

From Oracle Bone Inscriptions to the Discourse Power Shift in “Records of the Grand Historian”: Examining Early Intellectual Liberation in Ancient China

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Abstract:

When it comes to the historical evolution of thought, the West has the foundational studies of homo sapiens humanism during ancient Greece, while China is marked by the contention of a hundred schools of thought during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. However, in reality, from the oracular monologues of Shang and Zhou dynasty oracle bone inscriptions to the biographies of kings and nobles in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the intellectual liberation from divine authority to homo sapiens authority has never ceased. To better study the ideological emancipation in early ancient China, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the shift in discursive power—namely, the rise and fall of divine authority and the awakening of Homo sapiens’ inherent rationality alongside the development of Homo sapiens (kingly) authority—by comparing the stylistic structures and recorded content of oracle bone inscriptions with those of the *Records of the Grand Historian* and Broussonetia papyrifera. Through comparative research, it aims to reveal the developmental process of the gradual transition from divine authority to Homo sapiens authority from the Shang-Zhou period to the Qin-Han era, and on this basis, explores its underlying causes and subsequent historical impacts.

Keywords: Oracle Bone Inscriptions; Records of the Grand Historian; Literary Style; Discourse Power; Ideological Emancipation

1. Introduction

When it comes to the historical evolution of thought,

the West has the foundational studies of homo sapiens humanism during ancient Greece, while China is marked by the contention of a hundred schools of

thought during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. However, in reality, from the oracular monologues of Shang and Zhou dynasty oracle bone inscriptions to the state affairs recorded in bronze inscriptions then to the biographies of kings and nobles in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the intellectual liberation from divine authority to homo sapiens authority has never ceased. This transformation is concretely manifested in the systematic restructuring of literary forms, linguistic markers, and discourse subjects, with its essence being the rationalization of the “shamanic historiographical tradition” and the awakening of homo sapiens humanistic spirit [1].

To analyze the process of ideological liberation in early ancient China, this paper integrates Foucault’s discourse-power theory with the indigenous Chinese concept of “Disenchantment,” constructing a three-dimensional analytical framework of “textual structure—linguistic representation—ideological liberation” to provide new insights and evidence for understanding the emergence of rationalism in the early stages of Chinese civilization, while making pioneering and outstanding contributions in this regard [2]. Foucault mentions in the text, “Discourse’ is not a neutral linguistic tool but a social practice tightly interwoven with power.” “The indigenous Chinese concept of ‘Disenchantment’ originates from the dissolution of the mystique and sanctity of traditional authorities (such as religion, ritual norms, imperial power, etc.), particularly manifesting during modern social transformations as rational critiques of superstition and dogma, as well as the pursuit of individual autonomy.” The shift in narrative content and style from oracle bone inscriptions to *the Records of the Grand Historian*, reflecting the decline of theocracy and the rise of Homo sapiens, precisely confirms this viewpoint—that changes in the format and content of historical texts also mirror social transformation and the evolution of power, holding significant referential value.

This study focuses on primary historical records from early ancient China, employing documentary analysis to search and review relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this method lies in its ability to effectively analyze shifts in discursive power, which holds significant importance for researching ideological emancipation in early ancient China. Through textual analysis of *Broussonetia papyrifera* and comparisons with historical records, this paper will explore three key aspects: how the shamanistic traditions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties became institutionalized via textual *Broussonetia papyrifera*; how the narrative reconstruction in *Records of the Grand Historian* deconstructed divine authority and established Homo sapiens-centered authority; and the relationship between this discursive transformation and the Hundred Schools of Thought, as well as its impact on subsequent practices of ideological emancipation.

2. The Stylistic Structure of Oracle Bone Inscriptions and the Power Encoding of *Broussonetia papyrifera* Section Headings

Oracle bone inscriptions, as the name suggests, are characters carved on tortoise shells and ox bones during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, primarily used for divination and recording auspicious or inauspicious events related to state affairs. They represent the earliest known written prose in China. However, research indicates that these inscriptions are not merely simple historical records. At their core lies a sophisticated theocratic discourse system, where their textual structure *broussonetia papyrifera* and linguistic markers collectively serve the absolute monopoly of theocracy over interpreting the world.

