

## THE LEGACY OF BRONZES AND BRONZE INSCRIPTIONS IN EARLY CHINESE LITERATURE

References to bronze inscriptions in received literature are surprisingly rare. By far the lengthiest appears in an undated ritual text, “Protocols of Sacrifice” (“Jitong” 祭統), currently found in the compendium *Ritual Records* (*Liji*):

夫鼎有銘，銘者，自名也。自名以稱揚其先祖之美，而明著之後世者也。為先祖者，莫不有美焉，莫不有惡焉，銘之義，稱美而不稱惡，此孝子孝孫之心也。唯賢者能之。

銘者，論譏其先祖之有德善，功烈勳勞慶賞聲名列於天下，而酌之祭器；自成其名焉，以祀其先祖者也。顯揚先祖，所以崇孝也。身比焉，順也。明示後世，教也。

夫銘者，壹稱而上下皆得焉耳矣。是故君子之觀於銘也，既美其所稱，又美其所為。為之者，明足以見之，仁足以與之，知足以利之，可謂賢矣。賢而勿伐，可謂恭矣。

With regard to cauldrons with inscriptions: in the “inscription” (*ming* 銘), one “names” (*ming* 名) oneself. One names oneself in order to cite and extol what is beautiful in one’s ancestors, and clearly exhibit it for later generations. Among one’s ancestors, there is none without something beautiful and none without something ugly. The principle of a bronze inscription is to cite what is beautiful and not what is ugly. This is the heart of filial sons and grandsons; only a worthy can do it.

An inscription arranges and compiles the virtue and goodness of one’s ancestors, so that their merit, glory, rewards, and reputation are displayed throughout the world, and in feasting them with sacrificial vessels, one attains one’s name; in this way, one enshrines one’s ancestors. One does honor to filial piety by displaying and extolling one’s ancestors. Placing oneself near to them is complaisance; clearly exhibiting [these things] to later generations is instruction.

In an inscription, above and below [i.e. ancestors and descendants] all attain [their place] with a single reference. Thus when a noble man inspects an inscription, having praised those who are cited in it, he also praises whoever made it. Because the maker had sufficient insight to discern their [achievements], sufficient humanity to partake of them, and

sufficient wisdom to profit from them, he can be called worthy. One who is worthy without boasting can be called reverent.<sup>88</sup>

This text praises artful and appreciative inscriptions as expressions of filial respect, but does not advise interpreting them as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.<sup>89</sup> Rather, inscriptions were regarded as works of reverent commemoration. “Protocols of Sacrifice” goes on to quote an inscription in full—and probably a genuine one—but unfortunately this does not allow us to infer much about ancient palaeographical conventions, inasmuch as the received text is surely the product of intervening centuries of redaction. One might like to know how literati from the time of “Protocols of Sacrifice” would have transcribed the archaic graphs of bronze inscriptions, but the extant recension manifestly dates to the Six Dynasties or later, and obscures (and possibly even corrupts) whatever notation preceded it.<sup>90</sup> Noel Barnard has shown that hardly any other bronze inscription quoted in received literature can be trusted.<sup>91</sup>

Though they are not very informative on the question of how the ancients would have read bronze inscriptions, early literary sources do present a general consensus regarding the perceived importance of bronzes themselves. Specifically, bronze vessels are depicted in early literature as emblems of ritual effectiveness and political power. This should not be surprising; the late K.C. Chang, in his masterly book, *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, showed how the two went hand in hand. Chang cited an illuminating passage from the *Zuo Commentary to the Springs and Autumns* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳) that bears repeating here:

楚子伐陸渾之戎，遂至於雒，觀兵于周疆。定王使王孫滿勞楚子。楚子問鼎之大小、輕重焉。對曰：「在德不在鼎。昔夏之方有德也，遠方圖物，貢金九牧，鑄鼎象物，百物而為之備，使民知神、姦。故民入川、澤、山、林，不逢不若。螭魅、罔兩 [= 魍魎]，莫能逢之。用能協于上下，以承天休。」

