ChinaX Transcript

Week 3--Legitimation of Power in Antiquity

Historical Overview: The Chinese Bronze Age

Following these great sages were the first three Chinese dynasties-- the Xia, Shang, and Zhou. Much debate has arisen around whether or not the Xia dynasty was an actual historical reality or just a later myth. While no writing has been archaeologically discovered confirming the existence of the Xia, sites such as Erlitou reveal that a large state was present at the beginning of the Bronze Age in the central plains -- that is, at roughly the same time and in the same area as the Xia is recorded in later texts.

The Shang dynasty is the first Chinese dynasty that is historically attested. While the exact dates for this dynasty are uncertain, it is believed to have lasted from the 17th to the 11th century BCE. According to later legends, the last Xia ruler, Jie, was a cruel, lascivious tyrant. And thus, Tang, the first Shang king, arose and overthrew him, founding the new Shang dynasty.

The Shang are said to have ruled for many centuries, though the most dramatic archaeological discoveries of Shang remains date to the final portion of their reign at their last capital of Yin. Thus, the Shang is sometimes referred to as Yin. Near Anyang in Henan at a site called Yinxu, which actually means today the ruins of Yin, archaeologists have discovered here royal tombs with bronze ritual vessels, massive palaces, and workshops, and most importantly, animal bones inscribed with divination charges. Using these inscriptions, scholars have been able to verify that this site did indeed belong to the Shang we read of in ancient texts, and moreover, reconstruct how the final Shang kings lived and ruled.

The Shang dynasty did not last forever. And it is said that the last Shang king, named Zhou, was yet another violent and indulgent tyrant, much like the final Xia ruler, Jie. And also like Jie, King Zhou's misconduct caused others to rise up against
him and found a new dynasty. This new dynasty took the name of Zhou, but don’t be confused. This name is written with a different Chinese character. According to these legends, the first king of the Zhou dynasty, King Wen, the Civil, was once a vassal of the Shang, but upon recognizing their lack of virtue, received a heavenly mandate to overthrow them. King Wen began to plot this conquest. But it is only with his son, King Wu, the Marshall, that the Shang were finally defeated militarily at the battle of Muye around 1050 BCE. Thus, the Zhou dynasty was founded -- one of the longest lasting dynasties in Chinese history, spanning from the 11th to third century BCE. And one that would be frequently recalled by later figures as an ancient ideal.
Section 1: Introduction -- Legitimation Of Power In Antiquity

We begin this second discussion of early China, or ancient China, with the transition from the Neolithic, the Stone Age, to what's called the Bronze Age. And that's marked in Chinese historical terms by the advent of the Shang dynasty. Now, one of the things that happens with Shang -- and we know this from many sources -- is that it has the notion of a single king who would be lord over many peoples. And that gives us a kind of a question. Right? How did -- in a world where there were many peoples -- how did a single king legitimate that rule, that position of rule? You know, it's easy to say that you don't have to legitimate anything. If you come in with enough power, you could say to people: do or die. But in practice, in political history of the world of politics, people seek legitimation. They seek to justify what they're doing and to explain to others why they should accept the power of others being placed over them.

Now, in order to talk about this, we come back again to the two major sources we have for ancient China, or for thinking about ancient China -- one is artifact and the other is text. But now we're going to see something interesting about texts and artifacts, too. Chris Foster, graduate student in early Chinese studies, is here again -- somebody with great knowledge of archaeology. And Chris, you've brought in things to make the case that when I talk about legitimation, I need to talk about these things, these great products of the Shang. So what do you have?

Yeah, absolutely. From an archaeological perspective, you're going to talk about legitimation in these early periods of the Shang. There are really two types of artifacts that you absolutely have to discuss. The first would be bronze vessels from the Shang, such as this one here. The second would also be what initially was called dragon bones, but what we now call oracle bones. And the reason that they are so important is that they're actually the earliest attested form of writing in all of China.

And both of these, you argue, have to come into the story of legitimation.

Yes, definitely.

Well, we'll see if they do.

We sure will.

So the Shang claimed to possess the world and all the peoples in it under their rule.
And somehow these bronzes and these oracle bones are going to become part of that story -- or dragon bones if you will. Yu Wen is back with us, who works on Chinese intellectual history and has been talking to us very often about texts. And what do you have to say?

What I have to say is that we also have some evidence from the textual tradition to tell us something about the early legitimation. And so remember the Shangshu that I mentioned?

The Classic of Documents.

which is a book about the early sage kings' rule. It has different sections. It has a book for Shang. It has a book for--

A set of documents for Shang.

A set of documents for Shang. But also here we have a set of documents for Zhou. Here we have Zhou Shu.

And what this piece is talking about is actually about why it was justified for the Zhou to take over the Shang's rule. So in some sense, it is a propaganda piece. And so it has a lot to do with the matter of legitimation.

So in fact, we can pose that as a second kind of question. If Chris's material says to us, "How does the Shang legitimate the imposition of its power over other peoples?", Wen's material says, "How did the Zhou legitimate overthrowing the Shang?".

In some sense, these are two sides of the same coin. But they're not necessarily so. If we think about some countries -- Japan is an example -- where it's impossible to legitimate overthrowing the emperor, who is descended from the gods.

