

# Methods of killing Human Sacrifice in Shang-dynasty Oracle-bone Inscriptions

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## Abstract

Records on human sacrifice have been revealed by the oracle-bone inscriptions of Shang Dynasty. Human sacrifices carry special symbolic significance in Shang Dynasty for worshipping spirits. Different methods of killing were used in worship rituals. As the inscription reveals, some words are used as the methods of killing of human beings in general. In the meantime, some special characters are used to refer to specific killing methods through analysis of the characters and structures of the language. The lecture will focus on 12 different methods of killing human sacrifice. The methods include beheading, splitting the body into halves, dismembering bodies, beating to death, chopping to death, extracting blood, burying alive, drowning, burning to death, boiling, corpse displaying, exposing body part to hot sun. With the analysis of the different methods of human sacrifice, it is easy to conclude that human sacrifice was a very common religious practice in Shang dynasty. These practices reflect the cruelty of the rulers to their subjects and their piety towards the spirits they worship.

## 1 Introduction:

Records centered on human sacrifice are called *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞 in Shang dynasty oracle-bone inscriptions. *Rénjì* 人祭 refers to the ritual of killing living human individuals to worship spirits. Accordingly, the term *rénshēng* 人牲 refers to living human individuals offered to the spirits as a sacrifice<sup>①</sup>. Actually, during the process of the ritual of *rénjì* 人祭, the human sacrificial victims (*rénshēng* 人牲) had a special symbolic significance and were considered the best medium. The methods of killing human sacrifice refer to the way of killing living human individuals for worshipping spirits. According to our study, though *yòng* 用 was used to designate methods of killing human sacrifice in general<sup>②</sup>, the use of special terminology referring to the different methods of killing living human sacrifice was more common. The specific characters and structures used in the pictograms of these terms allow us to infer information about the process of killing living human victims.

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<sup>①</sup>See Huáng Zhǎnyuè. 黄展岳. *Zhōngguó gǔdài de rénshēng rénxiū*. 中国古代的人牲人殉 (Bèijīng: Wénwù Chūbǎnshè, 1990, p. 1).

<sup>②</sup>See example *Héjì*293,454.

On the basis of *Jiǎgǔwén Héjí* 《甲骨文合集》<sup>③</sup>, we have selected 17 terms, exemplifying 12 different methods of killing human sacrifice. These methods are beheading, splitting the body into halves, dismember bodies, beating to death, chopping to death, taking blood, burning, burying alive, drowning, exposing and drying.

## 2 Methods of killing human sacrifice :

### 2.1 Beheading

Beheading means to cut off a human sacrifice's head and then offer it to the spirits.

The technical terms to record this method include *fá* 伐 and *xī* 殪<sup>④</sup>.

The character of *fá* 伐 in Shang-dynasty oracle bone inscriptions depicts a dagger put on the neck of a person. It was not only used to designate a method of killing living human victims, but also as the name of a sacrificial ritual<sup>⑤</sup>. The character of *fá* 伐 shows the specific operational process of killing living human sacrifice, i.e. using a dagger to cut off human sacrifice's head for worship. This method of killing human sacrifice was quite common in the sacrificial activities. Human sacrifices killed this way were mostly male victims from alien tribes and they were offered mainly to worship male ancestors<sup>⑥</sup>. The officiant used the *fá* 伐 method to kill human victims to show piety to the spirits and at the same time scare the alien tribes. Since this method was used in the sacrificial activities very frequently, *fá* 伐 was also used for the name of the sacrifice. For example,



王其伐若，乙丑允伐，右卯罪左卯，隹夷牛。(Héjǐ 16131)

(figure 1).

“His Majesty (should) behead human sacrifices. Will the Sprits approve (this)? On

<sup>③</sup>See Guō Mòruò 郭沫若(ed). *Jiǎgǔwén Héjí*. 甲骨文合集 (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú Yīngyǐnběn 中华书局影印本, 1980-1983).

<sup>④</sup>There are more words to record this particular method of killing human sacrifice; here we just select the most typical words for each method.

