PART ONE: EARLY CHINA
Since the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) has had a place in the Chinese canon that can be understood fully only with reference to its “constitutional” promise. The text, initially known as the *Offices of Zhou* (*Zhouguan* 周官) (or, as I will argue below, *Comprehensive Offices*), incorporates both an office list and prescriptions for regular duties, and therefore bears comparison with similar blueprints of government from other places and times.¹ The most influential legend of its origins, the attribution to the Duke of Zhou, tellingly echoes stories of constitution making from early European history. The work shows clear generic affinities with passages in other early Chinese texts, offering an administrative system that is internally well ordered, clearly founded on traditional and philosophical principles, and potentially workable; yet the *Zhouli* dwarfs all its Chinese analogues in scale and, if recent hypotheses on its provenance are correct, is unique among them for its close association with an actual government, that of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). Finally, in a way that is characteristic of several early approaches to the problem of governing a unified empire, the text places two of the key activities of the central government—management of commerce and of communications—within a single system of circulation, making this system the foundation of the government’s legitimacy. In all these respects, even though it has never been adopted *in toto* as a template for government, the *Zhouli* has had a constitutional character.

It is important to specify the sense in which the *Zhouli* might usefully be called “constitutional.” The *Zhouli* is clearly not “constitutional” in the same sense that a modern document like the United States Constitution is; it does not guarantee the rights of the people or specify the duties of government. Instead, I mean the word “constitu-

¹ For an account of the changing titles of the work, see Wang Xueping 2007.