

Reflections on Literary and Devotional Aspects of Western Zhou Memorial Inscriptions

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This essay poses some very general questions concerning Western Zhou bronze inscriptions as a corpus that seem to me problems that are of intrinsic interest, inspired by one vessel in particular in the Shouyang Studio collection, and mixing a few other recently recovered inscriptions with ones I'm more familiar with in reflecting on the issues I want to raise. I should begin with a confession that it has been some years since I dealt with bronze inscriptions as part of a research agenda, and I cannot claim close familiarity with a wide range of those that have come to light in recent years, though working on this paper has helped me to know better what it is that I do not know. I have titled it a reflection because it is not the fruit of extensive and ongoing research, but my hope is that it raises issues of interest that are also ones we have the tools to explore.

The issues that concern me here are these: First, given the highly formulaic and restricted nature of most bronze texts, and the fact that significant portions of many seem to be redactions of texts originally created on other materials, wood or bamboo, how far can we identify in these texts elements of literary creativity and what might be construed as personal expression arising from the occasion of creating memorial inscriptions in bronze? Second, acknowledging that the context for the great majority of bronze inscriptions is religious, in connection with the ancestral cult, to what degree can we say that the texts reflect engagement in this devotional activity, as opposed to simply fulfilling a felt need to inscribe a portion of the vessels of sacrifice as a matter of proper form, and what features of such engagement may bring further nuance to our understanding of the way in which individuals conceived their relationship to the dead during the Western Zhou? And as a third and ancillary type question (originally inspired by observing

substantially different and more diverse deployment of the general activity of memorial inscription in durable media in early Egyptian culture), what is the range of functions served by memorial inscriptions in bronze?

This last question will be engaged in this paper only as an entry point, one that was, in fact, invited by an item in the Shouyang Studio collection. My general focus will be on questions of literary features and devotional engagement.

Let me amplify what I mean by each of my two major questions. In terms of literary features, what aspects of bronze inscriptions might we wish to include in, for example, an historical account of Chinese literature? Certain features of bronze inscriptions might be of interest because they represent *generic* forms of literary activity pursued in the durable medium of bronze and not in other media. For example, from their earliest period, bronze inscriptions are dominated by records of awards, and a more or less standard template for these texts emerges by the earliest years of the Western Zhou, including a dating section, a narrative section that includes a list of gifts, and a dedicatory section that includes prayer formulas (*guci* 嘏辭).¹ This template can accommodate insertions of text apparently imported in full or redacted from wood or bamboo, as we see, for example, in the *Da Yu ding* 大盂鼎, dating from the early tenth century BCE, which embeds an extensive *gao* 誥 style text within the framework of the standard template.² From the mid-tenth century on, this type of inscription increasingly conforms to a narrower template, that of the investiture or *ce ming* 冊命 genre, and other genres become more regular as well; for example, “typical” bell inscription, with their stress on rhyme and

¹For this discussion, I excluding considering simple clan sign or single name inscriptions, and also name lists, such as appear on some late Shang daggers.

²That award texts so consistently employ such a template suggests a parallel with oracle texts. In both cases, the medium was charged with religious significance related to individuals, but the practice suggests a type of orderly record-keeping impulse that seems to reflect the early development of impersonal bureaucratic practical frameworks.

onomatopoetics, often in place of an award narrative, and the generally brief form of the dowry inscription.

An anthology of these generic forms, though of interest and germane to a history of Western Zhou literature, is *not* what I have in mind when I raise questions about literary characteristics in bronzes; however, these forms are nevertheless central to my interests because what I am looking for is deviations from generic norms, exceptional cases that may signal some type of authorial creativity or engagement in an inscription, an impulse of literary artistry or personal expression.

Similarly, when considering the devotional aspects of inscriptions I am not principally interested in the features which reflect standard practices: the function of most vessels as temple objects of use in sacrificial rituals, the mere presence of laudatory words about ancestors, the choice of specific *guci*, and so forth. I am interested to learn whether there are instances that stand out against this ground as *exceptional* examples of devotional engagement. We are accustomed to think of Western Zhou society – at least among the patricianate – as deeply religious, but the pervasiveness of normative institutions of religion may not tell us much about personal religious beliefs beyond the *habitus* of verbal and practical ceremony, the experience of which as powerful or attenuated is extremely difficult to measure through a uniform rhetorical medium. Moreover, pervasive religious forms – or a pervasive rhetoric that suggests them – may obstruct us from exploring what I assume to be likely: that some people may have been more religious than others (perhaps recognized as so). When we see an exceptional expression of devotional sentiment, as we do on the final vessel I will discuss here, the well known *Zhong gui* 戎簋, it may be best to see it as an index of possibilities for personal or creative religious

expression, rather than to assume it provides access into Western Zhou religion as a unified practice.

The types of questions I am asking are ones that require some theory of the authorship of the inscriptions. I have nothing new to offer on this matter, other than to gesture to the ambiguities that the corpus suggests. A bronze inscription that follows a narrow template may have required no engagement by the vessel master,³ who might simply have ordered the text from a scribe trained in forms sanctioned by rule or taste, such that neither vessel master nor scribe could be said to have much in the way of authorial engagement. Moreover, when exceptional features occur, it will always, I think, be an open question whether the vessel master or a scribal “composer” was the source of invention. Since a distinction that is not possible to make is not meaningful, I will simply treat the “author” behind non-standard features as the vessel master, though in many cases that may not have been the case.

In posing questions of the literary and devotional qualities of bronze inscriptions, I am writing in awareness of Martin Kern’s work on these issues in a very substantial essay in which he suggests generic continuities among texts such *gao* 誥 type chapters of the *Shang shu*, liturgical poetry in the *Shi jing*, and bronze inscriptions, particularly bells.⁴ Kern’s analysis has much to offer and I see my reflections as in part a short descant on some elements of the themes he has introduced. But Kern is principally focused on generic features of inscriptions and their relationship to norms of performative practice; I am focusing here on features that I believe may fall outside of that range.⁵

³Using the term to describe the person who ordered the casting of an inscribed vessel.

