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### Book Review: EdX and HarvardX. China X. China's Past, Present and Future. <https://www.edx.org/chinax-chinas-past-present-future>

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**EdX and HarvardX. China X. China's Past, Present and Future.**  
**<https://www.edx.org/chinax-chinas-past-present-future>**

Part I: China's Political and Intellectual Foundations: from the Sage Kings to Confucius  
<https://www.edx.org/course/china-part-1-political-and-intellectual-foundations-from-the-sage-kings-to-confucius-and-the-legalists-2>

Reviewed by Constance Wilkinson

It's a MOOC, a Massive Open On-line Course. It is China X, a 10-part survey course covering the 6,000+ year history of China from the distant beginnings of its civilization up into the present.

China X is the brainchild of Harvard University's Harvard X, "a strategic initiative, to enable faculty to create online learning experiences . . . and enable groundbreaking research in online pedagogy." Free public education at its Harvard-quality finest, China X is a challenging opportunity that is available to anyone (and everyone) who can connect to it on the internet.

It was conceived by (and is taught by) Harvard professors Peter K. Bol and William C. Kirby and staff, including a lively team of pre-doc and post-doc teaching assistants.

China X is self-paced, well-designed, and intriguing, featuring video presentations by China X lead professors Bol and Kirby, along with others from Harvard and beyond. Each sub-section - or module - offers assignments - mainly primary source readings - with opportunities for individual interpretations and discussion, colorful interactive maps, visual explorations of artifacts, with follow-up assessments and even "office hours."

Information delivery has been broken down into short, easily digestible chunks - extremely helpful for those with short attention spans - not to mention helpful to those with lives lived on the run (which I won't mention) - so that if one stumbles on an extra 5-10 minutes, it's easy to re-pick up the narrative thread and continue to progress through the course.

One can gain access via desktop, laptop, or smart-phone, with the program transferring seamlessly from one device to another, so that learning can occur on a bus, train, plane, boat, subway, or late night in bed.

Indeed, this MOOC's educational process is swift, sweet, and surprisingly addictive. Within its very first module, *Part I*'s use of visuals succeeded in magically/effortlessly implanting in my consciousness a new understanding of the effect China's geography and climate had (and has) on the course of its civilization, shaping politics and culture, as dynasties ebb and flow - or ebb when flooded.

Worse yet, it features a terrifying musical earworm mnemonic which -- to the tune of *Frere Jacques* -- implants in mind 12 Chinese dynasties -- "*Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han; Shang Zhou, Qin, Han.*" - in chronological order.

Colorful dynamic interactive maps illuminate the physical features that characterize China: plains, mountains, the great rivers. One can move the maps back and forth in time, changing modes of movement, population shifts and twists and turns as we witness puce Chu being gobbled up by magenta Song.

Professor Bol presents two different versions of the origins and early history of China: one based on archaeology and another based on stories/histories from written texts.

Based on physical evidence, discussion of origins begins with migrations from Africa to Asia; Harvard Professor of Archaeology Rown Flad presents Swedish archeologist Johan Gunnar Andersson's groundbreaking work done in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at Zhoukoudian (Chou-k'ou-tien) which led to the discovery of Peking Man, *Homo Erectus*; at Yangshao, Andersson finds evidence of culture: painted kiln-fired pottery, the cultivation of millet, domestication of animals.

Artifacts are brought out from Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum collection for our observation: we can contemplate up-close their fragile Neolithic-era pots made of clay, smoothed, decorated, fired in a kiln. We can see maps of the many late Neolithic settlements of China in addition to Yangshao: Hongshan, Tuzhu, Dawenkou, Majiabeng, Hemudu, Tanshishan, Fengbitou, Shizia, Shanbei, Dazi. We view two Neolithic Yangshao burials and are asked what conclusions can be drawn from observations of objects placed in the graves - one is buried with clay pots, the other buried with an ax-like tool that could be jade.

The existence of a Xia Dynasty is posited in texts, unsupported by archaeological evidence. However, the Shang Dynasty's existence, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE, was confirmed by the discovery of Bronze Age artifacts.

