

# *The Qiang and the Question of Human Sacrifice in the Late Shang Period*



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"IN MY OPINION, two elements that have formed the cornerstone of our understanding of Sandai history are due for a basic overhaul. These are, first, the emphasis on the vertical, successive relationship of the Three Dynasties and, second, the understanding of the developing sequence of the Three Dynasties as an island of civilization in a sea of barbarous contemporaries" (Chang 1983: 495–496). In this quotation and many other places, K. C. Chang has pointed out the path which he believes the study of the Chinese Bronze Age should take. In his view, we should make every effort to go beyond traditional concepts and historiography, to try to understand the social and political processes operating at the time.

As Chang points out, historians have traditionally viewed the Three Dynasties, located in the Central Plain area (Zhong Yuan), as the most complex societies of the time and those from which all other developments in China arose. Because all the early historical records in our possession today were written by these same polities, it is hard to avoid adopting a geographic perspective centered on the Zhong Yuan. If we wish to better understand the processes that led to the formation and development of state societies in China, we must first attempt to overcome this tendency. We must not only challenge the traditional model of relations among the Three Dynasties but also reexamine evidence for the interactions between the Zhong Yuan cultures and contemporary cultures in other parts of China.

In this paper I examine one aspect of this larger issue: the nature of interaction between the late Shang state (fourteenth–eleventh centuries B.C.) and the Qiang.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the sacrifice of Qiang during Shang rituals is examined in the context of Shang political organization. By addressing this issue, we can gain a better understanding of cultures outside what is usually considered the "cradle of Chinese civilization" (Cheng 1978: 7). We can also gain insights into the processes that may have led to the formation of Chinese civilization.

According to available historical documents, the Qiang people lived to the northwest of the Shang. These people are best known from more than 800 late Shang oracle bone inscriptions excavated at the Yinxu site (near present-day An-

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*Asian Perspectives*, Vol. 35, No. 1, © 1996 by University of Hawai'i Press.

yang), believed to have been the last capital of the Shang dynasty. Most of these inscriptions refer to the sacrifice of Qiang people as part of rituals performed by the Shang court. Why did the Shang perform these rituals of mass human sacrifice? And why, among all the names of their neighbors recorded in the oracle bone inscriptions, were the Qiang the only ones to have been named as sacrificial victims (Chang 1980 : 249)?

Two approaches to these questions can be found in the literature on the Shang. The first and most common approach is to describe human sacrifice as a part of Shang ritual without attempting to explain what purpose it served (e.g., Chang 1980). This emic approach toward the phenomenon of human sacrifice can be found in the writings of archaeologists working in other parts of the world. Anawalt's (1982 : 45) conclusion that "such customs [human sacrifices and cannibalism] demonstrate the wide range of behavior that has been socially acceptable during human time on earth" exemplifies this attitude. The second approach can be labeled the materialistic approach. According to this model, war captives were sacrificed because there was no other use for them in the Shang system. The institutionalization of the use of war captives as slaves at the end of the Shang period and the following Zhou period is associated with a decline in human sacrifice (Huang 1989; Yang 1986).

I suggest that human sacrifice should instead be understood as an integral part of the Shang political system. This approach is inspired by attempts to explain human sacrifice in other parts of the world. Demarest (1984 : 228), for example, has suggested that "Classic Maya human sacrifice was both a legitimation and a sanctification of political power." In a similar fashion, human sacrifice may be thought of as helping to legitimize Shang political control over the population and to consolidate alliances between the Shang and their allies in wars against alien polities. The view of the Qiang as the antithesis of the Shang can be seen as instrumental in defining the Shang identity. The ability of the Shang kings to defeat Qiang armies and sacrifice Qiang victims was an actual or symbolic demonstration of their powers. Struggle for political hegemony and control over natural resources were the primary reasons for wars between the Shang and their neighbors. I suggest that the symbolic meaning of the Qiang added to the perceived importance of the wars the Shang conducted against them.

## THE NATURE OF THE SOURCES

### *Historical Texts*

Descriptions of a pastoralist tribe named Qiang appear in historical texts such as the *Shuo Wen* and *Hou Han Shu* (Sun 1987 : 688; Tian 1988 : 273; Yen 1978 : 776). Other sources refer to the alliance between the Zhou and the Qiang and the part played by the latter in overthrowing the Shang during the eleventh century B.C. (Hsu and Linduff 1988 : 27-28; Prusek 1971 : 38-40).<sup>2</sup> The problem common to all these primary sources is that they were written during the latter part of the Eastern Zhou (771-221 B.C.) and the Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) periods. Although these later sources may rely in part on older documents, knowledge of some aspects of the Shang period was lost during a thousand years of oral transmission. Error also results from projecting later situations on earlier periods and using the historical documents in the context of later political competition and claims for

legitimacy. Further, the historical texts reflect a view of non-Han people as inferior to the Han. This means that descriptions regarding non-Shang people are even less reliable than the other contents of these documents.

### *Oracle Bone Inscriptions*

Inscriptions on bones and turtle shells are the oldest written records known in China. Most of these inscriptions were found at the site of Yinxu, which was probably the capital of the late Shang. Numerous references to the Qiang in the oracle bone inscriptions are the most important source we possess for the study of their relations with the Shang. These inscriptions are more reliable than the historical records because they were inscribed during the late Shang period and so did not undergo later modification. On the other hand, the oracle bones are by no means objective historical documents. They were written and used in Shang court rituals and reflect the ideology and views of the Shang kings and elite.

### *Archaeology*

Archaeological data have the advantage of being both unbiased and dated to the time at which the events took place. However, when no associated inscriptions are found, it is difficult to identify archaeological data with ethnic or political groups. Archaeologists in the West long ago rejected the idea that archaeological cultures detected from the spatial patterning of objects and styles can be correlated with prehistoric ethnic groups or people (Hodder 1978; Renfrew 1978). Shennan (1989:11) pointed out that archaeological cultures are “not merely useless for analytical purposes, but positively misleading if taken as the basis of an approach to prehistory.” Chinese archaeologists have never abandoned the method of defining archaeological cultures and attempting to identify them as the material remains of ethnic groups mentioned in historical texts.<sup>3</sup> As Shennan has pointed out for other parts of the ancient world, heated debates in China surrounding the identification of ethnic groups with archaeological cultures have led the discussion away from more productive avenues of research.

Another problem with archaeological research in China is the common acceptance of the geographic view promoted by the historical texts. Until recently archaeological research in China focused on the Zhong Yuan area. This emphasis results in a distorted picture of societies that inhabited the “peripheral” areas. Limited knowledge of these “peripheral” areas constrains our ability to address questions concerning interactions between the Shang and their neighbors.

### WHO WERE THE QIANG?

The character that many scholars read as *Qiang* appears in more than 800 known oracle bone inscriptions (Shima 1958: 14–19).<sup>4</sup> The character was written in several ways, which is not uncommon for oracle bone characters (Fig. 1A). Among its main types we can observe two basic forms: the simplified (the first four characters in Fig. 1A) and the elaborate (the last five characters in Fig. 1A).

