“Li Feng has delivered a highly competent and accessible account of the social, political, and institutional history of early China. The text incorporates the most current state of scholarship in a rapidly developing field and deserves particular praise for its expert inclusion of archaeological evidence. The book will be welcomed by non-specialists and specialists alike.”

Roel Sterckx, University of Cambridge

“As Professor Li acknowledges, it is daring for a single scholar to attempt a coherent account of the history of early China over the truly longue durée. The task demands a staggering command of the textual sources and archaeology of two millennia, before one even contemplates the writing of a synthetic account of a vast sweep of social and cultural history. The simple fact is that there is no historian writing in English who can match Professor Li’s magisterial command and historical insight, and this account is sorely needed. Early China is a great achievement!”

David Pankenier, Lehigh University
Early China

“Early China” refers to the period from the beginning of human history in China to the end of the Han Dynasty in AD 220. The roots of modern Chinese society and culture are all to be found in this formative period of Chinese civilization. Li Feng’s new critical interpretation draws on the most recent scholarship and archaeological discoveries from the past thirty years. This fluent and engaging overview of early Chinese civilization explores key topics including the origins of the written language, the rise of the state, the Shang and Zhou religions, bureaucracy, law and governance, the evolving nature of war, the creation of empire, the changing image of art, and the philosophical search for social order. Beautifully illustrated with a wide range of new images, this book is essential reading for all those wanting to know more about the foundations of Chinese history and civilization.

LI FENG is Professor of Early Chinese History and Archaeology at Columbia University. Both a historian and an archaeologist, his research interests extend from bronze inscriptions and Western Zhou history to broader issues such as the nature of early states, bureaucracy, comparative literacy, cross-region cultural relations, and theories of social development. He is also an active archaeologist with extensive fieldwork experience in China and Japan. Li’s published English books include Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045–771 BC (2006), Bureaucracy and the State in Early China: Governing the Western Zhou (2008), and Writing and Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar (co-editor, 2011).
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Early China

A Social and Cultural History

Li Feng

Columbia University
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Preface

When Cambridge University Press’s commissioning editor, Marigold Acland, appeared in my office in spring 2006, it was clear to me that our common goal was to produce a book that could offer a first lesson about Early China to the advanced undergraduate and graduate students and any non-specialist readers. It immediately came to mind that the monumental volume *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC* (edited by Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy; Cambridge, 1999) can serve as a rich introduction to Early China. However, it was also understood that the volume’s intimidating size and the essentially sinological nature of its presentation leave an immediate need for a future book that could better meet the needs of students beginning to study this critical period of Chinese civilization.

The present book certainly is not a summary of *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, nor does it intend to show any resemblance to the latter work. Instead, it offers a reinterpretation of the process of formation of Chinese civilization from the beginning of farming life in China to AD 220, the end of the Han Dynasty, informed by many important new archaeological discoveries and the advances they have brought to the field over the past ten years. It would be adventurous if not considerably risky for anyone to try to write a general account of such a long period (in contrast to the short period in which one usually conducts his or her own research), thus exposing oneself to potential criticisms by scholars who have had much longer experience in certain periods or subject areas covered by the book. While this would seem inevitable, for no individual writer can be specialized in all periods, this is still a risk worth taking because a single-author book has the advantage of achieving a higher level of comprehension of the grand trends of development in a civilization. Such trends are observable only over a long span of time based on one’s deep understanding of the logic of history, a level that is often difficult to reach by a collaborative work by multiple authors who are informed by different theoretical frameworks and who often insist on opposing views. Therefore, the present book promises to be a consistent account (at least
within the book) of early Chinese civilization, although it cannot and should not be the only account of it.

As a historian of China, I have always believed that the best way to understand China’s history is to study it as a part of the common human experience in a comparative framework. Over the millennia of early human experience, there have been a number of critical moments, each understood as the result of a social and cultural process, and each has had a major impact on the course of human history: the beginning of agricultural way of life, the formation of regionally based social organization, the chiefdom, the emergence of urban culture, the rise of the state, the emergence of bureaucracy and bureaucratic administration, and the formation of empire. These processes have been widely attested across the globe and discussed in depth by anthropologists and historians alike. The present book takes the social development in Early China towards more massive and more complex organizations as its main line of presentation and explores political and cultural institutions that supported this development. It does so not for the purpose of fitting the Chinese data into a global theory of social development, but to use social theories to help highlight the meaning of great changes in Early China, and to achieve a coherent understanding of the trajectory of early Chinese civilization.