The Chinese case is very different. The Chinese found a way to legitimate overthrowing those who had been legitimated. And we'll explain why today.
Section 2: The Shang System And Its Sources

Let's talk now about the Shang system. And there is a system to Shang and how it works, but it's one in which the political, and the social, and the economic, and the religious, are combined together, as you'll see it. But let's begin with another question, which is, where do we know about Shang from? We know about it from, let's say, much later texts, but archaeologically speaking we know about Shang from the first place that has been dug up. And I'm looking here at a Shang burial and if I go through I see things like sacrificial victims, coffin with lots of grave goods, valuable jade discs in the burial pit. We find jade and bronze ceremonial daggers like this. We find, of course, a combination of bronze pots like that, but also with victims in it as well. Shang has various capitals, and they expand territory. The capital moves around. The final capitals were in a place called Anyang in Henan. And our understanding of how Shang conquers and spreads its territory is a bit hazy, but it seems to be something like this, and perhaps, too influenced by what happens later where we know much more. The royal lineage would hive off units, its separate segments out, so that units would be sent out and sent into the country where they'd establish their own capital. They'd go perhaps with slaves, they'd conquer territory, they'd take resources in, and these units, these lineage units would become part of the Shang apparatus, defending the Shang in war, going to war with Shang armies. But really, it was very much a feudal system, in the sense that these nobles from the royal lineage controlling territory, having their own ancestors, but also being linked back to the main court, to the capital, the center of wealth and consumption, the center of religious activity. When I use the word "feudalism" in this, we're thinking of a situation in the most simple sense, and the most simple sense is the way I'm using the word, that feudalism is when sovereignty, some degree of sovereignty over territory, is delegated to somebody else. And that person becomes, in a sense, the lord of that territory, possesses it, can pass it on to his descendants, and so on. Let's come back to this question of how did Shang keep connections to its relatives? How did
the relatives keep connections to the Shang king? And the answer is that they performed certain kinds of ceremonies. When lineage units were sent out, they would be given, very often, sets of vessels that they would take with them, and when they were buried, those vessels, very often, would be buried with them as well. So the kinship ties were supported, actually, by a material culture in which one of the most important elements were bronzes. And the bronze vessels from Shang are certainly one of its greatest artistic creations, but also one of its great political creations and religious and economic creations, as well. Let me show you what I mean.
Section 3: Sources Of Shang I -- How To Read A Bronze Vessel?

1. Shang Bronze Vessels: An Introduction

Shang has left us these bronzes, or we -- archaeologists-- have recovered them, but in fact, they've been appreciated throughout Chinese history. People have dug them up and valued them. The Sackler Museum here at Harvard happens to have probably the best collection of bronzes in the United States, and we're going to take you there, introduce you to that collection. We're to give you some examples from that collection in close-up to work with. We're also going to introduce you to one of the leading archaeologists working on Shang bronzes, Zhang Changping, who will talk to us about how he looks at some of the bronzes in the Sackler collection. And we think you'll have a lot of fun, in fact, playing around with the Sackler bronzes. And after that, I'll be back to talk a little bit more about how we as historians use bronzes to talk about Shang history.

2. Professor Zhang Changping's Close Reading

For this particular ding, as you can see the two handles and two feet are parallel. This means it is the front side of the tripod. For an object like this, from the front we can see a complete pattern. More importantly, the place where the rear foot meets the body of the bronze often will have an inscription. Thus, a round vessel will often still have a front and back side. This particular ding has an inscription on it. Many scholars believe that inscriptions from the Shang-Zhou period are clan insignia. From a decorative perspective, we can see that the patterns on this ding have undergone nearly a thousand years of development. Thus its ornamentations appear extremely sophisticated and delicate. In fact, we can see different levels of ornamentation. At first glance, we can see that this ding looks like an animal mask. We can see that it appears to be in the form of a beast. For example we can see its horns, its ears, etc. created through mid-relief. We can see that on the mid-relief there are very delicate patterns. There are also many delicate patterns on the background. In terms of ornamentation,
there are background patterns, there are mid-relief patterns, and there are patterns on the mid-relief. Thus it has three different layers of patterns. This reflects the creator's drive to push the decorative potential to the extreme.

3. Professor Zhang's Introduction To Chinese Bronzes

The bronzes in the Chinese Bronze Age are one of the most important cultural objects of that period. A large number of bronzes have survived, including vessels, weapons, horse drawn vehicles...etc. Nonetheless, the number of bronzes used for daily life is comparatively small. Most bronzes are designated for ritual activities. Thus, we often call them ritual objects. These ritual objects are mostly vessels. For example, there are tripods (ding) with round handles, or square-shape vessels (fangyi) or animal-like wine vessels (gong). Interestingly, such vessels are often called "guang" by western academics. From these items, we can see that even though they are vessels, they are not used for daily life. We can see they have very delicate decorations.

Evolution of Bronze Vessel Decorative Patterns

Professor Zhang, I would like to ask you a few questions pertaining to the Bronzes. I am very interested in the decorative design, for example, the animal-mask patterns, or the cloud-and-thunder patterns. What is the difference in decorative design between the earlier vessels and the later vessels? Decorative design, yes, that's a very interesting question too. Actually, I think compared to looking at its shape, it's easier to observe how these vessels changed over time based on their decorative patterns. The patterns in the early period are often animal-based. At the very beginning they were often simple, minimalistic decorations. What we see is often decoration that only has single layer and is relatively abstract. Then, when the China Bronze Age reached its peak, that is, around the 10th Century BCE, or 11th Century BCE. They gave a near realistic depiction of the imaginary animals. For example, the animal mask patterns. After that, the patterns became more and more abstract. Later, we see geometric abstraction in the patterns. You can no longer see the
animal-figure. Another significant difference is that the decorations tend to be on the surface of the vessel during the early period but in the late period the decorations tend to protrude out of the vessel. They are made separately and then assembled to the vessel.

Decor vs. Technology

Are the decorations designed based on aesthetic considerations, technological considerations, or functional considerations? Yes, this is an interesting question. Actually, the changes in the shape and decorative patterns of the vessels are all related to technology. The relation is different in different periods. In the early period the legs of the vessel were pointed and hallow due to technical limitations. Technology also exerted a similar influence in later periods. Because bronzes lost the social significance they had between the 12th and 10-9th century BCE, the production process was simplified.

