

## REVIEW

Wang Haicheng. *Writing and the Ancient State: Early China in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, xxii + 385 pp.

Reviewed by  
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This book is extremely ambitious and of dazzling scope. In a little over 300 pages of dense argument it sets out to compare ancient China to five regions, stretching from the Americas to the Middle East, and covering time periods ranging from the third millennium B.C.E. up to the sixteenth century C.E. The geographical region now called China receives particular attention, with arguments in each chapter drawing on evidence from periods as diverse as early second-millennium B.C.E. Erlitou all the way through to the Han dynasties, even reaching ninth-century C.E. Dunhuang—arguably very different cultures in their own right. In its approach, this study takes its cue from theories about the state, such as Max Weber’s understanding of the workings of bureaucracy as a mode of organization, as well as Benedict Anderson’s model of communication in shaping national identity. It sets particular stock in the (relatively) well-documented example of Mesopotamia as a standard for comparison.

The central thesis of the book is succinctly summarized in the blurb, which states that: “The compiling of lists – lists of names, or names and numbers – is a recurring theme throughout all three parts. A concluding chapter argues that there is nothing accidental about the pervasiveness of this theme: in both origin and function, *early writing is almost synonymous with the listing of names.*” (my italics) The author does however not confine himself to a mere listing and juxtaposing of examples. Rather, in light of the gaps in the evidence, the conclusion states that “[W]e must not allow ourselves to become prisoners of a biased sample [...] To speculate about what we do not have is risky, but comparative study gives us a powerful tool for controlled speculation.” (p. 304)

The book is structured around three different functions of writing in maintaining the ancient state: 1) “Writing and the legitimation of the state: History as king list”; 2) “Writing and the wealth of the state:

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People and land, census and land register"; 3) "Writing and the perpetuation of the state: Scribal education, lexical lists, and literature." Each of these sections is divided into two chapters, where the first draws on material from Mesopotamia and Egypt, in addition to the Mayas, Aztecs, and the Inka, to furnish a set of examples against which China is compared in the following chapters.

The first chapter of the book argues that king lists, whether in written, pictorial, or physical form, movable or immovable, displayed and transmitted a royal ideology by situating the presiding king as a legitimate heir in a lineage of his predecessors. Such a "legitimizing history," it is argued, "creates a sense of communal identity" (p. 21) in its audience. Moving through the famous Egyptian king lists of Abydos and the procession of royal mummies by the Inka, this section presents a richly illustrated variety of royal display. When it comes to audience and literacy, this section could have been further developed though. For example, while it is clear that monumentally portrayed lists can function as a means of display, it is not so clear how these immovable objects, largely inaccessible to anyone beyond the elite, as the author himself admits (p. 25), should have functioned as a means to *spread* knowledge of the king's power or of a "state sanctioned history." The acting out of royal history by Mexican performers (p. 32) or the oral narratives to which the summary alludes (p. 39), seem to be more likely candidates for transforming a mere enumerative list into narrative *history* that could additionally move around the kingdom, begging the question what functions writing adds in these contexts.

The next chapter discusses China, but it surprisingly starts with the Erlitou state and "Erligang empire" [*sic*], neither of which have left any writing that can be shown to have written a language. When it comes to the Shang, it is stated that "while no actual king list has been found at Anyang [...] the diviners certainly had written royal genealogies at hand to consult" (p. 44), and the concluding paragraphs of the chapter suggest that this list might have been passed down by scribes in written form all the way to Sima Qian (pp. 51–52). The argument engages in an inspired effort to imagine how the transmission of king lists as it occurred in Mesopotamia and Egypt could have happened in early China as well, without explaining why this model is to be preferred over the range of other practices of display and transmission discussed in the preceding chapter or that have been advanced in the study of early China.

