

Title: Understanding History through Oracle Bone Study

Subject: Sociology: Understanding culture - History of Chinese Language and the Influence of Religion

Grade Level: This lesson is for grades 10-12 in a basic sociology class. It could easily be adapted to the lower grades by reducing the complexity of the analysis and discussion surrounding the activity.

Concentrate the focus of the lesson more on the making of the oracles, and leave out the complex discussion of religion. This lesson could also be adapted or use in a history class as well.

Time Duration: This lesson can be completed in two class periods, with follow-up at an additional time.

Overview: During the Sociology unit on Culture, students will discuss the non-material components of culture. This lesson will give them the opportunity to explore the language and religious aspects of Chinese culture.

Objective:

- Students will become familiar with the Chinese characters and oracle bone inscriptions in order to understand the relevance of language to the reflection of cultural values.
- Students will become familiar with the appearance of an oracle bone and the use of oracle bones in the Shang dynasty divination.
- Students will create their own "modern oracles" and present them to the class.

Materials:

- Teacher prepared handout on the Chinese language using the following sources:
 - Daily Life in Ancient China - www.members.aol.com/donnclass/chinalife.html
 - Oracle bones - <http://reference.allrefer.com/encyclopedia/O/oraclebo.html>
 - Chinese Astrological Symbols -
 - Oracle Inscriptions - <http://www.chinavista.com/experience/oracle/oracle.html>
 - Origins of Chinese Writing - http://www.logoi.com/notes/Chinese_origins.html
 - Oracle Bone with Translation - <http://faculty.Vassar.edu/brvannor/translation.html>
 - Oracle Bones - <http://www.chinesefortunecalendar.com/oraclebone.html>
 - Oracle bone picture - <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/images/shng-ora.jpg>
 - Oracle bone picture - <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/images/shnagbon.jpg>
 - Oracle Bone picture - Freer Gallery of Art Smithsonian Institution
- Oracle Bone Translations
- Oracle Bone Translation Worksheet

Activities and Procedures:

Day 1

- Bell work: In what ways are we able to discern non-material culture from material culture? (5 minutes)
- Class discussion of the inextricable link between material and non-material culture (5 - 10 minutes)
- Teacher hands out information about the history of Oracle Bones (material culture), and oracle bone pictures.
- Students read this in class, taking time to look at the pictures (5-10 minutes)
- Teacher answers questions students have about the reading. Goes over it with students, reinforcing the main points.
- Teacher hands out oracle bone inscription translations (see attached); reviews the four parts of the oracle inscription from the handout
- Working with a partner students examine the translations of three oracle bones and break each down into the four parts. (10 minutes)
- Students work with partners to speculate about the meanings of the oracle inscriptions. (5 minutes)
- Students pair-share about what they can discern about the non-material culture of the Chinese from what they now know about the material culture (oracle bones). (5 minutes)
- Teacher led class discussion sharing thoughts, observations, and questions related to Oracle Bones. (10 minutes)
- Homework: Think about what, if any, similarities there are between Shang Dynasty Oracle Bones and divination methods in our history and in our contemporary culture. Come prepared to class tomorrow with some thoughts and ideas for discussion.

Day 2

- Bell work: What in our contemporary culture is analogous to the Shang Dynasty oracle bone method of divination. Pair-share your thoughts.
- Teacher led discussion on divination methods and language.
- If you were to create an oracle bone today, what are some questions you might ask? Students will create a list of several possible questions. If you were to create an oracle bone today, what material might you use? How would you make it? Students will have 5 minutes to work on this.
- Students will then pair-share their answers.
- Students will then design their own oracle using the attached assignment sheet.
- Homework: Students will actually create their own oracle.

Day 3

- Students present their Oracles.

based on material offered by [Mr. Du Feibao](#)



These refer to the scripts carved by the ancients of the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th to 11th century B. C.) on tortoise shells and ox scapulas (shoulder blades), which are considered to be the earliest written language of China.

Their discovery was by accident.

In 1899, Wang Yirong, an official under the Qing Dynasty, fell ill. One of the medicaments prescribed by the physician was called "*longgu*" (dragon bones). They turned out to be fragments of tortoise shells which were found to bear strange carved-on patterns. He kept the "dragon bones" and showed them to scholars who, after careful study, came to the conclusion that the carvings were written records from 3,000 years before and were of great historical significance. Further inquiries revealed that the "dragon bones" had been unearthed at Xiaotun Village, Anyang County, Henan Province, site of the remains of the Shang Dynasty capital.

Further digs made at the site in later years brought to light a total of more than 100,000 pieces of bones and shells all carved with words. About 4,500 different characters have been counted, and 1,700 of them deciphered.

