

Studies on the inscriptions on the three bronzes of Diaosheng

Shi Feng*

* Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 110710

Abstract

Based on the ritual background of *Xiang Yinjiu Li* (District Symposium), this paper re-examined the inscriptions of the bronze *gui* of Diaosheng (the owner's name marked in the inscriptions) with dates of "the fifth year" and "the sixth year" discovered in the past, and that of bronze *xi*-vessel with date of "the fifth year" recently unearthed in Fufeng County, Shaanxi Province, and revealed the connotation of the inscriptions and the patriarchal rules, ritual systems and social life and customs of the Western Zhou Dynasty reflected by these inscriptions. Meanwhile, this paper dated these three bronzes in the reign of King Li of the Western Zhou Dynasty with the references to the historic literature. What to be emphasized is that the contents of the bronze inscriptions well matched that of the chapter *Xiang Yinjiu Li* (District Symposium) in *Yili* (Book of Etiquettes and Ceremonial), which proved that *Yili* has reliable sources from ancient times. The inscription of the bronze *xi*-vessel with date of "the fifth year", which mentioned its own name as *xi*, presented us a new bronze type.

Keywords: bronze inscriptions—Western Zhou Dynasty; rites and ceremonies; patriarchal lineage system.

Introduction

The newly discovered "Fifth-Year Diaosheng *xi*" 五年琯生簋, a bronze vessel from the Western Zhou period, bears an inscription about the distribution of the land and retainers within the Shao 召 lineage. Complementing the previously known inscriptions on the "Fifth-Year Diaosheng *gui*" 五年琯生簋 and the "Sixth-Year Diaosheng *gui*" 六年琯生簋, its inscription conveys important new information on the *zongfa* 宗法 (patriarchal lineage system), the ritual system, and the land distribution system of the Western Zhou period. This paper examines some of the relevant background facts.

The three Diaosheng inscriptions

The inscription of the "Fifth-Year Diaosheng *gui*" may be paraphrased as follows:

On day *jichou* in the first moon of the fifth year of

the King [an unnamed king of the Zhou Dynasty], the Duke of Shao summoned Diaosheng to discuss his participation in the management of the land and retainers of the Shao lineage, and Shao Bo Hu came to join them. Diaosheng was self-confident on account of his good virtue. Dame Shao [later referred to as Fu Shi; the Duke of Shao's wife] held a District Symposium ceremony for this internal lineage meeting, and two vases of wine were ceremonially displayed. Fu Shi told the people attending the meeting: "Now let me convey the personal message of the Duke of Shao, the head of our lineage, to you. He says, 'I am becoming old. At present, the retainers of our lineage often raise complaints, accusations and disturbances. I require Bo Hu and Diaosheng to promise me not to let these retainers flee and leave the Shao lineage. We may entrust three fifths of the lands and retainers to the main branch of the Shao lineage [headed by Bo Hu] and two fifths to the minor branch, led by Diaosheng, to manage; or else, two thirds to Bo Hu and one third to Diaosheng.'" At the end of the discussion, Diaosheng presented a large jade *zhang*-scepter to the head of the Shao lineage to show his acceptance of this duty, and a bundle of silk and a jade *huang*-semicircular pendant to Dame Shao as gifts of gratitude. Bo Hu said to Diaosheng, "I have truthfully conveyed my parents' order to you without any falsification. I will do my best to fulfill one of the two plans suggested by my parents so as not to incur trouble in the future." Diaosheng presented a jade *gui*-scepter to show his sincerity and his trust in Shao Bo Hu.

The inscription of the "Fifth-Year Diaosheng *xi*" (see Figure 1) may be paraphrased as follows:

On the first auspicious day of the ninth moon of the fifth year of the King, Shao Jiang [Fu Shi, the Duke of Shao's wife] hosted a District Symposium ceremony to discuss Diaosheng's participation in the management of the land and retainers of the Shao lineage. At the ceremony, five cattail mats were spread out for the hosts and three senior guests; kerchiefs were provided for wiping the hands, and two vases of wine were displayed. Fu Shi conveyed the Duke of Shao's order, saying, "I am becoming old; the retainers of our lineage often raise accusations and troubles, and I require you, Diaosheng, to promise me not to let them depart. Now, three fifths of the lands and retainers are assigned to the primary lineage to manage, and two fifths to you, Diaosheng, to manage. You will participate in the management of the properties of our lineage, but your elder brother will be the successor to the duke position, while you as the younger brother are only the head of the minor branch