⁴Martin Kern, “Bronze Inscriptions, the *Shijing* and the *Shangshu*: The Evolution of the Ancestral Sacrifice During the Western Zhou,” in John Lagerway and Marc Kalinowski, ed., *Early Chinese Religion* (Leiden: 2009), pp. 143-200.

⁵Research along the lines I am suggesting in this essay should become far more fruitful to pursue in light of Chen Yingjie’s recently published study, *Xi-Zhou jinwen zuoqi yongtu mingci yanjiu* 西周金文作器用途銘辭研究

The Ying Hou *gui gai*

Among the Shouyang Studio collection vessels, the *Ying Hou gui* 應侯簋, a somewhat anomalous item including a vessel and cover with differing inscriptions, provides my starting point.⁶ It is the cover inscription that raises issues relevant here. As Edward Shaughnessy has provided a translation in a paper pre-circulated for this symposium, I will in this case simply borrow his reading.⁷

It was the first month, first auspiciousness, *dinghai* (day 24); the king in effect said: “Xiangong, Lord of Ying; Ni of our Yi of South of the Huai, dares to strike his multitudinous subjects and dares increasingly to rise up and make war, broadly attacking the southern states. The king commanded the Ying Hou to regulate and attack Ni of the Yi of the South of the Huai.” Successful, he was capable of striking and attacking the Southern Yi, capturing many dagger-axes. I do not dare to fail. I herewith make for my august aunt Shan Ji this offertory *gui*-tureen, with which my aunt may award long life and an eternal mandate; (may) sons’ sons and grandsons’ grandsons eternally treasure and use it to make offering.

The inscription seems anomalous because it recounts the meritorious deeds of the vessel commissioner, Ying Hou Xiangong 應侯見工, but announces that it is a presentation to an aunt, married into the ruling lineage of the state of Shan, intended for her and for her descendants to use in offerings. Lothar von Falkenhausen has suggested that a married woman could continue

(Beijing: 2008, 2 vols.), which explores in great detail the rhetorical features of inscriptions as they bear on the practical function of bronze vessels. Although Chen’s focus is primarily philological, the analysis his work provides will be an exceptional tool for close work on literary and religious issues. Much to my retrospective regret, I became aware of Chen’s study only at the final stage of preparing this draft. I have tried hastily to consult it with regard to some of the specific inscriptions I discuss, but have studied only a fraction of its findings and have not yet been able to reflect on their larger implications for my major questions. This makes me all the more aware of the fact that given my peripheral involvement in Western Zhou studies, there are likely other sources of which I am unaware that have anticipated or are relevant to this line of inquiry.

⁶ *Shouyang jijin: Hu Yingying Fan Jirong cang Zhongguo gudai qingtongqi* 首陽吉金:胡盈瑩范季融藏中國古代青銅器 (Shanghai: 2008) #39, pp. 112-14.

⁷ Edward Shaughnessy, “Newest Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels, 2000-2010,” unpublished paper, June 2010, p. 23. I have made small changes to accord with form elsewhere in this paper. Shaughnessy discusses issues of authenticity, and I am simply following his conclusion that the traces of casting spacers in the inscribed surface is a strong indicator of authenticity, despite the unusual mismatch of vessel and lid inscriptions (which may not have originally been paired).

sacrifices to her natal ancestors,⁸ and dowry vessels may include references to their continued use in sacrifice by later generations, though this seems quite rare.⁹ But this inscription is unexpected in combining three elements: dedication to a woman married into an outside lineage, statement of expectation of its use in sacrifice by her sons, and inclusion of a substantial record of the accomplishments of the author / vessel master. If indeed it were intended for ongoing usage of the vessel by male descendants, the vessel would ultimately be used in the ancestral shrine of the Shan ruling lineage, rather than as a vessel of sacrifice to the common ancestors that Ying Hou Xiangong shared with his aunt. If that was Ying Hou Xiangong's intent then the *purpose* of the inscription would seem to be advertisement of Xiangong's deeds to the Shan ruling lineage as a political statement, rather than as a devotional expression suitable only for Xiangong's own ancestors.

Even if this inscription's use of the language of devotional sacrifice was nothing more than formulaic, which appears more likely to me, it indicates how a bronze vessel could function as a prestige object that could be manipulated in ways oblique to its apparent purpose. As already noted, most bronzes were a medium for recording meritorious deeds and awards, and we assume that the audience for these announcements was conceived as the ancestral spirits to whom the vessels were dedicated, an assumption reinforced by identification of ancestral dedicatees and liturgical *guci*. But I am curious about the degree to which inscriptions may have been composed

⁸Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000-250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: 2006), p. 119. The evidence is a vessel cast by a husband, Yu Bo, for his wife, specifically for use in sacrifice to her late father. It includes no reference to continued use by later generations.

⁹For example, the *Qi Ying Ji pan* 齊縈姬盤 (*Yin-Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成 [hereafter *Jicheng*] 10147). This is the only such instance I note in a broad (but by no means complete) discussion of these vessels in Cao Zhaolan 曹兆蘭, *Jinwen yu Yin-Zhou nüxing wenhua* 金文與殷周女性文化 (Beijing: 2004), pp. 150-65. There is at least one other instance of such a gift to a *wanggu* 王姑 (or father's sister, according to the *Erya*). The Bo Shufu *gui* 伯庶父簋 inscription reads, "In the second month, *wuyin* day, Bo Shufu had made a tureen for his aunt Fan Jiang. May she treasure it forever." (Cited in Wang Longzheng, et al., "Xin jian Ying Hou Xiangong *gui* mingwen kaoshi 新見應侯見工簋銘文考釋, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 中原文物 2009.5, p. 56.) The Bo Shufu inscription does not resemble the self-advertisement of the *Ying Hou gui gai*.

as statements to this audience, which they rarely address directly, and the degree to which the devotional objects served only as a formal context to record deeds for a living audience, or perhaps simply to inscribe or record as a part of a formal, in some sense aesthetic purpose to render the objects of the lineage's sacrificial and banqueting spaces of suitable artistic and prestige value, fulfilling the social expectations of a stipulated or customary sumptuary code.¹⁰

Exceptional devotional features

Let me attempt to make this point by contrast, introducing an inscription that does seem directly addressed to an ancestral audience, a text in which the author seems to go far beyond formulaic devotional gestures. The inscription is on the *Zuoce Yi you* 乍冊嗑卣 (Document Maker Yi's pot).