The Viscount of Chu [i.e. King Zhuang of Chu 楚莊王, r. 613–591 B.C.E.] attacked the Rong of Luhun and eventually arrived at Luo, where he displayed his troops at the border with Zhou. King Ding [of Zhou, r. 606–

<sup>88</sup> Compare the translation in Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, IV, 251–52.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Shaughnessy, *Sources of Western Zhou History*, 175ff.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., Guo Moruo, *Jinwen congkao*, 84–87.

<sup>91</sup> “Records of Discoveries of Bronze Vessels in Literary Sources,” 457ff.

586 B.C.E.] dispatched Wangsun Man<sup>92</sup> with humanitarian gifts for the Viscount of Chu.

The Viscount of Chu asked about the size and weight of the cauldrons [of Zhou]. [Wangsun Man] responded: “[The matter] lies with one’s *de* [i.e. power derived from Heaven’s approval], not with one’s cauldrons. In the past, when the region of Xia had *de*, distant regions made images of creatures, and sent the Protectors of the Nine Provinces to make offerings of metal. Cauldrons were cast with representations of the creatures, including all their varieties, so as to let the people know what is divine and what is depraved. Thus when the people entered river valleys, marshes, mountains, or forests, they did not encounter anything untoward, nor did any goblins or banshees meet with them. By this means, they were able to forge cooperation between above and below, thereby securing Heaven-sent blessings.”<sup>93</sup>

Chang himself presented this passage as evidence of a shamanic dimension of early Chinese ritual practice<sup>94</sup>—an argument that remains controversial.<sup>95</sup> But the harangue attributed to Wangsun Man is valuable for another reason as well: it is, I believe, the oldest document in which the characteristic theriomorphic ornamentation on bronzes is given a Chinese name. Today, this design is widely, but anachronistically, called *taotie* 饕餮.<sup>96</sup> In this text, however, the images are identified as *wu* 物, “creatures,” and their function, though not explained in detail, seems to be both monitory and apotropaic: teaching the people how to avoid “untoward things” (*buruo* 不若) and keeping away goblins and banshees. Naturally, this says nothing about how the ornamentation would have been understood in Shang and Zhou times, when such vessels were cast,<sup>97</sup> but it confirms that, by

<sup>92</sup> Strictly speaking, this should be “Royal Grandson Man” (Wangsun is not a surname), but he is conventionally called Wangsun Man.

<sup>93</sup> Compare the translation in Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, V, 293. As my colleague Adam Smith has pointed out to me, the final line (i.e. *yong neng xie yu shangxia, yi cheng tianxiu* 用能協于上下, 以承天休) is jarringly archaic and seems out of place in Eastern Zhou prose. Perhaps Wangsun Man is subtly quoting a line from an inscription on the cauldrons?

<sup>94</sup> *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, 63ff.

<sup>95</sup> For a very different view, see, e.g., Keightley, “The Shang,” 262.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Wang, “A Textual Investigation of the *taotie*.”

<sup>97</sup> The relevant bibliography is too vast to cite in a single footnote. For a representative Chinese view, see Duan Yong, *Shang Zhou qingtongqi huanxiang dongwu yanjiu*.

the fourth century B.C.E. at the latest, the so-called “creature” images were thought to have a crucial religious purpose.<sup>98</sup>

Wangsun Man’s speech does not end here, for he apperceives the Chu ruler’s inquiries about the cauldrons as an intimation of that lord’s imperial ambitions—which he regards as impertinent, since the Mandate of Heaven still resides with Zhou. (Imagine Khrushchev asking an American ambassador how much gold is in Fort Knox.) Wangsun Man continues:

