

Alliance-Building at the Dawn of Chinese Civilization

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Two main dimensions of the late Shang state (ca. 1200-1045 B.C.) characterized the early Chinese civilization, although it was not China's first dynastic state:¹ that it was a dynastic state instead of a chiefdom, and that it preserved written records on oracle-bone inscriptions (OBI), which recorded diverse and well-organized human activities during a period of more than 270 years when Anyang was its capital (14th century B.C. – 11 century B.C.). The Shang state developed conceptions of sovereignty with the Shang king and his Zi 子-clan as the political center, which ruled a “territory” of the center (the Shang core, *da yi Shang* 大邑商, the Great Settlement Shang), hundreds of royal and non-royal lineage-settlements (*zu yi* 族邑), and various allied Shang and non-Shang settlement-states, the so-called *fang* 方-states (*fangguo* 方國).² In all of this the

¹ According to the consensus of contemporary scholars the Xia dynasty (2070-1600 BC) existed before the Shang. Wang Yuxin 王宇信 and Xu Yihua 徐義華, *Shangdai guojia yu shehui* 商代國家與社會 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 2011), p. 46.

² The Shang territory cannot be conceived as a defined and bounded territory, but was rather a reminiscent of Swiss cheese in that it was dotted with numerous settlement-polities. David Keightley, “The Shang state as seen in the oracle-bone inscriptions,” *Early China* 5 (1979/80), p. 26 and Shu-hui Wu, “Fighting for His Majesty: Accretion of the Greater Shang,” *Journal of Chinese Military History* 1, 1 (2012), p. 27.

Shang had a mature bureaucratic system and a large body of aristocrats and officials for governance.

The Shang king was the sole leader of his own lineage and those of his wives and his descendants, and through his superior and powerful armed forces he controlled military affairs and monopolized direct access to the High God, various nature gods, and ancestors during sacrificial ceremonies. Although the Shang king wielded power as the supreme military and religious ruler, he was never an autocrat, and the late Shang state did not by any means develop into a centralized government. The art of building alliances and consolidating their bonds enhanced the supreme power of the king and made it possible for the late Shang state to have an extremely expanding war machine under its internal control.

It is a challenge to translate the term *fangguo* because it was a particular geopolitical entity differing from a city-state and a tribal organization. A *fangguo* could be considered a polity that consisted of several settlements, *yi* 邑, depending on its size and power. It was, however, not a city-state that had a socially and economically well-developed polity as the center, which was then surrounded by rural villages, as we normally perceive. Neither was it a simple tribal society because of its own leader, armies, bureaucracy, and territory contiguous to or far away from the Shang, and it was certainly a hierarchical society.³ The relationship between the Shang and the *fang*-states was unstable, sometimes at peace and sometimes at war. Basically, the Shang won the upper hand and brought the *fang*-states under control because of its superior military power. But this did not always involve coercion, as most modern scholars believe. Instead, three ways the Shang king had of building alliances emerge when we scrutinize representative OBI, analyze archaeological reports, and investigate modern scholarship: marriage between the royal and other lineages, political cooperation and economic arrangements within the Shang lineages, and conquest of enemy or recalcitrant *fang*-states.

It was common practice for Shang kings and aristocrats to marry more than one wife, as evidenced in oracular records and excavation sites where one aristocratic man and two or more women were buried in one tomb along with bronze vessels, jade,

³ Lin Yun 林沄, "Jiaguwen zhong de shangdai fangguo lianmeng 甲骨文中的商代方國聯盟," *Guwenzi yanjiu* 6 (1981), pp. 90-91.

weapons, cooking ware, and wine.⁴ In oracle bone and bronze inscriptions modern historians have identified twenty-eight consorts of Shang kings' who were called "bi 妣 X" and another 168 royal consorts and aristocratic women who had the title of "fu 婦X" or "X fu."⁵ It is said that the celebrated King Wu Ding 武丁 (ca. 1200-1181 B.C.) had about ten consorts,⁶ among whom Lady Fu Hao 婦好 receives most of our attention because of the dazzling excavation work on her tomb.⁷ These consorts and aristocratic women suggest an alliance between the Shang king and his consort's homeland or lineage, as well as the Shang state with other *fang*-states.

