
How to Read an Oracle Bone from Huayuanzhuang East Pit H3

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This paper focuses on the work habits and motives of the Shang recordkeepers who wrote the divination accounts discovered in 1991 in Pit 3 at Huayuanzhuang East. These scribes, who worked under the patronage of a head of one of the princely households, collaborated with diviners sanctioned under the same mandate and the two professional groups developed and employed technologies to micromanage their workloads economically and to do their jobs coherently and efficiently. The scribes who produced the divination accounts on this homogenous and unified collection of shells and bones demonstrated accurate divination recordkeeping and displayed a unique competency and innovation in how these specialized records were designed, written out, and formally presented. More crucially, the orientation of the divination accounts indicates a control of the materials, attests to scribal literacy, and implies that they were written to be read and consulted.

Keywords: Shang recordkeeping, professional work habits and motives, oracle bone divination, literacy in the ancient world

Introduction

The Huayuanzhuang East oracle bone inscriptions (花園莊東地甲骨), first discovered in 1991 and completely published in six folio volumes in 2003, are a synchronically compact corpus of several thousand individual late Shang (ca. 1250–1045 BC) divination accounts inscribed on hundreds of intact turtle shells and cattle scapulae.¹ Produced under the patronage of a prince of the royal family during the reign of the 27th Shang king, Wu Ding, these “princely communications” are undeniably one of the most important epigraphic finds in the history of Chinese archaeology, and the collection as a excavated type has now become a model for corpus-based and statistically-driven approaches to oracle bone study, particularly as it concerns the process of decision making and producing written accounts of it. What the field of early China has needed for quite some time is more intact oracle bone discoveries that demonstrate the operational methods and technical expertise of the diviners and scribes who worked collectively to produce these material documents. The Huayuanzhuang East oracle bone inscriptions provide an ideal corpus to know more about the habits and motives of Shang diviners and recordkeepers.²

* This research output has been generously supported by the Hong Kong RGC, Early Career Scheme (Reference Number 22608419), project title: “The Language of the Huayuanzhuang East Oracle Bone Inscriptions.”

- 1 *Yinxu Huayuanzhuang dongdi jiagu* 殷墟花園莊東地甲骨, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan Kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, 6 vols. (Kunming: Yunnan renmin, 2003). Hereafter I use the abbreviation HYZ [HuaYuanZhuang] in reference to the oracle bones. An abbreviation like HYZ 181.5 means piece 181, divination account 5. A total of 689 inscribed pieces were collected from the pit. The large majority were turtle plastrons (659); turtle carapaces (25) and a few cattle scapulae (5) comprised the remainder. After rejoins, the 2003 official publication included color photographs, enlarged sectional photographs, and rubbings and facsimiles of 561 inscribed surfaces. After the extraction of reduplications, further rejoins, and the subtraction of inscriptions on verso sides (30), the number of inscribed bones totals 529: 511 turtle plastrons, 13 turtle carapaces, and 5 cattle scapulae. For commentary and additional information on the HYZ inscriptions cited in this paper, see A.C. Schwartz, *The Oracle Bone Inscriptions from Huayuanzhuang East* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2019).
- 2 David N. Keightley, “Theology and the Writing of History: Truth and the Ancestors in the Wu Ding Divination Records,” in *These Bones Shall Rise Again: Selected Writings on Early China*, ed. Henry Rosemont Jr. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2014), 207, says, “The oracle bone inscriptions of the Late Shang dynasty (ca. 1200 to ca. 1045 BCE) can on occasion provide us with an immediate sense, remarkable at a remove of over three thousand years, of the work habits and motives of the Shang diviners and record-keepers.”