

INTRODUCTION

Writing a book about writing is an intimidating task, not the least because every reader can be counted on to have a theory about it. I have not met a literate person who is not interested in the phenomenon of writing. The immense literature on this subject testifies to its appeal. But it also sets a challenge. Readers want to know, without delay, What is your take?

This book is a comparative study of the use of writing to create and maintain order in early states. Drawing its evidence from six regions – Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Maya lowlands, Central Mexico, the Andes, and China – it aims to use our knowledge of other early states to help us take a fresh look at China. The present introduction has three main tasks. First, it makes a case that writing, order, and early states constitute a coherent subject for investigation. Second, it explains the thinking behind comparative study, as I understand it, and relates it to the interdisciplinary study of writing. And finally, it briefly locates in space and time the early states that form our sample.

WRITING, ORDER, AND THE EARLY STATE

The early state was an enormous institution that subordinated most of its population to a small number of rulers. In spite of the ups and downs of rulers and dynasties, as a model for social arrangement it has survived the vagaries of history. Our modern state is only a late variant of the model. What is the binding agent that has been holding the great mass of people in subjugation for millennia? One ingredient, it seems to me, is the need for order and security in a dangerous and unpredictable world. To cope with it our ancestors very early formed groups. Just what it was that drove the gradual development from the tiny human group (“band”) to the gigantic state still eludes us, but the main steps in the development are plain to see.

Living together creates relationships among individuals. To navigate through the web of relationships, people use classification. Classification imposes order on a vagrant and unruly reality, enabling us to perceive a chaotic world as an orderly one. How the faculty of classification originated has long been debated by sociologists and cognitive scientists, with an entirely social origin and an innate one in the human mind forming opposite poles in the debate.¹ It seems safe at least to say that every individual possesses an innate capacity to *learn* to classify. We learn to classify people, animals, plants, tools, and gods, always with the same motive: to simplify things and to make life easier. The result of this intellectual exercise is knowledge, which is storable and communicable,

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and which provides rules to guide action. Written knowledge and society's use of it are at the heart of this book.

Just as there are social divisions of labor, there are diverse domains of knowledge. It is the nature of the social arrangement that determines what is essential knowledge for the survival of a particular social group and its members. What is the nature of the state, a huge and complex social arrangement? What knowledge is essential to its survival? A definition of the state is called for.

Benedict Anderson, with the modern nation-state in mind, defines the state as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign," that is, imagined as a well-defined territory under the rule of a person or an assembly.² In essence this is not much different from Thomas Hobbes's explication of the state, which, in Quentin Skinner's recent summary, regards the state "as a fictional or moral person distinct from both rulers and ruled."³ With the early state in mind, Norman Yoffee defines the state as consisting of a governmental center, an attendant hierarchy of officers and clients, and a territory under the political control of the center.⁴ The two definitions – one psychological and the other institutional – are perfectly compatible, and both are invoked in this book.

Anderson focuses on people's mental image of their community. Taking mass literacy for granted, he argues that the way people imagine their group depends to a large extent on knowledge of the world gained from the print medium. However, even without mass literacy and printing, which were not available in the early state, a collective identity could be created by using a shared body of knowledge of the state. At the core of this knowledge was the king, the symbol of the community. What exactly was known about the king depended in part on one's proximity to him, but in part also on the king's strategy for legitimizing the institution of kingship. Kingship is probably the most common form of state government, and the first part of this book examines the king list as the primordial assertion of the state's legitimacy. The succession of kings gave the state a concise history, a simple digest of the past that could conveniently be displayed to assert the message of royal ideology. History is made for a reason, and in early states the reason was not to record what happened but to substantiate and justify an ideology of rule. This motive is not transparent in a list of royal names, the simplest form of history, but it is hard to miss once we turn our attention to the institutional setting in which such lists were constructed. The Chinese "Mandate of Heaven" doctrine is one of the most familiar of these constructed royal ideologies. Chinese historians have so long looked at the past in the way it prescribes that its nature as a human construction has been difficult to see. The Sumerian King List, a celebrated Western counterpart on which we have more perspective, will help us understand history making in China.