Geographical Differences

Let's talk about geographical difference. Most of the vessels you mentioned are excavated in the central plains. Is there any difference between the vessels from different areas of China? For example from the south or the central plains? (In terms of differences in the origin of the ore, the form, technological abilities...) Geographical difference always existed in the bronzes in China. First, we have to make it clear that geographical regions in ancient China are different from China today. The geography we are concerned with in China's Bronze Age are always in relationship to the central plain culture. But even then, the bronzes produced outside the central plain culture sphere have always been different from the ones produced within the central plain culture sphere. For example, in the Yinxu (Shang) period, bronzes in the south, west, north and the central plain were all somewhat different. But, at the same time, many vessels, especially bronze vessels that were used in rituals, were heavily influenced by the central plain culture. For example, we would find bronze zun in the south. Zun is a typical bronze shape in the central plain. The people in the south were imitating them. But in the different regions in the
south, they could all produce their own bronzes. In the 10th century BCE, the differences widened as the power of vassal states increased, and they each had their own bronze production facilities. Hence, in the 7th century BCE, there were even formations of different bronze cultures. For example, the south, there was the Chu culture. In the north, the Jin culture or the Yan culture. Their bronze vessels have shown very strong variety and local features.

(Returning to the discussion on decorative pattern) Are these types of patterns used on objects other than the bronzes? Do they reflect anything about the Bronze Age society and culture? The patterns, of course, are not only on the bronzes. They are also seen on objects made out of other materials. For example, the animal mask patterns also appears on the bone objects in the Shang period. Thus, in different periods of time, how the patterns look and what kind of feeling they bring to people vary significantly. Nonetheless, to say what kind of social meaning they represent is a very contentious task. We cannot always perceive the thoughts and ideologies of a period in its material culture.

4. Dr. Robert Mowry On The Piece-Mold Technique

We're here in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of the Harvard Art Museums and we're here with Doctor Robert Mowry, who's Alan J. Dworsky Curator of Chinese Art and has been here at Harvard since 1986. One of the extraordinary features of Harvard's Chinese collection are a series of bronzes from the Shang dynasty. Perhaps you could just say a few words about the technology of making these bronzes.

Sure. These bronzes are made using a very complex method that was not used any place else in the world, most any time, maybe until the 20th century, maybe, but not before that. It's called the piece mold technique. And the way they did it, they first made a model of the vessel in clay, which they fired to give it strength, durability, and a very hard surface. Then they would take small pieces of clay and put them over sections of the vessel to make the mold itself. And that's why it's called piece mold. It's in numerous different pieces.

After they have made impressions from the model, decoration was carved into the
model. Never forget that one of the glories of these vessels is that everything that you see on the surface was integrally cast with the vessel itself. There is very little cold working, that is post casting, chasing, chiseling, and such. It is integrally cast so that that decoration, for the most part, was incised, engraved into the model, so that when you put the piece of clay against the model and then pull it off, it would have part of the shape of the vessel and part of the decoration.

Of course, those being clay and the bronze, when its mold's going to go in, is going to be very hot means that the pieces have to be fired. This is a difficult part because whenever you fire clay it's going to shrink. And so then you have to have pieces that even though they have shrunken still fit together perfectly. And then you would bind them together.

You have an inner mold, otherwise you're going to have a completely solid vessel. Little pieces of bronze called chaplets that hold the interior mold away from the pieces of the outer mold when it's all set. You put the molten bronze in.

Of course, the whole thing is upside down. The reason being when it's upside down, you don't want any bubbles. There are going to be bubbles in that molten bronze. When they rise to the top, you want them on the bottom of the legs, where no one's going to see them. So it's a very complex process, but it gives superior casting results.

5. What Does Casting Technique Tell Us?

Professor Prof. Zhang and Dr. Mowry talked about the bronzes in the collection with a sense of their artistic significance and how they were done and how to look at them. How do we look at them in historical context? Well, there are a number of things we can do with them.

We can think about bronzes of such size and weight, maybe weighing 150 kilograms. 150 kilograms would involve basically mining and refining around 30 tons of ore. So this is a major commitment of labor. It involves craftsmanship, it involves metallurgy, it involves what we would call science and technology. It has decorations and you will have already been talking about that.
One of the things that's interesting about this is if we look at the way in which Shang bronzes are formed, we see how different they are from bronzes in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean bronzes are hammered. And you can see this right here in the joint between the upper and the lower parts of the vessels. They're hammered out and then they're put together.

Not much bronze is used. Bronze is expensive. We think that these probably moved through commercial transactions. We see them being discovered around the eastern Mediterranean, into Egypt, up into Turkey, and then into Babylon and what's generally called Mesopotamia.

So I'm going to stop for a minute and ask you to ask some questions. What are the questions about historical context that you would want to ask about the bronzes you've seen?

6. Shang Bronze Vessels In Their Historical Context

These are very good questions. You've asked, where do these come from? In others words, which I'll interpret for the moment, is where does the ore come from?

Where does the copper and the tin come from that are used to make bronze? Where are they found? How are they used? Who paid for them? Who owned them? Well, I am not always sure we have full answers to all these questions, but we think that the ore is mined. Remember, Shang has located its capitals in the flat plains of the North China Plain. And the mountains to the northwest would probably be the source of ore for making bronzes.

There would have been workshops, metallurgists, a foundry. But we find the bronzes in graves. That's key to it. And we know that from the shape of the bronzes and the weight of the bronzes that they're being used as vessels of great significance, reflecting social status-- the bigger the bronze, the bigger the person, so to speak. And they are used in ceremonies.

So the living use bronzes, but the dead have bronzes too. And our understanding of what's happening, when is that the bronzes are used for a transaction. They're used for making offerings to the dead by the living. And this gets us, in fact, back
on track to the problem of legitimization. How did Shang legitimate its rule over many peoples?

