A LATE SHANG PLACE OF SACRIFICE
AND ITS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A. GUTKIND BULLING

In 1939 the Museum in Nanking made a trial dig in a place called Chi-hsu-wan in Tungshan county, in the northern part of the province of Kiangsu. They discovered some remains of neolithic occupation (1-2.5 m.) and decided on a more thorough excavation. This was done in 1940. The report of the excavation was published in Kung Fu, 1942.

Chi-hsu-wan is situated in mountainous country about 17 km. north of Hsi-chou, on a sloping terrace with a winding stream on its western side. The slope covered about 3,000 square meters, of which only a small section of 733 square meters has so far been excavated. It showed that this place had been lived in from late neolithic times on until the Western Chou period. Stratification revealed five main layers. The uppermost was that of present-day agricultural cultivation (0.15 m.). The one below—that in the second layer (0.12-0.67 m.)—contained some sherds datable to the Western Chou period. The third and fourth layers (1.2-1.4 m.) were the thickest, and both contained sherds and a great number of utensils dating from the Shang period. In the lowest layer, pottery sherds, stone tools and utensils showed that it dated back to the late neolithic period, and many of the shells, bone, and stone implements resembled closely those found in neolithic sites, such as Kao-huang-miao, in the neighborhood of Hsi-chou.

An important discovery among the neolithic pottery remains was some eggshell-thin black sherds, indicating that the inhabitants belonged to the Black Pottery or "classic" Lung-shan civilization of neighboring Shantung. The pottery sherds included some legs of tripods with devils faces typical of this area. From the relative scarcity of finds the excavators drew the conclusion that the small neolithic settlement was lived in during only a short period but that it may have been situated near a larger settlement.

The most important layers were the two above the neolithic settlement, both dating from the Shang period. The lower, the earlier one, was slightly thicker than the upper. Both layers contained foundations of houses, all made of yellow earth stamped hard, a type of construction called "bang fa," which we call pisé-de-terre. Although in isolated cases this type of construction had been used already in neolithic times, it became more generally applied in the Shang period, from pre-Anyang time (e.g. in Chéng-chou, Er-li-kang I and II, Jen-min-park and other excavated sites) on.

The houses were all small, simple huts with a round or oval-shaped fireplace in the center. Some of the walls were about 1.20 m. thick. Storage pits outside the houses had been dug into the gray earth of the native soil. The stone axes, stone sickles, stone and bone flint knives, shell knives, bone arrowheads and so forth conformed to types well known from other excavations of the Shang period.

Among the 4,000 pottery sherds were pottery paddles for impressing patterns on the wet clay. In shape, some of the vessels in the lower layer were still slightly akin to late neolithic shapes, and some black, thin sherds showed that the people living here in early Shang times were rooted in the Lung-shan Black Pottery civilization. The main difference between pottery sherds discovered in the lower and upper level of the Shang strata was that the quality of the clay used in earlier time was much superior to that used in the later period. Not only was the clay more carefully prepared but also the patterns were finer and better impressed into the wet clay. Although the clay used by the potters in the upper stream was much coarser and the patterns were cruder, yet they included rings, animal heads and triangles not found in the lower stratum.

In addition, some bronze arrowheads and a bronze knife were discovered in the upper layer. In quality of workmanship, the knife reflected a mature state of technology. In shape it resembled knives found in Tsu-k'ung in layers 3 and 4, and in the large tomb in Wui-hua-te'en.

No. 1 is the scapula of an ox or a piece of a tortoise, both used in divination.
Findings in other places have corroborated the theory that the turning of heads of sacrificial victims towards the central point of the ritual was a well-established custom in the Shang period. For instance, the bodies of a row of sacrificed people in Tomb No. 1 in Su-fu Fun, in Yi County, province of Shantung, were laid out in the passageway leading to the tomb pit, with their heads turned toward the coffin chamber, and a similar placement is reported in the famous Tomb No. 1001 in Hsiao-pen-chuang (Hou-chia chuang) in the Anyang region.