The second part of this book looks at the role played by writing in the state's extraction of wealth from its populace. Royal display was a major function of early writing; indeed it may have driven the invention of some writing systems (Egyptian, Mesoamerican). But there is no question that in Mesopotamia, at least, writing originated in administration. Indeed in Part II we will find that, not only in Mesopotamia, the writing that was put on display was often taken from or shaped by texts that originated in administration. Administrative texts – above all the most powerful ones, censuses and maps – feature prominently in Anderson's reading of the state as an imagined community. What he emphasizes, however, is the imagination, cultivated and conditioned, that fosters the

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common people's identification with the state. In the early state, this collective identity was not purely a matter of loyalty (nor is it in the modern state). Discontent, fear, and resentment of the state apparatus, paradoxically, were equally strong contributors to a sense of cohesion, and it was administration that was responsible for these sentiments.⁵

When we think of administration we are inclined to equate it with bureaucracy. From Max Weber to Michel Foucault there have been many studies of how modern bureaucracies function and what the rationale of government is.⁶ Some historians of the early state, conscious of the paucity of their written evidence, hesitate to make use of the insights of these studies, but should they? Do material remains have nothing to say about bureaucracy? For the study of modern bureaucracy Weber had at his disposal abundant written documents produced by modern bureaucracies, hence his conclusion that "[t]he management of the modern office is based upon written documents ('the files'), which are preserved in their original or draught form."⁷ More importantly, he could observe its functioning as an onlooker and as a subject ruled by bureaucracy. To study the art of government, Foucault could examine written treatises on government by European thinkers from the sixteenth century down to his own day. Few such sources are available to the historian of the early state. But a shortage of written evidence does not mean that there was no bureaucratic administration in early states. It certainly does not mean that there was no human creativity in governing worthy of our attention.

On the contrary, the early state was built by highly creative minds – "built on the urge to rule and on visions of order."⁸ And these visions of order are manifest in engineering that has imprinted itself in the archaeological record: cities, monumental buildings, and landscape terracing, to name only a few. Bureaucracy was the instrument created by ambitious imaginations to realize their visions of cohesion and obedience, and writing in Mesopotamia was invented to serve bureaucracy.⁹ Weber himself, aware of the abundant cuneiform documents from early Mesopotamian states, well understood their essentially bureaucratic nature.¹⁰ Chapter 5 in Machiavelli's *The Prince* is titled "Concerning the way to govern cities or principalities which lived under their own laws before they were annexed." Although no treatises like Machiavelli's have come down to us from ancient Mesopotamia, there is little doubt that thoughtful Mesopotamians had come up with their own solutions to his problem. Our task is to understand these solutions and their rationales. In an illuminating study of modern states, James Scott has stressed the state's need for what he calls "legibility," that is, for a clear and detailed knowledge of its population and resources. I follow Yoffee in believing that ancient states had similar needs.¹¹ Usually these needs were met with written lists. Although the states of Central Mexico and the Inka state in the Andes stored their administrative knowledge using pictorial and nongraphic recording systems, in format these records are not very different from written lists. With or without writing, legibility was achieved by simplification and classification: "the essence of the act of writing (and of drawing) is to reduce a complex and often chaotic reality to a comprehensible order" – that is, a rational ordering of society.¹²

We owe to Weber the insight that "the consequence of a rational ordering of society was discipline, the potentiality for subordination and the loss of the individual's autonomy, an estrangement from simpler forms of communal association, a growing fragmentation of social existence and values, and a sense of disenchantment."¹³ Was writing