The first chapter of the second section is the most solid of this book, containing copious amounts of references to a wealth of secondary and primary literature on early administrative practices across the case studies. It takes as central the extraction of wealth in agricultural

societies, and it is argued that the state was best served by careful book-keeping (labor, land, taxes, etc.) and ensuring accountability among bureaucrats and the working force alike. Additionally, it contains some original argumentation on the Inka's shaping of the land in order to fit their use of the knotted *kipu* cords in administration for example. (p. 111)

The accompanying chapter on early China, after conjecturing about the state of administration during the Erlitou and Erligang periods, discusses evidence from the Shang and Zhou periods on issues of farm-tool and land allocation and accountability measures. It speculates on the work that would be needed to verify the existence of the well-field system during the Zhou and describes the evidence for land transactions during this period. The subsequent part on the Qin and the Han builds on archaeological and textual evidence to discuss issues such as the resettlement of civilians and the use of maps, and it contains longer discussions on travel documentation, the military, and legal materials from the Qin, among other topics. The chapter presents the early Chinese state as a highly organized bureaucracy relying heavily on writing in all aspects of administration.

In the third section, scribal training is discussed. Most attention is given to the best-documented examples, Mesopotamia and to a lesser extent, Egypt. Due to preservation conditions, a large number of exercise tablets and practice potsherds have been preserved, allowing for a fairly accurate reconstruction of the curriculum. In the following, and final, chapter, the case of China is discussed. In light of the lack of evidence even for the Anyang period, comparisons are drawn between ninth-century C.E. scribal exercises from Dunhuang and a single, skillfully brushed graph on an Anyang potsherd labeled as a student exercise by the author. Based on the oft-repeated claim throughout this book that scribes at Anyang were predominantly writing with a brush for administrative purposes, and drawing on the previously discussed scribal curriculum from Mesopotamia, the author argues against Adam Smith's convincing reading of practice inscriptions on bone and shell as evidence for Shang literacy and inscription training.<sup>1</sup> As an example of the argumentation underlying this and similar claims in this book, it deserves to be quoted at length:

Chisels and tortoise shells were not the ordinary writing materials at Anyang; Anyang scribes wrote with brush and ink on bamboo and

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1. Adam D. Smith, "The Evidence for Scribal Training at Anyang," in *Writing and Literacy in Early China*, ed. Li Feng and David Branner (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 173–205.

wood strips, and Anyang schoolboys surely did too. The administrative functions of writing at Anyang (Chapter 4), the fact that elite literacy was not confined to diviners (discussed later), the primacy of brush writing (evident in the imitation of brush writing on carved bones and bronze), and the absence from the Anyang archaeological record of brush-written student exercises on any writing surface leave us no choice but to conclude that school exercises have disappeared from the record. (p. 279)

While I agree in principle with a point made earlier in the book, that to argue from a biased sample of evidence is problematic (p. 12), it is certainly also true that the same caution should apply to one's theoretical and comparative considerations. The fact remains that the lion's share of writing that Anyang has bequeathed us *is* inscribed on bone and shell, accordingly it is the evidence that these materials yield that ought to be the prime focus of any argument on scribal training at Anyang rather than select theoretical and comparative considerations.

The arguments in this book engage with fundamental questions on the use of writing in the ancient state, and they provoke many more. To name just a few, one could ask how the use of writing differs from other modes of communication in its roles and effects? How should developments in literacy be conceptualized and how does that influence our perception of the role of writing in the ancient state? Can a culture with the scope and influence of, say, Erligang be maintained without the use of writing, and if that appears to be so, does archaeological or comparative evidence allow us to understand how they managed otherwise? What administrative functions could ancient states require that could not be accomplished through written lists? How were early written materials used, and, how did they interact with oral narrative, witness testimony, or personal and cultural memory for example?

To round off with a final word on the form of the book, it is to be commended for providing the reader with a rich collection of useful translations of source materials, images of the objects, and inscribed materials. The inclusion of many color plates and a large number of references to secondary scholarship on the various cultures it compares to China make this work a very handy sourcebook for the classroom.