

# I

## *Introduction to the Shang*

In the spring of 1898, the villagers of Xiaotun, near Anyang in northern Henan Province, uncovered fragments of ancient bones with strange markings on them when ploughing their fields and sold them as ‘dragon bones’, a traditional ingredient of Chinese medicine. In the following year, the palaeographer Wang Yirong 王懿榮 examined the contents of his apothecary’s receipt and discovered that his ‘dragon bones’ were engraved with an ancient form of Chinese writing.<sup>1</sup> These ‘dragon bones’ or ‘oracle bones’, as they soon came to be called, were ox scapulae and turtle shells—primarily the undershells or plastrons—which had been used in divination by the kings of the late Shang dynasty.

The oracle bones had been carefully cleaned and trimmed and hollows had been made on one side. Divination was made by applying a hot poker to these hollows, resulting in a crack on the reverse side. This took a conventional shape, represented by the Chinese character *bu* 卜. How the cracks were read remains a mystery, but after they were made, the topic of divination was sometimes engraved beside the crack or, occasionally, across it.<sup>2</sup> Normally, only the topic of divination was recorded, but the scribe sometimes added a note about how the king interpreted the crack and, on rare occasions, recorded what actually happened afterwards.

The site where the bones were found was traditionally called Yinxu 殷墟, the ‘Remains of Yin’. Yin is the traditional name for its last capital and an alternative name for the dynasty. According to the *Shiji* 史記, compiled in the second century B.C., the dynasty was founded by Cheng Tang 成湯 and its capital was moved five times. The last capital, south of the Yellow River, that is, in present-day Henan Province, was founded by the nineteenth ruler, Pan Geng 盤庚. He was succeeded by his two brothers and then by his nephew Wu Ding 武丁, who held the rule for fifty-nine years and restored the grandeur of the dynasty, which lasted until its thirtieth king, the evil and incompetent Zhou Xin 紂辛, was overthrown by King Wu 武王, who established the Zhou 周 Dynasty. The Zhou had been a tributary state of the Shang with their homeland in the

western Wei River valley, in present-day Shaanxi Province. They established a new capital near modern Xi'an, and Yin fell into ruin.

The period from the fifth to third centuries B.C., known as the Period of the Warring States, was the classical period of Chinese philosophy in which "one hundred schools of thought contended," as the states battled one another for military supremacy. The primary form in which the philosophers expressed their vision of a perfect state and advocated their political philosophy was in terms of ancient sage kings. These included not only rulers of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but also those of a previous dynasty called the Xia 夏 (traditionally ca. 2200–1760 B.C.) and even earlier sage kings who did not establish hereditary dynasties.<sup>3</sup> However, there are only a few extant texts that predate the Warring States period and none that predate the founding of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1100–256 B.C.). At the beginning of this century, just as the oracle bone inscriptions were beginning to be deciphered, Chinese scholars had begun to reassess their traditional history and to recognize that it was intermingled with myth and legend. Some, such as the writer and philosopher Hu Shi 胡適, questioned the authenticity of all Chinese history before the Zhou Dynasty.

Mythology has been a focus for academic debate in the West for over twenty-five years. During this same period, our knowledge of ancient China has been dramatically altered by new archaeological discoveries and increasingly sophisticated interpretations of early inscriptions. The major works on Chinese mythology, however, are still those written in the first half of this century—in China, the *Gushibian* 古史辨 volumes edited by Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛; in the West, the works of Henri Maspero, Marcel Granet, Wolfram Eberhard, and Bernhard Karlgren. This work is a reexamination of the problem of myth in ancient China, understood broadly as mythic thinking, including cosmology, divination, art and ritual. It is planned as the first of a series of works on the development of early Chinese thought and will center upon the thought of the late Shang Dynasty (ca. 1700–1100 B.C.),<sup>4</sup> although references will also be made to later periods.