乍冊嗑乍父辛
厥名義曰子子孫寶
不泉嗑子延先
死亡子子引有孫不
敢娵憂覲鑄彝
用乍大禦于厥且
匕父母多申母念
戔弋勿剛嗑鰥寡
遺祐石宗不剝

Document Maker Yi makes a sacrificial vessel to Father Xin.
Its text should read, "May sons and grandsons treasure it."
Through misfortune, Yi's son Yan has already sadly
died; he has no sons, nor grandsons by his sons.¹¹ Not

¹⁰Consideration of the way in which inscriptions may be related more closely to the prestige nature of these objects, as essential décor, rather than as communication in themselves, was prompted by reflection on much broader research concerning the roles of prestige objects as social commodities in the Western Zhou by Constance Cook, "Wealth and the Western Zhou," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 60.2 (1997). In a different vein, as noted above, a non-religious motive could be conceived in terms of the impulse to preserve records in sanctioned form on durable media, in the manner of the oracle texts, a point I will talk about further below.

¹¹See Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, *Shang-Zhou qingtongqi mingwen xuan* 商周青銅器銘文選 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1988) [hereafter *Mingwen xuan*], vol. 3 (#142), pp. 95-96, and Chen Yingjie, *Xi-Zhou jinwen zuoqi yongtu mingci yanjiu*, vol. 2, pp. 553-54. My reading differs from both in breaking after *si* 死 and reading *wang* 亡 as *wu* 無, carrying the negative into the following phrase 子引有孫, which I am reading in the sense of presently having no sons who could

daring to be importunate,¹² he presents this cast vessel and therewith makes grand sacrifice to his late grandfather and grandmother, father and mother. May the many spirits not plan disaster, not cut Yi off, to be left with no support.¹³ May they grant aid that the ancestral shrine shall not be destroyed.

(*Jicheng*, 5427)

There are some points of difficulty in the inscription, but if this reading is accurate enough to capture the central idea, there are several features worth noting. The first is that the inscription is clearly prepared entirely for the vessel itself, as is demonstrated by the self-referential second sentence; it does not appear to redact compositions originally inscribed on other materials. The second and most interesting aspect is that the vessel constitutes a statement of religious purpose, despite the fact that it omits customary liturgical formulas of prayer for many progeny: the author means his prayer in a specific sense, and states it non-formulaically. The occasion for casting a vessel to the vessel master's father is unstated, but it would appear that the prayer and the planned ceremony to accompany it are themselves the occasion. A further feature related to the devotional nature of the vessel is that the dedicatee, Father Xin, is not to be the sole, or perhaps even the principal object of the ceremony for which it was intended, which included two generations of forebears.

Here is an inscription that actually speaks directly to the spirits in a voice represented as the vessel master's. While the context of almost all bronzes was the religious role they would

“draw forth” grandsons. Chen notes (but does not endorse) the interpretation of 子弓| as the name of a second son, in which case, maintaining that Yan was the name of the original heir, the text would be read: “Yan has already sadly died and perished, but my son Ziyin has borne a grandson [to me].” In this reading, attributed to Zhang Yachu 張亞初, the intent of the inscription and sacrifice may have been to exorcise the baleful influence of the late elder son's spirit.

¹²I am interpreting *you* 憂 as *rao* 擾, which accords with Zhang Yachu and seems to me clearly correct, but I see no clear reading for the unknown graph 𠄎 and I simply infer the meaning of what appears to be a two-character phrase according to the second graph and context.

¹³Reading *zai* 戕 as *zai* 災, and the unknown 𠄎 in context (its meaning seems clear enough; Chen glosses as 剝, presumably on phonetic grounds)..

play in the ancestral shrine or tomb, and most inscriptions invoke this context with liturgical formulas, it is a rare inscription that is addressed directly to the spirits in this way.

Reading the *Zuoce Yi you* raises the question of the audience for the text inscribed. While we may be inclined to believe that the imagined readers of all texts were the spirits themselves – though they never cleaned their plates at sacrifice to expose the texts to view – recalling the *Ying Hou gui gai* inscription, where the *primary* audience seems more likely to have been the living dedicatee and her marital clan members, it seems more consistent to suggest that the notion of an ancestral audience may have become, as a matter of routine, highly attenuated under normal circumstances, and that for inscriptions that do *not* bear features of the kind we see in the *Zuoce Yi you*, the audience was conceived primarily as the living. Liturgical formulas had perhaps become a rhetoric so customary that only their absence might have been a departure from the norm significant enough to attract notice.

Authorial origins and literary features

I want now to point to another aspect of the *Zuoce Yi you* inscription: literary artfulness, of which it seems to me to be an outstanding example. In developing a context for its prayer, the author or composer has demonstrated unusual literary skill by invoking at its outset *guci* that terminate standard inscriptions and deploying them in an ironic, counterfactual mode. There does not seem to be anything formulaic in this; it is inventive and conveys a personal rather than a ritual voice. In this sense, it stands out against the ground of the normal pieties and boasts of inscriptions, and constitutes a literary feature of considerable interest.

In an article on the recently recovered *Bin Gong xu* 鬯公盥, Edward Shaughnessy has pointed out the importance of that vessel in providing insight into the development of literature

during the Western Zhou period.¹⁴ The *Bin Gong xu* has been much celebrated and interpreted – I do not have anything to add to analysis of its text and so I will not discuss its particulars here, except to remind us that it recounts a version of the works of Yu the Great with moral commentary that suggests it reproduces the type of text associated with chapters of the *Shang shu* that have been dated by modern critics to centuries well after the end of the Western Zhou. In this, it suggests that we need to rewrite our accounts of the development of Chinese literature, acknowledging that outside the bronze corpus (or, more precisely, both outside and within the corpus), imaginative texts were developing in genres beyond the types of poetry and *gao* 誥 style prose that have been previously documented.

