

暴力、記憶與歷史敘事

——炮烙作為記憶場所

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摘要

本文探討暴力的敘事對形成文化記憶的作用。論述暴力的敘事引起娛樂、關注和沉浸式的接受，促使深刻記憶的形成。通過分析「炮烙」的酷刑作為一種記憶場所，我勾勒出古代中國文本中對本酷刑的回憶。除了愈來愈詳細書寫暴力以外，這些回憶還反映了「以今釋古」、「以史為鑒」兩種詮釋方式。

關鍵詞：文化記憶、暴力、敘事、接受、炮烙

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Violence, Memory, and Narratives of the Past: Burning and Roasting (*pao luo* 炮烙) as a Site of Memory

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of violent narrative in cultural memory formation. It argues how narratives of violence evoke an entertaining, engaged, and immersive reception experience, resulting in strong memory formation. I analyze the Burning and Roasting (*pao luo* 炮烙) torture as a site of memory to trace memories of the torture across early Chinese texts. Beyond reflecting a gradual increase in violent detail, these acts of remembrance both reflect an attempt to use current views to meaningfully interpret events of the past, all the while using the past to reflect on and process contemporary reality.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Violence, Narrative, Reception, Burning and Roasting

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Thus the [reputation for] goodness of the Three Dynasties
[reflects] the accumulated praise of a thousand years;
the [reputation for] evil of Jie and Zhou
[reflects] the accumulated condemnation of a thousand years.
“Profound Precepts,” *Huainanzi*.

故三代之稱，千歲之積譽也；
桀、紂之謗，千歲之積毀也。
《淮南子·繆稱訓》¹

1. Violent Narratives and Memories

We are accustomed to understanding Chinese historiography as avoiding the detailed depiction of violence.² Indeed, compared to the openness in which classical texts and commentators presented violence in Greek and Roman historiography,³ early Chinese texts are often outright evasive and quickly

¹ *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解, ann. Liu Wendian 劉文典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), j. 10, p. 409. Translation adapted from John Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 386.

² Relevant are C. H. Wang, *From Ritual to Allegory: Seven Essays in Chinese Poetry* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1988), pp. 53-72, and the discussion of Mengzi's famous expression of disbelief in the violence of the Zhou conquest of the Shang in Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 31-67. This tendency holds sway in the study of history in general, Philip Dwyer and Joy Damousi, “Theorizing Histories of Violence,” *History and Theory* 56.4 (2017): 3-6, note the historian's reluctance to theorize violence, instead moving towards contextualization.

For useful concrete counter cases, see Martin Kern, “Cultural Memory and the Epic in Early Chinese Literature: The Case of Qu Yuan 屈原 and the *Lisao* 離騷,” *The Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2022): 143-147, on how the tragic, unjust, and violent death of Qu Yuan spoke to a large group of Han literati who saw similar events in their own time. See also Eric Henry's study of violence and immoral behavior in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, Eric Henry, “Running Amok in Early Chinese Narrative,” in *Behaving Badly in Early and Medieval China*, eds. Harry N. Rothschild and Leslie V. Wallace (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), pp. 171-188.

³ Viktor D'Huys, “How to Describe Violence in Historical Narrative: Reflections of the Ancient Greek Historians and their Ancient Critics,” *Ancient Society*, no. 18 (1987): 209-250, however,

move into idealized and moral description after a euphemistic gloss of how one army “walled” or “surrounded” a city, for instance, without going into much detail. This is not to say that early Chinese texts completely eschewed violence. Indeed, much of the debate has focused on rebutting that assumption to show that instead a space was carved out for the depiction of legitimized violence, with the added caveat that local and contemporary conceptions of what constitutes violence may have been very different from our own.⁴ This presents an important corrective but it is crucial to keep in mind that violence is not just included in narratives to establish hierarchies of moral legitimacy. I argue that the narration of violence has important literary functions and takes on an instrumental role in cultural memory formation.

There is likewise an inherent unwillingness to understand historiographical texts as a source of entertainment. Johnson, writing in the 80s in an otherwise stimulating article, echoes approvingly Frye’s distinction between “serious, didactic, true ‘myth’ and the frivolous, entertaining, imaginary ‘romance,’” as if entertainment is not an acceptable mode of understanding the past.⁵ Lewis in

notes quite a number of ancient commentators who explicitly advise against including violence in historical narrative.

⁴ See especially the contributions by Barend J. ter Haar, *Religious Culture and Violence in Traditional China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Barend J. ter Haar, “A Word for Violence: The Chinese Term *bao* 暴,” *Journal of Religion and Violence* 8.3 (2020): 221-241; Barend J. ter Haar, “Violence in Chinese Religious Culture,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, ed. Andrew R. Murphy (London: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 249-262; and the classic work by Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). For a useful overview of theory on violence and how it relates to the premodern world, see Roderick Campbell, ed., *Violence and Civilization: Studies of Social Violence in History and Prehistory* (Oxford, England: Brown University, Oxbow Books, 2014).

⁵ David Johnson, “Epic and History in Early China: The Matter of Wu Tzu-hsü,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 40.2 (1981): 255. Note however, his assessment of the *Zuozhuan*: “The subject which more than any other interested the creators of the tradition that *Tso chuan* inherited was violent conflict-political, military, and personal. No amount of moralizing commentary, no rearrangement of the original text, can disguise the fact that this is the true subject matter of *Tso chuan*,” see David Johnson, “Epic and History in Early China: The Matter of Wu Tzu-hsü,” 270. See also Johnson’s discussion of the 9th and 10th c. *bianwen* 變文 renditions of the Wu Zixu 伍子胥 story, wherein he does recognize the literary and entertaining qualities of the

the 90s likewise opens his *Sanctioned Violence* noting that he is not concerned with the “deviant, frightening violence of the newspapers.”⁶ In this study, I will be looking exactly at those audience drawing qualities that media rely on. I argue that one of the reasons why famous stories such as those of Wu Zixu and Odysseus were remembered is not merely a question of literary virtuosity or cultural centrality but certainly also of entertainment and memorability. Their stories, violence, license and all, entertained and excited people of all classes and literary abilities—ensuring thus that these stories were retold, reread, reinterpreted, and remembered throughout the ages. That the legendary nemesis of civilization, Chi You 蚩尤, is violently desecrated by the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 highlights the moral rectitude of his culture-hero executor,⁷ just as much as it is a product of a religious culture infused with dramatic ritual performances of violence,⁸ even more so because audiences relished in the action, drama, and gruesome gore of the stories.⁹

For these reasons I seek to connect discussions on early Chinese historiography and violence, with those on the experience of narrative and the formation of cultural memory. The discussion on violence and how it relates to memory is vast, and has not surprisingly, centered on the memories of the world wars.¹⁰ To the modern historian, or indeed the anthropologist, there is little

narrative, for, as he argues, these were intended for a more *popular* audience. David Johnson, “The Wu Tzu-hsü Pien-wen and Its Sources: Part I,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40.1 (1980): 94-96.

⁶ Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, p. 1.

⁷ See Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, pp. 174-185.

⁸ For this aspect, see especially Barend J. ter Haar, “Violence in Chinese Religious Culture,” pp. 256-258, noting the visual description of all sorts of violence in ritual. For the cults associated with Chi You, see Barend J. ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 47-74, and Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, pp. 185-195.

⁹ For an overview on the enduring use of violence in entertainment, see Harold Schechter, *Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005); Jeffrey Goldstein, “The Attractions of Violent Entertainment,” *Media Psychology*, 1.3 (1999): 271-282.

¹⁰ For overviews, see Duncan Bell, “Introduction: Violence and Memory,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38.2 (2009): 345-360, and the review in Geoffrey White, “Violent

question that violence is an important, if not the prime, site for a wide variety of forms of memory and forgetting.¹¹ In much the same way that Hayden Whyte noted that narrative form gives meaning to the order of history,¹² Jeffrey Olick, one of the most prominent scholars of collective memory, notes that remembering and memorializing violence and violation are a means to impute meaning not just to acts of violence but to the order of existence itself.¹³ In early China too, the juxtaposition of culture heroes and archetypical villains carves out a space for coherently structured moralizing frameworks of historiography.¹⁴ But why present this distinction with such graphic descriptions of violence?