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invented and viewed primarily as a force for disciplined order, an instrument for domination? Those who follow Claude Lévi-Strauss have no doubt that the major function of writing is to facilitate the exploitation of human beings by the ruling class.¹⁴ But few concrete examples have been adduced to substantiate Lévi-Strauss's sweeping claim, which is only a sort of guilt-by-association argument made using an anecdote from a small Nambikwara group. In the same vein Jack Goody, noting that a "major sociological or anthropological question about the relation between writing and the polity has precisely to do with state formation, bureaucracy, and the subsequent role of early writing in helping to unify large empires such as China," answers the question not with solid evidence from any early state but only by asserting that "the earliest stages of literacy in most of the 'primary' civilizations were exactly contemporaneous with pristine state development."¹⁵

State formation is an ongoing process of establishing and keeping a legitimate monopoly of force and taxation within a certain territory.¹⁶ Traditional studies of early state formation have rightly focused on innovations that accrued during this process. In Part I the discussion of the written king list as a legitimizing force suggests that writing was such an innovation, one that had an intimate relationship with state formation, but it does not address how the state acquired the wealth necessary to support the functioning of its government. The state cannot run on ideology alone; it is as concerned with the present as with the past. Foucault's interest in government as an activity points in an empirical direction.¹⁷ In the early states two crucial components of the activity were collecting tax and forming an army. These depended on the state's knowledge of its subjects, its knowledge of population and property. People and resources needed to be put on the state's radar screen, identified and classified, and it was the institutions of the state that conferred identity on them.¹⁸ The government's activity thus had a distinctly classificational character. This also is a quintessential characteristic of writing. It is time to define writing.

Discussions of early writing tend to operate with two distinct definitions, one narrow and one broad. The narrow definition reserves the word *writing* for the exact graphical transcription of spoken language. The broad definition extends the word to embrace graphical recording systems whose conventionalized marks are not necessarily bound to a particular language.¹⁹ All the graphical systems employed by the early states treated in this book can be situated somewhere on a continuum between these two poles; indeed most of them developed from the second toward the first, for it is not in dispute that writing in the narrow sense grew out of writing in the broad sense. Recent research has made it very clear that the recording of spoken language was not the motive for the invention of the earliest writing systems. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, where documentation is most abundant, the development from graphic recording systems to "full writing" capable of reproducing the grammar and syntax of human speech was a gradual process that took several centuries.²⁰ Following Hans Nissen, Peter Damerow, and Robert Englund, we may conveniently call the precursor graphic systems *proto-writing*.²¹ As shown in Part II, the pictographic recording systems of Central Mexico have much in common with the proto-writing of the Old World, for both have an organized, self-generative lexicon and a numerical system. To call the former systems proto-writing would be inappropriate, though, because the term carries with it an expectation that they would in time have developed into full writing, something that may or may not be so.

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In any discussion that involves early writing, it is obviously important to keep clearly in mind the distinction between full writing and less-than-full writing. However, the aim of the present book is to investigate what early recording systems did rather than to label them. Whether representing language or not, their lexicons and numerical systems gave these early recording systems a remarkable ability to *sort* and *quantify*. The various king lists discussed in Part I are classifications of a particular type of people. In Part II we will encounter classifications of other segments of the society: the early state was keenly interested in making inventories of its population. To make an inventory of people – to count them – is to confer sameness on them. Once entered into the state's register, the populace received a collective identity and was subject to the state's surveillance. The coercive and punitive side of writing stressed by Lévi-Strauss will be very apparent when we learn how the state used its census to detect and punish those who tried to evade its conferment of the identity "taxpayer." State officials were not immune to writing's punishing power, either, as they soon found out when their deliveries did not match the written tax assessment. In population registers, we observe a rudimentary police state in the making. To scholars of modern European states, "[p]olice is a science of endless lists and classifications; there is a police of religion, of customs, of health, of foods, of highways, of public order, of sciences, commerce, manufactures, servants, poverty. . . . Police science seems to aspire to constitute a kind of omnivorous espousal of governed reality, the consortium of a Leviathan. It is also (again in aspiration) a knowledge of inexhaustibly detailed and continuous control."²²

Early states were perhaps less concerned than modern ones with the prosperity or happiness of their subjects – and hence were less ambitious as to the extent of their knowledge – but their desire for knowledge and their use of written lists to organize it were not much different from those of modern states.

