Introduction

> . . . what people do with language is more instructive than what they know about language or believe they do with it.
>
> —Linda Brodkey, *Academic Writing as Social Practice*

Text defined society in early imperial China. It did so before and after, too. But in the first centuries of empire, the position of text changed, and those changes resonated throughout society. Men and women at every social level interacted meaningfully with text. This book examines some of those interactions.

I argue in this book that the military bureaucracy of Han-era China brought soldiers and others from different regions and placed them in a literate community in the northwestern border region. There the soldiers encountered text, worked with information transmitted in written form, and heard various sorts of texts read. They were part of the textual culture of the realm.

Text has a long history in China, but the first imperial dynasties leveraged it in new ways. China entered the early imperial period in 221 BCE with a declaration of unification, which the First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 BCE) promulgated throughout the realm in written form. The universal government of the Qin dynasty was a bureaucracy, and the Han dynasty (206/2 BCE–220 CE) inherited and refined that system.[1] It functioned on the basis of text and played a key role in the dissemination of text throughout the realm.

M. T. Clanchy has written about the fundamental role religion played in spreading literate culture in medieval Europe. In Europe, the needs and requirements of the Christian church—its teachings,

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its authority, its controversies—gave shape and impetus to the development of textual civilization.[2] Document bureaucracy played an analogous role in early imperial China.

During the early imperial period, religion was an important part of Qin and Han culture. But there was no institution to act as a driving force in the development of textual culture. Religious practices varied and were often highly localized. While government was involved in religion, in that it promoted specific observances and prohibited others, there was far more variation across geographical area and social position than there was consistency. As Ori Tavor writes, "early Chinese religion is a particularly amorphous entity, as it lacks many of the features modern scholars view as fundamental—a canonical set of scriptures, organized clergy, or a fixed pantheon."[3] The situation changed after the arrival of Buddhism, but the spread of textual culture happened another way.

In contrast, the early bureaucracy, the governance that depended upon it, and the documents it produced, were universal influences. The bureaucracy, in theory at least, brought the whole of the Qin and Han realm under a single system, with its center at the capital. Its workings teemed with text; its documents were in front of all eyes. Religion was part of the bureaucracy, but as one matter among many.[4] When Buddhism spread to and within China, it brought with it new texts and inspired new traditions, and contributed to the spread of forms of writing. Buddhism came to influence China in many respects, including written culture.[5] But Chinese culture was already textual prior to its advent.

Due perhaps to text's central position in their governance and society, the first imperial dynasties in China dominated written culture in unprecedented ways. The Qin took measures that the critical historiography of the Han denoted as "the burning of books"—a putative destruction of much previously written knowledge.[6] Contemporary and later writers celebrated the establishment of scholastic offices dedicated to specific texts under the Han.[7] The Han period saw the creation of China's first universal history, *Historian's Records* (*Shiji* 史記), which was also arguably the first important example of synthesizing historiography in China. Later in the Han came the first dynastic history, *Han History* (*Han shu* 漢書). These works evinced new meta-conceptions of text as a tool for shaping perceptions of the past and the present.[8] Written forms of literary and intellectual

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expression were well established. And, of course, Chinese governance was, throughout the period (and after), a document bureaucracy. Officials read and wrote as part of their work. These things deserve the attention historians have given them. In this book, however, I want to look beyond the boundaries of formal officialdom.

The best-known forms of text in early China were the province of particular groups, all of whom were power holders or elites of various sorts. Previous studies have usually focused on the ways these groups engaged writing. Their members were often literate in a very full sense. They read and they wrote, often at a very high level, and in doing so drew from deep sources of shared textual culture. Those writers and their textual modes played a decisive role in the development of historiography and literature in China. For the most part, the texts that later historians study and take inspiration from were the same ones early historians, literati, and officials wrote and read. Those depictions remain definitive to the present. They also represent a narrow part of society.[9]

The pictures that emerge from studies in the inherited mode—sometimes consciously, oftentimes not—carry over social structures that inhere in those conceptions and their modern descendants. As Ruth Finnegan puts it, "Interpretations of the past which, perhaps quite innocently, fall in with current power relationships are to be found everywhere."[10] Or, as Alice Yao has written about early China specifically, "the privileging of one source material may also reprise unstated power relations."[11] It was power holders who were literate in the ways that came to matter for most historians and later readers, and they have often ended up being the focal points of scholarship. I want to examine other aspects of society, which requires making some shifts.

