

CHAPTER 1

Being, Society and World: Toward an Inter-Ontic Approach

Shang Civilization, Historiography and Early China

The Shang dynasty, especially the “Late Shang” (ca. 1250–1050 BCE), as seen through the palatial structures, monumental tombs, sacrificial pits and oracle-bone caches at Anyang, occupies a special place in Chinese history and archaeology. Not only was the “great settlement Shang,” in its time, the cultural, economic and political center of North China, its conquest by the Zhou was the central event around which Zhou ideology and dynastic narrative was built. Just as the Western Zhou (ca. 1045–781 BCE) conquest of the Shang facilitated the borrowing of substantial elements of Shang elite culture, and catapulted the Zhou dynastic house into political hegemony over the North China Plain, so too justification of the conquest shaped both Zhou moral and political ideology, and the construction of their identity as both the heirs to the Shang and its morally justified conquerors. The Zhou dynasty, in turn, holds a crucial place in Chinese history both as a strategic term in later constructions of social memory, and as a formative period for many later intellectual, social, political and economic developments (see Li 2006, 2008, von Falkenhausen 2006, Shaughnessy 1991, 1999). Archaeologically, the late Shang period comes at the end of a long process of increasing regional interaction and the cyclical growth and fall of increasingly large centers, a process that was well underway by the fourth millennium BCE (Campbell 2014a, Liu and Chen 2012). The Shang polity at Anyang, then, was both heir to the Bronze Age traditions of second millennium BCE North China and the legator of the Zhou inheritance. It is, moreover, a period of liminal history for which the first limited and partially deciphered corpus of contemporaneous inscriptions is available, linking the earlier periods known only from the archaeological record to the Zhou (ca. 1050–256 BCE) and the rest of Chinese history.

The site of Yinxu at Anyang, the Shang dynasty and the oracle-bones also occupy a special place in the narrative of archaeology and history in twentieth-century China. The discovery of Yinxu by the recently formed Academia Sinica in 1928 not only demonstrated the historicity of the Shang dynasty at a moment when it was beginning to be doubted by Chinese and foreign scholars alike, but with its monumental burials, palatial foundations of rammed earth, caches of oracle-bone inscriptions, magnificent bronze vessels and large-scale human sacrifice it gave the Modern Chinese nation a powerful (if ambivalent) symbol of its past.

Interrupted by the Japanese invasion of North China in 1937, the ensuing Second World War and the civil war that followed it, excavations resumed at Anyang in the early 1950s and have continued more or less unabated to this day. In the intervening sixty-some years, not only have hundreds of Chinese Bronze Age sites been discovered and excavated (both in the Central Plains and elsewhere), but studies of the oracle-bones and bronze inscriptions by Chinese, Japanese and scholars of other nationalities have greatly advanced our knowledge of the period. Until relatively recently, however, the field of Chinese archaeology was basically closed to foreign archaeologists who had to make do with what they could glean from the pages of “the three big journals” of Chinese archaeology. The double effect of this closure was theoretical and methodological isolation for Chinese archaeologists and a paucity of Western archaeologists trained in or knowledgeable about Chinese archaeology. This latter effect led in turn to the relative absence of China from Western archaeological discussion.²

A remarkable exception to this tendency was the work of K.C. Chang whose pioneering efforts to bring Western archaeology to China and Chinese archaeology to the West resulted in not only one of the first Sino-foreign archaeological collaborations in the PRC, but a heightened awareness on the part of Western scholars of the importance of China in discussions of world-comparative issues.³ For Chang, not only was the Chinese Bronze Age important simply by merit of its being a formative stage in the longest continuous civilization in human history, but also for

¹ These are *Kaogu*, *Kaoguxuebao* and *Wenwu*.

² Thus, looking at major comparative works on the rise of civilization or social complexity in the eighties and nineties there is little on China in English. Interestingly, there seems to be a marked increase in the “exposure” of early Chinese polities in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with several experts in other areas of world archaeology writing chapters on the Chinese case. This is an exciting development and hopefully will play a role in a more mature understanding of ancient China in the West.