States that filled their treasuries without writing – most instructively the Inka state in the Andes – will help us grasp the power of writing by showing us what was involved in managing without it. Administering a state largely consists of managing taxonomies, and writing is an exercise in taxonomy. Knowledge is power, and writing accumulates it. But we should not look at writing's disciplinary function from a purely practical point of view. Gary Urton, a scholar of the Inka *quipu* (knotted strings), proposes that bookkeeping in medieval Europe and pre-Hispanic Peru emerged in the keeping of precise records of transgressive behaviors, maintaining social norms by recording "confessions." He argues that Foucaultian governmentality and its evolution in Western Europe had counterparts in the Andes, where we find "a preoccupation with statistics, political arithmetic, institutions for monitoring and regulating individual and group behaviors." Both systems of government had strong moral and epistemological rationales, although their historical clash underlines their differences of morality and ethics.²³ Along a similar path, Michael Herzfeld treats modern bureaucratic actions as everyday rituals in the service of a religion that is nationalism.²⁴ Nationalism, the strong sense of group identity discussed by Anderson, is perhaps not a helpful concept for the study of early states, given its heavy freight of modern associations. Still, it is worth pondering how and by whom Anderson's "imagined community" was formed, and how, in the ongoing process of state formation, a larger, more inclusive collective identity came into being.²⁵

It was only to a limited literate audience that writing could help spread knowledge of the king as the symbol of the early state. In Part II I argue that the state order was an

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organized and systematically controlled symbolic system and that administrative writing brought more people into its orbit. Although we often classify extant writings as purely administrative documents or purely ideological documents, the two categories are by no means mutually exclusive.²⁶ Administrative writings had a profound symbolic meaning for everyone involved; display texts often contained down-to-earth laundry lists about the economy. As Herzfeld cautions, it is important to keep in mind “the symbolic representation of authority by those over whom it is exercised. To treat bureaucratic practice apart from popular reactions to it ... is implicitly to accept the disembodied rhetoric of officialdom.”²⁷ We need to consider how writing was perceived by the people who were doing it, the people who were reading it, and the people who were being written about.

Among these overlapping groups connected by writing, the people who were doing writing formed a *script community* that supplied the early state with literate bureaucrats. A prerequisite for Weberian office management to function is “thorough and expert training.”²⁸ Likewise, for writing to endure there must be “strategies of pedagogy and apprenticeship.”²⁹ Literacy education for those who are entitled to participate in governance, especially elementary schooling, has always been part of the process of state formation.³⁰ Part III therefore views education as a process by which the state perpetuates itself. Writing’s role in the life of the state spans past, present, and future.

In early states the school was one of the most important institutions for the making and transmission of elite culture. It supplied the intellectual foundation of the state’s quest for order. Conversely, order was a prerequisite for culture. “If without order there could be no pure culture, it was equally true that without culture there could be no meaningful order.”³¹ Those privileged to acquire literacy saw writing as a civilizing institution; it enabled order and embodied culture.

In Mesopotamia, where ancient education is most fully documented, we will find that it long centered on lexical lists, and that an immense variety of texts can be understood as variations or elaborations on the lists that, in the course of schooling, became second nature to every pupil. As they learned these lists the pupils internalized their form, acquiring a list-making classifier’s view of the world, a view comparable to the Weberian “attitude-set of the official for precise obedience within his *habitual* activity.”³² Pupils also internalized the content of the lists, implicit in which was a scribal ideology that tended to the maintenance of the state.