Recent years has seen a focus on the narrative representation of violence and memory,¹⁵ and scholars of the ancient world have increasingly examined the narrativization and collective remembrance of violent myths and wars.¹⁶ It represents a development of studies on cultural memory and narrative experience.¹⁷ Similarly, developments in the neurology of experience and

Memories/Memory Violence,” *Reviews in Anthropology* 46.1 (2017): 19-34.

¹¹ For example, studies by Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For trauma across generations, see Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm, eds., *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

¹² Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 20.

¹³ See for example Jeffrey K. Olick, “From the Memory of Violence to the Violence of Memory,” *Remembrance and Solidarity Studies in 20th-Century European History*, no. 6 (2018): 205-217.

¹⁴ Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Ancient China, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

¹⁵ See for example several studies included in a special issue “Memories of Violence” of the *Journal of the British Academy*, for an overview, see: Charles Tripp, “Memories of violence: introduction,” *Journal of the British Academy*, 8.s3 (2020): 1-6.

¹⁶ For example, Sonja Ammann et al., eds., *Collective Violence and Memory in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

¹⁷ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jonas Grethlein, *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography: “Futures Past” from Herodotus to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jonas Grethlein, Luuk Huitink, and Aldo Tagliabue, eds., *Experience, Narrative, and Criticism in Ancient Greece: Under the Spell of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

memory have been taken up in cognitive narratology. Human beings tend to process, organize, and remember experience drawing on movement and sensual cues that can likewise be activated through narrative.¹⁸ Narrative sections with movement, vivid description, and violent action are experienced especially strong.¹⁹ The narrative form invites the audience to suspend their disbelief all the while it is telling them it is only a story. This combination is especially effective in generating an engaged reception and as a result, is capable of creating strong memories and a committed audience.²⁰ Violence in narrative form, is as captivating and entertaining as it is memorable and should be understood as foundational to the formation of cultural memory.

Acts of remembering the past are never neutral and tend to reflect the concerns, realities, and often imagination of those looking back at a past far removed. My argument is that the narration of violence was employed productively to stimulate the reception of a story and as a more inadvertent result, ensured the remembrance of certain events from myth and history. An important reason why so many recipients, whether ancient or modern, gravitate to stories narrating the stuffing of Wu Zixu in a bag of his own skin, the violent

¹⁸ Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Anthony J. Sanford and Catherine Emmott, *Mind, Brain, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Miranda Anderson, Douglas Cairns, and Mark Sprevak, eds., *Distributed Cognition in Classical Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Christopher Comer and Ashley Taggart, *Brain, Mind, and the Narrative Imagination* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); Rolf A. Zwaan, “Embodiment and language comprehension: reframing the discussion,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 18.5 (2014): 229-234.

¹⁹ Rolf A. Zwaan, “Embodiment and language comprehension reframing the discussion,” 231-232; Rutger J. Allan, Irene J. F. de Jong, and Casper C. de Jonge, “From Enargeia to Immersion: The Ancient Roots of a Modern Concept,” *Style* 51.1 (2017): 34-51; Rutger J. Allan, “Narrative Immersion: Some Linguistic and Narratological Aspects,” in *Experience, Narrative, and Criticism in Ancient Greece*, eds. Jonas Grethlein, Luuk Huitink, and Aldo Tagliabue (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15-35.

²⁰ Robin I.M. Dunbar, et al., “Emotional arousal when watching drama increases pain threshold and social bonding,” *Royal Society open science* vol. 3: 9, 21 Sep. 2016, doi:10.1098/rsos.160288; and crime series, Penny Crofts, “Homicide in Television Drama Series,” *University of Technology Sydney Law Research Series* no. 19 (2017), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 1970.

dismembering of Chi You's body,²¹ or indeed the horrible escapades of Zhou Xin 紂辛 of the Shang dynasty, is because these stories are filled with extremely vivid depictions of violence. This made the stories equal parts revolting, entertaining, and highly memorable, thus increasing their chances for later adaptation and remembering.²² I will focus on the story of Zhou Xin of the Shang, who, among many other excesses, is remembered for employing the "Roasting and Burning" torture to punish those who opposed him to the delight of his favored consort, the infamous Da Ji 妲己.

In this article, I treat the Roasting and Burning (*pao luo* 炮烙) torture as a "site of memory,"²³ a container wherein memories about the past accrue. The sheer weight of the violence associated with the torture pulled other memories into its orbit. It is presented as one of the prime reasons why the Zhou gained the Heavenly Mandate and ended up conquering the Shang, and it has proven a formidable source of inspiration whether for creating actual tortures (see below), imagining the horrors of hell,²⁴ to writing popular literature.²⁵ In a web search I even encountered a CAD model for 3D printing a *pao luo* device.²⁶

²¹ See Barend J. ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero*, p. 67; Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, pp. 205-210; Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "Reimagining the Yellow Emperor's Four Faces," in *Text and Ritual in Early China*, ed. Martin Kern (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), pp. 226-248.

²² I consider these stories successful in generating powerful memories in that they were integrated into a large range of texts across time. In short, their vivid and violent descriptions generated an eminently quotable memory of the past. Instructive is Peter Ditmanson, "Venerating the Martyrs of the 1402 Usurpation: History and Memory in the Mid and Late Ming Dynasty," *T'oung Pao* 93.1/3 (2007): 110-158. The lack of violent narrative in comparative terms suggested at the start of this paper also shows that while violent narration is a successful literary strategy in many contexts, it clearly was not considered suitable to all avenues of literary production.

²³ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoires*," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7-24.

²⁴ The Buddhist *pao luo* hell seen for example at the Dazu Stone carvings, for an overview see Wu Ying 伍穎, *Dazu shike diyu guannian yu Songdai falü wenhua jiaorong chuxi* 大足石刻地獄觀念與宋代法律文化交融芻析 (Master Thesis, Chongqing: Xinan zhengfa university, 2019): p. 28. For a modern narrative rendering see Xuanhua shangren 宣化上人, "Yinluan bi duo paoluo diyu" 姪亂必墮炮烙地獄, in *Diyu bu kong: Xuanhua shanren jingdian kaishi xuanji vol. 3* 地獄不空: 宣化上人經典開示選輯 (三) (California: Fajie fojiao zonghui 法界佛教總會, Fojing fanyi wei yuanhui 佛經翻譯委員會, Fajie fojiao daxue 法界佛教大學,

The memory of this specific torture did not stand on its own and was part of a cornucopia of violence, license, and excess that was taken to symbolize Zhou Xin's reign. It is often mentioned in conjunction with the murder of a classical paragon of virtue, the prince Bigan 比干 who admonished against the ruler's licentious and excessive behavior. Other excesses included hosting parties with naked men and women cajoling through a forest with meat hanging from the branches of trees 肉林 to setting up a pond of booze 酒池, so big the production of the alcohol produced a veritable mountain worth of dregs 糟丘. Other often mentioned and bizarre cruelties include: the cutting open of the womb of a pregnant woman 剗孕婦 to see the gestation of a child; cruel murders inflicted upon the opposition such as the mincing of Lord Mei 梅 or the making of Lord E 鄂 into dried strips of meat; the cutting of the lower legs of people who walked the cold river at dawn 斲朝涉 in order to figure out what was so special about them, and many more. These memories blurred into each other, Bigan is said to have been simply murdered in most accounts but in others the narration of his murder turns grotesque and absurd, with his heart scooped from his body to see whether the heart of a sage really has seven apertures. These stories form a mutually strengthening web of excess, license, and gory violence that expands and contracts depending on the agenda and sensibilities that shaped the storyteller's remembrances.

I focus on a set of Warring States and Han dynasty materials, adding two recently unearthed manuscripts to a well-known set of sources insightfully described by Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 as a prime example of the type of changes that occur in the narration of past events in their retelling.²⁷ Gu Jiegang showed

1999), pp. 312-313.

