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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Royal Titles in Ur III Mesopotamia and China in the Shang Dynasty

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Abstract

This article examines historical transformations of the royal titles employed by kings of Ur III Mesopotamia and the Shang dynasty China. More specifically, it attends to the diverse ways in which royal titles were produced during the development of kingship and early state formation. The article engages mainly with royal titulary in the Ur III dynasty – "mighty man/king, king of Ur, king of Sumer and Akkad/king of the four quarters," as well as "god of his land" after the self-deification of the king – and three separate royal titles of the Shang dynasty: "king" (王), "I, the one man" (余一人) and "common ruler of all under heaven" (天下共主). Using comparative approach, the article argues that the royal titulary of Ur III reflects particular historical circumstances and the traits of the king, while royal titles in Shang highlight the supremacy, uniqueness as well as loneliness of kingship.

Introduction

The Ur III dynasty and Shang dynasty have been selected as representative civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia and early China during Bronze Age.[1] Although separated chronologically by more than

1- This article is based on a paper entitled "A Framework of Comparative Study between the Ur III and Shang Dynasty" presented in the online conference "Discussions in Assyriology," which convened on January 16, 2021. I am grateful to Magnus Widell and Parsa Daneshmand for inviting me to present my paper in the meeting and contribute to this volume.

half a millennium, both of the dynasties were territorial-political states; furthermore, they share several similarities in terms of political organization and culture. The Ur III dynasty ruled for 108 years and saw five kings. It was the last Sumerian dynasty that came to preeminent power in Mesopotamia towards the very end of the third millennium BC (ca. 2112-2004 BC), and extended geographically from the ancient coastline of the Persian Gulf eastwards into modern-day Iran, and northwards towards the edge of north-eastern Syria and northern Iraq. The Shang dynasty is the first historical dynasty in early China that ruled the mid and lower Yellow River valley in the second half of the second millennium BC (ca. 1600-1046 BC). Both dynasties are well documented. The Ur III state is well-known for having produced an extreme number of administrative and economic documents,[2] and the capital of late Shang, the Anyang site, has produced tens of thousands of so-called oracle inscriptions. These texts were characterized as divinations and offer critical insights into political, economic, social, and religious issues of the state.[3]

The comparative study between the Ur III and the Shang dynasty is feasible and has the potential to enhance our understanding of both societies. Comparative studies have many benefits: they not only distinguish common historical features among different cultures but also identify variables that were critical for historical outcomes. They also assess the nature of a given phenomenon in the broader context of structurally similar entities.[4] Most comparative studies between ancient Mesopotamia and China done by Assyriologists are case studies with specific focus and are typically not restricted to a particular dynasty or historical period.[5] Some anthropologists have also conducted comparative studies of ancient civilizations, including early China and Mesopotamia. However, such studies typically focus on more than four, sometimes as many as seven ancient civilizations, to find commonalities in the development of different civilizations within a wider chronological and geographical framework, preventing a more in-depth study of the Chinese and Mesopotamian culture.[6] As comparative systematic study of the Ur III and Shang dynasty has the potential to yield important results in a number of areas, I would like to offer this short communication as a point of departure.

Royal Titles in Ur III Dynasty

In ancient Mesopotamia, titles were first used to identify the office of kingship and then formed an essential appurtenance of it, changing accordingly with the development of early state and royal power. According to William Hallo, in ancient Mesopotamia, a royal title could take the form of any noun or nominal phrase other than the personal name or the patronymic to identify the ruler. It usually came after the royal name, appeared in a full form, limited to fixed numbers, and incorporated with a geographical name. The royal title was better attested in royal or seal inscriptions than in purely literary works (royal hymns for example) and had certain heritability within and between dynasties. The sum of all those titles of a given ruler

2- See Widell 2022, in this volume.

3- Keightley 1999: 235-237.

4- For the benefits and prospects of comparative study of ancient Civilizations and China's potential comparative advantages, see Scheidel 2005.