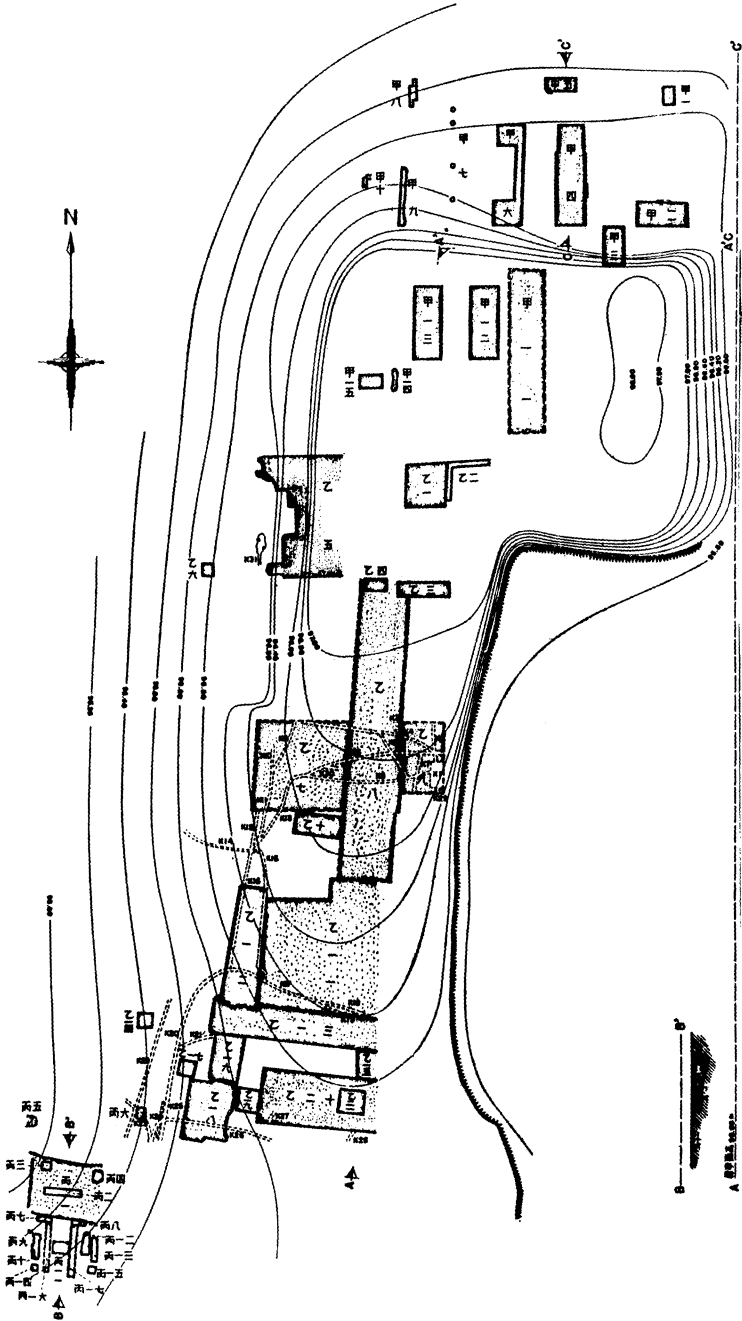
Many writers have made a distinction between the thinking of literate and nonliterate peoples. The oracle bone inscriptions from Yinxu represent a fully developed writing system, but, as I shall argue further on in this chapter, literature rather than literacy transforms mythic thinking and the use of writing was still severely restricted in the Shang Dynasty. Before turning to this argument, however, I will briefly review the historical and archaeological evidence for the Shang as background for the nonspecialist.

The oracle bone inscriptions established the historical authenticity of the Shang but by indirect means. They do not include any records uncon-

nected with divination, nor do they include any extended narrative. Most often they are simply isolated sentences, usually propositions about the future, either proposed sacrifices or other activities of the king or his entourage, or future events in the natural world. Even when an interpretation and record of what happened is recorded, it is stated very briefly and without exposition. Nevertheless, in divinations about ancestral sacrifices, the ancestors are often named and listed in generational order. From these, a genealogy and king list can be compiled. The names can be matched to those of the kings listed in the *Shi ji* and they confirm the historical record, though there is no evidence in the ancestral sacrifices that Cheng Tang had a special role as dynastic founder. He is simply one ancestor, albeit a particularly powerful one, within a genealogy of ancestors which stretches back many generations. Furthermore, the earliest divinations found at Yinxu date from the reign of Wu Ding, rather than from that of his uncle Pan Geng who, according to the traditional accounts, was the king who moved to Yin.

The tradition that Yinxu was the site of the last Shang capital was confirmed when the villagers' discovery of inscribed oracle bones led to the first major archaeological excavation in China. The primary excavations at Yinxu took place between 1928 and 1937 when they were interrupted by the Japanese invasion, but some further excavation has also taken place since 1949. The excavators not only found more oracle bones—the original object of their search; they also uncovered the foundations of large buildings, believed to be the temples and palaces, and the vast earthen tombs of the kings, as well as more ordinary dwellings and tombs, bronze, stone, pottery, shell and bone workshops. The excavations revealed that the Shang were a great and powerful dynasty capable of marshaling and maintaining a large labour force over long periods of time, but their rulers were not the benevolent sage kings imagined by later philosophers. The large-scale human as well as animal sacrifice to which the oracle bone divinations referred was confirmed by the discovery of thousands of human sacrifices accompanying the large tombs, buried in building foundations, and in special cemeteries for sacrificial victims.

The primary residential area excavated at Yinxu was in the vicinity of the village of Xiaotun, within the bend of the Huan River. Most important were three groups of large building foundations uncovered north of the village (see figure 1). The largest amongst them was some seventy metres by forty metres and all were constructed of tamped yellow loess, a method used in North China since neolithic times for the building of city walls as well as house foundations. The fine yellow soil was confined in wooden frames, tamped hard and built up layer by layer. Some of the large founda-



**Figure 1** Plan of Shang Dynasty Building Foundations at Xiaotun, Anyang

From Shi Zhangru, *Xiaotun*, I, part 2, p. 21

tions at Yinxu were as much as three meters in height and made of thirty layers of earth. The walls of the buildings were of wattle and daub; stone or bronze supports held wooden pillars and the roofs were thatched.

