

# Time and Ritual in Early China

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2009

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 0571-320X  
ISBN 978-3-447-06106-3

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## Introduction

The problem is clear: time is a concept that is not easy to grasp. It is perceptible only with the aid of indicators such as space, celestial bodies, human biographies, or history. Ritual is also among those things that serve to render time visible. Whether cultic ceremonies determined by the movements of the sun and the moon, *rites de passage* determined by the biological development of the individual, collective ceremonies determined by political needs, such as an enthronement, a victory celebration or a remembrance ceremony: such traditions often serve not only as metaphors of time but also as instruments for marking it.

The papers in this book examine ways in which time and ritual mutually stimulated each other in Early China. Attention is also paid to the role played by writing in encoding the calendar system and in the notation of time, and how time and history were linked. This is not the first book to examine aspects of the ritual and social context of time. David N. Keightley for instance has underlined the connection between space, time and ancestor worship. He traces the origin of time notation to the five-ritual cycle, and believes that ritual time was not only highly structured, but was used to date non-ritual events. It was through performance of the rituals that the Shāng Chinese were obliged to make time and take time.

All authors of this volume are concerned with related problems and make use of the same sources, namely archaeologically excavated inscriptions and received texts of Confucian classics. However, the research methods applied by the authors are quite different, so that at a first glance the reader may find the book non-homogeneous. Nonetheless, the thematic implications of most of the topics can be discovered by careful reading.

Astronomical phenomena always serve as basic indicators for the construction of time. Besides the sun, the moon is the most important celestial body used for reckoning time. Although the calendar of the Western Zhōu, like the periods before and after it, was based on a luni-solar year of about 355 days with an intercalary month every third year or so, and the Zhōu month was strictly based on the mean periodicity of the lunation, alternating between 29 and 30 days, the month itself was divided into four different periods, known as *chūjí* 初吉, *jìshēngpò* 既生霸, *jìwàng* 既望, and *jìsǐpò* 既死霸. In his paper, Edward L. Shaughnessy examines the four terms that appear routinely in the date notations of bronze inscriptions between the month and the day notation. He attempts to find out whether these terms refer to a single day or a period of time, and, if the latter is true, what period of time this could be. Through reviewing interpretations of these terms in traditional sources and investigating newly discovered bronze inscriptions from the Western Zhōu dynasty containing them, he concludes that the “four phases” theory by Wáng Guǒwéi 王國維 (1877–1927) is essentially correct, though it needs to be used with some

flexibility. This means that these four terms refer to four more or less equal periods within a lunar month.

In contrast, Ken-ichi Takashima, Liú Yuán and Robert H. Gassmann seek the origin of the conception of time in ancestral rites. The ancient Chinese word *sì* 祀 has two different meanings: “ritual” and “year”. The question is, how did they develop etymologically? Using the “synchronic evidential approach” (*gòngshí zhèngjù fǎ* 共時證據法) to explore and discover linguistic and cultural aspects of ancient Chinese, Takashima analyzes the syntactic, morphological, etymological, palaeographical, and lexicological aspects involved in each of the two words *jì* 祭 and *sì* 祀. As is known, they comprise the binomial term *jìsì* 祭祀 commonly rendered as “sacrifice” in English. By interfacing these linguistic aspects, the paper suggests a new hypothesis, namely that in the language of oracle bone inscriptions, the word *jì* functions as a verb meaning “to cut into pieces,” as well as a noun meaning “minced meat”. The paper also examines the syntactic behaviour of the word *sì* in oracle bone inscriptions. By analyzing the syntax in which *sì* is found, combined with an exploration into the underlying meaning of the word deduced from its cognates, among others *sì* 伺 ‘to inquire’, he also suggests a new hypothesis on the semantic and religious significance of the word *sì*. The word is used in two ways: as an intransitive verb meaning “conduct a providential ritual” and as a noun meaning “year” imbued with a sense of “divine providence.”

The paper by Liú Yuán is an abbreviated version of his doctoral thesis on sacrificial rites to ancestors during the Shāng and Zhōu dynasties. Instead of the common method of classifying sacrifices by their names *jì míng* 祭名 ‘sacrifice name’, he suggests a new classification that distinguishes between those sacrifices that imply a specific intention, and those sacrifices that do not. Thus, Late Shāng sacrifices can be divided into sacrifices of a specific character, i.e. sacrifices asking for the prevention of calamities *rángfú* 禳祓 ‘cleansing sacrifice’, as well as *qíqiú* 祈求 ‘praying sacrifice’, and sacrifices of a general character that are usually not the result of a specific intention. Following up this new classification, he provides a detailed analysis and comparative study of ancestor worship of the Shāng and Zhōu dynasty. During this period, ancestor worship with specific motives, such as asking for the prevention of disasters, or other request-like prayers, gradually decreased in its function as a specific temporary worship style. On the other hand, sacrifices of a general character, for the veneration of ancestors and as prayers for blessings *qífú* 祈福, became more prevalent. The evolution from irregular sacrifice events to standardized ritual activities reflects the development of a highly structured social system in which ritual and time are well coordinated. Meanwhile, there is a change in the conceptual framework of ancestor worship between the Shāng and Zhōu people: the first were in awe of their ancestors, while the later admired their ancestors in a more rational way.