<sup>⑤</sup>See Zhào Chéng. *Jiǎgǔwén Jiǎnmíng Cídiǎn* (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1988: 239).

<sup>⑥</sup>See for example *Héjǐ* 32083, 32097, 19000, 10408 ( 正 ).

the day of *yǐchǒu* 乙丑, indeed (they) performed the *fá* 伐-sacrifice, and also dissected a cow.”

In this inscription, the first *fá* 伐 designates the method of killing human sacrifice and the second one designates the name of the sacrificial act. *Fá* 伐 was also used as the unit of recording the human sacrifice, as is obvious in the following sentence:



出于唐子伐。(Héjǐ 456) (figure 2).

“Should (we) make an offering of decapituri to *Tángzǐ* 唐子?”

*Tángzǐ* 唐子 was the name of recipients of sacrificial act.

According to our study, the method of *fá* 伐 was mainly used for worshipping male ancestors’ spirits, but rarely for female ancestors’ and natural spirits. The reason for this may be that the generals who fought the wars were usually male.

Another point of interest is, that from the number of the human sacrifices killed in the sacrifice, we can deduce the status of a recipient of a sacrifice during his live-time.

Thus, for example the high status of the former emperors *Zǔyǐ* 祖乙, *Dàjiǎ* 大甲, *Shàngjiǎ* 上甲, when they were alive, is evident since they were usually offered ten human sacrifices by *fá* 伐 sacrifice at each sacrifice.

The character of *xī* 𤝵 consists of *xī* 奚 and *yuè* 戍. *Xī* 𤝵 like *fá* 伐 means to cut off human sacrifice’s head for worship<sup>⑦</sup>. *Xī* 奚 was a kind of servant, *yuè* 戍 was a

<sup>⑦</sup>See Luó Kūn . “Shāngdài Rénjì Xiāngguān Wèntí”, In: *Jiǎgǔ Tānshǐ lù* edited by Hú Hòuxuān (Běijīng: Sān lián shūdiàn, 1982: 125)

kind of weapon in ancient times, similar to an axe<sup>⑥</sup>. This kind of axe was unearthed in many Shang dynasty archaeological sites and tombs. In *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, *xī* 𠂔 designates the same method of killing human sacrifice as *fá* 伐; both of them imply the use of a weapon, dagger or axe, to cut off a human sacrifice's head for the sacrificial act<sup>⑦</sup>.

## 2.2 Splitting the body into halves

Splitting the body into halves refers to killing human sacrifice by splitting it into halves for worshipping spirits. The word *mǎo* 卯 was used for recording this method of killing human sacrifice in *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞. The character *mǎo* 卯 looks like a circle split by two verticals. Hóng Jiǎyì thought the meaning of *mǎo* 卯, to split human sacrifice's body into halves<sup>⑧</sup>, could be deduced from its character clearly<sup>⑨</sup>.

For example,



卯三羌二牛。卯五羌三牛。(Héjǐ 32093) (figure 3).

“Should (we) split three *Qiāng* 羌 human sacrifices and two cattle then offer them to spirits? Should (we) split five *Qiāng* 羌 human sacrifices and three cattle and then offer them to spirits?”

*Qiāng* 羌 here refers to the captives used as sacrifice from *Qiāng* 羌 tribe. The human sacrifices killed by this method mainly were male victims and were offered to male ancestors' spirits.

<sup>⑥</sup>See Zāng Kèhé and Wáng Píng. *Shuō wén jiězì Xīndīng* (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 2002:841) “戊，斧也”.

<sup>⑦</sup>See example Héjǐ 564,808 ( 𠂔 ), 809 ( 𠂔 ).

<sup>⑧</sup>See example Héjǐ 32108.

<sup>⑨</sup>See Hóng Jiǎyì. *Lìngmìng dē fēnhuà*. Edited by Yú Xīngwú. *Jǐgǔ wénzì gūnlín*. (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1996: 3440-3442.)

### 2.3 Dismember Bodies

Dismember bodies means to dismember human sacrifice's body to kill them for worshipping. Words for recording this kind of method include *sui* 歲 and *tā* 𠂔.