³ Not to mention either directly training or inspiring the majority of the next two generations of Western archaeologists of China.

being an example of a line of historical development different than that of Mesopotamia and Western Civilization in general. Thus, the Chinese case offered a corrective to a Western-centered view of world history, a contribution to be ignored only at the peril of theorists of comparative socio-political development.

Another pioneer of Shang studies in the West is the epigrapher and historian David Keightley, whose work on the oracle-bone inscriptions led him to also argue that China took a different historical path than the West. For Keightley, the collectivism, optimism and this-worldly orientation of Chinese civilization contrasts sharply with the individualism, pessimism and other-worldly outlook of the Greeks (Keightley 1993). Moreover, while accepting a basically Weberian social evolutionary framework that sees bureaucratization and routinization as the key hallmarks of historical development, Keightley linked these processes fundamentally to religious and kinship structures embodied in the ancestral cult and its socio-political legitimating function (Keightley 1999a, 2000).

Despite differences in their views concerning the particular character of Shang society, polity, and religion and its Chinese historical and world comparative perspective, Keightley and Chang's views of the Shang share a common ground.

The data lead to the conclusion that civilization evolved along with the dynasties because in China – as elsewhere – it was the manifestation of the accumulated wealth of a small segment of society, the dynasty. In our case we can demonstrate that this wealth was accumulated primarily through the exercise of political authority, and facilitated by several interrelated factors: kinship hierarchy, moral authority of the ruler, military power, exclusive access to gods and to ancestors (as through rituals, art, and the use of writing), and access to wealth itself. (Chang 1983: 8)

The Shang polity was a patrimonial theocracy ruled by a lineage head, the king, “I, the one man,” whose authority derived from his unique relationship to the ancestors, and who relied on the socioreligious ties of patriarchal authority and filiality to bind his dependents to the dynastic enterprise. (Keightley 1999a: 289–290)

Comparing these two statements, it is clear that despite differences deriving from the two authors' different foci, Chang on archaeology and later texts, and Keightley on contemporaneous inscriptions, there is significant agreement on basic issues. Thus, political order was based crucially on moral authority, kinship and a royal monopoly over access to the supernatural. Indeed, this common ground, with variations in the details, could be

said to be the consensus view of Shang sociopolitical authority today (see also Akatsuka 1977, Chen 1988, Itō and Takashima 1996) and the point of departure for studies ranging from iconography to political economy (e.g. Allan 1991, 2007, Underhill 2002, Liu and Chen 2003, Thorp 2006).

Nevertheless, what remains unexplained in the consensus view of Shang social-political authority are the actual mechanisms mediating between power, belief and social practices. How, for instance, was “exclusive access to gods and to ancestors” kept exclusive (or was it)? How was kinship constructed and “patriarchal authority and filiality” rendered “binding”? In what economy of power, access and obligation were Shang orientations, dispositions and values formed such that social orders were reproduced or contested? More generally, what is the relationship between “ideology” and “political economy”; between values, beliefs or mentality, on the one hand, and social, political and economic structures and processes on the other? How do these things change over time?

Interestingly, although both Chang and Keightley employ models of religious evolution in understanding the Shang and the developmental trajectory of Chinese history, not only do these differ, with Keightley drawing on Weber, and Chang ultimately on Eliade,⁴ they take opposite positions with respect to neo-evolutionary typologies. Thus, Keightley (1999a) states that,

The degree to which lineages were key elements in the state, so that political status was frequently based on kin status rather than assigned title, suggests that the Shang polity still shared some of the features of the complex chiefdoms that had appeared in the Late Neolithic. The large numbers of princes and other leaders about whose activities a king like Wu Ding divined suggests both a lack of routine administrative delegation and the great importance attached to such quasi-personal attention on the part of the king, who, in this regard, was still functioning like the “big man” of a prestate chiefdom. (289–290)

From this description of Shang political and social organization we can see two assumptions at play: that states are separated from chiefdoms in their replacement of kinship with formalized authority structures, and ad-hoc and charismatic administrative techniques are replaced with routine and