The conceptual framework of ancestor worship reached a more complex dimension among political elites in the Eastern Zhōu period. Through an investigation of the meaning of the word *xiào* 孝 in early documents, above all the

*Spring and Autumn Annals* or *Chūn Qiū* 春秋, Robert H. Gassmann points out that several objects of *xiào* can be observed, e.g. *filial* piety in two articulations (towards living or dead parents), and *ancestral* piety. The addressees of the latter form of conduct could be parental ancestors, but it was not necessarily so. Apart from parents, there were others who could qualify as “ancestors”. In the course of an extensive study of kinship and society in the Eastern Zhōu era, the so-called *zhāomù* 昭穆 system plays a central role. The unique distributional pattern of ancestors in what is commonly termed the “ancestral temple” (*zōngmiào* 宗廟) has the well known (but usually disregarded) implication that the immediately preceding ancestor of a king was not necessarily the biological or genealogical ancestor. Gassmann calls this system “geneatactical”. That *xiào* must have been a category within this system can be clearly inferred from the fact that some of the persons have the name-element *xiào* as canonical designation or “posthumous title” (*shì* 謚), i.e. the Xiào-Patriarch of Lǔ, Lǔ Xiào gōng 魯孝公, r. 795–768, or the Xiào-Patriarch of Qí, Qí Xiào gōng 齊孝公, r. 641–632. The genealogical or “geneatactical” system of ancestor worship during this period obviously offers important insights into the formation of a socio-historical time concept in Early China.

According to traditional views, Chinese history and culture have formed a homogeneous unit since the early phase of the civilization. Their development is linear evolutionary from the reign of the legendary Huáng Dì 黃帝 through the three dynasties, namely Xià, Shāng and Zhōu, until the first Emperor of Qín and the great empire of Hàn. Yet, new discoveries and scholarly studies during the last decades have provided ever more evidence of cultural diversity during the pre Qín period. Also the development of time notation systems seems not to be simply linear. In this respect, Liú Xuéshùn criticises the influential view of Sīmǎ Qiān 司馬遷 concerning the evolution of early Chinese calendars. According to Chapter 26 “Book of Calendars” (*Lìshū* 曆書) of *Shǐjì* 史記 the first calendar was created by Huáng Dì; from Huáng Dì to the Western Hàn Dynasty, the beginning of the calendrical year changed with each dynasty: the first month was chosen by the Xià Dynasty as the beginning of a year; the twelfth month by the Shāng Dynasty; the eleventh month by the Zhōu Dynasty 周朝 (ca. 1122 BC – 256 BC) and the tenth month by the Qín Dynasty 秦朝 (221 BC – 207 BC) and Western Hàn dynasty 西漢 (206 BC – 24 AD). In other words, early Chinese calendars would have been derivations of only one calendar. Any feature that was considered as an improvement was supposedly retained in later calendars. In contrast to this opinion, taking the issue of year intercalations as an example, Liú Xuéshùn points out that it took three steps of intercalating the additional month to eventually establish a permanent position for this intercalated month. It was not the case that once a change was made in one early Chinese calendar, all later calendars would follow. The reality must have been much more complicated than the situation described by Sīmǎ Qiān and believed by many later scholars. Not only independent states used differing calendars but also a newly founded dynasty always had to issue a new official calendar instead of using the

previous one. Obviously, Chinese politics was an important factor in the development of early Chinese calendars.

Further evidence for the fact that the application of a certain calendar was rather an individual choice is provided by Maria Khayutina in her study of the use and users of the royal year-count system during the Western Zhōu Dynasty. Among several thousand inscriptions on bronze vessels from this period, only several hundred contain dates. Among these only several dozens contain full dating formulas specifying a year of reign of a certain (unnamed) king, a month, a term referring to one of the four lunar phases, and a *gānzhī* day. The decision whether to introduce dates in the ritual texts was optional and very likely due to the wish of the persons who ordered the production of the bronze vessels. However, using the royal year-count, which initially served to register the activities of the ruling king, to date a private event may have been a means for the Zhōu elites to demonstrate their close relationship to the royal lineage. From the middle and late periods of the Zhōu dynasty the number of year-references grows gradually. Its increasing acceptance as a universal yardstick for the measurement of time in Zhōu society reflects the changes that took place in the social and political situation in the Western Zhōu kingdom during this time. With the transition from a mobile government in the early period to the establishment of Zhōu-under-Qí as the main political and administrative centre during the middle and late periods, the royal year-count gained more importance. Simultaneously, social tension was increasing in Zhōu society so that more loyalty was required from nobles and government officials towards the ruler.

