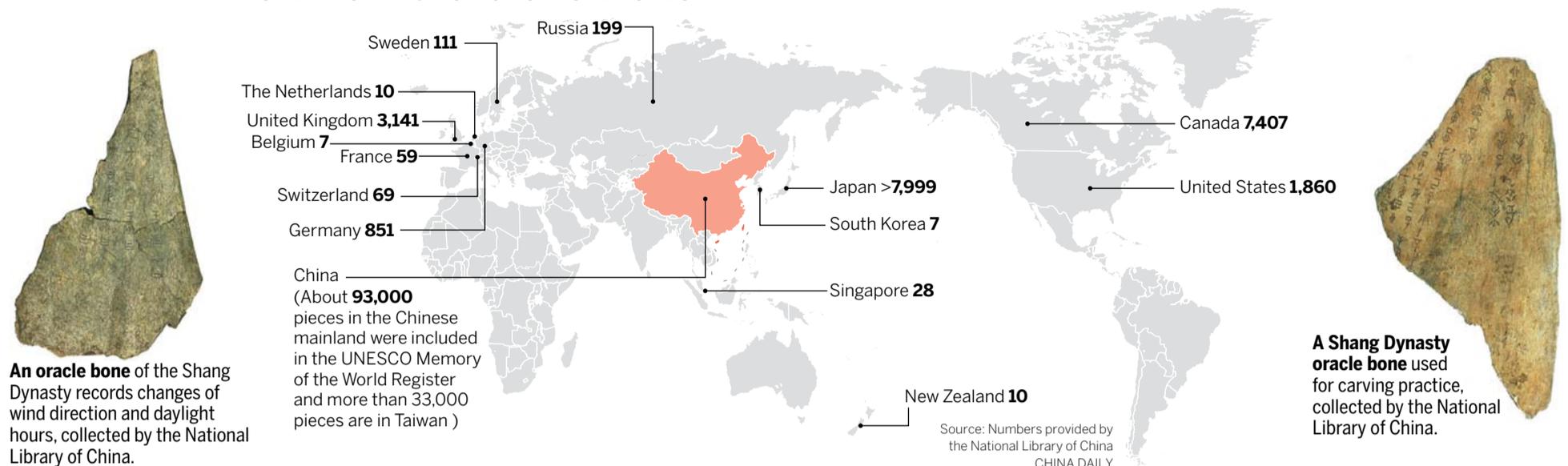


WORLD DISTRIBUTION OF ORACLE BONES



An oracle bone of the Shang Dynasty records changes of wind direction and daylight hours, collected by the National Library of China.



A Shang Dynasty oracle bone used for carving practice, collected by the National Library of China.

Piecing together the past

UNESCO listing of oracle bone inscriptions, the earliest-known Chinese characters, helps promote traditional culture

By WANG KAIHAO

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When President Xi Jinping talked with US President Donald Trump at the Palace Museum, or Forbidden City, in Beijing on Nov 8, Xi highlighted to his visiting US counterpart that “China has 3,000 years of history using written characters”.

The earliest-known Chinese characters that Xi referred to were found inscribed on oracle bones, mainly turtle shell and ox scapula, and were used for the purpose of recording or fortune-telling during the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th-11th century BC).

In late November, the inscriptions were listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register program.

“It’s a milestone to get the gist of traditional Chinese culture understood and promoted in the world,” said Du Yue, a director from the National Commission of China for UNESCO. “Now, it has become a common spiritual treasure for humanity.”

“Oracle bone inscriptions have the same lineage as the writing system used today and are the ancestors of Chinese characters,” said Song Zhenhao, a historian and academician committee member from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He was the principal academic leading the bid to get the oracle bones listed by UNESCO.

“Exploring the inscriptions will help us understand the origins of Chinese philosophy and thought, and help us figure out where our traditional culture comes from,” he added.

Song said that about 4,400 single characters were found among the inscriptions, and nearly 1,800 of them are still recognizable now.

This number is growing as research develops. “Many characters



Hu Huiping (left) and Zhao Aixue are full-time researchers at the National Library of China, in Beijing, on the world’s biggest collection of oracle bones.

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have disappeared, and we cannot find their counterparts in today’s Chinese writing system,” Song said. “The unrecognizable characters mainly relate to the names of people, places and forms of sacrificial rites.”

