

self-serving and short-sighted, or in league with the local elite to oppress the people. The interests of the emperor and the people were closely linked; the people needed a stable government which they believed only an emperor could provide, and the emperor was not interested in seeing any policy implemented that might threaten either the short or the long-term security of his dynasty. Even isolated inside his palace, the emperor could not afford to ignore the wishes of the people. The emperor may have benefitted from the idea that the imperial system was necessary, but his dynasty was far from inviolable. As the author notes, it was the incompetent emperors who did not respond effectively to signs of crisis among the people who were the most likely to face serious trouble. Discussions of this kind of social contract are perhaps skewed by the focus of this book on the more intelligent and effective emperors in China's history: Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, the founder of the Ming, and the three great High Qing emperors, Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong. Although admitting that the vast majority of emperors were far from being this competent, the way the gap between the actual and the ideal was bridged in the reigns of stupid, lazy or unhealthy rulers is a subject largely ignored.

Given the broad scope of this book, generalizations are necessary, but at times they risk misleading the reader. For example, in the argument found in the chapter on the role of the monarch, Yuri Pines suggests that the lack of effective leadership aggravated the crises "which should have been quite manageable" that brought down the Ming and Qing empires. This ignores the multifarious difficulties which faced both dynasties towards the end; the ecological disasters that occurred, particularly at the end of the Ming dynasty, were genuinely appalling and no state, modern or pre-modern, would have found them easy to deal with. It is also unfortunate in a book aimed at the general reader that the translations given are by-and-large somewhat awkward and difficult to follow; this may serve to blunt the pleasure of reading what is otherwise an excellent account of the ideological underpinnings of the Chinese empire.

Olivia Milburn

Seoul National University

LI FENG and DAVID PRAGER BRANNER (eds):

Writing and Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar.

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Since the early twentieth century, the growing avalanche of excavated inscriptions and manuscripts from ancient China has opened up unprecedented opportunities for research on political, social, religious and cultural history through previously inaccessible primary sources. This edited volume offers contributions by leading palaeographers and scholars of ancient China who utilize a wide range of archaeologically retrieved evidence to elucidate the origins, early development and structure of the Chinese script, but also discuss material aspects, practical uses, and social contexts of writing up to the second century CE.

Proceeding from the discussion of a recently discovered late neolithic solar observatory, David Pankenier builds a compelling argument for the impulse to develop

notational systems created by the need for externalized memory in astronomical record keeping and the origins of the sexagenary cycle from such practices. As William Boltz suggests, glottographic writing may have arisen incrementally from non-glottographic notations that need not have been iconic (he eschews the term “pictographic”) and presupposes, already at that stage, literacy in the sense of an ability to decode reliably their semantic content. Once the relationship between sign and word had stabilized and glottographic writing had appeared, new characters were created by recursive procedures, mainly through the addition of semantic components to existing characters in order to express homophonous or near-homophonous words. David Prager Branner discusses what he terms the “cryptophonogramm theory”: the notion that each character contains a phonetic element, even though this may no longer be obvious due to orthographic standardization and the loss of what Boltz calls “polyphony”, the fact that a given character could write semantically-related but phonetically different words. Branner argues that the phonetically underspecified but semantically stable writing system helped bridge boundaries between languages, dialects and sociolects and thus exerted a centripetal force still at work today.

Particular traits in the orthography and lexicon of divination inscriptions from settlements to the south and east of Anyang form the topic of Takashima Ken-ichi’s essay. He relates these features to certain diviner groups in Anyang itself while stressing their distinctively local characteristics. Adam Smith’s detailed examination of “practice inscriptions” from Anyang indicates that previously illiterate individuals acquired basic literacy through “‘in-house’ training” in divination workshops by utilizing the writing surfaces most conveniently available in this context – bones and tortoise shells. This body of evidence does not contradict the existence of literacy outside the scribal class, of generalized rather than narrowly functional literary skills on their part, or of scribal training on other writing supports. But it makes the idea of scribal literacy being restricted to members of divination workshops a plausible scenario. Matthias Richter analyses the profiles of two Mawangdui manuscripts by examining textual arrangement and punctuation as well as errors and corrections. From these material features he concludes that one of the manuscripts served performative functions while the other was more probably intended for textual preservation and transmission.

