

The Scribes' Genealogy

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A paper entitled 'the scribes' genealogy' may not sound very fitting for a panel about 'the scribes' tradition.'¹ In fact, 'genealogy,' in my understanding of the term, is the very *opposite* of 'tradition,' and this is why I have chosen it. Historians should be cautious about so-called traditions. Not so much because they are mostly invented but rather because they imply continuity, immutability, and eternal presence. All this is very dangerous for historians: for if nothing ever changed, there would be no history, and historians would lose their means of existence. To put it another way: history is born from the death of tradition. Genealogy, on the other hand – I am, of course, adopting this term from Michel Foucault² – is history taken to its logical extreme. It is the methodological search for *discontinuity*, for contingency and singularity, the attempt to prove that *there was no tradition*.

In the case of the scribes', the *shih*-tradition, the odds seem not to be in favor of such an attempt. Consulting a modern dictionary on Chinese history, we are told that the *shih* "were officials that administered historical material, noted historical events, and wrote works of history. The Yin called them *ts'o-ts'e*, the Chou had *ta-shih*, *hsiao-shih*, *nei-shih*, *wai-shih*, and *yü-shih*. In Ch'in and Han times they were called *t'ai-shih ling* and concurrently administered astronomy and the calendar"³ ... and so on, until Ch'ing times.

An impressive tradition, indeed. It seems as if the *shih* have been historiographers from the very beginning. But if one takes a closer look at this tradition, it soon becomes evident that it largely rests on texts that were written in Han times: the *Shuo-wen*, for example, which tells us about scribes at the court of the Yellow Emperor, or the *Chou-li*, which gives the neat list of five *shih*-offices in Chou times.⁴ More importantly, these works are what Bernhard Karlgren has called 'systematizing texts' that do not simply record ancient customs but "represent the endeavours of the Confucian school to determine what the beliefs and rites should properly be."⁵ Karlgren strongly advises us to give preference to 'free' texts of pre-Han times. This is what I will try to do for the study of *shih*: sift through the ancient sources, allowing them only to testify for their own time of composition, not trying to harmonize between them nor construct continuities. This is the project of genealogy.

1 This paper was originally delivered during the 14th EACS conference "Chinese Traditional Civilization and the Contemporary World," Moscow, August 26–28, 2002. A considerably expanded version has now become chapter one of my as yet unpublished habilitation thesis, "Geschichte als Problem: Studien zur Geschichtsschreibung im Alten China," Munich 2004, 20–94.

2 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire" (1971), in: idem, *Dis et Ecrits, tome II*. Paris: Gallimard, 136–56.

3 *Chung-kuo li-shih ta tz'u-tien* [originally 14 vols., 1983–2000], 2 vols., Shanghai 2000, vol. 1, 776, s.v. *shih-kuan*.

4 Hsü Shen , *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu* , Peking 1979, 314. Sun I-jang (ed.), *Chou-li cheng-i* , 14 vols., Peking 2000, *chüan* 51, 2079–2103, and 52, 2129–41.

5 Bernhard Karlgren, "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," in: *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 18 (1946), 199–365, quote: 203.

It is not an easy project since it requires painstaking work with highly problematic sources. Of these, the bone inscriptions of Shang times are certainly the most problematic. Only recently, Ken Takashima has written that “if there are, say, ten specialists working on a particular inscription, ten different interpretations can potentially appear.”⁶ This is primarily due to insufficient understanding of Shang palaeography: for example, the character 𠄎, which concerns me here, may be interpreted as modern 𠄎, 𠄎, or 𠄎.⁷ In view of this uncertainty, I will restrict myself to a few general observations concerning oracle bones.

The word – or rather: the character – *shih* first appears in a number of inscriptions dating from the reign of Wu Ting. They record statements like:

...
Crack-making on *kuai-wei*. Ku divined: Huang-yin will protect (?) our *shih* ... or will not protect (?) them.

Divination: Our *shih* will not be ordered to go.

𠄎 ... 𠄎

Our *shih* will perhaps not destroy the Fang⁸ ... will destroy them.

