

A Review of Key Works and Translation in North American Oracle-Bone Studies

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Abstract: This article reviews the key works of North American oracle-bone studies, focusing on its historical development, as well as its translation and reception within the Chinese academic context. The existing scholarship can be divided into three major phases: the early stage (1910s–1930s), which focused on the collection and cataloguing of oracle-bone inscriptions; the stage of disciplinary formation (1950s–1990s), characterized by palaeographic and linguistic interpretation; and the stage of interdisciplinary expansion since the 21st century, marked by the increasing integration of linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, history, and comparative studies. The translation and reception of North American oracle-bone scholarship in China have taken various forms: the translations of influential monographs, historiographical introductions, and studies of translation practices. The review shows that while North American oracle-bone studies occupy a significant position in global oracle-bone studies, it still lacks systematic bibliographic compilation, while its translation, dissemination, and reception in the Chinese academic context remain insufficiently studied.

Keywords: North American oracle-bone studies; Overseas Sinology; Historiography; Translation and reception

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1. Introduction

North American oracle-bone studies constitute an important branch of overseas studies on oracle-bone inscriptions. Since the early 20th century, when missionaries such as Frank H. Chalfant began collecting and cataloguing oracle bones, the field has gradually developed through material compilation and scholarly interpretation. In this process, scholars such as Roswell S. Britton, Paul L.-M. Serruys, David N. Keightley, Kwang-chih Chang, and Edward L. Shaughnessy, have continued to advance the discipline. Thus, North American oracle-bone studies have established a relatively stable research tradition with a set of scholarly concerns, including palaeographic interpretation, grammatical analysis, reconstruction of Shang history, studies of religious and social structures, and cross-cultural comparison.

2. A Chronological Overview of Oracle Bone Studies in North America

The development of oracle bone studies in North America can be roughly divided into three phases: the phase of material accumulation from the 1910s to the 1930s; the phase of disciplinary development from the 1950s to the end of the 20th century; and the phase of deepening research and interdisciplinary expansion since the 21st century. Its developmental trajectory reflects a progression from material discovery and collation to methodological development and, finally, to interdisciplinary interpretation. And at the same time, it also reflects the transformation of North American Sinology in terms of research subjects and of knowledge production.

2.1. Early North American Oracle Bone Studies (1910s–1930s)

In the early development of North American oracle-bone studies, the driving force was from missionaries in China, some collectors and early Sinologists. Research focused on material collection, preliminary interpretation, and cataloguing^[1]. A key feature of this phase is that the oracle bone materials had not yet well entered the academic interpretive framework systematically. They entered the Western Sinological landscape at that time just as the exotic textual materials and the evidence of ancient history.

In this context, Samuel Couling's paper on oracle bones in 1914 is generally considered as an important landmark that marks the early systematic engagement of the Western academic community with the materials of oracle bones^[2]. His work showed an attempt to use the data of oracle bones in order to contribute to historical accounts of ancient China. So, it is an early intellectual entrance for the following development of the oracle bone studies of North America. Subsequently, Lionel Charles Hopkins published a series of studies connecting the materials of oracle bones with the discussion of Shang dynasty, its political institutions and the reconstruction of its history^[3-5]. It shifted research from material presentation toward historically oriented analysis. This shift also has methodological significance because it is the beginning of integrating oracle-bone materials into Western Sinological approaches to historical reconstruction.

James Mellon Menzies also contributed to the collecting and cataloging of oracle bone inscriptions. He published two catalogues of oracle bones, systematically documenting his private collection^[6-7]. It enhanced the accessibility of oracle-bone materials and shifted early studies from private collections into the public academic domain. In the process, he shifted from collector to scholar, exemplifying the early fusion of missionary, collector, and academic roles in North American oracle-bone studies.