Combining inscriptional and received texts, Lothar von Falkenhausen argues that statements in the “documentary” and “subjective mode” making up the announcements of merit in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions represent pronouncements at different stages of court audiences. He also offers a convincing interpretation of the phrase *wang ruo yue* that has long puzzled commentators as part of a response to a previous statement meaning “The king approvingly said”. Exploring social, administrative, and legal dimensions of texts in the Western Zhou, Li Feng discusses the use of writings in court appointments, military contexts, and land transactions and registers. Contrary to interpretations that almost exclusively highlight religious functions of inscribed vessels, Li emphasizes the significance of non-sacrificial uses in the “domestic living space of the Western Zhou elites”. Exploring literacy and textual competence in such elite families, Constance Cook maps recurring formulas in lineage lore as attested in inscriptional and transmitted sources, which she interprets as evidence of the imperative for clan elders to pass on ritually significant hymns and narratives in writing. The final two contributions, by Robin Yates and Anthony Barbieri-Low, offer tantalizing glimpses into literacy among non-elite groups such as soldiers, artisans, and women.

Taken together, the papers can be considered to support the notion of a broad developmental arc in literacy’s penetration of Chinese society. Testimony from the

oracle bone inscriptions, down to the files and regulations of early imperial times, indicates that systematic instruction in literacy was mainly restricted to professional groups closely associated with the state, such as members of divination workshops, scribes and government clerks. Western Zhou elites may have maintained their own, lineage-centred, textual traditions but, as Cook points out, it appears that only with the break-up of the Zhou order did textual competence become more common outside of state and elite lineage structures. As a result, the political rhetoricians and court poets of the late Warring States and early imperial periods entered the stage. Finally, with the growing administrative demands on both officials and commoners, basic literacy percolated through the lower orders as village headmen, soldiers, artisans and, possibly, women from ordinary backgrounds were forced to keep registers, read lists, or sign their names. By then, writing had turned into a force for cultural cohesion but also, as Barbieri-Low emphasizes with Lévi-Strauss, into something much darker: a tool for governmental control.

As both the amount of available archaeological evidence and the analytical sophistication brought to bear on it are increasing, such narratives about the spread of literacy will remain open to revision. Smith, for instance, cautiously points out that even though the practice inscriptions can be taken to support the hypothesis of a narrowly restricted scribal literacy in Shang China, competing hypotheses of more widespread literacy are far from being refuted. And as Richter argues, the study of manuscripts is likely to be dominated by highly technical research for years to come, so any generalization about uses and functions of writing should at present be treated as preliminary. In the meantime, it is to be hoped that this fascinating and carefully edited volume will not only be consulted by specialists but also attract more students to one of the most fertile areas of research in Chinese studies.

Oliver Weingarten
Masaryk University, Brno

RONNIE LITTLEJOHN and JEFFREY DIPPMMANN (eds):

Riding the Wind with Liezi: New Perspectives on the Daoist Classic.

(SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture.), vii, 264 pp. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011. ISBN 978 1 4384 3455 1.

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“Lieh-tzu is not the only Chinese philosophical text of disputed date, but it is perhaps the most important”, wrote A.C. Graham in his seminal article “The date and composition of the Lieh-tzu” (*Asia Major* 8/2, 1960–61, 139–98). Scholarship on the *Liezi* has not substantially advanced: since Graham wrote those lines over fifty years ago, the *Liezi* has continued to be neglected. *Riding the Wind with Liezi* aims to fill this gap by presenting a collection of twelve essays that re-engage the *Liezi* from different points of view and try “to find overlooked dimensions of Daoist philosophy” as Roger Ames writes in his introduction. As the ambitious subtitle promises us *New Perspectives on the Daoist Classic* we shall discuss the kind of perspectives presented and where their innovative contribution lies. For this purpose the essays may be divided into those which try to locate the *Liezi* by contextualizing the text historically and philosophically on the one hand and those who locate the text by identifying themes in it that are well known from the fields of early Daoism or early Chinese philosophy on the other. A fundamental difference with regard to