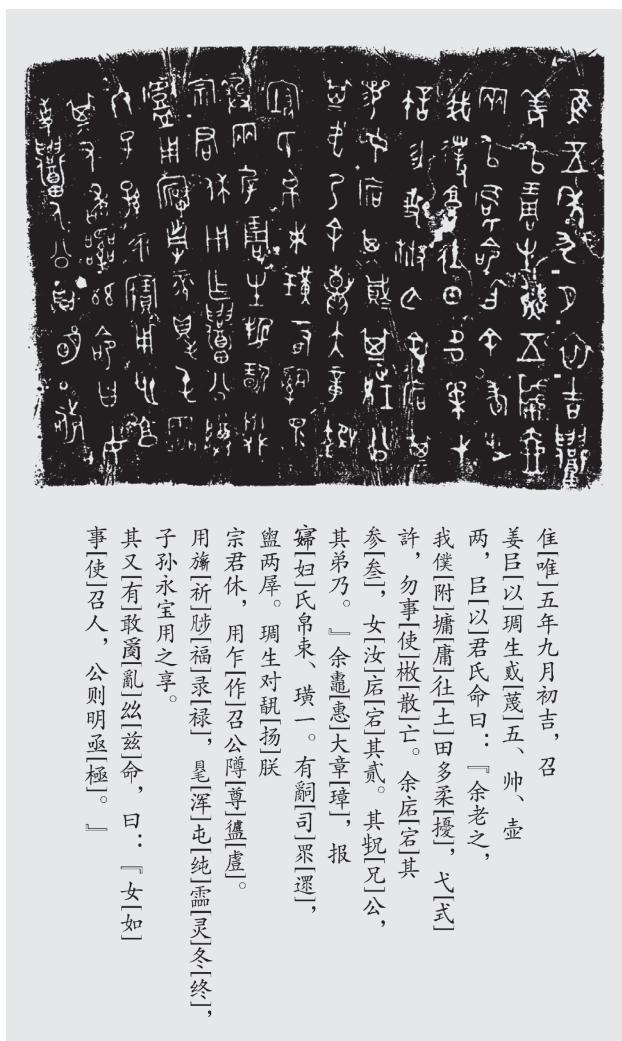


Figure 1 Rubbing and transcription of the “Fifth-year Diaosheng xi”.

and therefore will not be authorized to interfere with the other affairs of our lineage.” At the end of the discussion, Diaosheng presented a large jade *zhang*-scepter to the Duke of Shao to show his acceptance of this duty and a bundle of silk and a jade *huang*-semicircular pendant to Fu Shi as a gift of gratitude. The official in charge arrived at the occasion to oversee the ceremonial exchanges between the host, who was Shao Jiang, and the guest, who was Diaosheng, and assisted both parties in the ritual washing. Diaosheng praised the favorable intention of the lineage leader and made this precious *xi* vessel as ritual vessel to offer sacrifice to the first-generation Duke of Shao in order to pray for the blessing of happiness, wealth, contentment and a good end, so that this vessel may be used in sacrificial ceremonies forever. If someone dares to disobey the orders of the lineage leader, he will be warned: “If you interfere with the affairs of the Shao lineage and instigate turmoil among the members of the Shao lineage, [the first] Duke of Shao is watching you!”

The inscription of the “Sixth-Year Diaosheng *gui*” may be paraphrased as follows:

On day *jiazi* in the fourth moon of the sixth year of the King, the King was in Haojing. Shao Bo Hu said to Diaosheng: “Congratulations, I calmed down the complaints and accusations of the retainers of our lineage and put your management to the retainers into effect by paying them cowries [as currency]. This way of calming down the retainers’ troubles by giving them cowries is also the will of my late parents. Congratulations again; in the past, I told the relevant officials about your appointment to the management of our lands and retainers, but because of the troubles, complaints and accusations, we could not foresee whether they were leaving or not, so we could not make a precise list of the portion assigned to you to manage. Now, I have ordered the relevant officials to fulfill exactly the will of my late parents, and the list of the belongings assigned to you to manage has been made.” Shao Bo Hu handed over the list to Diaosheng, and Diaosheng presented a jade *bi*-disc as a return gift, and the whole affair was successfully completed. To praise the favorable intention of the lineage leader, Diaosheng made this *gui*-tureen as ritual vessel to offer sacrifice to the first-generation Duke of Shao, his remote ancestor. May this *gui* be used by generations and generations of our descendants for tens of thousands of years in this ancestral temple.