The *Bin Gong xu* is equally unsettling in demonstrating an unanticipated use of bronzes for such texts. We have long had texts such as the *Da Yu ding* and the *Mao Gong ding* 毛公鼎 that reproduce lengthy *gao*-style passages. But these are quoted as parts of the larger contexts and are tied in those narratives to the vessel master, so as to make their appearance seem simply to be to expansions of the commonly encountered royal commands that provided the occasions for the casting of the vessel. These speeches and commands were presumably documents previously recorded on bamboo or wood, in the manner of *ce ming* inscriptions, and this seems to be explicitly signaled through the phrase “*Wang ruo yue*” 王若曰 (perhaps, “the king in effect said”), which is often interpreted as meaning that his speech was in some way read out from a written document.

In the case of the *Bin Gong xu*, the only frame for the text is a final sentence, which reads: “Bin Gong said, ‘If only people could employ virtue such as this, there would be no cause for

¹⁴Edward Shaughnessy, “The *Bin Gong Xu* Inscription and the Beginnings of the Chinese Literary Tradition,” in *Books in Numbers: Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Harvard-Yenching Library, Conference Papers*, ed. Wilt Idema (Hong Kong: 2007), pp. 1-19

regret.” So atypical is this inscription that we cannot be certain how the quote, and Bin Gong, may be connected to the vessel itself, but the easiest assumption would be that Bin Gong was the vessel master, and the quote simultaneously expresses his pious view and marks his ownership of the vessel.

Why was this bronze cast? Nothing suggests a connection with the ancestor cult or any other familiar context of bronze use, and the presence of an inscription that conspicuously lacks such indicators would seem to point towards the conclusion that it was not intended for use in the ancestral temple. We have no grounds for stipulating the practical purpose of the *xu*, though we could speculate that Bin Gong had it cast for some secular, personal use, or to be used in his own shrine or tomb after his death. But what we can probably say is that if the text was a pre-existing one that was in circulation outside the lineage of Bin Gong and already admired, then inscribing it on the bronze object added value to the bronze by “decorating” it with a revered text. On the other hand, the comment by Bin Gong would presumably have had been elevated in gravity by its inscription in bronze, beyond what might be anticipated by its addition to a version of the text on wood or bamboo. In the much later practice of the late Warring States and Han periods, objects, not always bronze, might include brief admonitory inscriptions that were identified with their owners as a kind of personal motto.¹⁵ It may be that the *Bin Gong xu* is an early example of this text genre, associating individuals with inscribed sententious formulas.

¹⁵See Mark Csikszentmihalyi “Reimagining the Yellow Emperor’s Four Faces,” in Martin Kern, *Text and Ritual in Early China* (Seattle & London: 2005), pp. 230-31. The cauldron inscription attributed to Confucius’s ancestor Zheng Kaofu, reported in the *Zuozhuan* (Zhao 7), would be a reported early example of such a text. A brief and puzzling mid-Western Zhou vessel seems devoted to inscription of a sententious remark in a very different form. The vessel known as the *Guazi you* 寡子卣 (*Jicheng* 5392) reads, in full: 臺不弔，爾乃邦。烏虜。詒帝家以寡子。乍永寶。子。 Relying on the interpretation of Chen Yingjie, I would render the text in this way: “‘Attack the wicked and make populous your state.’ Ah! Support our major lineage and its sons. Made for eternal treasure. Zi-clan.” (See Chen, p. 567; I am reading 詒 differently, as *yi* 依, supposing a transitive usage: “provide support.”) If this is a valid reading, then the opening phrases, quoting an aphorism, may have been serving as a “signature” expression of the unnamed vessel master. (The latter portion may itself be of interest to a survey of non-standard devotional phrases addressed to the spirits.)

A similar but symmetrically opposite effect would be represented by the well known *Sanshi pan* 散氏盤 inscription (*Jicheng* 10176), which records a land treaty that was the outcome of a dispute between the peoples of San and Ze in the Wei River Valley region. The inscription, bearing no features connecting it to the ancestral cult, literally cast in bronze an agreement that had been originally been formulated as an archival document, as demonstrated by what appears to be a true authorial attribution at the close: “Keeper of the left tally, the official scribe Zhongnong.” In this case, inscribing the document in bronze probably served to heighten its authority.

In the cases of the *Bin Gong xu* and the *Sanshi pan*, in different ways, inscription on bronze was, perhaps, a matter of the medium itself being the message.¹⁶ These examples highlight the question of the “perlocutionary” force of words cast in this durable medium, which itself could signify wealth and prestige. Like the *Ying Hou Xiangong gui gai*, the impulse to inscribe vessels may in many cases have mixed multiple motives – perhaps to inform the ancestors of what they would already have known, or to earn their approval through the additional pious act (and expense) of inscription, but perhaps equally to exalt the living in the eyes of the living, through the content of the words, through the fact of the words being inscribed, or through the fact that the vessels of the ancestral hall, banquet, or private chamber were embellished with inscriptions.¹⁷

¹⁶This sort of function for bronzes may have been encouraged by the changes in bronze forms and ritual deployment that, following the work of Jessica Rawson and Lothar von Falkenhausen, have come to be known as the “Ritual Reform.” See the discussion of the reform characteristics in Kern, pp. 190-91 and his interesting discussion of the literary effects and potential relation to issues of audience in the following pages.

¹⁷A related issue to this last point would concern the quality of the calligraphy and the aesthetic care given to its presentation on the vessels. I do not attempt to address these issues here, but the relationship of calligraphic quality to vessel purpose and inscriptional content seems a potentially rich vein to explore; the only such study I am aware of to date is Li Feng’s, “Ancient Reproductions and Calligraphic Variations: Studies of Western Zhou Bronzes with ‘Identical’ Inscriptions,” *Early China* 22 (1997), pp. 1-41. Li’s analysis of the different calligraphic values that may have applied to primary and replicated vessels demonstrates that calligraphic aesthetics were a recognized value that was applied in different ways depending on the practical function of vessels.

