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Tablets (*Du*) and Passages (*Zhang*): the Material Conditions for the Formation of Early Short Passage Texts

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Abstract

Several studies have addressed the question of whether the people of early China wrote with thin bamboo strips held in their hands or whether they wrote with the support of flat desks. However, scholars have not addressed the distinction between *jian* (bamboo strips) and larger *du* (wooden tablets) in everyday writing. In early China, tablets would be held in the hand to write, while strips would be laid flat on a writing desk. Tablets were the main medium of everyday writing during the period spanning the pre-Qin and Western and Eastern Han dynasties. In the drafting of various literary texts, taking court records, and taking classroom notes, tablets were the primary writing medium. Among written materials from before the Western Han dynasty, *duan zhang* (short passages) were the most common style of writing, and most texts were composed of short passages. Among the early Chinese manuscripts that have been unearthed, short passages are also very common. However, almost no one has raised the question of why a documentary system dominated by short passages was formed in the pre-Qin and Western and Eastern Han dynasties period. The number of characters that a writing tablet can accommodate essentially coincides with the number of characters in short passages in early Chinese manuscripts. In view of its wide use, I propose that the formation of the short passage form was potentially influenced by the material writing medium of the tablet.

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The texts before the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE) primarily used the short passage (*duan zhang* 短章) format. As one of the most commonly encountered forms in early Chinese texts, short passages generally contained a self-contained principle or story. Many early Chinese texts, such as the *Analects*, the *Laozi* 老子, the *Liji* 禮記, the *Guoyu* 國語, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the *Mengzi* 孟子, the *Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋, and the *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, are mainly composed of short passages of up to five hundred characters in length. This article analyzes the formation of the short passage form at the level of the material mediums of writing and explores the relationship between materials used for writing and writing systems during the period when early Chinese texts were produced.

1 A Tablet in the Hand

In the study of unearthed texts (*chutu wenxian* 出土文獻), the ancient practice of writing on bamboo and wooden strips (*jian* 簡) and tablets (*du* 牘) has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years. Numerous discussions have concerned whether the people of early China held strips or tablets in their hands when writing or laid them flat on writing desks (*ji'an* 几案). Tsuen-hsuin Tsien has brought attention to the relationship between the writing habits engendered by the use of strips and tablets and the structure of texts in his book *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*. On the ordering of the writing in early Chinese texts, he speculates that "the habit of a right-handed scribe, who would lay the strips to his right in order as he finished them, might have resulted in a right-to-left arrangement in the columns."[1] This opinion is also echoed by You Shunzhao 游順釗.[2]

1 Tsuen-hsuin Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 204. Originally published by the University of Chicago Press in 1962, this book was based on Tsien's doctoral thesis, completed in 1957. The first Chinese translation was published in Hong Kong in 1975, under the title *Zhongguo gudai shu shi* 中國古代書史.

2 You Shunzhao 游順釗, "Gu Hanzi shuxie zongxiang chengyin: liushu yiwai de yige tantao" 古漢字書寫縱向成因—六書以外的一個探討, *Zhongguo yuwen* 中國語文, no. 5 (1992): 371–75.

Approaching early writing from the perspective of the compilation of bamboo strips, Xing Yitian 邢義田 found that in the case of compiling multiple strips into books (*ce* 冊),[3] texts were first written and only subsequently compiled. Relatedly, writing on a single strip did not require a desk on which to rest, as strips could also be held in the hand. Although the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 recorded that in the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasty people used desks to write, pictorial records show people holding strips in one hand and writing on them with the other, which is consistent with Xing Yitian's inference that the compilation of strips into books happened subsequently to their writing. Figurines of official scribes (*wenli* 文吏) unearthed from the mausoleum of Emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (r. 247–210 BCE) carried knives and brushes. Another important piece of evidence involves the numerous written records that mention writing on strips held in the hand. Descriptions of items of costume such as hairpins and earrings found in early Chinese historical and official records also illuminate everyday life in the Western and Eastern Han dynasties: "The reason why officials wore hairpins in their hair or earrings was related to their often needing to write while standing, be it while attending to their superiors or while in motion … and those were the most convenient places to place the brush."[4]

Ma Yi 馬怡 has collected visual materials spanning the Han through the Tang (618–907) dynasties in order to examine sitting postures, furniture for sitting, and so on. She believes that before the Tang dynasty the kneeling posture adopted to sit and the low tables that were used were not suitable for supporting writing on flat surfaces:

> The writer, whether standing or sitting, held the writing medium such as a strip with one hand and wrote without any support. This type of posture was very different from the general writing posture of later eras, and it is undoubtedly an important feature of writing in the era of strips and tablets. It was an adaptation to customs of living at floor level, low furniture, kneeling to sit, and stiff writing materials such as strips and tablets.[5]

3 This article follows Tseun-hsuin Tsien's convention of translating *ce* as "book." See Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*, chap. 5.

