Interacting with Text in Early China and Beyond

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Abstract: This paper challenges common assumptions about textual culture in early China and elsewhere. In place of the usual concentration on literacy, in the sense of an individual’s ability to read and to write, I suggest it is better to think in terms of interaction with text at the level of the community. Interaction with text places the various means of encoding and decoding text on a spectrum of ability that goes from none to a lot, explicitly acknowledging that meaningful intercommunication happens all along the spectrum. Thinking in terms of groups better fits premodern contexts and expands our understanding of how text functioned in those settings.

I’m quite illiterate, but I read a lot.—Holden Caulfield

I would like to reconsider literacy in early China. Not because familiar conceptions of it don’t reflect our experiences as modern literates. They usually do. I want to reconsider them because studying the past calls for something else. Common understandings of literacy concentrate on the ability—or lack thereof—of an individual to read and write. In this essay, I provide a conceptual basis for thinking in broader terms and different configurations, and I explore some of the implications of those shifts.

I want to make a case for considering combined reading and listening, dictation and writing, as ways of doing the same thing: interacting with text. For the purposes of my discussion, thinking in terms of interaction displaces the usual interest in the ability to create a written text. And while scholars often treat reading as a skill to be learned only with great difficulty, here I argue that reading is natural and more easily acquired than many believe. Nor am I content to consider the subject only terms of individuals’ abilities in reading and writing. I propose thinking instead about a community in which oral and textual transmission intermingled. This approach offers a workable solution to the difficulties and limitations of early sources. As an approach, it is more suited to the study of antiquity generally than concentrating on individual persons is. Because I study early China, it is there that I focus and find much of my evidence; this study however has wider connections.
Starting Points

Literacy has drawn much attention from scholars of early China, as it has in other places and times. Research concerning premodern societies’ interactions with text has concentrated, tacitly or not, on the relationship between exceptional individuals, elite classes, and the written word. This concentration is probably inevitable, at least in China: it was those persons and those groups that created the texts forming the main part of history—and indeed high culture generally. These texts shaped and continue to shape our perceptions of the past. They necessarily represent a small segment of society. But interactions with text extended far beyond the confines of that narrow set.¹

This is not to argue that every person in early China could comprehend, much less create, every sort of text. The barriers to making and understanding literary compositions were extremely high. Michael Nylan has described, for example, the combination of talent and erudition that Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), one of the great writers of the Han period, drew upon to compose his masterworks. Even Yang Xiong’s audience consisted of people with levels of facility with text that were, if lower than his, still very high: As Nylan puts it, “Yang Xiong’s ideal readers were those sufficiently learned and cultivated to engage in serious reading, transcribing, and composing of texts packed with classical allusions.” A writer needs both vocabulary and skills in composition to realize a literary vision. To create or even just properly understand elevated literature in early China furthermore demanded mastering an extensive body of knowledge that was the source of imagery, allusions, and phrasings. Matching the standard that Yang Xiong set, or simply appreciating what he wrote, was beyond most people. Few individuals belonged to the small part of society with access to the resources demanded to develop that level of ability.²

Nor was it easy to become a qualified writer of even workaday prose in Han times. A person had to meet very high standards to hold the official position of scribe (shi 史). According to statutes dating to the second century BCE, those requirements included the demonstrated ability to read and write at least five thousand characters and the ability to work with eight different scripts. Some readers understand five thousand in this context to mean five thousand distinct characters, while others believe that five thousand in this context refers to a text comprising five thousand graphs (rather than that many different ones).³ Either way, the statute calls for a substantial written vocabulary.

A person who hoped to pass for scribe would need to invest a great deal of time and effort in preparing to meet the requirements. There were significant hurdles to doing that. Not everyone valued canonical or literary learning. And, more concretely, study required resources that were
not available to everyone, including access to a knowledgeable teacher and the right kind of texts, as well as the free time needed for learning. This limited who could achieve a scribal level of facility with reading and writing.

Most scholars who have considered questions of literacy do so with one or both of these two models in mind. They may envision a literato, possessing exceptional ability and learning, alone and at work among the classics and canons. Or they conceive of the question in terms of a vocabulary that could be quantified and evaluated in terms of job qualifications. They think, in other words, of Yang Xiong or one of his readers, or they imagine an official scribe.