OBI indicate that the consorts of many Shang kings were active in late Shang political, religious, economic, and military arenas. Their importance is reflected in several dimensions: they bore the heir for the king, their states offered tribute and military assistance to the king, they sometimes participated in or even held sacrificial ceremonies for the king, some of them were in charge of preparing turtle shells or oracular inquiries, and most important and unusual of all, they were involved in Shang warfare.⁸ Several OBI record that King Wu Ding inquired into the will or concurrence of the gods or his ancestors when he ordered Fu Hao to undertake certain military activities: She once was ordered to summon three thousand men and mobilize thirteen thousand men in a campaign; the king asked her to summon troops and to attack Shang's formidable enemy, the Tu 土-*fang* state; she received orders to serve as a troop commander and accompany Zhi Guo 沚臧, King Wu Ding's ally and general, in the war against the Ba 巴 *fang*-state; she led troops to attack the Yi 夷 *fang*-state on two occasions

⁴ Song Zhenhao 宋鎮豪, *Shangdai shehui shenghuo yu lisu 商代社會生活與禮俗* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 2010), p. 403.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The consorts *bi* were followed by personal names or ancient Chinese days such as *jia* 甲, *yi* 乙, and *bing* 丙, etc. The consorts *fu* had the names of the states or lineages from which they originated. Song Zhenhao (2010), pp. 404-405, 409. Some historians claim that King Wu Ding had sixty-four consorts and some claim that these women (over 200 of them) were not all the king's consorts but included aristocratic women. Wang Yuxin and Xu Yihua (2011), p. 129. Chen Jie 陳潔 believes that "X fu" indicates that they were aristocratic women and that the name of their husband was before their title of *fu*. Chen Jie, "Guanyu shangdai fuming yanjiu zhong de liangge wenti 關於商代婦名研究中的兩個問題," 2004 nian Anyang Yin Shang wenming guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwenji (Beijing: Shehui kexue, 2004), pp. 238. For this list of the names of these women see Wang Yuxin and Yang Shengnan, *Jiaguxue yibainian 甲骨學一百年* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian, 1999), pp. 448-449.

⁷ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo, *Yinxu Fu Hao mu 殷墟婦好墓* (Beijing, Wewu, 1980), 8.

⁸ Wang Yuxin and Xu Yihua (2010), p. 137.

at royal command.⁹ More OBI indicate that Fu Hao also participated in campaigns led by the king and assist him in battle.¹⁰ The other consort of King Wu Ding, Fu Jing 婦井, also twice received royal orders to lead troops to attack the Long 龍 *fang*-state.¹¹ From the frequency of participating in warfare and the commanding power the consorts possessed, modern historians have concluded that a hierarchical order existed among the consorts.

As recognized in OBI Lady Fu Hao had her own fief “*hao yi* 好邑” and headed her lineage.¹² She was the closest consort to the king and clearly enjoyed the highest political, military, and social status among Wu Ding’s women, as evidenced by the bronze axes, symbols of military commandership, discovered in her tomb. Lady Fu Jing stood next to Fu Hao in terms of her status and hierarchy. Fu Jing is mentioned in several OBI relating to agriculture activities, including planting, harvesting, and collecting grains.¹³ In the northwest Shang core there was a group of settlements that belonged to the lineage Jing, whose head named Jing Bo 井伯 and the Shang had once subdued a hostile *fang*-state named Jing.¹⁴ I assume that Jing became a Shang ally after being subdued, a very common practice in Shang’s expansionism, and that the king married one of their female members who was called Fu Jing. The lineage Jing resided and took roots in the Shang due to this marriage alliance after the king had granted several fiefs (*tun* 屯) to Fu Jing.¹⁵ King Wu Ding had queried the deities regarding the childbirths of both Fu Hao and Fu Jing. They were the only two consorts of King Wu Ding whose descendants worshipped them after their deaths.¹⁶

⁹ Yao, Xiaosui 姚孝遂 (ed.), *Yinxu jiagu keci moshi zongji* 殷墟甲骨刻辭摹釋總集. (Hereafter ZJ), 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1998), HJ 39902, 6412, 6479 正, pp. 6459, 6480.

