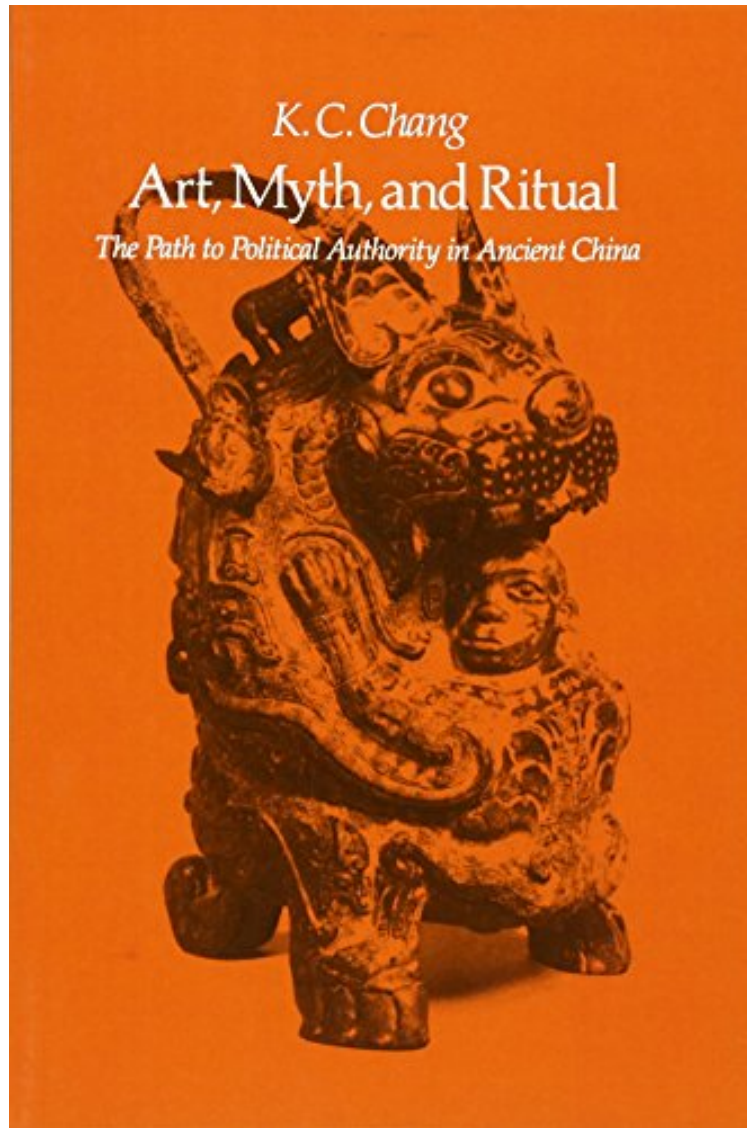


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Art, Myth and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China

K. C. Chang

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K. C. Chang : Art, Myth and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Art, Myth and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China:

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myself asking when deciding whether or not to purchase a book: Is this book a keeper? Is it enough to borrow it from a library and read it, or will I want to own it? (Confession: I am very keen on Chinese history.) Let me answer that question for you here: If you are a serious student of Chinese history and culture, you must own, not just read, this book. Its cross-disciplinary perspective makes it a book you will find yourself returning to on a regular basis as your own knowledge and understanding of Chinese history and culture grows. Passages once oblique or of little interest to you previously, will suddenly become the glue of new associations and insights. You will also want to underline, make margin notations in, and add your own notes, even if you don't usually mark up books. I was on my way to the library to take out this book for a third time when I realized, this is a keeper.

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Few are the books that contain so many insights in so few and interesting pages. One is happy to hold up this short text as an example of close and clear analysis. Of course, this is not airport literature, but whoever puts the effort into reading it, and savors the various strands of argumentation, comes away with a clearer (if not complete) view of pre-imperial China. It is a welcome prelude to Harvard UP's History of Imperial China, which begins abruptly with the Qin Empire The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han (History of Imperial China). How did pre-imperial China emerge from the Neolithic age? The author, who focuses on the period of the Three Dynasties (2200 -256 BC), sets out to show that it emerged as "various factors enabled political power to be concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite" (pg. 107). In other words, it is once again the story of an elite getting its hands on the emerging economic surplus and creating all sorts of mostly symbolic mechanisms to hold on to it over generations. In the final chapter the author dismisses Marx's "Oriental society" deprived of property, Max Weber's "patrimonial state", and Wittvogel's "hydraulic society". The essential difference is that Chang's world is essentially changing and dynamic, rather than static and unchangeable as in Western "theories". As agricultural surplus eventuated, villages organized themselves into clans and agnate lineages; the elites also relied on moral authority, coercive force, and exclusive access to spiritual world (shamanism, rituals, and associated paraphernalia) to establish and maintain themselves - it was a politically, rather than a technologically-driven process. The walk through early Chinese art, the conspicuous production (and destruction by interment with the dead ruler) of bronze vessels, the emergence of Chinese writing as record of communications from the ancestors into this world, all subtly lead to the final chapter 7, where the arguments are marshaled to full effect. After the short introduction I'd suggest having a go at this chapter first and then again after reading through the book. For in this chapter we have the description of the emerging civilization for the Neolithic period (7000 - 2200 BC), and the author shows how one by one the "various factors" are put in place in an emergent fashion. One understands the line of argument better this way. On a personal note, I'm wary of "theories" and "models", and strongly favor "small causes that have huge effects", or "emergence through a mix of necessity and contingency" - tinkering with various causally interrelated factors (and feedback loops) until by trial and error a winning combination is found. This book celebrates such a view of history, and one feels slightly comforted in noting that authorities from halfway around the world, with large field experience, seem to move in the same direction.

Leading scholar K. C. Chang challenges long-standing conceptions of the rise of political authority in ancient China. This strikingly illustrated book is a persuasive demonstration of the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of early civilizations.