

Digitising the Library's 'Oracle Bones' Collection: an International Cooperation Project

LIBRARY
HSILIB



Sara Chiesura, Chinese collections
The British Library
11th CCDSCR Conference 2016, Macau

The British Library

- It is the **national library** of the United Kingdom
- The **largest library** in the world by number of **items catalogued**
- **Legal deposit** library
- About **170 million** items
- British Library Act **1972** detached the library from the British Museum

BRITISH LIBRARY

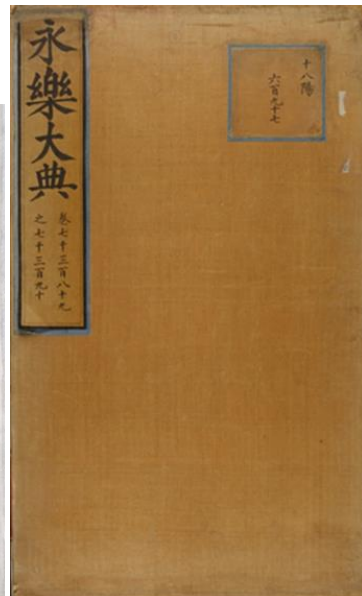


The Chinese collections

- **Chinese collections:** about **120,000** items
- From oracle bones to contemporary material
- Also managing Manchu, Mongolian, Naxi...
- Earliest acquisitions: **Sir Hans Sloane**
- **Stein** collection



LIBRARY
HSILIB



Funding, Partners & Practicalities

Funder: Department of Culture, Media and Sport

Title: UK-China Cultural Exchange Programme

Duration: Financial year 2015-2016

Budget: £62.5K per partner, supplemented by core funds and partner contributions. Further funding for a final symposium.

Partnerships: Four UK institutions plus Chinese partners

Scope: A range of activities aimed at building and fostering relationships with Chinese institutions

LIBRARY
HSIIRB

With

V&A

TATE

The British
Museum

Why the 'oracle bones'?

Importance of the Chinese oracle bones

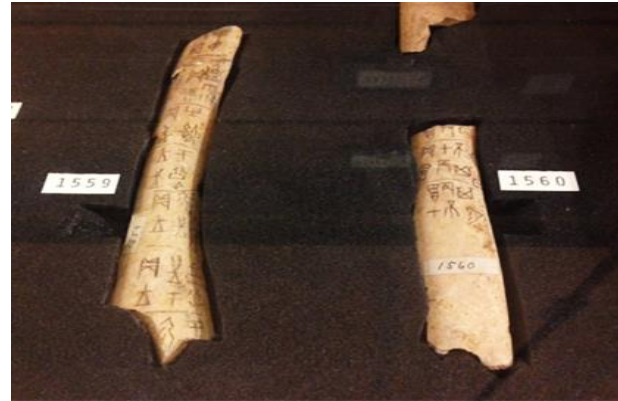
- Used for **divination** practices in Bronze Age China
- **The oldest items** in the British Library (3,000 years old!)
- Carry the **oldest Chinese script**
- Proved the existence of the **Shang dynasty**

The Library's collection of oracle bones

- More than **480**, with variety of shapes and sizes
- From between 1600 and 1050 BCE
- Acquired by the British Museum in 1911
- Catalogue of their rubbings: 1985
- Conservation survey: 2002

Challenges

- **Between 'museum' and 'library'** collections
- **Fragile** – access needs to be restricted
- **Specific needs** in terms of conservation, storage, delivery, access, cataloguing, exhibition, digitisation and so on



Why the National Library of China?

- Existing **strong cooperation links**, mutual trust
- **Renewed MoU** signed in September 2015 during Liu Yandong's visit to London
- NLC's extensive **bones collection** (> 35000) and **expertise** on the subject
- Chance for taking our existing cooperation links to a **deeper level**



LIBRARY
HSI111B



The NLC collection of oracle bones

馆藏甲骨的入藏 – The collection

中国国家图书馆早在**1932** 年就开始购藏甲骨。

形成了至今**35,651**片的规模。

Storage:



[Pictures courtesy of NLC – Dr Zhan Furui]

Online catalogue:



通用編號:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
真人名字:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
内容主题:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
馆藏信息:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
时代:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
地点:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
背面痕跡:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
綴合信息:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
釋文:	<input type="text"/>	与	<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索
參考信息:	<input type="text"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	模糊检索