The District Symposium ceremony in the Western Zhou Dynasty as seen in the inscriptions of the two Fifth-Year Diaosheng vessels

The inscriptions of the three bronzes of Diaosheng are about three different events. The first took place in the first moon of the fifth year, the second in the ninth moon of the same year, and the third in the fourth moon of the following year. The inscriptions of the two bronzes dated to the fifth year were both for the assignment of part of the property of the Shao lineage to Diaosheng, but they record discussions held at two different times. The two alternative distribution plans mentioned in the first moon of the fifth year had not been decided yet, but the decision was made in the ninth moon of that year. The two inscriptions of the same year do thus not refer to the same event, and their contents do not concern the same occasion.

The topic of the two meetings in the fifth year both times was Diaosheng’s participation in the management of the properties of the Shao lineage. Differing from previous scholars who have identified these meetings as rituals of investiture and gift exchange, I would like to emphasize that the rite used at these two meetings was that of the District Symposium. The vases (*hu* 壺) mentioned in the Fifth-Year Diaosheng *gui* inscription and the cattail mats (*mie* 蔑), kerchiefs (*shuai* 帥) and vases (*hu* 壺) mentioned in the Fifth-Year Diaosheng *xi* inscription were all utensils and implements for the District Symposium ceremony performed by members of the Shao lineage.

The *mie* 蔑 were mats woven of fine cattail strips. The Chapter “*Xiang Yinjiu Li*” 乡饮酒礼 (Rites for District Symposia) of the *Yili* 仪礼 (Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial) stipulates: “Thereafter they lay a mat for the principal guest, the host and the guest of the second degree. The mats for the body of the guests are not laid touching one another.” 乃席宾, 主人, 介. 众宾之席皆不属焉 (Translation by John Steele). Zheng Xuan glosses *xi* 席 (mats) as *fu xi* 敷席 (mats spread as cushions); the notes at the end of this chapter mention that “These are cattail mats with linings of monochrome cloth” 蒲筵, 缙布纯 (accepting Zheng Xuan’s gloss of *yan* 筵 as “mats”). The term *mie* mentioned in the inscription refers to just these kinds of mats, which were used during the District Symposium ceremony as seats for the guests.

The expression *mie wu* 蔑五 in the inscription means that Shao Jiang [Fu Shi] laid out five mat seats for the attendees. The meeting was hosted by Shao Jiang, and Diaosheng and Shao Bo Hu were called to attend. Because this meeting was for the participation of Diaosheng in the management of the lands and retainers of Shao lineage, Diaosheng certainly was the principal guest of this ceremony; Bo Hu was the secondary host, given that he was older than Diaosheng and belonged to the main branch of Shao lineage, but was not yet its head as the Duke of Shao, his father, was still alive. According to the general rule for District Symposia, the “mats for the body of the guests” *zhong bin zhi xi* 众宾之席 were also set; the chapter “*Xiang Yinjiu Yi*” 乡饮酒义 (The Meaning of the District Banquet) of *Liji* 礼记 (Book of Rites) mentions the “Three Head Guests” (*san bin* 三宾), for whom there had to be three mats; these, when combined with the mats for the principal host and the secondary host, add up to the “five mats” recorded in the inscription of the *xi*-vessel. One of the three “Head Guests” at the ceremony recorded in the inscription was obviously Diaosheng himself; we are not told the identity of the other two, but we may assume that they were selected from among the senior members of the Shao lineage.

The *shuai* 帥 was a kerchief for wiping one’s hands during the ceremony. The expression *hu liang* 壶两 in the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng *xi*” inscription refers to the two vases of wine displayed at the ceremony. The pairing of wine vessels is mentioned in the Chapter “*Xiang Yinjiu Li*” of the *Yili*. In the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng *gui*” inscription, *hu* 壶 occurs without a numeral, but it may be assumed that there were two here also. According to the rules for District Symposia, “the used-water jar [containing the waste water from washing] is placed to the southeast of the eastern steps”; the reference to an official “assisting both parties in the ritual washing” (*guan liang xi* 盥两犀) in the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng *xi*” alludes to this rule.

