MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF SHANG

By H. E. GIBSON

The intent of this paper is to describe the music and the musical instruments of the Shang Period as can be gathered from the study of the Inscribed Bones of Shang or more generally referred to as the Oracle Bones. These bone inscriptions are gradually assisting in uncovering much extremely valuable and generally no other way obtainable information concerning the people of that period (1766-1123 B.C.). As a matter of explanation, the sometimes crude, though in many instances artistic pictographs, were fairly accurate line drawings of objects as the Shang engravers saw them. It is very apparent that they strove for the simplicity of a clear outline rather than for elaborate design full of unnecessary strokes as is the case with numerous modern Chinese characters. On the whole the pictographs are very expressive and coupled with what we are able to decipher from the brief text of the inscriptions it is possible to collect much first hand information on various subjects as will be seen by our explanations in respect to the music and musical instruments of Shang.

The pictographs and inscriptions on the bones are far more reliable than the written records passed down through many generations and which have been subjected to mutilations, language changes, caprices of official recorders, scholars, high dignitaries or rulers who have expurgated sections not to their liking. Mencius complains that during his time the feudal princes destroyed many of the records of antiquity that they might better perpetrate their own usurpations and innovations. (Mencius V, ii, Ch. 2). Unlike the so called “Bamboo Records,” the inscribed bones of Shang have laid buried in the yellow loess of Honan, untouched by human hands, for a period of well over 3,000 years. They come to us unaltered and almost direct from the wonderful people who engraved them with such painstaking care. Therefore, whatever we are able to gather from the bone inscriptions may be considered extremely truthful information direct from the People of Shang.

Notwithstanding these facts it is entirely wrong to regard certain sections of the early Chinese records attributed to Shang with so much scepticism as is now being done by numerous foreign observers. A comparison of various facts to be gathered from the study of the bones with certain sections of the Shu King and the Shih King should be enough to prove to these incredulous observers that they have been too hasty in jumping at conclusions.

The Shu, which during the Han Period was termed the Shu King, still contains eleven of the original thirty-one pieces attributed to Shang. It was undoubtedly an existing collection of documents prior to and during the time of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) or approximately 600 years after the fall of Shang. It is not out of place to assume that the collection was much more complete during the early Kau Period and that these records coupled with other Shang documents, probably their ritual, were much used in moulding what later became known as the Chou Li. It is not here the place to dwell upon the Shu other than to mention that various passages do agree with certain facts proven by the Shang Bone inscriptions. Furthermore, the Shu contains the earliest utterance in the surviving records that have been handed down to us on the subject of poetry and music. Ancient Shun is quoted as having said to his Master of Music: “Poetry is the expression of earnest thought, and singing is the prolonged utterance of expression.”

The Shih King or Book of Poetry contains five pieces attributed to Shang. One of these, the Nâ, deals directly with their music. This ode is of particular interest and the bone inscriptions prove it to be very exact in the description of Shang ceremonial music. It not only correctly describes the musical instruments used coupled with the gesture-dancing that accompanied them, but also discloses the fact that music was used for the purpose of calling the spirits of the departed ancestors to a ceremony. The translation of the Nâ by James Legge reads:

“How admirable! how complete! Here are set our handdrums and drums. The drums resound harmonious and loud. To delight our meritorious ancestor.”

“The descendants of Tang invites him with this music, that he may soothe us with the realization of our thoughts. Deep is the sound of our hand-drums and drums; Shrielly sound the flutes: All harmonious and blending together. According to the notes of the sonorous gem. Oh! majestic is the descendant of Hang: Very admirable is his music.”

“The large bells and drums fill the ear: The various dances grandly performed. We have admirable visitors: Who are pleased and delighted.”

“From of old, before our time, The former men set us the example:—How to be mild and humble from morning to night, And to be reverent in discharging the service.”

May he regard our sacrifices of winter and autumn, (Thus) offered by the descendants of Tang!

The royal worship of ancestors during the Shang Period was conducted with much pomp, solemn ceremonies and the sacrificing of oxen, sheep, dogs, swine, fowl, deer and human beings, mostly from prisoners captured in the ceaseless wars with savage tribes surrounding the state. The sacrifices of Shang were always commenced with music to attract the spirits of those sacrificed in order to secure their presence. During the Kau Period this was changed to the offering of libations of wine.
Before proceeding with the subject of music it will not be out of place to make a few comments in respect to the “Bamboo Books” of Shang, certain of which undoubtedly had important bearing on the music of that period as has been shown by the ode of “Na.” The inscribed bones give abundant evidence of Shang written records being extensive. So far it has not been possible to identify individual books mentioned in the inscriptions but from the constructions of certain of the pictographs standing for “Records” it is clearly shown that distinction was made between various records and that certain books were more important and held in more reverence than others. It is also evident from the bone inscriptions that special books pertained to ancestors and were held sacred. The people of Shang had their annals which not only covered important events happening during the reign of their long line of rulers but also covered various events of the previous period or periods. They undoubtedly had a ritual which specified the procedure covering the ceremonies observed at sacrifices and divination which played so important a part in the lives of their kings. We know that they had a book of odes which possibly included music. It is also within keeping to assume that they had records covering astronomy, the fixing of their seasons and the calculation of time by use of their cycles. Further research and study of the bone inscriptions will, as time advances, uncover much interesting information concerning these subjects.

