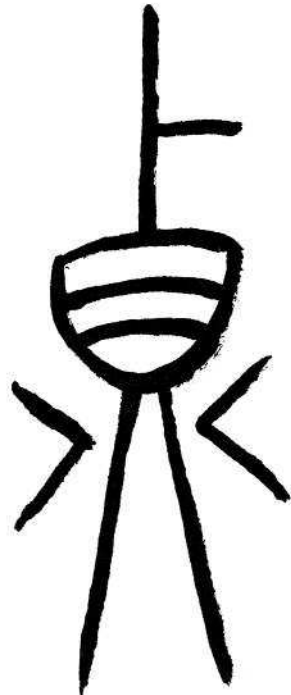


SOCIAL MEMORY AND STATE FORMATION IN EARLY CHINA

In this book, Li Min proposes a new paradigm for the foundation and emergence of the classical tradition in early China, from the late Neolithic through the Zhou period. Using a wide range of historical and archaeological data, he explains the development of ritual authority and particular concepts of kingship over time in relation to social memory, weaving together the major benchmarks in the emergence of the classical tradition, particularly how legacies of prehistoric interregional interactions, state formation, urban florescence and collapse during the late third and the second millennium BCE laid the critical foundation for the *Sandai* notion of history among Zhou elite. Moreover, the literary-historical accounts of the legendary Xia dynasty in early China reveal a cultural construction involving social memories of the past and subsequent political elaborations in various phases of history. This volume enables a new understanding of the long-term processes that enabled a classical civilization to take shape in China.

Li Min is Associate Professor of East Asian Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

李



SOCIAL MEMORY AND STATE FORMATION IN EARLY CHINA

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*I dedicate this book to Henry Wright,
a great mentor and an inspiring mind*

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FOREWORD

Paraphrasing Clausewitz, archaeology may be characterized as “merely the continuation of history with other means.” In other words (with apologies to Binford): “Archaeology is history or it is nothing.” This has always been emphasized in China. But archaeologists – in China and everywhere else – proceed differently from textual historians when they string together their historical narratives from material remains; and modern anthropological archaeology has generated a set of methods with which they can do so responsibly and reliably. Archaeological arguments are strongest when they are reached independently of text-based reasoning; in the words of Clausewitz’s erstwhile student Helmuth von Moltke, archaeology and textual history ought to “march separately and strike jointly.” When this is done, material evidence – as shown throughout this book – can throw important new light on textual records.

As a subdiscipline of anthropology, archaeology is a social science in the same sense that history, too, is a social science; and as an extension of history, it simultaneously belongs to the humanities to the same degree that history does. As a successful piece of archaeological writing, the present book strikes a fine balance between these dual dimensions of the discipline. Its author, Li Min, was trained at the University of Michigan in one of America’s foremost anthropology PhD programs, and in this book he boldly sets out to investigate early Chinese civilization from an anthropological perspective. His main topic – the development of sociopolitical complexity and the origins of the state – has been for many years the main focus of recent anthropological theory-building in archaeology, and it is a subject of central importance to textual historians of China as well.

Atypically, although *Social Memory and State Formation in Early China* is Li Min’s first book, it has no relation to his doctoral dissertation. Instead, Li Min took the considerable risk of undertaking a completely new and very ambitious research effort early in his academic career. The result is a mature, stand-alone work of grand synthesis. In it Li Min has harnessed some of the most advanced modern methods of spatial analysis to show how different parts of Asia interacted with one another during the third and second millennia BCE. In China, this period is for the most part prehistorical; only during its final centuries is there a small amount of contemporary textual

documentation in the form of the famous oracle bone inscriptions, and later textual records are few in number and biased in their contents. Through an anthropological approach, as pioneered in Chinese archaeology by the late K. C. Chang (1931–2001), the investigation of pre- and protohistoric materials from China is linked to worldwide, diachronic efforts at cross-cultural comparison, thereby bringing out the specifics of the Chinese case in the concert of state-level civilizations of the Ancient World. In adopting such an approach, the present study is by no means unprecedented. But Li Min adds a special twist: employing sophisticated models of how historical memory is formed, he revisits textually recorded legends about remote antiquity in light of recent archaeological evidence. He attempts – as far as I know, for the first time – to situate different traditions of historical memory within specific regions of protohistoric China, and he is able to show how they encapsulate regionally different models of, or trajectories toward, kingship and state-level government that can in turn be independently traced in the archaeological record. This reflective turn places the book at the very cutting edge of both the archaeological and the historical disciplines. More broadly speaking, Li Min contributes in a highly original manner to the current debate about memory among scholars across the humanities and the social sciences.

Li Min has painstakingly distilled his broad-stroked, wide-ranging, and many-stranded narrative from a huge body of archaeological data that was not originally generated with a view to facilitating a systematic, quantitative, and social-science minded analysis. This is a universal predicament: all over the world, archaeologists must face the fact that the materials at their disposal rarely speak directly to the research questions they are interested in answering. Li Min deals with this problem creatively, and his handling of the data reminds one of the tremendous untapped potential of the published archaeological record. Whereas Chinese scholarship tends to emphasize the connections between archaeological materials and written texts, this book provides a more balanced treatment, foregrounding new and often unexpected discoveries and linking them, first and foremost, to other material evidence.

This is a forward-looking book, exhibiting great intellectual courage. It is completely *sui generis*. Unlike many other books similar topics, it is not descriptive and enumerative, nor is it a mechanical application of shopworn theories of social evolution. Instead, it has its own clearly stated point of view – a point of view the reader is welcome and invited to argue with. The principal value of this book does not lie in establishing solutions of inshakeable validity, but in formulating new ideas for discussion, thereby encouraging the next generation of scholars to go further. Readers should keep in mind that this is an archaeological inquiry, and it would be unfair to demand from the author the philological and linguistic skills necessary to bring out all the nuances of meaning in the written sources adduced. Archaeologists rarely have these skills.

The self-reflective and often tentative approach to textual sources espoused in this book is commendable, but it cannot replace further in-depth philological work by qualified specialists.

I predict that *Social Memory and State Formation in Early China* will be one of those seminal books that everyone must read and engage with; for it establishes a new frame of discourse, forcing readers to rethink what they thought they knew. Such rethinking is altogether healthy and may be expected eventually to lead to new intellectual breakthroughs. I hope that this book will serve as a source of inspiration especially to younger colleagues – as an encouragement to explore new methods and to be creative in the way they approach both material and textual data. As the unforgotten K. C. Chang used to say: “The future is very bright.”

Lothar von Falkenhausen
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My interest in the diverse sources of power and the limitation of state institutions – the central pillar of this book – is firmly rooted in my graduate school training at University of Michigan. I am thankful to my advisor Carla Sinopoli and members of my dissertation committee, Henry Wright, Norman Yoffee, Martin Powers, John Speth, Richard Redding, and Yan Wenming 嚴文明. I also thank Richard Pearson from the University of British Columbia for helping me launching an academic career in East Asian archaeology.

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