

SHANG EMBLEMS IN THEIR ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT:  
A REFLECTION FROM RECENT DISCOVERIES

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(First draft – apologize for the English)

The George Fan collection contains some beautiful Late Shang and Early Western Zhou bronzes presenting inscriptions in which emblems occur. Bronze emblems have long been discussed by scholars from China and abroad.<sup>1</sup> I would like here to add some remarks on this topic by using some recent discoveries that have been made those last twenty years, as Mr. Fan was collecting his bronzes.

I would especially like to show here how the archaeological context could help us to understand better this very specific kind of inscriptions.

*Introduction*

The problem of Chinese early bronze inscriptions has been discussed by many scholars. All have underlined the difficulty to understand those inscriptions, which can be characterized as usually short and containing signs with a strong figurative aspect, which distinguish these signs from those currently used in writing at that time.

Even if we have a few earlier examples, this kind of inscriptions mainly developed about the time of Wu Ding reign, during what archaeologists call the *second phase* of the Yinxu period (around 1200 to 1150 BCE).

As far as we understand it, we can distinguish three categories of elements composing early bronze inscriptions:

- 1) Emblems: individual or collective.
- 2) Ancestors' names: (Deceased) Father, Ancestor, Mother, Ancestress, Elder Brother...
- 3) Other elements: various kind of indications, mostly related to the use of the bronze vessel (position of the vessel inside a set, specific kind of sacrificial animal to be cooked in the vessel, place where the vessel was used, etc.).

Please note that emblems represent the most important category, before the ancestors' names, and that only a few inscriptions clearly belong to the last category.

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<sup>1</sup> For an recent sizeable bibliography, commented by an important scholar in the field, see Zhang Maorong 張懋鎔, « Yiqiannian lai Shang Zhou tongqi zuhui wenzi yanjiu shuping 一千年來商周銅器族徽文字研究述評 », *Xin shixue* 新史學, n°18-2 (june 2007), p. 157-189. No less than four PhD theses on this subject have been defended in China since 2005. See appendix 1.

An early inscription can contain either only one or more than one of those elements. During the *fourth phase* of Yinxu — that is to say during the reign of the last two kings of the Shang Dynasty (around 1100 to 1050 BCE), this early model of inscriptions was still the most frequent, but a few longer inscriptions with a more complex content appeared, announcing a kind of inscription that will develop during the Western Zhou period.

The present communication only concerns emblems. But we have to remember that, because of their characteristics, early inscriptions are not so easy to fully understand. It is quite sure that some signs today considered as “emblems” may have in fact another meaning and have to be put in the “other elements” category, it is just that they have not been identified yet.

Among the emblems, it is possible to distinguish collective emblems from individual emblems. In fact, a lot of what I call *individual emblems* are individual names written in a specific way, so they can frequently be considered as a monogram.<sup>2</sup> The most famous case is of course Fu Hao’s emblem.

Most scholars working on Shang collective emblems use to call it “clan emblems” or “lineage emblems”, but as I am still not sure that members of those related groups were actually all linked by blood relationship, I would use here the more neutral term of “collective emblems”.

Now let’s have a look to two recent discoveries related to Shang emblems.

#### 1 – Huayuanzhuang-East cemetery

The archaeological report was published in 2007 and concerns a Shang cemetery that has been excavated between 1992 and 2002<sup>3</sup>.

This cemetery is located in the South-East part of the so called “temple-palace area” in the Yinxu site at Anyang.<sup>4</sup>

It was composed of 42 Shang tombs<sup>5</sup>, but twenty-two were already looted, there were also children’s tombs and tombs without any burial goods. In fact, we have here only twelve intact adult tombs with artifacts that can be dated, and only three of them contained bronze vessel.

Inscriptions can be found in each of those three tombs.

M42 (Yinxu period II) contains 6 bronzes of which 2 with inscription.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Bagley, “Anyang Writing and the Origin of the Chinese Writing System,” in Stephen D. Houston, ed., *The First Writing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 200-202.

<sup>3</sup> Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan Kaogu yanjiusuo Anyang gongzuodui 中國社會科學院考古研究所安陽工作隊, *Anyang Yinxu Huayuanzhuang dongdi Shang dai muzang* 安陽殷墟花園莊東地商代墓葬, Beijing, Kexue chubanshe 科學出版社, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> It has been accepted for many years that the area where were the Xiaotun « Palace-temple » foundations was surrounded by an important ditch, but recent works have called into question its existence. See for example Tang Jigen 唐際根 and Jing Zhichun 荆志淳 : « Anyang de ‘Shang yi’ yu ‘Da yi Shang’ 安陽的“商邑”與“大邑商” », *Kaogu* 考古, 2009, 9, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Eight tombs contained bronzes.

