
The Question of Literariness in the Composition of Western Zhou Bronze Bell Inscriptions*

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The present article sets out to investigate whether it is possible to talk about verbal parallelism, such as rhyme and meter in early Chinese bronze inscriptions in terms of sound correlated figures of speech. The answer to this question depends on whether or not these audible patterns can be shown to fulfill an identifiable structuring function in shaping the texts' messages. Addressing this issue is important in so far as it bears some major clues on how bronze inscriptions were retrieved (i.e. read, recited, etc.) and understood during the time when their carriers were still in use.

After discussing some disputed aspects concerning the nature and function of texts from early Chinese bronze inscriptions with regard to their ritual and material context, the present study proceeds with a detailed literary inquiry of the rhymed text inscribed on the late Western Zhou Guoji bian *zhong* 虢季編鐘 chime as a sample analysis.

Keywords: Bronze inscriptions, rhyme, literary form, literariness

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1. Introduction

In the first volume of the *Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, published in 2013, one reads the following statement:

Western Zhou bronze inscriptions are in many respects the fountainhead of Chinese Literature. [...] Cast into precious and durable artefacts of display, bronze inscriptions were more than just silent writings: their gradually emerging aesthetics of rhyme, meter, onomatopoeia, and other euphonic elements indicate that they were meant to be recited and heard.¹

Despite having eventually found their rightful place in the history of Chinese literature,² early Chinese bronze inscriptions, as the above cited passage suggests, are nevertheless often understood as reflecting something more, or perhaps rather something less than written literary texts. This is mainly due to the not entirely unfounded conviction that the recital of messages cast on ritual bronze paraphernalia may have been inextricably interwoven with other, non-verbal forms of expression that together constituted the ritual performances these artefacts were involved in. Thus, when it comes to interpreting the phenomenon of verbal parallelism in bronze inscriptions, many scholars tend to locate these features within the context of ritual and music. Indeed, especially rhymed inscriptions on bronze bell chimes invite one to draw parallels between the field of literary form and the audible aesthetics of musical performance. Chen Zhi 陳致 for instance observes the following phenomenon:

The four notes yu 羽, gong 宮, jue 角 and wei 徵 make up the basic melodic register of bronze bell chimes that were cast from the mid-Western Zhou period onwards. In correspondence to that, Western Zhou bronze inscription display the following features: Firstly, from the mid-Western Zhou period onwards four-character set phrases began to appear. Secondly, it became increasingly common for inscriptions starting from this period to employ rhyme. This development towards four character

1 Martin Kern, “Early Chinese literature, beginnings through Western Han,” in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, Volume I: To 1375*, ed. Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12–13.

2 Earlier seminal overviews in the field of early Chinese Literature, such as Mark Edward Lewis’s *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), merely mention the role of bronze inscriptions in passing.