Three thousand five hundred years ago, Anyang was a marshy area teeming with tortoises, a favourite food of the local inhabitants. And the Shangs were a very superstitious people. Their rulers would resort to divination and ask the gods for revelation whenever there was a gale, downpour, thunderstorm, famine or epidemic. Before going on a war or a big hunt, they would still more want to divine the outcome.

The method of divination then was to drill a hole on the interior side of the tortoise shell and put the shell on a fire to see what cracks would appear on the obverse side. By interpreting the cracks the soothsayer predicted the outcome of an event. After each divination, the dates, the events and the results would be written down and carved on tortoise shells or bones. And the collection of these became the earliest recorded historical material in China, from which modern scholars have divined "how things were in the Shang society".

In the oracle inscriptions, one finds many pictographs in their primitive picture forms, for example,  for the sun,  for the cow, and so on. Together they show that a well-structured script with a complete system of written signs was already formed in that early age.

Later on, the area around Anyang became dry, and tortoises grew scarce, so people began to use bamboo strips instead for divination. From this grew the practice of asking the gods about the future by drawing bamboo sticks, as one may see today at certain temples--a practice that has its remote root in the superstition of the Shang people.

Oracle Bone with Translation

This "oracle bone" dates from the reign of King Wu Ding in the Shang Dynasty. It is approximately three thousand years old. Ancient Chinese rulers for divination used such oracle bones. The bones were heated until they cracked, and then the cracks were interpreted. The questions asked of the bones (and sometimes also the prognostications and the actual outcomes) were then carved into the bones. The inscriptions on these bones are the earliest known examples of Chinese "characters."

Following is a partial translation of the left-hand side of this oracle bone.

[Preface:] Crack making on *gui-si* day, Que divined:

[Charge:] In the next ten days there will be no disaster.

[Prognostication:] The king, reading the cracks, said, "There will be no harm; there will perhaps be the coming of alarming news."

[Verification:] When it came to the fifth day, *ding-you*, there really was the coming of alarming news from the west. Zhi Guo, reporting, said, "The Du Fang [a border people] are besieging in our eastern borders and have harmed two settlements." The Gong-fang also raided the fields of our western borders.

ORACLE BONE TRANSLATIONS

It is important to recognize that not all oracle bone transcriptions have been translated to date.

Oracle 1

Crack-making on *xinyou* (day fifty-eight), Que divined:

"This season, the King should follow Wang Cheng to attack the Xia Wei, for if he does we will receive assistance in this case."

"Praying to lead away this sick tooth [?], the *ding* sacrifice will be favorable."

"You sacrifice a dog to Fu Geng and *mao* sacrifice a shee."

"Sick tooth will be favorable."

Oracle 2

Crack-making on *jiashen* (day twenty-one), Que divined:

"Lady Hao's childbearing will be good."

The king read the cracks and said: "If it be on a *ding* day that she give birth, it will be good. If it be on a *geng* day that she give birth, there will be prolonged luck."

After thirty-one days, on *jiayin* (day fifty-one), she gave birth. It was not good.

It was a girl.

Second abbreviated version of Oracle 2 (found on the left side of the bone)

Crack-making on *jiashen* (day twenty-one), Que divined:

"Lady Hao will give birth and it may not be good."

After thirty-one days, on *jiayin* (day fifty-one), she gave birth.

It really was not good. It was a girl.

Oracle 3

On the day *gui-si*, Que consulted the oracle:

"Will any misfortune occur in the next ten days?"

The king read the cracks and said: "Misfortune will occur. Perhaps disturbing news will come."

When it came to the fifth day, *ding-you*, did indeed come from the West.

Guo from Zhi said: "Tufang is besieging our eastern border and has attacked two villages.

Gongfang has also plundered the fields on our western border."

Names _____ Date _____ Period _____

ORACLE BONE TRANSLATION WORKSHEET

Oracle that you are translating 1 2 3

1. Restate the meaning of the oracle bone in your own words.

Break the oracle transcription into its four parts

Preface - _____

Charge - _____

Prognostication - _____

Verification - _____

What conclusions can you draw about the culture from this inscription? _____

Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

MODERN ORACLE TRANSLATION

What question are you going to ask the oracle? (CHARGE) _____

What material will you use for your oracle? _____

Who will preside over your question to determine the answer? _____

Who will answer your question? (ORACLE) _____

How will you interpret the answer? (PROGNOSTICATION)? _____

How will you track the VERIFICATION of your oracle? _____

HOMEWORK: Create your own oracle. Bring it to class tomorrow for presentation.