

## Velikovsky's Interpretation of the Evidence Offered by China in His *Worlds in Collision*

*How did Velikovsky treat evidence from China to support his reconstruction of world history from 1450 to 687 B.C.?*

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**I**N THE PREFACE of *Worlds in Collision*,<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Velikovsky claims that “formulated laws must conform with ‘historical facts.’” On the other hand, he declares that only someone with psychoanalytical training, namely, he himself, can see through the “collective amnesia” of the human race to reconstruct the history of the worldwide cosmic upheavals of antiquity. He further asserts, in the Epilogue, that since these upheavals have invalidated the established chronology preceding -687,\* the last phase of his celestial war, the histories of the ancient nations ought to be synchronized according to the catastrophic events experienced simultaneously by all peoples.

This article examines Velikovsky's use of the evidence offered by China to determine if he has adhered to his first claim. It will barely deal with his other claims, which are in fact unsound assumptions. For the definition of “historical facts” I use E. H. Carr's interpretation—facts that have been selected by a historian owing to their relevance to a past event and later accepted by other historians as significant.<sup>2</sup>

Since the beginning of their civilization, the Chinese have been keeping

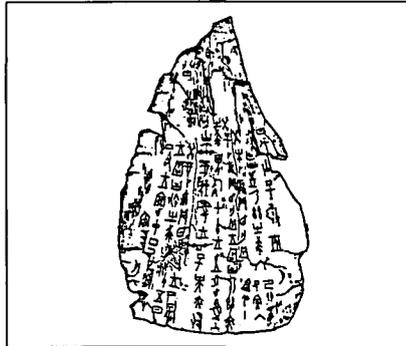
\*For the sake of brevity, the minus sign is used to denote the dates before the Common Era, or B.C.; and the plus sign, dates of the Common Era, or A.D.

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meticulous records of their past. Originally, the task was assumed by an official chronicler. Ancient China, like other primitive agrarian societies, was preoccupied with the observing, interpreting, and recording of astronomical phenomena in order to facilitate farming. A court-appointed clerk, who often functioned also as the official chronicler, was responsible for the task. Moreover, detailed astronomical records were usually included in the chronicles. At present, the oldest extant written documents are from the -17th century. Unfortunately, the written testimonies before the -11th century are mostly fragmented inscriptions on bronzes and oracle bones that are difficult to decipher. Nevertheless they provide definitive evidence that ancient Chinese civilization began at the latest with the Shang Dynasty, trad. -1623 to -1027.<sup>3</sup>



Oracle bone inscriptions, ca. -1600.

If Velikovsky's celestial wars did take place, in -1450, -1400, and between -747 and -687, evidence of them must exist in extant Chinese documents. The Chinese have recorded faithfully the many calamities caused by natural upheavals, e.g., "1,828 reports of flood and famine in the Huangho basin in the course of the last 2,000 years,"<sup>4</sup> and the numerous atrocities caused by human agents, i.e., wars and holocausts. If their records did not mention any celestial war it is because they had not experienced any rather than because, as Velikovsky postulates, they had erased the happening from their consciousness (to attain "collective amnesia") in order to survive the trauma caused by the disaster. Besides, Velikovsky states that, of all the catastrophes, the "flood" during the time of Emperor Yao is the only one that plays a conspicuous part in the recollection of the Chinese.<sup>5</sup> "The flood," owing to its dubious relevance to the Exodus episode, is the *prima donna* in the first act of Velikovsky's drama, which took place in -1450 and thereafter until -1400. Velikovsky believes that he has found the evidence to support his flood theme in the events occurring during the reign of Emperor Yao, trad. -2357 to -2256, which preceded his celestial war by 900 years. To investigate how Velikovsky arrived at such a conclusion, an examination of the evidence he used is in order here. Since Bob Forrest has done an excellent analysis of Velikovsky's use or abuse of sources, I will concentrate on the areas that were covered only minimally in that useful work.<sup>6</sup>

