

Introduction

Over twenty-five years ago, I published my first volume in the SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture, *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics*, which, as the subtitle indicates, was a collection of studies concerning how (some of) the Chinese classics—principally parts of the Yi 易 *Changes*, Shu 書 *Scriptures*, and Shi 詩 *Poetry*—were composed and how they may have been understood in their earliest contexts. The volume was generally well received in the scholarly press, though a short review by David Schaberg in the *Journal of Asian Studies* hinted at important reservations on his part.

The essays share a simple and effective intellectual plot. Shaughnessy believes strongly in the widespread use of writing during the Western Zhou period, and often seeks, in opposition to the skepticism of recent centuries, to discover authentically early materials in or behind the texts transmitted from before the Han. . . . Agreeing with Shaughnessy means accepting his belief in the ubiquity of writing as early as the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E. This collection will be useful and exemplary both for those who agree with him and for those who want to argue the point.¹

Schaberg's reference to "to the skepticism of recent centuries" vis-à-vis "the widespread use of writing during the Western Zhou period" would doubtless call to the mind of many readers familiar with the study of early Chinese history the sort of historiographical iconoclasm that goes back to the work of Yan Ruoqu 閻若璩 (1636–1704) and Hui Dong 惠棟 (1697–1758) on the authenticity of the "Ancient Script" (*guwen*

古文) *Shang shu* 尚書 *Exalted Scriptures*, the *Kao xin lu* 考信錄 *Record of Examining the True* of Cui Shu 崔述 (1740–1816), and especially the *Gu shi bian* 古史辨 *Discriminations of Ancient History* spearheaded by Gu Jiegang 顧頤剛 (1893–1980). Although such iconoclasm has been largely rejected in today’s China, its critics arguing that the remarkable archaeological discoveries of the last 120 years—including especially hundreds of thousands of written documents—have provided indubitable evidence of the antiquity of writing in China, it has remained influential among numerous Western Sinologists. In a lengthy review of another book of which I was the coeditor, Schaberg did go on to “argue the point,” presenting in detail the sort of disagreements with my work that he had only hinted at in his review of *Before Confucius*.

If archaeological studies of the second millennium have shown the influence of textualist prejudices, “traditional historical” work on the Shang and later periods has too often been defined by such prejudices. To bring this charge is not merely to repeat the truism that history begins with received texts; the problem lies deeper. For the most part, the texts that historians work with are of late or poorly understood provenance. Either they are known to have been written centuries after the events they recount (as in the case of the *Shiji* 史記) or, worse, they come down to us with no certain information about when and where they were written, or by whom. Even archaeologically recovered writings, like oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, carry with them precious little information about the circumstances of their composition and use, or about the relation of the instance of writing to surrounding historical realities. Further, the rare cases in which archaeology has yielded documents that unambiguously corroborate a received text’s account (as in the famous case of the *Shiji*’s list of Shang kings) cannot, on any logical grounds, be taken to demonstrate the general accuracy of the received text’s narratives. If “traditional history” is defined as historical research based in part on received texts, then it seems to begin either with radical uncertainty or with credulity. Historians derive both the framework of history (including the chronology of all but a few rulers) and information about its particulars from received texts that are either late or unprovenanced, and they

will, therefore, never be able to speak about the narrated past with the precision that characterizes many of archaeology's reconstructions.

The best historians, when they use received texts, routinely treat them as artifacts of dubious provenance. They note the doubts that surround them, cite and critique the best theories about their origins, and then take care not to reach conclusions more precise than the data will support. . . . A received text has, by definition, lost many of the material characteristics that it had when it was first made. It has undergone recopying, editing, compilation—we do not know when, or by whom—and it is practically impossible to reconstruct its first form, whether we imagine it starting as a manuscript on bamboo strips, as a spoken pronouncement, or as a performance in some other medium.²

According to this argument, not only is historical research based on received texts, such as the Chinese classics, inevitably characterized by “radical uncertainty or with credulity,” but even archaeologically recovered writings provide “precious little information” about historical realities. One might think that the Chinese written tradition of the first millennium or more before the common era is essentially null.