Two opposing meanings have been assigned to this character. Guo Moruo identifies the oracle bone character as *gou* and translates it as “dog” (Guo 1965:

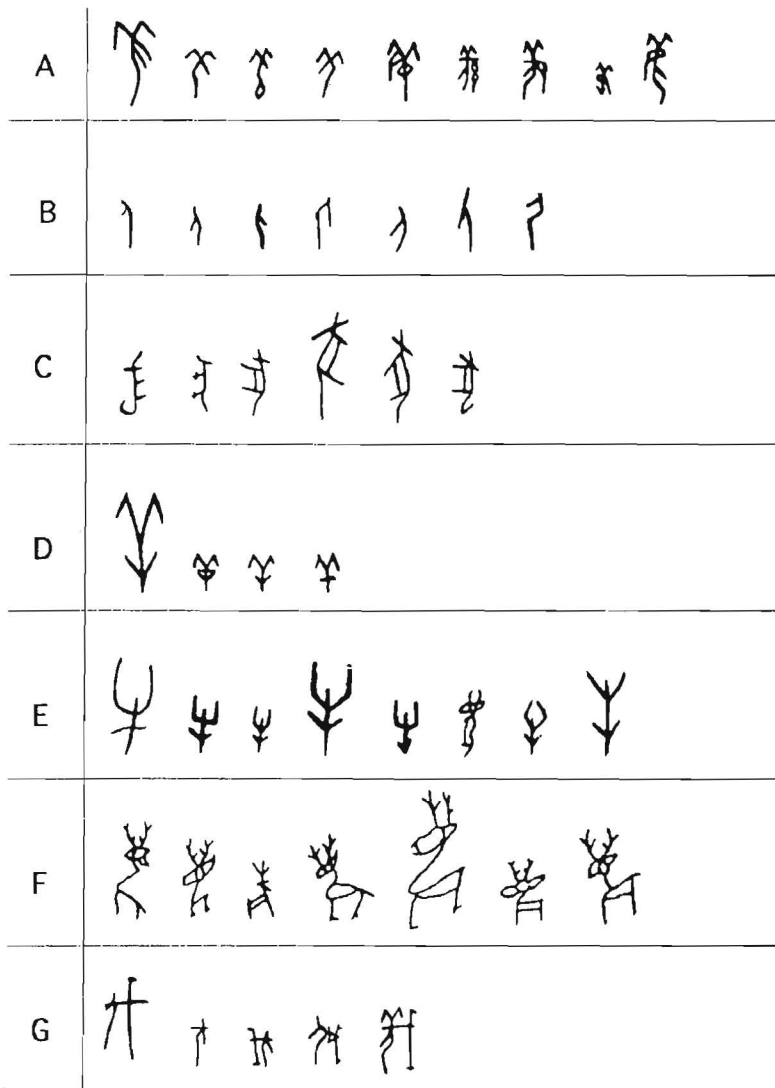


Fig. 1. Comparison of oracle bone characters: A, *Qiang*; B, *ren* (human); C, *gou* (dog); D, *yang* (sheep/goat); E, *niu* (cow); F, *lu* (deer); G, *fa* (after Xu 1988).

24–425). According to Guo, this is a pictographic character that represents a standing human figure with the ears of a dog. He interprets the elaborate form as a dog with a rope tied to its neck. He states that this character is identified as a Shang ancestor in the oracle bone inscriptions. He argues that this could be a postmortem name of Shang kings because the dog is known to have symbolized courage and loyalty (Guo 1965: 425).

Most scholars reject Guo's translation and identify the character instead with humans or activity involving humans. Almost all scholars base their identification on the explanation of this character in the *Shuo Wen*. The *Shuo Wen* writes, "Qiang: Western Rong sheep herdsman, [the character is made] from man and



from sheep.” Accordingly, most scholars see the Qiang as pastoralists living in west or northwest China (Chang 1980 : 249; Li 1984 : 127; Peng 1988 : 185; Tian 1987 : 273; Sun 1987 : 688; Yen 1967 : 776). These scholars also reject Guo’s assumption that the upper part of the character stands for the ears of a dog. Instead, they follow the *Shuo Wen* and see this part of the character as identifying a sheep.

Examination of the context in which the *Qiang* character was used in the oracle bone inscriptions supports the second interpretation. This, however, should not compel us to accept without question the entire definition provided in the *Shuo Wen*. The *Shuo Wen* dictionary was written during the Eastern Han period, more than 1000 years after the end of the Shang period. Over the course of this period, the names and nature of the tribes inhabiting the areas surrounding the Zhong Yuan area may have changed. For this reason, the fact that a nomadic tribe named Qiang is known to have occupied a part of northwestern China during the late Zhou and Han does not mean that the same tribe with the same name existed in the same place during the late Shang period. In this context, it is interesting to note Pulleyblank’s comment on the connection the *Shuo Wen* makes between the character *Qiang* and the pastoralist lifeway of the Qiang people: “Ch’iang [*Qiang*] is not analyzed in the Shuo-wen as having ‘sheep’ as phonetic, but is considered a *hui-yi* compound of ‘sheep’ plus ‘man’, referring to the pastoral way of life of the Ch’iang. It seems obvious, however, that this is incorrect and that ‘sheep’ has the same phonetic role here as in Chiang, the association with pastoralism is accidental and secondary” (Pulleyblank 1983 : 421).

Based on a comparison between characters in the oracle bone inscriptions, we can accept Guo’s identification of the lower part of *Qiang* with the character *ren*, which means “person” (Fig. 1A, B). A question still remains regarding the upper part of the character. Does it represent the ears of a dog or the horns of a sheep? Comparison with the character *quan* does not reveal a close resemblance (Fig. 1C). In fact, the upper part of *Qiang* is much closer to the way sheep horns (but not the head) are depicted in the character *yang* (Fig. 1D). The form of these horns is very different from the depiction of cattle (Fig. 1E), deer (Fig. 1F), or other animal horns.<sup>5</sup>

The clearest evidence for the identification of *Qiang* as a human being is the inscriptions that explicitly make this identification. For example, inscription *Cuibian* 593 was translated by Guo (1965 : 509) as “The king received 15 Qiang people.” In this case even Guo admits that the character referred to humans, but he understands it as standing for the character *gu*. Apparently, this inscription refers to Qiang people (or the sacrifice of Qiang people) being “received” by the Shang king. However, few such inscriptions exist, so we should look for more conclusive evidence.

The verb *fa*, which is believed to refer to the ritual decapitation of humans, is often used together with *Qiang* and terms referring to humans in oracle bone inscriptions, but is never associated with animals (see, for example, Shima 1958 : 16; Takashima 1985 : 74–78). This is consistent with the shape of the character itself: an axe or weapon decapitating a human (Fig. 1G; Xu 1988 : 893). It is most interesting that in some instances the human figure in this character is replaced by the character *Qiang* (Hu 1974b : 59; see the final character in Fig. 1G).<sup>6</sup> Clearly, in this respect at least, *Qiang* is interchangeable with “human.” In many cases the verb *fa* “acts on” the character *Qiang*, which shows that the Qiang were human beings.

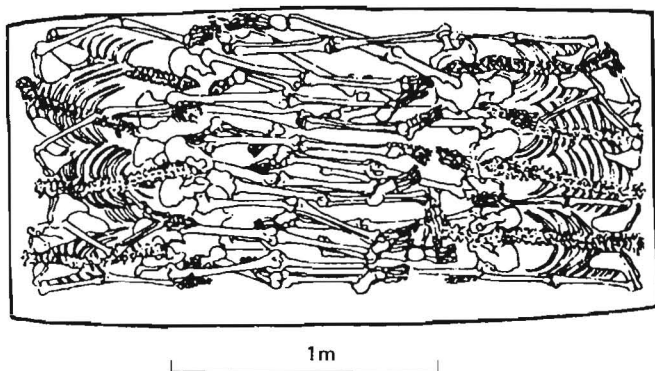


Fig. 2. Sacrificial pit containing skeletons of decapitated victims: pit M32 from the 1976 excavations at Xibeigang (after Zhongguo 1985: 113).

Although the Qiang were often sacrificed together with animals (Chen 1956: 281), the inscriptions carefully distinguish between human beings and animals. References to the sacrificial killing of animals make use of another character, *mao*. Different kinds of animals are “acted on” by the verb *mao* (Takashima 1985: 159–161), but no instance of it “acting on” *Qiang* has been found.<sup>7</sup>

Excavations at Xibeigang, the Shang royal cemetery at the Yinxu site, have revealed the importance of the decapitation of humans in late Shang society. At this site, more than 1000 small pit burials were placed in rows between the great royal tombs.<sup>8</sup> Each of these pits contained human bones representing up to 12 individuals accompanied by few if any grave goods. Many pits contained headless skeletons, while in others only the skulls were found (Fig. 2; Anyang 1977; Chang 1980; Yang 1986; Yang and Yang 1977; Zhongguo 1985). These “sacrificial pits,” as they are called in the reports, will be discussed later in connection with the question of human sacrifice and the Shang political system.