PLATE 1.

Ch’ai² Records. The so called “Bamboo Books”竹書. The archaic Shang pictographs represent a sheaf of thin wooden or bamboo slabs tied together by a cord so as to form volumes. As will be noticed by the examples shown on the plate, the Shang forms comprise three, four or five slabs. The downward strokes representing slabs are not uniform in length, apparently intentional on the part of the engraver, though the purpose has not been discovered. The Chin Wen, or the characters found on the bronzes of the Kau Period have three or five downward strokes. Characters with four strokes have so far not been discovered. Was it possible that the four stroke record was a book that the Kau rulers did not like and destroyed? Both the Ku Wen and the Shuo Wen characters have five downward strokes and thus the three and four stroke character must have been eliminated sometime during the Kau Period. The four stroke went first and the three stroke soon followed.

Let us examine very carefully the Shang pictographs contained in fourth line from the top of the plate. Below the sheaves of slabs are added strokes. The cross like strokes at either side represent the right and left hand as if holding the sheaf of slabs. The two horizontal lines between the hands stand for 上 Shang, above. The significance of the combination is that the records were in reverence raised to heaven by both hands and in order to show the spirits of departed ancestors, who were supposed to hover above, that their records were being preserved and kept sacred.

The last character of the fourth row is another variant. Instead of 上 Shang between the hands is the character 王 Shih. The meaning of 王 Shih is, the influx descending from heaven. It is clear that this pictograph was intended to represent records of important ancestors and must have been very sacred. It is not so often found in the inscriptions.

By the variants of the pictographs we have demonstrated that the People of Shang distinguished between their records and there were various sorts of books.

Plate 2.

Ch’ai². The Shuo Wen meaning of the character is given as 告也 Kao Yih, to tell, to announce. The Shang forms are composed, 封 Ch’ai, records and 口 K’ou, mouth and not 口 Yueh, to speak, as the Shuo Wen has it. The most probable meaning of the Shang forms would be, to sing or chant the records or odes. The Shang meaning for K’ou, was mouth or in combination, voice, as we will see later on under the heading of 聰 Hsi, joy.

The character does not appear on the Kau Bronzes, on ancient earthenware or in the Ku Wen. It is therefore rather remarkable how it came about that Hsu included it in the Shuo Wen. The character is now obsolete.
Shih⁴ Ch'ai². The Shang meaning was undoubtedly ancestral records. The combination is not found in the Chin Wên or the Shuo Wên Dictionary. It does not mean to repeat the records as some Chinese authorities of the bone inscriptions claim. The pictograph clearly shows that it was a record pertaining to ancestors.

Shang Music

The musical instruments used during the Shang Period as far as we can gather from the bone inscriptions were, the hand drum, drums struck by drum-sticks, the flute, sonorous stones, and bells. String instruments do not appear to have come into vogue until about the time of Confucius and it would appear that he had not heard them prior to his visit to Wu Chang. The Confucian Analects (Vol. XVII, Chap. IV) record:

"The master having come to Wu Chang, heard there the sound of stringed instruments and singing."

Chou¹ A drum that was struck by the right hand. It is the hand drum referred to in the Na. According to the Shuo Wên the forked top represents the right hand straightened and ready to strike the skin of the drum. The Chin Wên and the Shuo Wên forms are extremely similar to the Shang character.

Drums played a very important part in Shang ceremonies. The sound of the drum was supposed to attract the spirits of their departed ancestors to the ceremonies or sacrifices conducted in their honor. Drums accompanied their singing or timed the gesture dances. They were used in the time of war to summon their fighting men and no doubt used in battle to direct their operations.

An enlarged photograph of a Piece of Tortoise Shell Bone in the Collection of the Author on which are engraved Inscriptions of the Shang Period. Photograph by A. L. Dickson.
This plate is a very much enlarged photograph of a tortoise shell fragment upon which among other characters is a very clear engraving of a hand drum. The actual size of the fragment is about three-fourths of an inch square. The delicately carved lines are filled with a crystalization due to the chemical action of the loess.

**PLATE 5.**

**Ku.** A drum, which was struck by use of a drum-stick usually pictured as being held in the right hand. It will be remembered that in the Na it is stated, "Here are set our hand-drums and drums." The Chou above mentioned is the hand-drum and the Ku the other drum alluded to.

By examining the pictographs it will be noticed that Shang drums were set on a sort of tripod or stand and were of various shapes. The probable origin was a hollow log, then a section of a hollow log with a skin stretched over one or both openings. Drums were probably one of the earliest musical instruments of China. Hollow bamboo and gourds are drummed by Chinese at the present time and it would not be surprising if they were not also used during the Shang Period.

