

Message of the Academia Sinica

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It is only human for us mortals to yearn to know our future – be they imminent occurrences or our far-off destiny. In days of yore, our ancestors were concerned not only with the coming storm that may have ruined their crop but also the ways and dates of their eventual departure from loved ones. Human beings have gone to every length in the search for all kinds of mediumistic devices that could be used to harness the unknown and the intangible. These tools are either within us, as innate powers, or have been created by attuning ourselves to external phenomena. Human mediums observe signs – clues from our own involuntary bodily movements signalling daily misfortunes. We carve and burn, and read the cracks on horns and bones to make sure our newborns are healthy and strong. We even look up and decipher the shape-shifting clouds to determine whether the troops should march on.

This distinctive inquiry into the future cuts across class, gender, and ethnicity. Perhaps precisely because such practices are so prevalent and universal, historians have given them scant attention. Or is the lack of scholarship on this subject due to the modern dichotomy between science and superstition being so compelling that an inspection into the so-called irrational is easily dismissible? Whatever the reason, this publication sees modern scholars make amends for past neglect. In these pages we finally dare to grasp the fear and trembling of our ancestors by returning to the materials they used and left to posterity. After spending years rigorously studying the objects of divination and their historical contexts, the international team behind the current exhibition and catalogue are now able to present the findings of their hard work to the public.

The Institute of History and Philology is honoured to be part of this project. The showcased oracle bones from our collections are the oldest artifacts in the exhibition. The inscriptions bear witness to humanity's thirst for knowledge and acquired wisdom from three millennia ago. The oracle bones were discovered and examined by scholars at the Institute of History and Philology in the early 20th century. Over the past nine decades, the IHP has spared no effort in exploring new research materials. The displayed texts and images – rendered on stone rubbings, wooden slips, and rare manuscripts as well as talismans – are a testament to humanity's persistence in expanding the scope of prediction. These items have been selected out of the 140,000 objects housed at the Museum of the Institute of History and Philology. They are placed alongside divinatory devices from other civilizations, and even compared with present-day apparatuses. We invite you to marvel at these wonderful artifacts and open yourself to the thousands of years of human history stored inside. Particularly in the midst of a pandemic, they are a poignant reminder that the signs of humanity are common, across time, to us all.