It is my contention, thus, that *mie wu*, *shuai* and *hu liang* in the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng *xi*” and *hu* in the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng *gui*” inscriptions were all instruments and utensils used in District Symposia, and that the inscriptions record District Symposia that were

called by Shao Jiang for discussing the distribution of the management of the properties of the Shao lineage. The reason why the discussion meetings were held in the form of District Symposia were, presumably, that this ceremony had the purpose of respecting and promoting able and virtuous people. One of the functions of District Symposia was to seek and choose able and virtuous people. It may be assumed that the Duke of Shao had chosen able and virtuous people to assist in the management of the lineage properties and to prevent wily and immoral people from usurping the post of the lineage head. In the inscription of the *xi* vessel, the Duke of Shao’s order to Diaosheng states “your elder brother will be the successor to the duke position, while you as the younger brother are only the head of the minor branch” 其兄公, 其弟乃, emphasizing the different statuses of Diaosheng, who was only a descendant of a junior branch of the lineage, from Bo Hu, who was the eldest son in the trunk lineage. The warning “If you interfere with the affairs of the Shao lineage and instigate turmoil among the members of the Shao lineage, [the soul of the first] Duke of Shao is watching you!” at the end of the inscription is an injunction to Diaosheng to respect and obey the elders and the head of the lineage (Lin 1980). In promotions internal to the lineage, ability and virtue were the sole standard. We may assume that the reason why Diaosheng was selected from the many members of the Shao lineage to share the authority in managing the properties of the lineage was fundamentally because of his ability and good virtue, which are explicitly mentioned in the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng *gui*” inscription.

The expression *yu xian* 余献 in the inscription of the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng *gui*” gives the actual reason why Diaosheng was awarded such authority by the leaders of the Shao lineage. Previous scholars have interpreted these two characters as Diaosheng paying tribute to or even bribing the Duke of Shao and Dame Shao, but this is a misunderstanding. *Xian* 献 here does not govern any object, so it cannot be a verb (such as “to present” or “to pay”), but must be an adjective, to be glossed as *xian* 贤 (virtuous and able). The commentary attributed to Kong Anguo on the character *xian* 献 in the phrase “Throughout the myriad regions the most worthy of the people will all wish to be your ministers” 万邦黎献, 共惟帝臣 (translation by James Legge) in the “*Yi Ji*” 益稷 (Bo Yi and Hou Ji) chapter of the *Shujing* 书经 (Book of Documents) glosses *xian* 献 as *xian* 贤 (moral or virtuous). The inscription on a *gui*-turen cast by King Li (the *Hu-gui*) during the Late Western Zhou Dynasty contains the phrase *yi shi xian min* 义士献民, where *xian min* 献民 also means “able and virtuous people” (Zhang 1980). Confucius said in the chapter “*Ba Yi*” of the *Lunyu* (Confucian Analects) that “They cannot do so because of the insufficiency of their records and wise men” 文献不足故也 (English translation by James Legge); Zheng Xuan’s gloss on *xian* 献, here cited by He Yan 何晏, is: “*Xian* 献 is used in the meaning of *xian* 贤”. By analogy, the expression *yu xian* 余献 is a statement of self praise by Diaosheng explaining why he is being appreciated

and promoted; it means “I am able and virtuous” or “I am worthy and wise”. It was precisely because of this that Shao Jiang called Diaosheng to the meeting recorded in the inscription – a District Symposium ceremony that lived up to its goal of selecting and promoting able and virtuous lineage members.

The patriarchal lineage system and the social mode of advocating virtue as seen in the inscriptions on the three Diaosheng bronzes

The inscriptions of the three Diaosheng bronzes vividly record an internal lineage affair: the reassignment of the authority to manage the lands and retainers; it alludes to events and accidents took place in the fifth and sixth years because of the accusations and conflicts among the retainers of the Shao lineage. Sometime during the fifth year, Diaosheng was promoted to assist the lineage leader in managing the properties of the Shao lineage because of his ability and morality. Also sometime during that period, the Duke of Shao died and Shao Bo Hu succeeded him in the position of lineage head; the former Duke of Shao's wife, as well, seems to have been dead by the time the “Sixth Year Diaosheng *gui*” was cast. The contents of the three inscriptions follow a logical sequence; their description of the patriarchal lineage system and ritual system of the Western Zhou Dynasty are so true to life that the readers feel virtually present on the scene.

The analysis of these inscriptions reflects the fact that the patriarchal lineage system and ritual system in the Western Zhou society were comprehensive and strict.

Diaosheng could be promoted and granted strong authority because he was able and virtuous, but his status as a member of the minor lineage could not be changed, and this significantly limited his power within the Shao lineage. As the inscriptions record, the lineage leader granted Diaosheng authority exceeding that of common lineage members, but he also reminded Diaosheng never to forget his status as the son of a junior branch of the lineage and never to attempt to usurp the power of the lineage leader. Worried about this, the Shao lineage set good virtue as a required condition when it was looking for someone to share the duty of managing its properties. Hence virtue became an important measure for keeping the normal social order in Western Zhou Dynasty lineages. These facts revealed the true nature of the patriarchal lineage system of the Western Zhou Dynasty.