Rites in which humans and animals were sacrificed had been performed in association with the buildings in the central and southern sectors, suggesting ritually important palaces and temples, as opposed to the residences in the northern sector which were not associated with such sacrificial rites. In some cases, the sacrifices were performed during the building, presumably to consecrate the structure. Thus, children, adults holding weapons, pigs, oxen, and sheep were found buried within the foundations. In others, the sacrifices were not directly related to the structure and may have been performed after the building was complete, perhaps sacrificial rites performed in association with an established temple. Thus, 185 ceremonial pits were found near the seven large buildings in the central sector which contained 852 human victims, fifteen horses, ten oxen, eighteen sheep, thirty-five dogs and five chariots.<sup>5</sup>

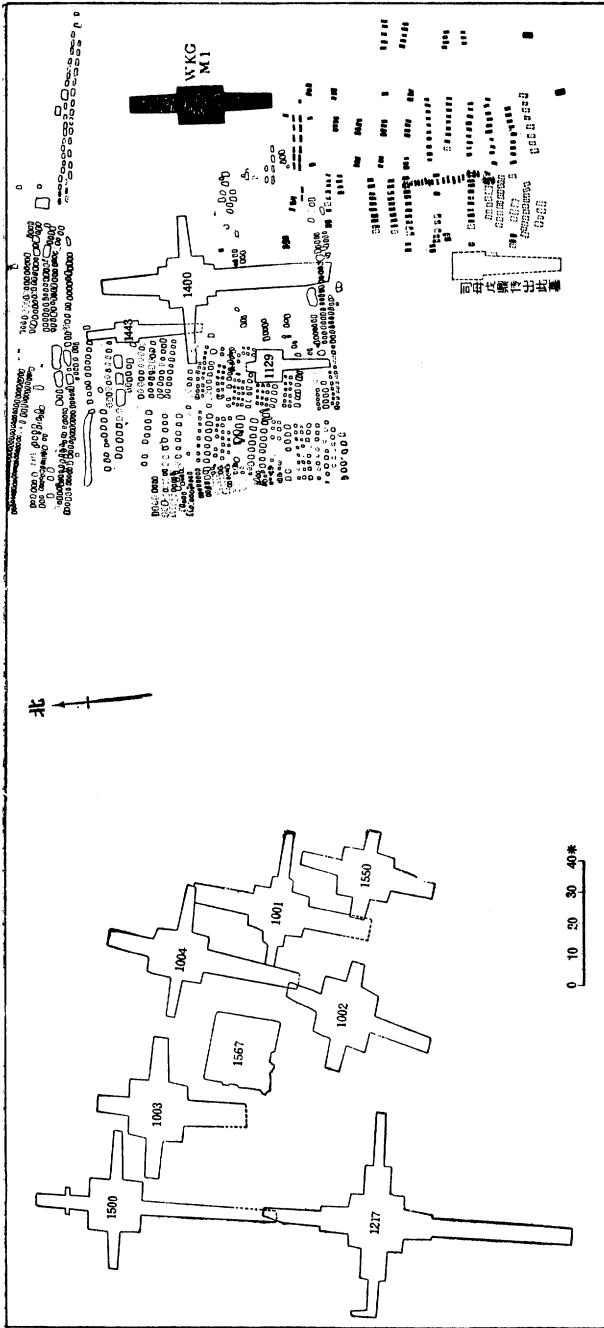
Besides these large house foundations, those of small semisubterranean houses in which the ordinary people continued to live in the same manner as their neolithic ancestors, were excavated, as well as small surface houses found in association with workshops and thought to be those of the artisans. A drainage system was discovered, but no city wall has been found yet and some scholars have questioned whether the extent of the residential areas uncovered thus far is sufficient for the site to merit the designation of the last capital of the Shang Dynasty. The Japanese scholar Miyazaki Ichisada has even argued that Yinxu was a necropolis rather than the capital.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no tradition, either earlier or later, as revealed in either the archaeological or the literary record, of building cities of the dead in China and it is unlikely that the Yinxu site would represent a unique example.

Although the hypothesis that Yinxu was a city of the dead as opposed to a political capital and residential city for the living is unlikely, the primary role of Yin was certainly that of a ritual center for the cult of sacrifice by means of which the Shang kings maintained the health and fertility of their people and their land. In the Zhou Dynasty and later times, the king was defined as the son of Heaven and his palace was the cosmological center from which he maintained the harmony of the empire by performing the appropriate rites as well as benevolent rule. This ritual tradition in which the Chinese king represented his people spiritually before Heaven has its origin in the ritual role of the Shang king whose primary duty was to determine and perform the correct sacrificial rites. As I shall discuss in the course of this work, this role was the reason why the Shang kings continually divined.

The central importance of the ancestral cult is apparent in the vast tombs built for the royal ancestors and the associated sacrificial burials of humans and animals excavated at Xibeigang 西北崗 (near Houjiazhuang 侯家莊), north of the Huan River, as well as by the large number of divination inscriptions about ancestral sacrifices (see figure 2). These excavations included eight large cross-shaped tombs with ramps in the cardinal directions, leading down to a central earthen chamber, and one unfinished tomb, a square pit without ramps. If the unfinished tomb was that of Zhou Xin, who was overthrown by the Zhou, then the number of tombs corresponds to the number of rulers from Wu Ding—the earliest king whose divinations have been uncovered at Yinxu—to the fall of the dynasty.<sup>7</sup> Three other large tombs have been excavated which have only two ramps and some scholars include them among the royal tombs, assuming that Pan Geng rather than Wu Ding moved to Yin, as stated in the historical records. However, although these tombs are impressive, they are significantly smaller than the larger cross-shaped tombs and this cannot be explained by chronology. Thus, they are probably the tombs of other members of the royal family.