The character of *sui* 歲 in oracle-bone inscriptions depicts an axe. The word *sui* 歲 in *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞 is used like the word *guì* 𠂔 in the written records<sup>⑥</sup>. The character of *tā* 𠂔 in oracle-bone inscriptions is composed of *tā* 它 and *pū* 𠂔. It refers to dismember human sacrifice for worship.

In oracle-bone inscriptions, the human sacrifice killed by this method were predominantly *Qiāng* 羌, but also sometimes *pū* 𠂔 etc.

For example,



戊辰卜, 争贞: 𠂔羌自妣庚。(Héjǐ 438) (figure 4).

“Divining on the *wùchén* 戊辰 day, *Zhēng* 争 Inquired: (should we) split *Qiāng* 羌 (tribesmen) as sacrifice for the ancestresses *Bì Gēng* 妣庚 and the others?”

*Zhēng* 争 is the name of a man who held the office of oracle priest under King *Wǔdīng* 武丁 during the first period of oracle-bone inscriptions. *Bìgēng* 妣庚 is one of the spouses of former kings. Usually, a large number, even hundreds, of human sacrifices were killed together by this method for one sacrifice<sup>⑦</sup>. The human sacrifices killed by this method were mostly male and the sacrifice was for worshipping ancestors' spirits.

### 2.4 Beating to Death

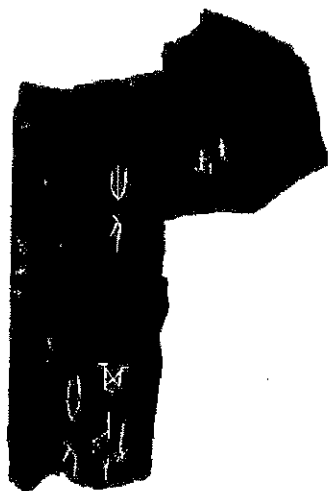
Beating to death refers to using sticks to beat human sacrifice for worshipping spirits. In the newly excavated Shang dynasty's remains at *Xiǎo Shuāngqiáo*, many skulls were found that have holes which seem to have been caused by hitting or beating with

<sup>⑥</sup>See Zhao Chéng. *Jiǎgǔwén Jiǎnmíng Cídiǎn*. (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1988:317) also Zāng Kèhé and Wáng Píng. *Shuō wén jiězì Xīndīng* (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 2002:278) “𠂔, 利伤也。从刀歲声”。 See for example *Héjǐ* 22548, 22572, 22573.

<sup>⑦</sup>See *Héjǐ* 305, 829, 9747.

some kind of sticks or weapons. *Mǎ Jífán* 马季凡 thinks they were human sacrifices' skulls and those people were killed by the way of beating<sup>⑭</sup>. Special words for recording this method include *tóu* 𠂔 and *tán* 𠂔.

The character of *tóu* 𠂔 consists of *dòu* 豆 and *Shū* 受 in oracle-bone inscriptions. *shū* 受 was also written as 攴 sometimes. According to the structure of *tóu* 𠂔, *Cuī Héngshēng* 崔恒升 thinks the method of *tóu* was using sticks to beat human sacrifice to death for worshipping spirits<sup>⑮</sup>. The human sacrifices killed by this method were mainly captives from *Qiāng* 羌 tribes and female slaves<sup>⑯</sup>. The character of *tán* 𠂔 consists of *gōng* 弓 and *pū* 攴, *pū* 攴 was written also as *yòu* 又 sometimes. *Gōng* 弓 is like a point on the bow; *pū* 攴 is like a hand beating something with a stick. *Zhào Chéng* explained *tán* 𠂔 as *tán* 彈. He thinks *tán* 𠂔 is the original character of *tán* 彈<sup>⑰</sup>. The methods of *tán* 𠂔 and *tóu* 𠂔 were alike, in both of them the human sacrifice was beaten with sticks to death for worshipping spirits. According to the *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, the number of human sacrifice killed by *tán* 𠂔 sacrifice was large. For example,



二十人其𠂔。三十人，大吉。(Héjǐ 27017) (figure 5).