This book is distinctive in two main ways. First, it argues for a way of thinking about the roles of text in Chinese society during the Han period that differs from its predecessors'. I propose an expanded understanding of what people did with text and concentrate on interaction with it. This approach encompasses a broader social scope than has been usual in considering paleographic texts. In place of concentrating more or less exclusively on officials and literati, which has been a common way to approach these things, I seek to consider more members of the community. This conception and its relationship to scholarship within and outside early China studies

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is the topic of chapter 1. The second way this book differs from its predecessors lies in its choice of source material. Most considerations of the topic have concentrated on literary or historical forms and transmitted texts. Here I am going to consider what is in essence a case study comprising documents that record the lives and activities of military personnel and the people around them in the northwestern border region of the Han.

While this book takes the form of a case study, it is not a narrow one. I do not restrict myself to a single site or small set of sites. I draw from paleographic records from throughout the four commanderies that defined the northwest border region in Han times. The Han did not occupy the areas at the same time or in the same way. I briefly discuss the background of the region and the characteristics of the Han presence there in chapter 2.

In this study, I give limited attention to institutions as institutions, because many scholars have already treated them. Previous scholarship on the source materials I use has generally taken one of two forms. The first of these is institutional history; the second is collection and translation. The truly seminal work of Michael Loewe combines both modes, and some later scholars have followed his example.[12] When translation is not the goal, institutional modes of history writing dominate. Often institutional studies concentrate on what the documents tell us about bureaucratic offices and practices. I draw a great deal from institutional history throughout my study. But by applying a different approach, I hope to do something distinct.

For the historian—in other words, someone fundamentally concerned with written records of the past—the northwestern border area offers things that other areas in China do not, or not in the same way. The first such thing is the very documents that I study. Despite recent finds and publications of early imperial paleographic sources, the materials now available represent only a small fraction of what once existed. The northwest border area provides us a sizable part of that fraction, because the military bureaucracy and the people who staffed it produced a lot of text and the climate of the region helped to preserve it. I talk in chapter 2 about their forms and contexts. There I also consider certain key institutional factors, especially the system of conscription that brought people from hundreds of miles away to the border region, then released them to return home when their service was done. The bureaucratic documents record particular

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types of information about the Han people in the northwest and what they did, which enables me to study their activities as members of a group, if not individually. Here we have more information than we do elsewhere.

This point has important implications for my study. Most of the paleographic texts that have contributed so much to our understanding of early Chinese history and culture in recent decades come from tombs. Many tombs have been excavated; according to Susan N. Erickson, for the Han period alone, "some thirty thousand, as estimated in 1999."[13] But only a small percentage contained written materials: Alain Thote calculates that just 119 tombs have produced texts, a figure that includes some pre-Han sites.[14] The contrast with the northwest is stark, as no few locations in the region of Juyan produced documents. Some produced thousands of strips, while most contained far fewer.[15] While the differences between tombs as a group and the northwest border region sites preclude direct comparison, the figures reflect that the northwest border region under Han occupation was rich in text.

The northwestern area has particular characteristics that contribute to my analysis. The region was far removed from the centers of culture and politics. Being located as they were on the edges of Han-controlled space, the border stations were remote by any standard. And the dry climate of the region preserved the documents for later historians, without the involvement of editors and compilers over the intervening centuries.

Deduction and Evidence

Over the course of this book, I go beyond collecting and relating information to make inferences and interpretations concerning aspects of Chinese society in early imperial times. The potential for misinterpretation in deduction and related processes is inevitable. The picture will also continue to evolve over time as archaeologists continue to add to the available body of text and the material record. I nevertheless believe that an interpretive method is the best.

Interpretation has not been the usual mode of inquiry in Chinese history over the centuries, including the most recent one. Much scholarship concerning Chinese history adheres to an approach that

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is more descriptive and antiquarian than historiographical. Scholars taking the descriptive approach gather, catalog, order, and relate the content of their sources. Institutional history as pursued in the Chinese context often epitomizes this mode; it conveys abundant detail about sources and what they tell us about things like specific official positions, structures, processes, and procedures. Details by themselves are not meaningful, however. What substitutes for acknowledged interpretation in many cases is tacit acceptance of existing concepts and wisdom. A historiographical approach, in contrast, seeks to make larger arguments about the past. Scholarship in this mode engages in acknowledged interpretation as a way to better understand its subject. Details and sources are always important, even as they become part of the larger argument and narrative rather than ends in themselves.[16]

This description of two approaches to studying the past is obviously simplified, and the best scholarship usually incorporates aspects of both. In this book, though, I consciously choose to prefer the historiographical. It is my goal to make a larger argument about the place of text in early society, not only examine individual examples. Making judicious deductions about the situation on a clearly delineated and supported basis is likely to create a better picture than is otherwise possible.