After clarifying *Qiang* as referring to human beings, we can now address the question of whether the *Shuo Wen* and the scholars who follow its identification of the Qiang are correct in seeing the Qiang as a tribe (or tribes) of sheep herders who lived in northwest China (Chang 1980: 249; Peng 1988: 185–186; Prusek 1971: 85; Sun 1987: 688; Tian 1988: 273; Yen 1967: 776). The critical issues are the geographical location of the Qiang, their social and political organization, and the economic base of their society.

#### *Geographical Location of the Qiang*

We cannot assume that the descriptions of the Qiang provided by the *Shuo Wen* and other late Zhou or Han sources can be used to describe the situation during the late Shang period. For example, the historical records speak of an alliance between the Zhou and the Qiang, followed by their collaboration in the overthrow of the Shang (Hsu and Linduff 1988: 55–58). Following this, the records speak of the Qiang being given fiefs (Prusek 1971: 40), with at least part of them moving to other locations. Even without such a specific reference, we know that during the Western Zhou and earlier periods, tribes and clans changed their loca-

tion very frequently (Hsu and Linduff 1988: 158–163; Prusek 1971). Furthermore, because place names have also changed, the geographical identification of names on oracle bones with those found in historical records is very problematic (Chen 1956: 249; Pulleyblank 1983: 418–421).

The best way to locate places named in the oracle bone inscriptions is by combining into groups place names found in the same inscription and assuming that all the names in one group were located relatively close to one another. These groups are then located on the map on the basis of the relative positions of places as mentioned in the inscriptions (e.g., “A is north of B”). As pointed out by Shaughnessy (1989), this method can lead to mistakes, and in certain instances we must return to the historical text for reference points to locate this network of place names on the map. It is therefore not surprising that, although most scholars agree that the Qiang inhabited areas northwest of the Shang, there is disagreement regarding their exact location. Chen (1956: 282), for example, locates them in southern Shanxi Province and adjacent areas in Shaanxi and Henan. Others have placed them in western Henan Province or in northern Shaanxi Province (Chang 1980: 249). Some locate them farther to the northwest in Gansu and Qinghai Provinces (Sun 1987: 610; Tian 1988: 274), while others suggest that some of the Qiang may have inhabited parts of Siberia (Prusek 1971: 82–86). Still others believe the area of Qiang activity to be much wider, including the provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and parts of Sichuan (Peng 1988: 186). They see the large size of this area as the result of the mobility of a group they believe to have had a pastoral economy and nomadic way of life.

In this context, we may consider Li's idea that *Qiang* actually has two meanings: a specific meaning associated with *Qiang-fang*, a polity he locates west of Shang (but probably very close to it) in south Shanxi and western Henan, and a general meaning as a name for tribes and people who lived west of the Shang (Li 1959: 80).<sup>9</sup> *Fang* is a term used in the oracle bones to describe specific polities beyond the control and influence of the Shang. Many inscriptions describe confrontations between the Shang and their allies and one or more of the *fang* polities (Keightley 1979–1980).<sup>10</sup> Although these polities are sometimes called “states” (Chang 1980; Shaughnessy 1989), there is nothing in the inscriptions to indicate the level of their social and political organization. Furthermore, a group or polity can at one time be the enemy of the Shang and labeled *fang* and at another time be a Shang ally, at which time *fang* is omitted (Hsu and Linduff 1988; Shaughnessy 1989).

In their military campaigns against the *Qiang-fang*, the Shang and their allies used many more soldiers than in campaigns against other *fang*. For example, during one campaign against the *Qiang-fang*, they deployed 13,000 soldiers, while against other *fang* polities they used only 3000–5000 (Tian 1988: 276). The proximity of the *Qiang-fang* to Shang territory may explain the threat posed by the Qiang as well as the ability of the Shang to concentrate such large forces against them (Li 1959: 77–80; Prusek 1971: 39).

#### *The Qiang and the Archaeological Record*

Because scholars are in disagreement about the geographical location of the Qiang, their identification of Qiang culture(s) in the archaeological record also

varies. Furthermore, as pointed out above, the prevailing Chinese method of defining archaeological cultures and assuming that each represents the activities of a specific prehistoric ethnic group is unacceptable to most Western archaeologists (Hodder 1978; Renfrew 1978; Shennan 1989). The type of data available is also problematic. No information exists regarding settlement patterns in this area, while information on habitation sites is meager at best. Our information is largely restricted to excavated burials, and the limited publication of such data prevents us from conducting comprehensive statistical analyses. In spite of these drawbacks, we can still obtain useful information from the available reports.

The questions we should ask regarding the archaeological data include whether they support the historical descriptions of the Qiang as a tribe of sheep herdsman and whether they justify the assumption that the culture and political system of the Qiang were inferior to those of the Shang.

The Qiang are most commonly identified with the Siwa culture (Hsu and Linduff 1988: 55; Sun 1987: 611–612; Tian 1988: 274).<sup>11</sup> This culture is distributed mainly in Gansu Province, east of Lanzhou in the Qianshui, Jingshui, and Weishui river basins (Fig. 3). It is dated to the fourteenth–eleventh centuries B.C., and its later portion is sometimes called Anguo. The Siwa culture is known mainly from graveyards and very limited excavations of habitation sites (Gansusheng 1990). Another culture that scholars have ascribed to the Qiang is Houshaogou (also called Siba). This culture is also known mainly from burials. It is found in north-

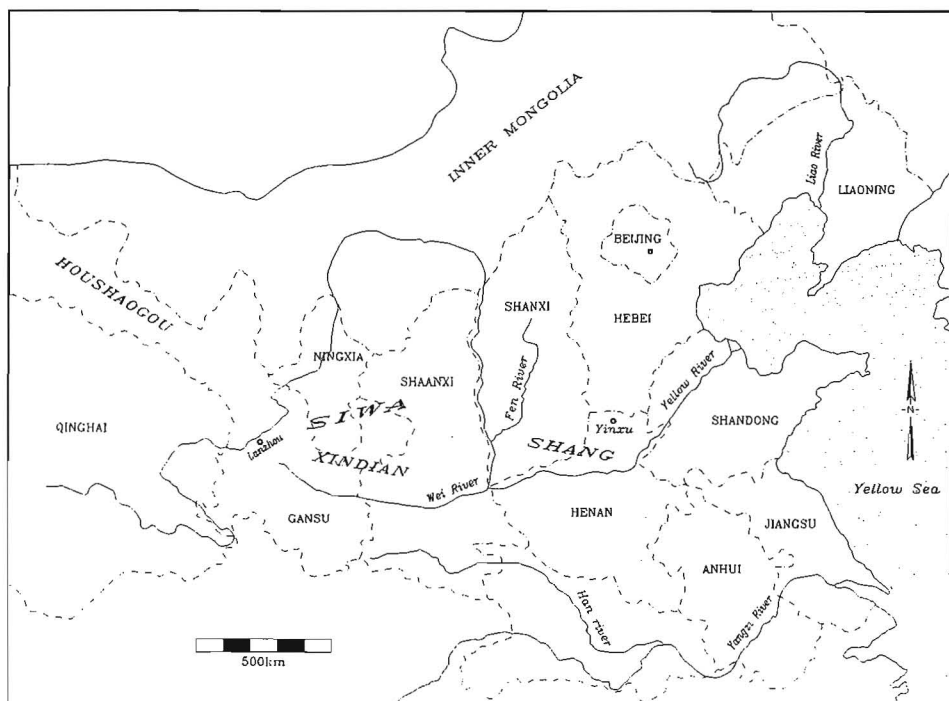


Fig. 3. Archaeological cultures of the late Shang period; names in italics represent archaeological cultures, names in roman type are Chinese provinces.

west Gansu, in the Yuman area, and is dated to the Xia and Shang periods (Gansusheng 1990; Li 1993; Tian 1988:274; *Wenwu* 1979:142–144). The last archaeological culture identified by some with the Qiang is the Xindian (*Wenwu* 1979:144; Xie 1985). It is located in the upper Yellow River Basin and in the Daxiahe and Taohe river valleys and is dated to the end of the second and beginning of the first millennium B.C. (Gansusheng 1990; Zhang et al. 1993).

