

The Legacy of Bronzes and Bronze Inscriptions in Early Chinese Literature

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The most famous references to bronze inscriptions in early Chinese literature are probably the “written on bamboo and silk” passages in the *Mozi* 墨子 (which furnished the title for a highly regarded study of Chinese codicology by Chicago’s own Tsuen-hsuei Tsien 錢存訓).¹ More than once, when asked to justify a consequential but historically questionable statement, Mozi is said to have responded: “It is written on bamboo and silk; it is inscribed in bronze and stone; it is incised on platters and bowls; and [thus] it is transmitted to the sons and grandsons of later generations” 書於竹帛，鏤於金石，琢於槃盂，傳遺後世子孫。² But in asserting that such documents convey credible information about the activities of the ancestors, Mohists were—as in so many other matters³—atypical of their intellectual culture. The more common ancient attitude toward the testimony of inscriptions was one of gentle skepticism: inscriptions were regarded as works of reverent commemoration, and incorporating the whole truth within them was taken to be as indecorous as, say, portraying Louis XIV complete with his gout and fistulas. As we read in an undated ritual text, “Protocols of Sacrifice” (“Jitong” 祭統), currently found in the compendium *Ritual Records* (*Liji* 禮記):

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

¹ *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

² This appears eight times almost *verbatim*: “Shangxian xia” 尚賢下, “Jian’ai xia” 兼愛下, “Tianzhi zhong” 天志忠, “Minggui xia” 明鬼下, “Feiming zhong” 非命中, “Feiming xia” 非命下, “Guiyi” 貴義, and “Luwen” 魯問; text in Wu Yujiang 吳毓江, *Mozi jiaozhu* 墨子校注, ed. Sun Qizhi 孫啟治, *Xinbian Zhuji jicheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1993), 2.10.97, 4.16.178, 7.27.306, 8.31.340, 9.36.415, 9.37.424, 12.47.687, and 13.49.734, respectively.

³ See my “Why *Mozi* Is Included in the *Daoist Canon*—Or, Why There Is More to Mohism than Utilitarian Ethics,” in *How Should We Live? Comparing Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. R.A.H. King and Dennis Schilling (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).

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 are 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 good 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 makes offerings to one’s ancestors. One does honor to filial piety by displaying and extolling one’s ancestors. Juxtaposing oneself to them is conformance; clearly showing [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.⁴

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.⁵ Using them as Mohists did—or, worse, as some modern historians do⁶—is misguided in that it fails to account for the reasons why (and modes in which) inscriptions were produced in the first place. It has taken us several decades of

⁴ Compare the translation in James Legge (1815-1897), *The Li Ki*, in *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879-85), IV, 251-52.

⁵ Cf. Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 175f. In a review criticizing this book, Lothar von Falkenhausen, “Issues in Western Zhou Studies: A Review Article,” *Early China* 18 (1993), 152n.26, refers to “Jitong” as well—somewhat unfairly, as Shaughnessy did not misrepresent its import.

⁶ E.g., Noel Barnard, “Chou China: A Review of the Third Volume of Cheng Te-k’un’s *Archaeology in China*,” *Monumenta Serica* 24 (1965), 307-442.

methodological debate⁷ to attain a comparable degree of understanding that this anonymous author presented as elementary wisdom.

“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. That is to say, 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.⁸ Noel Barnard has shown that hardly any other bronze inscription quoted in received literature can be trusted.⁹

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 as to 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 little 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:

⁷ It is not necessary to rehearse here the many titles by Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, and others who have established alternatives to objectivism in historical study. See, e.g., Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 599ff.

⁸ See, e.g., Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978), *Jinwen congkao* 金文叢考 (Beijing: Renmin, 1954), 84-87.

⁹ “Records of Discoveries of Bronze Vessels in Literary Sources—And Some Pertinent Remarks on Aspects of Chinese Historiography,” *Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong* 6.2 (1973), 457ff. This is not to say that the whole of Barnard’s article is sound. His general thesis is that imperial Chinese writers *could* have known a great deal about ancient bronzes, because there are many believable records of discoveries of such vessels, but their statements reveal a profound lack of understanding. This conviction leads Barnard to make several implausible assertions, for instance: “the chances of the compiler [of the *Zuozhuan*] being a Han period rather than a pre-Han period writer would appear to be high” (462). Few scholars of the *Zuozhuan* believe that it dates to any later than the fourth century B.C. For an overview of that controversy, see Wai-ye Li, *The Readability of the Past in Early Chinese Historiography*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 253 (Cambridge, Mass.; and London, 2007), 33-59.