The systematic publication of the oracle bone materials has also further progressed by the cataloging efforts of Roswell S. Britton. The publications he edited or contributed to marked a shift from sporadic publication of oracle-bone materials to standardized catalogue-style compilations^[8-10]. At this phase, no formal academic research system had been established. However, these efforts provided the important basic materials for the subsequent oracle bone studies and also laid the preliminary ground for the tradition of the oracle bone collation in North America.

2.2. The Disciplinary Formation of North American Oracle-Bone Studies (1950s–Late 20th Century)

From the 1950s on, North American oracle-bone studies found itself in a phase of discipline formation, with methodological diversification and a rather self-conscious research agenda. Oracle-bone studies slowly moved beyond the simple collation of ancient scripts to fields that included linguistics, history, anthropology and archaeology.

With regard to the organization of source materials, Hung-hsiang Chou conducted a systematic survey of oracle-bone inscriptions in American collections, helping to consolidate materials previously dispersed across institutions and private collections^[11]. This work was of great importance for the cataloguing scholarship, and also provided a stable documentary foundation for later research.

In the area of historical interpretation, Homer H. Dubs incorporated oracle-bone evidence into studies of ancient chronology and astronomy^[12]. He attempted to reconstruct the chronological framework of early China using excavated texts and astronomical data, initiating an interdisciplinary approach that treated oracle-bone inscriptions as historical evidence. His experiments with the method were influential for the subsequent development of the North American oracle-bone studies.

More systematic theoretical construction appeared in the work of Kwang-chih Chang, who treated the oracle-bone materials from the point of view of archaeology and anthropology. In his studies, he integrated oracle-bone inscriptions into broader analyses of Shang religion, ritual structure, and state formation^[13]. His scholarship went beyond the general paradigm, which mainly takes the paleographic interpretation as the center of interest. Thus, oracle-bone inscriptions became important evidence to understand the structure of early Chinese civilization.

Paul L.-M. Serruys set up the paradigm of Western oracle-bone linguistics with his systematic analysis of the grammatical structures of the oracle-bone inscriptions^[14]. In particular, he stressed the necessity to study syntax and analysis in the context, and thus helped the oracle-bone interpretation to move from the explanation in isolated lexis to the reading in the structure.

At the level of integrative interpretation, David N. Keightley built an integrative analytical framework connecting linguistics, archaeology, and transmitted historical texts and gradually constructed an interpretive model of Shang history around oracle-bone inscriptions^[15]. His work went well beyond the interpretation of the text itself, as he was interested in the social structures, the religious beliefs, and the political order which are reflected in the oracle-bone divination. In this sense, Keightley played a key role in the transformation of North American oracle-bone studies from a field concerned primarily with textual interpretation to one oriented toward the interpretation of civilization as a whole.

2.3. The Development of North American Oracle-Bone Studies Since the 21st Century

Since the beginning of the 21st century, North American oracle-bone scholarship has continued to develop on the basis of earlier work. At the same time, several trends can be observed: the expansion of source materials, methodological reflection, and interdisciplinary integration. In terms of the research materials, scholarly attention has gradually extended from the traditional data of Yinxu oracle-bone inscriptions to other related excavated texts, thereby broadening the temporal and cultural scope of oracle-bone studies.

A particularly important figure in this development is Edward L. Shaughnessy, whose work extends to divinatory inscriptions and the study of the Zhou divination practices^[16]. By analyzing differences between Shang and Zhou divinatory practices, he deepened the scholarly understanding of transformations in political culture and religious practice during the Shang–Zhou transition. This not only extended the documentary basis of oracle-bone studies, but also reinforced the interpretive role of the field in discussions concerning the continuity of early Chinese civilization.

At the same time, Ken-ichi Takashima further advanced oracle-bone linguistics through increasingly refined analyses of lexical systems, grammatical structures, and interpretive methodology^[17-18]. In this way,

oracle-bone linguistics gradually became a more technically rigorous and methodologically specialized field.

David N. Keightley's later scholarship illustrated the broader transformation of North American oracle-bone studies from palaeographic interpretation toward the study of civilization as a whole. His synthetic discussions of Shang political culture, religious belief, and kingship structure exemplify an approach that uses oracle-bone materials to reconstruct the overall social world of the Shang^[19].