¹⁰ HJ, p. 6480.

¹¹ HJ, p. 6585 正. Fu Jing was responsible for several other duties, including receiving and preparing turtle shells and other bones for sacrificial needs and agriculture activities, as evidenced in several OBI. Zhong Bosheng 鍾柏生, “Fu Jing buci ji qi xiangguan wenti de tantao 婦井卜辭及其相關問題的探討,” *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan*, 56, 1 (1985), pp. 124-125.

¹² Song Zhenhao (2010), p. 412.

¹³ HJ, pp. 9529, 9532, 9599, 40078. For more activities of other consorts see Chen Jie (2004), pp. 241-244.

¹⁴ OBI indicate that the Shang had once subdued the Jing “己巳貞執井方” (HI 33044). Yao Xiaosui (ed.) *Yinxu jiagu keci leizuan* 殷墟甲骨刻辭類纂 (hereafter LZ), p. 1105.

¹⁵ According to OBI, Fu Jing received various numbers of fiefs on different occasions, ranging from one to ten settlements. LZ, pp. 1105-1106. It is understood that the people residing in the fiefs also belonged to her.

¹⁶ Wang Yuxin and Xu Yihua (2011), pp. 147 & 149.

Shang marriage alliances were not limited to the king. Many Shang aristocrats and members of the royal family supported this political arrangement by marrying women from other settlement states inside or outside the Shang core and they married their daughters to other lineages or states as well in order to consolidate their political tie or military cooperation. The script for marriage (*qu* 取=娶) is recognizable in many OBI and is usually followed by the script for woman (*nú* 女). This type of marriage was often ordered by the king when he inquired whether he should demand that someone marry some woman from some state: “辛卯卜爭乎取鄭女子” “辛卯卜爭勿乎取鄭女子” (Crack-making on *xinmao* day. Diviner Zheng. Should the king order to marry the woman from Zheng?” “Crack-making on *xinmao* day. Diviner Zheng. The king should not order to marry the Zheng woman.” (HJ, page 536) The Shang king also married the women from his own family or clan to his allies or military commanders in order to achieve political or military goals. Interestingly, the Shang seemed to know the importance of not marrying its own family or clan members.

Marriage alliance was not the only way for the Shang king to consolidate internal cooperation and power. His sons, brothers, nephews, and uncles, who had their own lineages and resided in their own settlements, formed the so-called king's lineage (*wang zu* 王族) and many sub-lineages of the royal Zi (*duozi zu* 多子族) based on common bloodline. They served the king as advisers, officials, sacrificial organizers, and military commanders.¹⁷ Modern scholar Zhu Fenghan claims that the sons of reigning kings and former kings are recognizable in OBI by individual names followed the royal family name of Zi,¹⁸ such as Zi Yu 子漁 and Zi Yang 子央. These princes frequently accompanied King Wu Ding in his campaigns and hunts and participated in sacrificial ceremonies. Although these royal lineages and sub-lineages commanded their own

¹⁷ Wang Yuxin and Xu Yihua (2010), pp. 156-158.

¹⁸ Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚, *Shang Zhou jiazhu xingtai yanjiu 商周家族形態研究* (Tianjin: Guji, 2004), p. 81. Other scholars have identified various numbers of individuals who were royal members and named Zi-X, about 112 to 160. For their list see Wang Yuxin and Yang Shengnan (1999), pp. 452-453. Zhu claims that the princes did not belong to the king's lineage. Shen Changyun, however, argues that the many Zi sub-lineages and the Zi-X “princes” were all royal kin. Shen Changyun 沈長雲, “Shuo YinXu buci zhong de wangzu 說殷墟卜辭中的王族,” *Yidu xuekan* 1 (1998), p. 29. The former had a specific definition while the latter had a broader meaning, I conclude. Both Zhu and Shen concur that there were three groups of royal lineages.