The conclusion we can draw is that this Chieh-wan burial place had been a place of human sacrifice of which the stones—the altar—formed the center. Moreover, the posture of some of the skeletons suggests that they had been left lying where they died, only their heads, after death, being turned toward the stones, and their bodies being covered with a layer of yellow earth. Especially near the stones, the skeletons were found piled one upon the other, so that, in some cases, the lower ones suffered damage from the placement of others above. It is, however, important that the skeletons were found buried in different layers of earth, some as deep as 4.65 meters, others not more than 0.45 meters. This indicates that the victims had not been killed at a kind of mass sacrifice but at different periods over an extended length of time. Even those found buried at the same depth were found at different places in the burial ground, and they might not have all been killed on the same occasion. Although the state of preservation of the skeletons was not good, and some were not even complete, with some limbs missing, it was possible to identify six of the victims as males and four as females. Their ages ranged from young adult to middle age but did not include an old person.

The four stones are now situated in a corner of the burial field, but probably the altar was once the center of the sacrificial area and more victims may have been buried on the other sides. Another interesting point is that the number of victims buried at different depths varied. Apparently, in the lower layers fewer human beings and more dogs were buried (three people, one skull, and ten dogs), while the upper layer contained the skeletons of seventeen people, one skull and only two dogs. This means an increase in the number of human victims in the later periods.

Besides the excavation reports, two more important articles on the burial place in Chieh-wan have been published in China. One, written by Yu Wei-chao, was published in Kuo-ku and the other, by Wang Yu-hsin and Ch' 2en Shao-ji, in W' en-wu. Both contain valuable information.

T'ang-shan county and the whole region around Ho-ch'ou are known to have been inhabited in the late neolithic and Shang periods by the Eastern I, or YI. These YI barbarians, as they are called later, are quite frequently mentioned in ancient Chinese literature. According to Ssu-ma Ch' i-chen, Yao, one of the legendary rulers supposed to have lived in the latter part of the third millennium B.C., is described as having attempted to reform the Eastern Yi, and under his successor the Man and Yi tribes are said to have submitted. In general, these tribes are accused of being troublesome, thieves, murderers, or rebels. That the Yi were people valuing their independence is evident from other passages in the Shih-chi. Even much later, during the Ch' in-chi period, the Yi were able to retain their independence.
The Yi living in parts of Kiangsu and Shan-tung were, in the literature of Chou time, called the "Shang-Yin Yi." When they later moved to the Hsui River valley and Shan-tung, they were called Hsia Yi. Not much is known about their ancestors living according to the Li-chi, the inhabitants of the East are called Yi, they let their hair hang loose, tattoo their bodies, and consume certain foods, Professor Li Chi identifies the Eastern Yi with the Black Pottery people in Shan-tung, an opinion corroborated by the documents in Chi Chou-wan. In addition, he thinks that the civilization of the Shang people contained a considerable number of the Eastern Yi people of the last invading from the general similarity of houses and utensils, it seems that the substrata of many people in the territory of the northern area of the Shang Dynasty in many respects were not very different from those living in the country of the Eastern Yi.

The importance of many of the excavations carried out in the People's Republic of China is that they provide us with material for the reconstruction of aspects of early China either hitherto veiled from our view or else confirming the correctness of literary sources. We will now turn to the fate of the Eastern Yi during the Shang period. The Zhou people were, together from literary sources and oracle bone inscriptions. In the course of the whole period, this part of Kiangsu became a part of the kingdom of Chou. According to the genealogies, the Yi lived in the Shih-chi, one of their ancestors, Lu-chung, had six sons. The first one was called Pen-ting. He founded his own family, and his descendants took P'ing as their family name. According to the commentator, they established their residence at P'ing-yang. This is an ancient name of Hsi-chou. Their country was called P'ing or Ta P'ing country. During the later part of the Shang, the time of the Yin Dynasty, when the capital had been moved to Anyang, a descendant of P'ing-yu, Shuhi, was the king of the P'ing. Shuhi was a title which originally meant "elder brother."

The Shang rulers were continually at war with the Eastern Yi, defending their territory and against invaders or invaders, or trying to enslave their powers by incorporating neighboring peoples. The Eastern Yi, in their course, gave the defeated chieftain or ruler a title making him responsible for the defense of his country, collection of taxes, curfew, and other services. In the phrase of an oracle bone inscription mentioned by David Keightley: "The Shang, the ruling dynasty of their affairs."

An oracle bone inscription quoted by Wang Yu-hsin and Ch'en Shao-tai provides us with a description of the Ta P'ing country. It reads: "On the day hsin-shou the diviner Hsiian asked: Should we take P'ing?..."

