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978-0-521-88447-1 - Bureaucracy and the State in Early China: Governing the Western Zhou

Li Feng

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## Bureaucracy and the State in Early China

Ancient Chinese society developed a sophisticated and complex bureaucracy which is still in operation today and which had its pristine form in the government of the Western Zhou from 1045 to 771 BC, ranking among the oldest administrations in the world. Li Feng, one of the leading scholars of the period, explores and interprets the origins and operational characteristics of that bureaucracy on the basis of the contemporaneous inscriptions of royal edicts cast onto bronze vessels, many of which have been discovered quite recently in archeological explorations. The inscriptions clarify the political and social construction of the Western Zhou and the ways in which it exercised its authority. The discussion is accompanied by illustrations of the bronze vessels and their inscriptions, together with full references to their discovery and current ownership. The book also discusses the theory of bureaucracy and criticizes the various models of early-archaic states on the basis of close reading of the inscriptions. It redefines the Western Zhou as a kin-ordered and settlement-based state.

LI FENG is Associate Professor of Early Chinese Cultural History in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University. He has undertaken extensive fieldwork on Bronze-Age sites in China and is the author of *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge, 2006).

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## Governing the Western Zhou

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*Columbia University*



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## *Acknowledgments*

If the study of history is anything, it is a system of interpretation of the relationships between events that happened in the past and of the reasons why they were related in such ways. The present book interprets the political institutions of the Western Zhou state (1045–771 BC), which made a fundamental mark on East Asian civilization and was one of the earliest documented attempts to construct a government and manage the affairs of a state. For such a work to emerge, the field of research has to have gained a firm base of sources and has to have been honored already by a long series of pioneering works that have established the basic facts of the period and clarified its overall historical development. Therefore, although intended as an interpretative analysis, the present book is constructed on the collective merit of numerous previous evidential pieces of research in paleography, history, and archeology of the Western Zhou period, and it does only what they can support.

My own interest in the sociopolitical institutions of the Western Zhou state has grown in parallel, and indeed cognate, with my interest in its political geography. In fact, even before *Landscape and Power in Early China* was planned, and continuing through the intervals in my work on that book over many years, I have devoted most of my time available for research to reviewing inscriptions and contemplating their implications for the Western Zhou government. It was natural that the study of geography based on current archeology would clarify the spatial dimension as well as divisions of the Western Zhou state as a political organization, and a thorough understanding of the various complex political and socioeconomic relations based particularly on the administrative inscriptions could lead to promising opportunities to explain how the space or spaces conceived as the Western Zhou state were managed through a coherent political system. Emerging from these interlocking processes of research were a number of articles that gradually appeared in journals from 2001, and the negation of the doctrine of “Western Zhou feudalism” has provided me with a new ground to rethink the nature of the Western Zhou state and to reinterpret its political system along a new line of theory. The present book incorporates the contents of some of these articles, but it attempts a more comprehensive analysis of the governmental practice and political system

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of the Western Zhou state based on information in the currently available bronze inscriptions.

A number of scholars have generously helped this interpretation to develop before reaching its present form. But I owe my utmost debt of gratitude to two scholars who served as the first readers of the still rough first draft of the manuscript of this book in spring 2005: Professor Edward L. Shaughnessy of the University of Chicago has for a long time served as the first reader not only for the present book but for many of my previous works that provided the foundation for the present one; Professor Barry B. Blakeley of Seton Hall University sacrificed many beautiful, sunny California days of his retirement to toil over pages full of difficult ancient inscriptions. I thank them for their very constructive comments as well as the criticisms that challenged me on a number of critical issues concerning the book. At Columbia University, I am particularly grateful to Professor Madeleine Zelin, who has taken a large amount of time from her pioneering research into the socioeconomic history of later imperial China to read most of the chapters of this book and provide constructive comments. Professor Emeritus Cho-yun Hsu of the University of Pittsburgh, respected Academician of the Academia Sinica, generously offered his comments when parts of the book were presented in conferences we both attended; but I thank him even more for his advice and support for my work and research over the years. I am indebted also to Professor Ken-ichi Takashima of the University of British Columbia for his professional linguist's advice on the English translation of a number of key terms in the inscriptions. I have benefited from my continuous conversation with Professor Hirase Takao of the University of Tokyo, who has provided timely updates on recent Japanese scholarship on the early Chinese states. I am also grateful to Professor Quentin Skinner of the University of Cambridge for the opportunity to consult him about a number of key political terms used in the book such as "state" and "sovereignty." Finally, I thank the graduate students of Columbia University who attended my seminar on Western Zhou history in fall 2006, where a number of chapters from the manuscript were circulated for discussion in the class. One student, Nicholas Vogt, went on to compose the bibliographical list of inscriptions (Appendix II) for this book, and I thank him for his hard work.