²⁵ See most prominently the *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 and the large amount of TV shows and games that adapted the story even further. See the study by Mark R. E. Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

²⁶ 10310252 (nickname), "Pao luo: zhongguo gudai liu da kuxing" 炮烙——中國古代六大酷刑, accessed 26 January 2024. <https://www.tinkercad.com/things/5G12v700O20>.

²⁷ Gu Jiegang, "Zhou e qishi shi de fasheng cidi" 紂惡七十事的發生次第, in *Gushi bian* 古史辨, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), pp. 82-93.

that the stories of the final ruler of the Shang's evils were expanded until they achieved gruesome proportions. According to Gu, the stories surrounding Zhou Xin were distorted in the retelling by later authors. Yuri Pines, in a more recent article, has attributed these changes to shifts in the political culture and the need for legitimation of dynastic change of the time.²⁸ My point in this article is not to argue with the basic tenets of accretion nor that the political reality changed over time. It is clear that many stories grew in the telling, and Gu showed that the farther removed in time the more excessive the narrative becomes. Nevertheless, with unearthed evidence at hand, we can also see that violent renditions of the story were present from at least the Warring States period onwards, and more importantly, that these coexisted with narrations that only pointed to the violence in general terms. Accretion therefore does not provide the only or the best way to explain why certain versions were more violent than others. I will argue here that the dramaturgical use of violence in narrative and memory is one key to this problem. Selective activation of memories of the past and the narrative "staging" of events explains at least some of the dynamics that governed the inclusion of individual stories, their level of detail and violence, and the ways in which these adaptations were integrated in their narrative contexts.

My contention is that even in the many cases where a text chooses to render the memory of Zhou Xin's violence in comparatively general or euphemistic terms such as "murdered Bigan" or "violently abused the hundred clans"²⁹ the strength of these cues relied in a large part on an underlying related web of memories of violence and extravagance that were activated by it. To put it in straightforward terms, my understanding is that a contemporary audience would use their imagination and memories of previous renditions of the story to fill in the cue "murdered X" or "established the Roasting and Burning method" with graphic detail. Our best written evidence for this shows itself in texts opening

²⁸ Yuri Pines, "To Rebel is Justified? The Image of Zhouxin and the Legitimacy of Rebellion in the Chinese Political Tradition," *Oriens Extremus*, no. 47 (2008): 1-24.

²⁹ As in "Mu shi" 牧誓, *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義, ann. Kong Yingda 孔穎達, in vol. 1 of *Shisan jing zhushu fu jiaokan ji* 十三經注疏附校勘記, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), j. 11, p. 183 for instance.

with a general “neutral” reference to the immoral behavior in one chapter but expanding on the details of the depravities in narrative form in others as seen in *Han Feizi* 韓非子, *Shuo Yuan* 說苑, *Hanshi Waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 and many other texts. Likewise, many commentaries and later texts reflecting on the memories of the past reveal the resources, both mnemonic and textual, that these readers drew on to color in the contours of these remembered events.

2. Please remember to leave some room for the imagination!

One of the earliest appearances of the story in the unearthed record we find in a 4th c. BCE manuscript from the Tsinghua University collection, the self-titled *Zi Fan Zi Yu* 子犯子餘.³⁰ The story appears in a response from the advisor figure uncle Jian 蹇叔 to Lord Mu of Qin’s 秦穆公 enquiry after the way of the ancients. In his answer, he draws on a contrast between the experience of meeting the first and last ruler of the Shang dynasty (c. 1250-1046 BCE). In traditional Chinese historiography, it is common to understand the founding ruler of a dynasty as morally excellent (or at least capable of learning from those who are), and the last ruler, by extension, as morally depraved and the cause of the fall of the dynasty.

蹇叔答曰：「凡君之所問莫可聞。昔者成湯以神事山川，以德和民。四方夷莫後與人，面見湯，若濡雨方奔之而鹿膺焉，用果念政九州而命君之。後世就紂之身，殺三無辜，為炮烙，殺梅之女，為拳梏三百。殷邦之君子，無小大，無遠邇，見紂若大岸將顛崩，方走去之，懼不死刑以及于厥身，邦乃遂亡。」

Uncle Jian replied, saying: “Of all that you my lord ask, nothing could be heard. In times of yore, Cheng Tang served the mountains and rivers with his spirit, and harmonized the people with his

³⁰ For an analysis of the use of vivid language and metaphor in this passage, see Rens Krijgsman, “Vivid language and the Experience of the Past,” in *On Altars of Soil: Unearthing New Narratives in Early Chinese History*, eds. Paul Nicholas Vogt and Glenda Chao (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2025).

power. Of the peoples of the four directions, none wanted to be (placed) later than the others. When they saw Tang head-on, it was like a nourishing rain; they promptly rushed onward and deer-like responded to it. Thus, in the end they longed for his governance, and the Nine Regions diligently took him as their ruler. In later generations when we come to the person of Zhou, he murdered the three innocents, he engaged in roasting and burning,³¹ he murdered the daughters of Mei, and shackled over

³¹ Exactly how to understand the terms *pao* 炮 and *luo* 烙 here, and the combination *pao luo* 炮烙, sometimes referred to as *paoge* 炮格 or “Roasting grid” in the literature, is a question of debate from the Qing dynasty onwards. Scholars such as Duan Yucai 段玉裁, Lu Wenchao 盧文弨, and Wang Niansun 王念孫 have argued that *paoge* was the ancestral form and *luo* 烙 a later corruption, noting that *ge* referred to an object and fits the context of the language better, even going so far as suggesting that because the *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字 does not contain the graph, it did not exist in earlier times either. With the emergence of the excavated evidence it is clear that at least the graph was already current well before that, for the earliest occurrence in oracle bone inscriptions, see Wang Ziyang 王子揚, “Shi jiaguwen ‘ge’ ji xiangguan zhu zi: cong yi ban qixiang beijia tanqi” 釋甲骨文「零」及相關諸字——從一版氣象背甲談起, *Chutu wenxian zonghe jikan* 出土文獻綜合集刊, no. 17 (2023): 1-25.

Scholars such as Peng Wenfang 彭文芳, “‘Pao luo’ yu ‘pao ge’ bian” 「炮烙」與「炮格」辨, *Gu hanyu yanjiu* 古漢語研究 80.3 (2008): 43-44, show a preference for the Qing consensus. Zhao Ping’an 趙平安 in an early publication likewise holds this view and argues that the description in the *Rongchengshi* 容成氏 (for which, see below), the bowl *yu* 盂 (*wa, Old Chinese reconstructions follow Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007]) fits *ge* 格 (*kâk) better, and that the latter should even be understood as a loan for the former, see Zhao Ping’an 趙平安, “*Rongchengshi* suo zai ‘pao luo zhi xing’ kao” 《容成氏》所載「炮烙之刑」考, in *Shangbo guan cang zhanguo chu zhushu yanjiu xubian* 上博館藏戰國楚竹書研究續編, eds. Zhu Yuanqing 朱淵清 and Liao Mingchun 廖名春 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2004), pp. 346-349. With a different initial and ending, this connection seems a stretch. Moreover, if we follow the idea that *ge* 格 is the preferred form, given its root meaning of “branch,” it would have to refer to the wooden log in the description of the torture, not the bowl. Compare Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*, 254. Confronted with the appearance of *pao* 炮 and *luo* 烙 in the Tsinghua manuscripts, Zhao Ping’an 趙平安, “Liang tiao xin cailiao yu yige lao gushi: ‘pao luo zhi xing’ kao” 兩條新材料與一個老故事——「炮烙之刑」考, in *Xin chu jianbo yu guwenzi guwenxian yanjiu xujì* 新出簡帛與古文字古文獻研究續集, ed. Zhao Ping’an 趙平安 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2018): pp. 306-310, gives up on his earlier support for *ge* 格 yet proceeds to argue that *pao* and *luo* are presented as separate nouns and that *pao* ought to refer to the wooden log mentioned in the *Rongchengshi*. He suggests that *pao* 炮 (?*prû,

three hundred. The lords of the state of Yin, whether big or small, far or close, whenever they saw Zhou it was like seeing a tall dike about to collapse, and they promptly ran off and left him. They feared that even if they were not killed, corporal punishment would be inflicted upon their bodies. The state was then consequently lost.”³²