𠄎 ... 𠄎

Divination: The Fang will perhaps destroy our *shih* ... or will not destroy them.

𠄎 ... 𠄎

Crack-making on *kuai-bai*. Ch'üeh divined: Our *shih* will perhaps not destroy the Fou ... or destroy them.

...

Our *shih* will strike (?) ... or perhaps not strike (?).⁹

Some scholars have translated *shih* as ‘envoys’ in these passages, which seems fitting.¹⁰ One may add, that they were certainly no diplomats, but rather *warriors*: they ‘strike’, ‘destroy’ and in one case ‘capture’ other people. – Certainly no behaviour one would expect from historians.

Then there is the word *ta-shih* 𠄎 which, as some inscriptions indicate, may not only have been the name of a ritual but also that of a ritual specialist – perhaps. But *nowhere* is there any textual evidence in support of the claim that *shih* might have had anything to do with the study or writing of history, despite all speculations that try to analyze the character *shih* as a

6 Ken Takashima, “Towards a More Rigorous Methodology of Deciphering Oracle-Bone Inscriptions,” in: *T'oung Pao* 86 (2000), 363–99, quote: 370. Cf. also the remarks by Paul L.-M. Serruys, “Studies in the Language of the Shang Oracle Inscriptions,” in: *T'oung Pao* 60 (1974), 12–120, esp. 14–21.

7 Cf. Wang Tung 王同, “Shih-kuan wen-hua ti yen-chin” 殷墟文字研究, in: *Li-shih yen-chiu* 1993.4, 16–28, esp. 18.

8 David N. Keightley, “Shang Oracle-Bone Inscriptions,” in: Edward L. Shaughnessy (ed.), *New Sources of Early Chinese History. An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and Manuscripts*, Berkeley 1997, 15–55, translates Fang as “(men of the) borders” (p. 50). I follow Paul L.-M. Serruys (fn. 6), 35, who takes Fang as an ethnonym.

9 For all these passages, cf. Yao Hsiao-sui 姚孝遂 / Hsiao Ting 萧正 [i. e. Chao Ch'eng 曹公] (eds.), *Yin-hsiü chia-ku k'o-tz'u lei-tsan* 殷墟契刻类编, 3 vols., Peking 1992, 1125f, and Shima Kunio 志茂 邦彦, *Yinkyō bokujū sōrui* 殷墟甲骨刻辞类编, Kyōtō 1971, 420f.

10 Cf. Serruys (fn. 6), 26 and 35: “envoy;” David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History. The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China*, Berkeley 1978, 179: “envoys;” Keightley (fn. 8), 50: “emissaries.”

hand holding a bamboo strip or some other writing utensil.¹¹ In fact, there is no reason to believe that there should have existed Shang historians at all, since no historical writings from that period have come down to us. The oracle bone inscriptions certainly do not qualify, since they were purely ritual or bureaucratic documents.

So there was no tradition of the scribe in Shang times. Rather, it is in Western Chou times that one should look for the beginnings of history and, perhaps, a tradition of scribes. According to the *Chou-li*, there existed a well-ordered system of five scribal offices: *ta-shih*, *hsiao-shih*, *nei-shih*, *wai-shih*, *yü-shih*.¹² And not only Ssu-ma Ch'ien's ancestors, but also many other famous scribes supposedly flourished in the Western Chou: king Wu's *nei-shih* I, *ta-shih* Chou Jen, king Mu's *tso-shih* Pao and Liang and of course *t'ai-shih* Chou, the inventor of the greater seal script.¹³ According to traditional sources, it was the golden age of the *shih*.

I took a close look at the *contemporary* sources, namely at bronze inscriptions, in roughly 200 of which *shih* are mentioned.¹⁴ Unfortunately, I found little of what I was looking for: neither do any of the great names – *shih* I, *shih* Chou and so on – appear, nor is the system of five *shih* borne out by the inscriptions. There is no evidence for a *wai-shih* or a *hsiao-shih* whatsoever, and only two highly problematic occurrences of a *yü-shih*.¹⁵ Instead, we encounter a rather unbalanced system: whereas simple *shih* occur rather evenly throughout the whole period, *ta-shih* occur only in the early and late Western Chou, and *nei-shih* are virtually absent in the early period. – These superficial observations may suffice to make clear that there is quite a difference between what traditional sources tell us about *shih* and what the inscriptions reveal.