It is as yet impossible to correlate specific archaeological data with the Qiang. Nevertheless, since the Qiang-fang were active in this area at the time of these archaeological cultures, we can assume that the general features of these cultures reflect the social organization and economic base of the Qiang. Moreover, as pointed out, it is possible that in many inscriptions *Qiang* is used as a general name ascribed to alien people living west of the Shang rather than as a specific reference to the Qiang-fang (Li 1959:80). All these archaeological cultures could therefore be associated with a “Qiang culture.” Detailed research is needed to understand better the nature of these cultures. Question-oriented research and emphasis on systematic identification of settlement patterns would result in a much better understanding of the political organization of the polities that inhabited this area. Two general observations can nevertheless be made from the available data.

First, the assumption that the Qiang were nomadic pastoralists specializing in the raising of sheep is not supported by the archaeological data available from these regions. In all the cultures mentioned above, ample evidence was recovered to support the reconstruction of a mixed economic base of animal husbandry and agriculture. The Xindian culture was geographically the closest to the Shang and so was its economic base, which included agriculture and animal husbandry. Bones of pig, dog, sheep/goat, cow, and horse were all found at Xindian sites (Song 1991; Xie 1985; *Zhongguo* 1986–1988:586). This type of economy, especially when it includes pig raising, is associated with a sedentary rather than a mobile way of life. Even in cultures like Houshaogou and Siwa, located in areas more remote from the Shang, it can be demonstrated that agriculture played an important role. Large quantities of carbonized wheat grains were found in Houshaogou culture strata at the Xihuishan site, and the remains of carbonized millet grains were found inside ceramic vessels placed in graves at the Houshaogou site (Gansusheng 1990:318). These grains, along with the many agricultural tools found at sites and in graves of this culture, attest to the importance of agriculture in Houshaogou culture. Although no plant remains have so far been reported from sites of the Siwa culture, Chinese archaeologists point to the tool inventory and the few habitation sites excavated from this culture as evidence for an economy based at least in part on agriculture (*Wenwu* 1979:143; *Zhongguo* 1986–1988:485–486). In graves and sites of both the Houshaogou and Siwa cultures, bones of pig, sheep/goat, cow, and horse were found (Gansusheng 1990; Li 1993; *Wenwu* 1979:142; *Zhongguo* 1986–1988). Although the reports do not indicate the relative numbers of bones from different animals, the evidence suggests that these societies also were sedentary or at least not very mobile.

We can now return to the comment made by Pulleyblank regarding the connection the *Shuo Wen* makes between the character *Qiang* and the pastoralist life-way of the Qiang people. Pulleyblank (1983:421) demonstrates that from a linguistic perspective “the association [of the *Qiang* character] with pastoralism

is accidental and secondary." Since this association is also not supported by the archaeological record, we can suggest that it is the result of the *Shuo Wen* projecting the situation during the Han times back onto much earlier periods.

Pastoral nomadism was not developed in China and Central Asia until the beginning of the first millennium B.C. (Khazanov 1983; Prusek 1971:94–95; Qiao 1992). There is increasing dependency on animal husbandry during the Shang period in many areas of North China, from Gansu and Qinghai in the west to Liaoning in the east. However, the societies inhabiting these areas were mainly sedentary with a strong agricultural base (Qiao 1992; Linduff in press). The problem is that scholars who describe the Qiang as "sheep herders" or "nomads" have relied on sources from the Warring States and Han periods. The *Shuo Wen* and other sources describe the Qiang and other peoples at the end of a developmental process, at which time their way of life was surely different from that of the late Shang period.

The second general observation is that the assumption that the Qiang and other non-Shang people were socially and politically simpler than the Shang is mistaken. According to the fragmented data available, it seems that although these people did not possess the centralized organization of the Shang, their society was nevertheless stratified. Graves of all the cultures discussed above contain evidence for social stratification. Graves of Siwa culture differ in size, shape, and construction material. Some of them are large and include a secondary ledge and wooden coffin, while others are small pit graves with no coffin. Differences in the amount and type of grave goods are also a good indication of stratification. While some of the graves contain only a few ceramic vessels, others contain up to 70 vessels as well as bronze and stone implements and sacrificed animals (Gansusheng 1987, 1990; *Wenwu* 1979:143; *Zhongguo* 1982; *Zhongguo* 1986–1988:485–486). Perhaps the best evidence for social stratification, and also for the actual political power wielded by the elite, is the human sacrifices found in some of the graves. These human victims were placed in special niches dug into the grave walls (Gansusheng 1990:319). Preliminary reports of the excavations at the Xujianian cemetery indicate that skeletons of sacrificed victims were found in only 6.7 percent of the graves (*Zhongguo* 1982), which suggests that humans were sacrificed during the burial ceremonies of only a small portion of the population—most likely the ruling elite.

A similar situation is reported from excavated burials belonging to the Houshaogou culture. As for the graves of the Siwa culture, status differences between grave owners can be discussed in terms of the amount of labor that went into building and furnishing these graves (Li 1993; Tian 1988:274; *Wenwu* 1979:142–144). Graves of the Houshaogou culture also contain evidence for human sacrifice. Although the exact position of the victims in the graves was not reported, their presence is probably associated with political authority. A similar situation has been reported for graves of the Xindian culture, although even less information is available (*Zhongguo* 1986–1988:585–586).

The artifacts found at the sites of these three cultures attest not only to social stratification according to wealth and status but also to a developed system of division of labor. Relatively large numbers of bronze tools, weapons, and ornaments were found in graves of the Houshaogou, Siwa, and Xindian cultures (Gansusheng 1990; Li 1993; Song 1991; Tian 1988; Xie 1985; *Zhongguo* 1982).



In the cemetery of the Houshaogou site alone, more than 200 metal objects were excavated. Analysis performed on some of these artifacts confirmed that although some were made of pure copper, others are of bronze alloy (Yan 1984). The discovery of bronze slag and parts of furnaces used to smelt bronze indicates that bronze objects were produced locally (Song 1991). Most of the bronze objects from these cultures exhibit style and manufacturing techniques different from those of bronze objects produced by the Shang, reflecting their local origin. However, a few weapons, such as *ge* halberds (Zhongguo 1982:588), are similar to those typically found at Shang sites, suggesting interactions between these cultures and the Shang. Seashells and other nonlocal materials found in graves also point to trade with the Zhong Yuan as well as other parts of China (Li 1993; Song 1991; Tian 1988; *Wenwu* 1979; Zhongguo 1986–1988). Silver and gold objects, as well as objects made of semiprecious stones, were also found in graves of the three cultures (Gansusheng 1990). All these findings are indications of technological knowledge and a level of specialization associated with a division of labor.

Recent archaeological discoveries in northeast China point to a similar situation. These areas were inhabited by sophisticated bronze-producing cultures. The bronze artifacts discovered in these areas bear indications of technological and stylistic traditions very different from those of the Shang (Guo 1995*b*; Lin 1986). This again reflects a level of social and political stratification independent of the Shang system.