Without disagreeing about the position and characteristics of literacy in elevated culture and the bureaucracy, I suggest working with a more nuanced conception of interaction with writing and written text will allow us to understand another part of early society. The shift in understanding I propose has a number of aspects to it. Part of it concerns the definition of literacy. Even more basic than the matter of defining this tricky concept, however, is considering the relationship between text and the human mind. Recent research about the mind undermines some of the commonsense assumptions that undergird prior studies. In what follows, I will discuss these things, the interaction between them, and how they change how we think about early China.

**Getting at Text in Early China**

In order to arrive at a better understanding of how text functioned in early Chinese society, I want to shift the terms of discussion in two main respects. I conceive of the matter not in terms of individual capabilities and instead as a characteristic of a community. Communities are, of course, composed of persons, and I will not avoid all discussion of individuals. But the weight of my attention is on groups. Within those groups, I concentrate on the transmission and consumption of written information through reading and listening.

As many scholars have acknowledged, deriving a workable definition of literacy is tricky, especially in a premodern context. How much would a person have to know of what sort of knowledge in order to qualify as literate varies across time and place, between and within languages. Most importantly for study of antiquity, sources from the distant past that are available to us do not lend themselves to providing the kind of evidence most researchers seek when trying to understand literacy. Evelyn Rawski opens her influential study of literacy in late imperial China with the assertion that “One of the most difficult problems confronting students of premodern literacy concerns the definition of the term.” Enno Giele has acknowledged the difficulties in defining literacy and deciding who
had it in early imperial China, alluding to the fact that standard modern definitions are not well suited to the study of early history. Giele suggests a number of different ways of understanding the question, depending on the specific context.6

Tomiya Itaru 冨谷至 deems it impossible to articulate a workable standard for literacy in early China, due to the various types of facility with text that existed and the difficulty of understanding them on the basis of our limited sources. Particularly important for my discussion here is Tomiya’s insistence in this context that reading ability and writing ability are fundamentally distinct, a point that the paleographer M.C.A. Macdonald has also made in contexts far removed from early China.7

This is a major shift. Literacy as most people commonly conceive of it concerns both reading and writing, and historians apply the same conception to antiquity.8

Scholars who use the word literacy in the combined sense of reading and writing are not without justification in doing so. The very dictionary definition of the word “literacy” in English does the same.9 Nor is this fusion unique to modern times. The Han standards for scribes I mentioned already, for instance, set out requirements that specify reading and writing at least five thousand characters. Official positions other than scribe also required their holders to have writing ability, alongside basic accountancy and familiarity with laws. Writing and familiarity with law suggested reading without necessarily spelling it out. The exact level of facility these requirements imply is uncertain, as they do not provide a standard for judgment. But there are numerous examples of personnel records of various sorts among the documents reflecting the importance of the combination of skills in reading and writing for holders of government positions.10

Treating literacy as a combining competence in writing and reading is and has been usual. In the case of early imperial China, this historically derived from a focus on official duties and expressed requirements on the one hand, and on literary achievement on the other. Breaking away from the two modes that have dominated previous studies requires us to reconsider how we conceive of literacy.

**Individual Traces/Individual Tracelessness**

Scholars who have considered literacy in early China often treat writing and reading not merely as linked but as more or less interchangeable for the purposes of analysis, switching back and forth between the two as needed to make a point. When one of the two receives more attention, it is writing. The reason is clear: writing leaves visible traces, while reading does not. Discussing reading requires us to reason on the basis of imperfect information, while writing’s traces give us something concrete.
to tally and describe. For those who see reading and writing as fungible, the safer option has always been preferable. This, too, applied in early times: “being able to write,” _neng shu_ 能書 in the parlance of the Han bureaucracy, was testable and documentable in a concrete fashion that being able to read was and is not.

Another aspect of previous studies that I would like to query is the unit of analysis. Most scholars, tacitly or not, focus their considerations primarily or entirely on individual persons. They structure their research in terms of individuals’ skills, interests, and life circumstances. Trying to establish a percentage rate of literacy does this on a larger scale, in that it calculates the number of literate individuals within a group. This too has its parallels in early sources, as the standards for Han scribes I mentioned were based on the capabilities of a given man and his suitability for a position in the bureaucracy. But as I will show, thinking in terms of groups is more accurate, more illuminating, and more suited to the premodern context. The understanding of interaction with text I propose thus revises commonplace understandings by breaking down the association between reading and writing, and by considering literacy at the level of the group, rather than the single person.