4 Xing Yitian 邢義田, "Handai jiandu de tiji, zhongliang he shiyong" 漢代簡牘的體積、重量和使用, in *Di bu ai bao: Handai de jiandu* 地不愛寶：漢代的簡牘 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 38.

5 Ma Yi 馬怡, "Jiandu shidai de shuxie: yi shijue ziliao wei zhongxin de kaocha" 簡牘時代的書寫：以視覺資料爲中心的考察, *Wuhan daxue jianbo wang* 武漢大學簡帛網, March 7, 2014, http://www.bsm.org.cn/show_article.php?id=1995.

Indeed, after the Han dynasty, in the Six Dynasties period (222–589), after paper had entered common use, paintings such as the *Nüshi zhen tu* 女史箴圖 (Admonitions of the Court Instructress to the Palace Ladies; aka the Admonitions Scroll) and *Beiqi jiaoshu tu* 北齊校書圖 (Collating the Books of the Imperial Library) still show people both sitting and standing to write on scrolls of paper held in the hand.

Having left the question of whether people in early China wrote with the support of desks unaddressed in his "Handai jiandu de tiji, zhongliang he shiyong" 漢代簡牘的體積、重量和使用, Xing Yitian subsequently wrote "Fu ji'an er shu: zaishuo Zhongguo gudai de shuxie zishi" 伏幾案而書：再說中國古代的書寫姿勢, which is extremely rich in material pertaining to this question. Xing cited for the first time the record in Huan Tan's 桓譚 (ca. 23 BCE–56 CE) *Xinlun* 新論 that Gao Junmeng 高君孟 "knew the laws and regulations quite well, and often leaned over (*fu* 伏) [at a table or desk] to write," which corroborates the records of sitting and writing at desks in the *Yantie lun*. Xing's other evidence includes the following: the astronomical diagram unearthed from Qin tomb no. 30 in Zhoujiatai 周家台, Jingzhou 荊州, Hubei; illustrations from (*rishu* 日書) unearthed from the Qin tombs in Shuihudi 睡虎地, Yunmeng 雲夢; and pictures drawn on bamboo strips dating to the Western Han in the Peking University bamboo strips collection, such as birth charts and calendars, which illustrate that this type of drawing required several bamboo strips to be closely arranged side by side in order to draw lines across multiple strips. Also found among these archaeological discoveries were indeed many taller desks that could have been used for writing. Therefore, it can be surmised that sitting to write at a desk did occur and was even a common writing posture.[6]

Meng Yanhong 孟彥弘 has also drawn attention to the complicated relationship between artistic expression and everyday circumstances:

> The image of the scribe holding a tablet in his left hand and a brush in his right hand in visual materials may depict only a very particular situation or might reflect the intention of the person who created the image. Its symbolic significance holds more weight than [its representation of] reality. For example, the famous *Admonitions of the Court Instructress to the Palace Ladies* is not necessarily realistic. It is hard to imagine how a thin bamboo strip only around 1 cm in width could be held in the left

6 Xing Yitian 邢義田, "Fu ji'an er shu: zaishuo Zhongguo gudai de shuxie zishi (dingbu gao)" 伏幾案而書：再說中國古代的書寫姿勢（訂補稿）, *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 33, no. 1 (2015): 123–67.

> hand and written on with the right hand. It is also difficult for us to imagine how those officials with knife and brush could write standing up in daily life, let alone why the scribes stood while copying the classics instead of sitting and using a support.[7]

Meng adds that since taller writing desks existed before and after the Han dynasty, it is even more certain that in everyday situations bamboo strips would have been written on using a flat supporting surface.[8]

In recently unearthed bamboo manuscripts from the area of the Chu Kingdom – such as the Tsinghua University bamboo strips, the Shanghai Museum strips, and the Anhui University strips – the strips are 40–50 cm in length but only around 1 cm wide; the "*Shijing* 詩經 strip" in the Anhui University collection is only 6 mm in width. In general, the thickness of all strips is 1–2 mm. Naturally, such a form would have been very difficult to comfortably hold in the hand and write upon. However, the significant number of Han dynasty illustrations depicting the holding of strips cannot have emerged ex nihilo; artistic expression derives ultimately from a foundation in reality. As such, the safest conclusion is that standing and sitting modes of writing were both used in different contexts, and varied from person to person, time to time, and event to event.

The discussions outlined above generally do not distinguish between strips and tablets, however. Various forms of strips and tablets have different names, but we can adopt a very general classification of them into those that were intended to be compiled into a book and those that were intended to be used alone.[9] Bamboo strips, which are only one line wide, were made for the purpose of being compiled into a book; while wooden tablets (there were also bamboo tablets), which were several centimeters wide and could accommodate several rows of writing, were made for individual use. Of course, in the preservation of official documents of the Qin (221–207 BCE) to the Han dynasties, some tablets

7 Meng Yanhong 孟彥弘, *Chutu wenxian yu Hantang dianzhi yanjiu* 出土文獻與漢唐典制研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2015), 186.

