

3.6 SHANG RELIGION

A full description of Shang religion would include many facets. We would need to explore in detail the way in which the ancestral spirits were conceived, we would need to survey all non-ancestral deities and observe their powers, as reflected in divination, we would have to examine the complex system of ritual and sacrifice that paralleled Shang religious beliefs, we would need to discuss the symbolic significance of the sacrificial bronzes that constitute the outstanding emblem of Shang society, and we would need to examine indirect evidence for other forms of religious practice.

While this is clearly too ambitious a goal for this course, we will at least touch upon each of these elements. The principal purpose of this section is to introduce oracle inscriptions that have generally been taken to concern non-ancestral deities. These inscriptions have, since oracle texts were first deciphered, been seen as the reflection of a tripartite pantheon of spirits and gods. After the evidence for this model has been made clear, we will note some basic features of the data that may call it into question; we'll consider varying scholarly approaches to interpreting the Shang high deity, Di, and to construing the underlying religious forms that the oracle texts reflect. We will begin here with a description of the pantheon as reflected in the oracle texts, briefly considering issues of ancestral spirits and the ancestral sacrificial calendar.

Ancestors and ancestral sacrifice

The oracle texts make it very clear that the royal clan – the lineage group bearing the king's surname (Zi 子) – lived in the shadow of its dead, and we presume that this held true for other levels of society as well. As Keightley's imaginative reconstruction of a divination ceremony illustrated, it did not seem to have occurred to the superstitious king Wu-*ding* that his toothache could have come from natural causes; its supernatural agency was certain and that agency was sure to be ancestral.*

When we read the oracle texts inscribed during the reigns of Wu-*ding* and his immediate successors, we see that the king was deeply in awe of the powers of the ancestors. These powers include not only the ability to affect the royal person, the ancestors are also viewed as influencing the outcome of battles, the success of the hunt, and childbirth – whether the royal consorts would be fortunate and give birth to boys – and virtually all other affairs of life, including the weather and harvests. Sacrifices to the ancestors were often offered on a quid pro quo basis, as Pan-*geng* was offered a dog and a sheep to convince him to improve the king's dental well being.

*The guilty ancestor, Pan-*geng*, was a revered figure for the Classical Chinese, who knew of him through a moral speech included in the *Book of Documents* that he was said to have made at the time he moved the Shang capital to Yin. What would they have thought if they had known that he spent his free postmortem time digging cavities in his nephew's teeth!

In addition to such sacrifices in response to the needs of the occasion, the Shang also offered the ancestors sacrifices on a regular schedule – after all, if ancestors were fed with regularity they would have no cause to become upset and bring bad fortune to their descendants.

As we progress through the oracle records, we find that communication with the ancestors increasingly concerned the routine of scheduled sacrifice, and *quid pro quo* offerings almost disappear. The scheduled sacrifices, however, become the dominant feature of life at the Shang capital. Towards the end of the Shang, each major ancestor – the former kings or chief consorts (queens) – was treated during the course of the year to five grand ceremonies of sacrifice, huge affairs, which included many smaller steps of sacrifice and ritual performance. These rituals, into which the Shang poured enormous resources in the form of slaughtered animals and the labor of ceremonial specialists, musicians, and rows of dancers, grew in number by the end of the dynasty to a total of just over 360, thus ensuring that the Shang royal house would be engaged in mounting major ritual ceremonies on every day of the year. In fact, the word “sacrifice” came to denote a year, so closely did the sacrificial cycle correspond to the natural calendar, and when an inscription refers to the “third sacrifice” of some king’s reign, it means year number three.

One interesting aspect of Shang society that we can see through the inscriptions relating to sacrifice is the role that women may have played. While the sacrifice inscriptions do not speak directly to the role they played in life, they tell us about the role they played later. It is clear that ancestral mothers and grandmothers were powerful and not always friendly forces in the lives of their children and descendants. While the influence of dead males predominated, the spirits of women past played a forceful role as well. They may not have dominated, but they counted, at least once they were dead. (We will see in a later section that there are other inscriptions which show us that they could play very significant roles in life as well.)