<sup>⑭</sup>See *Mǎ Jífán*, "Shāngdai zhōngqī de rénjì zhìdù yánjiū -yǐ zhèngzhōu xiàoshuāngqiáo shāngdai yízhǐ dē rénjì yícún wéilì", In: *zhōngyuán wénwù* (2004:3).

<sup>⑮</sup> See *Cuī Héngshēng*, *Jiǎnmíng Jiǎngǔwén cídiǎn* (Anhuī. Anhuī Jiàoyù chūbǎnshè, 2001:518).

<sup>⑯</sup> See *Héjǐ* 26956, 35361.

<sup>⑰</sup>See *Zhào Chéng*, *Jiǎngǔwén Jiǎnmíng Cídiǎn* (Běijīng:Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1988:241).

“Should (we) offer twenty human sacrifices to the spirits by the method of *tán* 殫?”

Thirty human sacrifices were offered. (In fact) it was greatly auspicious.”

The victims killed by this method included both, male and female. They were mainly offered to ancestors’ spirits.

## 2.5 Chopping to death

Chopping to death refers to chop the human sacrificial victims to worship spirits. The particular word for record this method was *Cè* 𠬪. *Cè* 𠬪, meaning *kǎn* 砍<sup>®</sup>.

*Rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞 indicates that there were many kinds of human sacrifices killed by this method<sup>®</sup>.

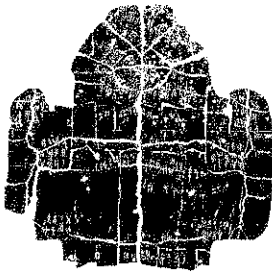
For example,



[贞:] 勿𠬪父乙十艮十宰, 青十。 (*Héjǐ* 702) (figure 6)

“(Inquired: (In) directing the exorcism ritual to the deceased emperor *FùYǐ* for *Fù Hǎo*,)...(should we) not chopping ten specially reared ovine, ten captives, (and) ten piglets and present them to *FuYi*?”

In *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, the number of human victims killed by this method was the largest one. For example, there is a record in *Héjǐ* 1027 : “不其 降𠬪千牛, 千人。”



不其降𠬪千牛, 千人。 ( *Héjǐ* 1027 recto ) (figure 7).

“Should (we) chop one thousand cattle and one thousand human sacrifices for sacrifice?”.

Some scholars think that *qiānrén* 千人 here does not refer to a thousand people who

<sup>®</sup>See Yú Xīngwú. *Jiǎgǔ wénzì gūnlín*. (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú. 1996:2967-2968).

<sup>®</sup>See *Héjǐ* 886 , 910 , 22231 , 26936 , 32182 , 32162 , 40914.

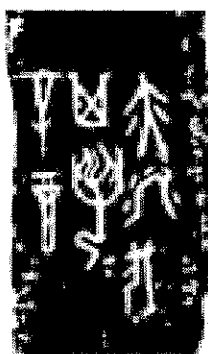
were killed, but that the term refers to the number of sacrificial victims registered on the bamboo books for worshipping the spirits<sup>20</sup>. Both of male and female victims might be killed by this method and they were mainly offered to ancestors' spirits, in particular to female ancestors' spirits.

## 2.6 Taking blood

Taking blood refers to obtaining human sacrifices' blood for worshipping spirits. The special word for recording this method is *jī* 𠂔. One of the usage of *jī* 𠂔 in oracle-bone inscriptions was to take human sacrifices' blood to worship spirits<sup>21</sup>. This blood was then spread on the surface of the sacrifice utensils. Usually, the sort of the

human victims were not recorded clearly; they were only recorded as *rén* 人 or *fá* 伐 in general.

For example,



辛酉其若，亦𠂔伐。(Héjī 32035) (figure 8).

“Would it be auspicious if we offer a blood sacrifice on the *xīnyǒu* 辛酉 day?”

From the inscriptions about this method of killing human sacrifice we know that the human victims killed by this method mainly were male and usually were offered to ancestors' spirits<sup>22</sup>. Blood was regarded as something very valuable by the ancient people. Without blood, human beings could not live. Life existed only when blood was circulating. Therefore, to some extent, blood is the symbol of life. Hence, blood was also offered as a sacrifice in the sacrificial activities in the ancient time.