It has to do with the relationship the Shang has with or the living kings the Shang have with their dead ancestors, because the ritual vessels are used to make offerings to ancestors. Why does this matter?

The Shang kings and nobles make offerings through ancestors, because they were sure that their ancestor could receive the offerings and could have access to information that the Shang kings needed, that the Shang kings could, in fact, rely on them to help the living Shang kings. And what kind of help did they want from their ancestors?

Above all, they wanted information. They wanted to know if they went out on a hunt, would they be successful? If they started a military campaign against a certain enemy, would they be victorious if they did it on a certain day? They wanted to know how their ancestors were feeling sometimes, were ancestors concerned that they weren't getting enough sacrifice? Were they being fed properly? And so on.

But the ancestors had access to knowledge, and the Shang kings wanted that knowledge. It was foreknowledge, in a sense, of what was going to happen. What would be fortuitous? What would be advantageous if they did it in a certain way?

The Shang kings sacrificed their ancestors, and the ancestors could help the Shang kings, because the ancestors had a relationship with Di, or Shangdi, the High God. And the High God was the leader of all the gods that existed. Whether the Shang supposed that he controlled them or not is unclear. But certainly, Shangdi was in a sense at the top of the pyramid that included the gods that populated the landscape, even populated our own body. So one of the reasons you might have a cold would be that there's something in you that's causing that, and that some way you might be able to fix that, for example.

So Di, the High God, was there somewhere. The dead ancestors communicated with the High God and the dead ancestors received offerings from the living. Now, to digress just a bit, it seems to me that's that there's sort of a great story of religion here. The story of religion is not just a story about how the living deal with the dead and deal with death, and the problems of the afterlife. It was clear that the Shang kings have a great afterlife.

It's also about man's place in a world, in which their natural forces-- the weather,
illness-- things that we cannot control, but would like to control. And it strikes me that what the Shang has done is found a way not only to erase the boundary between the living and the dead, but also to give them sort of a foot up on dealing with these unseen natural forces that are out there that so often determine our fates.

And they did this by having their ancestors in that realm, working with the gods, communicating with the gods that could control those forces. So in some sense, the natural world is a world of populated and active, intending things, beings, unseen, unpredictable, perhaps. But Shang has found a way to gain access to them and at least know how the world of the gods and the dead will affect them as living beings.

To feed the ancestors, this was a fundamental importance to the Shang polity. The ancestors had to be fed for the Shang to be successful, and for the ancestors to be fed, the Shang had to control a territory. It had to bring in booty from war. It had to bring in victims to sacrifice. It had to have resources to offer, not only to feed themselves, but to feed all their ancestors as well.

And so the Shang in order to be successful has to keep conquering. And by conquering, it's able to be successful. And they can point to the world in their realm and say, you see? We're right. We must-- for the betterment of the world, for peace and harmony in the world, so to speak, we have to control a territory, so we can deal with our ancestors, who can deal with the gods that control our fates and outcomes.

Only we have the ability to intercede with Di, with the High God. Our ancestors alone are there. Thus, we must remain, our lineage must remain in power, our lineage turns to God. Our ancestors are with the God and the gods. And that is why you must accept our rule. It's a kind of legitimation.

Now, this is all well and good, but I said the Shang to be successful needed information from the ancestors about what would happen, what the outcomes would be. But what I haven't said is how they got that information. But you recall at the beginning, when you met Chris Foster, he talked about not only the bronzes briefly, but also about those dragon bones, those oracle bones. Well, the answer lies there.
Section 4: Sources Of Shang II -- Origin Of Writing

1. The Origin Of Writing: Divination And The Beginning Of History

At the beginning of this module, Chris Foster brought two things to our attention talking about Shang. And one was the bronzes, that it was these dragon bones, oracle bones, and the advent of writing. Now is the time to talk to Chris in a bit more depth about what we mean by, how we should understand what the significance is of these bones. But first, Chris, to what degree is your own work, your own research concerned with this sort of thing? How does this tie into the things you care about?

Sure, definitely. My own research actually involves writing a history for writing itself in early China. Though it actually deals with slightly later periods, the end of the Warring States period and into the Han Dynasty, what I want to do is look at what the manuscript culture was like for those periods, how texts were produced, how they circulated, how visible they were, what literacy was like. But I also want to do an intellectual history for writing and talk about how people related to texts, how they understood writing and the philosophy of language. So I'm very interested in the early history of writing, and in particular, using sources that are slightly different from what we've been looking at before, which is actually excavated manuscripts--so that's writing that is on artifacts.

Right, and these bones have the very first writing?

Yes, they do. Yes, they do.

So what are the bones?

So the first thing we have to talk about here is the actual material, which is, obviously, bone. It's generally either ox scapula, which is the shoulder blade, or turtle plastrons, which is the underbelly of the turtle. You'll notice here that most of these are only fragments, however, oftentimes, when they are archaeologically excavated, we get whole pieces. And in fact, we can see parts or nearly complete
pieces here of the turtle plastrons.

You'll notice right here, these bones are prepared in a certain fashion. They are generally--

When you mean "prepared", you mean by museums or--

Oh, no, actually in antiquity.

I see, I see.

They were prepared, you'll notice there's all these marks on turtle plastron here. Generally what happens is the bone was leveled, certain layers were scraped off, such as the scute. But even more interesting are these little divots here that we call hollows, which was preparation for divination.

Oh, down, the lower right-hand corner, you can really--

Yes, good zoom view. You can see there's something of a vertical line and a horizontal line together, sort of like a t that's been tipped over there. You'll also notice that there's a lot of burn marks, which is evidence for how they actually went about conducting the divination.

And so, when you say how they conducted a divination, tell us more.

Sure.

What do we think they did?

