Public Memory in Early China

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Published by the Harvard University Asia Center
for the Harvard-Yenching Institute
Distributed by Harvard University Press
Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London 2014
INTRODUCTION

Han memorial culture

In 2004, during the rushed archaeological work prior to the planned flooding of the Three Gorges region on the Yangzi River, excavators discovered a stele dated 173 CE and dedicated to a local prefect who had otherwise disappeared from history (Figure 1). In language common for such gravestones from the later years of the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), the two-meter-high slab lavishly praised the administration of this minor official, named Jing Yun (d. 103 CE). It describes how the local populace wept at his death "as if mourning for a parent" (如喪考妣), how they set aside their musical instruments in brooding silence, and how smoke rising up from seasonal sacrifices on his behalf was visible all around the district. Typically borrowing lines and formats from earlier classical literature, it vaunts his accumulated achievements that merited such an inscription, "hoping to encourage future generations and inform posterity" (冀勉來嗣，示後昆兮).

Yet, if one searches for the details as to what those achievements were, there are none to be found. Other than Jing Yun's name, date of death, and a few standardized details about the origin of the Jing family, this 367-character inscription lacks any concrete data on what the prefect actually did. Instead, we are told that his administration "sorted the vermilion from the purple"—an allusion to Confucius (551-479), who had esteemed vermilion because it was an unadulterated royal color—or that it "promoted the enlightened and demoted the benighted after thrice examining his administrators," an allusion to the sage ruler Shun (舜), who had exemplified good government. While Jing Yun's stele is an

Fig. 1: The stele of Jing Yun, magistrate of Quren, erected 173 CE, from Yunnan County, Sichuan (Source: Chongqing Zhongguo Sanxia bowuguan—Chongqing bowuguan, 97).
qualities


data, such stereotyping is common for the early Chinese
and for other eulogistic media that aimed to insert their
dedications into the public memory. "Jing
Yun" here was a Confucian as well as a Sun, but was he Jing Yun?
Reducing a forebear to the rhetoric of stock images and stereotypes
runs counter to modern notions of individuality and would be like
compiling today's obituaries using nothing but topos from the Bible,
allusions to pop songs, and likenesses to television stars. From our
perspective, Jing Yun's stele is a failure, but in a predominantly oral culture,
an individuality that is so much praised today was anathema in post-
mortem remembrance. Not surprisingly, memory is more easily
populated by a few stock images than by a large diversity of data that must
ultimately rely upon an extensive written record. That is, the complex-
ity of detail that individuates a person taxes human memory's limited
capacity. While a truly singular ancestor might still rise above all others,
most forebears fade over time as their detailed identities—the sum of
particularities and differences that make them distinct—dissolve over
the generations. Conversely, if an identity were converted into a stock
image, that forebear would enjoy a more robust shelf life precisely by
being simplified, standardized, and tied into the existing public memory.
In early imperial China—here loosely defined as the Qin and
Han dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE)—the dead were indeed remembered
by stereotyping them, by relating them to the existing public memory,
and not by vaunting what made each individual distinct and out of the
ordinary. Their posthumous names were chosen from a limited pre-
determined pool; their descriptors were derived from set phrases in the
classicist (that is, Confucian) tradition; and their identities were explicit-
ly categorized with those of particular cultural heroes or sage rulers of
antiquity. In general terms, postmortem remembrance was a process of
pouring new ancestors into prefabricated molds, and the following study
is an examination of this pouring process that led to the construction of
public memory in early imperial China.
A person took up residence in the public memory by being positioned
in the collectively projected vision of society. One's personal attributes
such as name, age, and kinship typically were used to locate the self
and relate it to others in the social network; they didn't so much "single
you out" as "position you in." Your name, your age, and your kinship

