Rao Zongyi 1959: 1.73.) The king, namely Wu Ding 武丁 (d. 1189 BCE), seems to have believed that the auspiciousness of the birth would depend on the date in the ten-day week (called *xun* 旬) when it took place. (On lucky and unlucky days, see Keightley 2000: 29–43.) Much depends on how we construe the grammatical particle *qi* 其, which is usually interpreted as indicating possibilities rather than secure facts, and often marks an outcome as undesirable, as in “perhaps it will not be auspicious” 不其嘉, above. (The literature on *qi* in oracle-bone inscriptions is extensive; leading studies include Serruys 1974: 25–58; Serruys 1986: 204–25; Takashima 1994; Zhang 1994: 140–75; Luo 2009; and Keightley 2020.)

Most scholars have assumed that the king and his coterie of diviners were wishing for a son, but Constance A. Cook and Luo Xinhui observe that no such lamentations were recorded when Lady Hao gave birth to a daughter on a different occasion (*Jiaguwen heji* #6948 *recto*). Perhaps “auspiciousness” referred to “balancing the right days with the gender of the child” (Cook and Luo 2017: 55) or more generally to the ease of the birth—that is to say, the birth was inauspicious *and* the child was a girl; it was not necessarily inauspicious *because* the child was a girl. Moreover, it must be remembered that because royal succession was fraternal (Itō and Takashima 1996: 1.113–22), a son would not necessarily be a direct heir. (Wu Ding was succeeded by a son, known to posterity as Zu Geng 祖庚, r. 1188–1178 BCE, but Zu Geng was then succeeded by a brother, Zu Jia 祖甲, r. 1177–1158 BCE) Regardless of these uncertainties, this record would have been understood as an accurate one. Lady Hao did not give birth on a *ding* or *geng* day, and the

delivery on a *jia* day may have substantiated the concern, articulated one month earlier, that the birth might not be “auspicious,” however this designation is to be understood.

Occasionally, one can discern a prognostication that was not wholly correct:

癸巳卜，爭貞：今一月不其雨？

癸巳卜，爭貞：今一月雨？王占曰：丙雨。旬壬寅雨。甲辰亦雨。

(*Jiaguwen heji* #12487 recto)

己酉雨，辛亥亦雨。(*Jiaguwen heji* #12487 verso)

Scapulimancy on *guisi* day (i.e., #30), Zheng divined: “Will it perhaps not rain this month?”

Scapulimancy on *guisi* day, Zheng divined: “Will it rain this month?” The king prognosticated, saying: “It will rain on a *bing* day.” It rained on *renyin* day (#39) of the following ten-day week; on *jiachen* day (#41), it rained again.

It rained on *jiyou* day (#46); on *xinhai* day (#48), it rained again.

The scrupulous verifications inform us obliquely that the king was wrong when he said it would rain on a *bing* day; although it rained four times within a short period, it was on *ren*, *jia*, *ji*, and *xin* days. Was this considered an accurate prognostication nonetheless, because it did, in fact, rain? Because records of inaccurate results are very rare—one way to explain the skew is to suppose that inaccurate results were deemed unsuitable for recording—this one was presumably regarded as *sufficiently* accurate (Keightley 2014: 208–21 and 1978: 40–4). At least the king was right that it would rain.

But surely someone observed that the king was not right *in every respect*, and one wonders whether this minor inaccuracy invalidated, to anyone’s mind, the entire practice. In later periods, there were various commonplace explanations for inaccurate divinations. Often, the fault was thought to lie with the practitioner rather than the method. According to one recently excavated text, Confucius himself was right only 70 percent of the time (*Chutu jianbo* Zhou-Yi *shuzheng* 269), and who could claim to surpass Confucius? And the early-Han-Dynasty “Statute on Scribes” (“Shilü” 史律) tells us that, in order to be certified at the lowest level, a diviner in training had to succeed merely one time in six (*Ernian lüling* 299, strip 477). Not only was divination construed as a skill, like archery or chess, at which some people excelled and others did not; faulty divinations were often attributed to moral faults on the part of the diviner (e.g., *Qianfu lun jian jiao zheng* 6.293f.). The modern proverb “If your heart is sincere, there will be a numinous effect” (*xin cheng ze ling* 心誠則靈) is displayed in many religious buildings today.