My thanks for institutional support must go first to the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange for its generous granting of a Junior Scholar's Grant in 2004, which enabled me to extend my sabbatical leave to one year, during which the first manuscript of this book was completed. I thank the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures of Columbia University and its chair, Professor Robert Hymes, for the continuous and strong support to me and this book.

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charisma and personal kindness, which have encouraged me to continue to work with Cambridge on the publication of this book. My thanks go further to the following scholars and colleagues who have helped me to obtain photographs for the illustrations used in the book: Xiaoneng Yang of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Cao Wei of Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, and Chen Chao-jung and Hwang Ming-chong of the Academia Sinica. I have made every effort to contact copyright holders for permission to reproduce previously published images and would like to thank the following publishers for their generous permissions: The Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution (fig. 1); Zhonghua Books Co. (Beijing) (figs. 2, 5, 9, 11, 21, 24, 28); The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (fig. 4 and jacket); Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House (figs. 12, 26, 33); Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (fig. 29); The National Palace Museum, Taipei (figs. 8, 23). The author and publisher apologize for any errors or omissions and would welcome these being brought to their attention.

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[More information](#)*Scholarly conventions*

1. For bronze inscriptions cited in the book, references are unitarily made to the *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成, 18 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1984–94) (hereafter, JC) and *Jinchu Yin Zhou jinwen jilu* 近出殷周金文集錄, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2002) (hereafter, JL). Those that are not included in these two works, usually these very recently discovered ones, are separately noted.
2. References to bronzes reported in the monthly or bimonthly Chinese archeological journals are given only by the name of the journal followed by the year and issue number, and by page numbers (e.g. *Wenwu* 1996.9, 20–35). Archeological reports, monographs, and catalogues of bronzes are listed by their titles alone; their institutional authorial names are given only in the bibliography.
3. References to the Classical texts such as the *Shangshu* 尚書, *Shijing* 詩經, and *Liji* 禮記 are commonly made to the *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經註疏, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979). For the Chinese texts cited for which English translations are available, page numbers in both the Chinese texts and their English translations are provided. For the widely read Chinese texts such as the *Analects* and *Mencius*, their English translations alone are referred to.
4. For smooth reading, the Chinese text is not provided for the bronze inscriptions translated in this book. But Chinese characters are provided for critical or difficult terms as well as personal and place names rendered in Romanization.
5. Official titles are directly given in English with parenthetical notes provided at first occurrence introducing their original inscriptional forms in Chinese, such as “Supervisor of Land” (*situ* 嗣土), “Superintendent” (*zai* 宰).
6. Inscriptional names such as Jinhou 晉侯 (Ruler of Jin), Jingbo 井伯 (Elder of Jing), Rongji 榮季, as well as lineage designations such as Sanshi 散氏 and personal designations such as Sufu 俗父 will be treated as one term. Thus, I will render a full personal designation as, for instance, Guoji Zibai 虢季子白 or Sanbo Chefu 散伯車父.
7. Translations of aristocratic titles such as *hou* 侯, *bo* 伯, *zi* 子, and *nan* 男 with medieval European titles are avoided, but the well-established

- translation of *gong* 公 as “Duke” is maintained, along with “King” for *wang* 王. In addition, I also adopt the translation of *hou* as “Ruler” and *bo* as “Elder,” both with initial capitals.
8. In general, the conventional rules for *Pinyin* Romanization are observed. Alterations are made only to differentiate some frequent homophones, such as Han 漢 and Hann 韓, Wei 魏 and Wey 衛, King Yi 夷王 and King Yih 懿王, Shanxi 山西 and Shaanxi 陝西.

Chronology of the Western Zhou kings

Kings	Dates	Periodization
King Wen	1099/56–1050 BC*	PRE-CONQUEST
King Wu	1049/45–1043	EARLY WESTERN ZHOU**
Duke of Zhou	1042–1036	
King Cheng	1042/35–1006	
King Kang	1005/3–978	
King Zhao	977/75–957	
King Mu	956–918	MIDDLE WESTERN ZHOU
King Gong	917/15–900	
King Yih	899/97–873	
King Xiao	872?–866	
King Yi	865–858	
King Li	857/53–842/28	LATE WESTERN ZHOU
Gong He	841–828	
King Xuan	827/25–782	
King You	781–771 BC	

\* Absolute dates for Western Zhou kings proposed by Edward L. Shaughnessy; see Shaughnessy, *Sources of Western Zhou History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. xix. Shaughnessy’s system of dating accepts the theory advanced by Nivison that each king had two “First Years,” that in which he started his new reign and that which came after the completion of the mourning period for his father. Therefore, two first years are provided here for the majority of the kings. See also David Nivison, “The Dates of Western Chou,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43 (1983), 481–580.

\*\* Periodization follows the widely accepted system proposed by Chen Mengjia. See Chen, *Xi Zhou niandai kao* (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1945), p. 55; “Xi Zhou tongqi duandai I,” *Kaogu xuebao* 9 (1955), 138–39.