**Reading ≠ Writing**

Writing and reading obviously have an intrinsic association: without the first, the second cannot exist; without the second, the first has no meaning. But in terms of skills and abilities, they are very different. Fusing them, as prevalent understandings of literacy do, obscures and minimizes their important dissimilarities.

The basic fact of this difference is, I think, familiar to anyone who is able to write. I am surely not the only person to have gotten used to typing Chinese with a phonetic method, then felt a shiver of dismay when the pencil is back in hand and the strokes do not flow as they should—and once did. Something similar happens when I, who am used to relying on automatic correction when writing English, need to spell a troublesome word myself and cannot remember how and need to look it up or, worse yet, commit a misspelling.

These things are simply not at issue when thinking only about reading, which is to say _recognizing_ rather than generating written words. A foreign language of which one has only a reading knowledge makes this point even more poignantly. Trying to speak or write a language one is accustomed only to read can be humbling. These common experiences remind us that reading and writing are distinct. Yet this reminder does not go far enough.

We need to remember how very difficult the physical acts connected with writing are. They stand in contrast to reading, which—mental activ-
ity aside—is, in physical terms, a matter of looking. A particular kind of looking connected with a particular kind of cognition, certainly, but all things the human body does by nature. The processes of learning to read and to write in medieval China reflected the distinction between reading and writing. Students acquired both skills more or less simultaneously, but separately and at different paces. Formal instruction in reading began with engaging full texts under the tutelage of a teacher; the primary method was memorization of edifying material. Writing began with first learning how to hold the brush. The student then proceeded to tracing simple characters and, eventually, to mastery of word lists.

Reading and writing were separate, for good reason. In reading, there is no need to learn a new physical skill. The task is one of recognition. Students could, with the help of a teacher, move quickly on to advanced mental activity, such as learning texts by heart. There was no need to be selective about the texts and the characters that the student would learn. It seems counter-intuitive, but experimental research confirms that the relative complexity of Chinese characters in terms of stroke count has no clear influence on the recognition of graphs. Any text the teacher chose was fair game.

Learning to write was (and is) the opposite of this, in many respects. Writing calls for new physical skills, in addition to proficiency in the composition of characters. The initial difficulty in writing characters made it necessary to begin writing with simple graphs. The emerging appreciation during the Han period of calligraphy as a visual art, and attendant aesthetic judgments not important for a mere useful skill, added yet another difficulty for learners of that time and later.

The need to distinguish between reading and writing is not specific to Chinese or the writing systems that derive from it. M. T. Clanchy stresses the technical gulf between writing and reading in European manuscript cultures. He lists a specific set of skills required for writing that the modern world more or less obviates—things like using an early writing implement to form legible script. Creating recognizable words is hard—even in a context that does not put much weight on standardized orthography. Writing calls for faculties that reading does not. While Clanchy’s context is European, the things he points to are not different in kind from writing Chinese during early times. Both experience and history show that writing is harder to learn and to do than reading is. Distinguishing between the two is crucial for an improved understanding of how people interacted (and interact) with text.
**Reasons and Means for Learning**

Disentangling writing and reading brings to the fore several important questions. Studies of literacy in early China often concentrate on how practical utility motivated people to become literate. Scholars may conceive of utility in terms of working with documents as part of official service as a scribe or other bureaucrat, as I have discussed. These historians approach the question of literacy by considering what use a potential reader and writer would have for the acquisition of literacy or, by extension, what they would do with a certain text or even genre. In the context of China’s early governance, which was thoroughly bureaucratic already by the third century BCE, this utility has furthermore been understood primarily in terms of acquiring or performing duties in an official capacity. Literate is equated with employable as a bureaucrat; worth reading is equal to useful in obtaining or performing work.

This concentration on specific and concrete types of utility reflects the general tendency to treat the written word as separate and removed from the rest of life, as something a person would not tangle with without some concrete and discernable benefit to gain thereby. Scholars conceive of engaging text as something special, something that requires a specific reason before it will happen. Historians—and I count myself one—are primarily concerned with written records of the past and embody this tendency.

Historiography furthermore calls for explanation that lends itself to clear articulation. Identifiable, practical utility in terms of duties and offices has a strong appeal that has led to it becoming the primary mode of analysis. Practical utility is undoubtedly an important consideration for learning to interact with text, in the past and now. Yet reading is much more than a mere tool of employment.