Personalistic and generic literary elements

It seems likely that a substantial number of bronze inscriptions were, in large part, transcriptions of documents, or redacted elements of documents, that existed in other contexts, most likely in lineage archives, a point that Falkenhausen makes at some length with regard to the famous Wei 微 family inscriptions recovered from Zhuangbai, Shaanxi, including the *Qiang pan* 牆盤, and that Shaughnessy has documented in great detail with regard to the recently excavated *Qiu pan* 逯盤.¹⁸ What can we say about the relation between the pre-existing texts and the bronze texts?

The former are lost to us, but in many cases much of their general content is quite obvious. For example, in *ceming* inscriptions the pre-existing written charge of the king or lord is given (whether in full or redacted we generally cannot say). Some elements of standard inscriptional templates, such as the dating formula and the narrative of the *ceming* ceremony that surrounds the charge and its list of gifts, may have been part of the archival record as well.¹⁹ The dedication and brief liturgical prayers that conclude the inscription are standard for sacrificial vessels. In many of these cases, it is easy to imagine the process of composition to have involved no creative literary effort at all: the text is as bureaucratic in impulse as the typical Shang oracle bone inscription.

As devotional texts, such inscriptions add nothing to the casting of a sacrificial bronze other than to provide a formal element of décor that may have been conspicuous by absence, and they possess no literary value beyond a reaffirmation of generic practice. Their great value to us

¹⁸See Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society*, pp. 53-56, and Shaughnessy, “The Writing of a Late Western Zhou Bronze Inscription.” *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 61.3 (2007): 845-77.

¹⁹With regard to dates, however, Maria Khayutina has suggested that fully dated bronze inscriptions may have served the “bureaucratic” purpose of preserving event dates when those were, in fact, absent on texts preserved in other media. See “The Royal Year-Count of the Western Zhōu Dynasty (1045-771 BC) and Its Use(r)s,” in Xiaobing Wang-Riese and Thomas Höllman, *Time and Ritual in Early China* (Wiesbaden: 2009), p. 139.

as historical documents is, one would suppose, a completely unintended consequence. Even the most consciously historical of these texts, such as the *Qiang pan* and *Qiu pan*, were, as Falkenhausen and Shaughnessy have demonstrated, substantially redactions of existing textual materials.²⁰

In light of this, vessels like the *Zuoce Yi you* become intensely interesting as documents that appear to reveal authors employing bronze inscriptions as occasions for literary creativity and personal expression, and vessels like the *Ying Hou gui gai* become interesting as examples of creative deployment of standard textual forms for non-standard purposes.

A variety of other texts show promise, in different ways, of shedding added light on the history of literary and personal expression in the Western Zhou era. For example, from a relatively early point in the Western Zhou we see a subset of inscriptions that begin with first-person statements by the vessel-master, some of which seem to be composed for the occasion of bronze casting.²¹ One of the earliest of these, the *Shenzi Tuo gui gai* 沈子它簋蓋, generally dated to the early tenth century, begins as follows:

Tuo says, Bowing prostrate I dare to report with all care and clarity to my late father: You ordered me, the Lord of Shen, to perform services at the clan shrine of the Duke of Zhou to the two late Dukes. I dared not fail to do so. Through the grace of the Duke of Tong, I may succor my late father by making bright the commands I have received from him. . . .²²

(*Jicheng* 4330)

²⁰This is not to say that these inscriptions are not artful in a literary sense. Shaughnessy's analysis of the *Qiu pan* as a carefully constructed montage reveals the authorial care that lies behind its composition.

²¹Inscriptions of this form have been studied as a group by Chen Yingjie, *Xi-Zhou jinwen zuoqi yongtu mingci yanjiu*, vol. 2, pp. 818-35.

²²I give here a version of these opening phrases only to illustrate the form of text I am referring to, without pursuing philological discussion. There are a number of interesting issues that have been raised about this inscription. Not the least is whether the title "Lord of Shen" 沈子 should not instead be read "I, a sincere son," a point first suggested by Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 (see Chen Yingjie, *Xi-Zhou jinwen zuoqi yongtu mingci yanjiu*, vol. 2, pp. 838-39).

This is a statement that seems to mark the occasion for the vessel, reveal its originality to the vessel inscription, and express a devotional motive directly addressed to an ancestral audience. (The vessel is, in fact, dedicated to Tuo's father.)

Another vessel, the *Shu Huanfu you*, roughly contemporary in date, takes a similar literary form for a purpose that seems entirely secular.

弔釴父曰余考不
克御事唯女筮期敬
辭乃身母尚為小子余
覲為女茲小斲彝女期
用鄉乃辟軹戾逆滂
出內事人烏虜
筮敬戎茲小彝妹
吹見余唯用謀儻女

Shu Huanfu said, "I am old and unable to manage affairs. You, Shu, should attentively order your person. Do not continue to act as a youth! I give you this small wine vessel. You should use it to feast your ruler Zhi Hou as you receive orders, coming and going in service to his person. Oh, Shu! Be attentive! Let this small vessel never be discarded. Bringing me to mind as you employ it, may it provide you drink."²³
(*Jicheng* 5429)

This vessel is a testamentary admonishment, inscribed without explicit reference to the ancestral cult, wholly original to the vessel and personal in expression although, with the possible exception of the final line, conventional in wording. (If my somewhat speculative reading of that difficult line is correct, however, the close would appear imaginative and innovative.) Though cast in bronze and so perhaps borrowing the "rhetorical pitch" of religious practice, this is in fact

²³I have relied on the *Mingwen xuan* commentary (vol. 3, #85; p. 61) and Chen Yingjie, *Xi-Zhou jinwen zuoqi yongtu mingci yanjiu*, vol. 2, pp. 561-64. I diverge from both in my reading of the difficult final line, which I break differently, taking 見余唯用 as a phrase, rather than isolating the first two characters ("Look at me," perhaps). The *Mingwen xuan* reads the text as an elder brother addressing a younger, likely following Li Xueqin (who, Chen reports, reads 余覲 as *yu xiong* 余兄: "I, your elder brother"). Chen reads the graph as *huang* 皇 or *guang* 光, both in the sense of *guangchong* 光寵: "to favor with." That fits well, but it seems to me more elegant simply to read the graph as *kuang* 覲, which also permits what seems to me the more natural interpretation of the vessel master as a father addressing his son.

a genre of text distinct from the vast majority of bronze inscriptions.²⁴ That both this and the *Zuoce Yi you* date from early in the dynasty may be a reflection on the increasing tendencies towards standardization that seem to follow with the era of the ritual reform.