The following brief selections of inscriptions related to the ancestors (a complete list would number hundreds of thousands) will suggest how these spirits appear in the oracle texts.

- Crack-making on *bing-wu* day, Xing divined about whether if on the next *ding-wei* day we make *yi*-sacrifice to Father *Ding* there will be no misfortune.
- Crack-making on *ding-mao* day, Yin divined about whether if the King takes *Da-ding* as guest in the *xie*-sacrifice there will be no flaw.
- We shall protect the king’s eyes against Grandmother *Ji*.*
- [The king] has a toothache; it is [caused by] Father *Yi*.
- We shall *yu*-sacrifice to Father *Yi* on account of a stomach ailment.
- The king’s son Yu has encountered disaster on account of Mother *Geng*.

* This and the following inscriptions are abbreviated, leaving out the divination “preface” (date, diviner, and so forth). I have translated the remainder of each as a statement for the spirits to respond to.

- We shall perhaps pray for a child to High Grandmother *Bing*.

As we move “up” the ancestral ladder, from recent to distant ancestors, we find that earlier ancestors – the first generations of kings of the Shang Dynasty – the range of powers that ancestors seem to possess, as reflected in the oracle texts, grows. While most ancestors seem to have powers that pertain principally to the persons of the living king and members of the royal Zi lineage, distant ancestors seem to exercise powers that more directly affect the state.

Although the Shang Dynasty was founded about 1600 by the king known as Tang the Successful, the senior member of the Zi lineage during his lifetime, the oracle records make clear that the Zi lineage traced its origins to a much more distant progenitor, a leader referred to in divination texts as *Shang-jia*, who lived six generations prior to Tang. This figure, along with the generations of lineage leaders in the generations that follow prior to the establishment of the dynasty, are sometimes sacrificed to as a group. Both *Shang-jia* and these pre-dynastic leaders, who are sometimes referred to together as the Six Spirits (the remaining five being referred to as the Lesser Spirits), seem to have been pictured as able to influence such natural phenomena as the weather, which determined the size of the annual harvest.

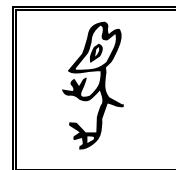
- Crack making on *ding-wei* day, we divined about requesting good harvest of *Shang-jia* through the Six Spirits with an ox, *ji*-sacrificing a sheep to the Lesser Spirits.

Such powers, as we will see below, are more often associated with spirits who are not ancestors of the Shang kings, and the overlap between these remote ancestors and spirits more directly associated with aspects of Nature leads to interesting questions about whether the Shang royal family, and perhaps all members of the Shang polity aware of the activities of the Shang state, viewed any clear division between the royal dead and spirit entities that were not conceived as human in any respect.

Spirits that Share Ancestral and Non-Ancestral Features

There are a number of figures who appear in the oracle texts who may be remote forbears of the Shang royal Zi lineage, but whose may instead be independent tribal “gods,” whom the Shang incorporated into what essentially constituted “state” religious practice, perhaps as a way of asserting Shang royal control over tribes that, through conquest or negotiation, had been incorporated into the polity controlled by Shang rulers. These figures are conventionally referred to as the “Former Lords.”

One of these figures may serve as an example. His name is represented by the oracle text graph at right, sometimes read as *Kui*, which most analysts interpret as referring to the figure known as *Ku*, or “Emperor *Ku*,” the great-grandson of the Yellow Emperor. In some traditional accounts of received texts, *Ku* is described as an ancestor of the Shang kings – in a sense, at least: the founder of the Shang line in these accounts, *Xie*, is said to have been the child of a consort of *Ku*, who conceived the baby after swallowing whole the egg of a mysterious “Dark Bird.” (You may recall that another consort of *Ku* conceived



the progenitor of the Zhou people by stepping on a giant footprint. It does seem that if Ku was a real person, he was unusually accepting of spousal explanations for inexplicable pregnancies.)