2.1 Four-Stage Structure *Broussonetia Papyrifera*’s Oracle Closed Loop

The four - part question - answer structure of oracle bone inscriptions can be regarded as a symbol of the shackles of theocracy on human rights. The highly stylized four - part structure of “preface - divination statement - oracle interpretation - verification statement” in oracle bone inscriptions forms a closed loop for interpreting divine will [3]. Even the few “unfulfilled” omens are re-interpreted as postponed or conditional, keeping divine authority unfalsifiable. The preface (e.g., “On the Guiyou day, divined by Zheng”) only marks the time and the name of the diviner, hiding the subjectivity of the writer, thus highlighting its function as a tool for communicating with the gods. The divination statement, such as “Will there be no misfortune in the coming ten days?”, presented in the form of a question, maintains the openness of the divine response. The oracle interpretation, “There will be trouble! There will be hardships coming”, uses an extremely affirmative tone (“There will be trouble”) (“There will be”). It is no longer a question but an assertion from the theocracy. As a result, it cancels the openness of the divination statement and sets the tone for the development of the upcoming event. The most authoritative part is the verification statement, such as “Sure enough, hardships came from the west”, which records the fulfillment of the divination result in an unassailable tone. It ultimately attributes all natural and social phenomena to “The Emperor approves” or “The Emperor does not approve” [4], that is, the divine will indicating whether the heaven approves or not. This question - answer and verification structure based on faith largely excludes causal explanations based on human reason and forcibly attributes the cause - effect relationship of all things’ development to “The Emperor (God)”, thereby strengthening the theocracy’s shackles on

the right of discourse and forming a closed - loop of theocratic discourse.

2.2 The Uncertainty of Authority in Language Markers

At the lexical level, Oracle Bone Inscriptions extensively employ uncertain modal particles such as „qí“ (indicating conjecture) and „yǔn“ (indicating fulfillment or verification). According to Zhang Yujin's research and statistics, the frequency of the character „其“ appearing in oracle bone inscriptions is approximately 43.5%. For instance, the syntactic pairing of „qí yǔ?“ (Will it perhaps rain?) with „yǔn yǔ“ (It indeed rained) constructs a grammatical logic that conveys „divine will is unpredictable yet ultimately verifiable“ [5]. Furthermore, these inscriptions exhibit minimal expression of human subjective will or emotion. Although diviners (such as „Bīn“ or „Zhēng“) performed the divination rituals, they merely served as mediated conduits—their individual voices were entirely effaced, rendering them anonymous intermediaries. This narrative mode, devoid of first-person perspective, ensured even the king's will had to be cloaked in the guise of „divinatory inquiry.“ Ultimately, the supreme source of discursive authority resided not in royal power but in the abstract concepts of „Dì“ (the Celestial Emperor) or ancestral deities [6].

3. Narrative Reconstruction and Power Transfer in Records of the Grand Historian

The characteristic „appraisal commentary“ structure of *Records of the Grand Historian* distinguishes itself from the implicit judgment-through-subtle-wording approach seen in *The Spring and Autumn Annals* and the rigorously official style of *Book of Han*. Marked by the signature phrase *The Grand Historian remarks*, it explicitly articulates the historian's perspectives and stance, which can be regarded as a hallmark of the emergence of human-centered narrative authority. In sharp contrast to the divinatory inscriptions on oracle bones, the textual organization and recorded content of *Records of the Grand Historian* reflect a fundamental shift in discursive power from the divine to the human. This transformation enabled historians to replace diviners, integrating personal perspectives and interpretations, thereby becoming the new interpreters and arbiters of history.

3.1 The Supersession and Transcendence of the Panegyric Style over Verification Formulas

From a literary structural perspective, the critical commentary style pioneered in *Records of the Grand Histori-*

an, exemplified by the „biographical annals + Grand Historian's remarks“ format, can be regarded as a thorough revolution against the four-part structure of oracle bone inscriptions. Particularly crucial is the functional transformation of the „Grand Historian's remarks“ section. Historical narratives ceased to serve as „verification texts“ that received and confirmed divine will; instead, they evolved into „critical commentaries“ where historians, grounded in moral rationality and historical experience, leveraged their erudition and insight to deliver value-laden judgments [7]. For instance, at the conclusion of *The Annals of Xiang Yu*, Sima Qian explicitly refutes Xiang Yu's fatalistic attribution of his defeat to heavenly mandate with the remark: „How absurd to claim 'Heaven is destroying me, not any fault in my command of troops!'“ This exemplifies the subversion of divine interpretation by human-centered rationality [8]. However, in reality, his ultimate failure was caused by factors such as his stubbornness and refusal to listen to advice, his indecision when making decisions, and his brutal and cruel treatment of prisoners of war. Therefore, it cannot be attributed to fate but rather to human factors.