In all three parts of this book we will over and over again encounter lists – lists of names or of names and numbers. I believe that this is no accident: early writing is almost synonymous with the listing of names. This has to do with its functions, of course, but also, as I suggest in the Conclusion, with its origin. To write, we might almost believe, is to make a list. I hope that after reading through the many examples quoted in this book, the reader will in the end feel rewarded by understanding something about human inventiveness that, for better or for worse, has profoundly influenced the course of human history.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES AND EARLY CHINA

Making comparisons is a universal human behavior, according to the anthropologist Donald Brown.³³ In this it resembles the penchant for classification mentioned in the preceding section, another behavior on Brown’s list. “To know thyself, compare thyself to others.” As a methodology in the humanities and social sciences, cross-cultural

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comparative study has been with us since the nineteenth century. Although its early practitioners sometimes aroused suspicion or scorn, comparative study has taken firm root within several disciplines, notably anthropology, law, literature, religion, and sociology. The Institute for the Comparative Study of Civilisations at Oslo was perhaps the best known organization promoting it in the early years of the twentieth century. It sponsored seminars that were subsequently published and became classics in many disciplines, among them Franz Boas's *Primitive Art* and Marc Bloch's *French Rural History*.

There are two distinct types of cross-cultural study, distinct in theory if not always in practice. The first is the study of contact, exchange, and transmission. The second is the comparison of cultures assumed not to have been in contact. Both types have a historical dimension. Both seek to account for apparent similarities and differences, either by finding the immediate origins of specific phenomena or through more general insights into possible trajectories of cultural development. And both, if they are to yield anything more than vague and superficial analogies, require detailed and concrete knowledge of two or more data sets. Furthermore, because many phenomena are of interest to several disciplines, comparative study often demands competence in two or more fields. Writing and the state belong to such a public domain: anthropologists, historians, sociologists, philologists, and psychologists all have written extensively about them. Today the flagship journal in comparative studies is *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, founded in 1958; the state, especially in its medieval and modern forms in Europe, has always been one of its main themes. Writing has received less attention from comparativists, but it appeared early and prominently on the scene with the controversial publication of "The Consequences of Literacy" by Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1963).³⁴ The paper is controversial because the cognitive impact upon humans and human society that the authors attribute to the advent of literacy has large implications for many fields, including philosophy, sociology, and psychology. The consequent debate about the so-called literacy thesis has seen many publications on both sides.³⁵ Can an archaeologist and art historian working mainly with material remains hope to do research on writing that might open a new channel for dialogue? I have repeatedly asked myself this question since my second month in graduate school, when my adviser, Robert Bagley, suggested the origin of writing as a seminar topic.

My answer is that archaeologists can certainly contribute to the study of writing in its earliest social contexts, particularly in the context of state formation. The relationship between writing and society has been studied in two basic ways, and archaeologists have been active participants from the beginning. The first approach might be termed philological. It treats writing as a self-contained development that influences society but that is itself shaped only by its own internal logic. The classic statement is I. J. Gelb's *A Study of Writing* (1963), which sees all the world's writing systems as descending by a single evolutionary path from Mesopotamian cuneiform. In the only chapter that he devotes to writing and society, Gelb makes the sweeping pronouncement that "[w]riting exists only in a civilization and a civilization cannot exist without writing."³⁶ But then he immediately turns his attention to the importance of writing in *modern* society, devoting three short sections to the relationships between writing and speech, art, and religion. Considering that Gelb had an astonishing knowledge of administrative documents in ancient Mesopotamia, as we will see when we come to land tenure in Chapter 3, it is surprising how little he has to tell us about writing's influence on early societies. His book's

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central concern seems to be the autonomy of writing. In my area of study, early China, major studies of the Chinese writing system fall into the philological camp, although most reject the idea of Mesopotamian origins.³⁷

The other approach, which sees a two-way interaction between writing and society, has largely eclipsed the philological approach, at least as to the origin of writing, although it has not yet had much impact on studies of Chinese writing. A brief but classic statement was the archaeologist Gordon Childe's article "The Urban Revolution" (1950), which looked at writing in comparative perspective and saw it as primarily a response to administrative needs.³⁸ The understanding of writing as a tool of administration has gone furthest in studies of Mesopotamian cuneiform, notably *Archaic Bookkeeping* by Hans Nissen et al. (1993). Recently, however, some specialists have argued that in Egypt and Mesoamerica the earliest writing served ideological rather than administrative needs. Both sides of the question are represented in *The First Writing* (2004), a collection of essays by Old and New World specialists edited by Stephen Houston. (The book includes a global survey of writing systems by Bruce Trigger that amounts to a comprehensive refutation of Gelb's idea of unilinear development.) The debate over administration and ideology leads directly to comparative study.