The oracle texts occasionally refer to Ku as “High Ancestor” Ku, and this does seem to make clear that he was, in some way, pictured as linked to the Shang royal lineage. Depending on one’s interpretation of the bone texts, at least one other member of the Former Lord group and perhaps others are also designated by the term High Ancestor. Such figures share with the most senior members of the Shang ancestral lineage power over such natural features as rain and harvest.

This type of evidence raises a central question concerning Shang religious practices and beliefs: was there any clear conceptual distinction between those spirits who were worshiped because they were in life the physical progenitors of the Shang kings and spirits without any blood connection or, perhaps, previous physical existence as living people? Further, was there any clear distinction between the religious practices of the royal Zi clan as a lineage – a group of people united by common descent – and those practices that belonged to “state religion” per se, practices that the Shang kings presided over by virtue of their royal office, rather than because they were senior leaders of the Zi clan?

Or should we conceive of the ties between the ruling Shang king and the realm of spirits as shading gradually from the fully corporal kinship linkages that would have been evident with respect to recently deceased parents and grandparents to tenuous, but still substantial kinship association with the most remote and exalted spirits, beings that appear in most respects to be *universal* deities – spirit forces of the non-human world of Nature and, perhaps, an ultimate High God, Di? If so, the Shang kings would, perhaps, have truly been regarded as deities-on-earth.

Oracle Text Spirits from the World of Nature and the High God Di

The oracle texts document worship of a variety of deities that seem clearly associated not with any human lineage group, but rather with phenomena of the natural world. Some of these seem to have been concrete physical objects – the Yellow River and Mt. Song, a peak located in the region we believe housed a series of Shang Dynasty capital cities prior to the move north to the Anyang region. Others are probably better characterized as “forces of Nature”: the winds of the four cardinal directions, the soil, the sun.

Above all these, too remote for direct worship through sacrifice but exemplifying the greatest range of powers, was a high deity known as Di. In the Shang oracle texts, no mention is made of the high god we are familiar with from the Classical era: Tian. Tian seems not to have been a part of the religion of the Shang, but rather to have been a religious figure of the Zhou people that was introduced into broader religious practice only after the conquest of 1045. Instead, Di seems to occupy the place of supreme spirit power in the oracle texts. So similar does Di seem to Tian, however, that it seems unsurprising that *after* the Zhou conquest, the terms seem to be used almost interchangeably in Zhou religious discourse.

In this section, we will introduce a series of inscriptions concerning Di, forces of Nature, and physical features of the landscape treated as objects of worship. We will begin with Di, and the passages cited are divided so as to illustrate the full array of powers we see ascribed to Di. In some of these inscriptions, Di seems to control natural forces as if controlling individual spirits in a hierarchy, and this has led many scholars to picture Di as the apex of an organized pantheon, perhaps including the Shang ancestors as well as nature deities.

After surveying this array of deities, we will examine in more detail the question of how Di should be conceived.

The Powers of the High God Di.

Di controls rain

- Di will order rain sufficient for harvest // Di perhaps will not order rain sufficient for the harvest.

Many oracle texts take the form of paired affirmative // negative statements, which we will occasionally indicate here.

- From today to the day *geng-yin* Di will order rain.

Di controls wind

- Next *gui-mao* day Di will perhaps order wind.

Di controls cloud dispersal

- Di will perhaps, upon it reaching the thirteenth month, order the clouds to clear.

Di sends down drought

- Di will perhaps send down drought upon us.

Di provides military and other support

- As for attacking the *Qiong-fang*, Di will provide us support.
- The King will survey the *fang* lands; Di will provide us with support.
- It does not rain; Di will not perhaps provide us with support.