Besides translations of ancient Chinese texts, Velikovsky also relies on tertiary Western works, some of which are obviously worthless and hence categorically ignored by this article.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese texts used are the *Book of Historical Documents*, the *Memoirs of the Grand Historian*, and the *Annals of the Bamboo Books*.<sup>8</sup> Velikovsky states that the *Book of Historical Documents* was rewritten from memory or hidden manuscripts after the burning of books by Shi Huang-Di (the First Emperor, r. -246 to -211), who unified China under the Qin Dynasty.<sup>9</sup> If he had made an effort to verify this allegation he would have learned that the First Emperor's Edict of -213, which aimed at enforcing "thought control" to keep people ignorant, applied to the books owned by commoners only. The books that were in the state archives or in the collections of court scholars remained intact.<sup>10</sup> However, the controversy about the authenticity of the *Documents* arose because some editions, which surfaced decades after the Qin Dynasty was replaced by the Han (-206), were found to differ from the edition adopted by the Han rulers. The various pieces in the *Documents* were gathered mainly around the -8th century, and the collected work was later edited by Confucius (-552 to -479), according to Chinese tradition. The "Canon of Yao," chapter 1 of the *Documents*, has been accepted by Sinologists as authentic and as written in the -8th century. Despite Velikovsky's skillful selective editing, Bob Forrest has presented evidence in his *Velikovsky's Sources* to shatter Velikovsky's unfounded assertion that the "canon" provides proofs for the visitation of cosmic catastrophes on the Chinese.

As noted above, Yao preceded the first celestial war by nine centuries. Velikovsky's synchronizing efforts would not work, particularly in this case, because there is simply no standing room for Yao in the middle -1000s. The millennium-old Chinese practice of ancestor worship required that the Chinese carefully record their genealogies, especially those of the priest-kings. The *Memoirs*, compiled by Ssu-Ma Ch'ien (ca. -145 to -86), who, as the Han official historian, had access to the state archives, is widely recognized as a reliable source, even for the Shang period, trad. -1623 to -1027, as proven by the oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, excavated around the early +1900s. It contains a complete genealogy of the Shang monarchs.<sup>11</sup> Yao does not appear on the list.

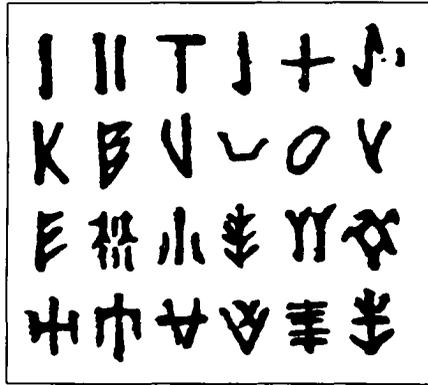
The *Annals*, dealing mainly with ancient Chinese chronology, was compiled for the ruler of the *Wei* state during the early -200s and found in his grave in +281. Unfortunately, it was lost during the Southern Sung Dynasty (+1126 to +1279), and forged texts appeared in Ming times (+1368 to +1643). From passages cited in some pre-Sung works, fragments of the authentic *Annals* were collated by modern scholars. In general it should be used with great care as a source of historical facts. The *Annals'* account of Yao's mythical birth—his mother was impregnated by a red dragon<sup>12</sup>—should have kept Velikovsky from including this source in his selective editing. Velikovsky, however, needed any written testimony that would supplement the one single document—the "Canon of Yao," which consists of only 440 characters—as

evidential support for his scenario.

According to orthodox scholarship, Yao was an immortal existing originally in Chinese mythology. As the oral traditions were handed down from generation to generation they were eventually recycled into history in the early years of the Zhou Dynasty (-1030 to -221) when euhemerization was in progress.<sup>13</sup> Yao personifies the forces at work that had brought civilization to the Chinese. Another legendary king, the Yu who saved China from the flood, according to Velikovsky's script, has come into existence through the same process. As pointed out by Bodde, the Yu flood is not a localized memory of any particular flood but part of the universal-flood theme symbolizing primeval chaos.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Yu, who allegedly succeeded in draining off the flood waters and opening up waterways, personified the course of struggling against nature a society goes through to attain agrarian economy. The euhemerization process was superbly refined by Confucius and his disciples, who took it upon themselves to conserve and edit the ancient texts into classics. Hence Yao and Yu have been praised as the sage kings of ancient China whom all monarchs ought to emulate. The flood is not remembered by the Chinese because of its unusually catastrophic impact generating a "collective amnesia," as rationalized by Velikovsky. It is remembered rather as a symbol of Yu's selfless service for the people.<sup>15</sup>

Velikovsky, after reiterating his scenario of the cosmic catastrophe that Yao had to deal with, asserts that the period before the catastrophe is quite obliterated.<sup>16</sup> If he is talking about the period before -1450, he has ignored the fact that the record of China's history, confirmed by oracle bone and bronze inscriptions (which information was available before +1950 when *WIC* was published), goes back to the -17th century. If he is talking about the period before Yao, trad. -2357, he is likewise mistaken. Archaeological finds unearthed in the early +1950s at Ban-Po confirmed that the Chinese settlement there around -4000 was already protoliterate: certain basic numerals and crude word-signs were found on some excavated potsherds.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the prehistoric Chinese, although they had produced beautiful pottery, did not use clay tablets as the Babylonians did for writing materials. Instead they used easily deteriorated materials like wood and bamboo strips. Nevertheless the mute evidence produced by prehistoric China (i.e., prior to -2200) that has been showing up in increasing quantity since the early +1900s does provide a record, though a very incomplete one, of China in antiquity.