So again. It's hard to know in the earliest pieces that we have, but what we believe happened was they'd prepare these hollows, then they'd take a rod, and they'd heat it up, so it was very hot. And they'd stick this hot rod into the hollow. And hopefully, what would happen is after a period of time, there'd be a crack or a fissure on the other side of the bone.

We don't know exactly what they did with this crack. Some scholars believe that they listened to the actual sound of the popping, the puh-puh or the pu. Which is why for the character, which you can see on screen here, the letter character bu,
which means divination, is perhaps actually sounded as "bu." This might be mimicking the early sounds of the crack.

Of bu

Of bu. Yeah, exactly. There is also later evidence in the textual record that the cracks were instead read. They were actually looked at. And certain features of this "bu" sign meant different things to these early diviners.

So it's sort of if you had a crack went down like this or like that, or like that, it would have different meanings?

Exactly, exactly. But the earliest records that we have, manuals for how to read these sort of divination cracks only date to the Han Dynasty, which is already 1,000 years later. So, we really don't know.

So this gets us to what, I guess, interests me the most, which is the writing on it. Because the writing doesn't begin right away. We have a whole series of oracle bones with no writing, right?

Yes, yes.

And writing begins at a certain moment. And what are they writing? What's there to read?

What we have here is generally very small here. Why don't we turn one of these over so that you can actually see the writing?

You show it to me.

Yeah, see?

Yeah.

Right there, and actually we have the bu character right there. What we find in the corpus of Shang materials are very terse divination statements that can be divided up into roughly six parts. The first part is a preface, which usually includes a cyclical date, a day date. It sometimes includes the diviner and very rarely, the location,
where the divination took place.

After that we have a charge, which is the topic of the divination. This is generally followed or sometimes followed by a crack number, or a crack notation, such as auspicious or inauspicious. After that we'll have a prognostication generally done by the King. And very, very rarely after that we'll have the verification.

So what would a typical divination statement sound like? And I actually have prepared one here. Pull it up. So for instance, we'll have a preface. Crack making on the jimao day, which the 16th day. Divine. And then we get to the charge-- it will rain.

Next, we have a prognostications. The King read the cracks and said, if it rains, it will be on a ren day. Then we have a verification. On the renwu day-- day 19-- it really did rain.

So if I understand at looking at this, your one example here, the first thing that said is the charge was that it will rain, it's a positive statement. And the answer to that could be yes or no. But they've done more than that. They haven't just said yes or no. They've said, well, it will rain, yes, but on a certain day?

Sometimes. You don't always find the same formula for prognostication. In this one instance, yeah.

Usually I thought they were yes/no answers, right?

Well, it's hard to tell, actually, what the charge actually is. Is it a question? Is it a command? We don't know this.

It could also be sending a message saying, do this.

It could say, it will rain.

And the guy comes back and says, well, no, it will rain, but only on that day.

Yes. And what's intriguing is actually we often find these divination statements in pairs, where the charge will both be positive in one statement, and then negative in
the other.

So that sort of says, you can agree with one or the other?

Exactly.

Oh, I see, OK. But there's a whole bunch of other kinds of questions too. Questions to the ancestors, what do you want? Do you want grain? Do you want a sacrifice of wine? Do you want a sacrifice of boys, girls, two boys, three boys? There's a whole range of things that we find here.

What's really extraordinary is that the last 200 years of the Shang Dynasty, I guess around 1250 BCE that the last 200 years has been reconstructed from these charges on oracle bones?

Yeah.

And it's confirmed, in fact, what we find in some of the textual sources about who the kings were when.

Yep, definitely.

So there's this is wonderful confluence at this point of the historical record, the textual record, and the artefactual record on these bones. And it's given us tremendous insight into Shang history in a way we couldn't have before. So in some sense, we could say, this is the beginning of written history in China.

That we can.

Good.

2. Professor Flad: The Bones Of Oracle Bones

I did bring the oracle bones in.
Oh, you did?
Because of Chris's suggestion, so I figured--
Oh how wonderful. Oh this is great. Are these--
These are not oracle.
These are the scapula.
This is scapula.
The shoulder bone--
Yes, you're correct.
--of a cow?
Yes.
And this is one of the kinds of bones that was used for divination?
That's right.
Except we haven't started doing a divination yet?
That's right.
OK.
And this is what the bone-- so you'll see on--
Oh, I see.
--on these bones, the ridge has been removed.
Has been removed. OK.
And that was typical with large animals like cattle and deer. One of the most interesting things about-- well, for me-- about the oracle bone tradition, the divination tradition using bones is that although we tend to think about the inscribed bones with characters on them-- this is a replica of a fragment from Anyang with an inscription on it. As the quintessential oracle bone, not all oracle bones had writing on them. In fact, the vast majority were uninscribed.
And the tradition goes back more than 1,000 years, before the time when we have writing on bones were among the first texts that we have in the East Asian historical tradition. Prior to the inscription on bones, we had the same sort of burning of bones for divinatory practices. Starting in late Neolithic and through the early Bronze Age, where they were using different types of animals. Initially, they were using deer, they started using pig, mostly scapula, scapula of deer and pigs, and sheep, and goat, eventually. We also have some other kind of exotic animals, like bear occasionally being used.
But over time, particularly during the second Millennium, the tradition becomes more and more specialized. And you start to get pre-treatment of bones, the removal of the spines on scapula, the thinning of bones in certain areas, the polishing of the reverse side of where the area that's going to be burned is in order
to facilitate a more predictable type of crack. And then, ultimately, you also get
turtle plastrons, so the breast plates of turtles being used as well, where the dermal
plates are removed, the skin from the underbelly of the plastron is removed.
The areas that are going to be burned by the diviner are prepared by making
hollows or chisel marks. And ultimately, you have this special double divination
mark style, where there's a circular drill hole and an elongated chisel mark on the
side. And then the burning is done in that to make the characteristic bu shape.
[INAUDIBLE]
That is the character for divination, the cracks. And so we've been in the context of
my class on the introduction to Chinese archaeology here at Harvard, every year I
take out some of these bones, and we try to get them to crack and we make
some divinations about the weather, usually, or what people's grade is going to be
in the class, or something like that. But just to show how difficult it is, actually, to
get the bone to crack in a way that you want it to crack-- to make a sound or to
make a shape that can then be interpreted by the diviner. And what that implies is
that the manipulations of the bones that were being done by the specialist diviners
that became more and more complicated over time was a way that those diviners
used to concentrate and control the knowledge and the power associated with
divination, which ultimately reaches its most specialized form in those cases, where
you do have the writing on them--
Right.
And you have these long inscriptions that relate to not only what the process was,
but what the topic was that they were divining about-- the dates and all these sorts
of things that we find in art of the bone descriptions, and outcomes in some cases
as well.
Great. Thank you.
Sure.
OK.
Section 5: The Zhou System And Its Sources