position were three identifiers that said something about you relative to
others in early China. There were other socially locative parameters, and
by way of example the Liji (Ritual records) lists six: name or appella-
tion (ming 名), age (changyou 長幼), kinship (qin 親), honors or rank
(zun 尊), marriage relationships (zhurur 出入), and dependence rela-
tionships with people other than kin. For reasons to be explained later,
this book will fold the parameter of rank into its discussion on age and will
address both marriage relationships and nonkin dependence rela-
tionships in its discussion on kinship.
With death came the need to fix this duly positioned self for perpetu-
ty, to weld this identity into the preexisting infrastructure, using both
tangible tools (such as the stele that displays Jing Yun's name and relates
him to the rest of his lineage) and intangible tools (such as the rhet-
oric that ties Jing Yun to Confucius and Shun). Thus, to explore the
mechanics of public memory (as opposed to the mechanics of ancestral
memory, which are examined in this book's companion volume), this
study progresses through five stages or parts:
1. A person's name is usually the last attribute to survive in the public memory,
and Part I explores how the "personal name" (ming 名) of the infant, the
"courtesy name" (zi 子) of the adolescent, the "posthumous name" (shi 施),
and the lineage "surname" (xing 姓) were in themselves all locative mark-
ers, not just labeling a unique individual but also positioning that individual
relative to others. They were more than static identifiers; they negotiated
relationships. In choosing to use the personal or courtesy name one indi-
cated hierarchal standing, and the observance of a name taboo after some-
one's death signified the scope of the deceased's in-group. Most of all, the
lineage surname itself, with its geographic associations and even its perceived
cosmological origins, was the focus of much early discourse.
2. Part II examines the ramifications of age. A person's age indexed a kind
of social value not only in theory but also in statute, as recently excavated
administrative materials amply demonstrate, translating age hierarchy into
sanctioned practice. An early Chinese version of the "ages of man" might be
summarized as a rising straight line with a fairly constant slope, a line that
continued upward unimpeded by the death threshold it crossed. The ances-
tral cult continued that line as ancestors paradoxically faded upward, their
detailed selves dwindling from the public memory as they disappeared into
the ever higher ranks of the lineage.
3. Just as Part I demonstrates that early Chinese names were not merely labels
for individuals but regularly implied relationships among individuals, Part III
shows that the self was generally conceived as dispersed rather than indi-
vidualized, more like a knot in a network of relationships. Kinship provided
the first and strongest strands that positioned this knot, and those strands served as a model for the bonds that extended beyond the lineage as well. Part III focuses on how the self was positioned in terms of kinship and surveys how rhetoric and ritual weakened personal agency and strengthened interpersonal ties. This dispersed view of self is most evident in the dynamics of the net, because pulling up a knot via achievement raised up adjacent knots (including those of one's ancestors) and pulling down a knot via wrongdoing dragged down its neighbors (again including one's ancestors).

4. Name, age, and kinship were three locative attributes within the public memory, but what tangible and intangible media actually preserved those attributes? Parts IV and V examine this question and its implications. In Part IV I suggest that, in the Han, tangible locators or objects of remembrance were less like "markers" and more like "maps." From calling cards to ancestral tablets, from grave steles to commemorative portraits, these objects identified and embodied a set of human connections and associations, and early texts were surprisingly explicit about how they preserved the knotlike nature of the self. A name-bearing ancestral tablet found its meaning within a constellation of other tablets; a commemorative portrait found its meaning through the other portraits hanging beside it. They were not representations of the individuated dead in a Western sense but were more like physical "You are here" tags in the public memory.

5. Just as early China cannot be characterized as solely a manuscript culture, being also an oral-performative one (see below), identity became located within the public memory, not just through visible media but also through invisible ones. These intangible locators found within the rhetorical infrastructure provided by the classics that came to dominate Han education. The dead were reduced to their core attributes, converted to a classicist model and then remembered by association, by being likened to venerates figures in antiquity. The dead became new old heroes. In other words, the "nettiness" that preserved identity in Part III is projected outward in Part V to cultural recollection in general, so that Jing Yun's "self" becomes remembered by being tied to a Confucian and associated with a Shun.