8 Meng Yanhong 孟彥弘, "Yi tu zheng shi: yishu yu zhenshi – ping ji er xie yihuo chi jian er shu?" 以圖證史：藝術與真實—憑几而寫抑或持簡而書? *Xueshu yuekan* 學術月刊, no. 12 (2017): 38–41.

9 For relevant materials on bamboo strips of the Han dynasty, see *Jiandu jianshu kao* 簡牘檢署考 by Wang Guowei 王國維. See Hu Pingsheng 胡平生 and Ma Yuehua 馬月華, *Jiandu jianshu kao jiaozhu* 簡牘檢署考校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004). See also Sun Ji 孫機, *Handai wuzhi wenhua ziliao tushuo* (*xiuding ben*) 漢代物質文化資料圖說（修訂本） (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011), 324–29.

that were used individually would also later be classified and compiled along thematic lines, but strips and tablets were originally used separately. The term "tablet" used in this article refers to pieces of bamboo or wood that would be used alone and could accommodate several rows of script.

The rubbings taken from pictorial stone and brick reliefs of the Han dynasty are not especially clear, but it can still be seen in most of the relevant images that tablets were held and written on in the hand. Examples include the Xiaotangshan 孝堂山 ancestral hall reliefs; the wall reliefs in Han tomb no. 1 in Wangdu 望都; the reliefs in the Han tombs in Beizhai 北寨 village, Yinan 沂南 and so on. In each of these images, there is a clear distinction between the use of strips and tablets.

In terms of documentary records, it seems that strips and tablets had different use contexts. Strips combined into books were used for the classics or important documents, such as imperial edicts and documents recording official appointments. Generally speaking, these were documents that would have been considered worth preserving. As Xu Shen's 許慎 (ca. 58–ca. 147) preface to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 states, "[Only] that which is on bamboo and silk can be considered writing." The phrase "written on bamboo and silk" is a common one in early Chinese texts, with "bamboo" referring to bamboo-strip books. The recording of a text in a bamboo-strip book connoted a high degree of preservation value and these texts were naturally of a relatively formal type.

In early history, everyday writing was primarily conducted using tablets. Again, the *Shuowen jiezi* states that "tablets are wooden boards for writing."[10] The *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 records that when the mother of King Jian of Qi 齊王建 (ca. 280–221 BCE) died he "took up a tablet to record [her] words." The *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 records that Zhao Jianzi's 趙簡子 (d. 476 BCE) minister Zhou She 周舍 "held tablet, ink, and brush" in readiness to record Zhao Jianzi's words at any time. These two details indicate that the everyday writing tools at that time were brushes and tablets. Both stories are found in manuscripts compiled during the Western Han dynasty, a time in which writing tools had not greatly changed when compared to those of the Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE), Qin, and Han dynasties, so they can generally be taken as a reliable reflection of the general conditions in these earlier dynasties.

In Han dynasty documents, tablets are used by everyone from the emperor to minor officials. For example, in the "Wuwuzi zhuan" 武五子傳 in the *Hanshu* 漢書, it is recorded that Liu He 劉賀 (r. 74 BCE), who was once briefly the ninth emperor of the Han dynasty, "went to see the envoy with a hairpin, brush, and

10 Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 318.

wooden tablet,"[11] that is, hurriedly putting a brush in his hairpin and bringing a wooden tablet in his hand. The *Dongguan Hanji* 東觀漢記 records that an utterance of Emperor Ming of Han 漢明帝 (r. 57–75) was recorded on a wooden tablet during a crop-related sacrificial ceremony.[12]

From the Qin to the Han dynasties, correspondence was mainly written on tablets. Such tablets were one *chi* 尺 in length, so at that time they were called "*chi* books" or "*chi* tablets." In order to reflect their noble status, letters written by the emperors of the Han dynasty were one *chi* and one *cun* 吋 in length. Of the letters that have been unearthed, most are written on tablets. For example, the oldest extant examples of family letters are two wooden tablets from Qin tomb no. 4 in Shuihudi, Yunmeng, Hubei province. They were written by two individuals, "Heifu" 黑夫 and "Jing" 驚, to their families. Each tablet is 23.1 cm long and 3.4 cm wide.[13] Thirty-four wooden tablets were unearthed from the Han tombs in Jizhuang 紀莊 village, Tianchang 天長 city, Anhui province. Most of them were letters. They were 22.2–23.2 cm long and 3.6–6.9 cm wide.[14] Fifty letters were unearthed from well no. 7 in the Dongpailou 東牌樓 site, Changsha. They were all written on wooden tablets, measuring 20–27.9 cm long and 2.2–6.3 cm wide.[15] The length of these wooden tablets is comparable to that of the *chi* tablets used in other Han dynasty written records.