## 2.7 Burning

Burning refers to burning human sacrifice on a fire to death for worshipping spirits. The special words for recording this kind of method include *jiāo* 𤇀 and *liáo* 𤇁.

The character of *jiāo* 𤇀 depicts a living human victim placed on a fire to burn. *Jiāo* 𤇀 used as *jiāo* 𤇀 in the received written records<sup>23</sup>. In *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, the term *jiāo* 𤇀 was used specifically when the human sacrifice was burned to pray for timely

<sup>20</sup> See Yú Xīngwú, *Jiǎgǔ wénzì gūlín*. (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1996:2966).

<sup>21</sup> See Zhào Chéng, *Jiǎgǔ wén Jiǎnmíng Cìdiǎn*. (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1988:317).

<sup>22</sup> See *Héjī* 32212, 32214.

<sup>23</sup> See Zāng Kèhé and Wáng Píng, *Shuō wén jiězì Xīndǐng* (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 2002:665): “𤇀, 交木然也。从火交声。”



rain<sup>24</sup>.

From the *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞 we know that human victims killed by this method were mainly female. These females had special designations, like *cái* 𡗗 *xiáng* 𡗗 *yáng* 𡗗 *yǒng nǚ* 永女.



贞：今丙戌𡗗𡗗出从雨。( *Héjǐ* 9177 recto ) ( figure 9 ).

“Inquired: Will there be ensuing rain if we sacrifice a *cái* female human sacrifice on

*bǐngxū* 丙戌 day by burning ?”

From the inscriptions about this method of sacrificial killing we know that in the sacrificial activities aimed at praying for rain, female victims were considered most efficient<sup>25</sup>. In ancient China, people’s livelihood depended on agriculture, so climate was of utmost importance. Drought and floods would be a fundamental threat to people’s lives. In ancient China, people relied on agriculture for a living. Thus, the weather had a great influence on people’s lives. Droughts or floods could create deadly threats. Therefore, the *jiāo* 𡗗 sacrifice, aimed at praying for rain and avoiding the drought, was a very important sacrificial activity in Shang dynasty. According to a statistic by Hú Hòuxuān and Hú Zhènyǔ, in the oracle-bone inscriptions there are 128 records, which refer to sacrifices of praying for rain<sup>26</sup>. The victims killed by this method were usually female. The purpose of this kind of sacrificial act was to worship natural spirits, especially the river and rain deities. Female victims were offered to river deities to prevent floods and to rain deities to induce timely rain. The fact, that the Shang people used female victims so frequently indicates that female victims were considered the best medium to communicate with the river and rain deities.

<sup>24</sup>See Cui Hóngshēng. *Jiǎnmíng Jiǎgǔwén cídiǎn*. (Anhuī .Anhuī Jiàoyù chūbǎnshè.2001:501).

<sup>25</sup>See *Héjǐ* 1121 ( 𠄎 ), 30169 , 32289 , 32290.

<sup>26</sup>See Hú Hòuxuān and Hú Zhènyǔ. *Yīn shāngshǐ* (Shànghǎi. Shànghǎi rénmin chūbǎnshè.2003:173). Apart from praying for rain, there are records about conducting *jiāo* 𡗗 sacrifice which aimed at prevent floods. See example in *Héjǐ* 32299.