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。」¹⁰

The Viscount of Chu [i.e. King Zhuang of Chu 楚莊王, r. 613-591 B.C.] attacked the Rong of Luhun and eventually arrived at Luo, where he reviewed his troops at the border with Zhou. King Ding [of Zhou, r. 606-586 B.C.] dispatched Wangsun Man¹¹ 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.¹² They cast cauldrons with representations of the creatures, including all varieties of them, 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.”¹³

Chang himself presented this passage as evidence of a shamanic dimension of early Chinese ritual practice¹⁴—an argument that remains controversial.¹⁵ But the

¹⁰ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, 2nd edition, Zhongguo gudian mingzhu yizhu congshu (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1990), II, 669ff. (Xuan 宣 3 = 606 B.C.).

¹¹ Strictly speaking, this should be “Royal Grandson Man” (Wangsun is not a surname), but he is usually called Wangsun Man in the secondary literature.

¹² Following the commentary of Du Yu 杜預 (A.D. 222-285).

¹³ Compare the translations in Wai-ye Li, 300; David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 205 (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2001), 60; and James Legge, *The Ch’un Ts’ew with the Tso Chuen*, in *The Chinese Classics*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1895), V, 293.

¹⁴ *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 63ff.

¹⁵ For a very different view, see, e.g., David N. Keightley, “The Shang: China’s First Historical Dynasty,” in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge, 1999), 262. Keightley acknowledges the importance of animals in the Shang religious imagination in *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in*

harangue attributed to Wangsun Mang is valuable because 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.¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ but it confirms that, by the fourth century B.C. at the latest, the so-called “creature” images were thought to have a crucial religious purpose.¹⁸

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。」¹⁹

“[King] Jie’s *de* was dimmed, and the cauldrons were moved to Shang, [where they remained] for six hundred years. [King] Zhòu of Shang [r.

Late Shang China (ca. 1200-1045 B.C.), China Research Monograph 53 (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000), 107-13—but without associating this feature with shamanism.

¹⁶ Cf. Wang Tao, “A Textual Investigation of the *taotie*,” in *The Problem of Meaning in Early Chinese Ritual Bronzes*, ed. Roderick Whitfield, *Colloquies on Art & Archaeology in Asia* 15 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1993), 102-18.

¹⁷ The relevant bibliography is too vast to cite in a single footnote. For a representative Chinese view, see Duan Yong 段勇, *Shang Zhou qingtongqi huanxiang dongwu yanjiu* 商周青銅器幻想動物研究 (Shanghai: Guji, 2003).

¹⁸ That is to say, the agnostic position staked out by Robert W. Bagley for earlier periods (“Meaning and Explanation,” in Whitfield, 34-55) would not be valid for the fourth century.

¹⁹ *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, II, 671f.

1075-1046 B.C.?) was cruel and tyrannical, and the cauldrons were moved to Zhou. When one's *de* is felicitous 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.?) 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."²⁰

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,²¹ in this manner 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 for imperial power, and it should come as no surprise that the First Emperor of Qin 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?)²² had sunk for unknown reasons. Even with a

²⁰ Compare the translations in Wai-ye Li, 300; Schaberg, 60; and Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, V, 293.

²¹ E.g., *Mencius* 1A.5-7; see the general discussion in Paul R. Goldin, *Confucianism*, Ancient Philosophies (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2011).

²² The sources are not in agreement. For example, “Qin benji” 秦本紀, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 5.218 states that all nine cauldrons came into possession of Qin in 255 B.C., after the destruction of Zhou; the commentary of Zhang Shoujie 張守節 (fl. A.D. 8th cent.) suggests that only eight of them completed the journey, because one fell into the River Si. Thus when the First Emperor's expedition to Si is related in “Qin shihuang benji” 秦始皇本紀, *Shiji* 6.248, one cannot tell whether he is after one cauldron or several. By contrast, Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (d. 527) states unambiguously in his *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 that “the nine cauldrons sank into the abyss of Si” 九鼎淪沒泗淵; text in Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛, *Shuijing zhu jiaozheng* 水經注校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2007), 25.601. Cf. Barnard, “Records of Discoveries of

thousand divers, the project was unsuccessful. (There is a delightful 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.)²³

In many other Warring States sources, bronzes generally—and the nine cauldrons of Zhou in particular—serve as symbols of political power; as these have been surveyed elsewhere, it suffices here to cite one illustrative example, 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.):

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。」²⁴

When [King] Wu Ding [of Shang, r. 1250?-1192? B.C.] 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 interpreters had come to court from six states.

