Writing & Literacy in Early China comes at a time when the early China field is becoming increasingly concerned with questions of literacy and orality, a development that appears however somewhat belated if compared with scholarship in Classics and Biblical Studies. The first study in the field concerned with these questions was probably C.H. Wang’s 1974 interpretation of the Odes, *The Bell and the Drum: Shih Ching as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), which drew on Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord’s work on fixed formulae in Yugoslavian epics.1 Wang argued that the *Odes* derived from an oral tradition because of their extensive use of fixed formulae of the kind discussed by Parry and Lord in the case of Homer. Wang’s study of the *Odes* suffered from an all too simplistic application of the oral formulaic hypothesis to a heavily edited corpus of texts. Nonetheless, his study still marked an important turning point for the early China field because of its focus on writing, literacy, and orality. Since Wang’s study, the early China field has come a long way and now addresses these issues in much more nuanced terms.2 In this context of soaring interest in the oral and the written in ‘Huaxia’

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1 Parry argued that the Homeric style is characterised by the extensive use of fixed expressions that can be adapted to different ideas under the same metrical conditions. Together with Lord, he recorded oral traditional poetry in Bosnia and developed the theory that the formulaic structure of the Homeric epic should be understood as a sign of its oral composition. This theory was later called the Oral Formulaic Hypothesis and was developed further in Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). For Parry’s work see Adam Parry (ed.), *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

(China), the focus on literacy (one should perhaps better speak of literacies!) and writing is the logical next step. By making this its explicit focus, *Writing & Literacy in Early China* marks an important contribution to a severely understudied area in the early China field. Without any doubt, this book will receive much deserved attention.

*Writing & Literacy in Early China* is an exciting study and its contributions are full of excellent remarks and insights. The editors have made an admirable job of bringing together conflicting views about highly contentious questions in one coherent volume organised around one theme—Chinese literacies from the Neolithic to circa 220 AD.

Although meticulously organised, this book should not be understood as an exhaustive study of writing and areas of literacy in Huaxia. Rather, it should be understood as a snapshot of related North American scholarship presented at the Columbia Early China Seminar Series. The institutional framework perhaps also explains the choice of exclusively North American contributors, which is at least noteworthy since there are exciting developments in European scholarship with regard to philology, as well as text and manuscript culture, which also deal with questions of orality, writing, and areas of literacy in Huaxia.

*Writing & Literacy in Early China* makes no attempt to present a ‘unified interpretation of literacy in Early China’ (p. 7). Instead, it provides a platform for different voices, making it a highly valuable contribution to a quickly developing field. Informed by scholarship from Classics, Anthropology, and the Social Sciences, the editors stress in their introduction that the focus of *Writing & Literacy in Early China* is to analyse literacy as a social phenomenon (p. 5). This renders ‘literacy’ a multi-layered and highly complex concept that no longer simply deals with the question what percentage of people might have been able to read and write but, as William Johnson suggests, denotes ‘text-oriented events embedded...”


5 Here I would like to mention the activities that relate to the study of writing, literacy, and orality in early China by the European Association for the Study of Chinese Manuscripts (EASCM) (for the website see: http://www.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/eascm/); the collaborative research centre “Manuscript Cultures in Asia, Africa, and Europe” as part of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at Hamburg University; the forthcoming volume, edited by Wolfgang Behr, Martin Kern and Dirk Meyer, *Reading Early Chinese Manuscripts: Texts, Contexts, Methods* (*Handbook of Oriental Studies;* Leiden: Brill), in which nine of the fifteen contributors are based in Europe.