Di provides food

- [We] should . . . call out; Di will send down food and provide support.

Di provides approval

- The King will establish a town; Di will approve.
- The King will not follow Guo; Di approves//Guo calls upon the King xx; Di approves.
- It does not rain like this; Di brings disaster upon this city and does not approve it.

Di sends down disaster

- The *fang* destroy in attack; Di has ordered that disaster be inflicted upon us.
- Divined: We will make a blood sacrifice; Di will perhaps not send down disaster. Tenth month.
- Rain. Di greatly . . . sends down disaster upon this city.
- Di will perhaps inflict disaster upon the King.

Di aids or harms crops

- Di will bring disaster to our harvest//Di will not bring disaster to our harvest//The King prognosticated saying, It shall not be that Di brings disaster.

Di influences the King

- It shall not be that Di harms the King.
- Di will not support the King.
- Di will perhaps inflict disaster upon the King.

Di influences towns and cities

- Di shall perhaps bring an end to this city.

Images of the “Court” of the High God Di

Some inscriptions seem to picture Di as commanding subordinate deities.

- For Di’s envoy Wind, two hounds.
- The King receives as a guest the envoy of Di.
- [Sacrifice] to Di’s minister. There will be rain.

- X will sacrifice to Di's Five Ministers. There will be a great rain.
- In autumn [sacrifice] to Di's Five Meritorious Ministers – cracking at the temple of Ancestor Yi.

Inscriptions Concerning Nature Deities

Weather and Sky Deities

1. Sun

- Crack-making on *wu-xu* day: Call within for Que to *shu*-sacrifice to the rising sun and the setting sun sheep and goat.
- Crack-making on *bing-zi* day; Ji divined: The King will receive the sun as guest; sacrifice will be without fault.
- On *xin-you* day *rong*-sacrifice to the four quarters//On *gui-you* day sacrifice to the rising sun.

2. Cloud

- Fire sacrifice to Di-cloud.
- Call upon Que to fire sacrifice to Cloud a hound.

3. Wind

- Perform a sacrifice of dog-dismemberment [to still] Wind.
- A shaman shall perform a dog-dismemberment [to still] Wind.
- A shaman shall perform a dog-dismemberment [to still] Wind with nine hounds.
- Perhaps perform a dog-dismemberment [to still] Wind, and sacrifice to Yi Yin sheep and pig.

4. Rain

- Perform a dog-dismemberment [to end] Rain at Yue Peak.
- Perform a dog-dismemberment [to still] Rain at the altar of the earth.

In the cases of wind and rain, it is unclear whether sacrifices are offered to Wind and Rain as gods, or to other spirits who can control the wind and the rain.

5. *Snow*

- Perhaps perform a fire sacrifice to Snow; there will be a great rain.

Natural Features of the Landscape: The Yellow River, Yue Peak, Huan River

- Crack-making on *xin-you* day, Bin divining: We shall pray for harvest to (at the?) River.

Analysts are agreed that the River of our inscription is the Yellow River.

- Crack-making on *xin-hai* day, Zhong divining: We shall pray for harvest to (at?) Yue Peak; fire sacrifice three sheep and pigs; decapitate three oxen. Second month.

The term *yue* means “peak”; I have rendered it “Yue Peak” for clarity. Most analysts believe the peak in question is Mt. Song, a tall mountain near the confluence of the Luo River and Yellow River which later eras regarded as a sacred peak.

- Crack-making on *Wu-wu* day, Pin divining: By a *rong*-sacrifice pray for harvest to Yue Peak, River, Kui.

The last mentioned figure, Kui, is one we encountered earlier – this is the “Former Lord” Ku, sometimes referred to as “High Ancestor,” and recorded in received texts as a progenitor of the Shang royal line. This important inscription, not by any means unique, indicates that spirits with ancestral features could be worshiped in the same context as spirits that were tied to features of the landscape – an important indication of the possible overlap between the lineage religious practice of the Shang ruling clan and the universal religious figures that the Shang kings worshiped in their role as state leaders.