A range of interdisciplinary studies has further broadened the interpretive horizons of the field, including Cook's work on Shang–Zhou political culture and ancestral concepts^[20], Shankman and Durrant's Sino-Greek comparisons of early Chinese intellectual traditions^[21], and Raphals's comparative religious approaches to Chinese and Greek divinatory traditions^[22]. Collectively, these studies have pushed North American oracle-bone scholarship into wider fields of cross-cultural and comparative studies, and they have gradually formed a composite research framework which combines paleography, history, and comparative cultural studies.

To summarize, the history of North American oracle-bone studies reveals a clear developmental trajectory. The early phase was largely devoted to the collection, organization, and publication of materials before a systematic discipline was formed. Then there was a period of disciplinary consolidation, in which the field went from the collation of the materials to the problem-oriented inquiry through diversification of methods so as to set up a relatively stable scholarly structure. Since the 21st century, the field has further expanded in both scope and theory, with increasing interdisciplinary and self-reflexive approaches. This development not only reflects the internal evolution of North American oracle-bone studies but also highlights its continued significance in global Sinology.

Nevertheless, there are still some evident structural limitations of the field. First, there is still a lack of systematic compilation of major and foundational works. The existing studies have in general looked at a relatively small number of representative scholars and canonical publications, lacking an account of the whole development of the field. In particular, there is still insufficient attention to the compilation, circulation, reception, and intellectual impact of these works, and no comprehensive bibliography of the key works of North American oracle-bone studies has yet been produced.

Second, the existing historiographical narratives are imbalanced with regard to both the selection of subjects and the interpretative framing. On the one hand, researches so far have put preferred weight on the paleography and linguistic analysis, while the contributions from archaeology, anthropology, or the cross-cultural aspect are relatively lacking^[23]. This selective focus has reinforced a linguistic-centered narrative, obscured methodological diversity in North American scholarship, and produced an unbalanced picture of the field.

3. The Translation and Reception of Key Works in North American Oracle-Bone Studies

The transmission and reception of North American oracle-bone studies among Chinese academics have shown various and interwoven forms of translation, introduction and scholarly mediation. These include the direct publication of the oracle-bone materials in Chinese, the complete translation of some important North American scholarly works, selective historiographical introductions and critical surveys of the West oracle-bone scholarship. Overall, these forms of the intellectual mediation together have constituted the main channels through which the North American oracle-bone studies have come into the Chinese academic context.

This earliest and most representative category consists of oracle-bone compilations produced through close collaboration within North American scholarly networks. Although published in Chinese and following traditional cataloguing conventions, they were deeply rooted in the collecting practices and academic networks of early North American Sinology. The example is *The Couling-Chalfant Collection of Inscribed Oracle Bone* with scripts prepared by Frank H. Chalfant, and edited by Roswell S. Britton^[24]. This volume tried to bring together all the oracle-bone materials from the collections of Samuel Couling and Frank H. Chalfant. Although written in Chinese, these compilations reflected the collecting practices, editorial methods, and scholarly concerns of early Western Sinology. Through the collection, cataloguing, and publication of oracle-bone materials, North American scholars became active participants in the broader field of oracle-bone studies.

Other works of a similar nature are *Seven Collections of Inscribed Oracle Bone*^[25], which assembled rubbings from several collections, and *The Hopkins Collection of Inscribed Oracle Bone*^[26], which concerned the oracle-bone holdings of Lionel Charles Hopkins. Both volumes, published in North America, used Chinese transcription and served as reference works for Sinology. They reflect the early emphasis in North American oracle-bone studies on material collection and catalogue production. Along the same lines, the works of James Mellon Menzies, *Oracle Bone Inscriptions from Yinxi*^[27] and *Oracle Bone Inscriptions from Yinxi (Supplement)*^[28], were also published in the form of Chinese-style catalogues..