Learners are able to view Shang Dynasty artifacts that are in the Sackler collection; there are two important categories of objects of crucial importance: bronze ritual vessels typically used as burial offerings and what are called "oracle bones."

Burial pits in Shang include bones and many valuable objects such as bronze pots and ceremonial daggers. In the Shang Dynasty there is a constant demand for ritual objects to honor the dead, funerary offerings to the dead from the living, a practice that consumes social energy and wealth based on beliefs about how to create conditions of auspiciousness.

The Sackler Museum collection includes many of these objects, which learners can inspect in detail, as they have been filmed 360 degrees around. The technical structure and social function of objects such as a dragon-headed wine vessel are explained by Dr. Robert D. Mowry, Head of the Department of Asian Art at the Sackler Museum and by Professor Zhang Changping.

Shang dynasty rulers gained legitimacy through their ability to communicate with ancestors through making sacrifices (sometimes human) and by their use of divinatory objects called "oracle bones."

Thanks to the Sackler collection, we see and can study actual artifacts, tortoise cartilage and large shoulder bones used as instruments to help rulers in making decisions; writing starts as record-keeping for questions asked and predictions made, reading the cracks in the bones as one might read tea leaves.

Written information includes:

The date (of the divination.)

The topic (it will rain tomorrow - yes it will/no it won't.)

*At this point, the ruler performs a ritual that will make a crack in the bone. He will then observe the way the bone cracks in response.*

The interpretation (that's a yes/that's a no.)

*The ruler gets to decide what the crack means.*

Lastly, though rarely, the outcome: *yes it rained/no it did not*

Who wants to keep good records of bad divinations?

Eventually Oracle Bone records include more and more pictures; over time this record-keeping evolves into the hieroglyphics of written Chinese.

What is striking is the emphasis on taking the advice of the bones; socio-political decisions are driven by successful reading of tea leaves; Oracle Bones are cast like dice (or a proto-I Ching.).

The second stream of knowledge for the early history of China comes from Warring States-era texts, *The Classic of the Documents*, that tell of China's legendary early rulers: the Yellow Emperor, the Divine Farmer, Emperors Yao, Shun, and Yu.

Professor Bol skips over the Yellow Emperor and the Divine Farmer entirely (not saying why) and concentrates on the latter three. Emperor Yao, according to Bol, “in some sense, invents government” around 2400 BCE. Yao creates useful agricultural calendars; he rules wisely — sagely, even, he harmonizes his subjects. Learners read excerpts from "*The Canon of Yao*" and discover Yao was "reverent, intelligent, accomplished, sincere, and mild."

The actions of the Sage Kings are seen solely through rose-colored glasses. Yao, Shun, Yu- their good qualities are pervasive! They are worthy! Modest! Respectful! Able to make bright [their] great virtue! Capable of bringing affection and harmony! Benevolent! Their good qualities are so pervasive as to make a learner take the accuracy of these descriptions with some grains of salt.

The Shang Dynasty is succeeded by the Zhou Dynasty; we can follow that transition as it expresses itself in Zhou Dynasty bronzes, again, supplied by the Sackler Museum collection.

As the Bronze Age becomes the Iron Age, we see sharper, more durable tools and wider land cultivation. Tension between the central state and states on its periphery increase; from the Spring and Autumn Period of the Eastern Zhou on there is increased social frictions; with the beginning of the Warring States period, there is, as the name suggests, constant warfare.

Along with the Warring States comes the rise of warring states of mind — Confucius and Mencius and Lao Tse and Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu), among many others. Excerpts from each are offered, with passages from Confucius' *Analects* examined at some length. The lecture on Zhuangzi by Professor Puett is quite long and is simply superb.

Having learned (via *Part I*) that China traditionally sought wisdom from history, those interested in China's present urgently need to know its past.

For that reason - and for its graceful ease of academic engagement - *China X, Part I* is well worth your attention. Have a look at the trailer!

<https://www.extension.harvard.edu/open-learning-initiative/china-history>