In sum, this book is a cultural history of identity in early imperial China and the relative positioning of that identity within the collectively projected vision of society. It treats the three definitive parameters of names, age, and kinship as ways of negotiating that position before turning to the tangible and intangible media responsible for keeping that defined identity on the map of Han public memory.

Yet before we can pursue this five-part argument about the implicit structure of public memory and the nature of self within it, we must recognize what the Han understanding of "memory" was. How was it acquired? The question of public memory is sufficiently vague to require a more concrete approach to the topic, and so by way of introduction, I will survey the formal memorization and recitation skills that characterized Han education. Recent scholarship has made great advances into understanding early writing and literacy, prompted in part by the growing number of excavated texts now available, but the Qin and Han dynasties cannot be described as a purely "chirographic" or manuscript culture. The counterpart to writing was oral performance and the skills of lengthy verbatim recall it entailed. Unlike writing and literacy, this aspect of early education has eluded research, but as will be seen below, it is necessary first to understand the formal memorization and recitation that characterizes an oral performative culture before grasping the more general notion of public memory explored in this book.

To that end, this introduction will briefly highlight what we know of early manuscript culture and then survey at length the surviving fragmentary evidence of the formal and conscious commitment of data to memory, thereby addressing the most basic questions one can ask, such as who memorized what and when. Finally I will speculate on how writing and recitation together changed the nature of the Han dynasty, even suggesting that the so-called Confucian victory had nothing to do with the content of classicism and everything to do with the lengthy verbatim recall skills the classicists brought to their employment at court. After establishing this beachhead of formal memorization skills, we will be in a better position to advance into the grander notion of Han memorial culture.

Section 1: "Repeated Inking" and the backdrop of a manuscript culture

In the Zhuangzi 莊子, a sagely being was once asked where she had learned the secret to her longevity, and the account of her method reveals one way in which oral performative and manuscript cultures were perceived in early China. She explains that the method was developed long ago by someone or something named "Uncertainty Beginning" and was then passed down to "Conjoined Silence," "Dim Darkness," "Sighing Song," and several other similar entities. All the names after the progenitor generally indicate a transmission via alternating audio and visual agencies as the secret moves from silence and darkness to discernment and acuity, the penultimate pairing being "Whispered Sound"
“Seen Clarity.” This chronological transmission ends with the grandson of “Continuous Chanting” (Luoshong 濃銤) and, last of all, the son of “Repeated Inking” (Fumo 費墨). What was recently passed on through the recited word had now become consigned to the written text.

Recently, modern scholarship has focused on the development of writing, literacy, and education in early China, the origins of their spread speculatively traceable to the ancestral cult and the preservation of lineage memory. Looking back to the Western Zhou 周 (trad. 1122–771), Yi Qun Zhou 週 has argued that, unlike early Greece, where education centered on the gymnasium, the sacred grove, and the symposium, “the home, where one engaged in daily practices of kinship-centered moral precepts and religious ceremonies, was the site for the most fundamental education in Zhou society.” Others have contended that literacy itself spread outward from that lineage center. Constance A. Cook speculates as follows:

Lineage narratives, memorized and adapted for performance at musical ceremonies by graduating youths, formed the early core of literary knowledge. Up through the Warring States period [481–221], bureaucratic expansion of this original Zhou-inspired educational structure—quite possibly inherited from the Shang [trad. 1766–1122]—and reduplication of it in numerous local and competing state variations led to the spread of literacy among the elite throughout the Yellow and Yangzi River valleys.

Robin D. S. Yates largely agrees: “Literacy was a technology that had gradually diffused from the courts and the religious experts associated with ancestral cults of the competing states, where it apparently was first deployed.” Thus remembrance of one’s forebears may have played a significant role in the preimperial spread of a manuscript culture.

