
The Term *min* 民 as a Political Concept in Western Zhou Thought*

Joern Peter GRUNDMANN

Department of Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh

This article analyzes the term *min* 民 as a political concept in Western Zhou texts. *Min*, the author argues, did not primarily serve to denote actual populations but referred first and foremost to a political idea, Zhou kingship. In the context of this idea, *min* constitutes a factor or a position within a structure of responsibility originating with Heaven as a transcendent ordering force that allowed the Zhou elites to conceive of their relation to non-Zhou populations in terms of universal kingship. As such, the concept *min* belongs to an imaginary order developed in Western Zhou political rhetoric. The present article sets out to analyze the conceptualization and the uses of the term *min* in contexts envisioning the idea of Zhou Kingship in texts from the *Documents* (*Shu* 書) and from Western Zhou bronze inscriptions.

Keywords: *Min* 民, Zhou kingship, four cardinal regions, Mandate of Heaven, bronze inscriptions, the *Documents*

* During the early stage, research on this paper has been funded by a doctoral fellowship from the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, granted for the academic year 2015/16. I herewith like to express my sincere gratitude for this support. I would further like to thank Joachim Gentz 耿幽靜, Guan Yinlin 管銀霖, Xie Wenhuan and the anonymous reviewers for *BJAS* for their invaluable suggestions on how to sharpen various aspects of my argument and for saving me from committing numerous mistakes. It goes without saying that I alone am responsible for all remaining shortcomings.

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the Western Zhou (ca. 1050–771 BCE) concept of *min* 民 as part of the political ideology developed in the *Documents* (*Shu* 書, or *Shangshu* 尚書) and in a number of texts from Western Zhou bronze inscriptions.¹ My argument addresses a tendency in early China studies to interpret the term *min* as actual populations within the early Chinese socio-political landscape. It has been pointed out by several scholars that in texts from Western Zhou bronze inscriptions and in the *Documents*, *min* often designates non-Zhou populations located on the fringes of the Zhou sphere of influence, especially within the newly acquired eastern territories formerly subject to Shang hegemony.² Although the context of many instances of *min* in these texts clearly corroborates this suggestion,³ I would object that what *min*

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- 1 Apart from the epigraphic sources that can be dated with relative confidence to more or less approximate sections within the Western Zhou period (cf. Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], 106–55 for different criteria that can be applied to date Western Zhou bronze inscriptions), no single text from the transmitted versions of either the *Documents* or the *Odes* (*Shi* 詩) can be securely ascribed a Western Zhou date based on scientific evidence. Based on the scholarship available to him at the time, Herrlee Glessner Creel (1905–1994) identified twelve passages from the modern text *Documents of Zhou* (*Zhou Shu* 周書) section to be of possible Western Zhou origin. These include the five “gao” 誥 chapters, the “Zi cai” 梓材, “Duo shi” 多士, “Jun shi” 君奭, “Duo fang” 多方, “Gu ming” 顧命, “Wen Hou zhi Ming” 文侯之命 and “Bi shi” 費誓 chapters. See H. G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China*, vol. 1, *The Western Chou Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 447–63. Creel’s selection is still largely accepted and will be followed in this article as well. However, there are indicators suggesting that even these twelve passages might have been composed at a much later date. Cf. Kai Vogelsang, “Inscriptions and Proclamations: On the Authenticity of the ‘Gao’ Chapters in the *Book of Documents*,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 74 (2002): 138–209.
- 2 See Léon Vandermeersch, *Wangdao ou La voie royale: recherches sur l’esprit des institutions de la Chine archaïque*, vol. 2, *Structures politiques, les rites* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1980), 153–56; Shirakawa Shizuka 白川靜, “Kinbun tsūshaku” 金文通釋, *Hakutsuru bijutsukan shi* 白鶴美術館誌 48(1978): 174; Thomas Crone, “Der Begriff *min* 民 in Texten der Westlichen Zhōu-Dynastie (1050–771 v. Chr.),” *Orientierungen* 2 (2014): 33–53; and Toyota Hisashi 豊田久, *Shūdai shi no kenkyū: Higashi Ajia sekai ni okeru tayōsei no tōgō* 周代史の研究: 東アジア世界における多様性の統合 (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 2015), 325–32.
- 3 See especially Crone, “Der Begriff *min* 民 in Texten der Westlichen Zhōu-Dynastie (1050–771 v. Chr.),” who presents ample evidence on this point. The traditional and still widely accepted opinion that *min* refers to “commoners” or “the people,” is discussed later in the second part of this paper.