Confucius said: “From *The Day of Gaozong’s rong Sacrifice*,²⁵ we see how swiftly *de* is recompensed.”²⁶

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 early

Bronze Vessels in Literary Sources,” 472f.

²³ See Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 95f.

²⁴ The source text is Li Fang 李昉 (925-996) *et al.*, *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (*Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊), 917.5b.

²⁵ This is usually understood as the title of a text. Gaozong is the temple name of Wu Ding.

²⁶ Compare the translation in James Legge, *The Shoo King*, in *The Chinese Classics*, III, 265.

prognostication, in which the observed movements of animals, especially birds, are imbued with ominous 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.

Whereas Warring States texts dwelled on the political consequences of the possession and use of bronze implements, earlier sources emphasized their ritual importance. For example, the *Odes* subtly indicate that the women of a lineage are essential to its ritual functioning by referring to their role in appointing the vessels:

執爨蹠蹠。	With reverential steps do they tend to the stove;
為俎孔碩，	they produce the <i>zu</i> -trays, which are very large.
或燔或炙。	Some have roast meat; some have grilled.
君婦莫莫，	Still and solemn are the chief wives;
為豆孔庶。 ²⁷	they produce the <i>dou</i> -vessels, which are very numerous. ²⁸

This tells us not only that *zu* and *dou* vessels were warranted for the particular rite undertaken on this occasion, but also that the “chief wives” (*junfu* 君婦) were charged with preparing the vessels and the foods contained in them.²⁹

* * *

The *Odes* exemplify another aspect of what I call “the legacy of bronze inscriptions”: the use of onomatopoetic 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,³⁰ where *guan* (Old Chinese *KROR)³¹ represents

²⁷ “Chuci” 楚茨 (Mao 209); text in *Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (*Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經註疏), 13B.468c.

²⁸ Compare the translations in Bernhard Karlgren, *The Book of Odes* (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950), 162; Arthur Waley (1889-1966), *The Book of Songs* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1937; rpt. [ed. Joseph R. Allen], New York: Grove, 1996), 195; and James Legge, *The She King*, in *The Chinese Classics*, IV, 370.

²⁹ For another example, see “Gongfu Wenbo zhi mu lun laoyi” 公父文伯之母論勞逸, *Guoyu* 國語 (Shanghai: Guji, 1978), 5.205: “When the sun has set, [the Son of Heaven] oversees the Nine Concubines; he commands them to clean and present the millet vessels for the *di* and *jiao* sacrifices” 日入監九御，使潔奉禘郊之粢盛。

³⁰ “Guanju” 關雎 (Mao 1), *Mao Shi zhengyi* 1A.273b.

³¹ My Old Chinese reconstructions follow, in the main, the systems laid out in Laurent Sagart, *The Roots of*

both the sound of the ospreys' call³² 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). As I have discussed elsewhere,³³ in the first line of “The Yellow Birds” (“Huangniao” 黃鳥, Mao 131), “*Jiaojiao*—the yellow birds” 交交黃鳥,³⁴ the word *jiao* (Old Chinese *kraw) 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 dissevered 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 where the birds land rhymes in each stanza with the name of the brother to be executed next.

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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ It seems significant that, even in the

Old Chinese, Amsterdam Studies in Theory and History of Linguistic Science: Series 4, Current Issues in Linguistic Theory (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999); and William H. Baxter, *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology*, Trends in Linguistics 64 (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992). The main difference is that I indicate the so-called Type A and B syllables with majuscule and minuscule typeface, respectively; in addition, I have incorporated certain refinements that Sagart and Baxter have made in recent unpublished work (such as the final *-r in the reconstruction for *guan*).

³² If indeed they are ospreys—we know next to nothing about the Bronze Age meanings of zoological terms.

³³ *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 39ff.

³⁴ “Huangniao,” *Mao Shi zhengyi* 6D.373a.