I suspect that Professor Schaberg would not wish to argue that all study of ancient Chinese texts is ultimately hopeless (after all, his own work has been resolutely focused on those texts). Instead, the last two clauses of the long quotation from his review hint at a second critique of writing in early China, which—at least at the present in the Western world—has become even more widespread than the earlier Chinese skepticism concerning the dates and authenticity of ancient texts: the notion that ancient China was a fundamentally oral culture and that the contents of the literature that has come down to us were originally communicated orally, and that writing—when it was employed at all—was of only secondary significance. As I will have occasion to recount in chapter 7 of this book, this viewpoint has been particularly pervasive vis-à-vis the *Shi jing* 詩經 *Classic of Poetry*, with such luminaries of contemporary Sinology as Stephen Owen, David Knechtges, Christoph Harbsmeier, and Martin Kern all voicing their support for some version of it.³ In particular, over the course of the last twenty years Kern has published numerous studies in which he argues forcefully that literary

expression in ancient China was largely oral. Perhaps his most mature statement regarding the putative oral nature of the *Shi jing*, and indeed of all the classics, has come in his contribution to *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*.

Quoting and reciting the *Poetry* was primarily a matter of oral practice. Regardless of the writings excavated from a small number of elite tombs, the manuscript culture of Warring States China must have been of limited depth and breadth. The available stationery was either too bulky (wood and bamboo) or too expensive (silk) for the extensive copying of texts and their circulation over vast distances. References to writing and reading, as well as to the economic, material, or educational conditions of textual production and circulation, are extremely scarce in the early literature, which instead consistently depicts learning in personal master–disciple settings (likely supported by writing as aide-mémoire and educational practice). While local writing of technical, administrative, legal, economic, military, and other matters existed in the different regions of the Warring States, the extensive circulation of the Classics probably did not depend on writing. No pre-imperial source speaks of the circulation of the Classics as writings, or of the profound difficulties involved in transcribing them among distinctly different calligraphic and orthographic regional traditions. Not one of the numerous invocations of the *Poetry* in the *Zuo Tradition* and the *Discourses of the States* mentions the use of a written text; invariably, they show the ability of memorization and free recitation—in the literary koine mentioned above—as the hallmark of education.⁴

Given Kern’s statement that “the manuscript culture of Warring States China must have been of limited depth and breadth,” my own claim made in the introduction to *Before Confucius* that “ancient China was a supremely literate culture,” even with the added qualification “at least at the royal court and among the social elite,”⁵ must surely seem naïve at best, if not totally mistaken. While I admit that my use of the expression “supremely literate culture” doubtless owed more to my own youthful exuberance than to any sort of sustained survey of the relevant evidence, even now, tempered by quite a few additional years,

I would suggest that there is a powerful evidential basis in support of it: over 160,000 pieces of inscribed oracle bones from the Shang dynasty, upward of twenty thousand inscribed bronze ritual vessels from the Zhou dynasty, and some three hundred thousand bamboo and wooden slips bearing textual records from the Warring States, Qin, and Han periods, all unearthed in China over the course of the last 120 years. These have been found in almost every province of China from Xinjiang and Gansu in the west, Liaoning and even as far as Korea in the north, Shandong and Jiangsu in the east, south as far as Hunan and Guangdong, and of course in every province of central China.

These are just the text-bearing artifacts that happen to have been unearthed; this must be just the tip of the figurative iceberg that was once put in the ground, and that too must have been a miniscule percentage of the writings that were produced but were disposed of above ground. Consider the thirty-six thousand bamboo-slip documents unearthed in 2002 in the village of Liye 里耶, Longshan 龍山 county, in far western Hunan Province. Salvage excavations undertaken in advance of the construction of a hydropower station turned up a Warring States town that apparently had been established by the ancient state of Chu 楚 to defend against the state of Qin 秦. With the Qin conquest of Chu and then subsequent unification of all other states, it became a local jurisdiction on the periphery of the Qin state. The bamboo-slip documents, produced over the course of about fifteen years beginning in 222 BCE and ending with the downfall of Qin, were discovered in the mud at the bottom of an ancient well, where they had been discarded by the vanquished administrators of the town.⁶ They show that even this relative backwater was thoroughly integrated into the Qin bureaucracy, exchanging regular correspondence and files with neighboring jurisdictions, and it is clear that those jurisdictions were also producing similar records. We have every reason to believe that local jurisdictions throughout the realm were engaged in the same sort of textual production; indeed, the Liye records show that they were required to do so. This would seem to call into question the claim that the manuscript culture of ancient China “must have been of limited depth and breadth.”

