

THE RE-DISCOVERY OF PRE-CONFUCIAN CHINA

BY HERRLEE GLESSNER CREEL

SIX YEARS ago a young student of things Chinese spoke to one of the world's greatest Sinologists of a project which he had in mind for the study of ancient Chinese culture, based chiefly on inscriptions on bronze vessels, etc. The Sinologist was almost scornful as he replied, "Study Chinese culture from ancient inscriptions? Why, there is no material!" As sometimes happens even to the great, he was partly wrong. Yet he was largely right—six years ago.

If the same undertaking were spoken of today, one would have to say: "Very well, but you must work fast. For there is so much material, and so many new things come to light almost every month, and the literature of interpretation of the material is growing so rapidly, that it will soon be impossible for any single person to have even a thorough general understanding of the whole field."

To say that the years since 1928 have seen more progress toward an understanding of China before Confucius than any like period in history would be a gross understatement. To say that the last twenty years have witnessed a greater advance than did the two thousand preceding them might seem an exaggeration, yet it would be no more than the truth. While the civil wars and disorders of the last decades have been doing their work of destruction, a very small army of scholars has been patiently at work building a new conception of the beginnings of their people's culture. And it is probable that their work will ultimately prove to have more influence, even on the political fate of China, than all the fighting of the generals.

One of the most important aspects of the Chinese situation is a very wide-spread "defeatist psychology," a tendency to pessimistic, fatalistic resignation. The intellectual basis of this, in so far as it has one, lies in the traditional Chinese philosophy of history, which has held the world to be gradually degenerating from a "golden age" in the remote past. In that glorious period, it has been held, men were naturally good, and all men, even the foreign barbarians, were obedient to the Chinese emperor, appointed by Heaven to rule the world. But the men of the present are not equal to those of the past, and if the foreign nations not only do not obey China, but

even invade and appropriate her territory—well, it is no more than might be expected, according to this gloomy view.

But the new history is changing all this. It holds the “golden age” to be no more nor less than a myth. It depicts Chinese history as a process which has, to be sure, known setbacks, but which has been on the whole a glorious series of achievements, building civilization out of barbarism and welding a nation out of people who were, three thousand years ago, so many warring tribes. Inevitably it turns the faces of its disciples toward the future, not to sigh after but to emulate the achievements of their ancestors by scaling new heights. When this spirit has thoroughly permeated the Chinese people, as it certainly will in time, they will be a different factor in the world situation.

What are the causes which have led to this remarkable activity in historical research, which is bearing its finest fruits in the present decade? They are many, but among the most important are some archeological finds of great moment. The most important is the discovery of the capital city of the Shang state (usually called the Shang dynasty) at Anyang in northern Honan Province. This is the most important excavation ever made in Eastern Asia, and one of the most important in the entire world. Here, under the joint auspices of the National Research Institute (a Chinese government organization) and the Freer Gallery of Art, the city which was the center of Chinese culture from about the fourteenth to the twelfth centuries B.C. has been uncovered by trained archeologists. The foundations of buildings resembling the Greek temples in form, as much as ninety-two feet long and twenty-six feet wide, have been brought to light. Extensive remains of the various industries of these people, including that of bronze casting, have been found. This excavation has proved (what Chinese have maintained but foreign archeologists denied) that the bronze vessels cast by the Shang people were finer, technically and artistically, than those produced in the Chou period, and among the finest work of its sort ever produced anywhere. Associated with these remains were found thousands of records of divination, carved on bone in the oldest Chinese writing known. These contain the genealogy of the Shang kings, give us the chronology of the site, and enable us to correct existing historical records. Patient study of these inscriptions enables us to form a very fair picture of the life, the religion, and the ideas of the people who wrote them.

Within the last two years the National Research Institute has also excavated a number of tombs (also located in Honan) of the rulers of the State of Wei, some of which may be as old as the eleventh century B.C. No report of these discoveries has yet been published, but from the verbal accounts of the excavators it is certain that this work will add tremendously to our knowledge of the period. Until about fifteen years ago it was considered doubtful that Neolithic men had lived in China, but within this period a large number of late Neolithic sites have been excavated by foreign and Chinese archeologists. Their research, which is still in full swing, has thrown a great deal of light on the origins of Chinese culture, and will throw still more.

The location of the Shang capital was first made known through the discovery, by farmers, of pieces of the inscribed bone already mentioned, which first came into the hands of scholars in 1899. It is eloquent of the almost insuperable prejudice which opposes archeological excavation in China that no scientific digging was done on the site until almost thirty years later. In the meantime more than one hundred thousand pieces of the inscribed bone and tortoise shell, dug up by peasants, came into the hands of scholars. Forgery flourished, and there are false inscriptions in collections of this material abroad as well as in China. But the trained eye can distinguish, and the scientific excavations at Anyang disposed finally of the contention, made in China and abroad, that none of the inscriptions were genuine.