#### THE SHANG AMONG THEIR NEIGHBORS

The archaeological evidence is directly relevant to the question of the nature of the interaction between the Shang and their neighbors. Was the Shang polity a fully developed state that exerted political control over a vast area and culturally dominated its neighbors? Or was it an incipient state, which directly controlled a limited area and interacted with surrounding, equally complex polities. The debate over these questions centers on evidence found in the oracle bone inscriptions and historical texts.<sup>12</sup> In recent years, Western historians have tended to subscribe to the second view. Shaughnessy (1989:12) concludes, “Rather than our seeing the center of Shang power as controlling vast stretches across northern Shansi, Hopei and Shantung, we once again interpret it as comprising a relatively circumscribed area roughly from present-day Anyang to no more than about 200 kilometers west” (Fig. 3). Keightley (1979–1980:26) argues for a much larger territory under Shang control but qualifies this by claiming that “the Shang state was *gruyere*, filled with non-Shang holes.”

In the absence of settlement pattern studies and systematic surveys, it is difficult to put these statements to the test of the archaeological record. But our increasingly detailed knowledge of the archaeology of areas beyond the Zhong Yuan leads us to see them as inhabited by independent polities. The material culture of these polities reflects symbolic and ritual systems very different from those of the Shang (Lin 1986; Linduff in press; Guo 1995*b*).

The consequences of the Zhou victory over the Shang demonstrate the cultural and political independence of these polities, known as *fang* in the oracle bone inscriptions. The Zhou, themselves allies of the Shang at one time and later

their strongest enemy, brought with them a culture that differed in many respects from that of the Shang. Although there is a certain continuity between the two periods, the new aesthetic values and ritual system must have originated in Zhou culture before the overthrow of the Shang (Hsu and Linduff 1988). Out of the 55 names of *fang* polities identified in the oracle bone inscriptions, 40 percent are also found as insignia inscriptions on bronze vessels of the Zhou period. According to Keightley (1979–1980:28), this suggests that “these non-Shang groups were able to maintain their independence through the period of the Chou [Zhou] conquest, a significant clue to their probable self-sufficiency in Late Shang.”

This implies that relations between the Shang and their neighbors should be described in terms of political negotiations (Keightley 1979–1980) and cultural interactions (Linduff in press) rather than political control and cultural domination (Sun 1987; Tong 1986). In political terms, the Shang had to constantly ensure the support of their allies and demonstrate their power as a warning to real or potential enemies. The marriage of Shang kings and nobles to foreign women was one strategy used to secure the support of neighboring polities (Chang 1980:253; Chen 1956; Linduff in press). Other mechanisms included adopting non-Shang ancestors into the Shang ritual system and employing non-Shang persons in high positions such as diviners at the Shang court (Keightley 1979–1980). Although there is no evidence for a diviner of Qiang origin, some inscriptions suggest that Qiang people took part in the ceremonial preparation of oracle bones and in other relatively important tasks (Li 1959:80). The Qiang are also associated with at least one of the Shang ancestors in the oracle bone inscriptions (Guo 1965:425). The late Shang bronze vessels that bear the inscription “Qiang” may strengthen our idea of a political alliance between the Shang and at least some of the Qiang (Li 1959:80).<sup>13</sup>

The need to secure a supply of raw materials and animals was another reason why the Shang had to maintain good relations with their neighbors. For example, there are frequent references in the oracle bone inscriptions to the delivery of turtle shells by non-Shang groups (Keightley 1979–1980:32). Turtle shells were used in Shang divination, and their acquisition was crucial for the maintenance of the Shang ritual system. Chang (1980:257–259) suggests that political alliances with groups occupying southern Shanxi, as well as occasional wars in this area, reflect Shang attempts to secure a supply of tin, copper, and salt. Horses were another commodity the Shang must have imported from their northern neighbors. As pointed out by Linduff (in press), chariots are important components of the royal tombs at Anyang and are known from inscriptions to have served in the royal sport of hunting as well as in wars. Horses and chariots, however, are unknown in earlier Shang periods. This implies that along with the horses the Shang must have brought to court foreign experts who bred the horses and took care of them and their equipment.<sup>14</sup>

The Shang were part of a regional political network that included many other polities. The Shang polity was probably the strongest, but it was not powerful enough to force the obedience of the others and not large enough to ignore them with impunity. It is against this background of the Shang’s external struggles, political negotiations, and internal striving for consolidation and legitimation that we should understand the function of human sacrifice.



## WHY WERE THE QIANG SACRIFICED?

Human sacrifice was an important part of Shang rituals, which included ceremonies in memory of ancestors, the dedication of important buildings, and the funerals of kings and nobles. In the known oracle bone inscriptions, at least 14,197 human victims are mentioned (Hu 1974b: 57). The importance of human sacrifice is illustrated in the excavations at Yinxu, where large numbers of human skeletons were found accompanying the king and nobles in the large tombs or placed as dedications at the foundations of important buildings. The scale of human sacrifice in Anyang is best demonstrated by the excavation of more than 1000 sacrificial pits, each containing up to 12 human skeletons (Anyang 1977; Hu 1974a; Chang 1980; Yang 1986; Yang and Yang 1977; Zhongguo 1985).<sup>15</sup> Scholars have estimated that at least 7426 Qiang people are mentioned as victims in the oracle bone inscriptions (Hu 1974b). If more than half of all the human victims mentioned in the inscriptions were Qiang, this is a strong indication of the important role they played in these ceremonies. Although the Qiang were not the only humans to be sacrificed by the Shang, they are the only non-Shang people mentioned specifically as sacrificial victims in the Shang rituals (Chang 1980: 230; Hu 1974b; Peng 1988: 130; Qiu 1983: 5).<sup>16</sup>

Ethnographic and ethnohistorical records from around the globe relate that sacrifice has typically involved two types of victims. The first are people who volunteered or at least accepted their fate. It was this type that Davis (1981: 13) had in mind when he wrote that “both sacrificer and victim knew that the act was required, to save the people from calamity and the cosmos from collapse” (see also Anawalt 1982; Davis 1984; Sahagun 1932; Schele and Miller 1989). The second type were foreigners captured during wars. “Hunting” expeditions were sometimes conducted to supply the victims needed for the rituals (Davis 1984; Herskovits 1938; Kirch 1991; Rands 1952; Schele 1984). These victims did not belong to the society that sacrificed them. They did not volunteer, nor did they agree to be killed. It can be argued that the Qiang belonged to the captive-victim category and, moreover, that to the Shang, they *were* the category.

The oracle bone inscriptions are clear about how Qiang victims were obtained. The Shang and their allies are described as “hunting” Qiang people, while on several occasions Qiang were gifts sent by foreign polities to the Shang court (Guo 1965; Keightley 1979–1980: 33; Shima 1958). The Qiang were clearly war prisoners, and some scholars go as far as to suggest that the reason for the large-scale wars against the Qiang-fang was the Shang’s desire to obtain Qiang victims for their rituals (Li 1984: 129; Prusek 1971: 39; Sun 1987: 609). We do not have to go so far to make the point that Qiang captives were certainly an important commodity to the Shang court.

Hu (1974b: 57) has identified 11 different verbs that describe Qiang sacrifices. The most common are *yong*, *you*, and *fa* (Shima 1958). Based on its shape, the character *fa* was clearly a method of decapitation. The character shows an axe on a human neck (Fig. 1G): the most common sacrificial method mentioned in the oracle bone inscriptions (Hu 1974b: 59). Although *fa* decapitation was also performed on non-Qiang people, the importance of Qiang victims in this ritual is underscored by the fact that in many cases the character *Qiang* replaces the human character *ren* as one of the parts of *fa*.

The excavations of the sacrificial pits at Anyang provide an interesting archaeological data base that should be correlated with the information provided by the inscriptions. Many sacrificial pits were found in the eastern part of the Xibeigang royal cemetery at the YinXu (Anyang) site. On the basis of cemetery layout, the sacrificial pits were divided by the archaeologists into groups, each group perhaps representing a single ceremony of human sacrifice (Yang 1986). Human victims were also found inside the large royal tombs, and the number of pit groups is greater than the number of royal tombs, so these ceremonies were probably not carried out during the funeral processions of Shang kings. Rather, these pits reflect independent ceremonies of reverence to and communication with the ancestors (Chang 1980: 121).