北圖2368 bei tu 2368



北圖2376 bei tu 2376



北圖2376 bei tu 2376



北圖2377 bei tu 2377



北圖2375 bei tu 2375



北圖237 bei tu 237



北圖2375 bei tu 2375



北圖2371 bei tu 2371

The NLC collection of oracle bones

馆藏甲骨展示与推广 - Display and promotion of the bones

2012年4月，举办“殷契重光—国家图书馆馆藏甲骨精品展”，为中国国家图书馆首次大规模甲骨专题展，共展出甲骨60片

2014年9月，中国国家典籍博物馆正式开馆，开馆首展“国家图书馆馆藏精品大展”中的“金石拓片展”展出甲骨20片

2015年10月，“甲骨文记忆展”再次展出甲骨65片，并在展陈内容通俗性、生动性方面进行了探索，受到大众的热烈欢迎。



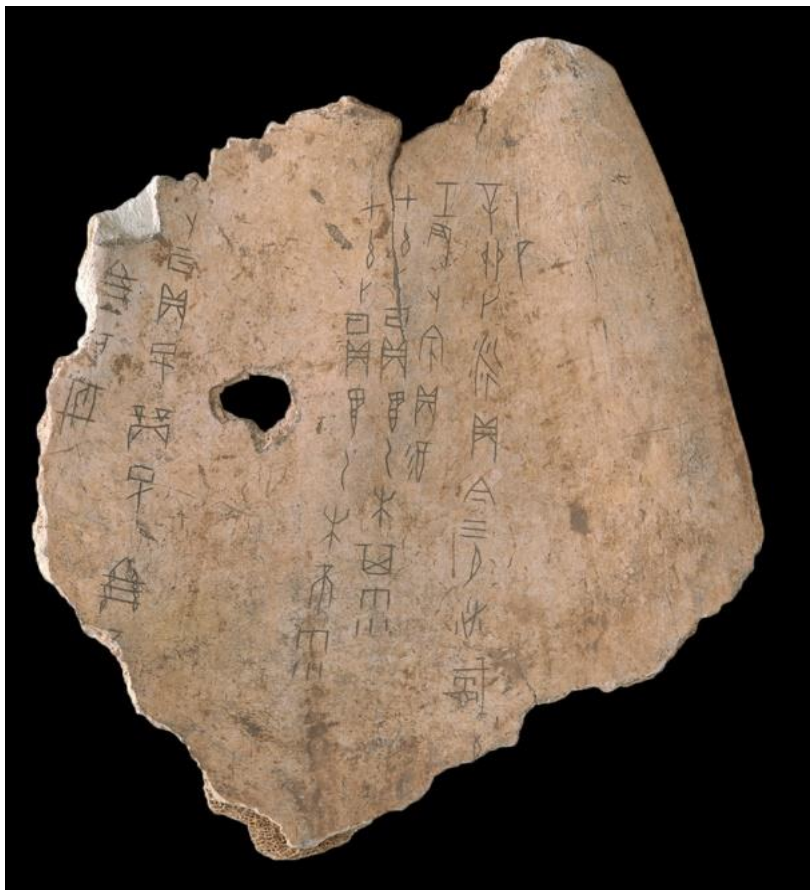
[Pictures courtesy of NLC – Dr Zhan Furui]

Oracle bones project : OBJECTIVES

1. **PARTNER INSTITUTION:** enable strong and long term skills exchange with the Chinese partner in oracle bones studies and their conservation practices.

2. **TO THE PUBLIC:** increase visibility of the Library's oracle bones collection, both in UK and abroad, especially in China, with the purpose of enhancing external research on these items.

3. **INSIDE THE LIBRARY:** increase our awareness and knowledge of the collection, with the purpose of enhancing the Library's contribution to research and the ongoing development of the Chinese collections team.



Oracle bones project : STRANDS



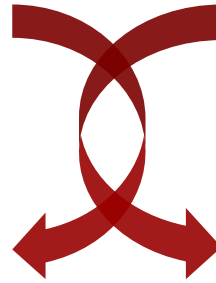
Conservation/technical:

to develop the **British Library's skills and expertise** relating to the conservation, storage, and exhibition of the oracle bones



Research:

