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.’ 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 Foucault – 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 tso-te, the Chou had ta-shih, hsiao-shih, nei-shih, wai-shih, and yii-shih. In Ch’in and Han times they were called t’ai-shih and concurrently administered astronomy and the calendar” ... 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.

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.” 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.

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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.


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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.” This is primarily due to insufficient understanding of Shang paleography: for example, the character 㝇, which concerns me here, may be interpreted as modern 史, 忿, 史 or 事. In view of this uncertainty, I will restrict myself to a few general observations concerning oracle bones.

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

癸未卜亥贞黄尹保我史...弗保我史
Crack-making on 亥万. Ku divined: Huang-yin will protect (?) our 䬖 ... or will not protect (?) them.

贞勿令我史步
Divination: Our 䬖 will not be ordered to go.

我史弗其域...其域方
Our 䬖 will perhaps not destroy the Fang... will destroy them.

弗其域我史...弗其域我史
Divination: The Fang will perhaps destroy our 䬖 ... or will not destroy them.

癸亥卜癸我史毋其域...我史域
Crack-making on 亥万. Ch’üeh divined: Our 䬖 will perhaps not destroy the Fou ... or destroy them.

貞我史工...無其工
Our 䬖 will strike (?) ... or perhaps not strike (?).

Some scholars have translated 䬖 as ‘envoys’ in these passages, which seems fitting. 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 甲-䬖 大史 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 䬖 might have had anything to do with the study or writing of history, despite all speculations that try to analyze the character 䬖 as a

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10 Cf. Serruys (fn. 6), 26 and 35: “envoys,” David N. Keightley, Sources of Shang History. The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronzy Age China, Berkeley 1978, 179: “envoys,” Keightley (fn. 8), 50: “emissaries.”
hand holding a bamboo strip or some other writing utensil. 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 traditional sources, it was the golden age of the shi.12 And not only Su-sha Ch'ien's ancestors, but also many other famous scribes
supposedly flourished in the Western Chou: king Wu's ta-shih 1, ta-shih Chou Jen, king Mu's
so-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 shi.12

I took a close look at the contemporary sources, namely at bronze inscriptions, in roughly 200
of which shih are mentioned. Unfortunately, I found little of what I was looking for: neither
do any of the great names - shih 1, 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 yu-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 Pu-ka- o 周法高/ Chang Jih-sheng 張日昇 (eds),
Ch'in-wen ku-lin 全文銘林, 16 vols., Hong Kong 1974-75, 1753-72, and Li P'U 李圃 et al. (eds), Ku-wen tzu ku-lin 古
15 Namely, on the yu-shih Ching Kung 御史君, and, perhaps, the Han yu-shih 乙治御書臣; cf. Chung-kao she-hui
k'o-shih-ying yuan k'ao-ku 會議研究會 1985, 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.
252, also Hsi Pu-ka- o 徐復觀, "Yuan shih - yi tsung-chiao t'ung-hsiang ren-wen ti shih-shih ti ch'eng-lü" 原
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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 $^\frac{1}{2}$ — not enough, in any case, to call the shih ritual specialists.

But can on 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 tai-shih handed over a testament to the king, and the second, the Chung yen inscription says that “shih Erh arrived with the king's order.” 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 tai-ti's — 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 tai-ti's 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

nei-shih have become domesticated: they have exchanged the sword for the brush.

The picture changes in the middle of the hall, while the king calls upon a person with a suggestive name, they were primarily occupied with bestowing gifts upon nobles. 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." Ordinarily, 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; 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-ch'ieh accounts of shih — that in itself is remarkable.

18 Cf. Chung, feng-ting 中方鼎: Yin Chou chiu-wen chi-ch'ing (fn. 15), No. 2785. If one reads chu 禿, the character would seem to denote a ritual, but if it is read kwang 昆, it may indicate a donation of land.
20 史臣以王命, cf. Yin Chou chiu-wen chi-ch'ing (fn. 15), No. 499.
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'ün-ch'ū or the Chān-kuo period. 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 猷史, shih-shih 丞史, tso-shih 司史, and chi-shih 受史. 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-]...” After a landside, “a shih performs the rites with words/texts (tzu)...” And when Han Hsüan Tzu from Chin visited Lu, “he looked at the various documents in the charge of the la-shih, the, the Hsiang- and the Ch'ei-t'hu of Lu ...” 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:

公孫彥與於盟，使大史書其名，且曰「七子」。
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

乙丑，越滅其君於桃園。...大史書曰：「越滅其君」，以示於朝。
On the day i-ch'ū 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

大史書曰：「崔杼弑其君。」崔子殺之。其弟嗣書，而死者二人。其弟又書，乃舍之。南史氏聞大史盡死，秋簡以往。聞既書矣，乃還。
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

25 Cf. Yang Po-ch'un 楊伯峻 (ed), Ch'un-ch'ū Tso-ch'üan chu 春秋左傳注, 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.
The last two cases have become causes célèbres for the upright spirit of the so-called 'historiographers.' The great attention these stories have demanded may have obscured the fact that only in three (or four) occurrences out of 70 in the Tso-chuan the shih are associated with writing. Besides, one would be hard pressed to actually call their writings historical - these ta-shih seem to have been in charge of court diaries which were not any more historical than the Shang oracle bone inscriptions. They were administrative records that may well serve as sources of history, but it would take an historian to 'emplot' them and turn them into an historical narrative. The shih did nothing of the kind.

Nor were they particularly noteworthy for their historical argumentation. In fact, as K. C. Chang has noted "they are often depicted in historical texts as being rather passive, insofar as giving advice to rulers is concerned." In the Tso-chuan, there are numerous instances of speeches following historical lines of reasoning, but the overwhelming majority is not underpinned by shih. Take the following passage. An old man, being asked what age he is, answers: "I am just a simple man, I cannot count my years. But in the year of my birth the first day of the first month was a chia-tey day; 445 chia-tey days have passed since." ... The music master K'uang responded: "In that year ... the Ti attacked Lu ... that was 73 years ago." And shih Chao said: "The character bai is made up of the element two on top and sixes below: if one lowers the two, one gets the number of his days." Two rather surprising responses: while the music master - of all people - comes up with precise historical knowledge, the shih contents himself with character and number games.

There are other instances in which shih are being ridiculed for lack of historical knowledge - for example the tso-shih I-hsiang of Ch'u who was ignorant of an ode and its historical setting. They add to the overall impression I get from reading the Tso-chuan: namely, that shih may have possessed scriptural knowledge, but they had little to do with history. What is more, their duties are so manifold and diverse that speaking of a 'tradition' would overly simplify the matter.

Perhaps the evidence of the Tso-chuan may be put into perspective by another text which offers many parallels: the Kuo-yü. It mentions shih in 30 places, among them tso-shih I-hsiang of Ch'u, mentioned above. In one place, he is denied an audience, whereupon he says:

32 The making of history is well described by Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore/London 1973, 5f: "First the elements in the historical field are organized into a chronicle by the arrangements of the events to be dealt with in the temporal order of their occurrence; then the chronicle is organized into a story by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a 'spectacle' or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end. This transformation of chronicle into story is effected by the characteristicization of some events in the chronicle in terms of inaugural motifs, of others in terms of terminating motifs, and of yet others in terms of transitional motifs. ... When a given set of events has been motifically encoded, the reader has been provided with a story; the chronicle of events has been transformed into a completed diachronic process, about which one can then ask questions as if he were dealing with a synchronic structure of relationships."

34 *Tso-chuan* (fn. 25), Hsiang 30, 1171.
35 Ibid., Chao 12, 1340f.
On another occasion, I-hsiang gives the following advice concerning a marriage: "Formerly, the noble tzu Nang ignored the posthumous name given by the king ..." and so on: in both cases, the tso-shih argues by historical precedent — certainly a contrast to what was said about him in the Ts'o-chuan.

Moreover there are several parallel stories in Ts'o-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: — Again, shih are pictured more prominently but also more historically-minded in the Kuo-yü than in the Ts'o-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. In both cases, they contain a flattering prophecy about the state of Ch'in'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 Lai-shih ch'un-ch'iu; some give laws and orders (and store them in archives!) like the t'ai-shih in Kuan-tyü; assist their rulers with good or bad, sometimes even wicked advice, they often act as military advisors in battle (ts'o-shih I-hsiang is a case in point), 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
King Chung Ku of the Hsia, shih Huang of mythical times. 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.

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