If we were to explore issues of authorial voice and literary art in bronze inscriptions in an organized way, vessels whose inscriptions begin with formulas in the form “X *yue*” would seem a fruitful corpus to examine.

A different type source that clearly bears on these issues is the unique genre of bells, which also frequently take the form of “X *yue*” inscriptions. Bells enter the inscribed bronze corpus during the middle portion of the Western Zhou, and their texts follow different principles because of the unique function of bells in ritual performance (the feature of bells that most drew the interest of Kern, who has published so much on the performative nature of early texts). Bell inscriptions typically include conspicuous onomatopoeia, rhymes are far more frequent, and self-referential passages bearing on the musical nature of the objects are common. The language of devotion tends to be much more prominent on bells than on vessels of food and drink. For example, the *Xing Ren Ning zhong* 井人佞鐘, dating from the mid-ninth century, bears an inscription whose occasion is no more than a celebration of ancestors through the casting of the bells themselves:

Ren Ning of Jing said, “Bright and pure my patterned grandfather and august father. They were able to make bright their virtue in full integrity and grace, and lived their full measure of years in good fortune. I, Ning, dare not fail to emulate the austere (*mumu* 穆穆) grasp of virtue of my patterned grandfather and august father. I earnestly bear in mind (*xianxian* 饗饗) their sagely rectitude rooted in our clan shrine. Wherefore was cast this *lin*-bell for Hefu, so as to pursue filial service pleasing to my patterned forebears. May my patterned forebears look down from above and, chiming *fengfeng* 豐豐 *chanchan* 臯臯, shower upon me blessings

²⁴As Chen Yingjie notes, the vessel is unusual in bearing an inscription that is itself the occasion for the vessel’s creation (*Xi-Zhou jinwen zuoqi yongtu mingci yanjiu*, vol. 1, p. 178, note 8).

without measure. May I live forever, and may my descendants ever treasure and receive this vessel's pleasure."²⁵

(*Jicheng* 109-112)

This inscription shows a number of features of bell compositions as a somewhat different ground generic ground for texts. The prominent role of ancestral descriptions, the use of reduplicative terms in those descriptions (neither of these features, of course, confined to bells), onomatopoeics associated with bell sounds, and, not visible in this translation, rhyme.

This is not universally true; some bell inscriptions are generically indistinguishable from food vessel inscriptions, or nearly so. For example, the recently recovered and much noted bells of Jin Hou Su 晉侯蘇 devote virtually the entirety of their long, composite inscription to recounting the circumstances of war and reward that would typically be found on a large tureen, cauldron, or basin.²⁶ Of the inscription's approximately 350 characters, only a section about twenty-five words in length alerts us that this is a bell inscription by including self-referential onomatopoeic language and so forth, and, unlike many bells, the devotional language is minimal.

A more typical example would be the recently recovered *Rongsheng bianzhong* 戎生編鐘, a composite inscription of about 150 characters, which also belongs, with the slight irregularity of placing a date at the outset, to the subset of inscriptions beginning with a speech by the vessel master. The *Rongsheng bianzhong*, unlike the *Xing Ren Ning zhong*, combines a largely devotional text with the brief narration of an event occasioning the bells casting.

隹十又一月乙亥。戎生曰：休台皇且憲公，桓桓、翼翼，啟厥明心，廣經其猷，臧禹穆天子肅肅，用建于茲外土，適司蠻戎，用幹不廷方。至于台皇考邵伯，緩緩、穆穆，懿善不替。召匹晉侯，用龔王令，令余弗段廢其顯光，對揚其大福，劓遣鹵責，俾譖征鯨湯，取厥吉金，用乍寶協鐘。厥音雍雍、鎗鎗、鏘鏘、哀哀、驚驚，既蘇獻盥。余用邵追孝于

²⁵I use the *Xing Ren Ning zhong* here simply to illustrate generic features, and so I am not providing a full philological analysis of this well known text.

²⁶For a full transcription and translation, see Jaehoon Shim, "The Jinhou Su *Bianzhong* Inscription and its Significance," *Early China* 22 (1997), pp. 43-75.

皇且皇考，用祈卓眉壽。戎生其萬年無疆，黃耇又耄，峻保其子孫永寶用。²⁷

Eleventh month on the *xinhai* day. Rongsheng said, “How fine, my august grandfather Xian Gong. All-awesome (*huanhuan*) and all-reverent (*yi*) he opened his brilliant mind and broadly laid out his plans. In excellent accord with the deeply spirit-like intention of the solemn Son of Heaven he thereupon established his settlement in this distant region, guiding and controlling the Man and Rong peoples by attacking any who did not obey. Then it came to my august father Zhao Bo, all-grand (*huanhuan*) and all-solemn (*mumu*), morally fine without flaw. Aiding Jin Hou, he sustained the order of the king. He ordered me never to dare to deviate from his shining brilliance. I have celebrated the great fortune of my forbears by forcefully dispatching those guarding the salt stores to make a side attack against Fantang, capturing their precious metals. Therewith I have cast these precious co-harmonious bells. Their tones are *yongyong*, *qiangqiang*, *yongyong*, *ai'ai*, *ao'ao*, both harmonious and fine. With them I brightly pursue my filial duty to my august grandfather and august father, seeking grand longevity, that I Rongsheng may have ten thousand years without end, to white haired age and beyond, and that my sons and grandsons may be vigorously protected as they treasure them forever.