Meaningful patterns can be observed in the reports of 191 pits excavated at Xibeigang in 1976. Only 165 of these pits contain human skeletons, of which 135 contain headless skeletons, 29 contain complete skeletons, and 2 contain both complete and headless skeletons (Anyang 1977). The complete skeletons were usually placed in rectangular pits oriented east and west, while skeletons without skulls were placed in pits oriented to the north and south (Table 1, Fig. 2). Grave goods were found in only 13 pits, 12 of which contained complete skeletons (Table 2). Previous excavations at Xibeigang reported a similar situation: very few grave goods in the pits of decapitated victims compared to more abundant artifacts in pits containing complete skeletons. In addition, these excavations identified a third category of pits: 209 pits, each containing up to 39 human skulls. These pits, like the ones containing decapitated skeletons, are rarely furnished with grave goods (Chang 1980: 124). These data suggest that the sacrificial pits accommodated two types of victims: decapitated victims placed in north-south pits without grave goods, and complete skeletons placed in east-west pits, sometimes with grave goods.

Table 1. ORIENTATION AND CONTENT OF SACRIFICIAL PITS  
FROM THE 1976 EXCAVATIONS AT XIBEIGANG

ORIENTATION	COMPLETE SKELETONS	DECAPITATED SKELETONS	DECAPITATED AND COMPLETE SKELETONS
North-South	6	132	0
East-West	23	2	2

Source: Anyang 1977.

Table 2. ASSOCIATION OF SKELETON TYPES WITH GENDER AND GRAVE GOODS  
IN SACRIFICIAL PITS FROM THE 1976 EXCAVATIONS AT XIBEIGANG

SKELETON TYPE	NUMBER OF GRAVES WITH GRAVE GOODS	TOTAL NUMBER OF GRAVE GOODS	PITS CONTAINING FEMALE SKELETONS	PITS CONTAINING MALE SKELETONS
Complete	12	34	34	4 <sup>a</sup>
Decapitated	1	1	1	335

Source: Anyang 1977; Zhongguo 1985.

<sup>a</sup>All 4 pits contained 1 skeleton each.

Table 3. DISTRIBUTION OF AGE AT DEATH OF VICTIMS FROM THE 1976 EXCAVATIONS OF SACRIFICIAL PITS AT XIBEIGANG

GENDER	AGE RANGE				TOTAL
	15-20	20-25	25-30	30-35	
Female	2	6	8	8	24
Male	34	7	3	4	48

Source: Zhongguo 1985.

Of the 715 skeletons excavated in 1976 and examined by a team from the Chinese Academy of Science, 339 were identified as those of men, 35 as those of women, and 19 as those of children under the age of 14. The report confirms that most of the complete skeletons were those of women or children, while most of the decapitated skeletons were those of men (Zhongguo 1985; see Table 2). The same report was able to determine the age at death of 72 skeletons (24 women and 48 men; Table 3). Almost all the men were young adults (15-20 years old), while the women were generally older with a more evenly spread age distribution.

On the basis of the oracle bone inscriptions and archaeological data, it seems likely that the Qiang sacrificial victims are those headless skeletons found in the pits at Anyang. First, decapitation is a sacrificial method closely associated with Qiang victims. Second, because they were war captives, we would expect Qiang victims to be mostly young men, and this agrees with the ages obtained for the decapitated skeletons. The fact that few, if any, grave goods were found in the pits of this group is probably related to the foreign identity and low status of the Qiang victims in comparison to victims of local origin.

Why did the Shang perform these rituals of mass human sacrifice? And why were Qiang victims so important in these rituals? As pointed out earlier, there have been two main approaches to these issues: the emic approach, relating human sacrifice to Shang beliefs and rituals, and the materialistic approach, explaining human sacrifice as the only way to use war captives in a society that lacked institutionalized slavery. Little can be said against the emic approach. Davis's view of human sacrifice as being "a bridge between God and fallen man," as well as his assertion that in stratified societies "it was unthinkable that a great ruler should enter the next world without a huge retinue" (Davis 1981:275, 278), can be applied to Shang rituals. Human sacrifice is described in the oracle bone inscriptions as a way to communicate with the ancestors and restore harmony to the world (Chang 1980; Keightley 1979-1980:29), and large numbers of retainers have been found in the graves of Shang kings and nobles (Chang 1980; Linduff in press; Yang 1986).

The emic approach can help us comprehend the belief system of the Shang. It cannot, however, explain why it was necessary to use human victims, or why human sacrifice declined drastically after the end of the Shang period. The materialistic approach attempts to address these issues. The Shang economy was based on an agricultural system whose laborers were "free farmers," known as *zong ren* in the oracle bone inscriptions.<sup>17</sup> Because slavery was not yet widespread or insti-

tutionalized, sacrifice was the only way of using the many prisoners captured during the wars of the Shang and their allies against the *fang* polities (Huang 1989; Yang 1986). By the same logic, once slavery became an attractive option, the sacrifice of war captives drastically declined.

The first step in testing the materialistic model is to look at evidence for the employment of Qiang slaves. Most scholars agree that Qiang captives were used not only as sacrificial victims but also as slaves of the Shang (Chen 1956: 279; Chang 1980: 230; Hu 1974b: 57; Li 1959: 80; Li 1984: 127–130; Prusek 1971: 39; Peng 1988: 186; Sun 1987: 609–610). The discussion usually centers on the importance of slavery in the Shang system. Even Yang and Huang, the proponents of the materialistic model, agree that some war captives were used as slaves. They argue, however, that only a small portion of the captives would have been used in this way (Yang 1986) or that slavery developed only toward the end of the Shang period (Huang 1989). A different view proposes that the Qiang war captives were used as slaves in large numbers throughout the late Shang period and that the character *Qiang* even became a synonym for “slave” (Hu 1974b: 57; Peng 1988: 122).

Chang (1980: 230) writes that “their [the Qiang] joining in agricultural production with the *chung jen* [*zong ren*] should not be regarded as an unusual event despite the rarity of such records in the available data.” The problem with such an explanation is really the “rarity of the records” on which it is based. Scholars have suggested two types of activity in which Qiang slaves were involved, agriculture and hunting. The only evidence for the employment of Qiang slaves as agricultural workers in the field is one inscription (*Cuibian* 1222; Fig. 4) which is usually translated, “Inquired: The King to order the many Qiang to clear new



Fig. 4. Oracle bone inscription *Cuibian* 1222 (after Guo 1965: 263).

fields" (Chang 1980: 227–228). The problem with this translation is that the important character *Qiang* is incomplete. Kun Lun (1983) discusses this inscription and draws two conclusions. First, the character in question is not *Qiang* but rather 𠄎, which is the name of the place where the fields were located. Second, two characters are missing at the beginning of each line, such that the inscription should read: "... Inquired: The King to order the many ... to clear new fields at 𠄎." In his opinion, there are no references to war captives being employed in agriculture (Kun 1983).

The only possible evidence for the *Qiang* being employed as hunters is found in inscriptions which read, "The many *Qiang* will hunt deer?" Only two such inscriptions are found in the concordance of oracle bone inscriptions (Shima 1958: 18). It is not at all clear whether they refer to *Qiang* slaves or to cooperation between the Shang and the *Qiang*.