- Perform a rain-dance to (at the?) River and Yue Peak.
- Will not the Huan River bring disaster to this city?
- Will the river bless this city?

A reflection on the Shang pantheon: the question of Di

It is generally the case that when we approach a body of unfamiliar evidence, we attempt to interpret it in terms of structures with which we are already familiar. The entire notion that the Shang possessed a “pantheon,” or structured population of spirits, is borrowed largely from our models of Greek and Roman religion (Chinese scholars probably model their pictures on both the Western examples and also on later Chinese popular religion). In particular, the figure of Di corresponds in some ways with the notion of a “Zeus” (stripped of his rich background of narrative myth) for Westerners, or of Tian, the high deity of the Zhou, for Chinese scholars. (It is well worth

noting that the deity “Tian” does not appear in the oracle inscriptions, although the term Di, used almost as a synonym of Tian, is not at all uncommon in later Zhou texts.)

In what way Di should be conceived as the apex of a pantheon – or whether we should conceive of Di that way at all – is a question that has generated a series of theories that help us become more conscious about the difficulties of interpreting religious terms and concepts. In this section we will look briefly at three approaches to “identifying” Di. They represent three different styles of interpreting Shang religious evidence; each solves certain problems presented by the oracle text evidence, but all are problematic in some feature.

1) The identification of Di with High Ancestor Ku.

A substantial number of scholars take the position that the term Di is an alternative way of denoting the figure identified in the historical text *Shiji* as the first ancestor of the Shang – Ku – who is named as “High Ancestor” in at least four inscriptions on separate oracle bones. The proposal that Di and Ku represent the identical Power has been endorsed by prominent scholars, and its implications for our understanding of Shang theology are profound. If the highest power in Shang state religion, exercising control over the spirit powers of the natural world, was an ancestor of the reigning Shang king, then the Shang kings would be easily seen as embodying in themselves an aspect of the divinity of the High Power Di, “thearchs” (deity-rulers) by birth. This identification of the Shang house with Di would, in essence, universalize the ancestral worship of the Zi clan, whose lineage ancestors would share control of events throughout the world below. Since we do, in fact, see some of the Shang ancestors exercising power over natural phenomena in oracle texts, the identification of Ku with Di would provide an underlying rationale for such a portrait.

The identification of Di with Ku is also attractive because it offers a way to bring greater coherence to the Shang pantheon and to elucidate in a systematic way the relationship between the ancestral and Nature sectors of the pantheon. However, appealing as this solution is, there are problems with it that are hard to reconcile. For example, the names Di and Kui (the more precise way of rendering the pronunciation of the graph 𠄎) are employed in the oracle texts quite differently. Di issues orders to other spirits – Kui does not. Di is frequently pictured sending down “approval” – Kui is never so pictured. Kui receives sacrifices – Di does not. Moreover, as illustrated in above, Kui is appealed to in series with other Nature spirits (and Former Lords as well) in some oracle texts, suggesting a horizontal relationship between them that undermines any portrait of Kui as the apex of a structured pantheon.

While these problems remain, among scholars who address the issue of Di’s identity, Ku (or Kui) is the figure that attracts greatest attention.