Hu Huiping, researcher with the National Library of China in Beijing, said: “We were cheered up immensely by that successful (UNESCO) bid. But the day-to-day work hasn’t really changed despite this.”

Having graduated from college 15 years ago, Hu spends her days researching, studying and cataloging oracle bones. “I wanted to understand what the Shang era was like,” she said. “But, maybe I’ve only caught a glimpse of what life was like then after these 15 years.”

When Hu first entered the library’s warehouse housing the oracle bones, there was no systematic catalog in place.

“I started to catalog them from No 00001 oracle bone,” Hu said, proudly. “Now, less than 10,000 items are on my waiting list.”

According to library statistics, 35,651 individual oracle bones are housed in the library, making it the

world’s biggest repository of these precious documents.

“It’s much more complicated than cataloging a book,” she said. “For one single piece of bone, you have to rifle through lots of files to make sure its explanation, time, usage, and cultural context are all properly recorded. It’s a lot of work.”

In 2011, Hu was joined by her colleague Zhao Aixue. They are the only two full-time researchers devoted to cataloging the oracle bones in the library.

According to Zhao, the status of oracle bones has been upgraded in recent years. “For a long time, they used to be categorized as cultural relics rather than documents,” he recalled. “That downplayed their significance as written history.”

After many academic discussions, the oracle bones were included in the larger list of key national ancient books and documents for the first time in 2013, which presented a solid foundation for the UNESCO bid.

According to Song, about 150,000 individual oracle bones exist in the world.

About 93,000 pieces from 11 insti-

tutions on the Chinese mainland, including the National Library of China, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Palace Museum, were included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. Academia Sinica in Taiwan is also a major institution that houses the bones.

Zhao revealed that images of about 3,800 fragments of oracle bones and 7,000 ink rubbings of bones have been uploaded to the website of the National Library of China for public use. The wider use of digital platforms has helped scientists locate broken fragments of bones kept at other institutions and rejoin them with their original host pieces.

Song said the digital approach still only plays an assisting role in their research. After viewing digitally, certain pieces that looked like they would fit together were found not to match perfectly.

“It needs interdisciplinary expertise,” he said. “Carrying out careful and in-depth research is always crucial.”

However, they are also facing the problem of how to attract more specialists. “Studying oracle bone inscriptions has almost become a dying art,” he said.

Song said he often worked in a group with 20 other scholars in the 1980s. In a recent research project in East China’s Shandong province, he only had three academics join him.

“Scholars switched to other fields,” Zhao said. “It’s easier to make a major breakthrough by studying bamboo slips or books made of silk.”

Introduced centuries after oracle bones, bamboo slips and silk books were major forms of recorded media in ancient China.

And there are also some key overseas institutions that have collections of oracle bones, including the British Library and the State Hermitage Museum in Russia. Many bones were

taken abroad by Western missionaries. Song recently finished cataloging oracle bones at the State Hermitage Museum, and one of his students also had a project in London studying a collection amassed by noted British sinologist Lionel Charles Hopkins (1854-1952).

According to Song, academic writings on oracle bone inscriptions have been discovered in 14 different languages around the world.

“The statistics are insufficient though,” Song said. “When I did research at some of these institutions, I counted the pieces one by one and found the numbers were more than their inventory showed, probably due to historical errors.”

He added that there may be “thousands more” oracle bones in the hands of individuals in and around Anyang, Central China’s Henan province, following discoveries there a century ago.

In the late 19th century, many oracle bones were unearthed by local villagers at the Yinxu Ruins in Anyang, an ancient capital during the Shang Dynasty. However, the locals regarded them as fossils and used them as ingredients in traditional Chinese medicine. There is a term used to describe this event as “humans swallowing Shang history.”

Nevertheless, Wang Yirong, a Beijing scholar and antiquarian, stumbled on some animal bones and tortoise shells on sale at a pharmacy in 1899, and he noticed symbols that looked like writing. He was later hailed as the discoverer of oracle bone inscriptions.

People later swarmed to Anyang to dig for bones, and many of the artifacts ended up with private collectors and antique dealers. In 1928, the government launched an official archaeological excavation at Yinxu and protected the area to prevent more artifacts from disappearing.