3.2 The Declaration of Subjectivity in Linguistic Marking

In terms of linguistic choices, Sima Qian frequently employs first-person pronouns (such as „余“ and „吾“) and assertive modal particles (including „必“ and „固“) to foreground human agency and overtly assert his subjectivity and authority as a historical narrator. For instance, he writes: „Having studied the ancient text of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, I came to understand that the states of Yu in the Central Plains and the barbaric Wu of Jing were originally brother-states. Through the benevolent heart of Prince Jizi of Yanling, whose unwavering admiration for righteousness enabled him to discern purity from impurity—ah, how profound was his vision and how extensive his knowledge as a noble man!“ (from *The Hereditary House of Wu Taibo*). Based on his personal interpretation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which revealed to him the fraternal relationship between Yu and Wu, coupled with his account of Jizi's conduct, Sima Qian expresses his profound admiration for the latter's moral character. This intense authorial presence forms a striking contrast to the anonymity of the oracle bone scribes, highlighting a fundamental divergence in narrative perspective [9]. Moreover, the use of modal expressions evolved from the speculative verification in oracle bone inscriptions (e.g., „qí“ and „yǔn“) to expressions denoting inevitability and necessity (e.g., „gù dāng rú cǐ“ and „bì yóu cǐ yǐ“), reflecting humanity's summation of the historical inevitability inherent in social development [10]. This shift demonstrates that the source of discursive power transitioned

from the elusive divine will to the individual historiographer's—or, more broadly, a specific group's—observation, reading, and value-rational judgment.

3.3 Direct Disenchantment of the Shamanistic Tradition

The „Treatise on Divination by Tortoise Shell and Milfoil“ in the *Records of the Grand Historian* is commonly regarded as a chapter documenting divinatory practices; however, it is in fact permeated with skepticism and irony toward such methods. Sima Qian explicitly states at the outset: “Since ancient times, when sage kings established states and received the Mandate of Heaven, have they not all treasured divination to assist in virtuous governance? Even among the barbarian tribes such as the Di and Qiang, who lack the hierarchical order of sovereign and subject, there exists divination for resolving doubts. Some use metal or stone, others employ plants or trees—customs vary across states. Yet all rely on it to wage war, deploy troops, and seek victory, each trusting in their own spirits to foretell future events” [11]. This passage broadly conveys that throughout history, both rulers of the Central Plains and chieftains of barbarian tribes have favored divination to decide matters of state destiny and governance, such as the initiation or cessation of military campaigns. While ostensibly emphasizing the authority of divination, it implicitly suggests that the so-called “sage kings” resorted to such practices more out of political necessity—for instance, to legitimize their rule or pacify the populace—rather than out of genuine belief in its mystical power. This rhetorical strategy of “praising before criticizing” carries a strong undercurrent of irony. Furthermore, throughout the text, Sima Qian consistently treats divination as a cultural custom rather than a sacred truth. By recounting numerous instances where divination failed to yield accurate results, he sharply questions the influence of divine oracles on objective reality. In doing so, he articulates his personal perspective and critical evaluation, affirming the role of human agency in social development and effecting a systematic disenchantment with the shamanistic historiographical tradition [12].

4. Textual Evidence of Ideological Liberation

The formal and substantive characteristics of a text reflect the concentration of discursive power in a given historical period, and its evolution ultimately serves the reshaping of historical perspectives. By comparing the divergent accounts of the same event as recorded in oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, and the *Records of the Grand Historian*, one can distinctly observe traces of this

intellectual liberation.

4.1 Varied Narrative Emphases

For the same historical event, oracle bone inscriptions and the *Records of the Grand Historian* have completely different narrative perspectives and thematic focuses. For instance, regarding the event of *Fu Hao's childbirth* during the reign of King Wu Ding. In the oracle bone inscriptions, it is recorded: “On the day of Jiashen, a divination was made: Will Fu Hao's childbirth be auspicious?” The entire text focuses on predicting the outcome of the childbirth through divination, with the core being to ask the gods for the result based on religious beliefs. However, in the *Annals of Yin* from the “Records of the Grand Historian”, Sima Qian completely omits the specific divination events during the reign of King Wu Ding and instead portrays him as a “moral model” who “reformed the government and practiced virtue, making the whole world happy and reviving the Yin way”, highlighting his personal achievements and qualities. Thus, it can be seen that the driving force of historical development was rewritten from “divine will” to “the virtue of the ruler” [13]. Another very classic example that clearly demonstrates the difference between the two is the “Battle against the Tu Fang (or Ba Fang) during the reign of King Wu Ding of the Shang Dynasty”. In oracle bone inscriptions, it is recorded: “On the day of Gui Si, the diviner ‘Zheng’ asked: If we attack the Ba region this month, will we be blessed?” This is a typical theocratic perspective. The narrative core is the dialogue between the Shang king and his ancestors and deities (such as “Emperor”), and the event itself is the topic of divination. Therefore, all its records were made to seek oracular guidance for practical actions rather than to be passed down to future generations. But in the account of Wu Ding in the “Annals of Yin” from the *Records of the Grand Historian*: “When Emperor Wu Ding ascended the throne, he was determined to restore the glory of the Shang Dynasty but had not yet found a capable assistant. Wuding reformed the government and practiced virtue, and all under heaven rejoiced. The Yin way was revived.” This is a typical historical and political perspective. The narrative core focuses on the achievements of emperors, generals and ministers and the rise and fall of states. Events are a link in the grand historical narrative, emphasizing historical context and moral judgment. From this, it can be seen that from oracle bone inscriptions to the “Records of the Grand Historian”, the driving force of historical narration has undergone a decisive shift from “divine will and destiny” to “human affairs and virtue”. The force that drives history has shifted from divination aimed at pleasing deities to the monarch's achievements and moral judgments under the discipline of Confucianism, with rational human actions becoming the core of historical interpretation.