Administrative documents of the Qin and Han dynasties were also mainly written on tablets or single strips. The Liye 里耶 Qin bamboo strips, Juyan 居延 Han bamboo strips (or Juyan new bamboo strips), and Xuanquan 懸泉 Han bamboo strips are all mainly administrative documents. Although they are all referred to as strips, the collections are primarily composed of tablets.

In conclusion, based on an analysis of various types of documents, tablets were the most common writing medium in China before paper entered common usage. As late as the Han dynasty, tablets were still the main medium of everyday writing. After the invention of paper, bamboo strips disappeared in

11 *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 63.2767.

12 Wu Shuping 吳樹平, *Dongguan Hanji jiaozhu* 東觀漢記校注 (Zhengzhou: Zhongguo guji chubanshe, 1987), 57–58.

13 Hubei Xiaogan diqu di'er qi yigong yinong wenwu kaogu xunlianban 湖北孝感地區第二期亦工亦農文物考古訓練班, "Hubei Yunmeng Shuihudi shiyi zuo Qin mu fajue jianbao" 湖北雲夢睡虎地十一座秦墓發掘簡報, *Wenwu* 文物, no. 9 (1976): 51–64. The wooden tablet referred to here can be found on page 63.

14 Tianchang shi wenwu guanlisuo 天長市文物管理所 and Tianchang shili bowuguan 天長市立博物館, "Anhui Tianchang Xihan mu fajue jianbao" 安徽天長西漢墓發掘簡報, *Wenwu* 文物, no. 11 (2006): 4–21.

15 Changsha shi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 長沙市文物考古研究所 and Zhongguo wenwu yanjiusuo 中國文物研究所, *Changsha Dongpailou Donghan jiandu* 長沙東牌樓東漢簡牘 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2006), plates 22–40.

the late third century, but tablets continued to be used until the Tang dynasty, indicating that people habitually relied on them more than bamboo-strip books.

2 A Medium for Everyday Writing

Among the unearthed texts, literary classics are almost entirely written on bound bamboo-strip books, while tablets commonly feature practical materials such as official documents, *buji* 簿籍 (registers), and letters.[16] The initial impression, therefore, is that tablets seem to have had little relationship with the classic texts. As far as research into early Chinese writing in general is concerned, unearthed documents are a very important type of evidence, but their significance is still limited. There are three main sources of the unearthed documents found so far: tombs, former garrisons and government offices, and refuse sites such as the wells from early China. The strips and tablets found in these three places are mainly funerary objects, administrative documents, and abandoned documents, respectively, and their scope is relatively limited. Among the documents discovered so far, a large number of administrative documents were often also once discarded, such as the Liye Qin bamboo strips, Xuanquan Han bamboo strips, and the Zoumalou 走馬樓 bamboo strips. The daily lives and individual writings of officials in early China were not confined to these three fields. Daily administrative writing was also different from the writing of ideas that is found in classic texts. As for the classic texts unearthed from tomb sites, whether ritual factors affected their form and content is a question that needs to be studied further. In short, the entire breadth of thought cannot be encapsulated in these limited materials. As such, the objects early Chinese people used in their everyday writing are still interesting and worthy of investigation.

Since tablets were the main medium for everyday writing, when it came to transcribing classic texts and taking notes in lectures, the main tools should also have been brushes and tablets. Of the materials unearthed from the tomb of the Marquis of Haihun 海昏侯,[17] one tablet contains excerpts from different passages of the *Analects*. There are six passages in total and the text is slightly different from the contemporary accepted version of the *Analects*. For example, *chu* 楚 takes the place of *jing* 荊, and *guo* 國 takes the place of *bang* 邦. These six passages, set out below according to the order

16 There are also catalogs of classic works, such as the catalog of Confucius's sayings found in the Fuyang 阜陽 Han bamboo strips.