The difference becomes even more apparent if one takes a closer look at what these *shih* actually did. Not a single inscription tells us that they knelt to the left and the right of the ruler, as *Li-chi* and *Han-shu* would have it.¹⁶ Rather, they were all over the place, being sent around the country to hand out rewards, accompanying the ruler in battle and leading armies themselves – somewhat like their Shang colleagues. Some scholars have argued that they fulfilled ritual or religious functions during battles, and there are some indications of this in transmitted texts;¹⁷

11 For a compilation of such etymographical explanations, cf. Chou Fa-kao / Chang Jih-sheng (eds.), *Chin-wen ku-lin*, 16 vols., Hong Kong 1974–75, 1753–72, and Li P'u et al. (eds.), *Ku-wen tzu ku-lin*, 8 vols. to date, Shanghai 2001ff, vol. 3, 462–81.

12 Cf. fn. 4. This theory is still being upheld by modern researchers like Li Tsung-t'ung, “Shih-kuan chih-tu – fu-lun tui ch'uan-t'ung chih tsun-chung” —, in: *Bulletin of the College of Arts, National Tainan University* 14 (1964), 119–57, esp. 124–26, or Chin Yü-fu, *Chung-kuo shih-hsüeh shih* [1964], repr. Shih-chia chuang 2002, 7.

13 For lists of early *shih*, cf. Chin Yü-fu (fn. 12), 9–12, und Liu Chieh, *Chung-kuo shih-hsüeh shih kao*, Cheng-chou 1982, 28–32.

14 The comprehensive *Chin-wen yin-te*, 2 vols. (*Yin-Shang Hsi-Chou chüan*, and *Ch'un-ch'iu Chan-kuo chüan*), Nan-ning 2001–2, vol. 2, 323, lists 222 occurrences for *shih* in the Western Chou. However, quite a few of these are personal names rather than official titles.

15 Namely, on the *yü-shih* Ching *kuai*, and, perhaps, the Han *yü-shih lei* []; cf. Chung-kuo she-hui k'o-hsüeh yüan k'ao-ku yen-chiu so (ed.), *Yin Chou chin-wen shih-ch'eng shih-wen*, 6 vols., Hong Kong 2001, Nos. 4134 and 9824.

16 Sun Hsi-tan (ed.), *Li-chi ch'i-chieh*, 3 vols., Peking 1998, *chüan* 13, 778; Pan Ku et al., *Han-shu*, Peking 1997, *chüan* 30, 1715.

17 Constance A. Cook, “Scribes, Cooks, and Artisans: Breaking Zhou Tradition,” in: *Early China* 20 (1995), 241–77, esp. 252; also Hsü Fu-kuan, “Yüan shih – yu tsung-chiao t'ung-hsiang ren-wen ti shih-hsüeh ti ch'eng-li?”

but the assertion is not really supported by the inscriptions: there are only two passages in which one could suspect a ritual activity of sorts – depending on how one deciphers a crucial character like 𠄎¹⁸ – not enough, in any case, to call the *shih* ritual specialists.

But can one call them scribes or even *historiographers*? Certainly not in early Western Chou times; there are only two passages that indicate any connection between *shih* and writing at all: the first, in the *Shu-ching*, states that a *t'ai-shih* handed over a testament to the king,¹⁹ and the second, the Chung *yen* inscription says that “*shih* Erh arrived with the king’s order.”²⁰ In both cases, be it noted, *shih* deliver a document; it is not stated that they actually *wrote* it – and in neither case are we dealing with historical writings. Nor is there any evidence that the *tso-ts’e* – often considered a subdivision of *shih* – had anything at all to do with writing. Despite their suggestive name, they were primarily occupied with bestowing gifts upon nobles.

