

*China in the Early Bronze Age: Shang Civilization*,  
by Robert L. Thorp, 2006. Philadelphia (PA):  
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This book was written in honour of K.C. Chang, the late foremost scholar of Chinese archaeology and one of Thorp's teachers, and, as such, it is very much in the mould of Chang's own writings. Heavily data-oriented, this timely volume brings us up to speed on recent discoveries surrounding the advent and development of China's Bronze Age society, from the Terminal Neolithic (Longshan period) through the Shang period. Thorp has painstakingly collected and collated recent excavation reports, journal articles and discovery notifications to piece together a fuller view of the social and material landscape of China during the period of social stratification and state emergence. While these data will be whole-heartedly welcomed by the area specialist, the theoretical archaeologist will no doubt find a dearth of discussion about the definitions, processes, and mechanisms that brought the Shang 'state' (and perhaps several others) into being. In this sense, this volume's sub-title of 'Shang civilization' is most appropriate for the descriptive way the material is presented.

The Introduction provides a general grounding in Terminal Neolithic developments, including a historical overview of Chang's own theorizing about the nuclear theory and his later interaction theory to account for complex social development across the China mainland. The current importance of settlement pattern archaeology to Neolithic studies is highlighted, and table 0.1 gives descriptions of 25 of the 50 walled sites which have recently been discovered through systematic site survey efforts. In this Introduction, Thorp asserts, 'By definition, early states were stratified societies with regional settlement hierarchies' (p. 19) while, in Chapter 1, he apparently approves the Chinese definition: 'The courtyard plan, so self-evidently ancestral to later palaces, temples, and other elite structures, seemed to vouchsafe the existence of a king, and hence a state, in the Chinese context' (p. 27). This accords with my own assessment that East Asian scholars treat centralized and hierarchical societies across the board as states, while I personally prefer to think that evidence of administrative organization is more essential to a definition of state; apparently Thorp does not.

In the late 1990s, a collaborative effort, the Three Dynasties Chronology Project, was conducted among 200 scholars in several research institutes and government offices in China, with a new resultant chronology announced in 2000 (see Thorp's box 5 and table 1.1). The impetus of the project was to garner archaeological proof of the existence of an elusive ancient dynasty, the Xia, which was the first of three historic dynasties that were honoured by Chinese historians: the Xia, Shang and Zhou. Although Thorp reports that the archaeological 'proof' for Xia is less than adequate (p. 61), the new consensus chronology has led to a new framework for state formation archaeology in China. The following table illustrates this new equation between dates for the historically attested periods (in the first two columns) and the archaeological periods and their constructed spans (in the second two columns).

Historic period	Dates BC	Archaeological period	Dates BC
Xia	2070–1600	Erlitou	1900–1500
Early Shang	1600–1300	Erligang (Early Shang) Huan-bei (Middle Shang)	1600–1300 1300–1200
Late Shang	1300–1046	Yinxu (Late Shang)	1250–1050
Western Zhou	1046–771		

With this new dating scheme, the first evidence of bronze-working in the Erlitou culture is assigned to the Xia Dynasty, while Shang is acknowledged to begin with the Erligang culture. Middle Shang is represented by a new phase designation, Huan-bei, and is treated as a 'transitional phase' rather than as a new period in its own right.

The Huan-bei site is one of the more spectacular recent discoveries. It consists of a square walled site measuring about 2.1 km per side, identified in 1999. The square is tilted about 13° east of north and sits immediately to the east of the royal cemetery of Xibeigang at the Anyang or Yinxu site of the Late Shang capital. It has been proposed as either the Xiang capital of the Shang king, He Tan Jia, or the Yin capital of King Pan Geng. Thorp marvels that such a major site could be hidden so long under the very feet of Shang archaeologists excavating at Anyang since 1928.

The type site of Erlitou has also had a new walled site discovered nearby, just north of the river at Yanshi. This is thought to be the Bo capital founded by the first Shang king, Cheng Tang. Thus, Xia can now be understood to have spawned the Shang polity directly, in its own backyard; or conversely, Shang took root in the area now identified as Xia. Either way, continuity – as attested in the bronze working – might also be assumed for socio-political development.

Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume respectively detail many archaeological aspects of the Erlitou and Erligang cultures: settlements, houses, workshops, burials, bronzes and jades. These cultures are then put into their respective spatio-temporal contexts by examining regional cultures surrounding them.

Chapter 4 then deals with the Anyang (Yinxu) site itself. Here, the discussion is not organized by material category but by ritual function, beginning with oracle bones and the divination 'process', the royal cult and worldview, the halls in which rituals were conducted, and the practice of sacrifice. Finally, the bronze ritual vessels, their inscriptions and the social relations they reveal, are investigated. Thorp has created a data base of 843 vessels excavated between 1928 and 2004 at sites around Anyang, and much of the discussion of shape types, manufacturing techniques, decoration motif and function is drawn from this corpus. Thorp also points out that writing appears as inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze vessels simultaneously during the reign of Wu Ding at Anyang (c. 1250–1192 bc). While only 4 per cent of Anyang graves contain bronze vessel(s), 70 per cent of those vessels are inscribed, usually with a clan or lineage emblem and more rarely with an indication of social rank. Often a mixture of vessels from different clan sources are found in a burial, giving rise to the interpretation that various groups contributed 'vessels, offerings, even persons (victims, servants), to the royal rites' (p. 210).

The final Chapter, 5, discusses Shang civilization in its temporal context between 1300 and 1050 bc. Here it is noted that writing has now become evident in other places outside of Anyang: at Daxinzhuang to the east, Wucheng in the south, and Zhouyuan to the west — the last being the source of the Zhou takeover of Shang in 1046 bc. Thus the elite of several regions appear to have been literate or exposed to literacy and interacting with Anyang, primarily through trade.

Where Shang attributes are found in the outer region in exact replica of the core region, it is often assumed these areas have been colonized from the centre. Thorp gives Daxinzhuang as one such example for Late Shang, and Panlongcheng in the south for Early Shang, the latter probably involved in the copper trade. The societies based at Zhouyuan and at Sanxingdui in the far southwest, however, are judged to be indigenous with greater or lesser borrowing from Shang technology and culture. These judgments confirm what has been generally acknowledged in the previous literature and serve to confine and define the extent and nature of Shang political activity across the North China Plain.

In closing, Thorp addresses the thorny problem of 'the invention of Chinese civilization'. He notes that many elements historically recognized as Chinese were added to the cultural repertoire during the early and late Bronze Ages (Shang and Zhou periods). However, the phenomenon of 'China', he believes, did not come into being until Qin unification in 221 bc. I fully agree with this assessment and applaud his recommendation to 'think of a world populated by diverse peoples and cultures up to Qin unification' — unlike the current Chinese effort to label every and all pre- and proto-historic societies existing within or overlapping with the current nation-state boundaries as inherently Chinese in origin.

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