On the basis of tomb texts, Liú Lèxián examines several *Day Books* dating to the times of Warring States Period, the Qín and Hàn dynasties. He attempts to differentiate the texts from the region of Chǔ and from Qín. For him, only *Day Book* from tomb no. M56 unearthed in Jiǔdiàn 九店 of Jiānglíng 江陵 County in Húběi province can be identified as a Chǔ text. Others from tomb M1 of Fàngmǎtān 放馬灘 in Tiānshuǐ 天水 County of Gānsù province and tomb M11 of Shuìhǔdì 睡虎地在 Yúnmèng 雲夢 County of Húběi province can be considered authentic sources for the Qín “art of selection” (*xuǎnzéshù* 選擇術). Through comparison of all these manuscripts in consideration of the twelve deities of their *jiànchú* 建除 and *cóngchén* 叢辰 systems as well as the movement of the star *sù* 歲 or *dàsuì* 大歲 in their *xiánchí* 咸池 systems, he concludes that Chǔ and Qín people possessed different traditions in the art of selection. This confirms the statement of Sīmǎ Qīān 司馬遷 in the chapter “Biographies of the day experts” (*Rìzhě lièzhuàn* 日者列傳) of *Shǐjì* 史記 that the “day experts” (*rìzhě* 日者) from the states of Qí, Chǔ, Qín and Zhào all followed different conventions, although the main part of the original texts of this chapter is lost. However, from the viewpoint of basic principles, the two traditions were indeed related and probably had the same origin. Ultimately, in respect of the influence of the art of selection in later times, it is obvious that the Qín tradition replaced the Chǔ tradition completely.

The last paper of this volume by Xiaobing Wang-Riese is devoted to the abstract dimension of time in respect of the conception of future in early Chinese inscriptions. As many historians have pointed out, historical thinking presupposes a linear time concept consisting of past, present and future. Acting on this assumption, she examines the time structures in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions by analysing the structural stereotypes of the texts as well as some key concepts concerning future time. In contrast to the Shāng, who seem much more concerned with current issues than with matters in a far distant future, the Zhōu possessed a strong historical awareness and show a tremendous concern for the time of their own descendants. The formal “felicitous phrases” (*gǔcí* 嘏辭, or *zhùgǔcí* 祝嘏辭) in bronze inscriptions contain expressions referring to the future, e.g. *zǐsūn* 子孫, *zǐzǐ sūnsūn* 子子孫孫, *yǒng* 永 and *wànnián* 萬年. The main trend in the use of such felicitous phrases for longevity and continued descent is quite obvious: their popularity reached a high point in the middle period of the Western Zhōu Dynasty and lasted until the early phase of the Spring and Autumn Period. This change is due not only to the new ritual function of the bronze vessels, which began to be displayed in ancestral halls instead of being buried in graves, but also to the emergence of historical awareness after the victory over the Shāng. This victory caused an intensive concern for their collective fate in future times among the Zhōu elites. They realized the transitory nature of history and began to maintain a kind of “cultural memory” to ensure their ethnic and cultural continuity.

Most of the papers published in this volume were presented at a conference entitled “Writing, Ritual and Cultural Memory in Early States” which took place in Munich in November 2007 within the framework of the tandem project “Writing, Ritual and Cultural Memory – Comparing Ancient China and Mesoamerica”, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. As the title suggests, many case studies from Mesoamerican cultures were also presented on this occasion. The main reason why this volume contains only papers relating to China is that a cross-cultural study would have no sound methodological basis at this early stage of research. On the other hand, it must be emphasized that the contact between representatives from different disciplines gave rise to many new questions and provided a stimulus for fruitful discussions.

We are grateful to our authors for their constructive cooperation, for their patience, and for their willingness to revise their papers several times. We thank Mǎ Jiàn, Thomas Kaiser and Hannah Rehle for preparing summaries and translations of the papers in Chinese. Ruth Schubert took on the task of editing all the papers in order to iron out any inconsistencies of English style. We would also like to thank the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, and especially Heinrich Meier and Gudrun Kresnik, who granted us generous hospitality during the meeting, and Daniel Graña-Behrens, Waltraud Gerstendörfer and Thomas Kaiser for their assistance in organizing the conference.

Munich, Spring 2009