When these ancient writings were first discovered it was impossible for scholars to read them. The story of their decipherment by the brilliant yet infinitely painstaking labors of many scholars, almost all of them Chinese, during the last thirty-five years is one of the most noteworthy pages in the history of scholarship. But it is only very recently indeed that this work has made the Shang inscriptions clear enough to us so that we can make extensive use of them to study Shang culture. Mr. Tung Tso-pin's paper establishing a method of dating individual inscriptions was published only in 1933. In it, he gives credit for valuable suggestions to Prof. James M. Menzies, a Canadian scholar living in China.

Decipherment of the bone writings would have been almost impossible had some Chinese scholars not already been familiar with archaic characters through study of bronze inscriptions. In China we have had the paradox that there was a large body of trans-

mitted literature, supposed to be from the pre-Confucian period, which could be read well enough but which was of very dubious authenticity, while in inscriptions on bronze vessels there was a large and undoubtedly genuine literature which could not be read sufficiently to make it available as historical material. The number and length of these inscriptions has hardly been suspected by any save a few Chinese specialists. From the Western Chou period (1122?-771 B.C.) alone we have, eliminating forgeries, at least eight inscriptions of from 150 to 500 characters, at least sixteen others of more than a hundred characters, and scores having less than this number but long enough to give very valuable information. Chinese scholars have been studying them for a thousand years, and it was suggested even in the Sung dynasty that they could make valuable contributions to history. But this contribution has been effectively possible, for the most part, only within the present decade.

This delay has been due to various causes, among which the authoritarian nature of Chinese scholarship has been important. There have, it is true, been vigorously original minds from time to time throughout the centuries, and they have been influential. But there has been too much tendency, especially during the Manchu dynasty, to follow blindly the principles laid down by scholars of the Han period (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). Too often these scholars revelled in the most forced and improbable interpretations, and they labored under the handicap of possessing less of authentic material from the very ancient period than we have today. It is only as Chinese scholars in considerable number have come to dare to make their own interpretations based directly on the source materials, contravening tradition if necessary, that marked progress has been possible. Much of the credit for this change must be given to the influence of Western scientific method. But it must be remarked that the most notable achievements in the study of their history have not been made by Chinese who have studied abroad. Almost entirely they have been the work of men who spoke no Occidental language, but who were influenced indirectly by foreign method. It was inevitable that an iconoclastic spirit, opposed to traditionalism but almost equally unscientific, should have been the first fruit of this cross-fertilization. But this is passing very rapidly. In its place there has grown up among a large group of Chinese scholars, during the past five years especially, a truly scientific spirit, intent solely on the search for truth and willing to follow wherever it may lead. This



A COURT GATEWAY
Forbidden City Palace, Peking.

is as yet hardly appreciated outside of China. It has been one of the prime reasons for the present rediscovery of the past.

Even more important than traditionalism in delaying the full utilization of the bronze inscriptions has been the fact that the forms of Chinese characters used in pre-Confucian times were very different from those used during the last two thousand years. How different may be judged from the fact that a celebrated European Sinologist wrote as late as 1923 that a group of scholars who flourished around 200 B.C. changed Chinese writing to something like the form we have now and in fact "created a new, comparatively simple and practical system of writing." Recent research shows that this statement is quite mistaken. Even the Shang bone inscriptions of more than three thousand years ago embody every important principle of the formation of Chinese characters now in use, and the language has developed steadily and gradually from that time. But the gaps in our knowledge have been tremendous—so great in fact that Chinese scholars, studying the bronze writings for a thousand years, have been able, to be sure, to make out the majority of the characters, but were unable to make translations complete and correct enough to make them really available as historical documents.

That the correspondence of ancient characters to modern forms has finally been worked out to a large degree is due to the researches of hundreds of men who have worked patiently, during the centuries, at inscriptions on all sorts of ancient objects: bronze vessels, weapons, coins, seals and impressions of seals, weights, pottery, inscribed stones, and so forth. But their results have lain to a large extent fallow, in books designed for specialists in their various fields. A new impulse to paleographic research, as well as valuable new material, was given by the discovery of the Shang oracle bones. And in recent years a small number of scholars have combined the results of these various lines of approach and brought them to bear, in the light of the new scientific method, on the bronze inscriptions. They have succeeded in interpreting these documents to such a degree that, while occasional characters or phrases or whole sentences still elude us, the great body of this material is perfectly clear and understandable. But that they could be read by specialists did not yet make these inscriptions available as material for the scholar who seeks to reconstruct ancient Chinese culture. For such a one must not only be able to read bronzes; he must also know

the quite different script of the Shang oracle bones, be thoroughly conversant with a large literature and its problems, and be well posted concerning all developments of excavations. He has not time to spend weeks in the study of each of the hundreds of bronze inscriptions with which he must deal, determining whether it is genuine and what is its date, and unravelling the difficulties of its particular text. Only after such studies of each of the most important inscriptions, made by specialists, had been published could this material be considered available for general historical research. And this has been true for only a very short time indeed.

