

# **A Course in Early Chinese History**

## **PART III**

### **Shang and Western Zhou Periods**

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## INTRODUCTION TO READINGS ON PRE-CLASSICAL CHINA

This page introduces a set of materials for the study of pre-Classical China. The initial focus of these readings will be the Shang period (c. 1500 - 1045). After the basic nature of the Shang has been discussed, there is a section on the Neolithic (New Stone Age) antecedents to the Shang, and then the story moves on to the Western Zhou (1045 - 771). The Shang and Western Zhou eras comprise the height of China's Bronze Age, and we will find that bronze artifacts are important in understanding the society and culture of these eras.

In studying pre-Classical China, we rely principally on materials that have been archaeologically excavated since the beginning of the twentieth century, although even when dealing with these, it is not possible to discard at least some textual sources that date from the Classical and post-Classical eras. Without the general frameworks provided by Han period histories such as the *Shiji*, it is unlikely that we could have made much sense of the archaeological materials. The way that the Shang and early Zhou have been studied by scholars in this century has always been in terms of how our newly uncovered evidence either confirms the accounts of the later texts or contradicts them. We will also take this approach.

Throughout the first section of this course, we referred to certain emperors as very likely legendary; we suggested that the Xia Dynasty (founded by the flood-conquering Emperor Yu) might not be historical; we had little to say about the Shang Dynasty prior to the tales of the evil last ruler, Zhòu, and wondered how much of the colorful account of the founding of the Zhou Dynasty was based on fact. In this part of the course, we will learn a substantial amount about late Shang culture and about the founding and first centuries of the Zhou. Part of the vagueness that surrounds these eras will be resolved. This is largely because China became literate in the mid-Shang, and among those objects that have been reclaimed from beneath the ground there are many that actually *speak* to us and address our questions (although often indirectly and in a language we still understand imperfectly).

We will learn less about the most distant ancestors of China. We will not be able to determine for certain whether the legendary emperors ever "existed" in any form, or whether the Xia Dynasty is a fictional construct. We will, however, be better able to consider what we might expect to learn with regard to the pre-literate eras of Chinese history, and to what degree we may hope to match late textual accounts with the silent evidence of Neolithic China.

The opening reading in this section of the course will introduce you to the archaeological perspective that will guide our work in this section of the course, and will contrast it to the later historical narrative vision of the *Shiji*.