The acceptable degrees of inaccuracy might be easier to determine if we knew how diviners produced their oracles, and sadly we do not. (In view of our extreme ignorance of both the procedures and the rationale, I do not find it useful to characterize Shang divination as “magic” or “magico-religious,” to use the two terms in Keightley 2014: 104–6.) One failed modern strategy has been to examine the characteristic cracks that would appear on bones and shells once they had been scorched long enough, a shape preserved in the pictograph for “scapulimancy”: *bu* 卜. (The later term for these lines is *zhao* 兆.) If there was a consistent correlation between the shape, angle, or orientation of the crack and the recorded result, no study has been able to uncover it—a problem that has stumped some of the best minds in the field (the definitive study remains Zhang Bingquan 1954; see also Chang 1983: 51ff. and Ji et al. 2017: 284–6). Since classical texts nonetheless ascribe meaning to the shape of the crack (*Zhouli zhengyi* 1924ff. and *Shiji* 128.3244; on the latter, see Shaughnessy 1983: 65), the arcana of the procedure

must have been long forgotten, and replaced by invented traditions. (For the clever preparatory technique of drilling a double cavity that induced the cracks to take the shape 卜, see Liu 2022: 128–31; also Venture 2007: 90.)

My suspicion is that the significance of the crack was not the shape, but the *sound*, which is also preserved in the word *bu* (Old Chinese *p^sok). (All Old Chinese reconstructions in this chapter are based on the system in Baxter and Sagart 2014.) I do not follow most specialists (notably Keightley 1978: 13 n. 48; more recently, Schwartz 2019: 28) in interpreting *zhan* 占 as “to read a crack.” (Hence my noncommittal translation above: “to prognosticate.”) The presumption that the cracks were to be read rather than heard reeks of the fetishization of writing in Chinese studies (for which see, e.g., Saussy 2001: 35–74). In modern times, the Naskapi (Cree) of the Labrador Peninsula, who practiced a similar mode of scapulimancy, imitated the cracking as “Pak!” (Speck 1935: 149). I imagine that this unmistakable sound informed Bronze Age diviners that the decisive moment had come, at which point they would look up and take note of whatever they saw: the movements of birds, a particular tree or plant, etc. And *that* object—perhaps its name, perhaps its cultural connotations—would guide them toward their results.

This theory is speculative, but is compatible with other information in written sources. Wild geese are treated as omens in both the *Changes* and the *Odes* (Kunst 1985: 77f.); presumably because of their conspicuous formation in flight, they were associated with military service and, accordingly, separation between husband and wife (Shaughnessy 1997: 20ff.). Orioles also seemed to have augured ill. In each stanza of “The Yellow Birds” (“Huangniao” 黃鳥, #131 in the *Odes*), the name of the tree or bush on which the orioles alight rhymes with the name of the brother about to be ritually executed to accompany his lord in death. When they land on the jujube (*ji* 棘, *krək), the one who is called to the sacrificial pit is Ziju Yanxi 子車奄息 (*sək); when they land on the mulberry (*sang* 桑, *[s]ʰaŋ), the time has come for Ziju Zhonghang 子車仲行 (*[g]ʰaŋ); when they land on the thorn bush (*chu* 楚, *s.ɾaʔ), the audience must know that the life of Ziju Qianhu 子車鍼虎 (*q^hraʔ) has come to an end (Goldin 2002: 19ff.; Vankeerberghen 2013: 199).

If this is how Shang diviners rendered oracles, they would have had considerable control over the process and could easily have engineered a result that was expected or desired (Keightley 2014: 134ff., with different suppositions, came to similar conclusions). This hypothesis would also explain why no correlation between the geometry of the cracks and the recorded result has been detected. Naturally, we cannot know what Bronze Age diviners happened to see when the bone said *p^sok—let alone how they interpreted the portent.

In addition to rain and childbirth, oracle-bone divinations addressed several matters of interest to the king and his family (neatly summarized in Keightley 1978: 34; more expansively, see Chen 1956 and Chang 1970), which need not be enumerated here, as they have been amply studied in previous scholarship. Disease was one of the most urgent topics of divination because it was construed as a manifestation of some spirit’s discontent. The conception of disease as a consequence of possession by malign spirits is widely attested in texts from centuries later. The Shang conceived of a landscape inhabited by untold numbers of spirits (Koo 2013: 51–104 and Eno 2009: 54–70), many of which were ancestral—comparable to what we would call ghosts. Thus kings would repeatedly divine about the source of this or that malady; for only after the responsible ancestor was identified could appropriate conciliatory measures be taken (Goldin 2020: 234–39; also Poo 2022: 23f.).