5- See e.g. Wu & Qu (1997) offering a comparison of sacrifices in ancient Mesopotamia and China; or Gong (2017), who has compared the Sumerian "Me" with the Chinese philosophical concept "Dao." See also Steinkeller (2017: 15-24) who compared historical sources in Southern Babylonia with sources in Egypt, Mesoamerica, and Ancient China.

6- See e.g. Maisels 1999, Trigger 2003.

amounted to the so-called "royal titular."[7]

At the beginning of the dynasty, the only title attributed to Ur-Nammu was "king of Ur" (lugal-urim$_5^{ki}$-ma), which coincided with a general limitation of royal power and control. It is suggested by Hallo that this title may have originally been as intimately linked with the city of Ur and favored by Sumerian rulers when they acquired supreme political power.[8] As a result, this title, due to its links to royal origins of the Ur III dynasty and old Sumerian traditions, formed an essential and invariable part of Ur III titulary from Ur-Nammu onwards.

With the preliminary consolidation of the dynasty, Ur-Nammu revived the title "mighty man" (nitaḫ-kalag-ga) which was first introduced by the Old Akkadian (ca. 2334-2113 BC) king Naram-Sin and created for him a brand-new title "king of Sumer and Akkad" (lugal-ki-en-gi-ki-uri). The title "king of Sumer and Akkad" was attested for the first time during the second half of Ur-Nammu's reign, signalising his attempt to shape the national spirit and declare his unquestioned power over the whole of Babylonia. On the other hand, as pointed out by Piotr Steinkeller, the duality of this title may be viewed as a kind of official acknowledgment of the political and cultural separation of Babylonia, given that the actual scope of control during the reign of Ur-Nammu was very limited.[9] Also, Ur-Nammu adopted the title "lord of Uruk" (en-unug^{ki}) as it appears in few inscriptions, but it was abandoned after him.[10]

When Šulgi ascended the throne after his father, he took over the three royal titles used by Ur-Nammu. During the first half of his reign, he made effort to consolidate the regime, while during the second half, simultaneously with his self-deification, he began a more aggressive policy of expansion, which may have been reflected by the change of the royal title.[11] The addition of the divine determinative (the "dingir" sign) preceding the king's name indicated the apotheosis of Šulgi and was in consistent use thereafter. The title "god of his land" (dingir-kalam-ma-na) or "god of the land" (dingir-kalam-ma) was introduced by Šulgi and continued to be used by his successors. This title is a variant of the "king of his land" (lugal-kalam-ma-na) title employed by the previous kings, and it is usually found in royal hymns and, less often in royal inscriptions (except for seal inscription during the reign of Ibbi-Sin's). The reason behind this divergence may lie in the different nature of the two genres, as royal inscriptions are classified as visual texts and the determinative was usually sufficient for the reader to recognize the king's divine nature. Royal hymns, on the other hand, are auditory material, therefore the silent grammatical element natural of the determinative requires the title "god of his land" to be added, to let the audience realize the king's new divine status.

Around the 28th year of Šulgi's rule, the title "king of Sumer and Akkad" was exchanged for "king of the four quarters" (lugal-an-ub-da-limmu$_2$-ba) and the original title never reappeared in any inscriptions or date formulas again. This new Sumerian title was the equivalent of the Akkadian royal title (*šar kibrātim arba'im*), which was introduced by Naram-Sin, who also assumed a divine status during his lifetime.

7- Hallo 1957: 2; 130-132.

8- Hallo 1957: 12; 16; 18.

9- Steinkeller 2017: 152.

10- According to Douglas Frayne (1997: 35), the two inscriptions with Ur-Nammu holding this title (RIME 3/2.01.01.12 and RIME 3/2.01.01.46), should in all likelihood be dated to the time shortly after the incorporation of Uruk into the realm of the Ur III state.

11- For an overview of divine kingship in ancient Mesopotamia, see Brisch 2013.