The picture changes in the middle Western Chou. Here the *tso-ts’e* all but disappear, and in their stead the *nei-shih* enter the scene. They, too, are concerned with gift-giving, but they do more than that. There are a great many investiture inscriptions in which typically the recipient stands in the middle of the hall, while the king calls upon a *nei-shih* – less often a *shih* – to record (or perhaps: read) the mandate (*ts’e-ming*).²¹ There are dozens of these inscriptions, and in view of this it certainly makes sense to translate *shih* as ‘scribe’ or ‘secretary’ as some researchers do. But maybe we can be more precise than that; for the *shih* by no means handle ordinary writings, but *legal documents*: mandates, orders, last wills. Perhaps it would be fitting to call them ‘notaries.’ Apparently, the belligerent *shih* of Shang and early Western Chou times have become domesticated: they have exchanged the sword for the brush.

To be sure, the *shih* also had other duties to fulfill – including military ones – but one may agree with Ch’en Meng-chia who says that ‘the most important was the system by which the *shih*-officials announced the king’s order in his stead.’²² *Orders*, be it noted, not history, and addressed to *nobles*, not to spirits. Still, the great tradition of the scribe is not apparent.

If we turn to the Ch’un-ch’iu period, the sources change. I have found barely a dozen inscriptions that mention *shih* – or *ta-shih* or *ta nei-shih* – at all;²³ unfortunately, they never tell us what they did – but at least that they existed. Not even this much can be said for another important source for the period, the *Ch’un-ch’iu*, which fails to mention a single *shih* in more than two and a half centuries. The word does not occur in a text that was supposedly composed from *shih-chi*: accounts of *shih* – this in itself is remarkable.

—, in: Tu Wei-yün / Huang Chin-hsing (eds.), *Chung-kuo shih-hsieh shih lun-wen hsian-chi*, Taipei 1979, vol. 3, 1–71, esp. 3–16.

18 Cf. Chung *fang-ting*: *Yin Chou chin-wen chi-ch’eng* (fn. 15), No. 2785. If one reads *chu* 祝 the character would seem to denote a ritual, but if it is read *ku’uang* 覯 it may indicate a donation of land.

19 Sun Hsing-yen (ed.), *Shang-shu chin-ku wen chu-shu*, 2 vols., Peking: 1998, p’ien 25 (“K’u-ming”), 501f. It should be noted that this point was made in 2002. Presently, I would hesitate to cite this passage at all, since I strongly doubt that it dates to early Western Chou times; cf. Kai Vogelsang, “Inscriptions and Proclamations: On the Authenticity of the ‘gao’ Chapters in the *Book of Documents*,” in: *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 74 (2002), 138–209.

20 ; cf. *Yin Chou chin-wen chi-ch’eng* (fn. 15), No. 949.

21 Cf. Ch’en Han-p’ing, *Hsi-chou ts’e-ming chih-tu yen-chiu*, Shanghai 1986.

22 Ch’en Meng-chia, “Hsi-chou t’ung-ch’i tuan-tai” , pt. 3, in: *K’ao-ku hsiieh-pao* 1956.1, 65–114, quote: 99.

23 Cf. *Chin-wen yin-te* (fn. 14), vol. 2, p. 115.

It is therefore to another text that we must turn our attention, namely the *Tso-chuan*. Many unsolved questions about this work remain, and sinologists disagree as to whether it should be used as source for the *Ch'un-ch'iu* or the *Chan-kuo* period.²⁴ I shall beg the question by simply discussing what the *Tso-chuan* has to say about the genealogy of the *shih*. It provides ample information, indeed: *shih* appear more than 70 times in the *Tso-chuan*, fulfilling the most diverse functions: as consultants, envoys, astronomers and oracle experts, men of letters, and even as warriors. At the same time, their titles become more diverse: apart from *shih*, *ta-shih*, and *nei-shih* there are *chu-shih*, *shih-shih*, *tso-shih* and *chi-shih*.²⁵ – Incidentally, it may be noted that a transmitted text once again does not accord with the epigraphic evidence.