Hsiian is the name of an often-mentioned diviner on oracle bones dating from Wu and T'ing's time. He was one of the powerful rulers of the Yin Dynasty in Anyang. It is, therefore, most likely that the Ta P'ing country was broken off from the ancestral territory of the Shang kings. Eventually, it split into two parts, following a tradition of 1324-1236 B.C. But calculations in regard to his dates vary: e.g. Tung Tse-pao, 1352-1235 B.C., 1285 B.C. After border clashes and fighting he might have gone on long before.

This type of vassalage did not please the P'ing family, or the Eastern Yi, as is expressed in a lacunar sentence in the Shih-chi: "The Shih-chi reporting that the last ruler of the Yin Dynasty family of P'ing was assassinated. The defeat of the Eastern Yi by Chou, the last king of the Yin, is mentioned in other literary sources, e.g. in the Tso-chou. In plain fact what this means is that, during the reign of the last ruler of the Yin, the Ta P'ing country was free from the domination of the Yin but were defeated, and the P'ing family was obliterated.

The importance of this excavation is that the discovery of this place of sacrifice enables us to draw certain conclusions in regard to beliefs and cults of the people about which ancient Chinese literature offers us very little information.

The fall of the Shih-chi in the Shang Dynasty in the area of the union, 12 in the Tso-chou into which the place of sacrifice was discovered corresponded to that of the upper layer of the Shim-chou layers, and the Shim-chou layers, and yellow earth indicate that its most likely time of use was during the later part of the Shang dynasty: roughly the last ten years of the time of the move of the capital to Anyang or from Wu T'ing's conquest. In any case, it would not be easy to mean that it was the oldest, the most, 275 years. In general, the use of geometrically patterned types of stone altars like the one in Shih-chou, a place that sur- vives well into historical periods. They were mostly used as altars of the gods or spirits of the earth, the sky, and the sun. They are the god in ancient China was sometimes wor- shipped in a forest or connected with specific trees. It is not clear, however, whether the people of Yin in their cult used stones for the shi. This is confirmed in the Li-shih chih-chi-chen ch'uan-ch'ung. When these trees stood around the altar of the earth in Chi-shan we don't know, but the spirit was always believed to reside in the stone to follow. It is to be expected that the Eastern Yi, like the Hsia, Shang, and Chou people, con- ceived the spirits of the earth, the god of the tilled fields, responsible for the weather, grain and harvest, for banquets as well as for calamities. There is considerable literature on the gods and spirits worshipped at the shi altar in Eastern as well as in Western languages. According to the literature of the Chou time, they were territorial gods, each limited to a particular region, which in size could encompass the soil of an entire state, or, more than the fields of a small village. There were different types of shi in the Chou period, as noted in the Li-chi. They were different, important for all inhabitants of the country and this is called Great Shih. He everts for himself a king's shi for his domain. It is called the "shih" of the king. A feudal prince builds a shi in his palace for all inhabitants of his state, calling it the shi of his country, and a "dai" for the city, and the shi of the prince. A Great Prefect (fa) and his subordinate together build a shi of their territory, calling it constitutional shi, and so forth. The importance of regional shih (altars) in Shang time is attested by the Po shih, the shi of Po, a place which according to the Shih-chi had been the capital of the first king of the Shang Dynasty. It is mentioned in oracle bone inscriptions, and sacrifices are made to it.

Ancient Chinese history, as well as questions and answers recorded on oracle bones, records only rites and ancestor worship of the royal family and the aristocracy, and not the manner of burial and the gifts placed in tombs of people of less exalted positions can be explained only by assuming that they too believed in the power of their ancestors. The discovery of oracle bones in Chi-shan and other places shows that divination was practised not only in the capital, but in all rural settlements. To whom else could the questions be directed except their own ancestors or tribal culture heroes? It would most certainly have been considered sacrilege to approach and demand help from ancestors of the ruling families. The difference in the existence in certain situations of modern people, the power of those living, the power of those having held high position in life considered vastly superior to that of those in lowly position.