lineage troops as well as commoners, laborers, and slaves from their own settlements,¹⁹ they were obliged to following the king's command (*hu* 乎), orders (*ling* 令), and demands (*qu* 取) in campaigns, hunting, and religious affairs. They utilized their land the king bestowed upon them, where they grew food and raised animals, but the king reserved the right to till the land in their territories, collect the harvest, and demand tribute. The royal lineages and many Zi sub-lineages also established alliances with originally non-Shang states, such as the Dagger-Axe (*ge zu* 戈族) and the Arrow-feather (*cha* 鬲), and through marriage or political arrangements they were brought into the Shang world, as indicated in the lineage insignia engraved in the bronze vessels excavated from Shang tombs in the capital city of Anyang. Modern scholars have identified more than a thousand lineage-insignias.²⁰ They submitted tribute to the king and supported Shang campaigns in return for protection and livelihoods in their own fiefs or states.²¹

The relationships between royal lineages were not always peaceful, and their political alliances do not seem to have been as stable as marriage alliances. Several OBI indicate that the king ordered his troop commanders to attack or pursue (*tu* 途 = 屠) some princes: “乙未卜賓貞令永途子央於南” (Crack-making on *yiwei* day. Diviner Bin. The king ordered Yong to attack Zi Yang in the south.) (HJ, page 6051/LZ, page 333), or “庚子貞王令畢途子畫” (Crack-making on *gengzi* day. Divined. The king ordered Bi to pursue Zi Hua.) (Tun, page 1115/LZ, page 333). Because the OBI are explanatory in nature, the causes and results of their conflicts remain unknown. It is noteworthy that the Shang king did not personally undertake attacks on his own kin but entrusted military commanders who were Shang aristocrats and allies such as Yong and Bi mentioned above. These aristocratic leaders played a crucial role in the Shang strategy of creating alliances and this requires further detailed investigation.

¹⁹ Shen Changyun (1998), p. 29.

²⁰ He Jingcheng 何景成, *Shang Zhou qingtongqi zushi mingwen yanjiu* 商周青銅器族氏銘文研究 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2009), p. 32.

²¹ The Shang king had once ordered five lineages stationed at Cha in order to protect it from invasion. (HI, p. 22054/LZ, p. 909).

The non-Zi aristocrats of the Shang and its allies could emerge as a result of conquest in addition to marriage arrangements and meritorious services.²² They were identified in several ways: Their names appear in OBI without the royal name Zi; there was a title of marquis (*hou* 侯) or earl (*bo* 伯) behind their personal names or names of their states/fiefs, or both; and they were represented simply by their *fang*-states. When they became Shang allies, their fiefs could be in the Shang core when the Shang king bestowed on them, but they could also remain in their states, depending on the distance and circumstances and if they needed to reside in the Great Settlement Shang at the service of the king. Leaders of allied states owned their own territories, were the sole rulers over their lineages and people, had rights to all property and productions, and possessed their own troops. The bronze vessels they possessed had engraved insignia of their lineage, highlighting their aristocratic power and independence. However, they carried the same obligations as the royal lineages and sub-lineages, such as bringing tribute, offering military assistance when the Shang launched a campaign, executing orders from the king, and accompanying the king in battle.²³ The king had the right to obtain natural resources and utilize or even give part of their lands to other states, but he could neither enter their territory at will nor interfere in their internal affairs.²⁴ The Shang aristocrats and allied *fang*-states had the additional duty of delivering captives,

²² The best example was Bi. OBI offer very much complete information regarding the process of subduing him and making his lineage serve the Shang. First the Bi *fang*-state was attacked by the Shang: “癸巳卜貞令伐途畢師” (Crack-making on guise day. Diviner Wan. The king ordered to attack the Bi army.) (HJ, p. 6051/LZ, p. 333), “... 卜萬貞令畱徒畢” (Crack-making on ... day. Diviner Wan. The king ordered Cha to attack Bi.) (HJ, p. 6049/LZ, p. 333). Bi later followed the king or led Shang troops to battle the Shang’s enemies. The king expressed his concerns and requested ancestral blessings: “壬戌貞畢以畱畱伐方受佑” (Crack-making on renxu day. Divined. Bi led Cha troops to attack Zhao-*fang* state. Will he receive blessings?) (Tun, p. 1099/LZ, p. 889), or “丁卯貞畢伐受佑” (On *dingmao* day. Divined. Bi is in battle[field]. Will he receive protection?) (HJ, p. 33116/LZ, p. 889). One of the princes was named Zi Bi 子畢, indicating that Bi was subdued and served the Shang. Perhaps one of his daughters married the king and they had a son named Zi Bi.