M. C. A. Macdonald has cataloged and refuted a number of assumptions about human interaction with text, demonstrating that the presumed universality of those assumptions is false. One of those assumptions is the notion that utility must be the motivation for acquiring literacy. Macdonald discusses the example of an oral society that remains primarily oral, in that its members handle important matters orally, even though the society possesses writing. For members of that group, writing serves only non-serious, even ludic, purposes. That is of course an extreme case. But the point is important for the discussion here. Literacy need not be utilitarian, either exclusively or primarily. Macdonald also discusses another case that suggests non-utilitarian motivations for writing: ancient nomads who marked the landscape they dwelled in with graffiti. These graffiti had no directly practical purpose. They were a form of personal expression, or perhaps just entertainment. As Macdonald writes,

> Literacy, it seems, added an extra pastime with almost endless possibilities. . . .

> [W]riting in these societies fulfilled a real need in the lives of individuals, not in
the practical, material and economic spheres with which we are accustomed to associate it, but as a creative antidote to hours of solitary boredom.\footnote{18}

Mark Edward Lewis has examined the question of utility in the context of early China, too, arguing that it is a mistake to think of facility with text as leading only to an official career.\footnote{19} Text is not just a tool for obtaining remuneration.

The notion that doing something with text must necessarily require an immediate and tangible benefit results from assumptions about writing’s distinctiveness. The usual idea is that writing, unlike spoken language, is not part of innate human nature; that it exists outside us and our evolved characteristics.\footnote{20} Yet there is real reason to challenge this idea and to think of text as a natural phenomenon.

**Neuroscience and Psycholinguistics**

The conception of writing as unnatural treats it as a set of signs that exist outside the evolved mind. Of course, the associations between words and their referents are, as a rule, matters of convention that exist as a system within groups of human speakers.\footnote{21} One could thus deem writing unnatural. That does not mean text is separate from our innate nature.

Neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene has demonstrated that text has an intrinsic relationship with human beings. He discusses at length how written language depends on the human brain’s built-in ability to recognize and interpret particular shapes in the natural environment. When people developed writing, they did so (without realizing it) relying on neural circuitry that had evolved to deal with those patterns. Writing emerged in forms that work within the brain’s inherent structures and in accord with the brain’s existing features. Writing systems, including alphabetic scripts and others, such as Chinese, share shapes and have other traits that work with our brain’s systems. Images of what happens in the brain during reading confirm this. Insofar as it built upon and within our evolved brains, reading is an essentially natural activity.\footnote{22}

Frank Smith spent his career studying the processes of learning how to read. In his influential *Understanding Reading*, Smith follows a different line of reasoning to arrive at more or less the same conclusion that Dehaene does. Smith examines the matter from a psycholinguistic perspective and concentrates on the process of learning to read, not its evolutionary background. Psycholinguistics holds that learning to read is just another form of learning, and that learning is both universal and natural among human beings. It is not learning that needs to be explained; it is not learning that is exceptional and in need of explanation.\footnote{23} Reading is part of this.

While Smith does not make this point, evidence from other fields confirms that evolution predisposes humans, like other higher organisms,
toward certain kinds of learning. For humans, the types of learning we are predisposed to include precisely the sort of shape recognition that reading entails. This empirical evidence is independent confirmation of same tendencies toward learning that Smith points to. Learning, and learning to read, are natural.

**Motivation for Learning to Read**

Smith recognizes reading as part of the process of seeking to understand the world around us, as innate and evolved. People learn not only to amass information for practical use, immediate or otherwise, or because another person commands it. People learn because our nature implants that desire in us. Learning in itself can even bring pleasure and reading is part of this. Reading can provide enjoyment and thus serve as an end in itself.

As Smith explains it, learning to read requires several things. The first of these is for a person to come to understand that text is important, that it contains information and has meaning in the world around him or her. Once that happens, in the presence of text and with the availability of assistance when needed, people can and will learn to read. Not every person and not every time, but enough people enough of the time. Looking for absolutes and black and white distinctions is both artificial and impracticable when dealing with the human behavior, now and in the past.

The available evidence reflects that the requirements Smith names were present. Text was important in early China and textual culture enjoyed tremendous prestige. As Martin Kern writes, “Toward the end of the first century BCE, two centuries after the establishment of the Chinese imperial state, writing began to assume a supreme status of cultural expression.”

Under the Qin dynasty, for instance, identity records tracked laborers in government service who happened also to owe money to local authorities across hundreds of miles and ensure collection of their debts. At the military outposts guarding the borders of the Han dynasty, where the military bureaucracy left behind ample evidence of its workings. In those border regions during the Han, conscripts, who had been registered by bureaucrats in their home areas and sent by bureaucrats to the border, served within a bureaucratic military that controlled their lives. For all these people, the importance of text for their lives was beyond doubt. These things ensure that the relationship between writing and speech was known in early China.