This manuscript culture moved beyond lineage narratives and found expression in administrative records, almanacs, covenants, inventory lists, prayers, divination and medical manuals, exercise guidebooks, and more.9 By the unification of China under the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE, this list could be expanded to include local census records, data on grain storage, land use figures, conscript records on military and civilian job expectations and performance, as well as omen reports.10 Bureaucratic recordkeeping was another important function of manuscripts. Strips excavated from a Qin provincial official’s grave dated just after the Qin unification attest to the continual writing of regional reports on favorable and unfavorable rains, droughts, violent winds, grasshoppers, and other agricultural mishaps.11 The legal material dated to the early Western Han (202 BCE–9 CE) excavated at Zhangjiashan in Hubei regulates the elaborate system of postal stations for circulating such reports, offering details such as what to do when seals were broken or which written documents were not to be sent by imperial post.12 Yates concludes from such evidence that “ordinary members of the population in Qin and Han times could have possessed basic literacy skills, even though there is no clear record of schools for such individuals.” That is not to say the literacy required for those original lineage narratives was the same as the literacy required for inventory lists and conscript records, and recent scholarship separates elite literacy from functional literacy, the latter being the ability to read or write limited, basic data in prescribed circumstances, such as filling out a form with one’s name, appending a label, or composing an extremely routinized report.

Evidence of functional literacy largely comes to us through excavated materials, whereas evidence of elite literacy survives in received texts that illustrate how great works of literature were being tracked down, copied, and explained. For example, over the first century after unification many written texts were collected into imperial and private libraries, notable examples being those of Liu De 劉德 (d. ca. 130 BCE) and Liu An 劉安 (d. 122 BCE), the kings of Hejian and Huainan respectively. The former rewarded anyone who brought him good books, which he then copied, keeping the originals. He accumulated written texts passed down through established lineages, particularly texts dating from before the Qin biblioclast, and his collection included works of both canonical and commentarial nature, of both classicist and Daoist perspective.14

Alongside the court libraries, the ancestral shrines were another notable place for the accumulation of written texts, as will be seen in Section 16. By the beginning of the first century of the imperial era, the famous grand historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86) did not bother to discuss the literary works of Guanzi 管子 (d. 645 BCE), Yanzi 墨子 (ca. 589–500), Mencius 孟子 (4th c. BCE), and others because, in his view, so many people already possessed their works.15

In the middle of the Han, a bibliography of the imperial collection lists 677 works,16 and we know that the private traffic of books flourished in the Eastern Han (25–220). Booksellers appeared in the marketplace,17 and stone reliefs from graves frequently depict books—usually in the
form of scrolls of bound wooden or bamboo slats—as in a grave excavated in Shandong, in which more than a dozen students gather around a master, each student holding a book (Figure 2).18

Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 100) identifies a well-versed person as one whose “books he has penetrated range from a minimum of one thousand chapters to a maximum of ten thousand scrolls” (通書千篇以上，萬卷以下), “chapters” being subunits of scrolls.19 He further describes such a scholar as follows:

通人積文，十室以上，聖人之言，賢者之語，上自黃帝，下至秦，漢，治國肥家之術，封世誇俗之言，備矣。

The well-versed person accumulates at least ten trunks of texts, and he can be considered accomplished if that includes the texts of the sages and the speeches of the worthies from the time of the Yellow Emperor down to the Qin and Han dynasties; the techniques of governing the state and enriching the family; and texts criticizing the age and scrutinizing custom.20

Wang Chong personally favored the production of written texts—not surprising, given that he was by his own admission a prolific writer—but he noted that writers attracted no students in comparison to common classicists. Wang Chong acknowledged that some classicists focused on only a single text or canon,21 but even those more narrowly focused scholars could produce volumes of work explicating that single text. In the century after Wang Chong, the respected scholar and frontier general Zhang Huan 張奂 (104–181) was praised for his commentary to the Shijing 書經 (Documents canon, also known as Shangshu 尚書 or...
of graphical variants—roughly one-third of any given text and primarily the more difficult words—but they generally maintain a phonological coherence with their received counterparts, all of which is evidence for a reliance upon oral transmission. Kern even suggests that many manuscripts were not necessarily copied from physically present earlier manuscripts but were reproduced from memory, thereby accounting for perhaps 90 percent of all textual variants.25