17 The Marquis of Haihun was the same Liu He mentioned above.

in which they are written on the tablet, correspond to the following passages in the contemporary accepted version of the *Analects*:

1. The passage beginning "The Master said of Jing, a scion of the ducal family of Wei" in the "Zi lu" 子路 chapter.
2. The passage beginning "The Master said: 'Am I indeed possessed of knowledge'" in the "Zi han" 子罕 chapter.
3. The passage beginning "The Master said: 'I returned from Wei to Lu'" in the "Zi han" chapter.
4. The passage beginning "The Master said, 'Perfect is the virtue which is according to the Constant Mean'" in the "Yong ye" 雍也 chapter. This passage does not take a new row and is transcribed into an empty space after the end of the third passage.
5. The passage beginning "The Master said, 'If good men were to govern a country in succession for a hundred years'" in the "Zi lu" chapter.
6. The passage beginning "Zhong Gong, being chief minister to the head of the Ji family" in the "Zi lu" chapter. The final five characters of the passage, "know, will others neglect them," are transcribed into a preceding open space (at the end of the fifth passage).[18]

The source of each passage, marked at the bottom of the tablet, correspond to the contemporary accepted version. The writer did not initially distinguish between the passages with a symbol. In the sixth passage, after filling the final row of the tablet there were still five characters left unwritten, so he added these characters in the blank space at the end of the fifth passage with an ink dot under the end of the fifth passage as a symbol of the break between the two. Also, the fourth passage does not take a new row, but is inserted in the blank space under the end of the third passage, again separated by an ink dot. The writing on this strip is relatively unsystematic, and there is a lack of consistency between the contents of the copied passages. As such, the tablet may have functioned to assist the writer in reading or memorizing, and thus it can be classified as a form of everyday writing. The curators of the collection believe that this is probably a tablet that the Marquis of Haihun wrote with regularly, and this is a credible judgment.[19]

18 English translations by James Legge, accessed via the Chinese Text Project: https://ctext.org/analects.

19 Wang Yile 王意樂, Xu Changqing 徐長青, and Yang Jun 楊軍, et al., "Haihun hou Liu He mu chutu Kongzi yijing" 海昏侯劉賀墓出土孔子衣鏡, *Nanfang wenwu* 南方文物, no. 3 (2016): 61–70.

There are many names for writing materials that can be classified as "tablets," such as *fang* 方, *ban* 版/板, *du* 牘, *die* 牒, *bian* 牑, and *zha* 札, all of which are referred to as writing tablets. When the people of early China first began to write something, they would not immediately begin writing on strips. Yang Xiong's 揚雄 "Da Linzi hou shu" 答臨淄侯書 stated that his first draft of the *Fangyan* 方言 was written on *qian* 槧, a type of tablet. Yang Xiu's 楊脩 (175–219) "Da Linzi hou shu" 答臨淄侯書 attributed the following statement to Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232): "I once personally saw affairs conducted using brush in one hand and tablet in the other. The writing was done as if reciting from heart and required not a moment of thought."[20] From these examples, it can be seen that for the late Han literati, the drafting of documents was conducted using tablets.

The main form of knowledge transfer in the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–256 BCE) and Qin-Han period was dictation from master to disciple. In the "Wei Linggong" 衛靈公 chapter of the *Analects*, there is a record of one of Confucius's disciples copying down Confucius's words on a *shen* 紳 (a type of girdle or broad belt), so as not to forget them.[21] This is among the earliest records of the recording of a master's words by a disciple in the literature. In early Chinese writing, there was a large number of homophonous characters, also known as "loan characters" (*jiajiezi* 假借字); as such, the same word might be recorded with several different Chinese characters. Loan characters could only have come about in the context of oral dictation from master to disciple. The "Zheng Xuan liezhuan" 鄭玄列傳 in the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 records an instance in which Zheng Xuan went to study the classics with Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166). Ma Rong had more than four hundred students, but only around fifty could come to his parlor to listen to the teachings.[22] It was impossible for each of the students to have a desk on which to write, so they had to hold tablets to record the lectures' contents.

The narrative reliefs on the "portrait bricks" (*huaxiang zhuan* 畫像磚) unearthed in Guanghan 廣漢, Sichuan, are generally considered to have been performance appraisals; that is, a visual summary of an official's previous year of service. One particular brick shows an extremely rare depiction of a scene of early Chinese people writing in situ. The figure in the center of the picture is speaking, while the other four are listening, each holding a tablet. There are two low desks in the picture. There are tablets and brushes on the desks, and there are inkstones and ink on the ground. From this it can be seen

20 *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 19.560.

21 Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, annot. Gao Liushui 高流水 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 18.616.

22 *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 35.1207.

that, as of the Eastern Han dynasty, the main tool for in situ recording and writing was still tablets.

Therefore, in the everyday writing of early China, whether it was administrative documents, prose and verse, or records taken by students of their masters, tablets were probably the initial medium. Only later would those written materials that were considered valuable be compiled into books or reorganized and copied onto new strips.

3 Comparing the Number of Characters Contained in Tablets and Strips

During the period of the Zhou and Qin – Han dynasties, when a scholar took up a brush to record a teacher's words or write a manuscript, the tablet he used naturally became a limiting factor in the scope of his writing. As for how this limiting factor contributed to the production of classic texts, it is currently difficult to make a conclusive judgment due to the limitations of the source materials. However, by comparing the formats of previously unearthed tablets with the basic characteristics of the short passages in the transmitted works (*chuanshi wenxian* 傳世文獻) passed down from antiquity, we can still roughly see the correlation between the two.

