Recent scholarship has highlighted many of the fundamental uncertainties scholars face when trying to describe the early Chinese state in historical terms. What was the scope and structure of early Chinese states? To what extent can models useful in describing state formation in other parts of the world be applied fruitfully in China? And just how many states were there in the formative period? Most or perhaps all of these questions emerge in part from, or can be analyzed with respect to, the problematic relationship between transmitted textual sources and archeologically discovered material remains and paleographic materials. To state the case plainly, the transmitted textual record appears to describe a single, centralized Chinese state, of wide-reaching political and cultural influence, with a well-articulated bureaucratic or protobureaucratic administrative hierarchy, stretching diachronically across the period of the Three Dynasties (the Xia, Shang, and Zhou) and perhaps even earlier, and geographically over a vast territory including the Wei River valley, the North China Plain, the Shandong peninsula, and much of the central and lower Yangzi River watershed. The archeological record, which has grown increasingly rich over the last two generations of scholarship, gives us a strikingly different picture, one of great cultural diversity and complexity and of still inchoate political institutions and changing social structures.

1 For a survey of recent approaches to this issue, see Yates 1997.

2 The disparity between traditional textual accounts of early China and the evidence from modern archeology is a major theme of Loewe and Shaughnessy 1999 and is reflected in the book’s overall organization and taken up in various ways by individual contributors; see, e.g., Loewe and Shaughnessy’s introduction (1999: 1–18) and the conclusion to Bagley’s chapter (Bagley 1999). See also the review by Schaberg (2001), which aptly notes the challenges involved in such a project and some of the ways in which portions of the Cambridge volume succeed in, or fall short of, integrating textual and archeological materials. Falkenhausen 2006
The notion of a centralized state with a single, unilinear history reaching back to a handful of sagely founders was an intellectual and textual invention. We are apt now to look back through the complex jumble of historical and archeological sources and try to discern the emergence of not just “civilization” or “the early state” but the rise of “the Chinese state”—not because the earliest data always lead us in this direction but because several important traditional sources created this entity and projected it onto the past, forever coloring the way our sources have come down to us and the ways we understand them or ask questions of them. In his widely influential book Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson posited the importance of the novel in the creation of modern nations, by allowing for a group of far-flung strangers to share a group identity as a single audience, a single readership. His work has helped highlight the importance of such imagination in conjuring and sustaining the very idea of a nation.\(^3\) Contributors to the equally influential volume The Invention of Tradition made a similar argument, focusing on the modern concoction of various pseudotraditions for contemporary political purposes.\(^4\) Neither book is particularly interested in the implications of such insights for scholars of the premodern era, so neither seriously asks if the processes in question might in fact be very old, or if modern “inventions” might often be reconfigurations of older inventions. We can forgive them this oversight: their tasks are mired in the scale of modernity, with its mass media and industrial or information age economy. The premodern world, as if that were a single entity, looks to them almost unrecognizable (“the past is a foreign country”).

Yet a field of scholarship has in fact sprung up around these very questions. Most of our colleagues in history or political science departments will politely inform us that we cannot use the word “nation” when speaking of premodern states, but within their own disciplines, the issue is far from settled.\(^5\) We may not want to worry ourselves with some of their squabbles, but below the surface of our terminology lurk important questions. If, on the one hand, we cannot speak of “nations,” and then, certainly, not of “nationalism,” and if, on the other hand, we are compelled to understand the role of such cultural artifacts as the novel in helping create those bonds of sentiment that we understand

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4 Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983. Hobsbawm, throughout his introduction to the volume, is aware of the problem noted here but never seriously pursues the question of the historical depth of the processes of the invention of tradition.

5 Anthony D. Smith has devoted much of his career to arguing for the existence of nations in the premodern era. See, inter alia, Smith 2000.