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Some notes on the meaning of *min* 民 (and *zhong* 眾) in the Tsinghua manuscript **Yin gao* 尹誥 (*The Announcement of Yin*)

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Abstract: This article addresses the phenomenon that in the **Yin gao* 尹誥 (*The Announcement of Yin*), a pre-imperial Chu manuscript of the 4th century BCE published by Tsinghua University, the words *min* 民 and *zhong* 眾 appear to refer to two different groups of people. After reviewing the textual evidence and previous hypotheses on this topic, the author draws attention to the fact that while *zhong* and *min* are attributed to geographically distinct regions, they nevertheless seem to be related to each other. The author notes that a similar (though not identical) relationship exists between the *zhong* and *min* in the “Pan geng” 盤庚 chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚書 (*Book of Documents*) and certain passages of the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 (*Zuo commentary of the Spring and Autumn Annals*), where the *zhong* appear to act as delegates of the *min*, conveying the ruler’s commands to the *min* and, in turn, communicating the *min*’s concerns back to the ruler.

Keywords: *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 (*Zuo commentary of the Spring and Autumn Annals*); *min* 民; “Pan Geng” 盤庚; **Yin gao* 尹誥 (*The Announcement of Yin*); *zhong* 眾

A few years ago, I wrote two articles on the meaning of *min* 民 (“the people”) in excavated and received Zhou period texts.¹ Recently, it came to my attention that a text I did not consider at that time supports my hypothesis that *min* initially served as a designation for subjugated lineages and their populations outside the immediate

¹ Crone 2014; Crone 2016. For further studies on the *min*, see Gassmann 2000; Gassmann 2006; Toyota Hisashi 2015, 325–332; Grundmann 2017, 111–135.

I adhere to the common practice of marking manuscript titles supplied by modern editors with an asterisk.

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domain of the ruling house.² In the following pages, I would like to briefly introduce this text and explore what it might add to our understanding of the *min* and another important social group: the *zhong* 眾 (“the multitude”).

The text in question is the **Yin gao* 尹誥 (“The Announcement of Yin”) manuscript of the looted Chu manuscript collection acquired by Tsinghua University in 2008.³ Generally considered a formerly lost *shu* 書 (“Documents”) text,⁴ the short text recounts how the famous statesman and adviser Yi Yin 伊尹 instructed the first Shang 商 king Cheng Tang 成湯 (r. c. 16th century BCE) after his victory over the Xia 夏.

The **Yin gao* appears to have been on the same bamboo manuscript along with two other texts that relate other events involving Yi Yin and Shang Tang: the *Chi jiu zhi ji Tang zhi wu* 赤鳩之集湯之屋 (“When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang’s House”) and the **Yin zhi* 尹至 (“The Arrival of Yin”).⁵ While some uncertainties remain,⁶ their proposed order corresponds with the chronology of the events described in the three texts. Thus, the *Chi jiu zhi ji Tang zhi wu*, which has been argued to have come first, focuses on the miraculous circumstances of how Yi Yin and Shang Tang first met.⁷ The second, the **Yin zhi* 尹至 (“The Arrival of Yin”),⁸ relates how Yi Yin helped Tang defeat the Xia, leading to the aftermath of his victory portrayed in the **Yin gao*.

In the **Yin gao*, Yi Yin counsels his sovereign on how to ascertain his new subjects’ loyalty. While doing so, Yi Yin addresses the importance of the *min* and the *zhong*. The names *min* and *zhong* already figure in the **Yin zhi*, where Yi Yin reports to Tang that the ruler of the Xia neglects his *zhong* and that the *min* are thus in fear that they will fall victim to warfare and political turmoil (which proves to be accurate).⁹ Up to this point, it is unclear if both terms refer to the same or different groups of people. This situation, however, seems to change in the **Yin gao*:

2 This geopolitical aspect of *min* may in fact have survived in the presumably derived cognate *meng* 氓, which begins to refer to immigrant labors and the inhabitants of uncultivated, rural areas in the 3rd century BCE.

3 I will not discuss the authenticity of the Tsinghua manuscripts cited in this article, given that after more than a decade of paleographic and other philological research, an overwhelming majority of scholars agrees on their genuineness. I must also admit that I do not share with others the moral concerns of working with looted manuscripts, as for me their scientific value outweighs the risk of inducing further looting. For a different view, see Goldin 2013.

4 Note that by *shu* I am not referring to the *Book of Documents* or *Exalted Documents*, *Shang shu* 尚書, but to the genre of *shu* texts from which the *Shang shu* was derived. Compare Allan 2012.

5 Xiao Xunxiao 2013.

6 Given that only the *Chi jiu zhi ji Tang zhi wu* received a title, one could speculate that the text was, at some point, physically separated from the other two.

