This collection of notes on some general problems related to the writing and the language (mostly in its grammatical aspects) of the Shang bone and shell inscriptions was begun as a review of the recent work of Chang Tsung-tung, Der Kult der Shang-Dynastie im Spiegel der Orakelinschriften (Eine paläographische Studie zur Religion im archaischen China). This is an important work, not only or mostly for its own special topic of research, the Shang religion, but for the study of the Shang bone texts itself. It was felt that the usual kind of review would not suffice to discuss in full the intricate problems involved in this field of research. Therefore these notes are intended as comments regarding any study of Shang oracle inscriptions in general rather than direct criticisms of Chang's book, which merely provided the occasion.

With the growing number of new publications, comprising special topical studies, editions of various bone collections with transcription and discussion of texts, indexes, dictionaries and an increasing number of monographs or studies on individual characters, the factual information contained in or to be derived from these materials has become more and more widely available to historians as well as philologists and linguists. To quote D. V. Keightley (Review of Shima Kunio 島邦男, Index to bokuji sōrui 境卜辞総類, Tokyo 1967. Hereafter: Shima, Index): "Shang oracle writings need no longer remain the exclusive realm of philologists. I hope that this review by introducing a major new reference work to Western scholars will assist all those, especially the historians interested in earliest Chinese records." (Monumenta Serica, xxviii, p. 467) One can only agree with this aim. However, the problems of decipherment, the comparative analysis of the graphs, and the study of the language of these
texts still loom as the biggest, the most important, and, in spite of all efforts, still insufficiently solved elements; they are preliminary, even conditio sine qua non, for any kind of reliable and sound historical or cultural (including religious) interpretations. Because of this, it still remains a fact that the historians will have to wait for reliable, accurate and justified translations and also the necessary comments from the philologists and linguists to qualify the degrees of certainty or doubtfulness at various levels of translation and interpretation, or they must themselves go through the efforts of doing the spade work, and double as philologists and linguists. While evaluating here Chang's success and contributions toward the solution of these problems connected with textual collation, transcription and translation of the texts, before even dealing with the exposition and interpretation of the facts contained in them, we want merely to clarify and stress some basic methodological requirements in any work of this type. We should mention at least the following separate steps: (1) dating of the bone fragments; (2) transcription of the graphs in original shape and sequence; (3) identification of graphs and their analysis, their possible equation or ancestral connection with later and better known graphic forms in successive periods of Chinese writing; (4) determination of meaning and usage of the graphs in the texts or within certain idiomatic expressions; (5) function of certain graphs in the grammatical system; and, last not least, (6) specific problems of syntax in the language of the Shang texts. Thus, we can see that at each step the student of Shang bone texts has to make decisions and opt for solutions that may seriously affect his translations and, then also, his historical and cultural interpretations. Some of these problems are dealt with by the author in his introductory remarks, but unfortunately in a too general outline.