

The Significance of the Shang Period for the Contemporary Construction of Chinese Cultural Identity*

El significado del período Shang para la construcción contemporánea de la identidad cultural China

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ABSTRACT

The Shang dynasty is a pivotal part of the complex historical construction of contemporary Chinese cultural identity. Nationhood is intrinsically linked to the shared experiences and language of a group of people. The present exploratory paper provides an overview of the many reasons why the Shang period is central to Chinese cultural identity. Historical, archaeological, and socio-political arguments are evaluated to assess the position of this period of history in the system of ideas and shared assumptions that make up contemporary Chinese Cultural Identity.

Key words: Shang Dynasty, Culture, Nationalism, Identity

RESUMEN

La dinastía Shang es una parte fundamental de la compleja construcción histórica de la identidad cultural china contemporánea. La nación está intrínsecamente vinculada a las experiencias y al lenguaje compartidos de un grupo de personas. El presente documento exploratorio proporciona una visión general de las muchas razones por las cuales el período Shang es fundamental para la identidad cultural china. Los argumentos históricos, arqueológicos y sociopolíticos se evalúan para evaluar la posición de este período de la historia en el sistema

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de ideas y suposiciones compartidas que conforman la identidad cultural china contemporánea.

Palabras clave: dinastía Shang, cultura, nacionalismo, identidad.

INTRODUCTION

The Shang dynasty enjoys pride of place in contemporary constructions of Chinese cultural identity. China, as the most populous country in the world and as one of the great ancient civilizations is a particularly good case study to explore the phenomenon of identity construction (Fenby, 2008). While most of the world moved to a period of globalization and globalism during the later years of the 20th century, many countries in the developing world experienced a wave of decolonization which resulted in a sudden revival of nationalism (Huntington, 2003; Malik, 2013; Saul, 2013; Sutter, 2012; Wang, 2008; Zhu, 2011). Part of the reason for this rise in nationalism was the need to match states with nations. In other words, to create a feeling of nationhood so as to better govern a particular territory and to define a nation-state vis a vis the rest of the international community (Kolodziej, 2005). This was particularly challenging to former Empires such as China, India, and Turkey (Mines, 2002; Pieterse, 2007). Ancient governance structures did not match the Westphalian notion of the modern nation-state and thus the contemporary governments were compelled to provide a more coherent and unambiguous account of the historical development of their respective nations (Lin, 2009; McCargo, 2008). One of the unintended consequences of parsimony is the emphasis of the experiences of a particular ethnic group over others in the narrative of national historical development (Devare, 2009; Feigenblatt, 2015; Ottaway, 1993). Therefore imperialism led to de-colonization which in turn fostered a new period of increased nationalism.

Modern China faced many challenges as a result of European imperialism. Examples include the Opium Wars with the United Kingdom, Russian expansionism in the 19th century, the many European concessions in the mainland, and the loss of Hong Kong and Macau (Fenby, 2008). Thus, the recent history of China is replete with examples of foreign threats to national integrity. The opening up of China under the guidance of Deng Xiao Ping exposed China to new international pressures while also providing new opportunities (Kim, Fidler, & Ganguly, 2009). A complex relationship with the United States based on trade is mired with suspicion and more recently with strategic competition in a vast array of sectors (Lemus, Feigenblatt, Orta, & Rivero, 2015; Miller, 2009; Mora, 1999; Nair, 2008; Peneau, 2013; Santander & Martínez, 2010).

The present exploratory paper is divided into three main sections. The first section explores the history of the Shang and how it fits into contemporary conceptions of Chinese identity. A second section focuses on the archeological record supporting the historical record. A third section summarizes the conclusions reached through a tentative interpretation of Shang cultural traits.

The Socio-Political Context

China's government is facing a relatively hostile international environment in which many neighboring countries and competing powers see China's growth and increasing international influence as a threat (Santander & Martínez, 2010; Saul, 2013; Tow, Thakur, & Hyun, 2000; Vatikiotis, 2003; Wang, 2008; Weitz, 2011). Historically China has not behaved as an expansionist power but many Western governments such as the United States view China's increasing expenditure in defense and its increased assertiveness as a threat to global security (Nair, 2008; Narine, 1997). Further exacerbating the challenges of regional security in East Asia are the competing claims over territory and in particular over the South China Sea (Malik, 2013). Many of the claims are based on different interpretations of history (Lin, 2009). There is also the thorny issue of Taiwan (the Republic of China) and the ambivalent position of the United States and its allies towards the democratic government on the island and its relationship with the People's Republic of China (Cordoba, 2005).

Internally China is also facing and has recently faced many challenges such as dealing with a the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, followed by a period of economic opening, and the push for democracy in the 1980s (Cordoba, 2005). More recent protests in Hong Kong, a former British colony, further evidences the internal challenges faced by the People's Republic of China (Nair, 2008). During the recent protests, early 2020, in Hong Kong students waived American and British flags and sang the American national anthem. This was a political and an identity issue for the Chinese government in that invoking American values by young people is a direct challenge to the mainstream conception of what it means to be Chinese in contemporary China, in particular in the mainland. International criticism of the treatment of the Uighur minority and the international exposure of re-education camps was a further challenge to a monolithic interpretation of history and cultural identity (Muhametzyanov, Usmanova, & Somkina, 2019). There is also the long lasting opposition over the occupation of Tibet and the important international cultural leadership of the Dalai Lama (Weitz, 2011).