³⁵ E.g., “Tingliao” 庭燎 (Mao 182), “Guzhong” 鼓鍾 (Mao 208), “Zhijing” 執競 (Mao 274), “You gu” 有瞽 (Mao 280).

³⁶ *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, 1997), 181f.

earliest bell inscriptions, onomatopoeic reduplicatives convey not only the sound of the bell, but also a corresponding meaning. Take, for example, the end of inscription from the first group of Xing bells (Xing *zhong* 興鐘), dated to the early ninth century B.C.:

敢作文人大寶協龠鐘，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。興其萬年永寶日鼓。³⁷

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—*fengfeng 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.³⁸

The phrase *fengfeng yiyi* (Old Chinese *phong-phong-lak-lak) reproduces the sound of Xing’s bells as they are struck during the ceremony (perhaps accompanied by some percussion—*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 onomatopoeic 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., 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.

³⁷ *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成, Kaoguxue tekan (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1984-), nos. 247-50 (four identical inscriptions). For this *kaishu* transcription, I rely heavily on the interpretation in Shirakawa Shizuka 白川靜, *Kimbun tsūshaku* 金文通釋 (Kobe: Hakutsuru Bijutsukan, 1962-84), 50.387-89.

³⁸ Compare the translation in Lothar Alexander von Falkenhausen, “Ritual Music in Bronze Age China: An Archaeological Perspective” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988), II, 974f.

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. I *do not* mean that bronze inscriptions themselves display a remarkable degree of parallelism. There are some famous cases, such as the Shi Qiang *pan* 史牆盤, where the parallelism of the inscription seems to be motivated at least in part by the symmetry of the vessel itself,³⁹ but most inscriptions are not organized in any overtly parallelistic manner.

Rather, what I have in mind is the formula *duiyang* 對揚, “to extol in response,” which appears so frequently in appointment inscriptions. 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 *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*) itself became a modest literary genre and was a frequent choice for inscriptions and the like.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cf. Martin Kern, “The Performance of Writing in Western Zhou China,” in *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign*, ed. S. La Porta and D. Shulman, *Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture* 6 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 169f.

⁴⁰ *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies 74 (Ann Arbor, 1997), 108.

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.), 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.⁴¹ Han emperors used this tactic to help them discover the most talented ministers in the realm.⁴² The famed statesman Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (200-121 B.C.) was originally 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。⁴³

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.⁴⁴

What all these uses of *dui* have in common is that the display of talent comes *in*

⁴¹ "Dong Zhongshu zhuan" 董仲舒傳, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 56.2495-2524.

⁴² Cf. Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6.

⁴³ "Pingjin hou Zhufu liezhuan" 平津侯主父列傳, *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 112.2949.

⁴⁴ Compare the translation in Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty*, *Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies* 65 (New York and Hong Kong: Columbia University Press, 1993), II, 187f.

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.

These considerations bear on the question of why parallelism has been so pronounced in Chinese literature—a question to which few persuasive answers have been submitted.⁴⁵ My answer would be that the two essential elements have been, first, a largely monosyllabic literary language in which single meaningful syllables can easily be echoed from one line to the next⁴⁶ (and where even polysyllabic phrases can be matched, syllable for syllable, in a regular couplet); and, second, a traditional culture that has accepted hierarchies as an inescapable element of the social order. 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.

⁴⁵ For example, Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 78-90, contends that Chinese parallelism is informed by the cosmology of the “uncreated universe.” There are two problems with this thesis. First, as Owen concedes, literature from cultures postulating a created universe (such as the Hebrew Bible) can also display marked parallelism. Second, it is by no means correct that all Chinese thinkers accepted the doctrine of an “uncreated universe.” Cf. Paul R. Goldin, “The Myth That China Has No Creation Myth,” *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008), 1-22.

For the more complex theory of Fan Wenlan 范文瀾 (1891-1969), see his *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue, 1958), 590n.1, discussed in Chu Binjie 褚斌傑, *Zhongguo gudai wenti gailun* 中國古代文體概論, revised edition (Beijing: Beijing Daxue, 1990), 149f. Suffice to say that Fan’s first two reasons—that parallelism comes naturally to the human mind and is characteristic of oral communication—are no more applicable to Chinese literature than to any other.

⁴⁶ Cf. Idema and Haft, 107.