“THE DEITY’S COMMAND” AND “HEAVEN’S MANDATE”

One inadequately appreciated concept in Shang oracle-bone inscriptions is “the Deity’s command” (*diling* 帝令), which could also be interpreted as “the Deity’s mandate” (*diming* 帝命) inasmuch as *ling* and *ming* were not consistently distinguished in palaeographical literature. In addition to ancestral spirits, there were numerous nature spirits such as the winds (*feng* 風/鳳, Li and Takashima 2022; Chen 2018: 101–2; Song 2011: 347–49; Wei 2002: 97–102), the spirit of the Yellow River (*he* 河, Boileau 2013: 103–7, though Song 2011: 363–6 argues that He is the name of a royal ancestor), and so on. At the top of the pantheon stood “the Deity” (*di*), who would communicate with the living through intermediaries such as ancestral spirits (Song 2011: 322–6; Keightley 2000: 100; Puett 2002: 44–50). (Eno 1990 and Paper 2020: 9ff. have suggested that *di* was plural—hence “the deities”—but I still interpret *di* as a single high god; see also Eno 2009: 70–7.) The Deity’s commands could be terrifying:

貞：方裁征，佳帝令作我禍。三月。(Jiaguwen heji #39912)

Divined: “The *fang* (i.e., enemies on the periphery of civilization) are harming and attacking [us] because the Deity commands them to make disasters for us.” Third lunation.

貞：不佳帝令作我禍。(Jiaguwen heji #6746)

Divined: “It is not because the Deity commands them to make disasters for us.”

Several words for “attack” appear in oracle-bone inscriptions, including *fa* 伐, “to chop, to hew,” *qin* 侵, “to raid, to encroach upon,” and *zai* 裁, “to cause damage” (identical to *zai* 災, “disaster”), but notice that the verb here is *zheng* 征 (*teŋ), “to correct, to punish.” This word is cognate with *zheng* 正 (*teŋs), “to rectify,” one of the most basic concepts of later moral philosophy. (For example, *zheng* 正 is used to gloss *zheng* 征 in Mencius 7B.4.) It would be one thing for unnamed barbarians to *raid* or to *harm* the Shang polity, but if they were construed as *correcting* or *punishing* it, one has to infer that they could do so, in the Shang imagination, only if the Deity commanded them (see further Goldin 2017: 125–6 and Chang Tsung-tung 1970: 215). Such inscriptions are uncommon but highly significant, for they suggest that a notion anticipating Heaven’s Mandate was in place before the Zhou conquest.

Heaven’s Mandate is much better documented than “the Deity’s command,” and hence better understood (Luo 2023: 35–66; Deng 2011: 30–48; Kominami 2006: 179–226). After having vanquished the Shang sometime around 1045 BCE, the Zhou suzerains were faced with a significant problem of legitimation, which they solved by appealing to a new entity: Heaven. The argument was that Heaven, an irresistible ethical force, chooses a virtuous individual on earth as its vicegerent, and installs him to rule on earth as the so-called Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子). If, however, he or one of his descendants ever fails to rule with virtue, Heaven will choose another champion to overthrow him. This was the justification that the Lords of Zhou submitted when explaining their astonishing success (we must remember that the nation of Shang seemed to all observers far mightier than its conqueror): the last king of Shang was evil; he maltreated his subjects; and Heaven appointed the Zhou to punish him and take his place. The avowed intention of the Zhou, in other words, was not brute conquest, but benign and Heaven-ordained rule.

(Incidentally, the term for “overturning the Mandate”—*geming* 革命—is used in Modern Chinese to mean “revolution.”)