The evidence for the *Qiang* being used as slaves by the Shang is very weak<sup>18</sup> and does not support the materialistic model. If the problem facing the Shang was how to use war captives, then why are there not more references to the sacrifice of prisoners from *fang* polities other than the *Qiang*? The *Qiang-fang* was not the only polity against which the Shang fought (Chang 1980: 248–260; Keightley 1979–1980: 31–32; Sun 1987). Moreover, the Shang are described in the inscriptions as "hunting" *Qiang* people, while on several occasions the *Qiang* are presented as gifts to the Shang court by foreign polities (Keightley 1979–1980: 33; Shima 1958). If *Qiang* captives were of so little use, why did the Shang make such an effort to obtain them? It seems that the logic of the materialistic model should be reversed: The *Qiang* were not used as slaves *because* they were important as sacrificial victims. Furthermore, the *Qiang* captives were not a marginal result of wars against the *Qiang-fang*; rather, obtaining them was one of the incentives that made these wars more attractive to the Shang. As pointed out above, political struggles and control over raw materials were the main reasons for wars between the Shang and the *fang* polities. Even if obtaining *Qiang* captives was not a primary reason for conducting wars, the captives were certainly a prize well appreciated by the Shang.

The most striking ethnographic examples demonstrating the nonmaterialistic value of human sacrifice are the ceremonies of the Dahomey kingdom of West Africa. European and local accounts relate that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 500–1000 victims were sacrificed each year in memory of the royal ancestors and during important court ceremonies. Dahomey was heavily involved in the slave trade with Europeans. In exchange, the Dahomey kings obtained not only wealth but also firearms. Most of the sacrificial victims were taken from among the nonlocal captives whom the Dahomey kings traded to the Europeans as slaves (Davis 1984; Herskovits 1938). Each victim to be sacrificed could have been sold to the Europeans. Therefore, such large-scale human sacrifice resulted in a great economic loss for the Dahomey kings. The same seems to be true for the Maya. Although slavery existed during the Classic period (Morley et al. 1983: 219) and workers were needed to construct the large monuments of the time, relatively large numbers of war captives were sacrificed (Schele 1984: 45). These examples demonstrate that human sacrifice was sometimes conducted in spite of the economic loss involved.

Anthropologist Timothy Earle has pointed out that one of the biggest prob-

lems facing leaders of early complex societies was maintaining their control and authority over the population while preventing the people from “voting with their feet” and leaving (Earle 1991: 4). One of the possible “solutions” to this problem was to maintain a high degree of circumscription around the polity through wars with neighboring groups (Earle 1991: 12).

A condition of continuous conflict, either through threat of war or actual battle, had obvious benefits for the Shang. It increased the dependency of the common people on their “defender” (the state) and prevented them from fleeing to other territories. No less important, it probably strengthened the position of the Shang among their allies. Keightley (1979–1980: 26) describes the Shang polity “not as Shang territory, but as a series of pro-Shang jurisdictions, each with its particular relationship to the center.” The Shang interest was to keep as many groups as possible dependent on and loyal to them while maintaining their hegemony. Such dependency was probably easier to bring about during wartime, or under the threat of war, when Shang leadership was needed to gather and control large armies.

The Qiang may be seen in this light as serving the role of “the enemy” that threatened the Shang coalition, which itself was “the enemy” from the Qiang perspective. They were also probably viewed as culturally antithetical to the Shang and thus helped maintain what Carneiro (1981: 64) has called “social circumscription” around the Shang state. In this view, the practice of sacrificing large numbers of Qiang can be seen as serving two functions: symbolizing the “otherness” of the Qiang, who were thought to belong to a different “category” of humans from the Shang, and serving to enforce the authority and increase the prestige of the Shang kings. In connection with this second function, the Qiang must have been regarded as a strong and dangerous—physically or spiritually—enemy that the king was able to overcome. It is probably because of these symbolic meanings that the Qiang war prisoners were not used as slaves. Slavery did not fit their nonhuman nature, and it would not have been as prestigious for the king to sacrifice mere slaves.

Li’s proposal regarding the two meanings of the *Qiang* character—a specific reference to the Qiang-fang polity and a general name given to all the people living west of the Shang (Li 1959: 18)—can be better understood in this context. It may reflect a process of developing symbolic categorization. The custom of sacrificing Qiang people perhaps began with war prisoners taken during conflicts with the Qiang-fang. But as the practice of Qiang sacrifice gained importance separately from the actual wars against the Qiang-fang, a constant supply of Qiang prisoners was needed. One solution may have been to organize campaigns against the Qiang-fang. Another could have been the creation of a broad symbolic category of “Qiang,” which included the Qiang-fang and other people of the “same nature.”

A brief survey of the ethnographic and archaeological literature seems to indicate that this use of war captives was not unique to Chinese civilization. Fried (1967: 222) has stated that among native cultures of the northwest coast of North America, “the highest value of a captive was as a sacrifice; he might be killed at the climax of various rituals, and it was for this potential moment that he was kept.” This situation seems also to be reflected in the archaeological record of North America. For example, some of the human remains excavated at Moundville-



phase sites are thought by Peebles and Kus (1977 : 439) to represent a “nonperson” category: “They are not burials *per se*, but are either whole skeletons or isolated skeletal parts, usually skulls, that are used as ritual artifacts.” Kirch has described the significance of human sacrifice and cannibalism in the maintenance of social hierarchy on the Marquesas Islands. He goes even further in suggesting that “a main objective of war was to provide cannibal sacrifices for certain feasts” (Kirch 1991 : 131). It seems that wars conducted for the purpose of capturing human victims were also common among the Maya (Rands 1952 : 184; Schele 1984 : 22–27; Schele and Miller 1986).

The society most widely known for having practiced large-scale human sacrifice is the Aztec. In many ways Aztec society is comparable to that of the Shang. Like the Shang, the Aztecs used different kinds of sacrifices for different occasions. They differentiated among various categories of human sacrifices, some of them probably involving the voluntary participation of the victims (Sahagun 1932). Among the different categories of human sacrifices, “captured warriors were overwhelmingly the greatest number of sacrificial offerings” (Anawalt 1982 : 44). Like the Shang and the northwest coast cultures, it seems that sacrifice was the main purpose for which these captives were kept.

Harris (1977) has proposed a materialistic model to explain Aztec cannibalism as a rational economic strategy in protein-poor environments, since eating human flesh would compensate for a lack of domestic animals. Many experts have rejected Harris’s materialistic explanation (Anawalt 1982 : 45; Davis 1981). Political rather than economic motivations seem likely to have prompted the development, in different societies, of large-scale human sacrifice rituals. Demarest’s (1984 : 228) suggestion that human sacrifice legitimized and sanctified the political power of the Mayan elite is applicable to the case of the Shang. Viewing human sacrifice as a mechanism of political legitimation explains the willingness of the rulers to invest labor (to conduct wars) and to suffer economic losses. As with other legitimation mechanisms, such as building monuments or manufacturing elaborate grave goods, it was precisely the ruler’s ability to perform such difficult and labor-intensive tasks that contributed most to his prestige and to the legitimation of his authority.

Human sacrifice seems to have occurred in almost every part of the world. But the statement that “a somewhat Lévi-Straussian concept of the basic structures of the human mind is enough to account for that omnipresence” (Soustelle 1984 : 5) does not explain why only certain societies performed human sacrifice or why a given society performed it in a certain way. It appears that in the Aztec, Maya, and other cultures, sacrificing war captives was a reaction to the same problems that the Shang faced: the need to maintain control over an unstable coalition of different groups in a system that was not very institutionalized. I do *not* claim that the sacrifice of war captives was a necessary element in the development of social complexity or even that it played the same role in all the societies that practiced it. I merely suggest that we should not view it as an isolated and “esoteric” phenomenon but as one of the limited number of options that rulers could choose to legitimize and secure their power. Viewing it in this way, we should not be surprised that human sacrifice is usually important in societies where stratification and social differences are already well developed but where the system is not yet institutionalized or very stable. In those societies, which are usually called “com-

plex chiefdoms" or "early states," the ruler needs a strong mechanism of legitimation to maintain his power base.

#### CONCLUSION

Returning to the realm of Chinese civilization, we should recall that the custom of human sacrifice was not unique to the Shang. The Shang probably used it more systematically and intensively than others, but most contemporary archaeological cultures in China present evidence for regular rituals involving human sacrifice. It is not unreasonable to assume that, in these cultures, the ritual sacrifice of humans served the same purpose as it did for the Shang.