Just as "the flood" is the focus of Act One of Velikovsky's cosmic drama, the abnormal movements of the sun, which caused the destruction of Sennacherib's army in -687, are the central theme of Act Two. Velikovsky needs to provide evidence to support his speculation that between -747 and -687 the battle between Mars and Earth caused various astral abnormalities throughout the world. The sources on Chinese astronomy mentioned by him were compiled by A. Gaubil, Abel-Rémusat, and Scaliger, all recognized as authorities of the field. But China's extensive astronomical records show that what Velikovsky considers as "rare" phenomena, such as eclipses, the falling



Crude word-signs on potsherds unearthed at Ban-Po, ca. -4000.

of meteorites, the lingering appearance of comets, the birth of novae, the effects of earth-shine and corona, and so on, have been observed and recorded regularly.<sup>18</sup> In fact, when Velikovsky quotes from the *Annals* that “a brilliant star appeared” to imply that the new-born comet Venus was causing the cataclysm of Yao’s time,<sup>19</sup> he must have noticed that two lines below that sentence the *Annals* records, “the five planets looked like threaded pearls.”<sup>20</sup> What China considered as the five planets had always been: Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury, and Saturn. Hence Venus already existed as a planet in Yao’s time, trad. -2400. William Mullen, a Velikovskian, says that Velikovsky has described himself as a psychiatrist by vocation and a historian by avocation.<sup>21</sup> How much credence should one give to Velikovsky’s “historical facts” when he consistently changes the dates of historical events to support the conclusion of his psychoanalysis?

The “rare” phenomena Velikovsky seeks can be found easily in the catalogs compiled by the abovementioned European astronomers. One such occurrence, a meteor shower, did fall on March 23, -687, and the entry “Stars fell like rain” is based on, says Velikovsky, “old chinese sources ascribed to Confucius,” but Velikovsky fails to name the *authoritative* sources.<sup>22</sup> Apparently Velikovsky cannot stretch such a terse statement, “Stars fell like rain,” too far. Fortunately he finds, in the *Annals*, a similar occurrence during the reign of King Kwei of the Hsia Dynasty (trad. -2000s to -1623). Moreover, the same statement, “Stars fell like rain,” was employed to describe that occurrence. Most important, this latter record contains other information he can manipulate to support his battling-planets hypothesis.<sup>23</sup> He therefore makes a most amazing leap and invents an interesting but imaginary logic. He proclaims that since the same statement was used by different sources to describe the occurrences, the latter record must have referred to one and the same event! As a matter of fact, “Stars fell like rain” (meaning “meteor showers”) serves the same purpose as “It rains cats and dogs.” Taking a brief glance at the chronology tables in *Memoirs*, one readily spots this statement here and there.<sup>24</sup> For example, it appears under -645, which is much closer to

-687 than -1678, the time of the event that was recorded in the *Annals*. It is impossible that Velikovsky is ignorant of the -1678 date; it is stated clearly in Legge's translation, which he has been using up to this point.<sup>25</sup>

Later, when Velikovsky again refers to the astral abnormality, after convincing himself that it happened on March 23, -687 instead of in -1687, he uses a different translation, which furnishes him with the necessary evidence for his alleged celestial war.<sup>26</sup> L. Wieger, whose selective editing is as remarkable as Velikovsky's, has translated the *Annals'* dull "chronicle of Kwei" into a sensational record of military endeavors. For example, the Chinese text says, "three suns appeared together," but Wieger's translation renders it into, "l'on vit deux soleils se battre dans le ciel."<sup>27</sup> How pleased Velikovsky must have been by his discovery of this translation! There is finally material for him to manufacture into supporting evidence for his alleged battle between Mars and Earth. The time element, a difference of a millennium, is still a problem despite his bold leap, because King Kwei, unlike Emperor Yao, is a historical personage rather than a legendary figure and was certainly not around anywhere in the whole universe on March 23, -687. Velikovsky tries to sweep this problem under the carpet by identifying King Kwei as the eighteenth monarch since Yao instead of indicating his reign dates: trad. -1688 to -1657. Even if Yao could have been fitted into Velikovsky's -1450 time-slot, King Kwei, being the eighteenth monarch following Yao, would need to reign, at the latest, 600 years after Yao (assuming 30 years to be the average span of each monarch's reign). This would place King Kwei in the -800s, still two centuries too early for the cosmic phenomena that supposedly caused Sennacherib's defeat.