Allusions to this idea are not rare in bronze inscriptions. It cannot be a coincidence that the same *zheng* 征 is the verb used to designate the Zhou conquest of Shang in the *Li gui* 利簋 inscription, which was cast soon afterward (*Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* #4131)—only this time, the punisher is not the Deity, but King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (r. 1049–1044 BCE). Thereafter, references to Heaven would become more explicit, as in the famous *He zun* 何尊 inscription:

在四月丙戌，王誥宗小子于京室，曰：昔在爾考公氏克逮文王，肆文王受茲[大命]。唯武王既克大邑商，則佺告于天，曰：余其宅茲中域，自茲乂民。 (*Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* #6014)

In the fourth month, on *bingxu* day (#23), King [Cheng 成, r. 1042–1021] enjoined the junior males of the lineage in the royal temple, saying: “In the past, your deceased patriarchs were able to confederate with King Wen, wherefore King Wen received this [great mandate]. When King Wu overpowered the great city of Shang, he prostrated himself and announced to Heaven: ‘Let me dwell in this central region, and from here govern the people.’”

Regrettably, the graphs interpreted here as *daming* 大命 (great mandate) are obliterated by a cavity on the vessel, but this reconstruction on the part of modern editors is probably correct. Other early Western Zhou inscriptions refer unambiguously to King Wen’s “receipt” (*shou* 受) of the Mandate from Heaven (e.g., *Da Yu ding* 大盂鼎, *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* #2837). The section quoted above is celebrated in China because of the phrase *zhongyu* 中域, or “central region”—that is, the capital—which has been zealously and anachronistically misread as *zhongguo* 中國, or China (Goldin 2018: 3f. and He 2011).

Many texts in the *Documents* discuss Heaven’s Mandate at greater length. Perhaps the clearest is “The Many Officers” (“Duoshi” 多士), a speech allegedly delivered by the Lord of Zhou 周公, a younger brother of King Wu named Dan 旦. (Because he was awarded the territory of the Zhou homeland, Dan and his successors were known as the Lords of Zhou; see, e.g., Lü 2006: 55–7.) When the Lord of Zhou arrives in Luo 洛, the city newly built for the purpose of controlling the restive Shang populace after an unsuccessful rebellion (which was joined by three opportunistic Zhou princes), he addresses them in the name of his nephew, King Cheng (Yang 2002: 116–20), and shrewdly invokes “the Deity” (*di*), whom the Shang recognized as their chief moral arbiter. What we call Heaven is simply what you have always called the Deity; our religion can encompass yours. Thus the phrase *shangdi ming* 上帝命, which anyone would have recognized as parallel to *tianming*, appears on multiple occasions in the *Documents* (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun*: 3.1273, 1279, and 1554).

In his oration, the Lord of Zhou refers to Xia 夏, the dynasty that was supposedly replaced by the Shang some five centuries earlier. It was with the aid of Heaven’s Mandate, he asserts, that Tang the Successful *Cheng Tang* 成湯, the first king of Shang, defeated Xia, whose own king had lost Heaven’s favor through his “licentiousness and dissolution” (*yinyi* 淫泆). Now history is repeating itself; although the Shang kings enjoyed Heaven’s Mandate for many generations, the last one became licentious and dissolute just like the last king of Xia, and Heaven appointed Zhou to destroy him. Chinese archaeologists tend to identify Xia with the Erlitou Culture, but it is likely that the Zhou dynasts invented Xia

for this rhetorical purpose (incisively, Thorp 1991: 30–8; more breezily, Thorp 2006: 57–61; also Allan 1984 and 2007).

爾殷遺多士！弗弔，旻天大降喪于殷；我有周佑命，將天明威，致王罰，敕殷命終于帝。肆爾多士，非我小國敢弑殷命，惟天不畀允罔固亂，弼我；我其敢求位？惟帝不畀，惟我下民秉為，惟天明畏。

我聞曰：「上帝引逸。」有夏不適逸，則惟帝降格，嚮于時。夏弗克庸帝，大淫泆，有辭；惟時天罔念聞，厥惟廢元命，降致罰。乃命爾先祖成湯革夏，俊民甸四方。自成湯至于帝乙，罔不明德恤祀；亦惟天丕建，保乂有殷；殷王亦罔敢失帝，罔不配天，其澤。在今後嗣王，誕罔顯于天，矧曰其有聽念于先王勤家？誕淫厥泆，罔顧于天顯民祗。惟時上帝不保，降若茲大喪。惟天不畀不明厥德；凡四方小大邦喪，罔非有辭于罰。 (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1512–13)

You many remaining officers of Shang! It is a misfortune; autumnal Heaven has greatly sent down destruction on Yin (i.e., Shang). We, possessors of Zhou, assisted in the mandate; led by Heaven's brilliant authority, we brought about the king's punishment, setting the mandate of Yin aright and [thereby] fulfilling [the will of] the Deity. Thus, you many officers, it was not that our small domain dared to take aim at the mandate of Yin; it was that Heaven, not cooperating with those who are deceitful, prevaricatory, ignorant, and disorderly, supported us. Would we dare seek this status [ourselves]? It was that the Deity would not cooperate [with you]. What our lowly people uphold and act upon is the brilliant dreadfulness of Heaven.