Through the creation of this new title, Naram-Sin employed the idea of kingship to gain control over not only previous city-states in southern Babylonia, but also the barbarians in distant and disobedient countries.[12] The practice of extending royal rule from a previously limited region to all lands was reintroduced by Šulgi and followed by all his successors. Among other titles, "king of the four quarters" seems to be the one that embodied the authority of the king and royal ideology best, and thus has spurred wide attention and discussion. As pointed out by Tohru Maeda, the adoption of this royal title corresponded with the development stage of the early state. According to Maeda, the Akkadian dynasty was in the formative phase of the territorial state, and the Ur III dynasty was in the phase of establishment.[13] In terms of political boundaries, the territory of Ur III consisted of the core, the peripheral area and the vassal states.[14] It has also been suggested that this title related to the ruler's universal ambitions to expand his rule beyond conceptual or topographical geographical boundaries, probably in the sense of ruling the divine spheres as well (i.e., heaven, sun, stars, etc.). Hence the divine kings of ancient Mesopotamia preferred this title.[15] Additionally, royal titles, as argued by Steinkeller, are not just rhetorical devices confined to a text, but can be actualized through some kind of cultic rituals a royal statue with the name "king of the four quarters" in Amar-Suen's reign may indicate the existence of a specific ritual to symbolize the king's rule over the entire world.[16]

Although a framework of royal titulary was set by Šulgi, three subtle changes were made by his successors: Amar-Suen and Ibbi-Suen. Firstly, Amar-Suen exchanged the first title "mighty man" for "mighty king" (lugal-kalag-ga) in the last third of his rule and he was considered to be the first king holding this title.[17] Secondly, under Amar-Suen, the title "god of his land" developed into two elaborated forms: "true god of his land" (dingir-zi-kalam-ma-na) and "true god, Utu of his land" (dingir-zi-^{d}utu kalam-ma-na).[18] The reason behind this change could have been the king's attempt to distance himself from the mortal nature of a man. The word "man" (nitaḫ) indicates the mortal element of his life while "king" (lugal) might be somewhat more ambiguous, as the gods were often addressed as kings. Thirdly, as already demonstrated by Rudolf Mayr and David Owen, Ibbi-Suen was the only Ur III king who added the title "god of his land" to the inscription on his so-called Royal Gift Seal, the designation of a subgroup that had been presented personally by the king to his favored subordinates.[19] Considering that Ibbi-Suen was the last king and his authority had diminished greatly, the reason behind this decision may have been to emphasize his divine identity and to deter potential rebels within the state.

12- Maeda 1984: 80.

13- Maeda 2015: 6.

14- For more discussions in detail, see Steinkeller 1991.

15- Michalowski 2010.

16- Steinkeller 2017: 135-136.

17- Hallo 1957: 69. Before Amar-Suen, there are two exceptions of Šulgi's usage of this title in seal inscriptions, which can be found in *SANTAG* 7, 175 (*CDLI*: P218250) and *NATN*47 (*CDLI*: P120744). But the content of the two tablets is not entirely credible: for the former, the king's name was incomplete; the official Šulgi-ili in the second tablet was attested from ŠS 6-IS 2, not the official of Šulgi, and the king's name was also fragmentary. Therefore, according to the materials we have so far, Amar-Suen was the first to hold the title of "mighty king."

18- Steinkeller 2017: 152.

19- Mayr & Owen 2004: 146.

Royal Titles in Shang Dynasty

The designations of the Shang king as they appear in the oracle inscriptions can be roughly divided into three categories: the first are the temple names employed by living kings to confer with their deceased ancestors; the second are the appellations of kinship, such as Father Yi (父乙) and Brother Xin (兄辛); the third are the original names of Shang kings during their lifetime. The first two are well attested in oracles and later texts, but only five personal names of living Shang kings are known to us so far.[20] According to David Keightley, the temple name of the king was composed of "heavenly stems" (天干) which have religious significance and structure the ancestral cult, and the royal ancestors received offerings on the day of their temple name.[21]

