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THE 'SHENG' SACRIFICE AT QI SHAN

 (If you see tiny squares where Chinese characters should be you are probably using Internet Explorer. Switch to [Firefox](#), it does a much better job.)

Most Yijing translations translate *sheng* 升, the name of hexagram 46, as 'pushing upwards', 'advancing' or 'ascending'. 'Pushing upwards' and 'advancing' are not good translations to my taste, but 'ascending' is perfectly alright. But there is more to this character (as always), if we look at the etymology and the first uses of this character, we can get a picture of *what* is ascended and *why*. The text of the Yijing also helps getting this clear.

On oracle bones we find this character with two meanings:

- a unit for measurement,
- the name of a certain sacrifice.



The original form of this character seems to depict some kind of ladle, with the same shape of the early form of *dou* 斗. But *sheng* often has little drops added to it (*picture left*), and in the bronze forms there is actually something *in* the ladle, where *dou* 斗 is empty (*picture right*).



Already on oracle bones is *dou* 斗 used to refer to the star constellation *beidou* 北斗, the Northern Ladle, in the West known as *Ursa Major* or the Great Bear. The 甲骨文字典 explains *dou* as "疑用為星名,即北斗,夕至翌日祭之.", "probably the name of a star (constellation), namely *beidou*, from the evening to the next day sacrifices are made to it". However, the 甲骨文簡明詞典 adds a fragment from a bone inscription: "月庚從斗, 征雨", which is read as 'when the moon passes through *dou* the rain will be prolonged'. It is impossible for the moon to go through the Northern Ladle, but there is also a *nandou* 南斗, a Southern Ladle, a constellation in the south which has the same shape as *beidou* but is smaller in size. As far as we know *nandou* was never receiving sacrifices, *beidou* was far more important. The *Tianguan Shu* 天官書 from Sima Qian 司馬遷 (135-87 BC) says:

Beidou serves as the chariot of the emperor and effectuates its control over the four cardinal points by revolving around the center; it separates the *yin* 陰 from the *yang* 陽 and regulates the four seasons; it maintains balance between the *wuxing* 五行; it regulates the moving of the celestial objects; it determines the epoch of the calendar.

(Xiaochun & Kistemaker; *The Chinese Sky during the Han*, p. 23)

Whether *beidou* had a similar meaning during the Shang and Zhou dynasties is not known, but we do know from the oracle bones that sacrifices were made to this constellation.

Sheng 升 is also the precursor of 禘, a character which is described in the 甲骨文字典 as a utensil for measurement, used in sacrifices (p. 27). The old forms of this character sometimes have hands added to it, and/or an altar, to express the presenting of an offering.



Sheng 升 was the name of a certain sacrifice, and because of the close resemblance between the old forms of *sheng* and *dou*, I believe that *sheng* could refer to a sacrifice made to the constellation *beidou*. *Dou* is empty, and this emptiness is already recognized in the *Shijing* 詩經, where we read:

維北有斗、不可以挹酒漿。

In the north is the Ladle, but it lades out no liquor .

(*Odes* M203)

Sheng, however, is full. Maybe a *sheng* 升 sacrifice was done to 'fill' the ladle by offering goods to it and thereby pleasing the gods, ancestors or spirits who regulated the movement of the constellation and the seasons. A logical object in this sacrifice would be a ladle. The meaning of 'ascending' comes from this sacrifice. According to Tsung-Tung Chang *sheng* is used in the meaning of another homophone verb which means 'bringing an offer at a high located altar' ("Das zeichen steht in Orakelinschriften wie im späteren Zeichensystem für das homophone Verb "Opfergabe auf einen höher gelegenen Kultplatz bringen" "; *Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie im Spiegel der Orakelinschriften*, p. 128). Chang does not specify which verb he refers to, but probably it is *deng* 登, of which certain old forms depict an altar with footsteps. The 王力古漢語字典 says that *sheng* and *deng* share a common root ("同源字", p. 89). In the Mawangdui 馬王堆 Yijing and the Fuyang 阜陽 Yijing *deng* 登 is the name of hexagram 46.

The line texts of hexagram 46 tell a lot about *sheng* 升:

Line 1

允升.大吉.