Did China suffer any catastrophes caused by the type of cosmic upheavals described by Velikovsky between -747 and -687? No evidence supporting a positive answer can be found in the *Book of Poetry*.<sup>28</sup> This collection of folksongs, which were written between the -9th and the -5th century, has been recognized by Sinologists as an authentic and excellent source that illuminates the life of the Chinese from the late -11th to the middle of the -6th century. Neither can a positive answer be substantiated by the chronology tables in the *Memoirs*, which record major events systematically from -841 to -101.

Velikovsky assigns a special reason to calendar formulating or revision. He interprets such activities as evidence that the cosmic order has been disturbed by catastrophic astral upheavals. He therefore claims Yao's order to have the calendar adjusted as a strong proof. Chinese tradition has it that before Yao ascended the throne the country was in chaos and therefore the astronomer neglected his responsibilities to maintain an accurate calendar. Hence Yao took measures to remedy the situation as soon as he became the emperor. A simpler but more pragmatic explanation than Velikovsky's logic is that ancient peoples, while backward in mathematics and astronomy, need to go through various developmental stages to achieve accuracy in time-reckoning.

Velikovsky also insists that between -1400 and -700 all peoples in the world adhered to a calendar that had 360 days a year, which was divided into 12 months of 30 days each. Later, he further professes that the belligerent Mars had caused Earth to shift her poles, thus lengthening the year to 365.25 days. Oracle bone inscriptions have confirmed that the Chinese were aware, in the -13th century, that the sidereal year consisted of 365.25 solar days. Moreover they had established that there were 29 or 30 days a month and 10 days a week. In order to make their lunar year calculation correspond with the sidereal year so that the four seasons would be regulated, the ancient Chinese added an intercalary month in a three-year period or two intercalary months in a five-year span. The basic principle of this lunar year calendar remains more or less the same throughout the ages and is still in operation in China today.

To illustrate his speculation on “collective amnesia,” Velikovsky chooses the dragon motif because it is prominent in many world cultures. He conjectures that the universal fascination with this theme originated in the viewing, by ancient peoples of the world, of the comet Typhon spreading “like an animal over the sky with its many heads and winged body, with fire flaming from its mouths.”<sup>29</sup> He further theorizes that the dragon, a nonexistent object, symbolizes an extinct menace, which at one time terrorized the peoples of antiquity. The trauma was so great that the menace, in this case, the comet Typhon, left an everlasting impression of its image on the collective unconsciousness of mankind even though its *raison d'être* has been erased from human consciousness. The evidence he cites includes a Chinese dragon flag.<sup>30</sup>

One cannot help wondering whether Velikovsky, who must have come across the Chinese dragon motif often in his sources on Chinese civilization, really fails to realize that the Chinese dragon—*lung*—is very different from the dragon of Indo-European cultures. Although the Chinese dragon did not acquire the “royal” status officially until the -200s, it had existed in the Chinese consciousness before -1600. It appeared frequently on Shang and early Western Zhou bronze vessels, especially those used for religious rituals. It did not represent any capricious menace to the Chinese as Velikovsky imagines. Instead, it served as an agent to the Chinese—or their priest-kings, rather—in their task of communicating between heaven, “where all the wisdom of human affairs lies,” and earth, the spirits, and the living.<sup>31</sup> Would the Chinese have given the dragon such a reverent treatment throughout their history if it had represented indeed an evil force in their collective unconsciousness? Suffice it to say, therefore, that the Chinese concept of dragon has disproved Velikovsky's hypothesis of “collective amnesia.”

This investigation has discovered that Velikovsky has misinterpreted or even abused the evidence provided by China to support his reconstruction of world history from -1450 to -687. It has also found that *Worlds in Collision* is ridden by the problem of fact, the problem of logic, the problem of scholarship, and the problem of culture. In 1974, Velikovsky declared: “Nobody can change a single sentence in my books.”<sup>32</sup> Did he really mean to



The Chinese dragon has only one head and rarely does it appear with fire flaming from its mouth. It is the topmost divinely constituted beast and signifies every auspicious thing under the sky. Bronze *kuang* (libation bucket) with dragon design, ca. -1600. (From *Historical Relics Unearthed in New China*, Foreign Languages Press, 1972.)