Now that the historian has these inscriptions, what is their value to him? In the first place, they constitute a large number of contemporary records, cast in unalterable bronze—patents of nobility, records of gifts of lands by the kings and other nobles, records of land transfers, treaties, judicial decisions, moral homilies, descriptions of religious ceremonies, memorials of military expeditions, and so forth. Equally important, they provide the only sure touchstone by which the transmitted literature which has been supposed to date from the very early period can be tested. Up to this time the criteria of criticism have been largely subjective, so that the judgments of scholars have varied widely. We are able to determine however, that many of the bronze inscriptions contain verbatim copies of royal decrees, written in the early Chou period. By studying the vocabulary, the syntax, the use of certain prepositions, figures of speech and phrases employed, the range of philosophical and religious ideas and the political institutions reflected in these writings, and comparing them in these respects with the transmitted books, it is possible to determine beyond serious question which books, or portions of them, are genuine and which are not, and to date them within a few centuries. Some of the books are so like certain bronze inscriptions that they might have been written by the same hand on the same day; others, for various reasons obviously forgeries, are as different as they can be.

The net result of all this is that students of ancient Chinese culture now possess, for the first time, a corpus of indubitably genuine, dated materials, consisting of bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, and authenticated books, from which it is possible to reconstruct the culture of pre-Confucian times to a very considerable extent. The new view of antiquity has provided many surprises. The deity T'ien, "Heaven," supposed to be anciently Chinese,

now appears to have been a divinity of the Chou people, who were "barbarians" until they took up Chinese culture and conquered the Shangs, when T'ien became an element of Chinese culture. China itself, as a united state, seems to be no older than the Chou dynasty. Before this time there were only a number of separate, warring states. The Shang and the Hsia, traditionally called Chinese dynasties, might better be called states. Feudalism in China seems to have begun only with the Chou period, and followed a course which is amazingly similar, even down to certain details, to that of European feudalism. Certain types of philosophical thinking which have been supposed to be quite ancient, such as the concepts surrounding the "five elements" (*wu hsing*) and the Yin and Yang, hardly appear in the pre-Confucian period.

Up to the present it has been customary, because we could not do otherwise, to accept the social and political philosophy of the time of Confucius as a *fait accompli*, with little inquiry into its origins and development. Chinese tradition has read it back into the remote ages even of myth and legend. Because this social and political philosophy has functioned as a basic norm for later China, we have tended to think of it as static. The new discoveries have changed all this. We are able now to push our investigation almost a millenium back of Confucius. We know a time, only a few centuries before the sage, when the seats of honor and the reins of power were held, not by scholars, but by military men. We are able to trace the rise of the influence of the literary class, the development of its tradition, and the growth, under its auspices, of humanitarian tendencies. We can sketch the rise of democratic ideas, of the stewardship theory of the Chinese monarchy, and of the doctrine of the right of revolution.

The task of the reconstruction and interpretation of this culture is proceeding at a constantly accelerating pace. At present, and for some time to come, it will be impossible to keep abreast of these developments unless one is living and working in China. An instance from the experience of the writer will illustrate this. It has been mentioned that the deity "Heaven" was unknown during the Shang period. This is contrary to all traditional scholarship, Chinese and foreign; it has been shown only by the Shang oracle bones. For several years this has been a moot question among specialists in the bone inscriptions, because there are certain characters resembling "Heaven" on the bones. No one could take the time to run through

the more than ten thousand published inscriptions in search of this one character. But a Chinese scholar has made an analytic index of about two-thirds of the inscriptions. With the generosity characteristic of Chinese scholars, he made his manuscript available to the writer a year ago. Given this, it was comparatively simple to run through the rest of the material, definitely prove that this deity was unknown to the Shang people, and determine its origin from other sources. This in turn made it possible to direct subsequent research into fruitful channels. But the publication of this index is just taking place as this is written. Had the writer not been in China he would not yet have seen this work, and he would probably have wasted a great deal of time during the last year in following blind alleys. This is merely one of many such instances which could be cited.

From this time forward all students of Chinese culture who must work without a good general knowledge of the new discoveries labor under a more or less serious handicap. It is very unlikely that such a knowledge will be made available to Western students by the Chinese scholars working in the field. For the most part they write no language but Chinese. Even the four volumes of reports of the Anyang excavations are in Chinese, and not even a summary exists in any other language. Even in Chinese, the publications in this field are often highly technical. If this material is to be made available to the Occident generally within the next decade, it will probably have to be done by Western scholars, thoroughly versed in the field, living in China and taking part in this research, and publishing its fruits in Western languages. This is a fact which should engage the serious attention of all those who believe a deeper understanding of the people and problems of the Far East to be either necessary or desirable.

The pre-Confucian period is not of interest merely to antiquarians. Some of the most important contributions which China can make to the West lie in the field of the theory and practice of government and social control, and here we can study these things at their fountain-head. In China the bearing of the past upon the present is unusually great, partly because of conservatism but even more because Chinese culture has not undergone the disruptive catastrophes which have broken continuity elsewhere. It is highly desirable and sometimes even necessary to know this formative period of her culture in order to understand the social and political

forces at work in the China of later times and even of the present day. In it we see part of the origins of Japanese culture as well. And this analysis of the development of Chinese ideas and institutions, when made available, will provide valuable comparative material for students in other fields.