**Text and Orality**

The shift of cultures from predominantly oral to predominantly written forms has historically been a gradual one, with the two modes intermingled for long periods. In medieval England, for instance, text acquired
importance and authority exceeding that of speech only slowly, over cen-
turies.\textsuperscript{31} The process in early Islam was comparable, and oral and aural
transmission retained authority well after the advent of textual culture.
The final shift to give primacy to writing came only at the instigation of
governmental and religious authorities.\textsuperscript{32}

Walter J. Ong writes of the close relationship between orality and writ-
ing in manuscript cultures. Ong stresses in particular the close relationship
that writing maintained with spoken word transmission in those contexts
where handwritten text, rather than print, was the mode: “Writing served
largely to recycle knowledge back into the oral world.” Using text as a
means of recording and transmitting information did not end the close
connection to speech: “Manuscript cultures remained largely oral-aural
even in retrieval of material preserved in texts.” Ong argues that it is only
with the advent of printing that this relationship began to shift.\textsuperscript{33}

Textual culture and orality intermingled in early China, too. Kern
analyzes inscriptions on bronze vessels created to mark the bestowal of
official positions in Western Zhou China. Those texts were created and
then read aloud as part of the rituals for installing officials. The result was
what Kern calls a “complex interplay between the oral and the written
performance of text.” The creation of a text recording granting a position
did not replace the spoken, and thus heard, aspects.\textsuperscript{34} Li Feng has endorsed
Kern’s views in this respect, further arguing that bronze vessels record
only a portion of these “appointment inscriptions,” more of which existed
on perishable materials. All were read aloud; only some made it onto
bronze.\textsuperscript{35} While epigraphic and not strictly speaking manuscript sources,
these texts served the same purpose that Ong asserted for manuscripts,
namely, “to recycle knowledge back into the oral world.”\textsuperscript{36} This interplay
was not limited to these Zhou-period contexts. Bu Xianqun and Enno Giele call attention to the important role oral communication had as
an adjunct of document bureaucracy in the early imperial period, as well.\textsuperscript{37}

Audible Text in Early China

The philosophical text \textit{Master Zhuang} (\textit{Zhuangzi} 莊子) asserts that “Writing
is nothing more than speech” \textit{書不過語}, a point that was even more true
in the manuscript culture of its time than it is now.\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Master Han Fei} (\textit{Han
Feizi} 韓非子) similarly says, “Writings are speech” \textit{書者, 言也}.\textsuperscript{39} Reading
aloud was the standard mode in early China, as it was elsewhere in the
ancient world.\textsuperscript{40} The very words most often used meaning “to read” in
classical Chinese, \textit{du} 讀 and \textit{song} 誦, implied reading aloud.\textsuperscript{41} Silent reading
was exceptional. In such a context, texts were created to be read aloud.\textsuperscript{42}

The connection between reading aloud and reading in early China was
so strong that it became fixed: the “sound of reading”—i.e., the sound
of reading aloud—became metonymy for the study of text and evidence
It could even stand for education in an abstract sense. By one account, Confucius’s disciple Zilu 子路 was so boorish before he came under the influence of the Master that when “he heard the sounds of reading aloud” 閱讀誦之聲, which is to say the sounds of learning, he responded by blowing a raspberry.44

Scholars who have discussed reading aloud in premodern China have often—reasonably—done so with a focus on the person doing the reading and the connection, or lack thereof, to an author.45 But it is also reasonable to presume that overhearing text read aloud—the same overhearing that let someone know there was study going on—resulted in the transmission of information outside of this pairing.

A classic example of the phenomenon comes in a story from Master Zhuang. There we find a ruler reading in his hall. Because the ruler was reading aloud—as the tale makes clear by implication—a wheelwright, at work carving a wheel, overhears him. “What are you reading?” the wheelwright asks. It turns out that the lord is reading the philosophy of some ancient sages, which the wheelwright derides as the leftovers of dead men who had tried and failed to convey the ineffable through words. This story remained current into the Han dynasty, making its way, with changes and embellishments, into compendia.46

The story is illuminating for my discussion here because of the relationship it evinces between reading, hearing, and hierarchy. The wheelwright did not understand all that he heard, but he was familiar enough with reading and with his ruler to ask what the text was. While the lord responds with anger to the wheelwright’s audacity in critiquing his reading material, no version of the tale remarks in any way on the fact of a handworker listening to his ruler read unbidden. None comments on the propriety of overhearing, despite the difference in status.