The character *liáo* 𤑔 in oracle bone inscriptions depicts putting a person on a pyre. In *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, the specific way of killing human sacrifice by this method was to put human sacrifice on a pyre to worship spirits<sup>27</sup>. *Liáo* 𤑔 was written as *liáo* 𤑔 in the written records<sup>28</sup>. In ancient people's mind, the deities lived above the sky, the smoke rose up there and then could be received by them easily. To burn human victims originated under such kind of thought. At the first beginning of the sacrificial act, the human victims mainly were the people who held the sacrificial activities<sup>29</sup>. The self-devotion indicated the worshipper's great piety with a kind of solemn atmosphere on the original meaning. Seeing from *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, the human victims killed by this method were mainly *wū* 巫, *qiāng* 羌 and *nǚ* 女. *Jiāo* 𤑔 and *liáo* 𤑔 sometimes were used together in *rénjì bǔcí*<sup>30</sup> 人祭卜辞. Both of the methods of *jiāo* 𤑔 and *liáo* 𤑔 were important ways of killing human sacrifice in the time of Shang. Although there were similarities, the two methods were essentially different. One of their similarities is that both of them were related to farming. The main difference is the gender of the victims; the *jiāo* 𤑔 sacrifice used mainly female victims while the *liáo* 𤑔 sacrifice used male victims<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, their purpose was different. The *jiāo* 𤑔 sacrifice had a specific purpose of praying for rain; the purpose of *liáo* 𤑔 sacrifice was to pray for rain or for a good harvest year.

## 2.8 Boiling

Boiling refers to boil human sacrifice for worshipping spirits. The special word for recording this method is *er* 𩚑 which equated with *er* 𩚑 in the books been handed down from the ancient times<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>27</sup>See Yú Xīngwú. *Jiǎgǔ wénzì gūlín*. (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1996:1467).

<sup>28</sup>See Zāng Kèhé and Wáng Píng. *Shuō wén jiězhì Xīndīng* (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 2002:664):“𤑔，柴祭天也。”

<sup>29</sup>See *Héjī* 1121, 1130, 1132.

<sup>30</sup>See *Héjī* 30169.

<sup>31</sup>See *Héjī* 23540, 1039.

<sup>32</sup>See Yú Xīngwú. *Jiǎgǔ wénzì gūlín*. (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1996:3445). Also Zuǒzhuàn Xuāngōng Ernǎn “宰夫𩚑熊蹯不熟，杀之。” Lù Dé míng *Jīngdiǎn Shìwén* “𩚑音而，煮也。”



.....狸率羌,隻二十出五而二。( *Héjǐ*499 ) (figure 10).

“èr èr 而二”means boiled two human sacrifices.

## 2.9 Drowning

Drowning refers to sink living human sacrifices into a river for worship. The special word for recording this method is *chén* 沈. The character of *chén* 沈 is like sinking a people into water. *Chén* 沈 is equivalent to *chén* 沉 in the books been handed down from the ancient times<sup>33</sup>. In *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, *chén* 沈 sacrifice was used very frequently, the sacrifices including both of animals and human sacrifices. For example,



丁巳卜, 其奠于河牢, 沈斃。( *Héjǐ*32161 ) (figure 11).

“Divining on the day of Ding Si, conduct offerings to the River Deities, should (we)

<sup>33</sup>See Zhao Chéng, *Jiǎgǔwén Jiǎnmíng Cǐdiǎn*.( Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1988:315).

burn special reared ovines by *liáo* 𦍋 sacrifice and drown female human sacrifice by *chén* 沈 sacrifice?”

*Qè* 郤 means female. The custom of drowning female human sacrifices in the river for worshipping was continued in many dynasties after the Shang dynasty. *Hébo Qǔfū* 河伯娶妇 is a well-know folk story related with this custom. The human sacrifices killed this way were mostly female and these sacrifices were used to worship natural spirits.

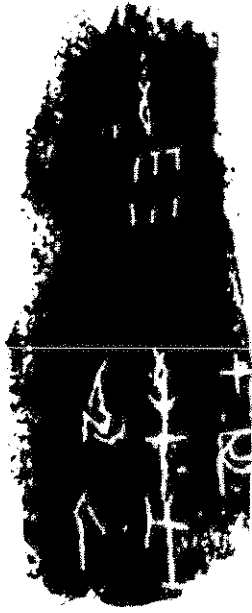
### 2.10 Burying

Burying refers to bury human sacrifices alive in a pit as a sacrifice to the spirits. The buried human victims did not have a clear sign of gender distinction and they were mainly used to worship natural spirits. The special word for recording this method is *xiàn* 𡵓. The character of *xiàn* 𡵓 depicts burying people in a deep pit. *Xiàn* 𡵓 was written as *xiàn* 陷 in ancient books. The reason of this method might because the people lived in Shang dynasty thought the spirits would receive offerings directly through burying them<sup>34</sup>. Seeing from the *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, human sacrifices killed by *xiàn* 𡵓 sacrifice were called *rén* 人 in general, without recording their status, gender or number clearly. The purpose of burying human victims mainly was praying for rain.