As a response to alternative views of history and in particular alternative interpretations or definitions of Chinese cultural identity, the Chinese government has invested considerable resources over the years to develop a parsimonious and linear version of history which shows the Han Chinese as the end in a long line starting with the Xia dynasty (Callahan, 2008; Feigenblatt, 2009b). This official history promoted by the Chinese government classifies many other ethnic groups as tributaries of the main Han Chinese culture and thus justifies the control over an extended territory reaching all the way to Tibet (Fenby, 2008; Frankel, 2011). There are many obvious reasons for the need to centralize the definition of Chinese cultural identity but the most important one is to foster nationalism and loyalty to the central government (Hwang, 2006). A secondary reason is to promote national prestige by showing a linear progression from ancient times to the present and thus a coherent image of one of the great ancient civilizations (Huntington, 2003).

The following section provides a few examples of instances in which contemporary and historical Chinese culture shows remarkable continuity with some basic Shang cultural constructs. A section on the archaeological record then follows.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The Historical Record and Official Chinese Historiography

It should be noted that history is part of the humanities and that the research methods and requirements for historical studies vary considerably from those of the Social Sciences (Moustakas, 1994; Muhametzyanov et al., 2019). This is important because the early history of China combines legend and myths with actual historical figures. There is always a certain degree of interpretation when studying the past and in particular the very nebulous concept of cultural identity (Harris, 2010; Hinton, 2006; HSIN-HUANG, HSIAO, & WAN, 2007; Komori, 2009; Muhametzyanov et al., 2019). The Shang dynasty holds pride of place in Chinese history as the first historically documented dynasty and as the period that saw the rise of Chinese writing (Fenby, 2008; Goldin, 2017; Shelah-Lavi, 2015).

There are several cultural traits of the Shang that have survived until our days as part of Chinese culture. Golding points at five core principles of traditional Chinese culture that can be traced to the Shang period (2017). The first one is the use of Chinese language as a only written language. China has many ethnic groups but the earliest use of writing was in Chinese, and more specifically in oracle bone inscriptions (Goldin, 2017; Shelah-Lavi, 2015). It is interesting to note that while there were many languages spoken in China during the Shang there was a single writing system which was Chinese (Goldin, 2017). This is very important in terms of cultural identity because having a unified writing system eventually facilitated the development of a more coherent idea of what it means to be Chinese and provided a great means to spread and to a certain extent standardize Chinese culture (Goldin, 2017). Initially writing was used mostly for ritual purposes but eventually it was used for recording other important aspects of the state (Shelah-Lavi, 2015).

A second important cultural trait that started with the Shang dynasty is the idea that some days are auspicious while others are not (Goldin, 2017). This idea continues to be espoused by many Chinese as can be observed in the days chosen for weddings and for other important occasions (Fenby, 2008; Hahm, 2006). Oracle bone inscriptions mention the auspicious nature of certain days for particular activities such as for battle or for agricultural activities (Shelah-Lavi, 2015). A third cultural trait is the patrilineal and patrilocal nature of the Chinese family. Burials and inscriptions show that women joined the lineages of their husbands and were included in their family cemeteries and rituals rather than in the ones for their male relatives (Goldin, 2017). This continues to be the case in traditional Chinese families in the mainland and even more commonly in Taiwan and in the expatriate Chinese communities of Southeast Asia (Fenby, 2008). Contemporary altars to ancestors follow the patrilineal system and include spouses.

This very important principle of Chinese families was already clearly established by the time of the Shang dynasty.

Another important concept that was introduced by the Shang is the idea of the “command of heaven” or “di ling” (Goldin, 2017). This is the idea that in certain cases heaven can give commands to mortals. The concept of the “mandate of heaven” became an important principle of Chinese history to justify changes in dynasty (Fenby, 2008). It should be noted that the concept during Shang times was not as highly developed as in later years but oracle bone inscriptions do mention the concept of “di ling” and allude to commands from the deities (Goldin, 2017).

A final concept that became important during the Shang is the concept of worship of the past, or the transition from myths to historicity (Muhametzyanov et al., 2019). Many experts consider that the Xia dynasty was historicized by the Shang to legitimize their rule (Shelah-Lavi, 2015). This transition from mythology to history is an important contribution of the Shang. Defining the past is a powerful way to build an identity and historically the Chinese are mindful of the past. Even the Communist government has invested considerable resources in constructing or reconstructing a parsimonious history of the development of Chinese civilization (Malik, 2013). In other words, the Shang introduced the importance of history as a pivotal value in Chinese culture.