Leaving aside the specific details, I shall concentrate on the question at hand: what can we learn about the *scribes'* genealogy, that is, what did *shih* have to do with writing? In *Tso-chuan*, they occasionally deal with prognostic or ritual texts: “A *shih* from Chou came to an audience with the marquis of Ch'en, carrying a [*Chou*]-I ...”²⁶ After a landslide, “a *shih* performs the rites with words/texts (*ts'u*).”²⁷ And when Han Hsüan tzu from Chin visited Lu, “he looked at the various documents in the charge of the *ta-shih*, the I, the *Hsiang* – and the *Ch'un-ch'iu* of Lu ...”²⁸ Here, for the first time, we encounter a *shih* in charge of what appears to be an *historical* work of sorts.

There are a few more passages in which it appears that *shih* were responsible for court diaries:

Kung-sun Hei insisted on participating in the covenant [with the duke of Cheng and six other nobles] and made the *ta-shih* write down his name so that [the text] said “seven nobles.”²⁹

...

On the day *i-ch'ou* Chao Ch'uan assaulted duke Ling [of Chin] in the Peach Garden. ... The *ta-shih* wrote: “Chao Tun murdered his ruler” and showed it around in court.³⁰

When the *ta-shih* [of Ch'i] wrote: “Ts'ui Chu murdered his ruler,” Ts'ui tzu killed him. When his younger brother followed him and wrote the same, the death toll rose to two. When his younger brother wrote it again, he let him get away with it. Upon hearing that the *ta-shih* had all died, Mister *Nan-shih* took his tablets and went on his way [to Ch'i]; but when he heard that [the matter] had already been written down, he returned.³¹

24 The former stance is maintained by Yuri Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought. Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722–453 B.C.E.*, Honolulu 2002; the latter by David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past. Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, Cambridge, MA 2001.

25 Cf. Yang Po-chün (ed.), *Ch'un-ch'iu Tso-chuan chu*, 4 vols., Peking 1995, Huan 6, 111; Hsi 28, 474; Hsiang 14, 1009; Hsiang 23, 1083; Hsiang 27, 1133; Chao 12, 1340f; Chao 17, 1384; Chao 17, 1390; Chao 18, 1396; Chao 26, 1480; Ai 17, 1708; Ai 25, 1726.

26 *Ibid.*, Chuang 22, 222.

27 *Ibid.*, Ch'eng 5, 823.

28 *Ibid.*, Chao 2, 1227.

29 *Ibid.*, Chao 1, 1215.

30 *Ibid.*, Hsüan 2, 662.

31 *Ibid.*, Hsiang 25, 1099.

Formerly duke Wu of Wei was 95 years old and still welcomed criticism ... and in the *Documents of Chou* it is said that King Wen [was so busy governing that he] did not have time to eat until afternoon.³⁶

On another occasion, I-hsiang gives the following advise concerning a marriage: "Formerly, the noble tzu Nang ignored the posthumous name given by the king ..."³⁷ and so on: in both cases, the *tso-shih* argues by historical precedent – certainly a contrast to what was said about him in the *Tso-chuan*.

Moreover there are several parallel stories in *Tso-chuan* and *Kuo-yü*, in which a ruler sends out a *nei-shih* on a mission (to give a mandate or examine a strange occurrence). The *nei-shih* comes back, reports on his mission and gives a prophetic comment on the future of the state he had been sent to. So far, the two versions coincide; the *Kuo-yü*, however, is usually more detailed and in every case it adds a long speech by the *nei-shih* stating why exactly a country will flourish or perish – and he does so using *historical arguments*.³⁸ – Again, *shih* are pictured more prominently but also more historically-minded in the *Kuo-yü* than in the *Tso-chuan*. The whole chapter 'Cheng-yü' consists entirely of the speech of *shih* Po, and it is replete with historical argumentation. It is in the *Kuo-yü*, moreover, that so-called *shih-chi*, 'records of *shih*' are mentioned for the first times.³⁹ In both cases, they contain a flattering prophecy about the state of Chin's future.