I have heard it said: "The Deity Above curbs idleness." The possessor of Xia did not restrict his idleness, so the Deity sent down visitations in order to provide guidance to the times. The Xia had no use for the Deity; they were greatly licentious and dissolute, for which [behavior] they invented pretexts. Thereupon Heaven no longer cared for them or heard them, but discontinued their primal mandate, sending down punishments. So your former ancestor Tang the Successful was commanded to overturn Xia; with your capable people he governed the four quarters. From Tang the Successful down to Thearch Yi, none [of your rulers] failed to make his virtue brilliant and attend to the sacrifices. Thus Heaven grandly established you, and protected and governed the possessors of Yin. The kings of Yin, for their part, did not dare to lose [the support of] the Deity, and did not fail to be adequate to Heaven and [receive] its emoluments. But more recently, their descendant and successor has been vastly unenlightened with respect to Heaven. How could it be said of him that he would comply with and care about the diligent heritage of the former kings? He was vastly licentious and dissolute; he did not look upon Heaven's manifest [presence] or the misery of the people. At this time, the Deity Above did not protect him, and sent down such great destruction as this. Heaven does not cooperate with those who do not make their virtue brilliant. Every territory that was destroyed within the four quarters, whether great or small—in no case was its punishment unjustified.

The Lord of Zhou finally assures his captive audience that the Shang royal house has been his dynasty's only enemy; although "the many officers" will be required to stay in Luo and serve the Zhou, they will not suffer any further penalty or encumbrance. In time, their houses may even flourish again. Notice that Heaven's Mandate bespeaks a conception of collective punishment: the Shang populace was conquered because of the misdeeds of its wicked king. The virtue or vice of any other individual is not even considered. The archaeological record suggests a general acceptance of collective punishment in the Bronze Age (for a grisly example, see Khayutina 2017: 184–5).

The Shang uprising furnished an occasion for a muffled expression of dissent in “The Great Injunction” (“Dagao” 大誥), one of the five so-called *gao* chapters, which are usually thought to be (at least largely) authentic, with diction that would not be out of place in a bronze inscription (despite Vogelsang 2002). Here the Lord of Zhou recounts a royal divination that called for a foreseeably arduous campaign of consolidation, prompting a muted objection (*fan* 反) from the wearied Zhou officers: “Why does Your Majesty not contravene the divination?” 王害不違卜 (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1271). The response:

予造天役 [=及] 遺 [=遣], 大投艱于朕身。越予冲人不印自卹, 義爾邦君越爾多士、尹氏、御事綏予曰: 「無愆于卹, 不可不成乃寧考圖功!」 (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1272)

I have encountered this Heaven-sent assignment; greatly does it cast hardship upon my person. As I, your young king, do not pity myself, it would be appropriate for you territorial lords, you many officers, secretaries, and administrators, to comfort me, saying: “Do not burden yourself with pity; the plan of your late forefather, the pacifier, cannot but be completed!”

And that is the extent of the debate: because the assignment to complete the subjugation of Shang comes from Heaven, King Cheng’s aides have no choice but to accept the burden (Yao 2023).

The idea that rulers bore a Heaven-ordained obligation to govern with forbearance went on to become one of the dominant elements of Chinese political culture. Later emperors may not have believed that an august and terrifying “Heaven” would strike them down if they were to misgovern their domain, but it was still typical for rulers and political advisors to discuss exhaustively the consequences that any proposed legislation might have for even the lowliest members of the population.

LOOKING FOR PHILOSOPHY IN THE DOCUMENTS

The aphorism in “The Many Officers” that “the Deity Above curbs idleness” gives a taste of the moral philosophy of the rest of the *Documents*. Thou shalt not have much fun. One chapter is entitled “Let There Be No Idleness” (“Wuyi” 無逸). It reuses the example of Shang to argue that the early kings of that dynasty “toiled” (*lao* 勞) and did not permit themselves “wasteful complacency” (*huangning* 荒寧); hence they enjoyed long reigns with scarcely a murmur against them. “They were able to protect and succor the common people; they did not dare to abuse those in widowed solitude” 能保惠于庶民, 不敢侮鰥寡 (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1532). The later Shang kings, by contrast, knew only idleness from the moment they were born; not toiling personally, they were oblivious to the toil of their subjects. It is only natural that they did not reach old age.

