



# WORKSHOP FOR MANUSCRIPT AND TEXT CULTURES (WMTC)

THE QUEEN'S COLLEGE, HIGH STREET, OX1 4AW

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## The Zhou Bronzes and the Shaping of the Tetrasyllable Poems in China

**Wednesday, 9 November 2016 at 5pm** in the Magrath Room, The Queen's  
College

In this presentation Professor Chen Zhi examines formulaic expressions and set phrases that appear both in the received version of the *Shijing* (Book of Songs), China's earliest anthology of poetry, and excavated Western Zhou bronze inscriptions (1045-771 BC). By looking across these two different corpuses of texts, transmitted and unearthed, Chen shall demonstrate how the shaping of a specific poetic form in the bronze inscriptions, i.e. tetrasyllabic meter and rhyme structure, can be dated to mid-Western Zhou—primarily to the reigns of kings Gong (ca. 917-900 BC) and Yi (ca. 899-873 BC), and implies that the early rhyme poems in the *Shijing*'s “Ya” 雅 and “Song” 頌 sections can be dated no earlier than this. Chen argues that the early development in form and style of these two genres of texts grew out of songs recited by worshippers in sacrificial and ceremonial activities. This study sheds new light on the origin of the tetrasyllabic poem and traces its roots back to elite court music related to ritual activities. Chen ultimately disagrees with the commonly held opinion that the tetrasyllabic poems, the earliest poetic genre in Chinese literary history, were improvised folk songs.



Image: “Mao Gong” ding, a three-legged cauldron of the Duke of Mao, Late Western Zhōu (ca 827-782 BC)