In 1975, tomb number five, identifiable by the inscriptions on the bronze vessels as that of Lady (Fu 婦) Hao 好, one of Wu Ding's sixty-four wives, was excavated northwest of Xiaotun.<sup>8</sup> This tomb is small by comparison with the great cross-shaped tombs or even those with only two ramps: it had an earthen pit measuring some 5.6 metres north–south and 4 metres east–west at the opening and 7.5 metres deep, compared, for example, with the pit of Houjiazhuang number 1004, one of the large cross-shaped tombs, which measured 17.9 metres north–south and 15.9 metres east–west at the opening and which was 12 metres deep, and it did not have any ramps. It is nevertheless of critical importance because it is the only large tomb at Yinxu which had not been looted prior to excavation and so it contained a complete complex of ritual artifacts, including over two hundred bronze vessels, more than the number scientifically excavated from all of the other tombs combined. Because bronze vessels inscribed with the owner's name were still in the tomb, it is also the one tomb whose owner can be indisputably identified and matched with the divination inscriptions.

A wooden chamber was placed in the central earthen pits of the large tombs at Yinxu. Though the pits in the vast four-ramp tombs were either rectangular or cross-shaped, all the wooden chambers were cross-shaped. In the other large tombs, both pit and chamber were rectangular. After the chamber was placed in the pit, a ledge was made around it at the level of the roof. Grave goods and sacrifices were placed on this ledge as well as in the chamber and sacrifices might also be placed on the roof of the chamber.



**Figure 2** Large tombs, Xibeigang, Houjiazhuang

From Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo, *Xin Zhongguo de kaogu yu faxian*, fig. 61

Human and/or dog sacrifices were also placed in a pit beneath the coffin which was placed in the center of the chamber. This practice was sometimes elaborated, as in the case of Houjiazhuang number 1550 in which there were a further eight pits containing dogs and human victims in the four cardinal directions, northeast, southeast, northwest, and southwest. Sacrifices were also buried along the ramps leading to the central earthen pits.

The scale of human sacrifice at Yinxu is evident from Houjiazhuang number 1001, possibly the tomb of Wu Ding himself, in which some 400 human victims were found, including fifty-nine headless skeletons divided into eleven rows and seventy-three skulls grouped in twenty-seven sets, which were buried along the ramps<sup>9</sup> (See figures 3 & 4). This was the largest number of human sacrifices found in any single tomb and may be compared with the sixteen victims sacrificed for the burial of Fu Hao. Sacrificial burials were also found in pits which were separate from the tombs. For example, in 1950, some seventeen pits with eight to ten headless corpses each were excavated southeast of the large tombs at Houjiazhuang and in 1976, a burial area covering 4,700 square metres, but assumed to be much larger, was excavated which included 191 burial pits and 1,330 human victims, presumably some of the 13,052 human sacrifices which, according to Hu Houxuan's 胡厚宣 calculations, are enumerated in the extant oracle bone inscriptions.<sup>10</sup>

Besides human and animal victims, a great many ritual objects were buried with the ancestors in the large tombs. The most important objects were the bronze vessels which held ritual offerings and which represent the supreme aesthetic achievement of the Shang. Since no other large tomb contained more than a small fraction of its original contents upon excavation, the tomb of Lady Hao may be used to suggest the richness of the original burials. This relatively small tomb contained 1,928 objects and approximately 7,000 cowrie shells. These included 460 bronze objects including both weapons and ritual vessels (but excluding buttons), 750 jade objects, 560 bone objects, five pottery vessels, and a few pieces of stone sculpture and ivory carvings.