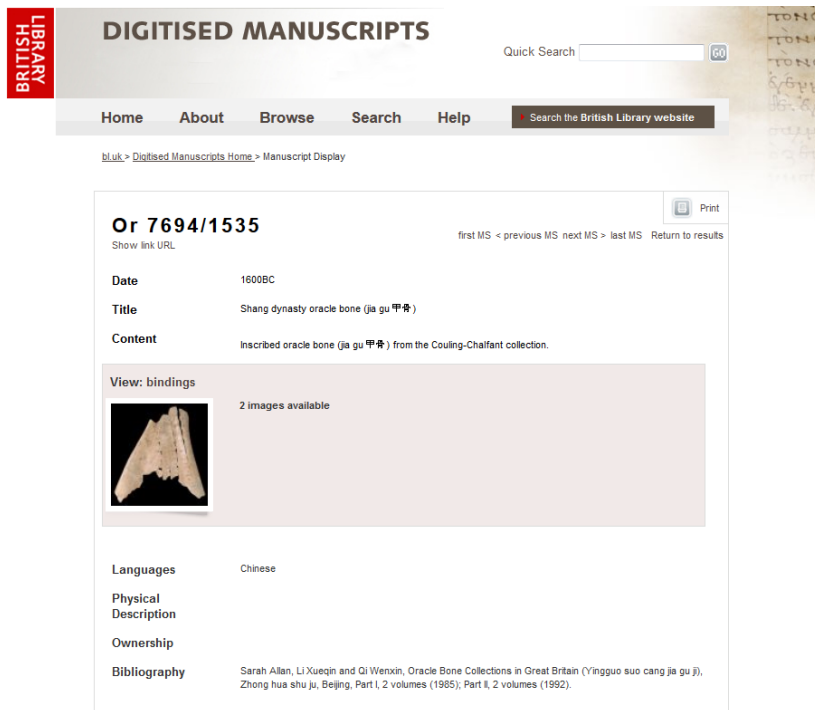
to extend **awareness and knowledge** of the Library's oracle bones and to enable people everywhere to **access** them



Oracle bones project : IMPROVING ACCESS

Cataloguing and 2D imaging of all the Library's oracle bones (more than 480 pieces, including fragments)

August/September 2015



The screenshot shows the British Library Digitised Manuscripts website. The header includes the British Library logo and navigation links: Home, About, Browse, Search, and Help. A search bar is present with a 'GO' button. Below the header, the breadcrumb trail reads: [BLUK > Digitised Manuscripts Home > Manuscript Display](#). The main content area displays the manuscript entry for 'Or 7694/1535'. It includes a 'Print' button and a 'Show link URL' option. The entry details are as follows:

Date	1600BC
Title	Shang dynasty oracle bone (jia gu 甲骨)
Content	Inscribed oracle bone (jia gu 甲骨) from the Couling-Chalfant collection.

Below the details, there is a section for 'View: bindings' with a thumbnail image of the oracle bone and the text '2 images available'. At the bottom, there are sections for 'Languages' (Chinese), 'Physical Description', 'Ownership', and 'Bibliography'.

Languages Chinese

Physical Description

Ownership

Bibliography Sarah Allan, Li Xueqin and Qi Wenxin, Oracle Bone Collections in Great Britain (Yingguo suo cang jia gu jil), Zhong hua shu ju, Beijing, Part I, 2 volumes (1985); Part II, 2 volumes (1992).



KEY BENEFITS:

- Improved access (before restricted due to fragility)
- Permanent online access

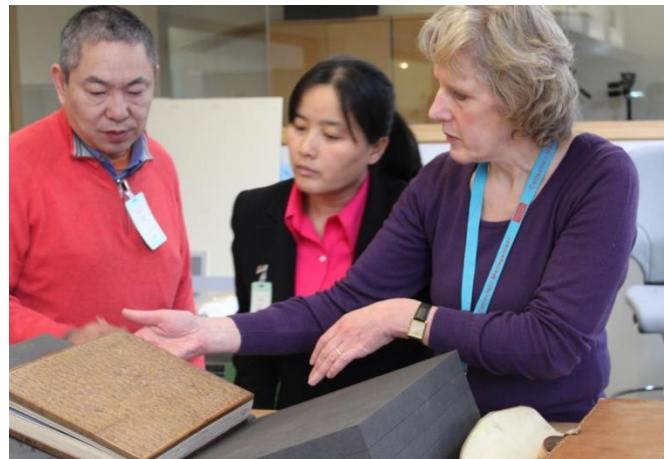
Oracle bones project: IMPROVING SKILLS (Conservation strand: London)

Visit of the Preventive Conservator and the Exhibition Manager of the National Library of China for a week - November 2015



KEY BENEFITS:

- Improved skills in conservation, storage, pre-digitisation conservation activities
- Exchange of ideas and solutions
- Stronger links with partner