Such a book will fit well, I hope, into Cambridge’s new series titled *New Approaches to Asian History*, which promises to introduce to students some of the epoch-making events and developments that have happened in the history of Asia, from its border with Europe to the far Pacific coast, on the collective merit of recent scholarship. The book covers some essential historical facts or events as necessary to clarify the general outline of the history of Early China for non-specialist readers, and scholars who endorse the ultra-skeptical view that nothing is knowable in history, particularly in Early China, cannot avoid finding themselves disappointed. But the author believes that although we will continue to debate about many things that we study, there are basic historical processes in Early China on which most scholars with objective judgment can agree and which can be made the basis for further intellectual inquiry. However, this book is not a simple narrative of the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires, which is in fact impossible to narrate for a long period in Early China due to the absence of reliable written records. Instead, it strikes a balance between a general introduction and a review of our current evidence for Early China, and, as such, it says as much about how history should be viewed as what it really was. For this reason, the discussion within each chapter is arranged around subject topics to allow for consideration of different interpretations as meaningful in highlighting the salient features as well as problems of each period. While discussing the general trends in early Chinese history,
it is also hoped that the book will serve as a general introduction to the current scholarship on Early China.

The selection of topics for discussion in this book has been influenced by the content of my course “History of Ancient China to the End of Han” which I have taught many times at Columbia University. Therefore, I would like to first and foremost thank the students who have participated in the course and raised thoughtful questions which have certainly helped enrich the contents of this book. Particularly in the past two years when the manuscript was circulated to the class, students have carefully read and helped me assess the level of difficulty of its presentation as a textbook. One student, Robert Alexander Woodend, deserves special thanks for his help with proofreading a large part of the manuscript prior to its final submission. In a more subtle but definitely sure sense, the book has been nourished enormously by presentations and discussions at the Columbia Early China Seminar, and I am grateful to all members of the seminar for their contributions that have profoundly helped expand the vision of this book. I owe special debt of gratitude to Marigold Acland, a debt that was only deepened by the fact that the book was not able to meet the target for publication before her recent retirement; but at least now with some delay I can fulfill my promise to her. I thank too the anonymous readers appointed by Cambridge University Press who carefully examined the book and offered constructive suggestions to improve it. My thanks are due further to the many friends including Cao Wei, Jiao Nanfeng, Zhang Jianlin, Zhou Ya, Huang Xiaofen, Fang Hui, Liu Li, Chen Xingcan, and Chen Chao-jung who have provided me with new images to be used in the book or helped acquire permissions. The author and publisher also acknowledge the following sources of copyright material and are grateful to the institutions for the permissions they granted. Among them, the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, deserves special thanks for generously permitting the use of multiple images it published. Other institutions include the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica (Figs. 1.3 and 9.3), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig. 6.4), Bloomsbury Publishing, London (Figs. 3.1 and 3.4), Yale University Press (Figs. 2.1, 4.2, 12.1, and 12.4), and the National Museum of China, Beijing (Figs. 3.6 and 4.12). While every effort has been made, it has not always been possible to identify the sources of all material used, or to trace all copyright holders. If any omissions are brought to our notice, we will be happy to include the appropriate acknowledgements on reprinting. Finally, I would also like to thank Lucy Rhymer for her willingness to pick up the responsibility for this book and to oversee its final production.
# Chronology of Early China

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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early farming communities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Yangshao</td>
<td>6500–5000 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yangshao Period</td>
<td>5000–3000 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Early complex societies</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Longshan Period</td>
<td>3000–2000 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Early settlement-based states</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Erlitou State (Xia Dynasty?)</td>
<td>1900–1555 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shang Dynasty</td>
<td>1554–1046 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhou Dynasty</td>
<td>1045–256 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Zhou</td>
<td>1045–771 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Zhou</td>
<td>770–256 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring and Autumn Period</td>
<td>770–481 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Territorial states</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Warring States Period</td>
<td>480–221 BC</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Early empires</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Qin Dynasty</td>
<td>221–207 BC</td>
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<td>Han Dynasty</td>
<td>206 BC – AD 220</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Han</td>
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<tr>
<td>(New Dynasty)</td>
<td>AD 9–24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eastern Han</td>
<td>AD 25–220</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Collapse of early empire</strong></td>
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Map