SHANG AND WESTERN ZHOU (1250–771 BC)
SHANG STATE RELIGION AND THE PANTHEON OF THE ORACLE TEXTS

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Introduction

The earliest voice that speaks to us from the Chinese past is the voice of the Shang dynasty oracle texts, divination records inscribed on animal bones and shells by mantic specialists in the service of the kings and princes of the late Shang royal house. Their earliest words date from about 1250 BC, and the oracle texts are virtually the only written legacy of any Chinese era before the armies of the Zhou brought the Shang dynasty to an end about 1046 BC. For this reason, we tend to see the Shang as ancestral to the culture of later eras and to search its texts for clues to the origins of Chinese religion. The goal of this chapter is to compose an outline portrait of Shang “state religion” and its pantheon of deities, and the interest of this exercise naturally relates to the position of the Shang as China’s first historically documented state.

But there are at least three respects in which we must be cautious when we approach this project. One of these pertains to the nature of the oracle texts themselves. The texts are entirely concerned with matters whose divination was of moment to the Shang ruling elite, but that does not mean that all the religious features they reveal should be considered part of a state religion. While some aspects may principally

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1 A small number of brief inscriptions on bronze vessels begin to appear in the early 11th century BC, and an even smaller corpus of 11th century non-Shang oracle texts, discussed below, has been found at sites of the predynastic Zhou. While these sources are important, they are dwarfed by over a million micro-texts in the Shang oracle corpus.

For convenience, I will use dates proposed by the recent Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project (Xia-Shang-Zhou duandai gongcheng zhuanjiazu 夏商周斷代工程專家組, Xia-Shang-Zhou duandai gongcheng zhuanjiazu 1996–2000 nian jieduan chengguo baogao 夏商周斷代工程 1996–2000 年階段成果報告 [Beijing, 2000], pp. 86–88). These dates continue to provoke strong debate among scholars, and no proposed dates for China prior to 841 BC may yet be considered authoritative. In recognition of this, all such dates are marked *circa*. Exceptionally, Chinese characters are included in the references in this chapter (note of the editors).