Oracle bones project: IMPROVING SKILLS (Conservation strand: Beijing)

Visit of two British Library conservators and one curator to the National Library of China 28 February - 5 March 2016

LIBRARY
HSILIB



KEY BENEFITS:

- Improved skills in conservation, storage, pre-digitisation conservation activities
- Exchange of ideas and solutions
- Stronger links with counterpart



IMPROVING VISIBILITY: the items

- **Free exhibit of selected bones** in the Library's Treasures Gallery, September 2015 – January 2016
- **Public talk:** Michael Wood: The Story of China in the Library's Conference Centre
- Library bones **featured** in 1st episode of the BBC series "The Story of China"

KEY BENEFITS:

- Increased public awareness of oracle bones and their significance
- Increased knowledge of the Chinese collections among the public and colleagues



IMPROVING VISIBILITY: the project

Articles on different Library **blogs**, often in cooperation with **external researchers** from different disciplines (sinology, conservation, astronomy...)

BRITISH LIBRARY

Catalogues ▾ Collections ▾ Discover ▾ Services ▾ Visiting ▾

Collection Care blog

All our blogs | Latest posts | About this blog

Search this blog

[Main](#)

[Previous post](#) | [Next post](#) ▸

16 DECEMBER 2015

Oracle Bones – a conservation collaboration with the National Library of China

Created between 1600 and 1050 BC, the British Library collection of Chinese Oracle bones (approximately 500 in total) are easily the oldest items held by the Library. By comparison [St Cuthbert's Gospel](#), the oldest intact European book dates to the early 8th century and the [Diamond Sutra](#), the world's earliest complete survival of a dated printed book, was produced in 868.



BRITISH LIBRARY

Catalogues ▾ Collections ▾ Discover ▾ Services ▾ Visiting ▾

Asian and African studies blog

All our blogs | Latest posts | Malay | Persian | Thai | Visual arts | About this blog

Search this blog

[Main](#)

[Previous post](#) | [Next post](#) ▸

11 JANUARY 2016

Last Chance to See: Records of a lunar eclipse from over 3,000 years ago

FINAL WEEK: The exhibition 'Beyond Paper: 3000 Years of Chinese Writing', which features the oracle bone described here, is on display in the Sir John Ritblat Gallery at the British Library until 17 January 2016.

Today's post was written with the help of Dr Roberto Soria, a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for Radio Astronomy Research, Curtin University in Western Australia. We are grateful to him for his expertise and valuable contributions.

The significance of the inscribed oracle bones of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1050 BC) for the study of Chinese civilization cannot be overestimated. Not only do they bear the earliest known examples of the Chinese written language and are therefore of great significance to linguists, but they are also the earliest primary source of documentary evidence for a much-disputed period of Chinese history. Through deciphering these texts scholars gained unprecedented insight into the concerns of the

KEY BENEFITS:

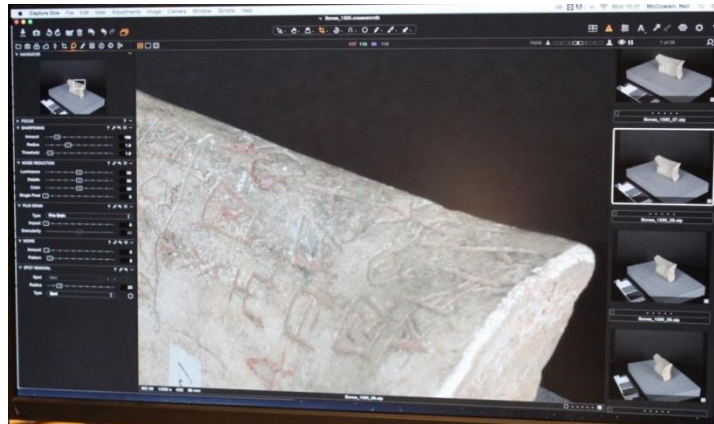
- Increased knowledge and visibility
- Direct contact with worldwide audience
- Forming links with researchers from other institutions and disciplines

Oracle bones project : USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Example: <https://skfb.ly/LVST>

15-16 February 2016:
3D imaging in the Library's
imaging studio of 5 selected items