7 Compare Allan 2015.

8 Compare Meyer 2021: 201–207.

9 Li Xueqin 2010: 2–3.

惟尹既及湯咸有一德，尹念天之敗西邑夏，曰：「夏自絕¹⁰(遏)其有民，亦惟厥眾。非民無與守邑。【一】厥辟作怨于民，民復之用離心，我翦(翦)¹¹滅夏。今后胡不鑑？」摯告湯曰：「我克協我友，今【二】惟民遠邦歸志。」湯曰：「嗚呼！吾何祚于民，俾我眾勿違朕言？」摯曰：「后，其賚之，其有夏之【三】金玉、田¹²邑。舍之吉言！」¹³乃致眾于亳中邑。【四】

After [Yi] Yin and [Shang] Tang were one at heart, Yin thought about Heaven's destruction of the Western Settlement Xia and said: "The Xia, of their own accord, repressed their *min* and also their *zhong*. If one opposes the *min*, there is no one with whom to guard the settlement. Their [i.e. the Xia] ruler had caused resentment among the *min*, and the *min*, in return, became disaffected, and we brought disaster and destruction upon Xia. Why should the Lord (Tang) not reflect on these events today?" Zhi (Yi Yin) said to Tang: "We are capable of uniting our amicable kinsmen, [but] the *min* have the wish of returning to their countries." Tang said: "Alas! What can I do for the *min* so my *zhong* will not betray my word?" Zhi said: "Lord, hand them gifts; they shall have the gold, jade, fields, and settlements of the Xia. Convey the favorable message to them!" Thereupon, Tang gathered *zhong* in the central settlement of Bo.¹⁴

The coordination of (you) *min*¹⁵ and *zhong* has attracted the interest of several scholars. The editors of the Tsinghua collection proposed that the phrase "and also their *zhong*" (*yi wei jue zhong* 亦惟厥眾) refers to the fact that the "defeat of the Xia was also caused by their people" (*Xia bai ye shi qi minzhong cucheng* 夏敗也是其民衆促成), apparently assuming that *min* and *zhong* were synonyms used interchangeably.¹⁶ Liao Mingchun 廖名春 has argued that what the editors identified as the possessive pronoun *jue* 厥 ("their") is the verb *jue* 蹶 ("to stumble, to fail") and that the phrase *yi wei jue zhong* instead means "and also because of this were defeated by

10 This graph has been discussed extensively. Recently, Shi Xiaoli 石小力 has argued that the graph is an early representation of the verb *e* 遏 ("to block, to constrain"). Since Shi takes into account graphemic and manuscript evidence, as well as a citation of this passage in the received "Zi yi" 緇衣 ("Black Robes") chapter of the *Liji* 禮記, I find his proposal most persuasive. Compare Shi Xiaoli 2019: 110–113. For a convenient survey of earlier proposals, see Cao Yuyang 2020: 64–68.

11 On the transcription of this graph, see Fudan daxue chutu wenxian yu guwenzi yanjiu zhong yanjiusheng dushuhui 2011.

12 The Tsinghua editors initially mistakenly transcribed this graph as *ri* 日. See Chen Jian's 陳劍 comment (#48) in Fudan daxue chutu wenxian yu guwenzi yanjiu zhong yanjiusheng dushuhui 2011.

13 Note that it is difficult to say when Yi Yin's last direct speech ends. It is possible that the last sentence is still part of what Yi Yin says to Shang Tang (or that his speech ended a sentence earlier). I have chosen to settle with the present solution given that the conjunction *nai* 乃 regularly follows after quotations of direct speech.

14 Apart from the exceptions indicated above, my transcription of the texts follows that of Li Xueqin 2010: 133.

15 The purpose of the word *you* 有 before certain nouns (especially proper nouns) in early Zhou period texts is an unresolved issue. Some scholars believe that *you* is a loan for *guo* 國 ("country"), others a meaningless prefix, others a demonstrative pronoun. I tend to the latter, based on the comprehensive analysis of Guo Lijian 2012.

16 Li Xueqin 2010: 133, n. 4.

the *zhong*” (*ye yinci zuobai yu zhong* 也因此挫敗於眾).¹⁷ Moreover, Huang Li-Chuan has suggested that the coordination of *min* and *zhong* is an elegant variation and thus has aesthetic but not semantic implications.¹⁸

The proposals of the Tsinghua editors and Liao Mingchun are straightforwardly contradicted by the apparent syntax of the sentence and force us to assume the intended omission or unintended loss of certain words or phrases. Huang Li-Chuan’s suggestion avoids such conjectures but is challenged by the apparent presence of the particle *yi* 亦 (“also, too, furthermore”), which indicates a semantic difference between the two conjuncts *zhong* and *min*. While she claims that treating *min* and *zhong* as non-synonyms would cause text-internal contradictions,¹⁹ a closer reading of the *Yin gao* exposes this conclusion as premature. It is undoubtedly true that the use of *min* and *zhong* raises questions as to who the two groups are and how they are related, but none of the later passages necessitates that both terms mean the same.