2) Di as the Celestial Pole

Recently, two scholars, one Chinese and one American, have proposed that Di was conceived as a function of astronomical aspects of Shang religion. This argument imagines that interest in the sky formed a basic structural feature of religious practice, both during the Shang and during earlier eras, stretching back to the late Neolithic. Evidence for this religious attention to the night sky may

be reflected in the foundations of palatial and ceremonial structures at pre-Shang and early Shang sites. During the centuries of the late Neolithic and dawn of the Bronze Age, the night sky underwent a slow but dramatic change as a normal astronomical phenomenon called “stellar precession” led to the gradual displacement of one “pole star” located at the unmoving “true north” point of the sky with another star, with a long intervening period when that location was occupied by no significant visible star at all. (Today, in the northern hemisphere, all the stars appear to revolve around the unmoving “pole star” Polaris, but because of wobbles in the earth’s orbit, other stars occupied that apparent place in the past, and will again in the distant future.) Despite the fact that the pole star of the late Neolithic gradually moved from true north, and that another star gradually moved into that position during the early centuries of the Shang, palace foundations built throughout these eras were aligned with the true North Celestial Pole. Maintaining such accuracy despite shifts in the field of stars necessarily reflects highly sophisticated astronomical observation and understanding. Clearly for the Shang, the location of the true pole was of critical importance.

One American scholar, David Pankenier, has illustrated how the oracle text graph for Di (𠂔) can be projected on the north polar region of the ancient sky in the time of the Shang in such a way that its extreme points correspond with significant visible stars, while the intersection of linear axes at the center will map to the vacant Celestial Pole. On this basis, Pankenier argues that Di was conceived as the spirit dwelling at the true Pole, an idea familiar from later eras of Chinese religion, seemingly tying Shang religious practice to traditions attested in received texts from the Classical period. By engaging the pantheon of the oracle texts so deeply with a tradition of religious astronomy that is well known only for a much later period, Pankenier suggests the possibility of a subtext of celestial organization underlying but largely unobservable in the oracle texts.

Pankenier’s theory is perhaps even more attractive than the identification of Di with the Shang ancestor Ku. However, there is a problem of evidence – the oracle texts nowhere seem to testify to the type of religious interest in the stars that the theory requires. While expertise in calendrics and observational interest in matters such as eclipses is clearly indicated by the oracle evidence, we encounter in the inscriptions only occasional mention of asterisms and other celestial phenomena, and this lack of positive evidence means that Pankenier’s theory must be treated as “speculative,” a term that denotes its logical reasonability but tenuous links to the data we possess.

3) “Di” as a generic term referring to no single deity

There are several features of the way the oracle texts use the term Di that suggest that we may be on entirely the wrong track when we picture the Shang pantheon as a structured hierarchy with Di at the apex. A third approach to the issue of the meaning of “Di” argues that there may have been no “high god” at all in Shang religion, and that in oracle texts, the word *di* is a generic term – in the same way that the word “king” may refer both to one specific king, to all kings, or to a subset of all kings. Under this theory, our reading of *di* as denoting a high god is a projection onto the oracle texts of a pattern of word usage that arises only after the Zhou conquest, when the term *di* became associated with the Zhou high god Tian.

To begin with a straightforward issue: scholars have argued since the oracle texts were first deciphered whether Di was an ancestral deity or a nature deity. Di seems in some inscriptions to command natural forces in a way no ancestral spirit otherwise appears to, and there is a famous oracle text that wonders whether Di will destroy the Shang capital itself – something an ancestor, dependent for sustenance on the food offerings of descendants, would be unlikely to do. These features suggest that Di was not conceived as an ancestor of the royal lineage.

But it is also true that term *di* has a direct ancestral usage: deceased kings could be referred to in the bones as “Di.” The usage is limited: kings are only named as “Di-*x*” (*x* being a stem sign) while their sons are ruling, but it is nevertheless a surprise to see kings referring to their fathers as “God so-and-so.” Scholars of ancient China have been less surprised at this than one might think because the term Di also means “emperor”: the name Yellow Emperor, for example, translates a Chinese term, “Huang Di,” where Huang means yellow and Di is the term we are discussing here. So pervasive is this use of the term Di, that we have lost track of how strange its use actually is.

