History 170E
China’s Bronze Age
Three Dynasties of Chinese Antiquity

- Xia 夏 (mythical?)
- Shang 商 (ca. 1550-1045 BCE)
- Zhou 周 (1045-256 BCE)
Erlitou: The Earliest State?

- Earliest bronze-working culture in East Asia
- Dated to ca. 1900-1600 BCE
- Identified with mythical Xia Dynasty by Chinese archaeologists
Erlitou 二里頭 (Early Bronze Age) Site

The walled central compound contained large structures ("palaces"), but the tombs do not reveal any strong differences in social status.

Site also included bronze and bone workshops.
Bronze Ritual Vessels from Erlitou

In the absence of writing, verification of the Erlitou culture with Xia remains unprovable.
Core Area of Shang Civilization

Shang Capitals

- Zhengzhou 鄭州 (1500-1300 BCE?)
- Anyang 安陽 (c. 1250-1045 BCE)
Inscribed Shang Oracle Bone

- Divination was performed by notching bone & heating it to make it crack
- After oracle was interpreted, the questions & answers were inscribed on the bone
- Oracle bone inscriptions are the earliest form of writing in East Asia
Shang Capital at Zhengzhou, 郑州, c. 1500-1300 BCE

- Despite impressive city walls, no royal tombs have yet been discovered at Zhengzhou.
- But walls provide evidence of Shang rulers’ ability to mobilize labor on a massive scale.
Urban Network of Shang Capital at Anyang

- Palace complex (at center) surrounded by scattered settlements, artisan workshops, and cemeteries
Shang Monarchy

- Oracle bone records begin in late 13th century BCE
- By that time, the ruling lineage had fractured into several competing rival branches
- King Wuding 武丁 (c. 1250-1200 BCE) reestablished a strong monarchy & founded capital at Anyang
- Anyang kings maintained stable rule and royal succession for over a century
- After 1100 BCE, increasingly confronted with both internal and external threats
“Mother Wu” Tripod

- Dedicated to Lady Jing, one of three principal consorts of King Wuding, by their son
- Weighing 875 kgs, this is the largest bronze vessel yet discovered in China
Ivory Chalice

- The chalice is carved from ivory and inlaid with turquoise
- This artifact comes from the tomb of Lady Hao 婦好 (c. 1200 BCE)
- Lady Hao’s tomb (only Shang royal tomb discovered intact) contained more than 200 bronze ritual vessels
Four-Class Society of Shang

- Royal Clan (*wangzu* 王族), divided into ten lineages
- Nobility, “Clans of Descendants” (*zizu* 子族)
- “Multitude” 羣: retainers, artisans, farmers
- Slaves 奴: captured in war; used for menial labor & human sacrifice
Shang Royal Tomb with Human Sacrifices

- Some Shang royal tombs included more than 200 human sacrifices (slaves captured as war booty)
- The more sumptuous the tomb and its contents, the more powerful the dead king became in the world of the ancestors
Shang Chariot Burial
Shang was the dominant bronze culture in East Asia, but by no means the only one.
The Shang & Zhou States at the Time of the Zhou Conquest (1045 BCE)
The Royal Domain in the Western Zhou

- Zhou ruling clan’s original home was at Zhouyuan 周原
- New capital consisted of twin cities of Feng 蒲 and Hao 镐
- Secondary capital at Cheng Zhou 成周 in the east
Inscription from Reign of King Mu 穆王 (ca. 956-918 BCE)

“…The King commanded the Lord of Mao to lead the officers, infantry, chariots, and halberdmen of his domain to attack the eastern countries . . . The lord’s son Qian ordered, ‘Take your kinsmen and follow Father (the Lord of Mao) on campaign; depart the city and protect his person.’ In three years we pacified the eastern countries. There are none who fail to submit to Heaven’s majesty. . . .”
Patrimonial State

- Mandate of Heaven entrusted to royal clan as a whole
- Shared sovereignty: king distributed lands (through investiture known as *fengjian* 封建) to members of royal clan as their proper share of the clan’s patrimony
- Non-kin allies “adopted” as fictive kinsmen of the Zhou royal house
[The king speaks:] ... I award you lands, including three hundred zhen [甽] fields; one hundred twenty...; thirty-five residential settlements (zhaiyi 宅邑); and one hundred forty .... I also award you ... seven surnames of the king’s men (wangren 王人) residing at Yi; seven Elders of Zheng whose X-retainers number ... and fifty men. I further award you commoners at Yi numbering six hundred and ... six men. Lord Yi extols the king’s beneficence, making for Father Ding this vessel.
Administration of the Royal Domain in Mid-Late Western Zhou

(1) State-owned lands: under the authority of the royal government headed by the Three Supervisors (of Lands, Horses, and Public Works)

(2) Royal Household: separate administration under the Royal Steward

(3) Land grants awarded to royal officials and meritorious nobles