The inscriptions also show that the internal lineage discussions in the Western Zhou society were usually conducted following strict ritual procedures. That the leaders of the Shao lineage received Diaosheng as the principal guest in a District Symposium to assign him considerable authority clearly reflects that in the society of that time, the ritual and musical systems, as principles for refining people's behavior, had become important ingredients of daily life and social activities. Some scholars explained the reason why Diaosheng was granted the authority of managing the lands and retainers by

claiming that Diaosheng sent two vases of wine to Shao Jiang as a gift or even a bribe, but this would be a very improper understanding. A more comprehensive study of the bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou Dynasty shows that Western Zhou society was actually preferring the ritual system and the cultivation of virtue (Feng 2003; 2005); in the inscriptions, expressions such as “hold fast to upright virtue” *bing mingde* 禀明德, “carefully examine your virtue” *shen jue de* 慎厥德, “comport oneself in a dignified manner” *bing weiyi* 禀威仪, and others, are frequently seen; as well, the deeds of King Wen and his righteous virtues are often recalled. Virtue was the reason why the leaders of the Shao lineage selected Diaosheng to assist the future lineage leader to manage the properties of the lineage. It is unimaginable that a gift or bribery with two vases of wine could have made them disobey the lineage system.

To the contrary, if we take the inscriptions with District Symposium ceremony as our lead, these seemingly contradictory phenomena are easily explained. The inscriptions of the three bronzes reflected that, presumably because of silliness and immorality, the Shao lineage had offended its retainers and incurred their accusations and complaints; there was even a danger that these retainers might flee and depart.

Diaosheng's statement “I am able and virtuous” (*yu xian*) implies the reason why the lineage's retainers had complaints and accusations and why he was nominated to handle the power of managing some of the lineage lands and the human beings attached to them; it is also the reason why the final decision as spelled out in the “Sixth-Year Diaosheng-*gui*” was the more favorable one of the two plans suggested in the “Fifth-Year Diaosheng-*gui*”. Clearly, both the virtue standard and ritual system served in conjunction to uphold the patriarchal lineage system, and this revealed the real intention of the virtue-worship in Western Zhou society. Therefore, the internal lineage meetings held under the strict lineage system recorded in the inscriptions of the three Diaosheng bronzes are very useful evidence for an objective observation of Western Zhou society.

The inscriptions hint that the Shao lineage was going through hard times: its previous leader was at the point of death or already dead and troubles were stirring among the retainers. However, the newly succeeding lineage leader and Diaosheng cooperated well and finally calmed down the retainers. Related historical facts are recorded in the “Twenty-fourth Year of Duke Xi” 僖公二十四年在 the *Zuozhuan* 左传 (Zuo Commentary) and in the poem “*Changdi*” 常棣 in the “*Xiaoya*” 小雅 (Minor Odes of the Kingdom) section of the *Shijing* 诗经 (Book of Poetry), both of which mention the individual referred to as Bo Hu in the three Diaosheng inscriptions.

“*Changdi*” has been traditionally attributed to Duke Mu of Shao, whose personal name is given as Hu (Wei Zhao 韦昭 [3 century CE] in his commentary on the “*Zhou Yu Zhong*” 周语中 [Discourses of Zhou, Part II] chapter of the *Guoyu* 国语 [Discourses of the States] alleges that this poem was written by the Duke of Zhou [*Guoyu*

p. 46, note no. 8], but this has been disproven [Yang 1959, 271–2]. By checking the inscriptions of the three Diaosheng bronzes against this poem, we can see that their contents seamlessly match up with each other. The transmitted sources relate that Shao Bo Hu gathered his lineage in Chengzhou after calming down the preceding troubles of his lineage's retainers. At that time, Bo Hu had become the lineage leader. Bo Hu's succession to the duke's position after the deaths of his parents noted in the inscriptions of the three Diaosheng bronzes must have been before this gathering. Since the events referred to in the transmitted occurred during the reign of King Li of Zhou (d. 827 BCE), these three bronzes must have been cast during the fifth and sixth years of King Li's reign.

The inscriptions of the three Diaosheng bronzes are important also because they for the first time provide clear evidence for the existence of the District Symposium ceremony during the Western Zhou Dynasty. What is more, the details of the procedure of that ceremony and the utensils and implements used can be matched with those recorded in the historic literature, even though some of the terminology later changed. This suggests that the sources used by the Eastern Zhou compilers of the *Yili* were not only old but also reliable – a realization that is highly significant for understanding the formation of the ancient classics and their historical value.

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Postscript

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