This passage provides an excellent example to discuss the tripartite problem of violence, narrative, and memory. Reference is made by uncle Jian to the experiential character of the information he is about to present, implying that he somehow has intimate access to the memory of two rulers that lived over 200 years apart. As to Zhou’s depravity, we are presented with a list of memory cues. In active language highlighting the agency of Zhou, the reader is presented with a list of murders, tortures, and imprisonments. The use of limited detail implies that the audience was assumed to know who the three innocents, the daughters of Mei, and the three hundred shackled were and that the mere mention of them is enough to trigger these memories. Indeed, it is common to characterize (violent) episodes of history with a catchy phrase. Compare for instance the summary “burning the books and burying the scholars” 焚書坑儒 used to characterize the harsh reign of the First Emperor of Qin.³³

As to the torture, there is no description of specific violence in the present formulation. If for a moment we do not read the text with knowledge of later textual evidence in mind, it is unclear what *wei pao wei luo* 為炮為烙 refers to exactly. Is it to engage in an activity or to set up a device? Are these two

包), *mu* 木 (*mòk), and *zhu* 柱 (*dro?) are different names for the same thing and can be loaned for each other, this too is phonologically a stretch. Finally, Zhang Feng 張峰, “Qinghua qi Zi Fan Zi Yu suo zai Zhou zhi shi yu gushu duidu er ze” 清華七《子犯子餘》所載紂之事與古書對讀二則, *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊, no. 1 (2019): 2-4, puts the matter to rest in a final review of the debate.

³² Edition and translation follow Rens Krijgsman, *Studies and Translations of the Tsinghua Manuscripts 6: Lady Wu of Zheng and other Related Texts* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2024), pp. 171-174.

³³ For an insightful analysis of this phrase see Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022), pp. 111-126.

separate elements or a single activity broken in two parts for rhetorical effect? No details are provided other than that it involves Roasting and Burning and that it is on par with murder. This achieves two effects. It calls on the memory of the audience, asking them to interpret these terms and in doing so triggers their creativity and has their imagination reign free to make the worst of these cues. As a result, the audience is committing part of themselves to the story, creating a psychologically profound reception experience.³⁴ This in turn influences future retelling and transmission.

By contrast, the *Rongchengshi* from the Shanghai Museum manuscripts presents an overview of the mechanics of the torture without providing a name:

湯王天下三十又一世而紂作。紂不述其先王之道，自為改為。於是乎作為九成之臺，寘盂炭其下，加園木於其上。使民道之，能遂者遂，不能遂者入而死。不從命者，從而極梏之。於是乎作為金桎三千。既為金桎，又為酒池。厚樂於酒，附夜以為淫，不聽其邦之政。於是乎九邦叛之……。

Tang ruled the realm and after thirty-one generations Zhou arose.³⁵ Zhou did not follow the way of his former kings, he himself exercised another way of doing. Thereupon he made a platform of nine layers. He placed a bowl with coals underneath it and added a round log on top. He let the people walk over it, those who succeeded could go, those who could not succeed would fall into the (coals) and die. Those who did not follow orders were accordingly fettered and handcuffed. Thereupon he had created three thousand metal fetters. Having made metal fetters, he then made a pond of booze. He partied hard in the booze, engaging in license deep into the night, and he did not

³⁴ Compare Georgina Lucas, “‘Piteous Massacre’: Violence, Language, and the Off-stage in *Richard III*”, *Journal of the British Academy*, 8.s3 (2020): 91-109.

³⁵ In the *Rongchengshi*, good rulers are given a biography but bad rulers simply “arise.” Text edition follows Shan Yuchen 單育辰, *Xinchu Chu jian Rongchengshi yanjiu* 新出楚簡《容成氏》研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), p. 29.

attend to the government of his state. Thereupon the nine states rebelled against him [...]

The description of the cuffing and fettering, and the mechanics of creation are emphasized without going into any of the concrete gory detail of the inventions. Here, the audience is given a more structured set of cues to feast the imagination on. As a result, while the text ostensibly stays within the palatable, it actually invokes an image that if considered in earnest, generates fundamental discomfort and horror. Inviting the audience to color between the lines of the description, as it were, prolongs their participation in the mental re-enactment of the torture, creating a stronger and meaningfully integrated reception experience triggering deeper memory formation.³⁶

3. King Wen as collaborator or hero, or, how to remember the violence of the past

But how to interpret this excessive violence? The sources all agree that something was rotten in the state of Shang, but the concrete macabre details, the origins of the torture, and how to justify the way contemporaries responded to it, vary from source to source. Part of this variation across sources is, as Sarah Allan has shown, due to the internal coherency of a mythic schema informing the argumentative program within the texts.³⁷ The various ways in which King Wen 周文王 collaborates with Zhou Xin or resists his cruelty is at least in part due to this structure but the dynamic is complicated by the ways in which societies remember traumatic pasts more generally.³⁸ Likewise, as argued by

³⁶ Compare here the need for visualization and turning into action for trauma processing, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” *American Imago* 48.4 (1991): 442-446.

³⁷ Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Ancient China, Revised and Expanded Edition*.

³⁸ Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” 450, note that “once flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experience.” In other words, for a traumatic memory to be meaningfully integrated into daily experience, it must be adapted in order to fit those circumstances. Quite possible, this may be true on a cultural level as well. Instructive are the

Yuri Pines and others, one reason for the violent depiction of the final Shang ruler is to justify the rebellious conquest by the Zhou.³⁹ This leaves king Wen in an awkward spot, as he is supposed to have loyally served Zhou Xin.

Instructive is the way in which the *Rongchengshi* story follows the misdeeds of Zhou Xin by narrating how king Wen loyally assisted his ruler in suppressing the rebellion of the nine states.⁴⁰ King Wen brings in the first seven states, visiting them dressed in attire suitable for disaster and abstinence according to the *Zhouli* (*Rites of Zhou*) 周禮, perhaps this signals a form of silent protest to the ruler's behavior.⁴¹ Yet when the states of Feng 豐 and Hao 鎬 do not follow suit, king Wen leads an army to submit them. Why does the text want us to laud king Wen as moral paragon even though he loyally campaigns on behalf of a tyrant?

The text attempts to negotiate tensions over collaboration and resistance often seen in acts of remembering violent pasts:⁴² how to understand rebels and war heroes? Do the results justify their deeds? Does a foundational ruler have to be without blemish? Was king Wen a vassal of the previous dynasty, that is, part of the proto dynastic model seen in the *Rongchengshi*—or instead a rival power in a diverse landscape of competing powers as in *Han Feizi* below? Is

studies in Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm, eds., *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*.

³⁹ Yuri Pines, "To Rebel is Justified? The Image of Zhouxin and the Legitimacy of Rebellion in the Chinese Political Tradition."

⁴⁰ King Wen is a vassal to the Shang king Zhou Xin in this version. In other versions, he is only referred to as king after having being recognized by other rulers of the ecumene. The use of the title signifies this recognition of his true kingship, whereas Zhou Xin, while technically king of the Shang, tends to be referred to by his personal name. The use of titles in this story is another form of assigning praise and blame. See Newell Ann Van Auken, *Spring and Autumn Historiography: Form and Hierarchy in Ancient Chinese Annals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

⁴¹ "Chunguan zongbo, sifu" 春官宗伯·司服, *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏, ann. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, comm. Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, in vol. 3 of *Shisan jing zhushu fu jiaokan ji* 十三經注疏附校勘記, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), j. 21, p. 781.

⁴² This is sometimes referred to as the "Vichy syndrome," see Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

collaboration justified under fear of punishment? But what if one has political ambitions? All of these questions influence the way later texts narrate the relation between king Wen and Zhou Xin and how they describe and evaluate their actions. These questions are revisited and reinterpreted so often because of the fundamental weight of the violent memories of the Roasting and Burning torture.