So prophecy and astronomy remain a part of the *shih*s' duties: this may be crucial for an understanding of their 'historical turn.' In fact, the explanation of the future hardly differs from that of the past. In the above-mentioned cases, *shih* regularly cite history to predict the future: the two naturally go together if one supposes that they are governed by the same laws. Thus the *shih* can answer the question *why* a state will perish with the answer: *because* history has shown that it always works this way. This particular view of history that becomes apparent here may well be explained by the *shih*s' work as astronomers and oracle experts: those tasks, too, presuppose immutable laws.

So have the *shih* turned into historians at last? The answer, nevertheless, is: no. Looking at other Chan-kuo texts, presumably younger ones than the *Kuo-yü*, one again encounters a bewildering variety of *shih*: some regulate the calendar, like the *t'ai-shih* in *Lü-shih ch'ün-ch'ün*,⁴⁰ some give laws and orders (and store them in archives!) like the *t'ai-shih* in *Kuan-tzu*,⁴¹ assist their rulers with good or bad, sometimes even wicked advise, they often act as military advisors in battle (*tso-shih* I-hsiang is a case in point⁴²), sometimes they take oracles or make predictions, and occasionally they even write.

It is hard to summarize these tendencies without doing injustice to the texts. But a few things deserve to be pointed out. First, many *shih* of olden times, unknown to earlier texts, suddenly appear: *nei-shih* Liao of the 7th century BC, *nei-shih* Hsiang Chih of the Yin, *t'ai-shih*

36 *Kuo-yü* , 2 vols., Shanghai 1988, 17 (Ch'u 1), p. 551.

37 *Ibid.*, 17 (Ch'u 1), p. 557f.

38 Cf. *Kuo-yü* 1 (*Chou-yü* 1), 29–33, vs. *Tso-chuan* (fn. 25), *Chuang* 32, 251f, and *Kuo-yü* 1 (*Chou-yü* 1), 35–40, vs. *Tso-chuan*, Hsi 11, 337f.

39 *Kuo-yü* 10 (Chin 4), 342, and 365.

40 Ch'en Ch'ü-yü (ed.), *Lü-shih ch'ün-ch'ün chiao-shih* , 2 vols., Shanghai 1984, 1.1, 1f.

41 Yen Ch'ang-yao (ed.), *Kuan-tzu chiao-shih* , Ch'ang-sha 1996, *chüan* 4, 33.

42 Ch'en Ch'ü-yü (ed.), *Han Fei-tzu chi-shih* , Taipei 1982, *chüan* 23, 472.

ling (!) chung Ku of the Hsia, *shih* Huang of mythical times.⁴³ Secondly, of course, they were all wise men who are to be emulated. *Shih* are becoming idealized, a process that was observable already in *Kuo-yü*. A great number of bonmots, so-called *chih* , are now attributed to them: first they appear as general rules of conduct, but in texts like *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* and *Han Fei-tzu*, they are regularly illustrated by an historical anecdote.⁴⁴

So *shih* – despite all ambiguity that surrounds them – have become models of wisdom. The *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* recounts how four such wise advisors left their corrupt ruler, whereupon his dynasty perished and the country that gave the *shih* refuge rose in power.⁴⁵ – And is that not just what Lü Pu-wei did, when he left Han for Ch'in? Is it not curious that in a largely legalist text like the *Kuan-tzu*, *shih* do nothing but announce laws? And is it an accident when *Chuang-tzu* says that Lao-tzu was a *shih* in Chou?⁴⁶ It seems like those wise old *shih* could be used to project one's own ideals back in time. In Chan-kuo texts, one can sense how different people tried to legitimize their positions with the use of *shih* and thereby, for the first time, created something like – a tradition.

43 Cf. *Han Fei-tzu* 10, 187; *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* (fn. 40) 16.1, 945, and 17.4, 1078.

44 On these *chih*, cf. David Schaberg, "Remonstrance in Eastern Zhou Historiography," in: *Early China* 22 (1997), 133–79, esp. 149, fn. 48.

45 *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* (fn. 40) 16.1, 945f.

46 Kuo Ch'ing-fan (ed.), *Chuang-tzu chi-shih* , 4 vols., Peking 1997, *chüan* 13, 477.