桀有昏德，鼎遷于商，載祀六百。商紂暴虐，鼎遷于周。德之休明，雖小，重也。其姦回昏亂，雖大，輕也。天祚明德，有所底止。成王定鼎于郊廓，卜世三十，卜年七百，天所命也。周德雖衰，天命未改。鼎之輕重，未可問也。

[King] Jie’s *de* dimmed, and the cauldrons were moved to Shang, [where they remained] for six hundred years. [King] Zhòu of Shang [r. 1075–1046 B.C.E.?] was cruel and tyrannical, and the cauldrons were moved to Zhou. When one’s *de* is blessed and brilliant, [one’s cauldrons] will be heavy even if they are small. When one is depraved, refractory, dim, and disorderly, they will be light even if they are large. When Heaven favors one of brilliant *de*, there must be a basis on which it rests. King Cheng [of Zhou, r. 1042–1021 B.C.E.?] settled the cauldrons in Jiaru, and divined that for thirty generations, for seven hundred years, [his dynasty] would be mandated by Heaven. Although the *de* of Zhou has declined, Heaven’s Mandate has not yet changed. It is too soon to ask about the weight of the cauldrons.

For Wangsun Man—and, implicitly, the author or authors of the *Zuo Commentary* as well—the cauldrons of Zhou serve as the material embodiment of the dynasty’s celestial sanction, which was itself earned, generations ago, by virtuous conduct of the Zhou founders. Centuries later, King Ding’s possession of the ritual implements necessary for the regular consecration and confirmation of this relationship with Heaven signifies his enduring supremacy in the terrestrial realm as well. If King Zhuang of Chu really wants to seize the cauldrons—that is, by synecdoche, the status of Son of Heaven—he should, instead of making inquiries about their physical characteristics, devote himself to leading a virtuous life that might attract Heaven’s approval; indeed, to take a Mencian sort of interpretation,<sup>99</sup> in this manner

<sup>98</sup> That is to say, the agnostic position staked out by Robert W. Bagley for earlier periods (in his “Meaning and Explanation”) would not be valid for the fourth century.

<sup>99</sup> E.g., *Mencius* 1A.5–7; see the general discussion in Goldin, *Confucianism*, 64ff.

the cauldrons might be vouchsafed to him without his even having to fight for them.

Later sources used the Zhou cauldrons (which were thought to number nine) as a transparent symbol of political power,<sup>100</sup> and it should come as no surprise that the First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇帝 (r. 221–210 B.C.E.) is depicted as having tried—in vain, of course—to fish them out of the River Si 泗水, where one (or all of them?)<sup>101</sup> had sunk for unknown reasons. Even with a thousand divers, the project was unsuccessful. There is a stone carving from the Wu Family Shrines illustrating the grand unconsummated affair, displaying all the confident mockery of an artist living some four centuries later.<sup>102</sup> It was a common theme in Eastern Han art.

Another illustrative example comes from the *Great Commentary to the Exalted Documents* (*Shangshu dazhuan* 尚書大傳) by Fu Sheng 伏勝 (fl. late 3rd-early 2nd century B.C.E.):

武丁祭成湯，有雉飛升鼎耳而雊。武丁問諸祖己，祖己曰：「雉者、野鳥，不當升鼎。今升鼎者，欲為用也。無則遠方將有來朝者乎？」故武丁內反諸己，以思先王之道。三年，編髮重譯來朝者六國。

孔子曰：「吾於《高宗彤日》見德之有報之疾也。」<sup>103</sup>

When [King] Wu Ding [of Shang, r. 1250?–1192? B.C.E.] was sacrificing to Tang the Successful [i.e. the founder of the Shang dynasty], a pheasant flew by and landed on top of the handle of a cauldron, where it crowed. Wu Ding asked Zu Ji about this; Zu Ji said: “The pheasant is a wild bird; it should not land on top of a cauldron. Now the fact that it has landed on top of the cauldron means that it wishes to be employed. Does it not follow that [people from] distant regions will come to court?” Thus Wu Ding reflected on this, and pondered the Way of the Former Kings. Within three years, [envoys] with braided hair and double interpreters<sup>104</sup> had come to court from six states.