Master Zhuang’s philosophical point is that masters’ texts have little value, and that a lowly handworker can see more clearly than his ruler. For the discussion here, the main takeaway is that it was not unexpected for the one to overhear the other. In a society like early China, with no particular expectation of privacy, overhearing would be inevitable and ubiquitous. Nor was commenting tartly when overhearing one’s sovereign read limited to Zhuangzian wheelwrights: it happened at the Han court, too.47 Dictation more or less reverses the hearing of text, turning oral communication into writing. It might seem self-evident to modern literates that those who can write do so, unless some extraneous factor interferes. Not writing oneself might appear to denote powerlessness or a lack of education. And while that can be the case, it is far from certain. In some premodern contexts, dictation, rather than writing oneself, was preferred. Writing with early implements required much effort; dictation left that work to someone else. Creating text was not synonymous with writing, as it has become.48
The Accessibility of Text

One of the conditioning factors that Frank Smith names for acquiring literacy is the presence of written material, without which learning to read is naturally impossible. David Johnson broached the question of access to text in his discussion of Chinese popular literature in medieval and later times. Johnson was alert to the existence of the ability to work with text at varying social levels, and argued that as books became widely available, “The increased accessibility of books stimulated the growth of literacy, especially moderate literacy.” Johnson wrote that the lack of access to text in early China worked against the spread of literacy and the emergence of popular literature in that time.\(^49\)

I agree with Johnson that simple access to text would result in increased literacy, presumably of a limited sort in many cases. But Johnson supposed that broad accessibility came only with the emergence and expansion of print culture. Excavated materials indicate that access to text came much earlier than printing—at least in certain contexts. A variety of texts were present in the northwestern border region in Han times, for instance; all were potential reading material. These were not limited to bureaucratic documents, though those were there, too. Those posts are one context where we have clear evidence of members of the common classes in proximity with edicts, poetry, letters, classics, and discursive texts.

The examples archaeologists have found come from trash heaps, privies, and sometimes simply neglected corners. The small size of the military posts, the existence of explicitly public texts, and the relaxed attitude about written materials after their creation meant the soldiers had material to read, if they wanted it. Officially disseminated texts could constitute primers, whether or not they were so intentioned; the contents of trash heaps, if nothing else, would provide additional potential readings. It takes little imagination to suppose that texts so lightly disposed of might also make their ways into various hands as they made their slow ways to disposal (and eventual recovery). Reading of various types, frequent listening, and overhearing, would work toward developing a community around and permeated by text.\(^50\)

The context of military installations in the border regions worked to obviate the resource constraints that I have already referred to in the context of learning. Soldiers had text to see and to read, and they had time in which they could learn, if they chose. Their most important duty, after all, was manning watchtowers and waiting for something to happen. They also had time for rest and days off.\(^51\) The presence of literates at least at the level of squad leader, even if we temporarily set aside the other soldiers, means there was someone who could teach, or at least answer questions and read aloud to them.
This is not to say that every soldier learned to read, or that most did; but the sum of the evidence suggests a significant number would have. And yet even that phrasing brings with it problems. For we should not imagine a black and white situation, in which there was only a distinction between reading and not reading. Rather we should conceive of individual abilities that existed along a spectrum ranging from relying fully on others to being able to read and write everything: between those able to visually access every text themselves, those who only listened, and those who did a combination of the two. The last of these seem sure to have been the largest group. The likelihood that most of them would have at most acquired what would be for us in the present a very limited ability does not make it insignificant. As Ong notes, “[I]t only takes a moderate degree of literacy to make a tremendous difference in thought processes. . . . A little literacy goes a long way.”

Determining an exact number or rate of individuals who could themselves read is an insoluble problem. Conceiving of a range of ability, a spectrum that stretches without a definite break between the two extremes, further complicates even asking the question by precluding any easy decision. Placing an individual at a specific location on that spectrum would require information that is, in nearly all cases, lacking. There is, however, a better approach than this focus on individuals’ abilities, an approach which both obviates these intractable problems and better fits the intellectual context of early China. That is to think in terms of the group, the community, rather than only of its constituents.