Bronze *yu* (libation bucket) with dragon motif, ca. -1600. (From *Historical Relics Unearthed in New China*.)



have the statement taken literally? If the answer is positive, how could he expect the science community to treat his writings as other than fiction? Similarly, the history profession is justified in its overall silence to his efforts in "reverse history," which culminate in books like *Worlds in Collision*.

## Notes

1. Immanuel Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (New York: Pocket Books, 1977). Henceforth cited as *WIC*.
2. Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1962), pp. 8-11.
3. The history of the Shang Dynasty is still awaiting rewriting, owing to new evidence unearthed by archaeological excavations that have been going on in China since the early 1900s. One particularly notable find was yielded by the +1928 to +1937 excavation at Anyang, the last Shang capital, established around -1301. However, based on the earliest extant Chinese texts, it has been confirmed that the dynasty had thirty kings whose collective reign lasted for about 600 years. Nevertheless, inconsistencies exist among the ancient texts regarding the dating of the dynasty, which has been a heated debate among modern-day experts on ancient China. The most influential dates are -1766 to -1122, -1711 to -1111, and -1623 to -1027. The last dating is most popular among contemporary Shang scholars. See Kwang-chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 16-19.
4. Kwang-chih Chang, *Early Chinese Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 66.
5. *WIC*, p. 115.
6. Bob Forrest, *Velikovsky's Sources* (Manchester: Forrest, 1983). Sections 12, 55, 56, and 57 deal with Chinese sources specifically.
7. For example, J. Hübner, *Kurze Fragen aus der politischen Historie* (1729); Hans Bellamy, *Moons, Myths and Man* (1936).
8. Henceforth referred to as the *Documents*, the *Memoirs*, and the *Annals*, respectively. Velikovsky used basically James Legge's monumental translations of the *Documents* and the *Annals* on which this study also relies. This paper, however, uses a modern yet authoritative Chinese edition of the *Memoirs*: Ch'ien Ssu-ma, *Shi-ji* (Hong Kong: Zhong-hua, 1969).
9. *WIC*, p. 116.
10. Ch'ien Ssu-ma, "History of the First Emperor," in the *Memoirs*. Even though the Qin state archive was burnt when a rebel leader fired the palace about -206, copies of ancient texts in official and even private collections did survive.
11. The complete list of the thirty Shang monarchs is reprinted in Kwang-chih Chang, *Shang Civilization*, op. cit., p. 6.
12. James Legge, *Annals of the Bamboo Books*, vol. 3, Pt. 1 of his *Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 112.
13. Derk Bodde, "Myths of Ancient China," in his *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 45-84. Euhemerization is the process of interpreting myths as accounts of actual historical events and people.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
15. According to Chinese traditions, for nine years Yu was so devoted to solving the flood problem that he did not even see his family. Thrice he passed his house but did not stop to enter, although he heard his infant son wailing from within.
16. *WIC*, p. 117.
17. Ping-ti Ho, *Cradle of the East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 223-226.
18. Joseph Needham, *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth*, vol. 3 of *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1959), pp. 409-436.
19. *WIC*, pp. 116, 169.
20. Legge, *Annals*, p. 112.
21. *Velikovsky Reconsidered* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 246.
22. *WIC*, p. 241.
23. Legge, *Annals*, p. 125. On page 241 of *WIC*, Velikovsky cites the entry, "In his 10th year the five planets went out of their courses. In the night stars fell like rain." However, he then chooses to ignore not only the time when the event occurred, -1678, but also the fact that there were already five planets, including Venus.
24. Needham, op. cit., p. 433. Needham claims that Chinese recordings show that the average period of recurrence of meteor showers was 33.25 years.
25. Legge had accepted -1523 as the beginning date of the Shang Dynasty. Since this paper has chosen a date that precedes Legge's by a century, all other dates used by Legge for ancient China, namely, -2200 to -246, will be moved back likewise. Consequently, -1578, the date specified in Legge's *Annals*, is replaced by -1678.

26. *WIC*, p. 260.
27. L. Wieger, *Texts Historiques* (1922-1923), vol. 1, p. 50, cited in Bob Forrest, *op. cit.*, p. 421.
28. Legge, *Book of Poetry*, vol. 4 of *Chinese Classics*, *op. cit.*
29. *WIC*, p. 310.
30. *Ibid.* Since 1912 when despotism was replaced by republicanism as the government structure of China the dragon has never appeared on a Chinese flag.
31. Kwang-chih Chang, *Art, Myth and Ritual* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 45, 65-68, 78. Excellent illustrations of the dragon motif on bronze vessels can be found on pp. 58, 77, 92.
32. Immanuel Velikovsky, "My Challenge to Conventional Views in Science," *Humanist*, 37 (November-December 1977), 10. ●

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