The whole process should not be seen as one-sided. The Shang may have served the same role for the Qiang and other groups that reached a certain level of social complexity. Similarly, social and political systems of which human sacrifice is a part should not be viewed as static. Rather, we should think of them in terms of a dynamic process involving interactions that led to the development of social complexity. Legitimation ideology probably played much more than a passive role. Once human sacrifice becomes an institutionalized legitimation mechanism, rulers are forced to continue conducting wars to maintain the supply of victims necessary for the ceremonies. This need for warfare itself presents logistical problems for the ruler. As pointed out by Flannery (1972), extra demands on one aspect of the social system may result in increasing social complexity of the entire system.

Although the evidence from the Shang period is mainly concerned with conflicts and violent interaction, we have seen that different types of interaction may have existed at various times between the Shang and the Qiang. Carneiro (1981: 63) states that "the mechanism that brought about chiefdoms is, in my opinion, the same that brought about states, namely, war." I am not at all certain that war was the main factor responsible for the emergence of chiefdoms and states in China.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the evidence does not seem to support Carneiro's theory regarding the importance of the use of war prisoners as slaves in the emergence of social stratification (Carneiro 1981: 65). Wars and violence nevertheless seem to play at this time an important role in maintaining the existing power base of the ruling elite.

Our knowledge of archaeological cultures in China is far from complete. This is especially true for cultures located outside the Zhong Yuan, although certain types of data, such as settlement patterns, are unavailable even for areas where much archaeological research has been done. Pointing out the type of data and research methods needed to address questions concerning political organization and interactions between polities may help stimulate future research in China. Some may object to my interpretation of the data and to the model presented to account for the sacrifice of Qiang victims by the Shang. It is, however, a well-established practice of Western archaeologists to use the available data to construct a model or hypothesis that can be tested in specially designed field research (Drennan 1992: 57; Steponaitis 1978: 437; Wright 1978: 66). Unfortunately, as pointed out by Olsen (1987: 287), "problem-oriented approaches to archaeological inquiry, the very corner-stone of archaeology in the west, are all but lacking in China." With the new openness of China, Chinese archaeologists are now



more than ever before willing to consider new ideas and adopt Western research methods. Perhaps this paper may stimulate research that will shed new light on the history of China.

## NOTES

1. I prefer at this stage not to label the Qiang as a state or tribe. This question will be addressed below.
2. The fall of the Shang dynasty has been traditionally dated to 1123 B.C., but modern historical research tends to date this event to around 1050 B.C. (Hsu and Linduff 1988).
3. Examples of this method are too numerous to be mentioned here. One recently published translation in English is Guo (1995a).
4. Here and throughout this paper, I use the transliteration *Qiang* to refer to a certain oracle bone character. I do this because it is more convenient than writing the character each time. It should be clear, however, that the important question here is the meaning of this oracle bone character, rather than the meaning of the modern Chinese character thought to have derived from it or its pronunciation, neither of which has real bearing on this question.
5. As for the so-called "rope" in the elaborate *Qiang* character, it may have represented, as some claim, a rope tied to the figure's neck (Guo 1965: 425; Peng 1988: 120). However, since the character *ren* depicts only the human body and not the head (Fig. 1B), it is not clear to which part between the horns and the body this accessory is connected. It may actually depict some kind of coiffure or ornament.
6. See the same phenomenon in the character that describes the ritual burning of humans (Qiu 1983–1985: 297).
7. Hu (1974b: 57) mentions *mao* as one of the verbs used to describe the sacrifice of Qiang, but presents no inscriptions to support his argument. A situation similar to that of the verbs *fa* and *mao* occurs in the case of verbs that mean "to chase." The verb *zhui* was used in conjunction with humans, while the verb *zhu* was associated with animals (Xu 1988: 157–158). Only *zhui* was used in the inscriptions that refer to Qiang (Shima 1958: 18). This again places the Qiang in the human rather than in the animal category.
8. Recent excavations refer to this area as Wuguancun. In reports of excavations conducted there before World War II, and in some of the general books on the Shang, this part of the YinXu site is named Xibeigang or Hsipeikang.
9. Among the references to Qiang-fang in the Oracle Bone Concordance of Shima Kunio, only the elaborate *Qiang* is found in the 17 cases where both characters (*Qiang* and *fang*) were identified (Shima 1958: 18). When the character *Qiang* appears in connection with characters other than *fang*, either the elaborate or the simple form is used. It may be, then, that a difference exists not only between Qiang-fang and the Qiang, but also between the meanings of the two basic forms of the character. The elaborate form may represent people from a specific Qiang state or tribe. In this case the "rope" in the character may represent a coiffure or ornament typical of this group. The simplified version would then be a general reference to those people belonging to the western tribes.
10. Keightley (1979–1980: 28) cites few inscriptions in which a friendly interaction seems to have taken place between the Shang and a *fang* polity, but he concludes that "the term A-fang, in short, may generally be taken as evidence of non-Shang territoriality."
11. Sun (1987: 611–612), quoting *Mozi*, *Liezi*, and other sources, claims that the Qiang observed the funeral custom of cremation. He uses the fact that evidence for this custom was discovered in Siwa graves to prove its identification with the Qiang. The problem is that cremation was not a widespread practice in the Siwa culture, with most of the graves containing the bones of a single human buried in a wooden coffin (*Zhongguo* 1986–1988: 485). Some scholars tend to connect the Siwa culture to the Di rather than to the Qiang (*Wenwu* 1979: 144).
12. For more on this debate and the methods used to argue for and against each view, see Shaughnessy 1989.
13. The inscriptions on these bronze vessels read "Ya Qiang," which may refer to a specific group of the Qiang.
14. Linduff (in press) associates typical northern bronze implements found in the YinXu excavation with the presence of these non-Shang people.
15. According to the reports from the 1976 excavations of 191 pits, the average was 6.2 skeletons per pit (*Zhongguo* 1985).
16. There are a few references to people from other non-Shang tribes being sacrificed. However, these probably speak of leaders of defeated polities (Hu 1974b: 60).

17. For more on the *zong ren* and their position in Shang society and economic system, see Chang 1980: 225, 231.
18. Another line of evidence is based on inscriptions that some believe describe fleeing Qiang slaves who are being chased (see Li 1959: 80). Not only is the inscription ambiguous, but also it seems that the slaves fled to Qiang but were not themselves Qiang.
19. For example, there is little evidence for wars being conducted during the important Erlitou period (1900–1600 B.C.) of the Yellow River Basin.

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## ABSTRACT

The character that many scholars read as *Qiang* appears in more than 800 known late Shang oracle bone inscriptions, most of which refer to the ritual sacrifice of *Qiang* people. More than half of all the human victims mentioned in the inscriptions are identified as *Qiang*, and among all the neighbors of Shang named in the inscriptions, only the *Qiang* are specifically mentioned as human sacrifices. Why

were the Qiang so important and why were such large numbers of Qiang victims sacrificed during Shang court rituals? Contrary to the usual identification of the Qiang as a tribe of nomadic herdsmen, archaeological data point to a society that practiced a mixed economy, lived in permanent or semipermanent settlements, and had a developed social hierarchy. The Qiang were politically independent from the Shang and maintained a significantly different cultural and symbolic system. Comparison with known ethnographic examples of human sacrifice and analysis of the context in which these ceremonies were performed by the Shang suggest that sacrificing Qiang war captives was a mechanism by which the Shang elite legitimized their political power. Ethnographic comparisons suggest that human sacrifice was important for the Shang, as for other societies where social stratification is already very developed but where the system is not yet institutionalized or very stable. In this context, human sacrifice is viewed as part of a dynamic process that led to the development of social complexity. **KEYWORDS:** Shang, China, human sacrifice, oracle bone inscriptions.