**Individual Literacy vs. the Literate Community**

We in the present generally conceive of reading and writing as matters of individual competency. This is a modern way of conceiving of both activities, one that has a distorting influence on our understanding of the past.

Linda Brodkey has dissected conceptions of writing that present it as the act of a single person, an isolated creator, the “solitary writer”—an image she proposes is the result of “modernism.” Elizabeth Long plays off of Brodkey’s critique in her own examination of the lone reader, someone separated from the rest of the world as she or he consumes text. Brodkey and Long express, in different ways, the degree to which the image of the reader and the writer as acting in isolation from the rest of the world is the product of a particular set of historical circumstances and intellectual predispositions, which function in our times.

The premodern situation was different. In the premodern world the focus was less on the specific person than on the community. This is not to say the individual was not important in early China. But for people in early China, as in other premodern societies, cultural production, dissemination, and consumption was generally a group matter. Researchers
working in the field of early China have touched upon the key function of
groups in its textual culture. Lewis has written that in early China “Learning
in solitude may have existed, but the generation and transmission of
texts was a collective activity.” Lewis concentrates on elevated texts and
formal contexts, the provinces of power holders and high culture. I argue
that conceptually similar things were happening in other parts of society,
with different texts among different groups.

Thinking in terms of community rather individuals also provides a way
to work around insoluble questions connected with determining rates of
literacy. According to Roger Bagnall, paleographer and papyrologist of
the Mediterranean world, it is impossible to know with certainty exactly
how many people were literate in any ancient society. This applies all the
more in the context of early China, where even the size of the population
remains unclear. Despite the attention such questions have attracted, the
available results do not seem to offer correspondingly meaningful insights.
This is the case both within and outside China. As Alan K. Bowman writes
in regard to early Roman society:

Attempts at quantifying and measuring literacy in the ancient world face
formidable difficulties, and it is much more important and fruitful to consider the
ways in which use of the written word was embedded in the institutional and
social structures of a society and the functions which depended on that use.

Shifting away from quantification does at least two things. It recognizes
the limitations of what we can assert about the past. It also invites us to
look at different questions.

Macdonald has examined the many different forms interaction with text
took on the Arabian Peninsula in premodern times. The question of what
individuals were doing is, in most cases, unanswerable at the distance
of two thousand years. Macdonald thus considers literacy at the level of
the society, a more workable unit of analysis. He writes, “I would define
a ‘literate society’ as one in which reading and writing have become es-
sential to its functioning, either throughout the society . . . or in certain
vital aspects, such as bureaucracy, economic and commercial activities,
or religious life.” The result is, as Bagnall puts it, that “a society may be
called literate even where a very high percentage of its members are not.”

Literate Community

While I follow Macdonald and others in thinking about interaction with
text at the level of the group rather than the individual, I write in terms
of community rather than what they refer to as society. The term com-
munity has, on the one hand, a useful vagueness in comparison to society.
While society implies large size and an advanced level of complexity,
community denotes a group of persons who are linked together by some characteristic, even something as fundamental as physical closeness.\(^64\)

This terminology also draws inspiration from Brian Stock’s work on the “textual communities” that came into being around religious texts in medieval Europe. In Stock’s use, a textual community formed at the intersection of two groups of persons, the literate and illiterate, and a text or set of texts. Like many others, Stock thinks of literacy in terms of the ability to read and write. He adds, however, two important additional aspects. One of these is the utilization of text, irrespective of whether or not one reads it personally. His alternative means of transmission was oral, and consisted of reading aloud and/or otherwise relaying content via word of mouth. The resulting situation in such a community was not an absolute distinction between literate persons who could read and non-literate persons who did not read and had no access to what a particular text conveyed. The situation was rather a blending of two forms of communication, reading and speaking/listening. The content of a text was separate from a particular written instantiation and could be transmitted as text to those who read and in oral form to those who did not. After transmission, in whatever form, it came to constitute the center of the community, a means for it to communicate and to function.\(^65\)

For the modern literate, transmission other than by reading oneself can seem unreliable and untrustworthy compared with the fixity and durability of writing, but this is a product of a particular way of dealing with text and is not universal.\(^66\) In the past, it was not necessarily for everyone to read everything—or even anything—by themselves to be part of the literate community, and that type of participation need not imply some lesser degree of affiliation.