The focus on descriptive and institutional approaches to history is in some respects a reaction to the difficulties of studying antiquity. The nature of early history means that historical fact is inevitably less certain than an idealist would like. Confirmation on the basis of multiple sources, as a historian of later times would demand, is usually not possible.[17] In the context of the early imperial period in China, a small set of texts, above all the *Historian's Records* and *Han History*, provide the bulk of available information. No few scholars have written on their basis alone, and all study of the period bears their imprint. This leaves the modern historian, skeptical and concerned about sources and reliability, with a decision to make about how to work. Institutional history and descriptive modes provide certainty and are thus appealing.

Descriptive and institutional modes of engagement, which concentrate on cataloging, compiling, evaluating, and translating sources, are conceptually similar approaches to the uncertainties of early history. Many scholars devote themselves to writing institutional history in more or less this fashion: extracting, arranging, and discussing details

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about systems and positions. Such work has immense value in increasing our understanding of the past, especially since it has developed into an important means of incorporating newly excavated materials into historical accounts. I draw from institutional history extensively in this book. That scholarship also leaves space for developing the sort of historiographical analysis and arguments that I seek.

Another approach to the problem has been to seek a solid basis among archaeological data. Yet, while archaeology in China has enriched our understanding of history, to turn history into a subordinate or ancillary of archaeology (or vice versa) would do justice to neither. They are separate, if overlapping, fields of inquiry. And, as Nicola Di Cosmo has put it, "If historical questions are investigated exclusively from an archaeological perspective, and thus removed from a deeper and broader understanding of the historical context, their interpretation may suffer from distortions due to an exclusive focus on material evidence."[18]

I would be a bit more emphatic than Di Cosmo in asserting that while history and archaeology inform each other, they are distinct. They can enrich but do not negate each other—even when they challenge each other. Such contact between the fields can be very productive. To quote Lothar von Falkenhausen, "The tension between texts and archaeology is potentially a fruitful one, because it enables us to broaden the scope of inquiry and ask new questions about ancient China."[19] This book is one product of contact between history and archaeology, in that it makes extensive use of archaeologically recovered materials. But it does not place archaeology in a position of absolute authority over history, or the other way around.

The final alternative way of dealing with early history's uncertainties that I would like to discuss is remaining silent and waiting for proof to emerge. This has real appeal, for one who is silent commits no error. Yet I do not think it is a feasible approach. No one knows what sorts of new sources may emerge in the coming years and decades. Waiting for evidence may prove interminable. And when archaeology has provided new data in the past, the sources often do not contain the exact information a historian would want. That seems likely to be the case in the future, too. In the meantime, I argue, remaining silent is not really possible. Even if one forgoes participation in the active and exciting international conversations about the history of early China that are happening now, silence would not mean saying

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nothing. The discursive space is not empty: a body of conceptions informed by centuries of historiography and editorial work fills it. To say nothing is to accede to those presentations and those ideas.

The preponderance of evidence suggests reality was different from the traditional picture. There is reason to think that received conceptions need revision. In my view, the historian's choice is not between patient silence on the one hand and risky deduction on the other. The choice seems to be between perpetuating the errors and prejudices of centuries and engaging in acknowledged interpretation. In this book, I choose the latter course.

This is not to condemn any other approach out of hand. Great scholars have worked in various modes. It is simply that I want to do something else. Part of that is redefinition of interaction with text, which is a key part of my argument. But more than just that definition is in play. Thinking about the past—especially the distant past—calls for something different than what has gone before.

Brief Summary of Chapters

Here I will briefly sketch the content of this book's chapters, saving detailed discussion and citation references for the respective sections of this book. I have already mentioned some of what chapter 1 does. It is there that I propose both to think in terms of interacting with text rather than literacy and to frame the discussion in terms of a community rather than individuals. Chapter 1 lays out the reasoning behind my approach, connecting it to and differentiating it from existing scholarship in early China studies. Some of the conclusions that guide my reasoning come from scholars working in other fields. One of those other fields is the study of textual culture and literacy in Europe and the Middle East during late antiquity and medieval times. Writers such as papyrologist and paleographer Roger Bagnall, paleographer M. C. A. Macdonald, and medievalist M. T. Clanchy provide important interdisciplinary support for my contentions about how to think about text and its place in society.