The unrelenting humorlessness of the *Documents* can obscure passages of philosophical interest. In “The Injunction about Ale” (“Jiugao” 酒誥), the ninth of King Wen’s ten sons, named Feng 封 or Kangshu 康叔, is treated to a homily by his elder brother, the aforementioned Lord of Zhou. The issue is ale: King Wen wisely prohibited it except at sacrifices, but the profligate king of Shang indulged in drink to the extent that he neglected his duties, incurring Heaven’s retribution. (The same allegations appear in the Da Yu *ding* inscription.) Right at the moment when readers might dismiss this text as yet another iteration of “Thou shalt not have much fun,” it surprises us with a lapidary comment on learning from history:

古人有言曰：「人無於水監，當於民監。」今惟殷墜厥命，我其可不大大監撫于時？
(*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1409)

The ancients had a saying: “People should not seek their reflection in water; they should seek their reflection in the populace.” Now that Yin has let fall its mandate, how could we fail to reflect on this greatly and accord with it?

In keeping with the exhortation to reflect on past mistakes, Feng is told that the bibulous Shang subjects need not be immediately executed: “let them be instructed for a while” 姑惟教之 (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1410). Only if they disregard the instructions are they to be killed without pity. Feng himself, who became the first Lord of Wey 衛 (see the Kanghou *gui* 康侯簋 inscription, *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* #4059; also the discussion in *Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1365–70), is enjoined not to allow his followers to drink until they have discharged their duties and seen to the happiness of their parents. A little fun is permitted at the end of a productive day.

Learning from the past is one of the most basic ideas in Chinese philosophy (e.g., Vogelsang 2007: 234–42, and Goldin 2008: 86ff.), and many titles of later historical works contain the word “mirror” (*jian* 鑑, *kʰram-s), an obvious derivative of the verb used above for “to reflect” (*jian* 監, *kʰram). For example, when Emperor Shenzong of Song 宋神宗 (r. 1067–85 CE) chose the name *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑) for the magnum opus by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86), his assessment was that “it serves as a mirror with respect to bygone affairs” 鑑于往事 (preface by Hu Sanxing 胡三省 [1230–1302], *Zizhi tongjian* 28). “The Injunction about Ale” might be the oldest scriptural resource underlying such associations. “The Injunction to Shao” (“Shaogao” 召誥) also directs us “to reflect” (*jian* 監) on the examples of Xia and Shang (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1441).

Another *gao* text is “The Injunction to Kang” (“Kanggao” 康誥), which begins with familiar somber language:

孟侯，朕其弟，小子封。惟乃丕顯考文王，克明德慎罰。不敢侮鰥寡，庸庸祇祇威顯民，用肇造我區夏；越我一二邦，以修我西土。惟時怙，冒聞于上帝，帝休。天乃大命文王，殪戎殷，誕受厥命，越厥邦厥民。 (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1299–1300)

Dean of the [territorial] lords, my younger brother, Junior Male Feng! It was your great and distinguished deceased late father, King Wen, who was able to manifest his virtue and attend cautiously to punishments. He did not dare to abuse those in widowed solitude, and employed, respected, and venerated the distinguished among the people, whereby he first established our province of the civilized world; aligning with one or two of our neighboring polities, he cultivated our territory in the West. Therefore, his diligence was heard by the Deity, and the Deity blessed him. Thus Heaven conferred on King Wen the great mandate to slay the warlike Yin and receive the mandate that was [originally] theirs, together with their kingdom and people.

“The Injunction to Kang” concludes with the warning that “the mandate is not constant” (*wei ming bu yu chang* 惟命不于常, *Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1353), an oft-repeated formula reminding the listener that Heaven’s Mandate could be withdrawn as swiftly as it had been awarded (Li Feng 2008: 295). Hence Kang is encouraged to live up to his mandate and “thereby peaceably govern the people” (*yong kang'ai min* 用康乂民,

Shangshu jiao shi yi lun 3.1354), a play on the name Kang, which can mean “peaceable.” Just as Heaven bestowed its great mandate on the king of Zhou, the king bestows his own lesser mandate on his kin and allies, to whom he delegates power within his regime. There is Heaven’s Mandate (*tianming*) and there is the royal mandate (*wangming* 王命, e.g., Shi Wang *ding* 師望鼎 inscription, *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* #2812).