In the oracle bone inscriptions, the Shang king is frequently referred to in the third person, along the lines of: "the king said," "the divination of the king," etc. The appellation exclusive to supreme Shang rulers is "king" (王), which is also confirmed by the "Annals of Yin (Shang)" in the *Historical Records* (史记•殷本纪) and other classical texts produced by later generations. From the glyphic point of view, the Chinese character "王" originated in the shape of the battle axe, implying kingship derived from the power and force of the military command.[22]

Apart from a direct designation of the king, the royal title "common ruler of all under heaven" (天下共主) is well attested in oracle inscriptions. Rather than centralized, Shang was a unified dynastic state, with the state structure composing of the inner domains (内服) or the kingdom itself and the outer domains (外服) or the minor states. Therefore, from the perspective of political territory, the term "all under heaven" in Shang state denominated the outer territories of vassal states, kingdom and its inner domains and the court bureaucracy.[23] On the other hand, from a cosmological point of view, the term "under heaven" (天下) in antiquity China was an epistemological phrase to describe the world as a territorial-cum-celestial totality, with the image of a square earth under a round heaven. Later historiographic tradition attributes the introduction of the title "common ruler of all under heaven" to Xia Kings, who documented, for the first time, the great unity "under heaven." During Shang's reign, the cosmography of "under heaven" was built around the Central Shang (中商) or the Great Settlement of Shang (大商邑) and imagined both the kingdom and Shang kings as the centers of the world.[24] Though the spheres of control of Shang kings were restricted to the lower Yellow River valley, they nevertheless claimed to universal domination (just like "king of the four quarters" in Ur III), and thus the supremacy of kingship became a cosmic force to maintain effective rule over outer domains.

The Shang kings also referred to themselves as "I, the one man" (余一人) in up to thirty-six oracle inscriptions. Traditionally, Chinese scholars tend to view this title as a reflection of Shang kings' supremacy,

20- Chao 1986.

21- The Shang combined a series of ten "heavenly stems" with another series of twelve "earthly branches" (地支) to name their days, which made up a repeating six-week cycle of sixty days, with each week of ten days. The sexagenary cycle of calendar with astrological implications was used later for the marking of hours, months and years as well. For more on time and calendar in Shang dynasty, see Keightley 1999: 249-251.

22- See Wang Z. 2018: 13-15 with references. For other suggestions towards the etymological origins of 王, see Ching 1997: 14-15.

23- Wang Zhenzhong (2013 and 2018) has defined the structure of the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasty) as different development stages of the "composite state."

24- Wang M. 2012: 340-342.

overweening and autocracy, overlooking all his subjects with arrogance.[25] More recently, scholars have reconsidered references to this title in their contexts and proposed different arguments. Grammatically, this self-assumed title is simply the first person singular pronoun "I" followed by an apposition applying to males of any rank (人).[26] In terms of function, this title was used on four specific occasions: first, under the premise of "fault" or anomalies, and inquiry made through divination asking whether this would bring disaster to "I, the one man" (up to 27 examples); Second, when offering sacrifices to ancestors, an inquiry through divination was made to ask if there were any concerns and faults on the side of "I, the one man" (3 examples); Third, in specific events (mostly foreign conquests), divination was conducted to discover the relationship between others and "I, the one man" (5 examples); Fourth, when "I, the one man" and the diviner divined separately but the results were different, divination was conducted on whose result should not be adopted (only one example). In all cases, the title was used to ask for divine help through divination when the king was in trouble (anomalies implied bad governance) or challenged.[27] In the face of supernatural forces, Shang kings were more likely to show humility, piety, and concern than arrogance. Therefore, this title was more likely to highlight the king's loneliness and difficulty wielding royal power and responsibility, and in the meantime serve to reinforce the notion of the king as the sole mediator between Heaven and earth.[28]

Royal title in the Shang dynasty did not seem to transform with the change of king and development of kingship. During early Shang, royal power was restricted by theocracy (represented by the diviner (贞人) group coming from notable lineages), and the clan power, while by late Shang, theocracy and clan power were integrated into the strengthened kingship.[29] The designation "king" and the title "common ruler of all under heaven" showed no sign of diachronic change. It has been suggested that "the one man" was used in early Shang and developed into the appositive structure "I, the one man" in late Shang.[30] But the existing materials cannot support this suggestion as "I, the one man" also appeared in early oracle inscriptions, and the difference between the two titles lies in the fact that the former describe how others addressed the king and the latter was the king's self-reference.