²³ For example, the king once ordered Wang Cheng, an allied aristocrat, to accompany him to battle: “貞王比望乘伐” (HJ, p. 6583/LZ, p. 888), or to accompany prince Zi Yu to invade the Hu 虎 *fang*-state in the south: “貞令望乘暨[子]輿徒虎方” (HJ, p. 6667/LZ, p. 333).

²⁴ Wang Zhenzhong 王震中, “Shangdai du bi yi luojie gou yu shangwang de tongzhi fangshi 商代都鄙邑落結構與商王的統治方式,” *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 4 (2007), p. 201.

slaves, and Qiang people for sacrificial purposes, in addition to guarding the Shang periphery, depending on their locations.²⁵

The titles of marquis and earl were combined with a name and appear in OBI in inconsistent ways. They were recognized sometimes as X Marquis/Earl (X *hou* 侯/X *bo* 伯) or Marquis X (*hou* 侯X/*bo* 伯 X), and the name (X) usually referred to a state, a lineage, or a person (generally the leader of a lineage or state). The leader of a *fangguo* was identified as an earl and the state could be friendly or hostile to the Shang. Although the marquis and earls had appeared inconsistently in OBI, their roles and functions in their own lineages and states were the same. Modern scholars have disputed their numbers as well. They identify some twenty-four to forty-nine marquis and twelve to forty-five earls.²⁶ In fact, neither their titles nor their numbers impacted the alliance status between them and the Shang. The Shang treated them at various levels, depending on their closeness to the Shang king, and their closeness to the king depended on their ability to serve him in addition to the degree of their connection to royal kin. These aristocratic allies contributed the most to Shang expansion when they either accompanied the king in battle or received royal orders to attack and annex other states.

Interestingly, some of these aristocratic allies participated in sacrificial ceremonies worshipping the Shang king's ancestors, a monopoly of the close Zi-clan. Marquis such as Bi, Cha, Wu 吳, Ai 愛, Que 雀, and Yi 壹 participated in royal sacrifices and sometimes even worshipped female royal ancestors, although their political hierarchy was below that of the princes. Modern historians explained that this was because they were not as close as the Zi-princes to the royal line.²⁷ I assume, however, that they could have been married to, or were the descendants of Shang female royal members, the Shang princesses. Their loyalty to the Shang was much more reliable and stable than that of the allied *fangguo*, as evidenced in the king's order to allied aristocrats to pursue the princes mentioned above. This type of conflict resolution was never entrusted to the *fangguo* leaders. Alliances between the Shang and local aristocrats

²⁵ For detailed information on these frontier *fang*-states, see Shu-hui Wu, "Fighting for His Majesty: Accretion of the Greater Shang (ca. 1200-1045 B.C.)," *Journal of Chinese Military History* 1, 1 (2012), pp. 32-33.

²⁶ Wang Yuxin and Yang Shengnan (1999), pp. 463 and 464.

²⁷ Wang Yuxin and Xu Yihua (2011), p. 169.

were not always harmonious. The king would order one to launch a punitive expedition against the other: “戊X卜令雀伐救侯” (Crack-making on *xu?* day. The king ordered Que to invade Marquis Mi.) (HJ, page 33072/LZ, page 668). Local aristocrats were not always on good terms with each other either: “...卜穀貞缶其狀雀” (Crack-making on XX day. Diviner Gu. Will Fou attack and harm Que?) (HJ, page 6989/LZ, page 668).