Other scholars have therefore begun to pursue the possibility that both terms designated different parts of Tang’s subjugated populace. Wang Ning, for instance, has argued that *zhong* refers to the Xia army and *min* to the “people” (*min zhong* 民眾) in general, including civilian and non-civilian populations.²⁰ Zhang Chongli amends him with reference to Zhu Fenghan’s 朱鳳瀚 research on the *zhong* in Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions and claims that *zhong* designates the entirety of all low-ranking lineage members of the Shang people, whereas *min* covers Shang and non-Shang populations.²¹

In my opinion, both proposals are unpersuasive. Wang’s hypothesis that the *zhong* represent an army is at odds with the fact that Yi Yin explicitly considers the *min* essential to the defense of a settlement but not the *zhong*.²² Zhang’s attempt to read the text against Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions is doubtful, since there is no evidence that the **Yin gao* is that old or was written in knowledge of the sociopolitical order of that time. Linguistic features suggest the **Yin gao* to be a product of the Eastern Zhou period.²³ Perhaps most problematic is the general

17 Liao Mingchun 2011: 111–112. Liao apparently published a more detailed argument in an earlier online paper, which, however, has not been available to me.

18 Huang Li-Chuan 2012: 40–44.

19 Huang 2012: 43.

20 Wang Ning 2011.

21 Zhang Chongli 2014. For Zhu Fenghan’s paper, see Zhu Fenghan 2009.

22 Wang Ning’s reading also imposes on the text the problematic concept of a (standing) army, whereas scholarly consensus has it that well into the Warring States period, troops were often mobilized on a temporary basis and that “soldiers” regularly returned to performing non-military duties after their service.

23 The conjunction *ji* 及 (惟尹既及湯咸有一德), the pronoun *zhi* 之 (民復之; 其賚之; 舍之吉言), and the possessive pronoun *qi* 其 (其有民) all seem present in the **Yin gao*, but are rather atypical for Western Zhou or earlier texts. Compare Xia Hanyi [Edward L. Shaughnessy] 2005: 320–326.

absence of the word *min* in Shang oracle bone inscriptions.²⁴ At the same time, the identity of the *zhong* in the oracle bone inscriptions is controversial and Zhu Fenghan's hypothesis is just one among many others, as the notoriously concise and ambiguous inscriptions are not at all clear about who the *zhong* were.²⁵ As a result, Zhang's line of interpretation seems to be based on several highly subjective and doubtful premises.

However, I agree with both scholars that the coordination of *min* and *zhong* should not lead us to assume that the actual referents of both terms must be completely different. It is possible that both groups overlap or even that one constitutes a subclass of the other. The particle *yi* could emphasize that the Xia not only managed to become separated from the *min* in general *but also* the *zhong* (among them) in particular.²⁶ After all, the text provides a strong reason to believe that the *min* and *zhong* represent two related groups of people: Tang wants to know from Yi Yin what he can do for the *min* to ensure the loyalty of the *zhong*. If we take both as names for different groups of people (which is what the text suggests), we also must assume that both groups shared certain interests and that what was done to the *min* could also affect the *zhong*.

Besides being two distinct but at the same time also somehow interrelated social collectives, the **Yin gao* indicates that in a properly ordered kingdom, the two groups dwelled in different locations: the *zhong* would gather (*zhi* 致) in the capital and the proximity of the king, whereas the *min* inhabited more distant regions. We can also infer from Yi Yin's and Tang's concern that the *zhong* and *min* were both considered crucial to the security of the realm and that negligence of either one of them was therefore at best avoided. Their relationship to the king differed from those who Yi Yin refers to as "amicable kinsmen" (*you* 友), an expression that (no matter whose interpretation we follow)²⁷ signals a deeper degree of affinity. In comparison, the relationship between the king and his *zhong* and *min* appears to have been rather tense, as their betrayal is considered a viable possibility.

24 While some characters in oracle bone inscriptions resemble those of *min* in later texts, they are few in number and generally believed to represent personal names or other, unrelated words. See Takashima Kenichi 1994: 109 (#0462).

25 Compare David Keightley's (2012: 50–62) extensive survey on the *zhong*, who also provides a comprehensive summary of the considerable amount of research literature dedicated to this topic. Keightley cautiously concludes that the *zhong* were "dependents located towards the base of the royal, patrimonial administrative and social organization in the Late Shang cult center" (2012: 56). While he also sees the *zhong* as delegates conveying orders of the king, he appears to view them as a far more dependent group than the texts discussed in this article suggest.

26 *Yi* (or *yi wei* 亦唯) often has a concessive aspect, even in Archaic Chinese, the apparent historical dialect of the manuscript text. See Dobson 1964: 105–106.