⁴ Puett (2002). In fact Chang’s most direct influence is probably the Mesoamericanist Peter Furst (1973–1974, 1976) whose definition of shamanism Chang quotes in several articles on the subject (Chang 1983, 1986, 1989a, 1989b). For a searing critique of the Shamanism hypothesis in Mesoamerica see Klein et al. (2002).

bureaucracy.⁵ Nevertheless, despite apparently accepting the framework of neo-evolutionary theory, Keightley finds that the Anyang polity sits somewhat ambiguously in between chiefdom and state, sharing properties of both. Moreover, in the relationship between socio-political organization and “theology” Keightley finds that in the Shang case,

it is in the logical relationships that Shang theology postulated as basic, and in the emotions associated with those relationships, that we find the characteristic elements which influenced the development of political culture in Zhou and later times. We find, in fact, a paradoxical situation: a Shang state permeated with a commitment to the ancestors, strongly religious in the totality of its demand; and yet we find that the commitment can be characterized as nonreligious, nonmysterious, and – because so explicitly goal directed – rational in its logic. (Keightley 1978b: 214)

Thus, not only was the Shang foundational for later Chinese civilization, but the specific logics and practices of ancestor worship influenced the form of later political practices. Moreover, although this “commitment” was “religious,” its logic was not. In fact, “in Weberian terms ... we can refer to the hierarchical, contractual, rational, routinized, mathematical, compartmentalized nature of Shang ancestor worship as bureaucratic” (Keightley 1978b: 216). The understanding of historical process implicit in this model then posits both historical or evolutionary stages and attendant mentalities, but mentalities that nevertheless have their own particularistic characteristics and histories. Thus, the bureaucratic orientation of Shang ancestor worship shaped later Zhou practices, while its semi-routinized nature indicates an “incipient state.”

Chang, for his part, questioned both Weberian and neo-evolutionary assumptions then current in the historical and anthropological literature on early complex polities. After citing Flannery’s (1972) definition of the state⁶ Chang (1980) is moved to say,

⁵ Actually, Keightley’s remark that the Shang king’s lack of “administrative delegation” was reminiscent of “the big-man of pre-state chiefdoms” mixes its neo-evolutionary typology. The big-man society (Sahlins 1963) was supposed to come before the chiefdom and its characteristics were not so much lack of delegation of authority or personal attention to details as the achieved as opposed to ascribed quality of status which, somewhat paradoxically (Yoffee 2005), is also a feature that neo-evolutionary theory assigns to status in states.

⁶ Flannery’s definition is as follows,

The state is a type of very strong, unusually highly centralized government, with a professional ruling class, largely divorced from the bonds of kinship which characterize simpler societies. It is highly stratified and extremely diversified internally,

In this view, a state society must possess two prerequisite features: replacement of blood bonds by territorial bonds in state organization, and legitimized force. Applying these criteria to Shang, we find that the first is not applicable but the second is. Was the Shang a state society? ... Is Shang a chiefdom then, and not a state? But it would be absurd to decide so, for Shang fits the definition of the state with regard to its legitimate use of force, its hierarchical ruling structure, and its social classes. In short, the Shang data pose some definitional problems in regard to its classification as chiefdom or state. (363–364)

For Chang, the typological trait-list that indicated the presence or absence of a state society was problematically based on the Western developmental path, as instantiated in the Mesopotamian case, and could not be accurately applied to the Chinese situation. As we will see later on in our discussion of theories of social complexity, the inherent limitations of this kind of trait list approach have led to its demise in the analysis of social-political development in general, but for present purposes what is interesting is Chang's influential solution to the problem of Western models and Chinese data.⁷ On the level of political economy, Chang stated that unlike Mesopotamia, where trade and technological innovation were factors in the rise of civilization, in China, "the accumulation and concentration of wealth," the hallmark of civilization in Chang's view, was "accomplished

with residential patterns often based on occupational specialization rather than blood or affinal relationship. The state attempts to maintain a monopoly of force, and is characterized by true law; almost any crime may be considered a crime against the state, in which case punishment is meted out by the state according to codified procedures, rather than being the responsibility of the offended party or his kin, as in simpler societies. While the individual citizens must forego violence, the state can wage war; it can also draft soldiers, levy taxes and exact tributes. (Flannery 1972: 403–404)

As will be discussed below such unilineal evolutionary definitions of *the* state are not much in favor in archaeology today, much less the political science or anthropological literature in which they originated.