Archeological Evidence for the Shang and for their Cultural Importance to Contemporary Cultural Identity

There is considerable archeological evidence about the Shang dynasty (Shelah-Lavi, 2015). Probably the most important discovery regarding the Shang were the oracle bone inscriptions in Yinxu. This discovery was important because it corroborated the historical records about the existence of the Shang as a dynasty and as an important state. Having written records and using Chinese also provides a very direct link to modern day Chinese culture and identity. Other important archeological site related to the Shang is Huanbei and Zhengzhou (Shelah-Lavi, 2015). From an archeological perspective the Shang period is dated from 1600 to 1050 BCE. The period is traditionally divided into several subperiods.

Burial practices and tombs provide evidence for the assertion that the Shang worshiped their ancestors. There are many examples of Shang graves and cemeteries that have been excavated. One interesting observation is that the investment in resources in burials was considerable and that depending on the rank and status of the person the quality of the objects that were buried with them. One good specific example is grave 1001 from Xibeigan which includes several ramps (Shelah-Lavi, 2015, p. 207). In other graves bronze vessels with inscriptions were found which provide further evidence as to the importance and careful planning that was involved in terms of preparing burials. In terms of ritual activities, Xiatong is the location where many oracle bones were found (Shelah-Lavi, 2015). Sacrificial pits for human and animal sacrifices further support the assertion that the Shang worshipped their ancestors.

The oracle bone inscriptions found at Xiaotun have provided considerable evidence in regards to the development of Chinese writing and also have provided a glimpse at how

the Shang lived (Shelah-Lavi, 2015). It should be noted that most oracle bones focused on ritual activity but because much ritual activity was focused on trying to predict the auspiciousness of different activities, it is possible to understand important cultural factors of Shang China. Thus there is clear evidence in the archeological record about the cultural factors identified in the previous section.

RESULT

The Shang Dynasty holds pride of place in the Chinese consciousness because it is the first historical dynasty with clearly Chinese features (Goldin, 2017). In other words it is considered to be the cradle of Chinese civilization the core of its identity formation. The historical and archeological records both support and document the existence of this dynasty and thus provide added legitimacy to the claim that China is one of the great ancient civilizations. Language is also a key feature of identity formation, and the Shang used an early form of Chinese across a wide span of territory. Other cultural factors such as family structure, the belief in auspiciousness, ancestor worship, and an early form of the belief in the mandate of heaven are all important cultural aspects of Chinese culture that can be traced back to Shang times.

Contemporary Chinese culture is not static or easily defined; nevertheless it is an important concept with considerable socio-political implications (Kim et al., 2009). Control over the understanding of history is a powerful tool that can be used to promote national cohesion and to guide the population in one or another particular direction (Callahan, 2008; Feigenblatt, 2009a; Hillel, 2009; Morris, 1997; Napier, 2001). History can be mobilized in the service of public policy (Rüland, 2011). This is particularly the case in countries with authoritarian regimes and it is also a very common phenomenon in post-colonial societies (Chachavalpongpun, 2009; Chambers & Wolf, 2010; Chizuko, 2010; Iwabuchi, 2008). China suffered the ethnocentrism of European imperialism during the 19th and early 20th century and as a result developed a strong national consciousness (Fenby, 2008). A strong national identity needs to be rooted in history and therefore the government, as the representative of the nation, embarked on a long process of bringing greater coherence to the history of the country (Hahm, 2006). Contemporary Chinese culture has many traditional elements. The Chinese Civil War and later on the Cultural Revolution attempted to break away from traditional history by important Western values adopted from Marxist theory (Fenby, 2008). Nevertheless after the failed experiment of the Cultural Revolution and the passing away of Chairman Mao Tse Tung, the more pragmatic leadership of the PRC started to promote more traditional Chinese values (Fenby, 2008). There was a particular emphasis on the values of Confucianism as the key to a harmonious society (Hahm, 2006). A boom in tourism and an increasingly influential position for China in the international community also resulted in increased interest in heritage and China's ancient past (Kim et al., 2009).

The rise of the Chinese middle class is another important social factor which may partly explain the increasing emphasis on traditional Chinese values (Hahm, 2006; Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2008; HSIN-HUANG et al., 2007). Leisure and an increase in

both international and domestic tourism bring greater attention to China's archeological heritage. Moreover, China's increasingly visible role in the field of international development can partly be explained as China regaining its traditional central role as the Middle Kingdom (Kim et al., 2009; Nair, 2008). In other words, it is another way to explain the rise of China by providing a linear history of its development from the ancient Shang dynasty to the present.

CONCLUSION

The influence of the Shang period on contemporary Chinese culture is a very broad topic which requires an interdisciplinary approach. A grounded theory approach to develop a tentative model of Shang cultural values based on both the historical and archeological records would be an important step in a better understanding of this period but it would also facilitate the comparison of those values and system of thought with the values of contemporary Chinese. This type of study would require considerable interpretation and to a certain extent some simplification into what Max Webber called "ideal types". Nevertheless the benefits of mapping Shang values and making a relatively simple comparison to those of contemporary China far outweighs the methodological and theoretical challenges of borrowing methods from disciplines with very different paradigmatic theoretical assumptions.

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