27 On the meaning of *you* in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, see Zhu Fenghan 2004: 292–297.

A similar triangular relationship between the *zhong*, *min*, and the respective ruling house is also found in the “Pan geng” 盤庚 chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚書 (*Book of Documents*) – another *shu* text portraying events of the Shang period – and the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 (*Zuo commentary of the Spring and Autumn Annals*). In the former, the *zhong* figure as a heterogeneous group of nobles and officials²⁸ summoned by the Shang king Pang Geng (ca. 14th/13th c. BCE) to convey his orders to the *min*,²⁹ and forward possible reservations of the *min* back to the throne.³⁰ We are told on two occasions that “all” (*xi* 悉, *xian* 咸) *zhong* had gathered at the king’s court, indicating a limited group of people.³¹ Moreover, Pan Geng’s contrastive juxtaposition of “(our) former Kings” (*xianwang* 先王) and “my former lords” (*wo xian hou* 我先后) vis a vis “your (the *zhong*’s) ancestors” (*er zu* 爾祖) demonstrates that the *zhong* were not immediate descendants of the royal house.³² They were considered part of the *min*, as Pan Geng refers to them at one point as “the *min* I nurture” (*wo chu min* 我畜民),³³ which further suggests that their livelihoods may have depended on what the royal house provided to them for their service.

In the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*,³⁴ the *zhong* also serve as delegates and representatives of the *min*,³⁵ and are said to disobey should the ruler neglect his *min*.³⁶ While they can serve as armed companions of their sovereign,³⁷ they are also important advisors to the throne whose permission is needed for certain undertakings and who can even select an heir in case of an uncertain succession.³⁸ They can reject the

28 The most unambiguous indication of their social status is found at the end of his third speech, where Pan Geng addresses the *zhong* (or parts thereof) as *bangbo* 邦伯 (“state elders”), *shizhang* 師長 (“principal marshals”) and *bai zhi shi zhi ren* 百執事之人 (“all people that manage affairs”). Ruan Yuan 2009: 9.364.

29 Ruan Yuan 2009: 9.357.

30 Ruan Yuan 2009: 9.359.

31 Ruan Yuan 2009: 9.357, 9.360.

32 Ruan Yuan 2009: 9.359, 362.

33 Ruan Yuan 2009: 9.362. Earlier the text also states that “Pan Geng thereupon caused his *min* to appear and enter” (盤庚乃登進厥民。), referring to his summoning of the *zhong*. Ruan Yuan 2009: 10.360.

34 Note that Gassmann’s (2006, 355–363) discussion of the *zhong* also heavily relies on the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*. While I do not agree with him in every detail, the passages he cites as well as his conclusions generally overlap with mine.

35 This is most evident when in 528 BCE the *min* of the settlement of Bi 費 want to rebel against Nan Kuai 南蒯 and not them but only the *zhong* are invited to an audience with Nan Kuai. Yang Bojun 1981: Zhao 14.2.1364; Durrant et al. 2016: 1515.

36 Yang Bojun 1981: Zhuang 27.5.236, Xi 13.4.344, Ding 10.5.1581; Durrant et al. 2016: 209, 309, 1801.

37 Yang Bojun 1981: Zhao 17.6.1391–1392; Zhao 23.2.1442; Zhao 25.6.1464 Durrant et al. 2016: 1551, 1617, 1647.

38 Yang Bojun 1981: Yin 4.6.38, Xi 18.4.378, Zhao 12.1.1331; Durrant et al. 2016: 33, 339, 1471.

readmission of an ousted sovereign,³⁹ and were able to veto a meeting between their sovereign and the ruler of another state.⁴⁰

However, in the “Pan geng” chapter, the *min* do not seem to dwell in remote regions but are the general population in and perhaps also around Pan Geng’s capital.⁴¹ In the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*, the *min* are often the ruling houses of individual Grandmasters (*dafu* 大夫) and the populations under their control.⁴² These differences could be significant and indicate that the social order against the background of which the relevant texts and passages were written had changed. Or they could result from the fact that an essentially identical relationship in which a ruler interacted with his *min* through a smaller group of people called *zhong* was projected onto different political and historical circumstances. In any case, these discrepancies and questions invite us to continue to explore these social key terms and warn us against assuming them to refer interchangeably to the same group of people. Texts such as the **Yin gao* manuscript illustrate vividly that this is not necessarily the case.

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³⁹ Yang Bojun 1981: Ai 26.1.1728; Durrant et al. 2016: 1983.

⁴⁰ Yang Bojun 1981: Ai 12.4.1672; Durrant et al. 2016: 1911.

⁴¹ This is, at least, suggested by the fact that the *min* are reluctant to move to the new capital.

⁴² Crone 2016: 677–683.

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