4.2 Different Narrative Perspectives

The records of the famous historical event, the Battle of Muye, also differ greatly between the two. The bronze inscription on the Li Gui (early Western Zhou Dynasty), which is contemporary with the oracle bone inscriptions, states: „King Wu attacked Shang. On the morning of the day of Ji Zi, the star of the year was in the sky, and he defeated Shang.“ The inscription emphasizes that King Wu’s attack on King Zhou took place on the morning of Ji Zi day, with the star of the year (Jupiter) in the sky, indicating a favorable omen and suggesting the sacredness and divine mandate of King Wu’s victory over Shang [14], which leans more towards reinforcing the belief in the divine right of kings.

However, in the same event, the account in *Records of the Grand Historian* is different: In the *Chronicle of the Zhou Dynasty*, although Sima Qian retains some auspicious records such as “a white fish leaping into the king’s boat”, the narrative focus completely shifts to “politics and human affairs”: “Although the Shang army was numerous, they had no will to fight and wished King Wu to enter quickly... The Shang army turned their weapons

against each other to fight, opening the way for King Wu.” Through an objective narrative and rational analysis from a third-person perspective, Sima Qian attributes the defeat of the Shang army to King Zhou’s tyranny and loss of popular support (“The Shang army turned their weapons against each other to fight”), rather than simply attributing it to divine favor for the Zhou army [15]. This highlights the emphasis on the behavior and character of the king, thereby reflecting human thinking about history and the summary of objective laws. Thus, when the interpretation of historical evolution shifts completely from “astronomical phenomena” to “the will of the people”, the discourse power of history gradually shifts from the divine to the human, and humanism continues to rise and develop.

5. The Historical Significance of Ideological Emancipation

Through research and analysis, the transition from oracle bone inscriptions to the *Records of the Grand Historian* represents a profound shift in discourse power, with its significance for ideological liberation broadly summarized into the following three dimensions (Table 1):

Table 1. Three Scheme comparing

The Significance Dimension of Discourse Power Transformation	Oracle Bone Inscriptions	Records of the Grand Historian
Power subject	God (Di)	Man(Official Historian)
Authoritative Source	It materialized precisely as the omen had indicated.	Moral rationality
Language objectives	Record the oracle	Critique of history

The table elaborately demonstrates how the changes in the structure of the text and the content of the narrative from oracle bone inscriptions to the *Records of the Grand Historian* reflect the transformation of discourse power. During this process, it is not difficult to notice that as the writing format evolved, the originally restricted expression method of the four-part question-and-answer format was gradually replaced by the argumentative and evaluative style with clear positions and viewpoints. Whether from the perspective of the structure of the text or the narrative angle and emphasis, it shifted from the past reliance on the will of heaven to the description and evaluation of the character of the monarch. This change indicates that the subject of power also shifted, from the original emperor to the historian, that is, from the divine to the human. The source of authority also changed, from the past divination and omens to judgments based on moral rationality. In terms of language goals, it also completed the transformation from recording divine oracles to criticizing history, demonstrating human subjective initiative. This series of

changes fully proves the shift of discourse power from the divine to the human, revealing the continuous improvement of human status and role in the process of historical development, and confirming the early ideological liberation in ancient China.

6. Conclusion

As a crucial medium for narration and lyrical expression, text serves not only as a battleground for ideological contention but also as an enduring monument to spiritual emancipation. The evolution from oracle bone inscriptions to the *Records of the Grand Historian*(*Shiji*) represents far more than a mere transformation of literary forms; it constitutes a monumental shift in discursive power. The disappearance of diviners and the emergence of court historians, the decline of „verification texts“ and the establishment of „commentarial judgments,“ the retreat of divine oracles and the ascendancy of human judgment—these profound transformations embedded within textual practices collectively heralded one of the earliest intellec-

tual liberations in Chinese civilization: humanity emancipated itself from subservience to deities, embracing reason and morality to courageously assume the profound responsibility of interpreting the past, evaluating the present, and guiding the future. Today, re-examining this silent revolution not only illuminates early Chinese rationalism but also invites digital-humanities studies that quantify modal particles and narrator presence across pre-Qin corpora.

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