Really (and joyous) *sheng* sacrifice

Yun 允 is used on oracle bones with the meaning of 'truly, really', as in 'it *really* did rain on that day' (甲骨文字典, p. 958) and is always used before a verb (甲骨文簡明詞典, p. 288). Tsung-Tung Chang says it probably depicts a person who nods his head in agreement ("Es zeigt vermutlich einen Menschen, der zustimmend nickt"; *Der Kult*, p. 212). [According to the Shuowen 說文](#) the Yi originally used 𠄎(𠄎) instead of 允. 𠄎 consist of 山, 𠄎(=本) and 允. 山 is a mountain, 本 means 'to advance', but the 漢語大字典 adds that it happens with joy ('進趣', 1.60). Advancing on a mountain with joy seems to be connected with 允.



允升 could therefore mean 'really (and joyous) *sheng* sacrifice'. The offering is successfully taking place, the ladle is actually 'filled' (maybe stars were appearing in the container of the ladle, the little dots in the early form of *sheng*?). This brings great fortune (大吉).

Line 2

孚乃利用禴.(無咎.)

Captives use the music instruments (of the *yue* sacrifice).

Fu 孚 means 'captives of war' (甲骨文字典, p. 265, 895; 甲骨文簡明詞典, p. 164, 333; 金文大字典, p. 2694; 金文常用字典, p. 301).

Nai 乃 is a so-called 'empty character' (*xuzi* 虛字), in most ancient texts it has a more or less abstract meaning which is not always easy to translate, but it comes close to 'thereupon', 'only then', etc., equal to *nai* 迺 (甲骨文簡明詞典, p. 293). On bronzes we also find *nai* with the meaning 'this is/has' (金文常用字典, p. 498), like in sayings as 貧乃禍中福: 'poverty, **this is** misfortune's blessing' (poverty is a blessing in disguise). But *nai* also signifies that what follows it is somewhat special, it is used to emphasize a fact or situation which needs special attention.

Liyong 利用 is an old fixed expression and means '(put to) use things, objects or people' (漢語大詞典, 2.635b), like in the *Guanzi* 管子: "春秋冬夏, 陰陽之推移也; 時之短長, 陰陽之利用也", "Spring and autumn, winter and summer represent shifts in the *yin* and *yang*. The shortening and lengthening of the seasons represents their **appliance**." (see W.A. Rickett, *Guanzi*, p. 117). *Li* signifies that the use of the object gives results and that these results are known; *yong* without *li* means that a result is not immediately expected or anticipated.

I believe *yue* 禴 is a key character in understanding the meaning of *sheng* 升. *Yue* is the name of a sacrifice which was used mostly in summer, but also in spring. The Zhouli 周禮 says: "以祠春享先王. 以禴夏享先王. 以嘗秋享先王. 以烝冬享先王", "Use the *ci* 祠 sacrifice to serve



the ancestors in spring. Use the *yue* 籥 sacrifice to serve the ancestors in the summer. Use the *chang* 嘗 sacrifice to serve the ancestors in autumn. Use the *zheng* 烝 sacrifice to serve the ancestors in the winter" (周禮.春官宗伯; see also *Shijing* M166).

The nature of the *yue* sacrifice is found in the component 龠. The oracle bone graph is the picture of a music instrument made from bamboo, maybe related to the '*khaen*' as still used in Laos. The 甲骨文字典 says *yue* is the name of a sacrifice in which music was used, in later ages it was more and more written as 籥 (p. 199). Music was associated with joy and [spring](#).

But 龠 was not only a music instrument, it was also a unit for measure, related to *sheng* 升 and *dou* 斗. The 說文 says that 1 斗 equals 10 升, and that 1 升 equals 10 龠. It is interesting to notice that the things which are used during sacrifices, like a ladle and a flute, are also used as containers for measurement, and that these containers are related to each other. It seems as if in the *sheng* sacrifice the 'measures', fixing the units, is important.