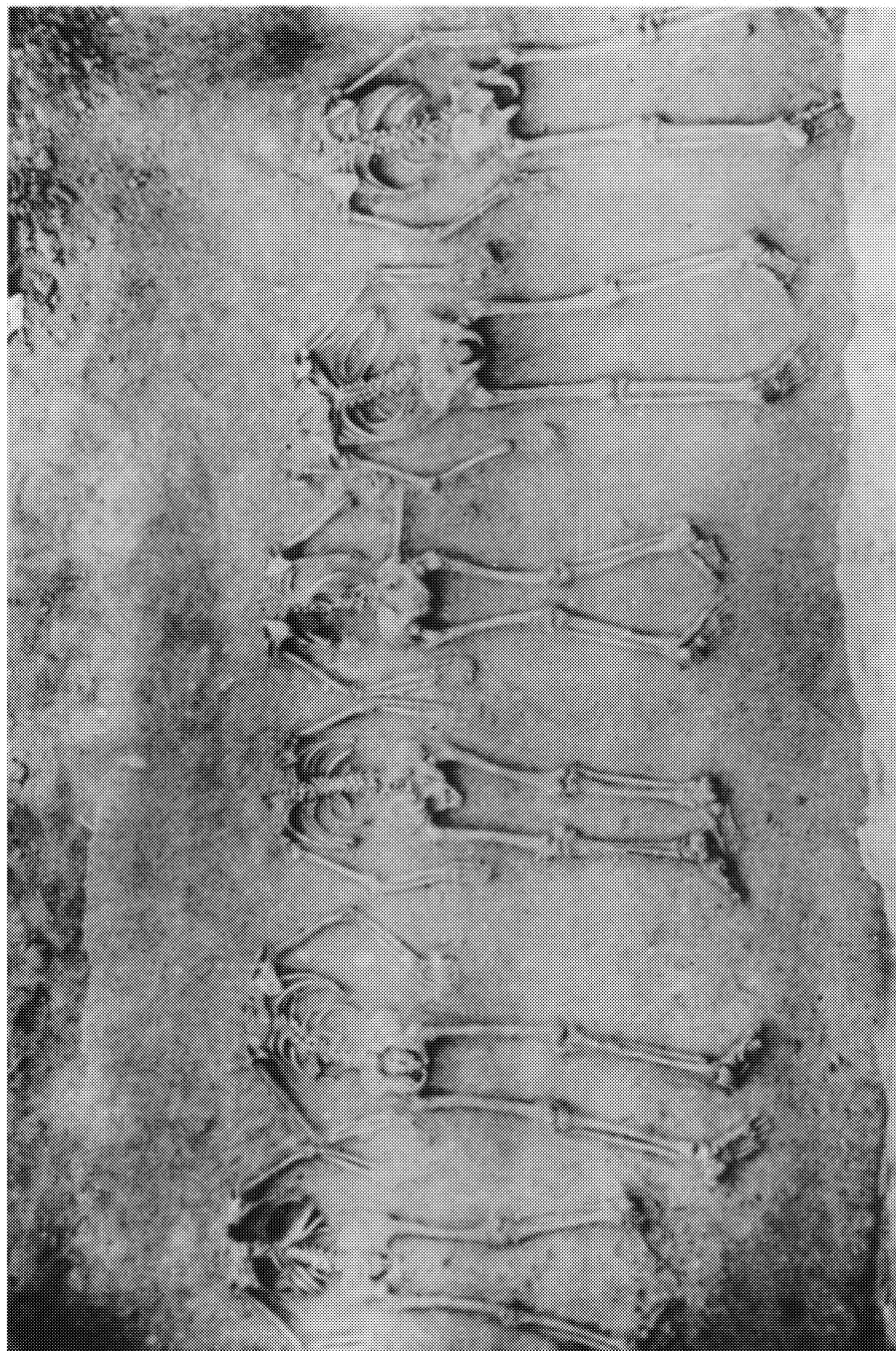
When the initial excavations were made at Yinxu, a fully developed bronze culture able to produce bronzes technically unsurpassed even in modern times appeared to rise suddenly without any indigenous origin or development and some scholars assumed that it must have been introduced from the West. Since that time, the indigenous development of China's distinctive bronze culture centered on the North China plain has been gradually revealed. Two sites in Henan Province are particularly important in understanding this development: Zhengzhou 鄭州 including the nearby site





**Figure 3** Excavation of tomb 1001 at Houjiazhuang (Xibeigang)

From Liang Siyong and Gao Quxun, *Houjiazhuang 1001-hao da mu*, v. 2, pl. 3, no. 2.



**Figure 4** Tomb 1001, Houjiazhuang: headless skeletons on the southern tomb ramp

From Liang Siyong and Gao Quxun, *Houjiazhuang 1001-hao da mu*, v. 2, pl. XXVIII.

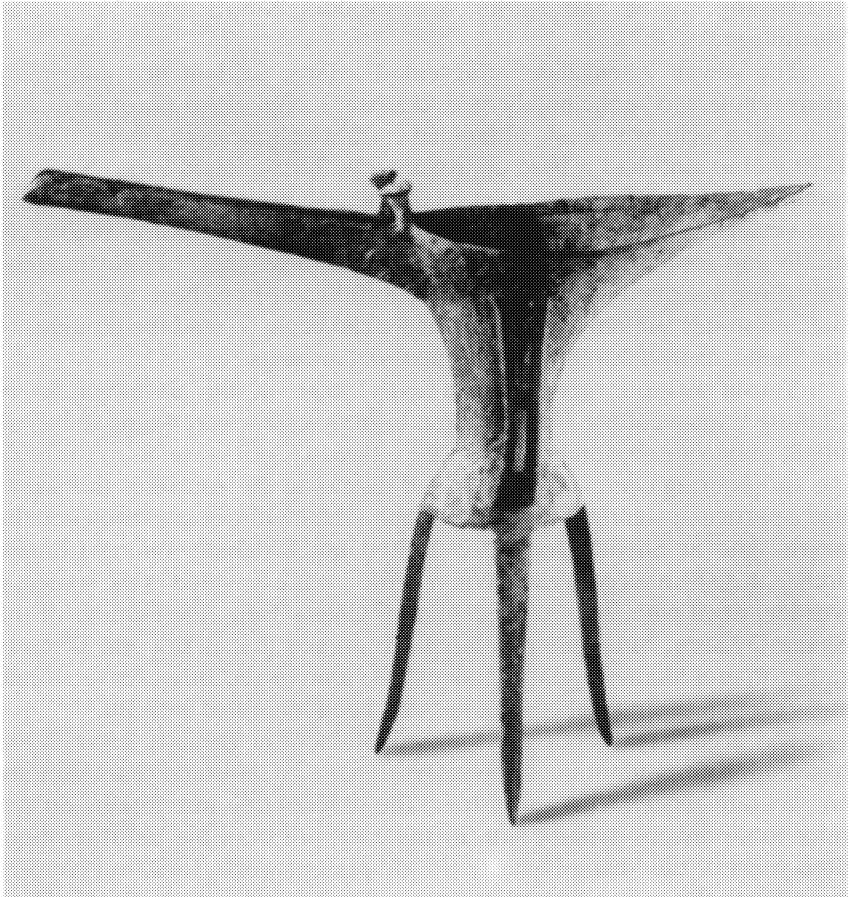
of Erligang 二里崗, and Yanshi 偃師, including both Erlitou 二里頭 and Shixianggou 尸鄉溝.