The *Rongchengshi*, for instance, notes a tension between loyalty to the office, “even when the ruler has lost the way, would a minister dare not serve him?” 雖君無道，臣敢勿事乎 and loyalty to a higher morality. This tension is dissolved in the final encounter with the rebelling states. After beating the drums to attack and retreat thrice, king Wen exclaims that the people should not be punished for the faults of one person, after which the city of course gladly surrenders to him. The *Rongchengshi*'s solution of showing moral superiority in staged speeches was a common one and is reminiscent of the speeches in the *Zuo zhuan*. Yet it was not strong enough to wash off the stain of complicity to the Roasting and Burning torture and king Wen had to be cast as performing an even larger gesture to absolve him of any blame.

The late Warring States *Han Feizi*, for example, presents king Wen with full agency in attacking (this time a different set of) states. In typical fashion, the situation is presented laconically as competition between two rival powers. Far from a vassal indirectly complicit in the actions of their liege, king Wen is remembered here as a rival force with sovereign agency:

昔者文王侵孟、克莒、舉鄆，三舉事而紂惡之，文王乃懼，請入洛西之地、赤壤之國，方千里以請解炮烙之刑，天下皆說。仲尼聞之曰：「仁哉文王！輕千里之國而請解炮烙之刑。智哉文王！出千里之地而得天下之心。」

In days of yore king Wen invaded Meng, overcame Ju, and set (an army) on Feng, he set three affairs in motion and Zhou hated him. King Wen then became frightened, and requested to bring in the lands west of the Luo and the territories of red earth. A thousand square *li* in order to request the abolition of the Burning and

Roasting punishment, and all in the realm rejoiced. Zhongni heard of it and said: “Oh how humane is king Wen! He makes light of territories of a thousand *li* in order to request the abolition of the Burning and Roasting punishment. Oh how wise is king Wen! He gives lands of a thousand *li* away and gains the hearts of the realm.”⁴³

The violence of the Burning and Roasting punishment is reified and turned into a powerful tool that can be traded for territory. Distance from the evils of the torture—standing in for the regime at large—is the defining element of king Wen’s moral overweight. The memory of the torture is weighed in terms of the magnitude of the territory used to trade for it. Even so, when Zhongni 仲尼 expresses the humaneness of king Wen’s request he also notes the wisdom of his choice. Indeed, to give a thousand *li* 禮 in order to gain the world is as savvy a deal as it is humane, even though the *Han Feizi* characteristically notes that it was unwise for king Wen to upset the ruler by gaining the hearts of the people so visibly.

This particular formulation of king Wen’s request became popular and reappears across ancient texts. Wrapped around a core of violence, the weight of the memory shows in the regularity that the specific act of requesting to have the torture removed is quoted in the literature. It is as if the literary culture is forced to repeat, and through narrative, reenact the trauma associated with the final days of the Shang.⁴⁴ This “request to abolish” becomes a hallmark of king Wen and appears in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 and *Shi ji* 史記 (see below), the *Huainanzi*,⁴⁵ and appears in lists with other examples of attaining the hearts

⁴³ “Nan er” 難二, *Han Feizi jijie* 韓非子集解, ann. Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), j. 15, pp. 393-394.

⁴⁴ Illustrative is the difference between embodied traumatic memory which replicates the original experience as opposed to a shorter, narrativized and therefore selective and structured, form of memory. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” 431. See also Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 90-119 on re-enactment as an embodied re-experiencing of the past in order to collapse the distance between the past and the present, and thereby reintegrating it in current structures of meaning.

⁴⁵ *Huainan Honglie jijie*, ann. Liu Wendian, j. 10, pp. 404-405.

and minds of the people such as in the *Xinshu* 新書,⁴⁶ and *Shuoyuan* 說苑,⁴⁷ for instance.

But the problem of collaboration with an evil power was not forgotten, and there are some clear differences in the way the sources remember the trade-off.⁴⁸ For example, the *Lüshi Chunqiu* notes that Zhou Xin was so pleased with king Wen's regular and loyal service—he did not miss a single morning audience—that he named him Elder of the West 西伯 and gave him the thousand *li* territory as a reward. King Wen does here not give up territory acquired by himself, but instead dramatically refuses a gift rewarding loyal cooperation.⁴⁹

The *Shi ji* preserves yet two different memories of the events. In the basic annals of Yin, we are told that the Elder of the West was spotted sighing over the violence at court including the Burning and Roasting method upon which he was prisoned at Youli 羑里. Distance to the violence is generated here by having him overhear the events, making it doubly clear that the future king Wen was not in any position to prevent things, all the while his imprisonment removes any doubt about his allegiance. In order to secure his release, the text presents a parallel

⁴⁶ Jia Yi 賈誼, “Taijiao” 胎教, *Xinshu jiaozhu* 新書校注, ann. Yan Zhenyi 閻振益 and Zhong Xia 鐘夏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), j. 10, p. 392.

⁴⁷ Liu Xiang 劉向, “Zunxian” 尊賢, *Shuo Yuan jiaozheng* 說苑校證, ann. Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), j. 8, p. 180.

⁴⁸ For an overview of the historical dynamics that underlay these developments, see Edward L. Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, eds. Edward L. Shaughnessy and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 302-309. In actual effect, the right to campaigning west of the Shang that is here variously expressed in the title “Elder of the West” and the ownership of the territories west of the river Luo, was likely a concession to the actual power the Zhou people held over those territories. For an overview of the historical and archaeological evidence of the capitals of the Western Zhou, see the detailed study by Maria Khayutina, “Western ‘Capitals’ of the Western Zhou Dynasty: Historical Reality and Its Reflections Until the Time of Sima Qian,” *Oriens Extremus*, no. 47 (2008): 25-65. For an earlier corrective to the scope of the territory held by the Shang and the early Zhou, see Edward L. Shaughnessy, “Historical Geography and the Extent of the Earliest Chinese Kingdoms,” *Asia Major 3rd Series* 2.2 (1989): 1-22.

⁴⁹ Xu Weiyu 許維通, *Lüshi Chunqiu jishi* 呂氏春秋集釋, comp. Liang Yunhua 梁運華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), j. 9, pp. 201-202.

horse-trade: pretty girls, exotic items, and excellent horses are gifted to Zhou Xin. In turn, the Elder of the West gifts his lands to abolish the Burning and Roasting punishment and have the people released. In this version, it is only after this trade that he receives gifts and is reconfirmed as Elder of the West and charged with conquest.⁵⁰ King Wen's service and complicity are reframed and his title is presented as a reward for his morally correct trading in of his lands.

The Basic Annals of the Zhou version presents a yet different form of agency. The future king Wen is presented as actively drawing the other lords to his cause. The order of events changes again with the Elder of the West requesting to have the punishment abolished *only after* he has been instated and commanded to go on conquest.⁵¹ The reason for this change in order is simple: the *Shi ji* narrative continues with a description of the near utopic quality of the Elder's rule and the request to abolish the punishment sets up this narrative perfectly.

The order and signification of events is changed across the narratives to play out various models of collaboration and resistance in an effort to reenact the traumatic transfer of power between the Shang and the Zhou. In effect, the change in power is memorialized in terms of the trading of Burning and Roasting either for power, the people, or in reward for loyalty. In the same way, texts drew on the violent power of the Burning and Roasting torture to inscribe other values. For example, Bi Gan is presented as a model for the morally upright minister who remonstrates regardless of danger to his own person.⁵² In other texts, discussions on proper punishments are framed in light of the boundaries drawn up by the memory of Zhou Xin's use of Burning and

⁵⁰ Sima Qian 司馬遷, "Yin benji" 殷本紀, *Shi ji*, 100 juan in 10 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), j. 3, pp. 105-108; Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records, vol. 1: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 50. One would suspect that the title "Elder of the West" refers in fact to ruling areas "to the west" or, the very territories he just gave up to Zhou Xin.

