

Beijing Forum 2019

Writing Practice in Early Civilizations: Origins, Formation and Circulation (II)

On the afternoon of November 2nd, the second seminar of the Beijing Forum (2019) “Writing Practice in Early Civilizations: Origin, Formation and Circulation” was held in the second conference room of the Yingjie Exchange Center of Peking University. A total of seven scholars spoke in this discussion, and associate professor Celine Lai of Peking University hosted the meeting.

The first speaker was professor Olivier Venture, from Ecole Pratique des Etudes (EPHE). The topic of his speech was "A Few Remarks on Writing Practices in Early China through Archaeological Discoveries". Prof. Venture first pointed out that the Shang Dynasty already had a complete writing system for recording divination, sacrifice and other activities, and had a strong religious character. Secondly, he argued for an utilitarian use of writing in Shang China and advocated that there must be continuous observations from archaeological excavation. It is believed that Shang people probably already used to write on bamboo and wood, but the use of writing was still limited to specific areas.

The second speaker was professor Edward Shaughnessy, from The University of Chicago. The topic of his speech was "Writing Natural Images and Reading China's Classic of Changes". Prof. Shaughnessy questioned the saying that the trigram in Classic of Change was a natural image in the traditional “XiCi Zuan” by citing the trigram images and the comparison with the contents of the divination in unearthed documents in recent years. He expressed his belief that not all of the sixty-four hexagrams of China's Classic of Changes were so visually compelling by any means.

Professor Maria Khayutina, from University of Munich, was the third scholar to present her paper, titled “Writing as Cultural Capital on the Fringes: Inscriptions of “Peripheral” Polities in Early China (11th – 3rd c. BCE)”. Prof. Khayutina's speech put forward the concepts of “center” and “fringe”, enumerating four cases from the Late Shang Period to the Warring States Period, and pointed out the trend of making more complex inscriptions of the political power in the “fringe”, believing that the social elites in the “fringes” gained cultural capital by imitating mainstream culture and further gaining benefits in the fields of social politics.

The fourth speaker was Ondřej Škrabal, a researcher from the University of Hamburg. The title of his speech was "From Script to Ornaments: Stages in the Process of Substitution in Early Chinese Epigraphy". Prof Škrabal's speech first proposed the concept of "decorative writing", pointing out that the script only occupying the original functional area of the ornamentation has a decorative function. Secondly, he divided the Spring and Autumn Period into the Han Dynasty into four stages, which in turn illustrated the process from script to ornamentation.

Professor Huang Dekuan, from Tsinghua University, was the fifth scholar to present his paper, titled "Writing and Inheritance of Characters in the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties". Huang Dekuan pointed out that the Shang and Zhou people had the same writing system. Then he speculated that the Xia Dynasty already had a mature writing system, pointing out its close relationship with the Shang and Zhou's writing system, and expressed his belief that Xia, Shang and Zhou shared the same writing system at the same time.

Associate professor Celine Lai from Peking University was the sixth scholar to present her paper, titled "A Bronze Turtle from c.1100 BC: Inscription and Representation". Celine Lai's speech first mentioned that, compared with other early civilizations in the world, ancient Chinese monarchs did not carve their own images, but relied more on the writing system. Celine Lai made a brief introduction to the Bronze Turtle and Yung Qi. Taking the Bronze Turtle as an example, she pointed out the phenomenon of the separation of information carried by inscriptions and artifacts.

Professor Zhu Fenghan, from Peking University, was the seventh scholar to present his paper, titled "On the Cruciform Sign "ya" in the Shang and Zhou Bronze Inscriptions". He argued that ya carries the meaning of 'secondary', when it was drawn in an artistic form and used together with the name of a lineage group. Because bronzes were produced for ancestral worships, ya helped a certain lineage group to indicate the level within the clan it belonged. Such members of the same clan can then be easily identified and distinguished.