M48 (Yinxu period IV) contains 5 bronzes of which 1 with inscription.

These proportions are quite representative of the situation of lower elite tombs from Anyang<sup>6</sup>.

The last tomb, M52 (Yinxu period II) belongs to the upper elite tomb category. It contained 37 ritual bronze vessels of which 26 were inscribed.

If we compare the situation of M52 with the two other tombs (M42 and M48), we have here more than 70%<sup>7</sup> of ritual bronze vessels with inscription, versus a bit more than 27% of inscribed bronzes in those two lower elite tombs.

Here the number of tombs is too small to hope to get a truly representative result.

But, according to my own compute, around 20% of bronze vessels founded in non looted lower elite tombs from Anyang present inscriptions. If we take in consideration non looted upper elite tombs from Anyang containing more than 20 bronze vessels, for example, this percentage reach 56% to more than 97%.<sup>8</sup> So, from this point of view, M54 is quite representative of upper elite tombs situation in Anyang.

What is less common in this last tomb is the high number of bronze weapons with inscriptions: 6 axes, probably more than 39 lance-heads and 31 halberd blades.<sup>9</sup> In Fu Hao tomb for example, all the 4 axes present inscriptions, but none of the 91 halberd blades do so. Tomb M160 from Guojiazhuang contained 119 halberd blades, but not a single one with inscription.

If we look to their content, all those inscriptions can be considered as emblems. We notice that, even if those bronze vessels come from the same cemetery, they do not share the same emblem.

One element seems common to the inscriptions of the two lower elite tombs and it can be identified as a form of the character Zi 子 « Prince », probably standing here as a rank or a title.<sup>10</sup> Emblems with the 子 element were here probably related to one person and not to a group.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> I here use « lower elite » and « upper elite » as convenient terms to distinguish people buried with a few bronzes (one to six) and those who were buried with more bronzes (10 and more). In fact, I do not expect those categories to correspond to any well defined social class, as differences must also be related to people sex, function, wealth, etc.

<sup>7</sup> 70,27%

<sup>8</sup> See for example: Xiaotun-North 小屯北 M18, Guojiazhuang 郭家莊 M160, Dasikong 大司空 M303, Liujiashuang-North 劉家莊北 M1046 and Fu Hao's Tomb. For further statistics concerning emblems in Anyang, see Feng Yicheng 風儀誠 [Olivier Venture], « Anyang Shang dai muzang chutu 'zuhui' 安陽商代墓葬出土'族徽' », forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> On a total of 7 axes, 52 lance-heads and 73 halberd blades. 11 lance-heads were so damaged that it was not possible to see if they present inscription or not.

<sup>10</sup> One can evoke a possible relationship between those emblems and oracle bone inscriptions, made for a « Prince » (子), excavated in 1991 from pit H3 at Huayuanzhuang-East, about 50 m from M54.

<sup>11</sup> It has to be noticed that if 子 X can be considered as an individual emblem, tomb M42 contained emblems related to two different persons whose names could probably be transcribed as Zi Gu 子古 and Zi Shi 子豕, so the question of the relationship between those two persons and the tomb owner is still open to discussions.

In M54, all the inscriptions, with one single exception on a halberd blade<sup>12</sup>, correspond to the same emblem or monogram: 亞長. As it seems to be attested only in this tomb, and in such an important way, I would rather be inclined to consider it as an individual emblem linked to the owner of the tomb.

#### 4 – Qianzhangda cemetery

The Qianzhangda cemetery is located in the South of Shandong province, on the territory of Tengzhou municipality. A Shang-Zhou cemetery was identified there as early as the sixties, but scientific excavations only began in the eighties. An archaeological report has been published in 2005 about the first eight archaeological campaigns (until 1998)<sup>13</sup>.

111 tombs were excavated. According to the report, among the datable tombs, 27 belong to the Late Shang period and 46 to the Early Western Zhou period.

As underlined by Professor Li Chaoyuan, in a study of Qianzhangda inscriptions,<sup>14</sup> 26 tombs contained ritual bronzes, of which 17 contained bronzes with the same emblem: 史. He also pointed that a total of 171 ritual bronzes were unearthed, of which 67 presented the same emblem (史).