For example,

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<sup>34</sup>See Kǒng Yíngdǎ. *Lǐjì-Jiāotèshēng*: “地示在下，非瘞埋不足以达之。”it means only through the way of burying the victims underground, the spirits lived there could receive offerings directly.



甲辰 至戊陷人.丙午雨. ( *Héjǐ* 1079 ) (figure 12).

“On the day of *Jiǎchén* 甲辰.....Should (we) bury human sacrifice at the time of *Wù* 戊? It rained on the day of *Bǐngwǔ* 丙午.”

## 2.11 Displaying

Displaying refers to displaying human sacrifices' dead bodies as a sacrifice to the spirits. The human sacrifices killed by this method mainly were male and they were used for sacrificing to natural spirits and ancestral spirits. The special words for recording this method include *zú* 𠄎 and *shǐ* 矢.

The character of *zú* 𠄎 in oracle-bone inscriptions is like a shelf displaying bodies in sacrificial activities, It was written “*zú* 俎” in received written records<sup>35</sup>. In *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞, the human victims killed by *zú* 𠄎 sacrifice mainly were from the *Qiāng* tribe<sup>36</sup>. Sometimes *zú* 𠄎 sacrifice was used with *fá* 伐 sacrifice together<sup>37</sup>.

The character of *shǐ* 矢 in oracle-bone inscriptions depicted displaying human sacrifice for worship<sup>38</sup>.  
For example,

<sup>35</sup>See Zāng Kèhé and Wáng Píng. *Shuō wén jiězì Xīndǐng* (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 2002:941):“俎，礼俎也。从半肉在且上。”

<sup>36</sup>See *Héjǐ* 6068 , 10405 ( 正 ), 32161 , 32124.

<sup>37</sup>See *Héjǐ* 41303.

<sup>38</sup>See Zhào Chéng. *Jiǎgǔwén Jiǎnmíng Cídiǎn*. ( Běijīng:Zhōnghuá Shūjú,1988:316)



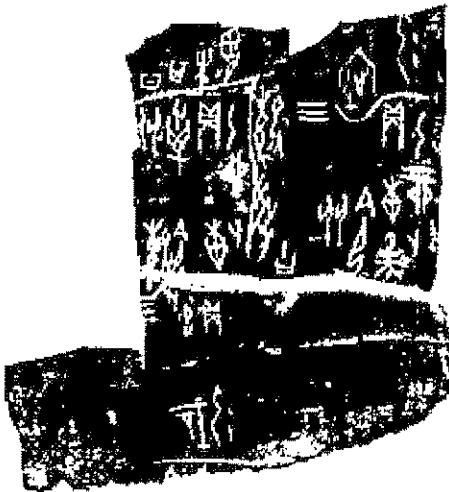
己丑卜, 吉, 贞 : 矢, 若。 ( *Héjǐ* 916 ) (figure 13).

“Divining on the jǐchǒu day, Inquired: (If we) display offerings, will it be agreeable (to Sprits) ?”

*Zhōng* 中 was the man who held the office of sacrificial activity under the king *Wǔdīng* 武丁 at the first period of the oracle-bone inscriptions.

### 2.12 Exposing and Drying

Exposing and Drying refers to exposing the dead body of human victims to the sun to dry for worship. The special word for recording this method is *chī* 𠄎. *Chī* 𠄎 was used as a method of killing human sacrifice refers to carve open human victims' bodies and then expose the body to become like dried meat<sup>39</sup>.



贞勿𠄎。 ( *Héjǐ* 4025 ) (figure 14).

“Inquired: “Should not (we) use *chī* 𠄎 sacrifice and *tā* 𠄎 sacrifice to kill human sacrifice?”