Another surprising piece of evidence is that Di sometimes appears to be a plural term in the oracle texts. Ancient written Chinese made no distinction between singular and plural terms; context and usage patterns alone signal whether a term is being used in the singular or the plural. In some bone texts that belong to longer sets of inscriptions, the term Di appears in some members of the series parallel to specifically plural terms which appear in all the other texts of the set, terms such as “the many grandmothers,” or “the spirits above and below.” If the term *di* could denote many spirits, can we be sure that any particular instance denoted a single high deity?

Finally, perhaps the most surprising characteristic of the Shang high god Di is that of all the members of the Shang spirit world, Di alone received no sacrifices. The enormity of this omission can’t be overstated – it suggests that somehow Di alone possessed none of the corporal needs of the spirits, nor required any of the outward signs of respect accorded to every other spirit to pacify it and guarantee its friendly disposition towards the world of men.

One possible explanation for this last fact is that Di was truly a super-god, the only being in the universe that truly transcended the natural order, which governed man and spirits alike. This would push Shang religion in the direction of a type of attenuated monotheism – while there were many spirits, there was only one true God (not so unlike one type of Judeo-Christian vision, which peoples Heaven with angels and others, but keeps God elevated on a qualitatively different plane). This explanation, of course, makes it even more surprising that the term Di could be applied to individual deceased fathers, or come to name a sacrifice to one’s father.

But there is another, simpler, explanation. That is that there was no concept of a high god at all, and that instead Di was a “corporate” term, referring to all the spirits, or at least all the ancestors, together: its sense would be something like “The Deceased-Fathers.” In other uses, it would serve as a generic term, assignable to individual deceased fathers by their sons, which would account for the title Di being applied by some Shang kings to their own fathers in divination inscriptions.

These two explanations imply entirely different directions for Shang theology. The former would support the image of a royal roll of spirits, subservient to a high god in much the way that ministers serve an emperor. The inscriptions that appear above which seem to picture a “court” of the high god Di can be used to support this notion. David Keightley has found in this imagery the earliest evidence of proto-bureaucratic thinking in China.

The alternative model points towards a spirit world with no single unifying apex; it removes the “command structure” of the other world, and portrays Shang theology as a truly ancestor-based polytheism. Such a model would lead us to reinterpret our readings of the “court of Di” inscriptions, and tends to be supported by the plural and extra-religious uses of the term Di.

The notion of *di* as a generic term is directly challenged by only one piece of strong counter-evidence. There exists a plastron on which a series of texts pair together ancestral figures in the context of a ritual involving a spirit-host and a spirit-guest. The spirits named are all ancestral kings except one, who is called, simply, “Di,” and who seems to be treated as senior to all the others. If this is indeed a High God and not a shorthand reference for a spirit whose identity was understood, then the theory of *di* as a generic term would be difficult to maintain, and it would also be difficult to maintain the view that Di was not an ancestral figure.

The fact that three different models may all be supportable – but none irrefutably so – on the basis of the evidence provided by the oracle texts exemplifies the difficulties of interpretation that beset those who are engaged in reconstructing the history of Shang religious ideology. It shows very clearly how the ambiguities of historical scholarship do not necessarily evaporate in the face of rich stores of primary data that have been preserved untampered.

Shamanism and Shang religion

The oracle texts suggest a religious structure that focuses on interactions with the realm of spirits that pivot on ritual performance, sacrificial offerings, and the technical manipulation of numinous materials (prepared bone and shell). Communication with spirits is, in this sense, at one remove from direct encounter. But some interpreters, such as K.C. Chang, argued strongly that this picture was incomplete, and that Shang religion was permeated with shamanistic practices. These could be understood through proper understanding of the remnants of Shang myth that survived in later texts and in the iconography of Shang ritual bronzes, as discussed in the earlier reading on that topic.