⁷ The position of Western theory in Chinese studies is not only a sub-set of the perennial etic and emic translation issues of anthropology, or the recursive relationship between model and empirical data, but a central problematic of Chinese archaeology and Chinese studies in general. Nationalism, identity, cultural and scholarly traditions, politics, personal relationships, language and access weave a complicated web between Western archaeologists, China specialists, their Chinese colleagues and their subject matter, though with the accelerating pace of international collaboration and interaction, the nature of these dynamics is rapidly changing and the day when Chinese data, theory and theorists play a proportional role in comparative anthropological and historical discussion will hopefully soon be at hand.

more in the domain of politics than in the domain of technology and economics”(Chang 1989a: 160). Moreover, “the characteristic feature of the Chinese rise to civilization ... is that ideology was one of the principal instruments whereby the society’s economic relations were realigned” (Chang 1989a: 164) – an ideology that Chang saw as shamanistic (Chang 1983, 1989a, 1989b, 1999, 2005, etc.). Even more importantly, Chang linked shamanism and, thus, the orientation of Chinese civilization in general, to a more archaic, holistic relationship between nature and culture, a “world view, sometimes referred to as ‘correlative cosmology,’” that is essentially “the substratum of the human view of the world found widely among primitive societies”(1989a: 162). Thus, unlike the West with its “qualitative break from the ancient substratum common to the lot of the rest of men,” its “rupture” of “cosmic holism,” and its “demarcation between man and his natural resources”(1989a: 166), ancient Chinese civilization was a civilization of continuity, “built on top and within” the “confines” of an essentially shamanistic world-view (1989a: 162).

The cultural essentialism and historical accuracy of this model have been critiqued in other places (Puett 2002) and the applicability of the term “shamanism” both to the Shang and as a universal type of “primitive” religion, has been questioned on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Nevertheless, the kernel of Chang’s model has continued to be influential: that Shang political economy was more political than economic, and that the political was underwritten significantly by authority of ultimately religious origin. Looking at the specifics of the articulation of political economy and ideology in Chang’s theory, there is an apparent connection between technology, economic development, society and ideology as Chang notes that “both productive technology and strategic trade had their turn in the next phase of Chinese civilization [the Eastern Zhou (650–221 BCE in Chang’s periodization)] (Chang 1989a: 160). Thus, the Chinese Bronze Age (2000–650 BCE) is both a period when Chang felt the state first arose in China and a period lacking obvious development of productive forces or technology put to economic (as opposed to political or religious) purposes. While more recent research is increasingly demonstrating that this is not an accurate assessment of the social uses of technological development in second millennium BCE North China (Yuan and Campbell 2009, Campbell et al. 2011, Kejibu 2009, etc.), it could indeed be said that the civilization of the Central Plains in the second millennium BCE was built on the foundations of the third – but does that make it a “civilization of continuity” in Chang’s sense? Chang’s claim is apparently based on both an understanding of shamanism as a universal primitive religion (and thus

representative of a time before the “demarcation between man and his natural resources”) and the assumption that technological innovation and economic development occurs in a process of “rupture” and increasing disenchantment of the world. Thus, the difference between China and the West lies in China’s development of “state-level society” without “rupture” in its cosmological relationship with the natural world. Although socially and politically impacting economic and technological developments did occur later, it was the formation of the state within the bounds and on the basis of a shamanistic world-view that threw the switch of Chinese history for Chang.