A second major form of translation comes with the maturing of the North American Sinology in the late 20th century, when the theoretically influential works on oracle-bone and Shang civilization starts to be fully translated into Chinese. The most representative one is *The Ancestral Landscape* of David N. Keightley^[29]. The book, while integrating historical anthropology with the interpretation of oracle-bone inscriptions, takes a systematic look at conceptions of time, spatial order, and the religio-political structure of the late Shang society, providing a very influential interpretive system of the Shang civilization.

Similarly, Kwang-chih Chang's *Shang Civilization*^[30], one of the most influential works by a Chinese-American scholar in North America, was translated relatively early, by which Chang's archaeological and anthropological interpretations of Shang civilization were introduced to a wider Chinese readership. The translation and reception of these works reflect the broader shift in North American oracle-bone studies from documentary collation to theoretical interpretation, and their growing institutional recognition in Chinese academic discourse.

A third category consists of historiographical introductions produced in Chinese academic contexts. Unlike full translations of individual works, these studies offer structured overviews of North American and Western oracle-bone scholarship through historiographical narratives. A representative example is Edward L. Shaughnessy's work *Westward View of Han Records (Xiguan Hanji)*^[31]. As a whole, it represents the introduction of the Western scholarship on excavated texts, including a systematic survey of the history of the Western oracle-bone studies. In this framework, two essays, "An Overview of Western Sinological Research on Oracle-Bone Inscriptions" and "Biographical Sketches of Western Scholars of Oracle-Bone Studies" sum up the research trajectories of the North American and other Western scholars. Such works facilitate the broader introduction of the North American oracle-bone scholarship into the Chinese academic discourse.

Finally, there are also a small number of studies focusing on translation practices in North American oracle-bone scholarship. For example, Jin Yang focused on Keightley's translation by looking at his interpretive in terms of terminology, linguistic representation, and explanatory technique^[32]. These studies

treat translation as an object of scholarly inquiry, positioning North American oracle-bone studies not only as a research field but also as an important case in translation studies and knowledge transmission.

To sum up, the translation and the reception of the North American oracle-bone studies in the Chinese academic context show a progressive historical track: from documentary and catalogue-style publications, to translations of theoretically oriented monographs, and finally to historiographical introductions and critical reflections on translation itself. However, this field still calls for further research. Part of the major North American scholarship still only exists in English, and the systematic translation into Chinese has not yet been done. The existing works on translation are still concentrated on several canonical works, while the introduction and the evaluation of the whole scholarly literature are still lacking. At the same time, little attention is devoted to the ways of dissemination and reception, and the academic effect of the translated works. The broader processes through which North American oracle-bone scholarship has been reproduced and recontextualized in Chinese academia remain underexplored.

4. Conclusion

North American oracle-bone studies, as a major branch of overseas Sinology, have developed since the early 20th century from material collection and collation to disciplinary formation, and, more recently, into interdisciplinary expansion. Within the global oracle-bone scholarship, this tradition occupies an important position. From the beginning, linguistic, archaeological, and historical approaches have been gradually integrated. As a result, oracle-bone studies have moved from textual interpretation to broader analyses of Shang civilization. In the 21st century, it has further expanded to cross-cultural comparison and reflexive inquiry into knowledge production. Historiographical studies of this tradition remain uneven. While existing studies have addressed individual scholars and selected themes, they remain unsystematic in bibliographic terms and lack a coherent framework centered on key texts. In addition, the existing narratives also pay insufficient attention to the interdisciplinary studies and to the less-addressed scholars, thereby producing an incomplete picture of the field. Another important limitation concerns translation and dissemination. The literature of North American oracle-bone studies has not yet been systematically translated into Chinese. The reception and the mechanisms of transmission of these studies are not sufficiently studied, limiting their integration into Chinese academic discourse.

Future research should focus on systematic bibliographic compilation and integrate perspectives from translation history and knowledge transmission in order to better reconstruct the structure of the field and enhance its cross-cultural communication.

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