Using the concept of community connects to the idea of the “script community” that Robert W. Bagley puts forth in his discussion of writing’s emergence in China. Bagley’s context is an argument against the common idea that writing in China developed for religious purposes. He suggests instead that writing had its origins in administration. The earliest administrators as a group constituted what Bagley calls a “script community,” composed of people who used writing and taught others to do so, including others who were likewise going to become bureaucrats. This community thus ensured the use and perpetuation of what was then a new—at least relatively—form of communication.\(^67\) Bagley’s focus is on writing and learning to write. While differing from my conception of interaction, we both recognize the position of the community as a nexus for interaction with text.

I propose that adopting a group focus is the best way to consider text’s social roles in early China. This entails considering the question at the level
of the community, and not concentrating on seeking only evidence about whether individuals, alone or in the aggregate, could personally write. The word community may call to mind Benedict Anderson’s influential work on “imagined communities.” According to Anderson’s definition, people who are in close proximity and personally acquainted with each other are part of a community different from that of those who “imagine” theirs into being. The communities that I am thinking of in early China were not imagined. They were real.

Conclusions

This article has offered an approach to thinking about text in premodern contexts that acknowledges the limitations of our knowledge and work within them. What I have proposed involves a number of changes from the usual approaches, of which three are most important. One of them is conceiving of interaction at the level of the community rather than just the individual. This permits recognition and appreciation of textual interactions that exclusive focus on individuals might overlook or underestimate.

I furthermore see potential in moving away from thinking in terms of literacy, at least the usual sense of literacy. Most conceptions of literacy combine the abilities of reading and writing. I speak instead of interaction with text. This explicitly acknowledges the validity and importance of different ways of accessing and creating text. Reading oneself, reading together with others, and hearing others read are all legitimate modes of interaction; none is inherently superior or inferior. Likewise are dictation, writing oneself, and writing with the help of another all valid ways of creating text. I subsume this variety under the term interaction. Interaction uncouples reading and writing and expands the scope of recognition for what people do with and about text. All of this is—emphatically—not to dismiss or disparage other working methods. While I of course think my approach bring particular benefits, much quality research has been and is being done by scholars working in different modes. I hope only that these changes may open up new aspects of society to historians’ consideration.

Notes

This article is adapted from a chapter of my monograph Literate Community in Early Imperial China (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).


8. E.g., Hsing I-t‘ien 邢義田, “Qin-Han pingmin de duxie nengli—shiliao jiedu pian zhi yi” 秦漢平民的讀寫能力—史料解讀篇之一, Gudai shumin shehui: Disijie guoji Hanxue huiyi lunwenji 古代庶民社會: 第四屆國際漢學會議論文集. 古代庶民社會, edited by Hsing I-t‘ien and Liu Zenggui 劉增貴 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, 2013), 242 and passim, refers to literacy as “the ability to read and write” (duxie nengli 讀寫能力), and sometimes as “character recognition” (shizi 識字), but not distinguishing between writing and reading.


10. Tomiya, Monjo gyōsei, 112–16.
11. Stanislas Dehaene, Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read (New York: Penguin, 2009); see also below.
16. E.g., Zhang Jinguang, Qin zhi yanjiu 秦制研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), 711, 716–17.


22. Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain*, 122–42 and passim. See also Drège, “La lecture et l’écriture en Chine”: 80, who makes a similar point about the essential similarity of reading Chinese and an alphabetic script.


29. The classic study of these documents is Michael Loewe’s *Records of Han Administration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

30. These systems have been the subject of many studies; for a Western-language example, see Michael Loewe’s seminal *Records of Han Administration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

31. This is the central thesis of Clanchy’s *From Memory to Written Record*.


33. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 77–135; both quotes from 117.


44. Huang Hui 黃暉, ed., Lunheng jiaoshi 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 2.73.


47. Fan Ye, Hou Han shu, 26.902.


50. Hsing I-t’ien, “Qin-Han pingmin de duxie nengli,” discusses texts concerned with soldiers’ duties in a similar way.


52. Tomiya, Monjo gyousei, 107, proposes five distinct different levels of literacy, an idea that is somewhat similar to my own, though I suggest that any gradation must be much fuzzier if it is to reflect reality. In this respect I am closer to Rawski, Education and Popular Literacy, 2, who writes, “If literacy can be defined as the acquisition of some functional level of reading and writing abilities, there was a continuum of such skills in Ch’ing [Qing] China.” Hirschler, The Written Word, 16, notes also the intrinsic difficulty of trying to define literacy.

53. Ong, Orality and Literacy, 50, 52–53.


58. Lewis, Writing and Authority, 56.