### 3. Conclusions:

Human sacrifice was a very common religious phenomenon in Shang dynasty. It not only reflected the cruelty of killing human sacrifice but also indicated the human

<sup>39</sup> See Zhào Chéng *Jiǎgǔwén Jiǎnmíng Cídiǎn* (Běijīng: Zhōnghuá Shūjú, 1988: 317). See example in *Héjǐ* 22475.

sacrifices' low status had no clear differences with animals. The words which recorded the methods of killing human sacrifices contain a lot of information about the religious beliefs in the Shang dynasty, also it reflected the lower status of human sacrifices and the rulers' great piety toward spirits. Concluded from the *rénjì bǔcí* 人

祭卜辞, the methods of killing human sacrifices had the following characteristics:

First, the methods of killing human sacrifices not only had various categories but also were very cruel and barbarous. The most common way of killing human sacrifice was beheading since among all the words we have studied, *fá* 伐 was used most frequently.

Archaeologist had found many signs of beheading for worship at Xiǎo Shuāngqiáo and An Yáng relics of Yin dynasty. Many skulls were found separated from the bones. This might indicate that the human victims had been killed for sacrificial activities. The victims killed by beheading mostly were captives, many of them were from the

*Qiāng* 羌 tribe. At the time of Shang, the *Qiāng* 羌 tribe lived in the northwest of Shang lands, leading a nomadic life. The people of the *Qiāng* 羌 tribe rebelled against the Shang Dynasty from time to time. Therefore, the King Wuding declared wars against the *Qiāng* 羌 tribe many times. According to the records of *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜

辞, the largest war against the *Qiāng* 羌 tribe included more than 13,000 warriors

from Shang Dynasty. Since Shang people often fought with the *Qiāng* 羌 people, they captured a lot of captives from them, which were mainly used as human sacrifices.

Second, The selecting of killing methods was dependent on the recipients and the purpose of the worship. Common methods of killing human sacrifices for worshipping ancestral spirits were beheading, dismembering, beating, cutting off feet, taking blood, boiling, displaying, drying etc. The purpose mainly was to pray for blessings and support from ancestral spirits and ward off misfortunes. The methods of killing human sacrifices for worshipping natural spirits were burning, burying, drowning etc. The main purpose was to pray for a good harvest year and timely rain. Ancestral worship originated under specific social conditions; in the mind of the Shang people, the blessing of their ancestors' spirits alone could guarantee that the whole clan would last forever. Ancestors were holy and unreachable. Especially the ancestors' protection for their country and family's dignity were valued and highly thought of. Therefore, when they were worshipping their ancestors, they selected various drastic killing methods. Ancient China was an agricultural society, timely rain was of major importance. To satisfy the natural spirits who were in charge of rain, the people selected appropriate methods, such as burying, burning, drowning. Furthermore, the methods of killing human sacrifices for worshipping ancestral spirits were many more than those for worshipping natural spirits. This indicates that the

reverence for their ancestors was much higher than the veneration of natural spirits.

Third, the methods of killing female victims were not as cruel as male victims. The killing methods of female victims mainly were *cè* 𠂔 sacrifice and *lā* 𠂔 sacrifice. Furthermore, the number of female victims was much smaller than the number of male victims, since the maximum number of the former was up to 30 while the latter amounted to hundreds.

Fourth, the words recording the killing methods also were used as the name of the sacrifice. Because of the frequent use of killing human sacrifice in sacrificial activities, it had been a custom with a fixed name. For example, *fá* 伐 refers to cutting victiming heads down, apart from this, it was used as the name of sacrificial activity means killing human sacrifice by way of cutting their heads down for worship. The former one was the way of killing human sacrifice while the latter one was the name of sacrificial act. This indicates that the sacrificial name and the method were closely connected.

In conclusion, to kill living human beings and offer to spirits was the cruelest custom in *rénjì bǔcí* 人祭卜辞. Nearly all the methods to kill animals could be applied also to human sacrifices. This reflected the low status of slaves and the rulers' great despise toward the common people. The extremely cruel sacrificial activity showed the rulers' great piety towards the spirits too. It was the specific representation of religion beliefs at that time. This is a worldwide religious phenomenon.