<sup>100</sup> K.O. Thompson (private communication) has suggested a comparison with the Sword in the Stone of Arthurian legend. Perhaps it is significant that in the Chinese tradition, the material embodiment of a ruler’s legitimacy is a set of ritual vessels, whereas in the Medieval European one, it is an implement of war.

<sup>101</sup> The sources are not in agreement. The most famous ancient discussion of the discrepancies in the various accounts of the Nine Cauldrons is by Wang Chong 王充 (A.D. 27–ca. 100); see Huang Hui, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 8.375–80 (“Ruzeng” 儒增).

<sup>102</sup> See Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, 95ff.

<sup>103</sup> The source text is Li Fang, *et al.*, *Taiping yulan*, 917.5b.

<sup>104</sup> The term “double interpreters” (*chongyi* 重譯) refers to teams of translators who would be em-

Confucius said: “From *The Day of Gaozong’s rong Sacrifice*,<sup>105</sup> we see how swiftly *de* is recompensed.”<sup>106</sup>

One of the reasons for the preservation of this vignette—from a work that survives only in fragments—must be its affinity with other examples of augury, in which the observed movements of animals, especially birds, are imbued with prognosticative significance. In the symbolic vocabulary of the time, a pheasant alighting on a bronze vessel is taken as a metaphor for the arrival of wild tribes at the king’s civilized court.

The *Odes* exemplifies another aspect of what may be regarded as the legacy of bronze inscriptions: the use of onomatopoeic phrases conveying a specific sound imbued with meaning. The most famous example is probably the opening line of the *Odes*, “*Guanguan*—the ospreys” 關關雎鳩,<sup>107</sup> where *guan* (Old Chinese \*k<sup>s</sup>ror) represents both the sound of the ospreys’ call<sup>108</sup> and a meaning in the semantic domain of “to join”—as is only fitting for an epithalamium. Such onomatopoeic reduplicatives can be deployed powerfully in the poetics of the *Odes*, especially the section called “Airs of the States” (“Guofeng” 國風). For example, in the first line of “The Yellow Birds” (“Huangniao” 黃鳥, Mao 131), “*Jiaojiao*—the yellow birds” 交交黃鳥,<sup>109</sup> the word *jiao* (\*k<sup>s</sup>raw) packs at least three layers of meaning: first, it represents the call of the yellow birds (perhaps orioles); second, it means, straightforwardly, “they copulate”; and third, it evokes the crisscross flight pattern of mating birds. All these allusions to copulation present an ironic contrast with the fate of the three noble brothers in this poem, who are severed from their wives and forced to follow their deceased lord in death. As in the passage from the *Great Commentary to the Exalted Documents*, alighting birds take on all the significance of omens, for the name of the tree on

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ployed for languages so remote that no Chinese speaker was familiar with them. The king would address the first interpreter, who would then use some common language to convey the message to the second interpreter, who could speak to the barbarians directly.

<sup>105</sup> Gaozong is the temple name of Wu Ding. *The Day of Gaozong’s rong Sacrifice* is usually understood as the title of a text, and the received *Documents* contains a chapter by this name, which relates this episode with important differences.

<sup>106</sup> Compare the translation in Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, III, 265.

<sup>107</sup> Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, IV, 1.

<sup>108</sup> If indeed they are ospreys—we know next to nothing about the Bronze-Age meanings of zoological terms.