Liyong 利用 signifies that what follows is probably an object, something that can be used. Putting all this together we can translate 孚乃利用籥 as 'Captives use the music instruments (of the *yue* sacrifice)'. To me 利用籥 does not mean that the *yue* sacrifice itself was used, they only used the *instruments* which bear the name of this sacrifice. Because I see *sheng* 升 itself as a sacrifice and the text of hexagram 46 as dealing with this sacrifice it would not fit to see *yue* 籥 as the *yue* sacrifice, rather I think it points to the objects of the *yue* sacrifice (after all, 籥 is the later form of 龠). The fact that music is associated with joy (which reminds us of the variant form 鬯 of 允 in the first line of hexagram 46) also adds a little bit of credit. *Yue* 籥 is also mentioned in the fifth line of hexagram 63: 東鄰殺牛. 不如西鄰之籥祭. Here the character *ji* 祭, 'sacrifice', is added to stress the *act*, and not the instruments used during the act. When the sacrifice itself is meant this is specifically stated, just as in 47-2: 利用亨祀 - *heng* 亨 being the sacrifice, *si* 祀, 'offer sacrifices' to stress the act.

It might seem odd to let captives play musical instruments during an important sacrifice, but captives, prisoners of war, played an important role in Shang and Zhou society. If they cooperated they would be given rewards and occasionally a high position (J.C.H. Hsu, *The Written Word in Ancient China*, p. 846-849). Using captives during a ceremony, be it as a sacrifice or in other ways, showed the ancestors that the conquered clan was obedient and willing to serve the ancestors of the victorious clan. Besides that, a *yue* instrument was not difficult to play. One of the variant forms of the oracle bone graph for *yue* shows an A-shaped component on top of the tubes that was probably the single mouthpiece controlling the air to all the tubes, but with each tube producing only one single note. It was constructed like the modern thirteen-reed *sheng* 笙 pan-pipe. This meant that the player only needed to move his fingers on the holes of the tubes without blowing into each separate tube (*The Written Word*, p. 674).



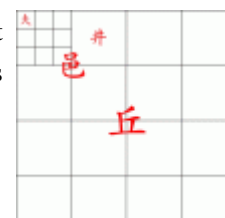
Line 3

升虛邑.

Ascending to the hill settlement.

In most Yi translations *xu* 虛 is translated as 'empty'. Although this is indeed one of the many meanings of *xu* it does not make much sense in the context of hexagram 46. If you want to use *xu* in the meaning of 'empty', then you must bear in mind that *xu* means that there is literally *nothing at all*. The phrase 'empty city' is therefore nonsense, because if there would still be a city, it would not be called 'empty', no matter how little is left of it. In Tang 唐 and Song 宋 times the phrase 虛邑 stood for land enfeoffed to feudal lords by the king, but the lords were not allowed to levy taxes on these lands (漢語大詞典 8.820a) - there was nothing to get, it was 'empty'. *Xu* is also translated as 'ruins', as in *Shijing* M50 quoted below. This is also a better translation than 'empty'.

Another, and concerning hexagram 46 more appropriate meaning of *xu*, is 'hill'. We have seen that *sheng* 升 means the ascending of a mountain, and in the *Shijing* *sheng* is also connected with hills or mountains: "升彼大阜", "ascend the great hill" (M180). In M50 it is said "升彼虛矣", and normally *xu* is translated here as 'old walls', but it would be equally correct to translate *xu* as 'hill', but a hill with inhabitants. The *Shuowen* supports this view. It says (quoting the Zhouli 周禮): "



古者九夫為井，四井為邑，四邑為丘。丘謂之虛，"in ancient times 9 *fu* 夫 constituted a *jing* 井, 4 *jing* 井 constituted a *yi* 邑, 4 *yi* 邑 constituted a *qiu* 丘. A *qiu* 丘 is also called a *xu* 虛". It is interesting to see that in this context *xu* 虛 and *yi* 邑 are used, just as in line 3 of hexagram 46. Just like 龠, 斗 and 升 can 虛 and 邑 be seen as units for measurement. It gives the impression that the *sheng* 升 sacrifice was used to determine (and set straight) the measure units that were used in the country. But this is speculation, we can not really substantiate it by facts.

The Shijing shows that *sheng* has to do with climbing, and I think *xu* should therefore be translated as 'hill', which would make 升虛邑 "ascending to the hill settlement". The old form of *yi* 邑 is the picture of a square, symbolizing a marked piece of land, and a person kneeling. On bronzes it is used in the meanings of 1. a measure word for cities, 2. a small city or town (as opposed to a *dou* 都, a capital), and 3. a country (金文常用字典, p. 663). Another interesting meaning is that of a capital without an ancestral temple ("指古代無先君宗廟的都城"; 漢語大字典, 6.3753). It also refers in a more general sense to a region inhabited by people.