Between this predictable introduction and conclusion, “The Injunction to Kang” advances several noteworthy tenets of jurisprudence. One conspicuous difference between Shang and Zhou sources is that the latter exhibit much greater concern for the problem of judging legal cases (e.g., Mu *gui* 牧簋 inscription, *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* #4343, discussed in Li Feng 2004 and Cook 2017: 97ff.; and the “Lüxing” 呂刑 chapter of *Shangshu*, discussed in Sanft 2015: 448–69). The Shang king may have performed comparable tasks; our sense of him as primarily a cultic figure may be distorted by our unavoidable reliance on oracle-bone inscriptions as historical sources. But it remains striking that legal dilemmas were not a topic of divination.

According to “The Injunction to Kang,” the fundamental principles (*yi* 彝) were given to the people by Heaven (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1336); those who “will not be guided by these great benchmarks” (*bu shuai dajia* 不率大戛, *Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1341), whether commoners or officials, must all be “moderated” (*jie* 節)—an apparent euphemism for punishment. Western philosophers would call this *ius naturale*, or natural law. (For a survey of such thinking in later Chinese sources, see Bodde 1991: 332–45.) How do we apperceive these benchmarks? One convenient aid is the Shang penal system, which admirably reflected the Heavenly principles; thus Kang is enjoined to perpetuate it in his own administration (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1331; cf. 1327, where the Shang penal laws are said to have “possessed the right interrelations” 有倫). He is also told to learn from the example of the former kings of Shang (*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1309; cf. 1348, where the Lord of Zhou asserts that the king himself does the same). These recommendations are not surprising if we take seriously the premise that the early kings of Shang earned Heaven’s favor. Before their downfall, they must have done some things right.

Most intriguing of all is the following statement, which is traditionally interpreted as establishing a concept of criminal intent:

人有小罪非眚，乃惟終，自作不典，式爾；有厥罪小，乃不可不殺。乃有大罪非終，乃惟眚哉，適爾，既道 [=迪] 極 [=殛] 厥辜，時乃不可殺。(*Shangshu jiao shi yi lun* 3.1319)

If people commit a minor crime without acknowledging it, and, to the end, willfully do what is illicit, this is intentional; although their crime is minor, you cannot fail to execute them. But if they commit a major crime without [willfully doing what is illicit] to the end, and they acknowledge [their wrongdoing], this is unintentional; provided that you have already applied a punishment for their crimes, you cannot execute them.

Much of this translation is tentative because there are many obscure phrases (such as *shi er* 式爾 and *shi er* 適爾, which are contrastive but opaque). Moreover, the issue might be contrition rather than intent; perhaps the claim is that executing criminals who acknowledge their wrongdoing and reform themselves serves no purpose (just as the Shang subjects in “The Injunction about Ale” are given a chance to amend their sottish habits). Only the irremediably recidivist cannot be pardoned (Sanft 2017: 468f.).

THE END OF THE BRONZE AGE AND THE RISE OF DOUBT

Western Zhou bronze inscriptions present the kingdom as a great family, modeled on the structure of Bronze Age lineages (Li 2008: 294–9; Hsu and Linduff 1988: 163–71). This was not just a self-serving fantasy; many of the King’s officers and plenipotentiaries were, in fact, his kinsmen. Wang Ming-ke (1999: 238) stresses the theme of fellowship through shared participation in the wars against the Shang, as we have seen in the He *zun* inscription. This conception of the state as a harmonious household informs several aristocratic titles, such as *gong* 公 (*C.q^oŋ), traditionally rendered as “duke” but with the etymon of “patriarch”; *bo* 伯 (*p^orak), “earl” but more literally “eldest brother” (and hence “protector,” or *ba* 霸, *p^orak-s), and *zi* 子 (*tsə^o), “viscount” but more literally “son,”—i.e., nobleman by virtue of his father’s status (Goldin 2021).