Regarding the number of characters on a given tablet, in the unearthed texts the situation varies greatly, and of course, it is also related to the size of the tablets and whether they are fully or partially written on. Pian Yuqian 駢宇騫 and Duan Shu'an 段書安 give several examples:

> The strips unearthed from the Han dynasty tombs in Yinwan are 23 cm long and about 6 cm wide: Tablet 1 has 330 characters on the front and 336 characters on the back, for a total of 666 characters; Tablet 2 has 1,071 characters on the front and 1,954 characters on the back, for a total of 3,025 characters (not including illegible characters); Tablet 3 has at least 799 characters on the front and at least 1,006 characters on the reverse, totaling 1,805 characters. In the *Juyan xin jian* 居延新簡: "EPT44·4" has 89 characters on the front and 96 characters on the back, for a total of 185 characters. In the *Juyan Hanjian jia yi bian* 居延漢簡甲乙編, "7.7" has 148 characters on the front and 21 characters on the back, totaling 169 characters; "495.4" has 106 characters on the front and 80 characters on the back, totaling 186 characters.[23]

23 Pian Yuqian 駢宇騫 and Duan Shu'an 段書安, eds., *Ershi shiji chutu jian bo zongshu* 二十世紀出土簡帛綜述 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2006), 86.

To this, we can add another example. The wooden tablets unearthed from the well no. 1 in Liye are 23 cm long and 1.4–8.5 cm wide. Generally, each tablet deals with a single subject, and the front and back sides are written on. Some of the writing on the reverse sides appears to have been writing exercises. These independent tablets were later compiled and bound together.[24] While there is variance from writer to writer in terms of the number of characters on the tablets, most tablets contain about thirty characters per row.[25]

Evidently, in terms of tablets for everyday use, the total number of characters that they contain will be very different depending on the width, whether they are fully covered in writing, and the different writing habits of the scribes. Generally speaking, for a tablet of about 23 cm in length and more than 3 cm in width, a single side will contain between one hundred and five hundred characters. Some of the tablets from the Han tombs in Yinwan contain more characters. For example, one wooden tablet unearthed from tomb no. 6 in Yinwan is 23 cm long and 7 cm wide. Both sides are written on. The first line on the front contains the original title, of which only four characters, *du wei xian xiang* 都尉縣鄉, remain. The curators have given it the title "Donghai jun liyuan bu" 東海郡吏員簿.[26] It has a total of more than 3,400 characters on the front and back, which is likely to be the upper limit in terms of the total number of characters on a standard *chi* tablet. In general, the Yinwan Han tombs' wooden tablets can be classed as *buji* and have their own particular characteristics, but this is the wooden tablet with the largest number of characters and the most standardized writing among those unearthed from the Yinwan Han tombs.

The size of the *Analects* tablet unearthed from the tomb of the Marquis of Haihun discussed above has not been disclosed. However, based on the supplementary information that has been made available, we can glean that the

24 In the process of producing classic literary texts, there was probably a similar stage, that is, when short passages drafted on tablets were compiled and connected according to themes to form preliminary chapters.

25 For example, among the Liye bamboo strips, Strip 1 has six rows of text on the front side and a total of 155 characters; were it to be fully inscribed it would contain some 180 characters. Strip 2 has six rows of text on the front side and a total of 129 characters; fully inscribed it would have about 160 characters. Strip 3 has four rows on the front and a total of 95 characters; fully inscribed it would have about 120 characters. Strip 4 has seven rows on the front side and 209 characters in total; fully inscribed it would have about 240 characters.

26 Lianyungang shi bowuguan 連雲港市博物館, Donghai xian bowuguan 東海縣博物館, Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan jianbo yanjiu zhongxin 中國社會科學院簡帛研究中心, and Zhongguo wenwu yanjiusuo 中國文物研究所, *Yinwan Hanmu jiandu* 尹灣漢墓簡牘 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 79–81.

tablet contains a total of 168 characters. Taking the size of the characters in the fifth passage, beginning "The Master said, 'If good men were to govern a country in succession for a hundred years,'" as a guide, the tablet could accommodate more than 200 characters, which is equivalent to the tablets classed as correspondence or administrative documents from Liye, Juyan, Dunhuang, Changsha, and so on. This appears to have been a relatively common number of characters for tablets used in everyday writing.