The *Rongsheng bianzhong* can serve as a model bell inscription, mediating between those bell texts that are solely directed towards self-referential celebration of the musical qualities of the bell and those that use bells for more ordinary inscriptional purposes, merely nodding briefly to the exceptional nature of bells, in the manner of the *Jin Hou Su bianzhong*. While the inscription makes mention of the event that occasions the casting of the bells – the seizure of metals in the attack on Fantang – the focus, like many bell inscriptions, is on devotional praise of

²⁷The transcription choices are largely based on Hu Changchun 胡長春, *Xinchu Yin-Zhou qingtongqi mingwen zhengli yu yanjiu* 新出殷周青銅器銘文整理語研究 (Beijing: 2008), vol. 1, pp. 98-103, as well as Liu Yu 劉雨 and Lu Yan 盧岩, *Jinchu Yin-Zhou jinwen jilu* 新出殷周金文集錄 (Beijing: 2002), vol. 1 p. 41. Hu's collection includes notes on selected issues raised by Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, Li Xueqin 李學勤, and Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, who wrote commentary articles on the vessel published in the Poly Museum catalogue volume to which I have not yet gained access. A detailed discussion appears in Li Xueqin, “*Rongsheng bianzhong* shilun,” *Wenwu* 文物 1999.9, pp. 75-82. Li dates the vessel to 740 BCE, which would place it just outside the Western Zhou time frame of my discussion. In terms of the issues I raise, however, I do not think even this wide difference is germane.

I would normally expect to provide the transcription of the CHANT online website for characters without modern equivalents, but in the case of this inscription there are systematic errors throughout. Rather than type a clutter of unreadable composites, I am supplying readings based on Hu Changchun, in many cases selecting glosses provided by Hu or the commentators he cites. In light of space considerations, the transcription does not accord with the line breaks of the inscription, lines being very short, as is true for most bells. I have added punctuation to clarify my reading.

ancestors and a setting of the ordinary liturgical prayer in the context of an evocation of the musical qualities of the bell. The formal constraints of composition generally exceed the norm for most sacrificial vessels; for example, the musical section and at least portions of the final prayer section are rhymed (鐘 *toŋ; 雍 *ʔoŋ; 鋪 *loŋʔ / 驚 *ŋâu; 盥 *tiau / 老 *khûʔ; 壽 *duʔ;).²⁸ It may be that extra care in creating parallel prosody has been given to the reduplicated descriptors early in the inscription as well, if these have been appropriately interpreted (桓桓翼翼 *wânwan ləklək; 緩緩穆穆 *wânʔwânʔ mukmuk).

The manner in which the format of the *Rongsheng bianzhong* affects the inscription can be measured in some respects by comparing it to an entirely independent cauldron inscription, the *Jin Jiang ding* 晉姜鼎, which, as Li Xueqin has pointed out, recounts an overlapping set of events, including the seizure of metals from Fantang.²⁹ The *Jin Jiang ding* inscription, which is in the voice of the chief consort of the late ruler of Jin, is almost as long as the *Rongsheng bianzhong* (about 120 words), and shares many of the formal characteristics of the bell inscription. It too begins with the vessel master speaking, and shares so many features of vocabulary and calligraphy that one may wonder whether the composition and inscription were the products of a single scribe and calligrapher. Comparison of the two texts indicates that in this case, the effects of distinct vessel media is, after all, not profound. The *Jin Jiang ding* does not, of course, include onomatopoeics, nor does it seem to include rhyme. Its account of events is

²⁸The final lines do not seem to be rhymed (疆 *kaŋ; 盥 *dît [*lîtʔ]; 用 *loŋh), although the first and last of these likely resonated. The graph *die* 盥 is one suggested by Li Xueqin for an unknown character that is substantially different in the graph of its apparent phonetic element. Although I have borrowed Li's gloss because it fits semantically, it is probably best to consider the specific word and phonetic value unknown. Phonetic reconstructions are based on Axel Scheussler, *Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese* (Honolulu: 2009).

²⁹*Jicheng* 2826; *Mingwen xuan*, #885, v.4, pp.585-86. For Li's discussion, see "Rongsheng bianzhong lunshi," pp. 80-81.

somewhat more detailed than the *Rongsheng bianzhong*, about twice as long, but still forms only a minor part of the inscription.

This comparison cannot be taken to reflect a general rule concerning the effects of the bell medium on inscriptional content, however. For example, a comparison of the various inscriptions associated with the mid-ninth century vessel master Xing 癩, part of the extensive Wei clan cache from Zhuangbai, shows that food vessels and bells were put to very different uses in terms of inscriptions, with the food vessels including narration of award occasions for casting, sometimes in standard template, sometime in the “X yue” format, and the bells confined to devotional celebration.³⁰ On the other hand, as noted above, the *Jin Hou Su bianzhong* bell inscription is barely affected by the medium in which it cast.

For all the artfulness and devotional emphasis of the rhetorical “ground” for bell inscriptions as a generic template, these inscriptions do not stand out as loci for innovations of personal authorship. Moreover, comparison of the *Rongsheng bianzhong* and *Jin Jiang ding*, despite some differences, suggest that the “X yue” format may not in itself be a signal of any special degree of personalistic expression on the part of the vessel master. The *Rongsheng bianzhong* indicates that though the form of first-person narration may in some instances signal a true authorial voice, it can equally become a vehicle for standard convention.

Ultimately, it may be that indications of literary artistry, personal expression, or exceptional devotional immediacy, all beyond the evolving but confining “ground” of normal generic expectations cannot be predicted from any easily discernable subset of the corpus.

³⁰I have added these comments on the Xing vessels late, on the basis of a brief and incomplete survey, including the *Shisan nian Xing hu* 十三年癩壺 (*Jicheng* 9723), the *Sanshi nian Xing hu* 三十年癩壺 (*Jicheng* 9724), and the *Xing xu* 癩盪 (*Jicheng* 4462), relatively brief inscriptions that conform to the narrative award-occasion template, the *Xing gui* 癩簋 (*Jicheng* 4170), a short “X yue” form inscription that combines a brief encomium to the ancestors with a standard award notice and *guci*, and three *Xing zhong* 癩鐘 inscriptions (*Jicheng* 246, 247, 251-56), all distinct, only one of which (247) includes notice of royal award. Falkenhausen discusses one of the Xing bell inscriptions and its relation to temple ceremony in *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius*, pp. 294-95.