**PLATE 6.**

**P'eng.** The sound of a drum. The archaic forms depict by three or more small strokes the sound of the drum. The character through its long evolution has changed very slightly and still retains its original characteristics.
Hai. Joy. The archaic forms are composed of K’ou, mouth and Chou Drum. The significance, singing or chanting to the accompaniment of a drum brought joy or happiness. From this pictograph it becomes clear that the common people witnessing a ceremony joined in the singing to the time of the drums. Sacrifices were performed for what was thought to be the good of the people and in singing to the accompaniment of the drums they became joyous because something was being accomplished for their benefit.

It is interesting to note that the Shuo Wen character is composed of K’ou, mouth and Yüeh, drum, and not as done with the character Ch’ai, from Yueh, to speak and Ch’ai record. The Shang pictographs in both instances use K’ou, mouth, and that is why it was pointed out under the heading of Ch’ai, that the Shuo Wen and certain Chinese authorities were wrong. In fact these authorities have simply fallen into a Shuo Wen trap and have not taken the trouble to reason out for themselves, nor to check up on the difference in the formation between the Shang pictographs for K’ou, mouth, and Yüeh, to speak. There is considerable difference and we must accept the Shang meaning rather than the Shuo Wen.

Yao. The modern meaning is music in general. The Shang pictographs represent forked wooden supports upon which bells were hung. It was therefore a musical instrument. The Chin Wen and Shuo Wen characters picture a wooden frame or support for the bells but in addition there is a drum placed in the center. The Shang pictograph at the extreme right of the plate shows that the bells were struck by a stick held in the hand, which implies action. This must have been a very early musical instrument for the reason that the forms found on the bones have become conventionalized. Before the use of bronze it is possible that the bells may have been made of earthen ware.

Yao. A flute. In modern times referred to as kuan. The flute of Shang according to the pictographs comprised two bamboo or more probably two reeds bound together by a cord. At the lower right of the plate is a drawing of the same kind of a flute that was used during the Kau Period. This is probably the same sort of flute found on the bones.

Ch’ing. Sonorous stone. Shuo Wen explains Yao Shih, musical stone. The Shang pictographs depict a triangular stone being struck by what resembles a padded striker, similar to what in modern times is used to beat brass gongs. Plate 10a is a reproduction of the sonorous stones and a drum as used during the Kau and Han Periods.
ERRATA
Plate 10a should be inserted immediately after plate 10 on page 15.
Plate 10a
A gesture dance. The Nà informs us that "The various dances were grandly performed." Again we find the Nà to be very truthful in respect to the Music of Shang. The pictographs representing dancing are realistic and their simple lines portray action. They also show that costumes, worn by the dancers were probably trimmed with fur or long hair. During the Chou period dancers frequently wore yak tails suspended from the back of their girdles. The Shuo Wên mentions that yak tails were worn.

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The striking of a horn with a stick very probably had some connection with music. This combination is not recorded in Shuo Wên. It may have been similar in use to the hollow bamboo and the gourds or used for timing of the music.

A combination of

This plate illustrates Shang pictographs with an unmarried woman or a man kneeling or squatting at the side of a hand-drum. The pictographs with the woman are plentiful but those with a man are very rare. From this fact we must assume that it was mostly young women who played the hand-drums at the ceremonies of Shang.

The Shuo Wên character is composed, 人, man, and 㝬, Chou, hand-drum. The character is not found on the Chou Bronzes.
animal which so far has not been identified. The next pictograph has connection with records. It is composed of to the left, a sprouting plant, to the right of which is a sheaf of slabs forming a book. Below is the symbol for fire. It may allude to records, in connection with the warmth of spring bringing forth sprouting plants.

C. This is an incomplete fragment. The three characters at left, 山 shi ch'ai, ancestral records (see plate III), erh lao 萬 two sacrificial victims, illustrates that this kind of a record was used at a sacrifice.

D. This is a very interesting oracle, almost complete on the lower half of the tortoise shell fragment. Beginning with the first character left hand character half way down the bone we have: The cycle 歌 keng-yn, 歌 hui pu hsi cheng, is it divined to sing to 神 神 Wong Pin Royal Guest, 神 i, to cultivate the ground, 祥 fu, happiness 祥 wang, to hide, 何 chi, to divine as an explanation, the oracle has been consulted in order to ascertain if the Royal Guest (the spirit of the departed ancestor) will be pleased with the singing to the drums and cause happiness and (success) in planting of crops.

E. This is a tortoise shell fragment. The oracle inquires as to the singing of the records at a sacrifice of fifty victims. From left hand side it reads: 空 (blank) Ch'ou, 歌 Ch'ai, singing the records, 王 Tsu hsin (King of Shang, 1506-1490 B.C.), with fifty 亖 sacrifice victims 亖. The victims in this instance may have been oxen.

NOTE. The following symbols are used on the plates;
S. Shang Bone Inscription
C.W. Chin Wen
K.W. Ku Wen
S.W. Shuo Wen Dictionary.