If we consider only tombs which were not looted, with grave goods, and that can be dated, as we did for Huayanzhuang-East cemetery, we have here 50 tombs, of which 20 contained ritual bronze vessels. On those 20 tombs with ritual vessels, 15 contained bronze vessels with inscription. 146 ritual bronze vessels come from those tombs and 81 were inscribed; 55,47% represent a quite high proportion of inscribed ritual bronze vessels.

But, as Professor Li underlined, most of these tombs can be dated from the Early Western Zhou period. So, even if these tombs belong to the same Shang tradition as Huayanzhuang-East cemetery, they may reflect a new step in the evolution of the practice of bronze inscription.

Furthermore, as we did with Anyang data, it may be interesting here to distinguish between tombs of lower elite and tombs of upper elite. If taking number of bronze vessels as a criterion, we have one group of 14 tombs which contain no more than 6 bronze vessels, and another group of 6 tombs which contain 12 or more bronze vessels.

A little more than a third of the ritual bronzes vessels excavated from the first group were inscribed, whereas a little more than a half do so for the second group. Part of the second group, M11 was the non-looted tomb which contained the most important assemblage of ritual bronze vessels (31 bronzes); more than 80% of those bronzes present an inscription. All this confirms here the importance accorded to inscriptions by upper elite.




<sup>12</sup> Which number is M54: 126.

<sup>13</sup> Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, *Shandong Tengzhou Qianzhangda mudi* 山东滕州前掌大墓地, Beijing, Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Li Chaoyuan 李朝遠, « Qianzhangda mudi zhong de shi ji qita – du Qianzhangda mudi 前掌大墓地中的史及其他- 讀滕州前掌大墓地 », *Dongfang kaogu* 東方考古, 4, Beijing, Kexue chubanshe 科學出版社, 2008, p. 154-161.

When turning to the content of inscriptions, it is clear that *shi* 史 was here a collective emblem. It appears in 12 of the 15 non-looted tombs with inscribed bronze vessels and on 62 of the 81 concerned bronze vessels (76,54%), finally it appears on all the 25 inscribed bronzes from M11 tomb. Then it can be accepted that this cemetery belong to a group which have 史 as an emblem, and in which M11 tomb owner must have a quite high position. But people with higher position than him must have been buried in other larger tombs, but as those tombs have all been looted, we do not know anything about the bronze vessels they must have contained originally.

Except *shi* 史 we also find here some other well known collective emblems like A, B and C, but they are not very numerous.

A	B	C
		

Some tombs also contain ancestors names or ancestors names linked to collective emblems, especially to 史.

For comparison with M54 from Huanyuanzhuang-East, 21 halberd-blades have been excavated from M21, but none was inscribed.

**Remarks**

As shown in the presented examples, the way emblems appear in each tomb, and in each cemetery seems to follow different kinds of patterns.

To analyze this phenomenon I found useful to distinguish two situations:

When a tomb contains many bronzes with emblems, and when most of those emblems can be treated as corresponding to the same emblem, then we can call this emblem: *major emblem* of the tomb. Emblems distinct from the major emblem, which occurs in small number in the same tomb, can be considered as *minor emblems* of the tomb.

For example, A appears as the major emblem of M54, whereas B appears as a minor emblem of this tomb.

A	B
	

As small tombs could usually only contain one or two bronzes, it is difficult in this case to decide between *major* and *minor emblem*. Although, this distinction could also be extended to emblems found in a group of tombs. If, a group of three or four tombs, located in the same area, contains bronzes with the same emblem, we can consider that this emblem is the *major emblem* of this group of tombs.

This is quite obvious with 史 emblem at Qianzhangda.

According to my understanding, the situation in Anyang seems to be quite different from the situation of other important Late Shang / Early Western Zhou cemeteries. Even if scholars often talk about clan or lineage cemeteries of Anyang (a concept mostly based on similarities in funeral assemblages and ancient texts), we have some difficulties to connect this phenomenon with the spread of emblems in Anyang. Up to now, we can not identify in Anyang any cemetery where one emblem is so well attested in a large group of tombs as in Qianzhangda cemetery. But we can find similar examples outside of Anyang, like at Mangzhang 蟒張 in South Henan<sup>15</sup>.

A slightly different situation is reflected by cemeteries as Gaojiabao 高家堡 (Shaanxi) or Jingjie 旌介 (Shanxi) where we find only small groups of upper elite tombs sharing the same major emblem. As far as I know, that kind of situation has not been reported for Anyang yet.<sup>16</sup>

In Anyang, major emblems phenomenon usually concern single upper elite tombs or small groups of lower elite tombs. In many cases, major emblems of upper elite tombs should probably be considered as individual emblems and not as collective ones.