⁵¹ Sima Qian, "Zhou benji" 周本紀, *Shi ji*, j. 4, pp. 116-118; Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records, vol. 1: The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, pp. 57-58.

⁵² Compare for example Han Ying 韓嬰, *Hanshi waizhuan jishi* 韓詩外傳集釋, ann. Xu Weiyu 許維通 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), j. 4, p. 129.

Roasting.⁵³ In doing so, these texts open up a space to help audiences reflect on what appropriate violence and responses to violence may be.⁵⁴ The violence looming in the background makes for an effective vehicle to communicate such foundational stories in the cultural memory of the Warring States and early empires.⁵⁵

4. Remembering origins

Origin stories present another means of commemoration. The *Rongchengshi* presents Zhou Xin as an antithesis to the sage kings. Instead of their cultural achievements, Zhou Xin is credited with inventing or establishing (*zuo* 作) a type of “anti-institutions.”⁵⁶ Other texts take this up and speak of the Burning and Roasting torture as an institutionalized “punishment” 刑, “method” 法, or

⁵³ See for example the parallel texts in Han Ying, *Hanshi Waizhuan jishi*, j. 4, p. 137; Wang Xianqian 王先謙, “Yibing” 議兵, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, coll. Shen Xiaohuan 沈嘯寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星賢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), j. 10, p. 334; Sima Qian, “Lishu” 禮書, *Shi ji*, j. 23, p. 1164, which all develop the idea of reducing punishments in order to achieve a ritually informed model of adherence to rule in contrast to the extreme counterexample of Zhou Xin.

⁵⁴ Compare the discussion in Morten Oxeboell, “Epistemologies of Violence: Medieval Japanese War Tales,” *History and Theory* 56.4 (2017): 44-59. Oxeboell discusses literature on the socially constructed nature of appropriate significations and expressions of violence, and how the representations of violence itself feed back into the system and are replicated. As will be clear below, this effect shows in the adoption of (adaptations of) the *Roasting* and *Burning* torture in the form of a handheld metal device filled with coals which the accused had to hold in their hands. It appears that this torture was developed from the more archetypal form. This torture was intermittently picked up throughout imperial China and surfaces in the official histories of Han, Song, Liao, and Ming dynasties.

⁵⁵ The reverse is also true, and as Paul Connerton has noted for restoration periods in postwar and post totalitarian societies, there is often a need to forget concrete details of the atrocities so as not to generate cognitive dissonance. See Paul Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” *Memory Studies* 1.1 (2008): 62-63.

⁵⁶ Compare Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Afterlife in Early China* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001). By extension we may think of the various “examinations” performed under his rule as anti-observations. Compare the studious observation of “pattern” *wen* 文 in the course of the heavens and the tracks of birds ascribed to the sages, for instance, to the nefarious “investigation” conducted by Zhou Xin and Da Ji into the heart of a sage having seven apertures *qi qiao* 七巧 or the gestation of a baby in the womb, the special qualities of the legs of morning bathers etcetera.

“abuse” 虐, that was “created” 為, “established” 設, or “invented” 作. Compare for example another early text, the *Bamboo Annals* 竹書紀年:

帝辛：四年，大蒐于黎。作炮烙之刑。⁵⁷

Thearch Xin: 4th year, greatly examined the army at Li. Invented the Roasting and Burning punishment.

Given how many later sources such as the *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 “Bibliographies of Virtuous Women” attribute the development of this cruel punishment to consort Da Ji, it is interesting to note that the timeline given in the *Annals* places this invention five years before Da Ji is supposed to have been taken by Zhou Xin.⁵⁸

Several hundreds of years removed in time, it is no surprise that it is unclear how the torture came about or what it consisted of. The prevalence of stories about the torture’s origins suggests that there was a continuing relevance to its memory and that it jarred with lived reality. Because the torture was so far out of place in the moral landscape of the early Chinese literary mind, its memory had to be rationalized by giving it an origin and a cause. The *Huainanzi* chapter “Integrating Customs” 齊俗 draws iconic images of the depravity of the Shang together, to show that the aberration of the torture was actually already inscribed in minute signs visible in the past:

聖人之見終始微矣。故糟丘生乎象箸，炮烙生乎熱斗。

The sages’ perception of outcomes at their origins is [truly] subtle!
Thus the “mountain of dregs” originated with the use of ivory chopsticks; “Roasting and Burning” originated with a hot iron.⁵⁹

The subtle mind of the sage, and by extension, the perturbed mind of the cultured reader, could take mental control over the memory of Shang’s depravity by rationalizing it as a logical development from history and material

⁵⁷ Hao Yixing 郝懿行, *Zhushu jinian jiaozheng* 竹書紀年校證, in vol.5 of *Hao Yixing ji* 郝懿行集, ed. An Zuozhang 安作璋 (Jinan: Qi lu shushe, 2010), j. 8, p. 3870.

⁵⁸ Hao Yixing, *Zhushu jinian jiaozheng*, j. 8, p. 3871.

⁵⁹ Yi 矣 is emended from yan 言 based on Sun Yirang 孫怡讓, see *Huainan Honglie jijie*, ann. Liu Wendian, j. 11, p. 416. Translation adapted from John Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, p. 401.

signs. In terms of sheer numbers, the mountain of dregs, ivory chopsticks, and the hot iron are not nearly as commonly referred to in the literature as the Roasting and Burning torture.⁶⁰ It seems likely that, especially for the hot iron, this is a case of projecting current objects and affairs back into the past with the intention of providing social commentary. This memory only comes up from the western Han onwards, and is explained in different ways by various commentators. Xu Shen 許慎 (58-146?) notes:

庖人進羹于紂，熱，以為惡，以熱斗殺之。趙國斗可以殺人故起炮烙。

A cook brought soup to Zhou, and he hated that it was so hot, so that he killed him with a hot ladle. The torture of Burning and Roasting arose because the ladle from the state of Zhao could be used to kill people.⁶¹

Yet in the commentary preserved in the *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽 version also attributed to Xu Shen, he is quoted as explaining that:

熱斗，熱熨也。熱人手，遂作炮烙之刑也。

“hot *dou*” is a hot iron. It burned someone’s hands, thereupon he invented the Burning and Roasting punishment.⁶²

This understanding of the origins is echoed by Gao You 高誘 (fl. 160-200) who notes that Zhou liked to “regularly burn people’s hands” 常熨爛人手。⁶³ Huangfu Mi’s 皇甫謐 (215-282) *Diwang shiji* 帝王世紀 has another closely related story attempting to iron out the details of the torture’s origins:

紂欲重刑，乃先為大熨斗，以火爇之，使人舉，輒爛手不能勝。紂怒，乃更為銅柱，以膏塗之，加于熱炭之上，使有

⁶⁰ An example can be found in “Yulao” 喻老, in *Han Feizi jijie*, j. 7, p. 174.

⁶¹ *Huainan honglie jijie*, ann. Liu Wendian, j. 11, p. 416.

⁶² *Huainan honglie jijie*, ann. Liu Wendian, j. 11, p. 416. Because of the complicated history of the commentaries, with Gao You’s and Xu Shen’s divided and mixed across chapters, it is also possible that this is actually Gao You’s commentary.

⁶³ Xu Weiyu, *Lüshi Chunqiu jishi*, j. 9, pp. 201-202.

罪者緣焉，足滑跌墮火中，紂與妲己笑為樂，名曰炮烙之刑。⁶⁴

Zhou wanted to increase the severity of punishments, he then first made a large iron and heated it with fire. He let people hold it and it would burn their hands until they could no longer hold it. Zhou got angry and then he changed it to a copper pole. He had it smeared with grease and placed above hot coals. He let the guilty go along it, their feet would slip and they would fall into the fire. Zhou and Daji would laugh in pleasure. It was called the Burning grid punishment.

This understanding of the origins became common from the eastern Han onwards. It seems to be resounding most clearly in the minds of commentators in the first two centuries of the common era. Were they looking back at the reign of emperor Cheng of the Han 漢成帝 who is known for his cruelty?