The site at Zhengzhou represented a large settlement, thought by many scholars to be the middle period Shang capital of Ao 隄 (or Xiao 囂). It included a city wall made of tamped earth which measured some 1700 by 1870 meters and had a base approximately thirty meters wide. No large tombs have been discovered yet near Zhengzhou, but bronze workshops and vessels were excavated and the bronze vessels are clearly both technically and aesthetically antecedent to the Yinxu bronzes.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, only three inscribed oracle bones of doubtful value have been found at this site and so it is still only at Yinxu that we can begin to read the thoughts of the Shang, as well as observe their material artifacts.<sup>12</sup>

Yanshi Erlitou represents an early stage in the development of Chinese bronze culture.<sup>13</sup> Only seven bronze vessels were found there, all small, undecorated, thinly cast *jue* 爵, a three-legged vessel used for heating and pouring wine which, as I shall discuss in the course of this work, had a particular significance for the Shang. The identities of Erlitou and the nearby site at Shixianggou have excited much debate among Chinese archaeologists in recent years. When Erlitou was excavated in the sixties, it was identified with Bo 亳, the capital of Cheng Tang, the founder of the Shang Dynasty, but some scholars have argued that it is a Xia Dynasty rather than a Shang capital. Shixianggou, a more recently excavated and still incompletely published site, has also been identified with Bo.<sup>14</sup>

The arguments about the location of the Xia Dynasty capitals are based upon an assumption that texts written over a thousand years later are an accurate reflection of prehistory; the oracle bone inscriptions do not refer to a previous dynasty and, in any case, are from the last three hundred years of the Shang Dynasty. In the present work, I will not concern myself with the archaeological argument. I hope, however, to shed light on the meaning of the textual tradition by revealing its origin in Shang mythological dualism.

Shang culture was not limited to Henan Province. Shang bronzes and sites have been discovered throughout most of present-day China. The most important site outside the central plains of the Yellow River region which was the center of Shang culture is Huangpi Panlongcheng 黃陂盤龍城 in the northern part of the southern province of Hubei, where a walled city, palace foundations and bronzes similar to those found at Zhengzhou were excavated. Other important finds include a large cross-shaped tomb in Shandong Province in the far east of China; bronzes from the early Yinxu period near Beijing, pre-dynastic Zhou sites with oracle bones and distinctive bronzes in Shaanxi Province, to the west of Anyang; and scattered sites with bronze vessels in the Yangzi River valley.<sup>15</sup> Late



**Figure 5** *Jue* excavated at Yanshixian Erlitou

From *Henansheng Bowuguan*, no. 1

Shang bronzes similar to those from Yinxu have been found in the far western province of Sichuan and, most recently, another bronze culture, inspired by the Shang but stylistically and culturally independent from it, has been discovered at Guanghan 廣漢 in Sichuan Province.<sup>16</sup>

In the present study I will explore various aspects of Shang Dynasty religious thought. In so doing, I will make use of three types of evidence: archaeological artifacts, contemporaneous inscriptions and later texts. Archaeological artifacts are the material manifestations of that thought,

reflected, for example, in the shape of tombs and burial practices, ritual vessels and their decoration, etc. Oracle bone inscriptions provide another form of contemporaneous evidence. They are a rich source for the study of religious thought because their primary topic is sacrifice and because they are divination statements. Although they are direct representations of Shang religious thought, because they are exclusively divination records and include no extended discourse or explanatory statements, we must also refer to later texts. These are useful not only because they include later traditions about the Shang, but also because they reflect thought systems which may have developed from the Shang.

In using later texts, I assume that there was a continuity between the Shang and later Chinese civilization. As long as we recognize that later texts are not direct representations of Shang thought, but later transformations of that thought, we may legitimately use them in conjunction with contemporaneous materials. Indeed, all interpretations of oracle bone inscriptions are based upon an assumption of linguistic and epigraphic continuity, without which decipherment could not have begun. But just as characters develop in form and meaning, so too do myths, ideas of cosmos, art motifs, etcetera. Furthermore, these early myths, ideas, etcetera may give rise to a number of different later manifestations depending on place and circumstance (elite or popular culture) and the differences between the later related forms may help us to reconstruct the Shang source, just as modern Chinese dialects help in reconstructing ancient Chinese pronunciation or modern European vocabularies to reconstruct Indo-European.

Although I assume a continuity between the Shang and later Chinese traditions, I believe that there is a fundamental distinction between Shang thought and that represented by surviving Zhou literature. I do not refer here to that change which is inevitable over any passage of time. Nor do I refer to differences in the belief systems of the Shang and Zhou peoples, although I believe that such differences did exist and that they are important in understanding the development of early Chinese thought, as I will discuss in the course of this work, but to an evolutionary change which appears to have taken place some time during the Western Zhou (circa 1100–771 B.C.) as the uses of literacy were extended and a varied body of literature began to develop.