Based on the above examination, it becomes very interesting to look again at the number of characters in the short passages of early transmitted works. The basic unit of more than half of the transmitted works of the Zhou and Qin – Han dynasties is the passage; these include the *Analects*, the *Laozi*, the *Guoyu*, the *Mengzi*, the *Zhuangzi*, the *Liji*, the *Xunzi* 荀子, and the *Zhanguo ce*. Many transmitted works contain common, near-identical passages taken from other transmitted works – known as "mutual texts" (*hujian wenxian* 互見文獻) – almost all of which are short passages. For example, the *Lüshi Chunqiu* and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 on the one hand and the *Han shi waizhuan*, the *Shuoyuan* 說苑, and the *Xinxu* 新序 on the other are the two groups of texts with the highest degree of cross-pollination during the period of the Warring States (475–221 BCE) and Qin and Han dynasties, and almost all of their mutual texts take the form of passages. In fact, among pre-Han texts, except for a few works such as the *Yijing* 易經, *Shangshu* 尚書, *Shijing*, the *Yili* 儀禮, *Zhouli* 周禮, the *Chunqiu* 春秋, and the *Chuci* 楚辭, most of the early Chinese manuscripts consist for the most part of short passages. Even in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, which today seems to be a long text, most of the annual records are composed of relatively independent short passages. The Qing (1616–1911) dynasty scholar Liu Fenglu 劉逢祿 (1776–1829) judged that the *Zuozhuan* was modified by Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. 23 BCE) from documents such as the *Guoyu* on the basis of this feature.[27]

Unearthed documents also show that short passages were quite popular during the Warring States, Qin, and Han dynasties. Many scholars have discussed this issue, such as Li Xueqin, Li Ling, William G. Boltz, and Edward L. Shaughnessy, and so on.[28] Sarah Allen's opinions on this are worth quoting:

27 Liu Fenglu 劉逢祿, *Zuoshi chunqiu kaozheng* 左氏春秋考證, annot. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (Beijing: Pu she, 1933).

28 Li Xueqin 李學勤, *Zhouyi suyuan* 周易溯源 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2006), 310–15; Li Ling 李零, *Jianbo gushu yu xueshu yuanliu* 簡帛古書與學術源流 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004), 198. William G. Boltz, "The Composite Nature of Early Chinese Texts," in *Text and Ritual in Early China*, ed. Martin Kern (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 50–78; Xia Hanyi 夏含夷 [Edward L. Shaughnessy], *Chongxie Zhongguo gudai wenxian* 重寫中國古代文獻 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 46–47.

> Although the early Chinese documents circulating today are mainly composed of multiple passages and *jie* 节 and are long, their most striking feature is that they are composed of several sporadic and fragmented texts. These parts have been grouped under the same genre or under the name of a certain thinker, thereby establishing connections. … My hypothesis is that early Chinese texts were originally circulated in the form of short passages, and the most common communication media at that time were wooden and bamboo strips and tablets and books composed of strips.[29]

Li Ling's *Jianbo gushu yu xueshu yuanliu* discusses the composition of early Chinese manuscripts and mentions that:

> Early Chinese literary manuscripts were mostly composed of "broken texts" (*duan pian* 斷片) (i.e., fragmented passages and sentences). They were written ad hoc and in situ, often lacking a unified structure, so the possibility of rearrangement and reordering was great, and there were also many modifications and additions. They were divided up unsystematically, and whether they were preserved or not was unpredictable. … This made a chronological compilation very complicated.[30]

It can be said that the short passage was one of the most important forms for structuring manuscripts in the Warring States, Qin, and Han dynasties. They were like bricks used to build various types of structures.

Such short passages range from ten to about a thousand characters, but most of them are between one hundred and five hundred characters. Passages exceeding five hundred characters are rare. Among them, the *Guoyu* is a unique case. While it is an early Chinese manuscript composed of passages, the source of the materials for each part is more complicated. For example, the "Zhouyu" 周語 section has many long passages. Using the passage divisions in the accepted contemporary version of the "Zhouyu" section, the number of characters in each passage is 512, 94, 262, 198, 72, 572, 96, 181, 189, 131, 508, 587, 341, 632, 46, 351, 227, 137, 101, 438, 722, 432, 185, 810, 500, 554, 1227, 522, 406, 1002, 611, 101, and 479. Of the thirty-three passages, thirteen have more than five hundred characters, which is already a very high proportion. After the

29 Ai Lan 艾蘭 [Sarah Allan], "Guanyu Zhongguo zaoqi wenxian de yige jiashe" 關於中國早期文獻的一個假設, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, January 9, 2012, 15.

30 Li Ling, *Jianbo gushu yu xueshu yuanliu*, 198.

"Luyu" 魯語 section, however, there are very few passages with more than five hundred characters. Because the *Guoyu* is historically interrelated with the *Zuozhuan*, some of the passages in the "Zhouyu" section also show traces of later editing, making it difficult to discuss the relationship between its textual production and the available writing materials.