A large mountain is not just one isolated peak, normally it consists of several smaller hills which support the summit. Along the road to the top small settlements with temples would be placed, as a resting place, but also for worship during the travel. The Tai Shan 泰山 is a good example of this (see picture on the right, click to enlarge; from D.C. Baker, *T'ai Shan - An Account of the Sacred Eastern Peak of China*).



Line 4

王用享于岐山。(吉無咎。)

The king applied an offering at Qi Shan.

The original form of *xiang* 享 is 亨. In the [small seal script](#) (*xiaozhuan* 小篆), which became the standard during the Qin dynasty, 享 was written as . When the *Lishu* 隸書 style of writing was introduced during the Han dynasty the lower part of this character was abbreviated to 子, but the earlier form 亨 is also still in use (甲骨文簡明詞典, p. 125). 享 shares the same etymological root with 獻, 亨 and 饗. All these characters, which are close in pronunciation, share the meaning of 'serving food', to ancestors, nature spirits or guests. 享 in its earliest usage therefore referred to making offerings to please or entertain the spirits (maybe it is related to the so-called *bin* 賓 hosting ritual).

Qi Shan 岐山, also known as 'Phoenix Mountain', is a mountain in the north of the modern 扶風 Fufeng district, the first Zhou capital Qiyi 岐邑 was established in the plain located to the south side of Qi Shan (Maria Khayutina, [Where Was the Western Zhou Capital?](#), p. 2. See also Shijing M237). Considering the meaning of *sheng* 升 I believe that this is the mountain where the *sheng* sacrifice took place. 王用享于岐山 translates as "The king applied an offering at Qi Shan".

Line 5

貞吉.升階。

Jie 階 means 'stairs'. The complete sentence could be translated as "The divination is auspicious. Ascend the stairs (as part of the ritual)." Before a certain ritual would take place it was customary to consult the tortoise if the ancestors would approve (see for examples D. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape*, p. 41-42). In this case the ancestors approve, it is okay to proceed.

Line 6

冥升.利于不息之貞。

Dark *sheng* sacrifice. Good result when performing divinations continuously.

The etymology of *ming* 冥 is somewhat disputed. Guo Moruo 郭沫若 says we should read 冥 as *mian* 媯/媯 which means 'to bear a son'. This meaning is also derived from the fact that *mian* often occurs with *fu* 婦, a title for a woman in a high position. Tang Lan 唐蘭 follows this, but adds that the graph is



related to *mi* 幘, a veil. The earliest form shows two hands holding a piece of cloth (甲骨文字典, p. 1573), probably supposed to shield the mother from spectators while giving birth. This 'covering' gave the later meaning of 'dim, dusky, obscure' and 'evening' or 'night'. Added to the meaning of 'giving birth' the meaning of 'nether world', the dark place where spirits dwell, is formed (漢語大字典, p. 1.304).



冥升 Could mean 'dark *sheng* 升 sacrifice'. The 甲骨文字典 describes *dou* 斗 as a constellation to which "from the evening to the next day sacrifices are made to it". If *sheng* is a sacrifice to the constellation *dou* I assume that the ritual started in the evening with the ascension of Qi Shan, which takes quite some hours, and when the top is reached it will be in the middle of the night. This is when the serious work starts, it is the most important part of the ritual, the top is where the actual sacrifice takes place.

Xi 息 means 'breath', but also 'to stop'. In bronze inscriptions it is used in the meaning of *xiuxi* 休息, 'to have a rest' (金文大字典, p. 1838). *Buxi* 不息 means 'not stopping, not resting'. The complete translation would then be 'Dark *sheng* sacrifice. Good result when performing divinations continuously'.

The actual performance of the sacrifice in the dark, when the constellation *beidou* can be seen and you are close to the spirits, you are vulnerable to their influences. To find out if the sacrifice is going to their will it is wise to consult the oracle continuously (see for an example of a continuing divination M. Puett, *To Become a God*, p. 42-43). This also stresses the importance of the *sheng* sacrifice.

From the line texts of the Yi we get the picture of a sacrifice which was performed on mountain Qi Shan, probably at the beginning of spring. A sacrifice which was performed to honor the *beidou* 北斗 constellation which was supposed to regulate the seasons, and maybe had something to do with setting straight the units of measurement. The sacrifice was performed from the evening through the night, and was accompanied with music to celebrate the joyous occasion.