1. Shang - Zhou Transition

So the Shang had resources, territory, a kinship system, a religious system, it had technology, it had bronzes, these wonderful objects, it had a way of talking to the ancestors, it had an economic system as well, and it had to continue. For them not to keep the system running would have been self-destructive. The gods would have turned against them, well the ancestors would have started to ignore them, nothing would have worked. And so they kept going, they kept going.

But as time went on, the kings became ever more certain of their own powers. And it's striking that the last two kings started to include the name di, god, in their names. And they started to divine and only get good outcomes. They were starting to think that they in fact were the equal of gods themselves. They were wrong.

And in the 11th century BCE, the Shang was overthrown. And how that was justified is the story of the legitimation of the Zhou dynasty and justification for overthrowing those of power. And the concept that comes with that is one of the most important concepts in Chinese political history, and that's the idea of Heaven's Mandate.

Let me briefly recall what has already been said in the overview, that the Zhou begins with the king, that later known as King Wen who begins the movement towards setting up Zhou first as a rival to Shang. King Wu leads the armies against the Shang. The Zhou by the way is coming out of the west. In fact, if we look at the Zhou on this map you'll see that the Zhou in fact is behind the passes in the West and its armies are going east towards what's now called Louyang Anyang and overcoming the Shang, putting down the rebellion of the Shang nobles and so on.

King Wu leads that conquest. His brother, after King Wu dies, his brother known as the Duke of Zhou, another famous figure in Chinese history, is Regent, helps the young King Cheng succeed. The Duke of Zhou puts down a rebellion of the Shang nobles, and the Zhou is now established.
But let’s ask the question of how Zhou exactly established itself, legitimated itself. Because the Zhou began to use writing for another purpose, not to record inscriptions on bones of its divinations. Although they might have been doing that as well. They began to use writing to persuade people. An extraordinary event that writing now is seen as something that has its own power, the power of persuasion.

2. King Wen

You have another poem from the Classic of Odes, which is also about the founding of the Zhou dynasty, and also talks about Zhou’s relationship with God, with Heaven, and with the Shang people. I’m going to read through it with you and suggest some questions that you might ask as you read it.

Begins with this statement: "King Wen is on high. Oh he shines in Heaven! Zhou is an old people, but its mandate is new. The leaders of Zhou became illustrious. Was not Di’s mandate timely given? King Wen ascends and descends on the left and right of Di."

So the poem begins with a claim that King Wen is somewhere. He's dead now, but he shines in Heaven. Now we know "Heaven" is the name for the Zhou god-- up there, "Heaven" in the sky -- and that Di is the name for the Shang god. And so here right from the beginning, it says that King Wen is in Heaven, Zhou has a mandate from Heaven. That same mandate is also Di’s mandate. So it's beginning by conflating, by joining together, the Zhou god and the Shang god.

Now as we read on in the poem, we read more about King Wen. What is he? He's also the progenitor, the source of an extensive lineage, grandsons and sons over hundreds of generations. And he has officials. So he has a government, and he has a family.

We go on to the third stanza, and we see that King Wen there in Heaven-- read the last line-- "King Wen takes comfort in them. King Wen takes comfort in the many officials of his kingdom" who support the Zhou. But we also know that the Shang was there. And now the Shang is brought fully into the picture,

King Wen was great. He had the Mandate of Heaven. But there were lots of
Shang people too. It's tempting to ask the question: How come Shang would accept the Zhou, if they outnumbered the Zhou perhaps. And the answer is because their god gave his command, his mandate, to Zhou and thus they accepted the Zhou. Now we know that they didn't. They had to be conquered, and we know they revolted. But you can understand from the Zhou perspective, this is a much happier story than the historical one.

It goes on to talk more about the fact that the Shang people bowed down to Zhou and made offerings to them. And it ends with the line: "Think always of your ancestors." Well, so what? Why think always of your ancestors? Their ancestors had once had the mandate and they had lost it. So we go on to the sixth stanza, we see that seems to be exactly the point. The Shang people are told Think of your ancestors.

Cultivate virtue. Try to accord to the mandate. Remember that before you lost, you were in accord with god. The Zhou people need to look at you as an example and avoid your fate. For as we see in the last stanza, a mandate is not easy to keep. May it not end with you.

And then in the last two lines, it says something-- or the last four lines, that "The doings of high Heaven have no sound, no smell. Make King Wen your pattern, and all the states will trust in you." What strikes me about this poem is that it ends by saying we really can't know Heaven. But we can make Wen our pattern.

So if in the first stanza of the poem, King Wen was there in heaven. Now in the last stanza of the people, we're turned away from heaven, as something we can't know, and told instead to think of King Wen as an historical figure that we can take as our model in the present. And that seems to me to mark a shift in attention from that world that we can't control of heaven and the gods to the historical world where Zhou gives us a history. And in some sense, Zhou then became one at the beginning of a new history of China.