Many scholars have considered this question in terms of literacy in the sense of a person's ability to read and write at a certain level. Oftentimes those discussions treat scribes and others whose jobs required them to be able to read and write. We should, however,

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avoid imagining interaction with text in terms of a sharp distinction between professional literates, who read and wrote, and everyone else, who did not. Rather we should expect people's abilities to have existed on a spectrum.

At the low end of that spectrum were those who encountered text only insofar as it was read aloud and explained to them, or as it was written down on the basis of what they said. This was not a zero level of engagement, which the text-soaked environment of the early Chinese empire precluded, but a low level. At the other end were highly educated scholars and officials, and those who were both. They could read, compose, write, and comprehend text at a high level—activities that required extensive knowledge of the script, literature, and history of their intellectual environment. Most people fell somewhere in between these two extremes.

For the purposes of discussion in this book, I separate reading and writing. This more accurately represents the historical (and present) situation, as these activities are distinct. Research in fields ranging from neuroscience to literacy education indicates that learning to read is much easier than learning to write. I propose the military bureaucracy of the northwest region created conditions conducive to learning to read.

The combination of posting and reading aloud of text developed a spectrum of comprehension among the population of the early empire, some of whom could and did read; some of whom read along; a majority of whom combined listening with some degree of reading, however slight; and some who relied on listening alone. It is important to remember that persons who did not write still participated in the creation of text by dictation. As comparative research reminds us, dictation is a legitimate means of content creation and is not invalid or inauthentic.

While the distinction between written and oral transmission is an important one, even more important is the recognition that for most persons in Han China, there was not a black-and-white separation between the two. Rather, people lived in groups—communities—in which they interacted with text orally or through written transmission according to their abilities and interests. The sources from Han China will probably never permit us to reliably calculate a broad literacy rate for early imperial China. That does not prevent us from considering how people interacted with text.

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Chapter 2 gives a brief overview of the arid northwest context of the documents I treat in this book. Those details aid the reader in understanding the rest of the book but constitute a limited part of the discussion. The chapters that follow the first two work out the implications of my mode of engagement by considering different types of materials. Each chapter treats one type or set of types of text, each itself illustrating different types of interaction with text. While these may seem to align with genres of texts, it is not the purpose of this book to argue for the historical integrity of those groups as groups. While some bear similarities to types that appear in the earliest extant textual groupings, others are absent from those lists.[20] Rather than asserting that the sets of texts I treat were genres in their contemporary context, I use them as a way to structure my consideration and presentation of the primary sources. Those sources come to us without intrinsic order, and I need to give them some order for the purpose of discussion. While I do not doubt the sources I study could contribute to a study of early textual genres, that is a separate issue.

Chapter 3 begins the study of the sources by considering examples of posted texts. These are of two main types. One of these types is the regulations outlining the signals that soldiers used to communicate across distances by means of fire, drums, flags, and so forth, to convey information. Local-level authorities disseminated the standards, which soldiers needed to know for signaling. The function of the border defense system required this knowledge, and we have documents indicating that soldiers' knowledge was checked. The other type of posted texts is imperial edicts, which conveyed commands from the central government, and which in several extant cases incorporated elevated, literary language. Many examples of posted texts contain instructions that required the contents of the texts to be posted in public places and communicated to the populace.

Both of these types were available to the soldiers who formed the main audience for the texts I study; both contained and conveyed knowledge that they needed to master. These two created a situation in which learning to read at least some words was likely: the combination of content learned by rote and texts conveying that content would have allowed anyone interested to put the two together and begin to acquire reading ability. Obviously not everyone did this. But the most reasonable interpretation, if we consider what we know about learning and reading, is that a meaningful portion

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did. That already changes how we think about text and its roles in early imperial society.