However, as in the cases of the *Ying Hou gui gai*, *Bin Gong xu*, *Zuoce Yi you*, and *Shu Huanfu you*, we may find evidence of direct and individual composition scattered throughout the corpus, and assembling a fuller inventory would surely provide more insight into possibilities of literary expression beyond the range of generic options.

A final example: the *Zhong gui*

I'd like to close this brief essay with an example from a well-known inscription, the mid-tenth century *Zhong gui* 戎簋.

Outside of the most standardized body of inscriptions, those describing the *ce ming* ceremony, bronze texts vary widely in the amount of detail they include in sections narrating the temporal and circumstantial contexts for events that occasion the casting of a bronze. Some texts provide exceptional detail (many battle and booty descriptions provide examples), but in most cases, the motive of the narrative seems to be a straightforward inventory of ceremonial or military acts, enhanced primarily with intensifying adverbs and adjectives. The *Ying Hou gui gai* would be an example, when it speaks of “*multitudinous* subjects,” and an adversary who “*increasingly*” rises up, “*broadly* attacking.” When rhetoric of this kind proliferates to the degree it does in bronze inscriptions, it becomes part of the ground of narrative description, its impact likely attenuated by common use, and a mark of convention rather than vivid narration.³¹

The *Zhong gui*, however, seems to interrupt an otherwise at least semi-formulaic battle narration with a passage that seems exceptional on both literary and devotional grounds, both

³¹I don't mean to imply that narrative sections of inscriptions would not be a valuable source for locating features of literary interest; I just have not made such a survey. One inscription that very obviously invites analysis of its extraordinary narration is the early tenth-century *Xiao Yu ding* 小盂鼎 (*Jicheng* 2839), which despite the regrettable illegibility of much of the extant rubbing is perhaps the outstanding Western Zhou example of non-formulaic and detailed narration, including what may be efforts at verisimilitude. Inscriptions such as the *Mai zun* 麥尊 (*Jicheng* 6015) and the *Ling ding* 令鼎 (*Jicheng* 2803) are among many that seem to show literary inventiveness in description.

providing the narration with a far more powerful literary thrust than is normally seen, and suggesting devotional elements well beyond the standard expressions of ancestral cult inscriptions. This familiar passage is indicated in italics below, within the context of the full inscription.

It was in the first period of the sixth month on the day *yiyou*, at the encampment at Tang. The Rong tribes attacked X. Zhong led the supervisors and the commanders, rushing to repulse the Rong at the woods of Yu, and striking them a blow at Hu. *My patterned mother guided with great care my every action, made my heart firm, and ever cloaked my person that I might conquer my enemies.*³² I took one hundred scalps, and captured two leaders along with many weapons: shields, spears, halberds, bows, quivers, arrows, battle clothes, and armor: altogether one hundred and thirty-five items. In addition, I captured one hundred and fourteen Rong troops. The blows of the troops inflicted no wounds upon Zhong's own body. Your son Zhong bows prostrate and dares to raise in thanks the blessed glory of his patterned mother. Wherefore was cast a precious sacrificial tureen for patterned mother Ri Geng. Let your son Zhong live ten thousand years that he may unstintingly day and night perform filial sacrifice to his patterned mother. May his descendants treasure this forever.

(*Jicheng* 4322)

The phrases in question suggest a religious vision of ancestral spirit attendance in action that we generally miss in early narrative accounts. Its force is enhanced if we read the companion *Zhong fang ding* 戎方鼎 (II) and follow Chen Yingjie's interpretation of it as a prayer for protection cast *in advance* of the campaign described in the *Zhong gui*:³³

Zhong said, "Oh! The King recalls Zhong's valorous late father Jia Gong, and thus has the King caused your son Zhong to lead the tiger braves to repulse the Rong of Huai." Zhong said, "Oh! My patterned father Jia Gong and my patterned mother Ri Geng! May your grace and example ever make firm the heart of your son Zhong and ever cloak the person of Zhong, that he may continue in service to the Son of Heaven. May you grant that your son Zhong may serve the Son of Heaven for ten thousand years. Let no harm touch upon his person." Zhong bowed prostrate and raised in thanks the charge of the King. Wherefore was cast this precious sacrificial

³²The passage translates the following phrases: 朕文母競敏駉行，休宥厥心，永襲厥身，卑克厥咎。

³³ See Cang Yingjie, *Xi-Zhou jinwen zuoqi yongtu mingci yanjiu*, vol. 2, p. 821. Although Cang's intriguing interpretation seems consistent with the inscription, the more usual interpretation of the inscription as cast after a battle is also cogent.

vessel for patterned mother Ri Geng, that Zhong may solemnly night and day filially sacrifice to her and be blessed; may his descendants forever treasure this merit.

(*Jicheng* 2824)

The Zhong inscriptions may be read as evidence of “Western Zhou religious beliefs,” but I suspect they are better regarded as exceptions, showing a higher or at least somewhat distinct range of devotional engagement than was the norm.³⁴ The Zhong vessels, as devotional pieces, reminds us that within the larger Zhou polity there unquestionably existed a diversity of cultural traditions even among lineages that shared signature Zhou practices, such as inscribing bronze vessels intended for rites of ancestral sacrifice, as well as differences among individuals that may lie behind exceptional elements that contribute to the literary and devotional profiles of the memorial inscriptions from the Western Zhou period.

³⁴Zhong was Bo 伯 of the state of Lu 魯, and he elsewhere refers to his father as a king: Li Wang 釐王. While the title of king was not, in practice, entirely confined to the Zhou ruler, though in theory it may have been, it is an exceptional usage and may signal that the rulers of Lu (of whom we have inscriptions from several generations) represented a cultural or ethnic lineage distinct from those in the Zhou mainstream.