<sup>109</sup> “Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, IV, 198.

which the birds land rhymes in each stanza with the name of the brother to be executed next.<sup>110</sup>

In “The *Guan*-ing Ospreys” and “The Yellow Birds,” the onomatopoeic reduplicatives are placed in the mouths of birds, but in the oldest poems they tend to be associated with musical instruments, especially bells.<sup>111</sup> Edward L. Shaughnessy has argued that the use of this device derives from bell inscriptions, which record the sounds of the very bells that they have been cast into.<sup>112</sup> It seems significant that, even in the earliest bell inscriptions, onomatopoeic reduplicatives convey not only the sound of the bell, but also a corresponding meaning. Take, for example, the end of the inscription from the first group of Xing bells (Xing *zhong* 癩鐘, no. 33, below), dated to the early ninth century B.C.E.:

敢作文人大寶協籛鐘，用追孝，享祀照格，樂大神。大神其陟降嚴祐僕，綏厚多福。其豐豐懌懌授余屯魯、通祿、永命、眉壽靈終。癩其萬年永寶日鼓。

I venture to craft for my cultured [ancestors] a great treasure of harmoniously tuned bells, so as to pursue filial piety, to make sacrificial offerings to those who splendidly arrive [i.e. the ancestors], and to please the great spirits. May the great spirits, ascending and descending, solemnly bless and assist us, assuage us and grant us manifold fortune. May they—*feng-feng yiyi*—bestow on us hoards of boon, enveloping wealth, enduring life, outstanding longevity, and a numinous end. May I, Xing, treasure and peal [these bells] every day for ten thousand years.

The phrase *fengfeng yiyi* (\*p<sup>h</sup>oŋ-p<sup>h</sup>oŋ lak-lak) reproduces the sound of Xing’s bells as they are struck during the ceremony (perhaps accompanied by other instruments—\*lak-lak sounds more like a clapper than a bell), but it has a definite meaning as well: “fecund and soothing.” As Xing invokes his ancestors and beseeches them to rain down peace and prosperity, the bells themselves call out “Fecund and soothing! Fecund and soothing!”—echoing his prayer in their own brazen language.

Associating this kind of rhetoric in bronze inscriptions with onomatopoeia in the *Odes* seems compelling because in each context, the on-

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Goldin, *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China*, 39ff.

<sup>111</sup> E.g., “Tingliao” 庭燎 (Mao 182), “Guzhong” 鼓鍾 (Mao 208), “Zhijing” 執競 (Mao 274), “Yogu” 有瞽 (Mao 280).

<sup>112</sup> *Before Confucius*, 181ff. See also Kern, “Bronze Inscriptions, the *Shijing* and the *Shangshu*,” 167ff.

matopoetic phrases capture both an appropriate sound and an appropriate meaning. Moreover, this poetic device could hardly have developed before bell inscriptions became commonplace in the mid-tenth century B.C.E., because other types of bronze vessels could not produce a musical tone. No one ever wrote “*Clang, clang*—the platter” or “*Thud, thud*—the cauldron.” As onomatopoeia would go on to be prolific in Chinese poetry, this debt to bell inscriptions must be reckoned as a substantial one.

Antecedents of another characteristic feature of later Chinese literature, namely parallel prose, can be found in bronze inscriptions as well. The connection is more tenuous than with onomatopoeia, but there is one distinctive feature of bronze inscriptions that merits consideration in this regard: the formula *duiyang* 對揚, “to extol in response,” which appears so frequently in appointment inscriptions.<sup>113</sup> After the King has recounted the various precedents justifying the award (acts of merit, ancestral service, etc.), and then announces the charge, the recipient will typically extol in response (*duiyang*) with gratitude and praise. Significantly, the King always speaks first; the awardee “responds” only after the King has set the terms of the occasion.