Although the materials in early Chinese documents such as the *Yanzi chunqiu*, the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, the *Han shi waizhuan*, and the *Shuoyuan* were copied many times, they were mostly moved and recompiled as whole texts. Thus their original length has not changed much and they can help us understand the relationship between writing and material mediums in early textual production. For instance, the *Yanzi chunqiu* is composed of twenty-five passages with the following number of characters: 281, 273, 141, 95, 516, 187, 300, 229, 464, 106, 300, 370, 164, 408, 214, 303, 164, 346, 204, 156, 241, 348, 260, 111, and 198. The first *juan* 卷 of the *Han shi waizhuan* is composed of twenty-eight passages, with the following number of characters: 175, 72, 350, 100, 105, 128, 45, 220, 233, 77, 75, 111, 81, 74, 59, 155, 58, 41, 121, 277, 115, 141, 136, 119, 266, 128, 235, and 145. The *Shuoyuan* is very similar in structure to the *Han shi waizhuan*.

The *Han shi waizhuan* and the *Shuoyuan* are both works that compile various short passages of the Warring States period and Qin and Han dynasties, so they have the nature of samplers. In a given *juan*, the basic characteristics of short passage during the Warring States and Qin – Han dynasties period is generally discernable. Comparing the number of characters in these short passages and the number of characters contained in a standard tablet, it is not difficult to determine that the two are roughly consistent, with both concentrating around the figure of five hundred characters. Therefore, I believe that the formation of the short passage format in early manuscripts was closely related to the use of tablets in everyday writing. As for whether the short passage, having been initially determined by the material restrictions of the writing tablet, gradually became a stylistic form and played a standardizing role in subsequent writing, this is harder to say, but the inference is a reasonable one.

4 The Material Conditions of Writing and Textual Forms

Short passages were like the bricks and stones of early manuscripts. Without understanding these bricks and stones, it is difficult to truly engage with classical texts as physical entities. Although the original writing of these texts cannot have been entirely conditioned by the materiality of tablets, the fragmentary characteristics of the manuscripts of that era as a whole can be roughly related

to the needs of everyday writing, especially the relatively high degree of relatedness between tablets and the drafting of documents and taking of notes.[31] In this way, not only can we draw some initial conclusions about how not just the short passage form came about, but also the particular rhetorical style of the people of early China.

In recent years, the production of pre-Qin texts has become a very important topic. However, most research only focuses on comparing different texts and judging the changes (or lack thereof) in these texts during their circulation and reproduction, which is a far cry from truly addressing their "production." To truly explore the formation of written texts, we cannot but resort to unearthed texts. However, how to effectively deal with the relationship between unearthed texts and transmitted works has not attracted enough attention. There are many manuscripts of classical texts in the unearthed texts, and these are compared with transmitted works by researchers to draw conclusions on topics such as the early dissemination of and variation in these texts. However, whether as a conscious method or not, most scholars simply compare two texts, such as the version of the poem "Xishuai" 蟋蟀 contained in the Tsinghua University bamboo strips and the poem of the same title in the "Tangfeng" 唐風 section of the *Shijing*. The transmitted works were revised several times after the Han dynasty, as well as four or five times in the Tang dynasty alone. The transmitted works we see today are mainly texts that were collated and compiled during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), when the appearance of these texts was also basically fixed due to engraving and printing. We know very little about how early Chinese writing differed or remained the same, especially the differences between the pre-Han period and the Han dynasty. There are many potential methodological pitfalls when comparing Warring States and Western Han dynasty texts with texts compiled in the Song dynasty (960–1279).

While comparing unearthed texts and transmitted works is still essentially comparing two texts, one very important factor is that the material characteristics of unearthed texts have not become an important object of consideration. Likewise, scholars who are interested in the material characteristics of unearthed texts are less concerned about the content of the texts. The issues they are concerned with are the codification of the bamboo strips, the writing methods, the different ways of writing characters,

31 This article specifically uses the word "relatedness" mainly because the proposed relationship between tablets and the textual system precedes the vast majority of unearthed texts and transmitted works. Based on the existing materials, this connection can be accurately inferred and is even relatively evident. However, considering that it is after all only a potential connection, it can only be described in terms of a possibility.

punctuation marks, and so on. Research on texts as texts and texts as material objects is still conducted separately, and there is still a lack of effective methods to connect the two fields of study.

The structure of the manuscript is one of the textual factors that can be associated with the material characteristics of writing materials. If the writer already knows what the material medium of the text is in advance, and that medium's capacity is limited, then there will be a potential constraint when they conceive of or write the text; that is, whether it is a bamboo strip or a wooden tablet, they are required to complete the idea or narrative within a certain number of characters. It can be inferred that whether it is creative writing or note taking, or a long or short text, they will be subtly influenced by this material precondition. Therefore, when we think about the issue of the "production (or formation) of texts in the pre-Qin and Han dynasties," first ascertaining the specific material forms is at least a feasible methodology.

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