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***Writing and the Ancient State: Early China in Comparative Perspective.* By WANG Haicheng. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. Pp. 427.**

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It is all too rare for early China specialists to pursue extensive engagement with the details of other regions' histories. Wang Haicheng's book *Writing and the Ancient State: Early China in Comparative Perspective* is thus in its conception and execution an innovative work. Wang's study extensively considers the role of writing in tasks associated with premodern governance. The examples come from governmental practices in China, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Meso-America and South America that relied upon writing, including taxation, population control, and land management. Wang's core contention is that writing depends for its existence on political states. The result is an impressive study that traverses continents, millennia, and scholarly fields with aplomb and insight.

Comparative studies that effectively incorporate early China are rare. Specialists often insist on the uniqueness of the Chinese case, and scholars from other fields have problems accessing current research. The details of every region's history are unending in their distinctiveness. But, as Wang shows, studying different areas and thinking in broader terms can bring new questions, fresh approaches, and better understanding. Wang spends much of his introduction arguing for the value of comparison across cultures. He rightly notes that this requires real engagement, not the facile borrowing of concepts that are half-understood or worse. This apologia won me over to Wang's side and his willingness to challenge established consensus refreshed this feeling periodically throughout the book.

The main content of the book divides into three sections, each of which juxtaposes "The Near East and the Americas" with China. Wang treats the latter more or less as a stable entity, differing primarily in terms of dynasty. The exact constituents of the comparative groups vary somewhat. The first section of *Writing and the Ancient State* treats questions of political legitimacy

in the context of state-type governance. Wang concentrates on lists of monarchs' names, which occur in different forms in a variety of cultures and periods: Egypt in the time before the pharaohs; Sumer and other polities in ancient Mesopotamia; the Maya; the Inca; and polities in what is now Central Mexico. Some of the lists these societies created were written, while others employed images, but the similarity in practice among the various states is striking.

The second section is much longer than the first and treats what Wang calls "The Wealth of the State" (53), which includes both territory and population. Working in groups of premodern states mostly similar to those in the first section, Wang examines examples of registration and control of land parcels and of population. Wang argues for a sophisticated understanding of these practices. While acknowledging their concrete aspects—divvying up farmland, tracking taxes and labor service, etc.—he also discusses the ideological functions inherent in them. Much of the bulk of this section comes from very detailed presentation of the various systems.

In the third and final content section, Wang Haicheng considers the role of writing in other spheres of life, particularly in connection with education. Looking once again at similar geographical groupings of early states, Wang examines their various systems and practices connected to education, particularly education related to writing. He returns repeatedly to written lists of names and their various purposes: not only recording, but also constituting and perpetuating the state and its memory. Wang writes of "list mania" (262) and this phrase seems to describe the situation accurately.

Wang Haicheng's multitude of examples leave no doubt that political structures throughout recorded history have made extensive use of writing and related practices, and the sort of detailed, durable recording they permit. He points out similarities across times and places that suggest humans share a predilection for using writing to effect particular kinds of social control. While proving causation in such a case is impossible, the commonalities are clear, making Wang's argument compelling and thought-provoking. His inclusion of functionalities that go beyond the tangible to include abstract but nevertheless very real structures and mechanisms of power brings out important aspects of writing and bureaucracy, to which scholars sometimes give less attention than they should.

I always find it disorienting to read secondary scholarship in a new field: each has its shared assumptions, its established disagreements, its jargon. Wang is an early China specialist, and his readiness to delve into multiple fields elicits the reader's admiration. It is inevitable that his discussion of other

regions relies on reporting previous scholarship in those fields. His treatment of China integrates its sources into a more organic whole

Over the course of *Writing and the Ancient States*, Wang Haicheng attempts a fair amount of rapid-fire defining and resolution of complicated questions. For instance, already on page 1 the reader finds out, “We learn to classify people, animals, plants, tools and gods, always with the same motive: to simplify things and make life easier. The result of this intellectual exercise is knowledge...” (1). I wonder, though, whether classifying plants has a motive or result at all like that of classifying “gods.” The two sets are quite different in empirical terms. And I wonder even more which classification of “gods” will “make life easier.” There are no few attempts at this kind of thing in the book. They give the impression that Wang is interesting dinner company. I am not sure they satisfy a skeptical reader, who will wish for engagement with authorities.

In his discussion of comparative studies in the introduction, Wang acknowledges the potential difficulties of such work (6–14). He frames them mainly in terms of understanding other fields of research. Yet it seems to me that the same limitations apply within one’s own field, too. For example, Wang discusses the example of “Cang Jie pian” 蒼頡篇 (282–84), drawing on a small but reliable set of sources. The resulting discussion is a creditable brief treatment of the topic. Yet Wang does not note that Hu Pingsheng 胡平生—some of whose work he cites—has identified additional paleographic materials as part of the “Cang Jie pian”, including lists of personal names. Since lists, names, and name lists feature prominently in Wang’s study, the presence of name lists in “Cang Jie pian” seems worthy of note. Wang discusses name lists from “Jijiu pian” 急就篇 (284–85). Hu Pingsheng has some good reasons to think that the Jijiu pian lists imitated those in “Cang Jie pian”.<sup>1</sup> Hu’s work could have added to Wang’s argument, I think.

There are only so many hours in the day and an ambitious project like Wang’s covers a great deal of ground indeed. I do not pretend to have an easy answer for the limitations that realities of time impose. Nevertheless I think that those of us who work comparatively ought at least to acknowledge that this approach, like any other, requires trade-offs. Doing comparative work that will satisfy specialists is always a balancing act, and this is not the case only in one’s dealings with other fields. The potential gains far outweigh the dangers, however, as Wang’s study nicely demonstrates.

1 Hu Pingsheng 胡平生, “Han jian ‘Cang Jie pian’ xin ziliao yanjiu” 漢簡 蒼頡篇新資料研究, in *Hu Pingsheng jiandu wenwu lungao* 胡平生簡牘文物論稿 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2012), 12–15, 18–20, 24–25.