3. The Zhou System And Its Sources

Yu Wen, you've brought in a text that you think is going to give us some insight in
Zhou's justification for its basically overthrowing the Shang.

Yes.

So what do you have?

So I have a piece from the Classic of the Odes, Shijing.

Classic of Odes, OK.

And it is under the section of Daya. And then it's called "Huangyi." So let me read that the opening sentences.

[READING IN CHINESE]

God on high examined them. And hated the laxity of their rule. So he turned his gaze toward the west. And here he made his dwelling place.

So you've given us this poem. And why is this significant?

So it is a very interesting piece, to think about what argument, actually, the sentences are making. So remember, when you talk about Shang, and then we mentioned their concept of di and God. And then remember that you mentioned that for the Shang court, that the ancestors of the rulers are together with the di.

So they have access to the di. Then in this poem, basically, the Zhou people is saying that actually, the God is not just with you. But the God, actually, he can give you the mandate. But he can also take it away.

And he makes his judgment based on the quality of the rule. So it is, basically, a theory saying that there's no eternal authority for any rule or any government. If the quality of the rule decreased or it doesn't meet the quality that God want you to have, and then he might just take the mandate from you.

And even from the Zhou itself?

Even from the Zhou itself.
So the Zhou itself is putting itself on notice, puts itself at risk, so to speak?

At risk, yes.

So when God looks down on the four quarters and then he decides hmm, those guys in the West, that's where Zhou is, right? So there you makes it his dwelling place?

Yes, yes.

So that's where we'll start. We'll start with that question. This whole notion that heaven has a mandate. But here, they were using the word "di", another name for God.

And so in some sense, what they're doing is saying, oh, that God that you had, it's actually the same as our God.

It's as the same our God.

It's our heaven too.

Yes, yes.

OK.

And this is not the only piece that you found in the Classic of the Odes that try to justify the rule of the Zhou. And perhaps later we will read more other pieces that try to justify or legitimate the rule of the Zhou, but from many, many different perspectives.

So I think what we'll do is, actually, we'll stop this now and give you some pieces to look at and comment on. And let's come back after you've had a chance to think about the kinds of things Zhou is telling the world about itself. OK, thank you very much.
4. Heaven's Mandate

There are lots of implications for the idea of heaven's mandate, as you'll see. Zhou's own ancestral god is called tian--heaven. Its ruler claims to be the tianzi--the son of heaven. And it claims to rule over everything that is tianxia--under heaven. And these are common terms now in China today or in the past, and they begin really with Zhou.

Zhou's claim, of course, was that its mandate to rule, given by god, was based on the fact that god had decided that the Shang were unworthy and the Zhou is worthy. And eventually, Zhou will begin to say, how does god know? It's not just that god looks at our kings and sees whether we do the rituals correctly. God sees and hears through the eyes and ears of the populace. That those who are governed by the king become the test of the quality of the king's rule.

Heaven's mandate would seem to be very, very convenient for somebody who wants to overthrow, but by Shang standards was the necessary only political power in the world. And it seems to be a convenient ploy. After all, heaven's up there, heaven can order us around, heaven's our ancestral god, and so on.

But in fact, let's think about the heavens up there and what people saw. At a time with less pollution, where you could look up and you could see a brilliant array of lights and lighting in the sky. Let's take a look. So let's come out and take a look at the sky. Bright daylight at the moment.

Well, the sky today is not the sky that the Zhou saw. But we do know something about what happened in the year 1059 BCE. There was a conjunction of the five visible planets.

Now, by a conjunction we mean all the planets are getting aligned in a fairly narrow degree of space. In this case, it was around seven degrees out of 360, right? That seven degrees of space, all those planets, the visible plants are lined up. The following year, in 1058, the Zhou adopts the Shang calendar. And by adopting that calendar themselves for their king, they're making a claim to, in effect, universal kingship to control the calendar.
In that year, Jupiter was in the eighth station of its 12-year cycle. Because the Jupiter takes 12 years to go around the Sun. This is year eight in that cycle by Zhou counting. So 1058 becomes the first year of the Zhou mandate, that Zhou claimed to have the mandate. And it's exactly 12 years later that can King Wu invades the Shang and conquers the Shang.

And so you can see this as a convenient ploy or you actually can say that that astronomical event was so extraordinary, that everyone knew that there must be some message there. Are after all, the Zhou ancestors were up there, in heaven. With all those stars shining brightly down. All those planets coming into conjunction. The Zhou could plausibly claim that it now had received a special mandate, orders from on high, and it began to act.

What are the consequences of the Zhou adoption of this idea of heaven's mandate? Well, what the Zhou is said, of course, is that heaven is looking down on us, and if we misbehave, we can lose our mandate. The Shang says we have to keep our ancestors happy. We make offerings to our ancestors. The Zhou says we must behave correctly, which in early Zhou probably meant we must do the rituals correctly, the rituals of offerings to ancestors correctly, because the Shang had not been doing them correctly. We are doing them correctly, heaven, thus, looks down on us with favor.

5. Zhou's New Conception Of Ritual

One could argue that this is the beginning of a sense of morality that how we behave is the standard by which we should be judged. Do we act according to the rules? Do we act according to the rituals? Zhou has shifted attention then, shifted attention from the dead to the living, from offerings to the way we make our offerings. And it begins as it appoints, it's some of his relatives, but also allies, as feudal lords in the various states. It says, this body of ritual is something we share. And those feudal lords who share these rituals with us, we become part of the larger community of-- in some sense-- the civilized. And those who don't share these rituals with us, they're outside. So Zhou begins to create a world, which is bifurcated, between what comes to be
called the Central States, the Zhongguo, and the surrounding peoples outside, what we now call the Tribal Peoples, or the yidi, which—sometimes the stress is—the barbarians. And so the Zhongguo, the Central States, most of them are located in North China Plain, come to define a shared civilization, surrounded by people excluded from it, the yidi, the barbarians, to the west, to the north, to the south. That word— the Zhongguo, the Central States—is the word that comes to be adopted in the 20th century as the name for that country we call China.
Section 6: Zhou Bronzes

Dr. Mowry On Zhou Bronzes

The Zhou dynasty was doing bronzes too?