For both Chang and Keightley then, religious practices and their underlying world-views or mentalities were crucial to understanding not only Shang civilization, but also the developmental path of later Chinese history. A crucial difference, however, is that Keightley saw religious and socio-political evolution as moving in holistic stages while Chang de-linked social complexity and world-view, while nonetheless seeing some world-views as more primeval than others.⁸ This difference has been noted by Puett (2002) who divides works on Early Chinese cosmology into cultural-essentialist and evolutionist camps placing Chang in the former, and Keightley in the latter,

Weber, as well as those who advocated a generally evolutionist framework, present cosmological models as part of an attempt to rationalize an existing magical, theistic, animistic worldview. Correlative cosmology was thus a shift toward rationality and naturalism, even if it unfortunately retained many of the earlier magical notions ... The advocates of the cultural-essentialist model, on the other hand, hold that these cosmological texts are indicative of a set of underlying assumptions in early China. Figures as diverse as Granet, Mote, Chang, Graham and Hall and Ames hold that even if cosmological systems did not emerge until the third century BC, they are nonetheless representative of a general “Chinese” way of thinking ... According to these interpretations, China and Greece (indeed, all of the West) are distinguished by radically different cosmologies – the Western tradition being defined in terms of (among other things) a disjunction between man and god, and the Chinese assuming an inherent correlation and linkage. (Puett 2002: 21)

⁸ My interpretation of Chang’s analysis of Early Chinese history is that different aspects of historical change need not occur at exactly the same rate although there is a general shape and direction of historical change.

Thus, Early Chinese intellectual history is generally either fit into a teleology that, in the West at least, culminates in the discovery of science and an increasingly “rational” interaction with the world, or it is contrasted with the West as being predicated on an enduring and fundamentally different kind of mind-set. The problem with the first tendency is that it generally amounts to little more than the backward projection of categories and modes of thought that ultimately derive from the Enlightenment onto all of human history. Setting magic, religion and science in a teleology that leads to increasing disenchantment of the world and a discovery of the universe as it “really is,” these models forget that “science,” “magic” and “religion” are the historically and culturally constructed categories of one tradition, framed within the boundaries of its ontology and repackaged with historical trajectory. Equally problematic are cultural essentialist assumptions which tend to lock civilizations into particularistic historical streams which again beg the question of history and process, not to mention potentially reifying difference into cultural or civilizational incommensurability (e.g. Huntington 1997). Thus, whether ideology/world-view is characterized as civilizational or stadial, its relationship to specific social-historical practices, institutions and processes remains unexamined. Thus, human sacrifice, divination and ancestor worship tend to become either symptoms of a Bronze Age mentality or instantiations of a particularly “Chinese” view of the world, rather than as social practices recursively shaping and shaped by social actors, embedded in social fields and economies, and the products of local and trans-local processes.

Puett’s (2002) solution to the problem of sailing between cultural essentialism and evolutionism is to advocate a “full historical study” that sees texts as “claims” and the project of which is “to reconstruct the contexts in which these claims were meaningful” (24). In a superficial sense, one could look at Puett’s (2002) method as replacing a history of mentality and society with a history of ideas – instead of comparing epochs and general world-views Puett wants to examine particular texts in their specific contexts. But what do “text” and “context” mean here? For Puett, texts are to be understood as instantiating intellectual positions in the context of debates arising from underlying structural tensions. Thus, it is not so much the comparability of world-views (which thus do not need to be set in either linear or parallel orders of development) that is at stake for Puett, but rather that it is “by recognizing these tensions and concerns that one can compare the Chinese material with that found in other cultures facing similar political and cultural problems” (Puett 2002: 321). Furthermore, for Puett, “the interesting issues for comparative

studies are how and why the claims were made in each culture, and how and why various solutions came to be institutionalized” (322). Puett then, like Chang and Keightley, is arguing for a relationship between world-view and society, but sees the former as constituted of particular ideas responding to specific social-political issues. Nevertheless, while introducing a finer chronological and contextual framework for the investigation of Chinese intellectual history, some questions remain. What, for instance, is the linkage between “claim,” “debate,” “structural tensions” and the knowledge of social actors? How do “political and cultural problems” come to be figured intellectually? Thus, if the Qin establishment of empire created tensions around which debate swirled, was it the introduction of the novel concept of empire that created these tensions, or was it the restructuring of social and political life? If, as I suspect, Puett’s answer would be both, then, from the social end of things, how are “tensions” produced, how are they experienced by social actors and how does this understanding and production of “cultural problems” articulate with institutions, practices and dispositions? I would argue that we need to flesh out the articulation between material conditions, practices and discourse to get to a more fully contextual approach. Indeed, to avoid the pitfalls of cultural essentialism and evolutionism even the ontological ground of analysis must come under historical scrutiny.