Of course, it might be objected first that the Liye records are “local writing of technical, administrative, legal, economic, military, and other matters,” and second that they date to the Qin and not to the Warring States period. Both of these points are certainly true, but there was no dramatic difference in the skills required to produce these sorts of records

and other kinds of texts or in the technology available to produce the bamboo slips over the course of these two periods.⁷ Although no similar Warring States government archives have been unearthed as of yet, thousands of Warring States slips of all kinds—including texts of the *Shi jing* and also other classics—have been unearthed in just the last twenty years. The most important of these texts, at least as of the present, are doubtless those in the collection of Tsinghua (Qinghua) University, three or four of which will be taken up in the following chapters.⁸ According to the Tsinghua editors, there are at least sixty other texts, some quite substantial, the publication of which, already ongoing for the last ten years, is expected to take another six or seven years. I suspect that the original effort involved in writing and reading the texts was considerably less labor intensive than the modern work to read and understand them. Moreover, as I will note in chapters 5 and 9, contra Kern’s assertion, there is good evidence that some of the texts, including those of the Classics, certainly circulated over very long, if not “vast,” distances, at least over the course of the second half of the first millennium BCE.

With regard to still earlier periods, in his review of *Before Confucius*, Schaberg attributed to me a “belief in the ubiquity of writing as early as the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E.” I doubt that I have ever believed in the “ubiquity” of anything, much less writing, and certainly would not wish to characterize it as such at the beginning of the Western Zhou. Nevertheless, even then writing was growing ever more widespread. This is not the place to argue the point, and it is certainly not the place to attempt a comprehensive survey of all the sorts of writings currently known from this time, a survey that, given the pace of archaeological discovery in China nowadays, would doubtless be out of date by the time it was published in any event. However, it might suffice to note that such a survey of Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, the primary source upon which I drew when writing *Before Confucius*, was recently given by Li Feng. He describes writing as central to the Zhou government: “Although writing was elite-oriented, its role in Western Zhou society was far more central than marginal or inconsequential. Particularly in the sphere of administration, writing was the indispensable means by which the Zhou government operated, and scribal activities constituted a constant path to political-administrative authority.”⁹

Li has demonstrated that writing not only “had a routine place in the operation of the Zhou government,” being used in such diverse capacities as official appointments, the validation of property transactions,

territorial concessions, lawsuits, and military activities, but it “was also used extensively in local administration beyond the central court.”¹⁰

My own preferred style of research, whether in *Before Confucius* or in the present book, might best be described as pointillist, employing specific case studies from which I attempt to draw broader conclusions. While the discussion in *Before Confucius* drew to the extent possible on the paleographic record available at that time, this was largely limited to bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou period and, to a much lesser extent, to the oracle-bone inscriptions of the earlier Shang dynasty. The twenty-five years since that book was published have witnessed a dramatic change in the type of paleographic sources available. The year after *Before Confucius* was published brought the publication of the Guodian 郭店 manuscripts,¹¹ the first significant discovery of texts from the Warring States period that resembled in type China’s traditional classical literature. Since then, many more corpuses of Warring States manuscripts have been unearthed, attracting the attention of scholars the world over, and making possible consideration of a host of new questions, including not least the ways that knowledge was transmitted over the course of China’s first millennium of literacy.

The present book, *Writing Early China*, has attempted to take advantage of these new sources to consider these new questions. I have not forgotten by any means my early interest in how the classic literature was created, and so the first four chapters discuss what Shang oracle-bone and especially Western Zhou bronze inscriptions show about record-keeping and literary creativity at that early time. I continue to believe that by the mid- to late Western Zhou—the mid-tenth to the early eighth centuries BCE—the literary record was quite extensive, with a corps of scribes, both at the royal court and among the elite families distributed across the Chinese world of the time, fully capable of producing the kinds of texts seen in the earliest parts of the Chinese classics.