22 January 2016:
Micro-CT scanning at the Natural
History Museum of 4 selected items



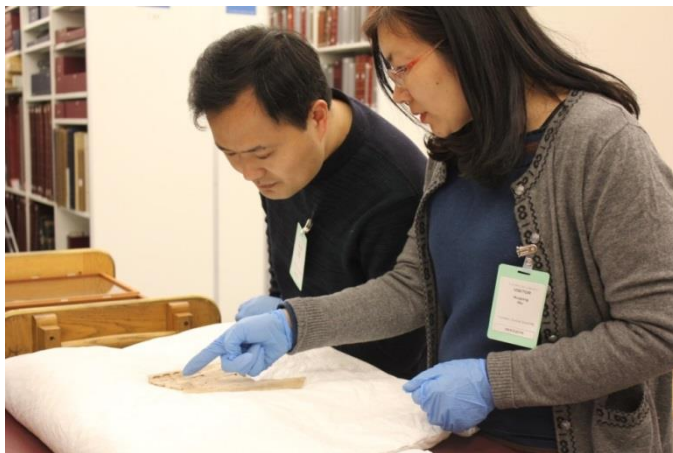
KEY BENEFITS:

- Developing new approaches for oracle bones research
- Improved access to the items
- Cooperation with other UK institutions



Oracle bones project: RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

7 – 11 March 2016:
visit to the Library of
two oracle bones
experts from the
National Library of
China



National Library of China
British Library
University of Edinburgh
Cambridge University Library
British Museum
Cambridge University Museum of
Archaeology and Anthropology
University College London (UCL)
Natural History Museum
University of Oxford

9 March 2016:
roundtable for
oracle bones studies
at the Library



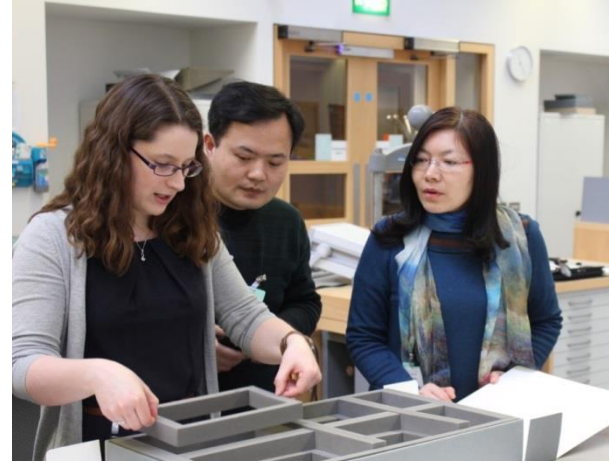
- Encouraging exchange between academic institutions **both with China and within the UK**
- Improved knowledge of the bones collections around the world
- Basis for **future research**

Oracle bones project: OUTPUTS AND LEGACY

- Permanent online access to the Library's collection of oracle bones
- Improved skills for the Library's staff and their Chinese colleagues
- Stronger and more diverse institutional links between the British Library and the National Library of China
- Improved links between UK institutions with oracle bones collections
- Shared knowledge and experiences
- Basis for future research and collaboration activities

Living Knowledge

To make our intellectual heritage accessible to everyone, for research, inspiration and enjoyment



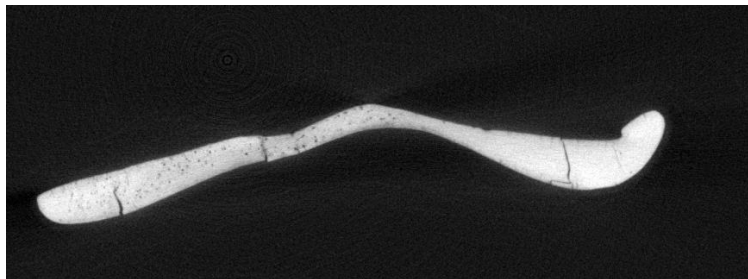
Oracle bones project: FINAL ROUNDTABLE AND SYMPOSIUM

At Tate Britain, 17th
March 2016

- Roundtable
- 4 Panel discussions:
 - Collections, Research & Digital
 - Funding & Governance
 - Touring Exhibition
 - Training



FUTURE STEPS



Research strand:

- Study and research of the **Micro-CT scans results**
- Improvement of the **catalogue records**
- Ongoing **dialogue** with partner institution and UK institutions for future research activities (shared cataloguing standard? union catalogue?)

Conservation strand:

Rehousing of the entire collection thanks to the prototype developed with NLC colleagues

Thank you!

谢谢!

Website:

www.bl.uk/subjects/east-asia

sara.chiesura@bl.uk

Blog:

<http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/asian-and-african/>

Twitter:

@BLAsia_Africa



LIBRARY
HSI LIB