Gu Yong 谷永 (fl. 36-9 BCE), an assistant to the Superintendent of Ceremonial 太常丞, was asked to comment upon the appearance of a black dragon (black being the color of the Shang) in the year 29 BCE of emperor Cheng's reign. He memorializes that the emperor is under the influence of women, engages in extravagance, license, and wanton punishment of the opposition, including use of the Roasting grid.⁶⁵ The parallels are clear and the memory of Zhou Xin is actively invoked by Gu Yong in his memorials. In the capital, the Burning and Roasting method was perhaps more than a memory as it could easily end up hurting the courtiers themselves. Whether the use of the

⁶⁴ Quoted in Li Fang 李昉 et al., "Huang wang bu ba" 皇王部八, *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽, 1000 juan in 4 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), j. 83, p. 393. Note that the *Suo yin* 索隱 commentary to the *Shi ji* has a note explaining the torture originating in Zhou seeing ants walking on a hot spoon and burning their feet. Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, j. 3, p. 107.

⁶⁵ See Griet Vankeerberghen, "Pining for the West: Chang'an in the Life of Kings and their Families during Chengdi's Reign," in *Chang'an 26 BCE: An Augustan Age in China*, eds. Vankeerberghen, Griet, and Michael Nylan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), pp. 358-359; Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han, and Xin Periods (221BC-AD24)* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 132; Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書, ann. Yan Shigu 顏師古, 100 juan in 12 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), j. 85, p. 3460.

term Roasting grid, as common in the official histories such as the *Shi ji* and *Han shu* reflects a misunderstanding of the original form *luo* or represents a reinvention of the torture is not clear.⁶⁶

Wei Ao 隗囂 (d. 33), a warlord emerging during the power struggles after the defeat of Wang Mang 王莽, had been formerly in the employ of Liu Xin 劉歆 (46-23 BCE) and likewise knew his classics.⁶⁷ In his condemnation of Wang Mang attached to a call to arms circulating in 23 CE, he refers to a range of offences, including boozing, the imprisoning and punishing of loyal ministers, and of course, engaging in the Roasting grid punishment.⁶⁸ Within the context of a public document intent on rousing support for the restoration of the Han, it is unclear to what extent these accusations reflected reality. It may very well have been an attempt to cancel out Wang Mang's more egregious claims of heritage based on the classics and an affected likeness to the Duke of Zhou by instead comparing him to Zhou Xin.⁶⁹ Be that as it may, the memory and the execution of the punishment itself may have been a much more current concern in the capital.⁷⁰ Indeed, throughout imperial history, the punishment would resurface in a variety of forms, with examples known from later dynasties.⁷¹ It is likely that

⁶⁶ See the discussion in note 31 above.

⁶⁷ As opposed to other texts of the time such as the *Fuzi* 符子 that include an apocryphal story attributing the Burning and Roasting method to Jie, the last ruler of the Xia included in the Li Fang et al., "Huang wang bu qi" 皇王部七, *Taiping yulan*, j. 82, p. 386; or a biography in Fan Ye 范曄, "Zhang Wang Zhong Chen liezhuan" 張王种陳列傳, *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, ann. Li Xian 李賢 et al., 120 juan in 12 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), j. 56, p. 1823. attributing the abolishment of the torture to king Wu 武 of Zhou instead.

⁶⁸ Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han, and Xin Periods (221BC-AD24)*, p. 568; Fan Ye, "Wei Ao Gongsun Shu liezhuan" 隗囂公孫述列傳, *Hou Hanshu*, j. 13, p. 513.

⁶⁹ Note that to Wang Chong, it was the other way around and Zhou's depravity did not match Wang Mang's. Huang Hui 黃暉, "Yuzeng" 語增, *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), v. 1, j. 7, p. 404.

⁷⁰ Note also the practice of burning *fanshao* 燔燒 people alive or posthumously, for example in "Chuzhen" 徹真, *Huainan honglie jijie*, j. 2, p. 90; Liu Xiang, "Quan mou" 權謀, *Shuo Yuan jiaozheng*, j. 13, p. 323. For an overview, see Shen Jiaben 沈家本, *Lidai xingfa kao* 歷代刑法考, 2 vols. (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2011), pp. 85-87.

⁷¹ See for example Wang Yongkuang 王永寬, *Zhongguo gudai kuxing* 中國古代酷刑 (Taipei: Yunlong chubanshe, 1998), pp. 3, 47-54, with examples from the Liao, Ming, and Qing. Also

on the one hand, the cornucopia of excess and violence that Zhou Xin stood for was brought back into memory every time an emperor displayed a number of his notorious characteristics. At the same time, particularly cruel emperors could cherry pick from a whole range of remembered tortures from the past.

5. Doubts about memory

Not everybody agreed that the graphic descriptions of excess attributed to the last ruler of the Shang were realistic. The *Xunzi* 荀子 “Fei xiang” 非相 chapter notes a disparity between memories attesting to the excellence of the vilified last rulers and their eventual perception in the cultural memory:

古者桀紂長巨姣美，天下之傑也。筋力越勁，百人之敵也，然而身死國亡，為天下大僂，後世言惡，則必稽焉。

In antiquity, Jie and Zhou were tall and beautiful, they were among the realm’s finest, strong and nimble, they were an enemy equal to a hundred men. But when they died their state fell, and they became the shame of the realm. Thus, when later generations speak evil of them, we have to scrutinize that.⁷²

The *Xunzi* is referring to Zhou Xin’s physical prowess. The *Shi ji* similarly notes how none could outargue the last Shang ruler and in the *Lunheng* 論衡 we find (a rebuttal of) a legend that he was so strong he could twist metal.⁷³ For the *Xunzi*, the memory of the beauty and ability of these last rulers threw competing memories of their evils in doubt and attributed it to them simply being the last rulers. Others had a more analytical basis for their doubts.

In characteristic fashion, Wang Chong’s 王充 (27-97 CE) *Lunheng* devotes a significant portion of the chapter “Yu zeng” (“Exaggerations”) 語增 to doubting the descriptions of the extravagance and depravity at Zhou’s court. In doing so, he is one of the first to critically weigh the evaluations of earlier

note the discussion in Shen Jiaben, *Lidai xingfa kao*, pp. 83-84.

⁷² Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie*, j. 3, pp. 88-89.

⁷³ See Sima Qian, *Shi ji*, j. 3, pp. 105-106; Huang Hui, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, j. 7, pp. 399-400.

authorities against each other, noting that even Kongzi 孔子 and Mengzi 孟子 cannot agree on the basic facts of the matter. Working with the by then common understanding that Kongzi edited the *Shu* (*Documents*) 書 and thus authorized their content, any comment by Mengzi against the *Shu* goes directly against the sage himself:

孔子曰：「紂之不善，不若是之甚也，是以君子惡居下流，天下之惡皆歸焉。」⁷⁴孟子曰：「吾於〈武成〉，取二三策耳。以至仁伐不仁，如何其血之浮杵也？」若孔子言，殆沮浮杵；若孟子之言，近不血刃。浮杵過其實，不血刃亦失其正。一聖一賢，共論一紂，輕重殊稱，多少異實。

Kongzi said: “Zhou’s wickedness was not so very great. Therefore the superior man hates to consort with base persons, for the faults of the whole world are laid to their charge.” Mengzi said: “From the ‘Completion of the War’ I accept but two or three slips. If the most humane defeated the inhumane, how could so much blood be spilt, that clubs swam in it?” The utterance of Kongzi would seem to uphold the swimming of clubs, whereas the words of Mengzi are very much akin to the assertion that the weapons were not stained with blood. The first overshoots the mark, the second falls short of it. Thus a Sage and a Worthy pass a judgment on Zhou, but both use a different weight, and one gives him credit for more than the other.⁷⁵

Wang Chong, drawing on more recent memory of the bloody defeat of the Qin by the Han armies, repeatedly castigates this passage from *Mengzi*. Wang Chong does not deny the violence, his attack is against literary embellishment. Further on, he challenges the validity of the classic images of depravity, such as

⁷⁴ Note that this statement is attributed to Zi Zhang 子張 in the transmitted version of the *Lunyu* 論語.