Oh, yes.

And are they good bronzes? Are they worth looking at?

They're very good bronzes. They're definitely worth looking at. In many ways, the Zhou peoples were the inheritors of the Shang tradition. Many of the religious practices that they followed, they inherited from the Shang. They also cast bronzes using exactly the same technique, the piece mold casting technique, and even following some of the same style.

These are all definitely Zhou dynasty, none of them possibly Shang, they're Zhou. At first, you see the vessels look just like the Shang vessels superficially. But then you realize, a food-serving vessel like this, the handles are much grander, but the main difference from a Shang dynasty vessel is not just the handles.

A Shang dynasty vessel would have stopped at that little foot ring. Suddenly, this has been placed on a nice big socle. They go on altars to begin with, but this is given a little altar of its own. In addition, the principal type of decoration that we see on the Shang dynasty bronzes is the taotie mask. It's not the only decoration, but it's the principal decoration. It occurs on 90% of the vessels.

When we get to the Zhou dynasty, at first, they do use the Shang taotie maybe in altered form. But then they begin to replace it with other things. Look here at this vessel, look at the confronting birds. They're probably peacocks with the great tail rising up in the back. They're confronting, just as we have the confronting animals on the Shang dynasty vessels, but they're birds, probably peacocks.

Or this one is a really rare type of decoration. It's harder to see down here, although it's the same. But if you look at the cover, they're elephants. They are
two confronting elephants. See, the big round body and the trunk coming down. The trunk just to the right of the flange.

Now, if you don't believe that there were elephants in China or if they had ivory. This is a carved tusk from the Shang dynasty. We don't know where that tusk is from, but it's probably from an elephant in China, in the south of China. If you look at it carefully, it's carved and engraved with exactly the same kind of declaration that you have on the bronze vessels.

Now, they probably were not hunting elephants because they wanted ivory-- that too, but they also had the rhinoceros. They were hunting rhinoceros in the Shang dynasty. They were also native to South China. Probably first, they wanted the food, the meat from the elephants and the rhinoceros.

In addition, we know that from early times the Chinese used the rhinoceros hide as armor, because it's so thick, so difficult to pierce. And then, with the elephants and the rhinoceros both, they probably began to use the ivory. And with the rhinoceros, the rhinoceros horns, the connection that continues down to the present day.

Hey, Bob, back one on these, just one further question, if I may. These have serious writing. Can you tell us something about that? Does it tell us who they are from? Does it say, to Bob with love?

I wish. Yes, there's still funerary vessels. In the Shang dynasty, they were strictly funerary vessels. And there are short inscriptions there. It might simply say "Father Ding", meaning it was made for the burial of Father Ding. And so it's be very short inscriptions.

Here, as you can see, we begin to get some very long inscriptions. It means that these are still put in graves, but they take on an added function. From not just used in funerary ceremonies, but they become commemorative vessels.

King gives a grant of land to someone. The recipient will have a vessel cast to commemorate that and will incorporate into the inscription what's going on, when, who did what to whom.
So these now become part of sort of a Zhou feudal order?

Zhou feudal order--

But whether they're being given to as to vessels.

But also keep in mind, these are some of the earliest extent written--

Inscriptions, that's right.

--documents. You don't have any other written documents from China.

So we have writing in the Shang dynasty on the oracle bones, which we'll be talking about in a bit. But the Zhou was the first really to use written documents as a kind of propaganda, for record keeping, and so on. And you're right, the first ones appear right here on the bronzes themselves, the most valuable materials.

Right, but they also wrote on perishable material-- on leather, on wood, on bamboo, on things like that--

Which we don't have.

--which have disappeared. So when I say the early earliest extent, it's not to say the only ones, but the only ones that survived from this period. Some of the inscriptions, indeed, are very, very long. And you might also note that the characters you see in these inscriptions, while a little different in appearance for modern Chinese, these characters are the direct ancestor of modern written Chinese.
Section 7: Conclusion - Zhou Moves East

So between 1200 BC and 800 BC, in this 400-year period, we've seen the appearance of writing, organized religion, a new notion of political legitimacy, the idea of morality, and the appearance of a conviction that rulers cannot do as they please, but must be responsive to some higher standard. I think we've also seen the emergence of history as a way of thinking. Looking back to the past, just as God looked to the various quarters, looked through space to see who is right, the Zhou looks back to the Shang and says, we do not want to be like Shang.

Confucius will say that the Zhou took the past as a mirror, took the Xia and the Shang as mirrors by which to judge itself. I think there's some great deal of truth to that comment. The Zhou inaugurated there with its capital in the west behind the passes. The Zhou inaugurated two centuries of peace. The Central States, its vassals, the feudal lords grew stronger. The tribal peoples outside, the yidi, the barbarians excluded, grew more eager to share in this new wealth. And around early in the 8th century BC, the Zhou pressed on its flank by foreign tribes, flees east. It moves its royal capital to the east. When it moves its capital, however, it finds itself now the royal domain is not the biggest state anymore. It's a small state surrounded by vassals who, although they're vassals of the Zhou are, in fact, more powerful than the Zhou. Those vassals soon start to fight among themselves. This is the world into which Confucius came, into which he was born. A man with a sense of history and a man with a mission. We'll talk about that next.