Shang thought was still 'primitive' or, as I prefer to all it, 'mythic'. As Jack Goody has observed, a historic sensibility or awareness of the "pastness of the past" depends upon permanent written records:

. . . The Tiv have their genealogies, others their sacred tales about the origin of the world and the way in which man acquired his culture. But all their conceptualizations of the past cannot help

being governed by the concerns of the present, merely because there is no body of chronologically ordered statements to which reference can be made. . . . Myth and history merge into one: the elements in the cultural heritage which cease to have a contemporary relevance tend to be soon forgotten or transformed; and as the individuals of each generation acquire their vocabulary, their genealogies, and their myths, they are unaware that various words, proper names and stories have dropped out, or that others have changed their names and been replaced. . . .<sup>17</sup>

All interest in the past is because of present concerns, although in societies with a literary tradition, our conception of the past is constrained at least to some degree by written records. The difference between myth and history is not, however, that the history of a literate society is more accurate than the myth of a nonliterate one. Myth is freely conceived. It includes events which not only did not happen, but which *could not have happened*, which are fantastic, breaching the confines of both reality and possibility, for its events are sacred in their nature and not meant to be of this world. In primitive or 'mythic' societies, as I prefer to call them, myth, art, ritual, divination, sacrifice, and cosmology are all manifestations of an integral belief system, generated directly from the religious structure, rather than secondarily from the written records. To use Claude Lévi-Strauss's expression, in such societies, people "think in myths". Such thought may make use of real past events as well as present realities, but it is neither concerned with what actually happened nor fettered by real possibility.

Although the manifestations of mythic thought—myths, art, ritual, etc.—are traditional and thus limited by convention in the forms of their expression, they are generated at the time that they are transmitted, performed or created. Once stories or events are recorded, however, the record assumes a life of its own. People begin to think *about* myth rather than in it, to compare different versions, to worry about their inconsistencies, and to wonder about their truth. Where myth and history were once one, they may be distinguished and myth relegated to a special sphere of religion; or they may *not* be distinguished which, as I shall discuss in the following chapter, was the case in China, and then, when the rational literate writer examines the received tradition, he may decide that the myths have been embellished and suppress their supernatural and logically impossible elements.

In a previous book, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China*, I examined the manner in which 'history' was recorded in Chinese texts of the fifth to first centuries B.C. and argued that it was regularly

transformed as a means of expressing a philosophic viewpoint. Thus, for example, the relationship between the pre-dynastic rulers Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, could be expressed as an abdication, usurpation or simply a matter of the changing allegiance of the population, depending upon the writer. Furthermore, I argued that historical legend functioned as myth, to mediate an inherent social conflict, in the case of the legends surrounding passing rule, a conflict between hereditary right and rule by virtue or obligation to one's family and obligation to the larger social group.

Although there are some remnants of an earlier mythology in the legends of the pre-dynastic and Xia rulers, the legends which I have argued functioned as myth, were mostly recounted in a realistic manner. No distinction was made between the pre-dynastic and dynastic period; all of the rulers behaving realistically, if stereotypically, as men of the writers' own time might. Indeed, the same motifs were repeated in the legends of both periods and they were tied together in a single structure, so that it was possible to predict from how a writer related a legend of one period, how he would recount that of another. For example, if he described Shun as usurping the rule from Yao, then he would also say that the first Zhou ruler committed regicide against the Shang king. There is no "sense of the past" in these legends, of a world which has changed, but, as I shall demonstrate herein, the stories of the pre-dynastic past and the Xia Dynasty derive from an earlier mythology.

Many scholars take literacy as the critical factor determining the difference between the thinking of so-called primitive societies and 'advanced' ones. It is not the existence of a writing system and the ability to read, however, which brings about the change, but literature—a corpus of historical records, stories, etc., which may be consulted and compared—which allows us that distance from our own thought and that of our predecessors necessary for critical analysis. Such literature need not develop until some time after the writing system. This, I believe, was the case in early China.

When and where the Chinese writing system originated is not yet clear. The earliest evidence are some symbols engraved on turtle plastrons recently excavated at Wuyang 舞陽 in Henan Province, datable to 8500–7500 B.P.<sup>18</sup> These symbols are not understood but they resemble later Chinese characters and may be a form of protowriting. Although there are a number of examples of isolated symbols later in the neolithic period which may be related to later Chinese writing and some characters on pottery as well as the three oracle bones mentioned above from Zhengzhou, Chinese archaeologists have yet to find the precedents for the oracle bone inscriptions from Yinxu.

Of the oracle bone inscriptions at Yinxu, those of the first period—the

reign of Wu Ding—are the greatest in number and the richest and most varied in content. The writing system was also already fully developed. All types of words were represented in the script, though some grammatical particles may sometimes have been omitted. The characters were formed according to all of the same principles as modern Chinese characters and include both semantic and phonetic elements. The pictorial origins of some of these elements are more readily discerned than in the later script, but they are already highly conventionalized and abstracted. Both the writing system and the practice of inscribing divinations on bone must have had a period of development before Yinxu even though the earlier examples have not yet been uncovered.