Western Zhou bronze inscriptions also inform several of the chapters that make up the second two-thirds of the book, but here attention turns more and more to the Warring States manuscripts written on bamboo strips. The chapters in this part of the book address very different types of manuscripts, most of them newly unearthed, each reflecting different aspects of the literary and scribal culture of the time. Taken in the aggregate, I am increasingly confident that this new evidence shows that culture to have been wide-ranging; one might even say “supremely literate.”

While I would not wish to anticipate any future reviews by Professors Schaberg and Kern,¹² I suspect that they would continue to resist this view of early Chinese literary culture. Since the time of Schaberg's review of my book *Before Confucius*, I have been a very interested reader of both his and Professor Kern's scholarship. Although I have disagreed with many of their viewpoints, I admire the rigor and clarity with which they have argued their position. Over the course of the last twenty years, much of my own scholarship has been stimulated, at least in part, by their arguments, if only to argue against them. None of this is to deny that there was a vibrant and pervasive oral culture in early China. Singers sang, teachers taught, and speakers surely spoke. Nevertheless, it was just as surely the case that writers wrote, and did so in a script that represented the contemporary language, not some sort of secret code shared only by the corps of scribes and the gods. We may not ever see bamboo slips with writing from the Western Zhou period, not to mention from the still earlier Shang. But it is good to keep in mind that it was only some sixty years ago that original bamboo slips from early China were first seen—at least in modern times.¹³ With advances in excavation techniques, the next sixty years are likely to turn up many more such writings, at which time we will surely be better able to understand both how they were composed and how they are to be read. The present volume should be viewed as just an interim report, based on some of the presently available evidence. I very much look forward both to new evidence and also to critiques of my own understanding of it.



Most of the chapters in the present book have been previously published over the course of these last twenty years. The versions presented here have been modified somewhat for the purposes of this book: I have unified the conventions concerning presentation and citation; I have updated some of the contents to accord with my present views; I have deleted some sections that were redundant between chapters, retaining the presentation in the chapter where it is most germane to the overall argument; I have deleted most archaic characters, retaining for the most part only current standard characters; and I have deleted many references to secondary sources that were originally supplied for the sake of completeness, but which were not specifically cited. Any reader wishing

to consult the more complete published versions of the studies can find them using the citations at the bottom of the first page of each chapter.

Full bibliographic citations of other references will be given at the first mention in the book; thereafter, sources will be cited by author's name, abbreviated title, and page number. Characters will be given for all proper names and terms at the first mention in each chapter, as will reign years and birth and death years for individuals.

This book includes eleven such case studies, treating such diverse early Chinese texts as Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, various types of Warring States bamboo-strip manuscripts, and ending with a Qin period bamboo-strip manuscript. Only the first chapter, "History and Inscriptions," is in the nature of a broader survey, examining both Shang dynasty oracle-bone inscriptions and also a broad array of Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, especially for what they reveal about writing practices over the course of the first several centuries that writing was used in China. I divide the twelve chapters of the book into three major sections: "Inscriptions," led off by the first chapter and including also three case studies of individual bronze inscriptions; "The Classics," in which I examine first two texts, written on bamboo strips, that have some claim to being "scriptures" (*shu* 書) of the sort that were included in the *Shang shu* 尚書 *Exalted Scriptures*, and then follow this with two further chapters discussing recent manuscript evidence related to the *Shi jing* 詩經 *Classic of Poetry*; and "Manuscripts," in which I discuss four different manuscripts of different sorts of texts, including especially a study of two manuscripts of a single text copied by one and the same scribe, but certainly based on two different source texts. In this third section, I also examine two different annals, one the *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年 *Bamboo Annals* and the other the Qin 秦 **Bian nian ji* 編年記 **Annalistic Record* from Shuihudi 睡虎地, and discuss the important role they played in the development of Chinese historiography.