Although several recent efforts by archaeologists at cross-cultural comparison give some attention to writing, few have yet combined comparative study with firsthand knowledge of the Chinese material.³⁹ This is a perennial problem in other ambitious comparative enterprises as well, in particular those concerned with the state, bureaucracy, and social power. Today, after a century of archaeology, we can raise an eyebrow at Weber for making large generalizations about Chinese economy and religion on the strength of a very limited knowledge of ancient China. But his followers do not seem to have availed themselves of the wealth of knowledge now readily available to them. Eisenstadt (1963) does not consider early China before the imperial period. In Michael Mann's monumental volume on the history of power from the fourth millennium B.C. to A.D. 1760, Shang China occupies one and a half pages.⁴⁰ S. E. Finer's *The History of Government From the Earliest Times* (1997) has a longer section on ancient China, but its quaint characterization of Chinese writing ("The Chinese script is very wonderful, very complicated, very archaic" or "The Chinese script is uniquely Chinese") is certainly out of date, and its knowledge of Chinese bureaucracy before Han is insufficient to contribute anything to Finer's argument.⁴¹ As for Trigger, despite the colossal energy and erudition he brought to his comprehensive comparison of all the major early civilizations, he often relied on dubious secondary sources. He believed that Shang China was a territorial state, a belief that owes more to ancient ideologies and traditional historiography than to modern archaeology.⁴² And he believed that serving religion was the main or even sole function of the earliest Chinese writing because his sources told him so, even though the prominence of inscriptions related to ritual in the early Chinese epigraphic record seems to be only a bias of preservation.⁴³ How can the comparativist "be fully acquainted with historical research in these fields and know the different controversies among historians, so that he can evaluate them, can beware of too facile use of any data or view, and can explore the extent to which such data can be analyzed according to the problems he analyzes and the categories he uses"?⁴⁴

Committed comparativists are well aware of this problem. One solution, proposed by the editorial in the first issue of *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, is to found

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a forum “for comparable work on recurrent types of problem of general interest.”⁴⁵ It finds an echo in Houston’s preface to *The First Writing*: “Comparison is best done, not by a single person, often misconstruing data and debates in areas far from their specialty, but within an interactive setting that convenes authorities from diverse fields. From this will emerge, it is hoped, a shared vocabulary and a sharpened sense of problems and prospects relating to each system. Dialogue cannot exist unless scholars tune to the same wavelength.”⁴⁶

One fruitful product of such an approach was a seminal paper by John Baines and Norman Yoffee (1998) that singled out order, legitimacy, and wealth as the overriding concerns of the early state and in the process supplied a uniform vocabulary for comparative purposes. It has been a source of inspiration for the present book.

The dialogic approach to comparative study requires each partner to trust the expertise of the others, and a coherent result depends on collaborators whose wavelengths are attuned very closely indeed. A second approach takes different risks. The solitary comparativist (the word *solitary* is qualified in this book’s Acknowledgments section) hopes that extensive reading of the kind Weber did will equip him to read critically and form his own views in all the areas of his study. But a commando raid into unfamiliar territory will not do. This vivid simile is borrowed from the cuneiform scholar and archaeologist J. N. Postgate, who, in a plea for “increased cross-frontier awareness” between material-based archaeologists and art historians on the one hand, and text-oriented historians and philologists on the other, demands that “each side must take cognizance of the totality of the other side’s data base, and understand how the tempting prizes actually belong in their own context.”⁴⁷ In her tribute to Weber, Sylvia Thrupp, the first editor of *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, sets the bar as high as Postgate: “Max Weber through phenomenal labor set new standards and as D. G. MacRae in a recent review article recalls was himself uneasy about the adequacy of his factual knowledge of China. . . . In the handling of evidence the generalist has to meet the standards of specialists. He may disregard petty objections about stray exceptions to his statements but not criticism on the score of misinterpretation of evidence or neglect of relevant problems.”⁴⁸ There is no shortcut.