Of course, a lot of tombs have been looted in Anyang, and this may have an influence on our perception of Anyang's situation. But, if we recognize that it is also the case for many of others Shang/Zhou funeral sites (just as Qianzhangda), and as concerned data are still quite numerous, I think we can consider that the differences that can be observed through archaeological remains may, at some point, reflect some aspects of the actual situation in antiquity.

According to our observations, groups delimited by the use of the same emblem on bronzes seem to have been quite small in Anyang. Of course, we have to remember that only a minority of Anyang tomb owners were given bronze vessels as funeral goods.<sup>17</sup> So, if we consider that only the leaders of the groups could enjoy that kind of artifact, then one can suppose that it only represents the visible part of the iceberg, and that larger groups exist beside that, but that those groups were mainly constituted by members who were not buried

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<sup>15</sup> For a brief presentation and bibliographical references concerning those Late Shang –Early Western Zhou cemeteries outside Anyang, see Robert Thorp, *China in the Early Bronze Age - Shang Civilization*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, p. 218-228.

<sup>16</sup> The closest case is probably the one of two elite tombs excavated in the South-East of Guojiashuang 郭家莊 東南. One (M26) contained 8 ritual bronze vessels of which 2 presented a similar emblem (also appearing on a bronze ash pan). The second tomb (M5) contained 11 ritual bronze vessels of which 4 presented the same emblem (also appearing on a bronze ash pan). The distance between those two tombs is not indicated in the two reports, but they mustn't be too far one to another. See *Kaogu* 考古, 2008, 8, p. 22-33 and *Kaogu* 考古, 1998, 10, p. 36-47. However, M5 tomb is may be not wealthy enough to be considered as a upper elit tomb.

<sup>17</sup> Proportion of tombs with bronze vessels differs quite a lot from a cemetery to another, Robert Thorp estimates that 4% of all the Shang tombs of Anyang site contained bronze vessels. See Robert Thorp, *China in the Early Bronze Age - Shang Civilization*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, p. 152.

with ritual bronzes, and who perhaps did not own ritual bronzes when they were alive. But, if it was the case, and if Anyang cemeteries were actually organized as clan or lineage cemeteries, then we will expect to find an important distance between those tombs with different collective emblems. As far as I understand Anyang material, it doesn't seem to be the case.

So, as a final reflection, I would say that if someone considers collective emblems of Anyang as associated with kinship groups as lineages, then it must be accepted that they were small groups. And if one considers, as some scholars do, that Shang society, and the all Anyang Shang site, was structured by very large-scale kinship groups, he has to accept that emblems do not reflect the existence of such large groups in Anyang.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, we still have many problems to understand well early bronze inscriptions, mostly because their content is so succinct. Even about emblems, it seems that we are still far from understanding everything about those signs. But I really think that, in parallel with other kind of studies, like looking for parallels with oracle bone inscriptions, bringing back inscriptions in their original archaeological context could help us to understand a bit better this specific kind of documents.

## Appendix 1

List of recent PhD theses on the topic:

- He Jingcheng 何景成, *Shang Zhou qingtongqi zushi mingwen yanjiu* 商周青銅器族氏銘文研究, Jilin University, 2005 (Wu Zhenwu 吳振武 dir.). Published by Qilu shushe 齊魯書社, Jinan, 2009.
- Yan Zhibin 嚴志斌, *Shangdai qingtongqi mingwen yanjiu* 商代青銅器銘文研究, CASS Institute of Archaeology, 2006 (Liu Yiman 劉一曼 dir.).
- Wang Changfeng 王長豐, *Yin Zhou jinwen zuhui zhengli yu yanjiu* 殷周金文族徽整理與研究, Zhengzhou University, 2006 (Wang Yunzhi 王蘊智 dir.).
- Luo Youcang 雒有倉, *Shang Zhou qingtongqi zuhui wenzi zonghe yanjiu* 商周青銅器族徽文字綜合研究, Shaanxi Normal University, 2007, (Zhang Maorong 張懋鎔 dir.).

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<sup>18</sup> Some scholars studying composite emblems (複合族徽) have tried to prove the existence of larger groups that may have contained many of the groups represented by emblems. But, it has been shown quite convincingly that a systematical hierarchical treatment of composite emblems leads to illogical conclusions. See Yan Zhibin 嚴志斌, "Fuhe shiming cengji shuo zhi sikao 複合氏名層級說之思考", *Zhongyuan wenwu* 中原文物, 2002, 3, p. 34-44.