Long after bronze inscriptions had fallen out of cultural favor, compositions presenting a suitable “response” to a predetermined theme—usually set by a superior—became a common genre in Chinese literature. As Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft explain:

In later centuries a prominent feature of traditional Chinese education was training in the construction of pairs of parallel lines. The teacher would begin by naming any one-syllable word, whereupon the pupil was expected to produce a contrasting word of the same semantic category. For example, if the teacher said “heaven,” the pupil might answer “earth.” Once the student had grasped the basic principle, he would be confronted with combinations of two characters, such as “blue heaven” or “setting sun,” to which he might answer “yellow earth” or “rising moon.” The number of syllables assigned was gradually increased until the student had no trouble coming up with parallel lines of three, four, six, or more syllables (as usual in prose), or with couplets of five- or seven-syllable lines as used in poetry. The couplet (*dui* or *duilian* [對聯]) itself became

<sup>113</sup> For a recent discussion of the phrase, with references to previous scholarship, see Wang Jing, “*Duiyang’ zai shi*.” One leading account is Shen Wenzhuo, *Zong-Zhou liyue wenming kaolun*, 529–51.



a modest literary genre and was a frequent choice for inscriptions and the like.<sup>114</sup>

A well-known example of this sort of exercise is the contest in Chapter 50 of *The Story of the Stone* 石頭記, where the denizens of the poetry garden are asked to craft lines in response to a specific theme—a passage that is particularly memorable because the elegant but unaffected vernacular of the narrator contrasts with the formal diction and syntax of the contestants' verses.

One might initially discount as farfetched any connection between this much later practice and the formulaic *duiyang* of bronze inscriptions were it not for the fact that the same word, *dui*, is used to refer to both. *Dui* can also denote a minister's response to specific queries from a sovereign. In his biography of Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (fl. 152–119 B.C.E.), for example, the historian Ban Gu 班固 (A.D. 32–92) chose to include, as most representative of Dong's work, his so-called *duice* 對策, "policies [formulated] in response," which were extended replies to the Emperor's questions on statecraft.<sup>115</sup> Han emperors used this tactic to help them discover the most talented ministers in the realm.<sup>116</sup> The famed statesman Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (200–121 B.C.E.) was a humble pig farmer who attained instant renown when the Emperor was impressed by his *duice*:

太常令所徵儒士各對策，百餘人，弘第居下。策奏，天子擢弘對為第一。召入見，狀貌甚麗，拜為博士。<sup>117</sup>

The Chamberlain of Ceremonies ordered each of the classically-trained scholars who had been recruited—over one hundred men—to compose a *duice*, and [Gongsun] Hong was ranked toward the bottom. But when the *ce* were submitted to the throne, the Son of Heaven selected Hong's *dui* as the best. He was summoned to an imperial audience, and, with his extremely handsome appearance, was honored as an Erudite.

<sup>114</sup> Idema and Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, 108.

<sup>115</sup> *Hanshu* 56.2495–2524. In *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–522 C.E.) defined *duice* as "policies deployed in response to an imperial summons" 應詔而陳政; text in Yang Mingzhao, *Zengding Wenxin diaolong jiaozhu*, 5.24.333 ("Yidui" 議對). It should be emphasized that *dui* need not have this connotation in every context; sometimes, *dui* refers merely to a conversation between two people, without any explicit distinction between superior and inferior. Moreover, *dui* can be performed by kings as well. In the *Ke he* 克盃 and *Ke lei* 克壘 inscriptions (no. 7, below), for example, the King "responds" to the offerings of the Grand Protector (*taibao* 太保).

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 6.

<sup>117</sup> *Shiji* 112.2949.

What all these uses of *dui* have in common is that the display of talent comes *in response* to a theme or question set by someone authorized to speak first. The talented do not set the theme themselves; rather, the talented respond with words that are worth hearing, but consonant with the theme established by the superior. It may be given to you to speak, but it is not given to you to speak first. A contrast can be drawn with ancient Rome, where emperors were expected to make artful speeches before the public even after their unquestioned authority had been established.<sup>118</sup> In China, it was the ministers, not the sovereign, who were expected to produce artful speeches. Whereas talented Americans tend to associate success with getting ahead in society, in traditional China, talented minds regarded success as the thoughtful and constructive performance of the roles that fate had allotted them.

*PRG*

<sup>118</sup> See Yakobson, "Political Rhetoric in China and in Imperial Rome."