Although the Shang—or at least the Shang ruler and those priests charged with divining on his behalf—were fully literate, the oracle bone inscriptions are not literature comparable to the extant texts transmitted from Zhou times. They include no extended discourse and they are exclusively records of divination. They are primary evidence of Shang divination as it took place, a direct representation of the ritual. No other narrative is recorded. Possibly, the recording of the divinations led to a consciousness of the system and thus to its standardization, but the oracle bone inscriptions are still thinking in myth—or, in this case, ritual—rather than about it.

We cannot be entirely certain of how writing was used in the Shang since there is always the possibility of undiscovered texts. Early Chinese books were written on bamboo slips tied with string. Such bamboo (or wooden) slips did exist in the Shang Dynasty because the oracle bone inscriptions include the character *ce* 册 (册), a pictograph of the slips, and several related characters which also include this element. They include 册 (册)—a picture of bamboo slips placed in a box (later mistaken for a mouth); 淞 (淞)—slips sunk in a river; 禘 (禘)—slips on an altar; and 典 (典)—slips presented with two hands, to which a box (册) or an altar (禘) may also be added. All of these characters are used to describe the offering of ritual promises or oaths recorded on bamboo slips by placing them on the ancestral altars or sinking them in rivers. Divinations were also made about the appointment of military officials in which bamboo slips were used, apparently to sanctify the appointment. These usages indicate that writing held the power of a sacred promise and we know from them that the potential for the development of a literary tradition was present, but they do not indicate that writing was used in the Shang for other than ritual purposes.

Although we cannot be entirely certain that the Shang did not have literature unconnected with ritual, there is no evidence of a lost body of Shang literature in Zhou texts. In an early Western Zhou document



included in the *Shang shu* 尚書, the Zhou attempted to persuade the Shang people that their ruler's overthrow was divinely sanctioned, telling them "You know that the earlier men of Yin had documents and records of how Yin superseded the mandate of Xia",<sup>19</sup> but this document does not cite any earlier record and it implies that such records were not extant in the early Western Zhou. Furthermore, Zhou texts do not cite from a lost body of Shang literature, as we would expect if they had such literature.

The earliest extant Chinese texts are the *Shang shu* documents (alternatively called the *Shujing* 書經 'Book of Documents'), some of which were written soon after the overthrow of the Shang by the Zhou. These documents appear to derive from inscriptions on bronze ritual vessels. Throughout most of the YinXu period, these were very simple—names and then simple ancestral dedications. At the end of the Shang, however, the inscriptions began to lengthen and the inscriptions of the early Western Zhou period often commemorate deeds and record speeches in language which is similar to the contemporaneous *Shang shu* documents. This suggests that the document tradition developed from, or at least in tandem with, bronze inscriptions and did not have an origin in earlier Shang documents.

After the *Shang shu*, the next early texts in the Chinese tradition are the hexagram lines of the *Yijing* 易經 or *Book of Changes* and the earliest parts of the *Shijing* 詩經 or *Books of Songs*, both of which were recorded in the early centuries of the Zhou Dynasty. Neither of these texts represents the continuation of a Shang literary tradition. The *Yijing* is associated with the Zhou people and represents another divination tradition. The *Shijing* were originally songs, an oral rather than a literary tradition which was recorded in the Zhou dynasty. These early Zhou texts all suggest that writing gradually expanded in its uses at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty or, possibly, at the very end of the Shang. With the development of a corpus of documents and different types of texts came changes in patterns of thought. Some of the changes which came about will be indicated herein, but a subsequent volume will also be devoted to tracing and explaining later developments.

In the following chapter, I will argue that the Shang had a myth of ten suns and that their ancestors were classified together with these suns. This totemic classification was the basis of their ritual calendar. In Chapter 3, I will explore the manner in which Shang mythology was transformed into the historical legend of Zhou texts. I will argue that the legend of Yao's abdication to Shun was a transformation of a Shang myth in which the high lord, *di* 帝, appointed the first Shang ruler. I will also argue that the Xia were originally the mythical inverse of the Shang, associated with water, dragons, the moons, darkness and death, as opposed to the fire, birds, suns, light and life, with which the Shang were associated. This myth was

transformed into the story of an historical dynasty at the beginning of the Zhou.

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with cosmology and divination. In Chapter 4, I ask the question, what was the shape of the cosmos in the minds of the Shang kings and their diviners, and argue that the earth was not a simple square, as in later Chinese cosmology, but a square surrounded by four mythical quadrates in the cardinal directions. This cruciform shape is replicated in the shapes of the royal tombs and is often used to enclose bronze inscriptions. It also provides the origin for numerology based on the number five, as in later five-element theory. Furthermore, the cruciform is the shape of the turtle plastron and the turtle was a model of the cosmos. This recognition provides the key to a new interpretation of Shang divination which I will propose in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the problem of the meaning of the motifs on bronze ritual vessels. These motifs are readily recognized, but they are continually transformed and they are not representations. I will argue that they are nevertheless iconographically meaningful. In order to understand their meaning, I return to the problem of the nature of myth and its relationship to art in mythological societies. I argue that both the myths and the art of such societies derive directly from the religious structure and that both necessarily breach the bounds of natural reality as a sign of their sacred character. The art alludes to motifs found in other contexts, in this case, eating and sacrifice, the watery underworld, and transformation, but it does not illustrate, and it is characterized by such techniques as distortion, the conjoining of disparate creatures, and double imagery.