In ancient Chinese history the spirit or god, the spirit of the earth is also identified with a legendary ancestor or minister of an Emperor and culture hero. A legendary hero called Kao-kung is supposed to have been minister of works under both Fu-hsi and Shen-nung, had a son called K'ai-lang who was believed to be a guardian of the shi. One of the ancestors of the Chou kings was worshipped as Hou T'ou and so forth. It is possible that the children of ancestors of different tribes lived in neighboring villages and regions and their dedications are therefore to ancestors. In any case, their names might not have been known outside their own immediate neighborhood or region, not long before still considered the spirits of the land and grain more important for the people than the sovereign ruler.

This is, however, important as it would mean that, contrary to customary conceptions, the people in the countryside did not feel helpless all the more so, the help of the god of the earth long before the Shang period. In
persons buried around the altar in Chi'wan had been similarly victims of riots against natural calamities. But the feature supporting the assumption that this place of sacrifice was used by the people living in this region and not by those who visited the river for the sake of their fishing and hunting. The skull-burning is known to have been practiced in this part of China and the skulls might have been sent to this region in connection with villagers in search of sacrificial victims for the shit altar.

Another question, who might have been the sacrificed victims in this place? Inscriptions on oracle bones leave no doubt that in the Shang time slaves had been sacrificed as victims. Among the people most often named were the Chi'liang. It is believed that the Chi'liang, a proto-Tibetan tribe, lived in this time not only in Shensi but even as far east as the mountainous parts of Hopei and Honan. They might have been the victims whom they sometimes recapitulated, which implies that they had previously been deprived of their freedom and we could call them "slaves." However, the name Chi'liang might have been a term for many tribes such as the Jung. T. and M. Xiong suggests, just a general name for "strangers."

However, the type of utensils, the houses, and the bones found there showed that the people in this region were poor farmers who most certainly had no slaves. Therefore, among the victims eliminates the possibility that they were prisoners of war sent to the countryside to be executed on this altar. We may just conjecture that among the victims were some unhappy inhabitants of the region—that is, members of the "in-group." Or, following the Shang terminology, some who had committed a crime, or anti-social elements who refused to follow well-established customs and had aroused the anger of their neighbors. Some of the victims may have been strangers caught in the border areas or those who ventured into the barbarian lands. These victims were needed for an important sacrificial task. Tradition is very strong in China, and there is enough evidence in history that various sacrificial rites in much later periods in certain parts of China, strangers were lured into the village to serve as victims of the altar. People were reconciled by the Chou after their defeat. This, in the course of the Chou period, became the State of Lu, that kept some of the customs of the Shang. The Duke of Lu is known to have had a Po-shu, an ancient altar of the Shang dedicated to the earth god of Po. The Tso-chuan reports several instances in which people were sacrificed in such a way to promote the desires of the "out-group," such as prisoners of war, and of the "in-group" (in both senses), that is, members of the aristocracy.

It is interesting, however, that on one occasion the sacrifice was done explicitly to pray for the Eastern Yü—that is, the original inhabitants of the country. This means that the sacrifice of victims was just as much an act at that time with the Eastern Yü as with the Shang. As the story of Yü has shown, the sacrificing of victims had been done long before the rise of the Shang Dynasty to power. It may have had its beginning in the substrata of the population even during which the Shang later assumed control. Yet we can draw the conclusion from the practice of sacrificial Chi'wan that this was done not solely by members of the royal house or the aristocracy but by groups of people living together in a restricted region hoping to influence supernatural powers for their own benefit.

Wang Yu-hsin and Chi’en Shu-t’i 'Notes on the remains of Shang dynasty sacrificial altars discovered in Shensi province,' Kuanghsu Province, 1973, No. 12, pp. 53-54.

Yu Wei-shen 'Remarks on the remains of Shang dynasty sacrificial altars discovered in Shensi province,' Chi’en Chih, 1973, 6, pp. 290-306.

Hsueh Wei-chung 'Chou-t’ung and the Southern Barbarians' in the Period of 1800-100 B.C.' 1971, pp. 30-33, Diederichs.


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The Shun Dynasty, in the famous speech at Kan before a battle, Yu, the legendary founder of the Shun Dynasty, threatened his soldiers by declaring that if they disobeyed his orders, he would put to death on the altar of the earth the men and women of the P’eng fu family. If the burial place had contained double or triple the number of victims, that would mean that the P’eng fu family would still mean that, spread over 200 or 275 years, the sacrifice of human beings would be done only on rare occasions—perhaps every five or ten years, or else restricted to times of great calamities. Oracle bone inscriptions, how-