Inter-Ontic

Introduced by the linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike in 1954, the concepts of emic and etic have proven influential in anthropology, entering into common use and spreading to other disciplines. These concepts derive from the distinction in phonology between phonetics and phonemics, with the former denoting a system of possible sound distinctions produced in human languages while the latter denotes the distinctions actually made by speakers of a particular language. Thus, to borrow an example from Trigger (2003: 63), “in English ‘pin’ and ‘bin’ are two different words, while in Arabic *p* and *b* are interpreted as the same sound. In English ‘king’ and ‘queen’ are believed to begin with the same sound, although *k* is velar and *q* uvular. In Arabic, however, *kalb* signifies ‘dog’ and *qalb* ‘heart.’” By analogy then, etic is usually understood to refer to a universally valid or scientific analytical framework for studying cultures and emic to the actual distinctions made and concepts used by the people of a particular society. Trigger’s (2003) discussion of the term is fairly representative,

In anthropology *etic* refers to analysis in terms of cross-culturally applicable scientific terms and *emic* to the study of the terminology and underlying concepts that have meaning for the people who belong to a particular society. (63)

One of the first objections that might be raised to the use of these terms is the issue of whether or not the analogy between phonology and culture is a strong one. This leads to the further question of what notion of culture is being deployed and how strictly analogous *emic* and *etic* are to phonemic and phonetic. If the underlying model of culture is language as in structuralism and its semiological off-shoots (especially if modeled on Saussurian semiotics where meaning is predicated on distinctions) then *emic* and *etic* seem potentially useful – but if culture is seen as more than a system of semiotic distinctions, then there is an additional dimension of inquiry beyond simply the difference between our system of signifiers and theirs. Thus, if, as in Geertz's influential formulation, culture is a “model of reality” and a “model for reality,” and “cultural patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves” (Geertz 2000: 93) – then *emic* might productively be defined as the local “model” of reality and *etic* as the nomothetic categories into which the anthropologist translates it.⁹ On the other hand, if, as Asad (1993) argues in his critique of Geertz's analysis of religion, “the formation of what we have here called ‘symbols’ (complexes, concepts) is conditioned by the social relations in which the growing child is involved – by the social activities that he or she is permitted or encouraged or obliged to undertake” (31), then semiotic systems cannot stand for culture if by the latter we wish to include “life ways,” “social habits” or “traditions,” and *emic/etic* distinctions may be of limited utility in the analysis of local worlds as products of social practices and power relations as opposed to representations of them.

In Trigger's and many other anthropologists use of the term, the distinction between *etic* and *emic* is not drawn between “our” concepts and

⁹ It should be noted that Geertz himself eschews the terminology *etic* and *emic*, and his own “thick description” approach avoids the pitfalls implicit in positing a universally valid *etic* framework with which to understand the semiotic systems of others, instead arguing that ethnography is a fundamentally interpretive endeavor. For Geertz, what makes this interpretation more than projection is the isomorphism between social action and semiotic system suggested in the formulation of symbolic systems as systems of and for reality. In my view, however, the practical and social aspects of human action and meaning are underdeveloped in Geertz's model.

“theirs,” but between scientific “experience-distant” and culturally specific “experience-near” ones. This then raises the question of whether or not there is such a thing as a set of “scientific” universally applicable terms that are not simply instantiations of the emic views of the scientist. If Kuhn is correct in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in saying, “there is ... no theory independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there’; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its ‘real’ counterpart in nature seems to me illusive in principle” (Kuhn 1996: 209), then the possibility of a “scientific” vantage point from which to render human societies comprehensible that itself stands outside of history and society seems dubious on the face of it. The only understanding of a human science left to us then, is that of a complex of inter-related practices, techniques and values grounded in particular cultural embodiments – in effect, our own privileged, emic locus of truth production. This is not, however, an argument for idiosyncratic solipsism and even less for relativistic nihilism – rather it is a recognition of the relational nature of perception, historical or otherwise.