The Shang had diverse mechanisms for securing the loyalty of its allies. The Shang naturally benefited from its superior military power and advanced weapons, with which it could offer the weaker and smaller *fangguo* military assistance and protection and suppress the disloyal *fangguo*. Modern scholars offer a statistic of about sixty *fang*-states King Wu Ding had conquered during his reign.²⁸ However, conquest was not the only strategy. Other strategies such as the hostage system,²⁹ granting economic advantage and stable livelihoods in the Great Settlement Shang, and incorporating them in the Shang state system by offering high political status and religious functions, effectively secured alliances on a longer term.

The aristocratic allies Bi, Que, and Wu, for example, were politically and militarily active from the reign of King Wu Ding down to his descendants King Wu Yi and King Wen Ding.³⁰ Their lineages grew ever more powerful and continued to exercise strong influence on Shang politics by having their members serve in all levels of Shang bureaucratic and military positions. The aristocratic state Ai was a Shang strong ally and its was a marquis of the Shang as mentioned above. A bronze *ding* 鼎 with an engraved insignia of Ai, which hallmarked its high political status, was excavated in Guojiazhuang 郭家莊 at Anyang. In Guojiazhuang, the members of the Ai lineage lived, worked, fought, worshipped, and were buried together.³¹ The Shang king granted them the privileges to cultivate new lands in order to expand their living quarters. According to OBI the king often inquired about their agriculture activities and

²⁸ Wang Yuxin and Yang Shengnan (1999), p. 501.

²⁹ Shu-hui Wu (2012), pp. 39-41.

³⁰ Wang Yuxin and Yang Shengnan (1999), p. 462.

³¹ Luo, Youcang 雒有倉, “Jiaguwen suojian shangdai zu shi lianghe yu lianmeng guanxi yanjiu 甲骨文所見商代族氏聯合與聯盟關係研究,” *Yindu xuekan* 2 (2010), p. 4.

harvests. Marquis Ai often received orders to launch campaigns and participate in royal hunts; however, he was not allowed to participate in royal ancestral worship.³²

The diviners of the Shang king played crucial roles in the Shang's religious life, military operations, and alliance-building. Modern scholars have identified about 120 diviners who served the Shang in this most important religious performance.³³ Their crack-making and ultimate prognostications were the most powerful channels for the king to obtain information and make decisions, especially in military operations. The states of the diviners were Shang aristocratic allies and enjoyed high political statuses and social privileges in the Shang state, although their fiefs were often outside the Shang core. Modern scholars believe that they were originally leaders of the *fang*-states away from the Shang,³⁴ and I concur with them because in order to make effective prognostications, the diviners needed sufficient knowledge of other states in distant areas, including geographical conditions, society, leadership, and so on – all topics the Shang king wanted to know about. The diviners usually had multiple lineages, some of them residing in their own *fang*-states and some in the Shang. The diviner Fu 蕞, for example, came from an ancient Fu state, the lineage members of which specialized in manufacturing all kinds of containers or bags. Many bronze vessels engraved with various insignias such as *zhu fu* 貯蕞 (container for storage) and *yue fu* 鉞蕞 (container or bag for axe) have been excavated in the areas surrounding the Shang ruins.³⁵ The states of the diviners established strong solidarity with the Shang.

In sum, the key to a successful alliance policy in the late Shang period was the Shang king's willingness to share the power and profits of its military success. The Shang fell because its last Shang king, Di Xin 帝辛, became more and more autocratic. His ever-centralizing governance aroused rebellion among the *fangguo*. One of the *fangguo*, the Zhou 周 *fang*-state, emerged the final winner due to its successful alliance policy and more advanced weapons. In ca. 1045 BC the Zhou, a state originally subjugated by the Shang, took over the Shang world.

³² Ibid.

³³ Li Xueshan 李雪山, "Zhenren wei fangguo shouling laichao zhizhang zhanbu jisi zhi guan 貞人為方國首領來朝職掌占卜祭祀之官," 2004 *nian Anyang Yin Shang wenmingguoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji*, p. 284.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wang Zhengzhong 王震中, *Shangdai duyi 商代都邑* (Beijing: Shehui kexue, 2010), p. 346. The possession of bronze vessels suggests their aristocratic status.