

*Public Memory in Early China.*

By K. E. Brashier. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 511.

ISBN 10: 067449203X; ISBN 13: 978-0674492035.

**Reviewed by Wen Zhou, Peking University**

E-mail [zhouwen1227@gmail.com](mailto:zhouwen1227@gmail.com)

doi:10.1017/S1479591415000108

Memory in early China is once more up for discussion in K. E. Brashier's second book, *Public Memory in Early China*, which follows on from his well-received book *Ancestral Memory in Early China*, which was published in 2011.

*Public Memory in Early China* starts with the examination of a newly excavated stone stele, which serves as the memorial for a minor official called Jing Yun 景雲. Brashier notices that other than Jing Yun's name, his date of death, and information about the origin of Jing's family, the "concrete data" of Jing Yun's life, such as his education, his service history, the age at which he died, and any details about his surviving relatives, is not included on the stele. The author observes that such absence of personal information is common for stelae and other eulogistic media, going on to say that all kinds of eulogistic objects had the goal of inserting their dedicatees into the public memory. In other words, any memories of an individual's identity in early China were highly stereotyped, and served only as a "collectively projected vision of society" (p. 4).

The book is defined as a cultural history of identity. In it, Brashier aims to highlight how public memory is structured in the Han dynasty generally as well as in Han memorial culture in particular. Throughout the book, he argues that names, ages, and kinship were the three definitive elements used to insert people into the map of Han public memory. Before this, he illustrates a number of ideas at length, including the Han understanding of "memory," how "memory" was acquired and the important role verbatim recall skills played in social life in early China.

Starting with a lengthy introduction (pp. 1–57), the book is divided into five parts (pp. 58–365) and ends with a concise conclusion.

Part I examines how an individual first acquired a "personal name" (*ming* 名) during their infancy before progressing to a "courtesy name" (*zi* 字) as an adolescent and finally a "posthumous name" (*shi* 謚), which is attained only by a few highly honored adults. Brashier notes, however, that once memories faded over a few generations, one's identity was reduced solely to the lineage "surname" (*xing* 姓). Personal name, courtesy name, and posthumous name together could be seen as contextualizing the self into a growing relationship network. It was the surname, however, that deserved special attention, as this was the way in which an individual in early China could trace his or her lineage all the way back to the mythic rulers—and even to the forces of nature in some cosmological theories. Through the use of rituals, the idea of the self was consciously reduced to just a name, which then resided within the public memory.

Part II illustrates how the Chinese used age as a way to position people within the public memory. In early China, childhood was not considered to be a valuable part of a person's life and so was not thought to be worth remembering. After a person made his or her way into adulthood, it was possible they would achieve an administrative position that reflected their relationship to everyone else. Seniority was revered with the elderly enjoying a high position in society. Interestingly, he points out how the general notion of "the older the better" even applied posthumously. The state affirmed such an age-based method of assessment through a system of administrative grades. Brashier shows in detail how each age group was remembered by analyzing evidence in eulogies and memorials carved on stone stelae.

In Part III, Brashier argues that in early China, as opposed to western culture, kinship links up with name and age as an index tool in the public memory. The self was defined as one knot in a net of

relationships, and this manifested itself in how people interacted with one another, including in almost all social practices. In this way, the self was placed in a position relative to everyone else within the collective memory and the author thereby concludes, “the basic identity in all these texts was not a bordered entity but was assumed to be the sum of strands extending outward to others” (p. 262).

Part IV and Part V then discuss the tangible and intangible tools that would help to preserve the remembered self's position within public memory.

Part IV focuses upon the tangible tools of remembrance, such as the grave stele, the household shrine, the tablets, the ancestral portraits, and other types of remembrances, with the aim of highlighting how particular objects and activities continued to map out the self's relationships to others, especially when the physical self was deceased.

Part V shifts to the intangible tools, and returns to the memorial culture that was outlined in the Introduction. Reduction, conversion, and association were the three mnemonic techniques used in early China. Brashier argues that in terms of ritual and the notion of *xiang* 象 or “schema,” reduction had the aim of transforming the newly dead into core patterns and archetypes. Another way to establish the dead person in the territory of public memory was to convert them into a classicist exemplar or by associating the dead person with heroes who were already being remembered. As the early Chinese notion of self was, as mentioned, seen as being a knot in a relationship net, rather than a dispersed self, this showed the tendency for remembrance through association with other existing heroes.

The concluding part of the book echoes the Introduction, as the narration returns to the Jing Yun stele. The author extends his study beyond the realm of early China, contemplating greater issues, such as the relationship between personal memory and public memory, and the relationship between the past and the present.

All in all, *Public Memory in Early China* is an exquisite and comprehensive account of memorial culture in early China, with some features that I would like to draw attention to in particular. Brashier adopts a comparative view when he discusses each subject. The most impressive example is when he compares the different views that the post-medieval West and early China held with regard to age. For the West, a lifetime was seen as an arc, whereas in early China it was regarded as a straight line that moved upward. He even includes two charts to show these two views, which is both clever and also helpful with regard to clarity. Such a comparative method encourages readers to speculate on the question of “what is noticeably unique about early Chinese public memory” (p. 366). Brashier also draws on a variety of theories and approaches, in order to address broader human traits. Furthermore, he singles out women's status in memorial culture and discusses this in detail, especially in Part III (“Kinship as positioning the self”), which is both inspiring and refreshing.

Brashier has chosen a difficult subject to study and deals with a wide spectrum of time, primarily but not exclusively during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). His incorporation of a variety of textual sources is laudable. Nevertheless, the chief materials he uses to demonstrate his arguments are ceremonial stelae, which are generally regarded as a phenomenon of the later Han dynasty (25–220 CE). Throughout the book, the terms “the Han dynasty” and “early China” are sometimes used interchangeably. Whether the Han period, especially the late Han, and the pre-Han era were homogeneous or not is an assumption that might need to be proven in future.

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