Some interpreters see confirmation of the shamanistic basis of Shang religion in the oracle texts themselves. It is certainly true that we find in the oracle texts a written character that corresponds with the later Chinese term *wu* (巫 – rendered in the oracle texts as 𠩺), which we generally translate as “shaman,” and which figures, for example, in the religion of Chu during the later Zhou period. We even encounter in the inscriptional records individuals who bear the term *wu* as a title. But whether this term actually corresponds to figures who functioned as shamans – that is, as people who, through trance or some other skill or gift could have direct contact with the world of spirits – is not clear.

For example, Victor Mair, a scholar who has explored the long history of contact between China and Inner Asia has argued from archaeological, artistic, and linguistic evidence that the term *wu* is etymologically and culturally related to the term *magus* (plural *magi*, as the in the Biblical “Three Magi”), which originally denoted priests in Persian Zoroastrian religious practice. Mair’s archaeological evidence suggests that *wu* (which, in Old Chinese, would have had pronunciation similar to “*myag*”) were originally non-Chinese religious figures, members of migrant Iranian communities who occupied Central Asian regions adjacent to and interacting with China. *Magi* were not shamans with a gift for spirit contact; they were priests whose powers came from learned knowledge (the term “magician” is a descendant of *magus*). Mair argues that the Shang *wu* are best understood in these terms as people able to communicate with spirits through the media of ritual and manipulative arts, not through personal mediation and trance.

But other scholars note that oracle texts picture the Shang king as uniquely equipped to “hear” the messages of the spirits through oracle divination – only the king prognosticates the future on the basis of the cracks made in bone and shell during the divination process. Moreover, as art historian Elizabeth Childs-Johnson has pointed out, the “guest” ritual that many oracle texts refer to suggests that the Shang king acted as the direct host of powerful spirits descending during sacrificial ceremonies. In her view, the Shang king himself must be understood to have been a shaman, wielding power as a consequence of personal mediation with royal ancestors and other powerful spirits.

Shamanism – if we allow some flexibility to the definition – was a widely dispersed religious form in traditional societies, and it is not unreasonable to anticipate that it was a feature of Shang religion, particularly since we have strong evidence for shamanism, denoted by the term *wu*, a millennium later in Chu religion. However, on the basis of current evidence, it is probably most accurate to say that claims for Shang shamanism, while not inconsistent with the evidence, are also not required by it, and that the theory remains speculative.

LIST OF KEY NAMES AND TERMS

Di

Kui

wu

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *On the basis of oracle text evidence, how was the pantheon of Shang religion structured?*
2. *What different types of spirit entities seem to have been part of Shang religious imagination, and how did their powers vary?*
3. *What range of powers did Di possess, and how do these relate to the powers possessed by other spirits in Shang religion?*
4. *What was the relation of the Shang king to Di and to the other spirits?*
5. *What concepts do scholars suggest may have been at the root of the idea of Di in the Shang?*
6. *Was Shang religion based on shamanistic practices?*

Sources and Further Readings

The discussion of Di is condensed from my survey article “Shang State Religion and the Pantheon of the Oracle Texts,” in John Lagerwey & Marc Kalinowski, ed., *Early Chinese Religion* (Leiden: 2009, v. 1). The argument for the identification of Di with Ku is one with a long pedigree in China, and many prominent scholars of the Shang have adopted it with varying degrees of certainty. Pankenier’s theory appears in his article, “A Brief History of Beiji 北極 (Northern Culmen), With an Excursus on the Origin of the Character *di* 帝” (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124.2, 211-236). The theory of Di as generic reference is an argument I outlined in “Was There a High God Ti in Shang Religion?” (*Early China* 15, 1-26).

On Shang shamanism, the sources for K.C. Chang’s ideas have been noted in the reading on Shang bronzes. Elizabeth Childs-Johnson’s ideas have most recently been laid out in *The Meaning of the Graph Yi 異 and Its Implications for Shang Belief and Art* (U.K.: 2008). Victor Mair’s analysis of *wu* is found in his “Old Sinitic **M*^y*ag*, Old Persian *Maguš*, and English ‘Magician’” (*Early China* 15, 27-47).