So how is the comparativist to handle evidence that lies outside his expertise? Ideally the advice of a specialist friend will guide him to an up-to-date general treatment of the topic he is concerned with, writing or the state for example. But this is only a starting point, and the next step is crucial. If he finds points of interest in the book or article, he should track down the author’s references both to their original sources and to whatever secondary sources offer different interpretations. In studying early writing’s functions, for example, he should try (1) to read in full (though necessarily in translation) the actual pieces of ancient writing quoted or cited in the secondary sources, and (2) to look at their archaeological contexts. Of course only specialist epigraphers can translate the original cuneiform, hieroglyphic, or Chinese bronze inscriptions, and it is inevitable that they will disagree about details. The comparativist cannot hope to resolve the disagreements, but the details are not always relevant to his topic; often they can be safely ignored. By tracking down references the comparativist finds a great many primary and secondary sources and, as his knowledge accumulates, develops his own views on long-standing issues while also discovering unexpected questions along the way.

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This is the path I took in writing this book. What at first I thought only to be a Chinese archaeologist's foray into the alien world of writing turned out to be a belated education. I found myself increasingly drawn to the treasure trove of texts in the ancient Near East, to the codices of Mesoamerica, and to the rich ethnographic records left by indigenous and European chroniclers in the New World. In learning about these documents and their modern interpretations, I was struck by the shortage of studies focused on the relationship between writing and the state, on how early states used recording systems to achieve their goals of order, legitimacy, and wealth. So I set out to piece together the scattered sources to write my own description of this relationship, region by region. When a region had a long and continuous written tradition, as the ancient Near East did, I made my description chronological, pointing out significant changes and continuities.

Armed with these descriptions I then turned to early China. To the specialists who study it, the immense textual record of early China and the traditional understanding of it are so familiar that they can easily be taken for granted. Comparative study gives us a new perspective on the familiar. It is a machine that generates coincidences both planned and unplanned. The king lists and lists of royal gifts ostentatiously displayed in certain Chinese bronze inscriptions are traditionally studied for their relevance to chronology and lexicography. Set next to Near Eastern and Mesoamerican monuments, however, they gain new meanings as testimony to writing's functions in state ideology and economy. Like ethnographic analogy, comparative study cannot supply proofs; the fact that writing in Mesopotamia began as bookkeeping, for instance, does not ensure that writing in China began in the same way. But like ethnographic analogy, comparative study can alert us to possibilities that we might not otherwise think of, and in scientific inquiry it is a well-established rule to prefer multiple possibilities to the exploration of only one.⁴⁹ The enthusiastic attention given to scribal education by Assyriologists makes us ask ourselves how else a full-blown writing system could be maintained over time. How do we explain the absence of school texts in early China? Is early China devoid of school texts simply because the materials on which the texts were written have perished? Or are there perhaps a few survivors that have yet to be recognized for what they are?

In the course of this study many similarities between early China and other early states will emerge. Text types and practices that have never seemed anything but Chinese will turn out to be local forms of widespread phenomena – not peculiarities of early China but characteristics of early state societies. Finding similarities is usually the first result of comparative studies, because in the beginning of the process what we notice is not the uniqueness of a certain phenomenon but its analogies with what it is being compared with. In a gradual process of differentiation, of course, comparison will uncover specific points of difference within the general similarities.

Some of the differences that emerge in the present study are striking. Others might be the result only of loss of evidence, making them less easy to evaluate. Comparative study regularly presents us with the problem of deciding whether we are looking at genuine cultural difference or only at a gap in the evidentiary record of one of our cultures. How do we establish comparability if one side's database does not match the other's? Cautious colleagues are understandably reluctant to make conjectures about missing evidence. A few regard it as methodologically virtuous to proceed as though nothing were missing. Others prefer to confine their activities to a secure corner where the evidence