Chapter 4 introduces statements, marked by the phrase *ziyan* 自言 ("to state oneself"), which represent a different sort of widespread interaction with text. These documents emerged out of oral exchanges between officials and members of the common population. The process by which these documents were created represents a form of dictation. The statements thus record interaction with text for those commoners who made them. Women dictated statements, too, which testifies to their interaction with text in a mode that was, mutatis mutandis, the same as that of men. Women were part of the literate community. There are furthermore statements from non-Chinese persons. These examples demonstrate that the literate community of the region had boundaries that could shift, depending on the situation. The documents I study confirm that, far from being limited to the official scribes and others who fall within conventional definitions of literacy, persons from throughout and even beyond Han society also interacted with text in early China.

One important manner of interacting with text in Han literary practice was creation by assembly, in which a creator selected and combined existing written material in a new way. Some of the most famous and important texts in Chinese history came into being around this time and in this manner. Chapter 5 shows that this mode functioned in the border regions, too, where we find composite texts created from locally available source material. The main example text juxtaposes an idiosyncratic imperial pronouncement with a personal letter. Scholars studying it have typically concentrated on one or the other of these aspects of the text, usually the former, and have not considered the implications of the two being alongside each other. As part of this discussion I also look at some example texts that come to us from graves in the northwest region. These examples concern the "king's staff" (*wangzhang* 王杖), which Han practice granted to men of advanced age as a symbol of special status and attendant privileges. The documents we have contain various texts and appear to have been assembled by individuals for personal purposes. Creating composites was an important mode of interaction with text that the borderlands shared with the center.

Chapter 6 considers texts that direct the reader in how to do things. For this reason I call them *practical*. The best example of this

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type is a short text on evaluating swords. Its content was of interest to soldiers, and its form also seems to be something that would be accessible to inexpert readers. Its structure is simple and explicit, its grammar is elementary, and its reasoning very straightforward. In this case, again, I bring in consideration of some texts that archaeologists excavated from graves to help illustrate what is distinctive about the northwest example. The most important counterpoint is that of a text on the evaluation of horses, which employs a complicated structure, recondite formulations, and difficult vocabulary. It implies an educated readership just as much as the text on evaluating swords suggests a less-cultivated audience. The chapter ends with discussion of a text on the brewing of beer that straddles the boundary between practical writing and ritual classic.

That text is not the only example of a classic among the documents from the border region. Chapter 7 discusses examples from *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and other canonical texts. The chapter title refers to its subject as cultural texts; however, rather than canonical, as much of what we find in the documents does not correspond to classics, or the classic content is embedded in other material. There is perhaps no really satisfactory way to label these texts: most possible labels would necessarily or potentially be anachronistic, exclude certain materials, pass a judgment upon them, or simply confuse the matter. But these texts embodied cultivation in a way distinct from other types of text, and so I label them cultural. This is intended as a description, not to assert that they form a generic type. Among the texts from the northwest we find, for instance, material that appears in the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), as well as texts that quote *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) poems, a common occurrence throughout received literature. The settings, however, differ from the previously known examples. There are also narratives that relate to figures and accounts familiar from received literature, albeit in different guises. These things reflect the border regions' connections to the literary culture and community of the center, despite their physical distance from it.[21]

Chapter 8 is in some respects the culmination of the book. Its topic is letters that officials working in low rungs of the bureaucracy exchanged. While the letters usually concern matters connected with official work, they existed outside the usual bureaucratic processes for creating and circulating documents and adopted a more personal tone.

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They thus mark a development in interaction between individuals through text at a low social level, within the context that soldiers and others also occupied. Indeed, no few of the letters bring in by name persons who neither created the content nor were named as recipient(s). Such letters illustrate relationships that were maintained through and by means of text, even when the persons involved were outside of the binary relationship of creator and recipient. The letters demonstrate the extent of the literate community. Importantly, here again I show that the community included women, who were addressed in some instances by title and other times by name, and sometimes brought into the official matters that letters treated. As a social group, women fall outside the usual definitions of literacy in early imperial China. Yet they, like other non-officials, were part of the literate community and had meaningful interactions with text.

This project has broad implications for our understanding of early imperial society. Because the primary source material I work with comes from a limited geographical area and provides a spectrum of information not available elsewhere, the main part of the monograph does not treat its wider ramifications. I wait to engage them until the conclusion, where I push my interpretations further than elsewhere. One of the important, broad implications of this study is that we should expect there to have been much more interaction with text—more reading, in particular—in early imperial society than scholars have often assumed. Widespread interaction with text was a characteristic of society in early China and helped shape it then and in later centuries. The first step in arriving at this recognition is the conceptual framework that is the topic of chapter 1.

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