If culture is not necessarily like language and there is no ontologically privileged vantage point upon which to build universal analytical schemes, then on what grounds can a historical or anthropological analysis be based if it is to be more than anachronistic or culture-centric projection? My solution is two-fold. Following Merleau-Ponty’s (2002) rejection of Cartesian mind/body, subject/object dichotomies and the idea that being is instead constituted by and constitutive of perceptual interactions with our environments, and Mauss (1973), Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 2000), Kleinman (1995), Csordas (1994) and others in seeing “being-in-the-world” in terms of a mutually constitutive dialectic between material and symbolic aspects of individual and world, I would claim that framing science as the analyst’s local social embodiment does not rule out translation but grounds it in a trans-local dialectic that I would call inter-ontic. The inter-ontic then, is the inter-subjective writ large, that experience of the trans-local that is constituted through a simultaneous sense of experiential phenomena and the organ of experience itself. So just as the hand touching an object gains a tactile sense of that object and at the same time a sense of its own weight, softness, strength, etc. – a processual constitution of both the knower and the known – so too the sensitive anthropologist/historian constructs a sense of not only the world of study but through it also her own. With the concept of the inter-ontic, what I mean to emphasize is that while the categories and mental habits of one’s local world must necessarily form the point of departure,

if the understanding of the past is to be more than projection, the very frameworks of historical analysis must be constructed in a *process* of inter-local hermeneutic endeavor.

The inter-ontic also serves to remind us that there can be no study of other times and places that bypasses translation; that experience of other local worlds is, by definition, inter-local/inter-historical. Moreover, in keeping with the critique of culture as language, I want to stretch the original phonological analogy to accommodate a notion of culture as not only a semiotic system located in the mind, but also orientations and durable dispositions shaping the body/self through its participation in nature-cultural collectives. As Latour (1993: 106) writes,

If there is one thing we all do, it is surely that we construct both our human collectives and the nonhumans that surround them. In constituting their collectives, some mobilize ancestors, lions, fixed stars, and the coagulated blood of sacrifice; in constructing ours, we mobilize genetics, zoology, cosmology and haematology.

In other words, returning to the problematic of history and society in ancient China and beyond, I would like to move beyond the sense that ontology can be reduced to local misrepresentations of reality, and that what falls on the wrong side of our Enlightenment divide between science / truth / rationality / nature, on the one hand, and religion / superstition / irrationality / supernatural, on the other, is merely the product of primitive thought or self-serving elite ideology. If we instead imagine the collectives of others to be just as much an entangled and entangling ball of concepts, people, things, practices and environments as our own, we will not only come to a more accurate understanding of the past but also a more realistic perspective on our own doings – shorn of the mentally lazy and historically unexamined use of habitual categories such as religion, rationality or the state. I am arguing then, for a willing suspension of disbelief; an analytical untangling of the socio-technical collectives of the past; an extraction from them local sets of meaningful categories and orientations-to-being-in-the-world; and finally a re-assembling of the past according to its own reconstructed ontologies.

Arising from this inter-ontic approach to society as process, and history as the ephemeral and enduring structures inscribed by and on bodies and worlds,¹⁰ is the conviction that ancient societies like that of Shang Anyang,

¹⁰ In saying this I am basically agreeing with Giddens' (1979) statement that "there simply are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history – appropriately conceived" (230).

are of more than antiquarian interest. They matter both for the legacy they left inscribed in the institutions and structures that, however transformed by subsequent developments, nonetheless bear the indelible marks of their history, and for their potential, as instantiations of possible ways of being-in-the-world, for a re-enchanting of history with a broadened and historicized knowledge of what it is to be “human.”