⁷⁵ Huang Hui, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, j. 7, pp. 403-404. Translation adapted from Alfred Forke, *Lun-Hêng Part I. Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch'ung, translated from the Chinese and Annotated by Alfred Forke* (London: Luzac and Co., 1907), p. 485.

the mountain of dregs, pond of booze, and forest of meat, because they do not appear in *Shangshu* 尚書 “Kang gao” 康誥.⁷⁶ Even though the equally graphic Burning and Roasting torture does not appear in that chapter either, it goes unchallenged by Wang Chong. Given that in the same chapter, Wang Chong faults Wang Mang for even greater misdeeds than Zhou Xin, perhaps Wei Ao’s claim that Wang Mang used the Roasting grid is not so far sought after all—it is possible that to Wang Chong recent memories of the torture removed any doubt about it occurring in the past.

6. Concluding thoughts

In lieu of a conclusion, several things stand out from Wang Chong’s critiques that help us reflect on the use of violence in memory construction more generally.

(1) Extremes

Wang Chong singles out descriptions that appear extreme. Levels of depravity, legendary strength, dozens of days of drunkenness, and bloodless conquests. These are some of the most vivid images and this is why they were remembered and commented upon again and again. Some of the memories appear crafted to outdo each other in extremity, this irked Gu Jiegang, but it is a common consequence of relating remembered stories from the past.⁷⁷ Others appear deliberately truncated, presented as short euphemistic cues. This too is not surprising in a culture where audiences were assumed to have these stories engrained in their memories, and it does not make the narrative more truthful.

(2) Morality vs. literary craft

The very success of these narratives lies in how effective they are in imprinting images upon the minds of the audience and triggering their imagination. The moral commentator faults them for their depravity and the realist for their exaggeration. In turn, the historian knows how to use these images to weave a powerful narrative and the dramaturg uses them to draw in

⁷⁶ Huang Hui, *Lunheng jiaoshi*, j. 7, pp. 407-411.

⁷⁷ See Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Curry, 1985).

audiences. Yet none is able to pass over these memories easily and all comment on the torture. In terms of the reception of the story, the way the violence was used is crucial. Much of the moral commentary was focused on that Zhou inflicted these punishments on the innocent and the loyal, not necessarily because of the cruelty of the punishments itself.

(3) Authority

Authority often bears the weight of tradition and stories gain in significance the more often they are repeated. From different versions of the narrative surrounding the Burning and Roasting torture we can see that it hardly goes challenged. Effort is instead devoted to explicating its mechanics or analyzing its origins. Divergence in the accounts often focuses on the specific agents involved and the levels of their participation, the order and cause of events, the detail of description, and the surrounding images of depravity. But, as Wang Chong reminds us, authority also comes from authorities. Whether the Duke of Zhou in the “Kang gao” or the use of the *Shi ji* and its commentaries as a standard point of reference for later commentators, certain memories were privileged over others. By drawing on logical inference, textual evidence, debates between authorities, recent memory, and sources in his challenge to various memories, Wang Chong embodies a shift towards a more complicated and reflective memory culture.

(4) Personal experience and memory communities

From the Han onwards, commentators approach the problem with seeming reference to more recent memories. While we do not have direct evidence for the interaction of these commentators, there nevertheless emerges a picture of them cohabitating a memory community interlinked in its access to the texts and the communicative memory of the capital elite. Sima Qian, Liu Xiang (77-6 BCE),⁷⁸ and Liu Xin, Gu Yong, Wei Ao, Wang Chong, Xu Shen, Gao You, and many others formed a literate elite centered around the capital engaged in an

⁷⁸ For example, there is a clear cluster of memories closely related to the narratives current in the capital, associated to Liu Xiang, evidenced by sources such as the *Lienü zhuan*, *Shuoyuan* and *Xinxu*, which appear to have had access to similar sources as the *Shi ji* and Jia Yi's *Xinshu*.

“extended discourse.”⁷⁹ This community was close to power, often the violent kind, and saw their fears reflected in earlier victims such as Bigan, all the while hearsay of more recent uses of the Roasting grid or hot irons reached their ears. While we do not have firm evidence beyond accusations, it appears that to such communities, the horror of Burning and Roasting was more than just a memory. The memories themselves corresponded to a lineage of bad rulers as well, including of course Jie of the Xia in the nebulous past, but also more recent examples such as the first emperor of Qin and Wang Mang. These examples provided a way to digest fears about the present, perhaps Sima Qian’s vivid description of the topic was at least partly informed by the witch scare surrounding emperor Wu of the Han 漢武帝, for example.⁸⁰

(5) Memory, violence, and why we remember

In this article I have argued that violent stories provided a formidable vehicle for cultural memory. While these stories revolved around important issues such as the legitimacy of the Zhou conquest of the Shang, they drew on violent description to draw in audiences to their argument. By triggering the imagination, involvement, and powerful reactions of audiences, these stories created a lasting impression, inscribing powerful images in the cultural memory. At the same time, the depravity and willfulness of the violence itself was so problematic that it needed to be given a proper interpretive place, preferably in the nebulous past. This created enough distance for the capital elite to articulate concerns about their present ruler in the same way that it helped philosophers frame their arguments about loyalty and morality. Violence is but one effective way to inscribing these issues in the cultural memory. As we have seen in some of the examples noted above, material excess, carnal license, and the absurd are all ways of making such memories larger than life. As cues,

⁷⁹ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, pp. 259-262.

⁸⁰ Zhang Hanmo, “Witchcraft and Witch-hunting in the Later Years of Emperor Wu’s Reign: A Reappraisal,” *Bulletin of the Jao tsung-I Academy of Sinology*, no. 8 (2021): 153; Barend J. ter Haar, *The Fear of Witchcraft and Witches in Imperial China: Figurines, Familiars and Demons* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2025).

they provide a door into a broader web of memories otherwise not easily accessible. I want to round up with a final reflection on the enduring power of these memories.

Rudy Kousbroek, in an essay reminiscing on proper Indonesian food, brings up an encounter wherein Chinese tourists refer to a beloved vegetable of his youth, Kangkoeng, as “heartless vegetable” *kongxin cai* 空心菜.⁸¹ Reminded instantly of the story of Bigan in a translated version of the *Feng Shen* (Verheffing tot Goden),⁸² he recollects how Bigan cut out his heart under order of Cheng Tang (sic!) before riding off on his horse. Upon hearing a grocer selling heartless vegetables say that those without a heart die, Bigan dies with blood violently gushing from his chest. This anecdote on its own is of course a great example of the link between violence and remembrance, but in between the lines, Kousbroek reveals another reason for remembering this particular vegetable. He recalls that when he was young, he would sneak out of the Japanese internment camp he grew up in to pick the plant for food. This was risky business because those caught faced “djemoeneren,” exposure in the scorching sun while restrained with a bamboo stick.⁸³ The parallels between personally experienced traumatic past and the violent story associated with a heartless vegetable, in itself retold in a Dutch translation of a Ming dynasty adaptation of the story are revealing of how we use narratives to work through both personal and culturally shared violent memories of the past.

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⁸¹ Rudy Kousbroek, “Over kangkoeng,” NRC, accessed February 20 2024. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/1994/08/06/over-kangkoeng-10444766-a906393>.

⁸² On the novel and its adaptations, see Mark R. E. Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel*. This particular version likely refers to Nio Joe Lan [Liang Youlan], *Feng Shen: de verheffing tot goden: een oud-Chineesch verhaal door een onbekenden auteur* (Batavia: Handel Mij. & Drukkerij “Sin Po,” 1940).

⁸³ Note how Zhou Xin was likewise remembered for “exposing the elderly” 播棄黎老, see “Ming gui xia” 明鬼下, *Mozi jiaozhu* 墨子校注, ann. Wu Yujiang 吳毓江 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), j. 8, pp. 342-343.

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