How did this confident ideology come crashing down? Like any other, the theory of Heaven’s Mandate stood or fell on its power to explain, and after the Western Zhou, it had two glaring weaknesses: the kings were patently not the most powerful men in the world anymore, nor were they (or indeed any political leaders) plausibly judged as moral paragons worthy of the epithet Son of Heaven. Accordingly, when the great western state of Qin 秦 was about to usher in a new political order by uniting the warring kingdoms of the third century BCE, it made scant appeal to Heaven’s Mandate. Their thinkers proposed an amoral account of dynastic succession that was based on phases of *qi* 氣 and thus fundamentally distinct from Heaven’s Mandate (Goldin 2020: 239–41).

Moreover, with the passage of generations and the dispossession of multiple ducal houses (notably those of Jin 晉 and Qi 齊), the cheery familial discourse must have seemed antiquated. Now allies were not necessarily kinsmen; kinsmen were not necessarily allies. Extraordinary population growth had a hand in eviscerating such ideals as well. It was simply no longer possible to govern a kingdom of millions in the old fraternal mode. Now one needed bureaucracies staffed by specialists such as accountants, cartographers, engineers, strategists, and, above all, clerks. (Occasionally even philosophers might be consulted for their daft opinions.) In order to find true competence, most of these officials would have to be recruited from beyond the aristocracy.

Against this backdrop, doubt finally found its voice. (Humor, incidentally, did, too: Harbsmeier 1990 and Moeller 2022.) One of several revolutionary notions in the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) was that ancestral spirits might not know what is best for us after all. “Respect the ghosts and spirits, but keep them at a distance” 敬鬼神而遠之 (*Analects* 6.20): pondering the afterlife and the supernatural will only impede moral reasoning (Goldin 2020: 35ff.). Another innovation was to redefine the term *junzi* 君子, literally “noble son,” or a member of the hereditary aristocracy, in purely moral terms: a *junzi* is someone who acts as a *junzi* should, regardless of birth (Pines 2017: 165–72). One of the various necessary conditions for this radical reconceptualization must have been the sensibility that most soi-disant *junzi* were behaving like churls.

For a final perspective on the philosophical limitations of the Bronze Age, contrast the ironclad Bronze Age faith in Heaven’s justice with the struggle in *Mencius* 2B.13 to rationalize Heaven’s failure to save humanity by delivering a new sage king:

五百年必有王者興，其間必有名世者。由周而來，七百有餘歲矣；以其數則過矣，以其時考之則可矣。夫天，未欲平治天下也。(Mengzi zhengyi 9.309–11)

Every five hundred years, a true king is supposed to arise; within the same interval, there are supposed to be people famous in their era. It has been more than seven hundred years since [King Wen] of Zhou. By the [500-year] sequence, we have already passed [the time when a sage should arrive], and if we consider [the needs] of the present time, it would be opportune [for a sage to arrive]. Heaven does not yet wish to bring peace and order to the world.

Mencius was by no means prepared to abandon the theory of Heaven's Mandate (see, e.g., *Mencius* 5A.5–6), but he was not so foolish as to disbelieve his eyes and pretend that the celestial clockwork was proceeding as he had been taught to expect. His inference was that, for inscrutable reasons, Heaven wants us to keep suffering. Maybe people had such skeptical thoughts in the Bronze Age, too, but if they did, they were silenced.

Of the classical philosophies, the closest one to Bronze Age thinking was Mohism. Not in every respect—the Mohists' meritocratic priorities led them to criticize rulers who blithely entrust the government to friends and relatives. In the same vein, Mohists idolized legendary kings who abdicated in favor of worthy successors instead of allowing their sons to inherit the throne (Pines 2005: 248ff.). These ideals would have been inconceivable in the Bronze Age. But the Mohist concept of divine justice was backward-looking (Luo and Pines 2023: 30ff.): Heaven is responsible for the political hierarchy on Earth, and that is exactly why it is right and proper. Even as Confucians and others cautioned against looking to the spirit world for moral norms, Mohists redoubled their faith in “percipient ghosts” (*minggui* 明鬼), charged by Heaven to monitor the populace and punish wrongdoing infallibly. One of their credos was: “If we do what Heaven desires, Heaven will surely do what we desire” 我為天之所欲，天亦為我所欲 (*Mozi jiaozhu* 7.288). This intransigent theodicy, which could have come right out of the Bronze Age, is one of the main reasons why Mohism lost adherents in the Warring States (Goldin 2020: 54–78). Certitude no longer suited the times.

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