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**THE
POWER
OF
FIRE**

Oracle Bones

What would you do if you wanted to know the outcome of your next exam? Well, if you had lived in China

about 3,500 years ago—the time of the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 B.C.E.)—you would have asked your ancestors and then figured out their answer by reading the cracks on animal bones. We know this to be true thanks to a discovery made in 1899. The find was an oracle bone, just like the one pictured here, by the antique dealer Wang Yirong in Anyang, a city that once served as the capital of the Shang dynasty.

As you can guess from the name, oracle bones served as tools that helped people look into the future. At least this is what the Chinese believed. To achieve this, a question about upcoming weather, the outcome of the next harvest, the fortune of the royal family, or other similar topics was scratched into the bone by a diviner, usually the king. The bone, which was either a shoulder bone of an ox or a shell of a tortoise, was then heated until its surfaces began to crack. The shape of these cracks offered clues to the answer, which eventually was inscribed onto the bone as well.

By the way, the oracle bone script is the earliest Chinese script known so far. As you look at the characters, you see that they resemble pictures of what they actually signify. That is why they are called pictograms. Because of the powers oracle bones were thought to possess, people referred to



them as dragon bones and believed they could heal diseases when pounded into medicine.

—Patrick Wertmann

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