Finally, the concept and expression worth noting are that of "the four quarters" (四方) in Shang, though it was not used in royal title directly. In Shang oracle inscriptions, the term 方 primarily referred to a concept within political geography, which designated "others," namely alien polities, sometimes hostile or unknown others, as opposed to "us," the Shang state. Thus, this term was also translated by Keightley as "side, border, country or region," indicating a periphery defining the political center of Shang.[31] When combined with the number "four," it took the form of "the four quarters" acquiring a cosmological meaning which embodied political domains as well as spiritual lands. It also functioned as a primary structure for political and ritual action, through which the Shang kings could monopolize the communication with supernatural powers: it took place through sacrificial rites with the assistance of the king's ancestors' spirits

25- See e.g. Hu 1957 and 1981.

26- Wheatley 1971: 52.

27- For detailed discussion of all these references and cases, see Ning 2018.

28- Ning 2018: 175-177. Similar opinions can also be found in Ching 1997: 15; Li 2003: 84.

29- Chao 1984.

30- See Hu 1957 and 1981.

31- Keightley 1999: 269; see also Song 2011: 5-9.

and the diviners.[32] That is to say, the Shang world was defined in three dimensions by "the four quarters": the political and geographical center defined by the boundary marker, as well as "the ritual-cosmological center of the royal ancestral lines defined by the lineage of the others."[33]

Conclusions

The royal title is of great historical significance and can well reflect the dynastic and even individual traits of particular kings, since it is considered the most condensed expression of royal ideology in a given historical and cultural circumstance. Royal titles in Ur III reflected the consolidation, expansion, stability and decline of the dynasty, as well as the phenomenon of self-deification of Šulgi and his three successors.[34] Though the formation of titulary was relatively fixed, with the first title referring to the royal origin, the second stressing the king's personal quality and the third implying the king's domain area, all Ur III kings were willing and able to make changes to their titles, even if those changes remained subtle.

Royal titles adopted by Shang kings were quite different. In different periods of the dynasty and the reign of particular kings, royal titles remained the same. Three titles were used separately with different connotations. The title "king" was used to record the king's behavior, inquiry or command directly, while the "common ruler of all under heaven" resembles in some respects the Ur III title "king of the four quarters," both titles pointing towards the universal domain. "I, the one man," the most special title of the Shang rulers used in very specific cases, was the king's form of self-address when he communicated with the supernatural powers to seek divine support or help. The title hints at the role of the Shang king as alone being responsible for the state, and his inescapable mission of serving as the sole mediator between the divine and the secular sphere. In this respect, the meaning behind royal titles of Sumerian kings in Ur III and Shang kings displayed some similarities, though the titles themselves remained different.

The reason for the different attitudes to the royal titles lies in the Ur III and Shang kings' completely contradictory strategies of strengthening royal power. Ur III kings preferred to show off authority; they, or their statues, would travel around the kingdom during festivals and ceremonies. When this attitude was reflected in the royal title of the king, it was diverse in form and varied in content, with a certain personal style that was accessible to a large number of subjects, even illiterate ones. By contrast, Shang kings enhanced their authority by being completely isolated from the commoners, maintaining a sense of elevated mystery. The audience of royal titles in oracle inscriptions was limited to educated elite.

32- For more discussion in detail, see Wang A. 2000: 29-37.

33- Wang A. 2000: 46.

34- For a division of the Ur III state into four separate stages of development, see Dahl 2007:1, n. 1.

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