Zhu Xi praises his forebears for their lengthy verbatim recall (or memoria recitatio), which consists of word-for-word textual recitation, rather than for their rhetorical memory (or memoria rerum), which concentrates on organizing and retaining data without regard for precise wording. While there is an extensive Western tradition of mnemonic strategies for developing the latter (including the famous “memory palace” in which ideas are symbolically placed in the corners of rooms of a familiar building), the scattered evidence from early Chinese texts focuses upon the former for reasons that will become apparent.26 Yet history does not record contemporary commonplaces such as the cultural assumptions about lengthy verbatim recall, unless those commonplaces are either disrupted or manifested in some extraordinary way. Thus one is reduced to chance references, to scattered data, and to noteworthy exceptions to the norm. Once this fragmentary material is brought together to form a whole picture (albeit under cracked and discolored glass), we might be able to discern a clearer relationship between the manuscript and the memorized, between Repeated Inking and Continuous Chanting. This survey attempts to collect such material together and thereby answer rudimentary questions on early imperial memorial culture, such as who memorized what and how.27

Who masters and recites

Prior to the late Warring States, education was an uncertain enterprise, and little evidence survives as to what form it may have taken, if any. There were of course the famous master-disciple relationships of the great scholars Confucius and Mozi 墨子 (late 4th c. BCE), but there are no grounds to equate them with the later multigenerational textual lineages found in the Han.28 Modern ideas that there existed academies (e.g., at Jixia) akin to the Library of Alexandria have now been dismissed after closer examination of the data. Groups of specialists—including many whom we might term “intellectuals”—did gather around certain wealthy patrons, but, as Nathan Sivin observes, “no anecdote in the early sources suggests that patrons were concerned about, or even curious about, education.”29 As Yiqun Zhou noted, education began at home.30

That changed at least by the early Han, as the state to a small degree began to take on the role of protecting texts and scholarship, not only guaranteeing the transmission of particular traditions but also developing a pool of experts in ritual and administration. But who could enter into this pool? Early in the dynasty, Lu Jia 陸賈 (d. 178 BCE) presents a rather optimistic view of would-be participants in Han memorial culture, claiming as follows:

蓋力學而誦詩《詩》、《書》, 凡人所能為也; 若欲移江、河, 動泰山, 故人力所不能也。如謂心在己, 甚惡向善, 不貧於財, 不喜於利, 分財取善, 賞罰取功, 此天下易知之道, 易行之事也, 盤有難哉?

When it comes to energetically studying and reciting the Songs and Documents canon, anyone can do it. [Yet] if someone wanted to shift the Jiang and Yellow Rivers or move Mount Tai, human effort could not do it. If someone keeps a harmonious mind within, turns away from evil and faces goodness, it is not greedy for material things nor recklessly bent on profit, selects the lesser portion when material things are divided and selects the harder jobs when it comes to service, these are general principles that all the world easily understands and are activities that all the world can easily carry out. Surely that’s not hard!31

Ideally, anyone might have been able to engage in recitation and cleave to the classicist goals, but in reality, there were several barriers.

First, education required money, both for texts and tutors and because it took the wouldn-be student out of the labor market.32 A few anecdotes describe how youths from impoverished families studied texts while standing at bookstalls or having borrowed them from friends, and others tell of people reciting texts while weeding, tending firewood, or tending to the drying grain. These ambitious youths subsequently rose up to take office, but the exceptional nature of their rags-to-riches ascent is the part of their story that makes them exceptional and hence noteworthy. Sometimes such myths take over from fact, as in the case of Liao Dong’s grand commandant, Du Shang 盧尚 (d. 166 CE). The Hou Han shu 後漢書 (Later Han documents) reports that when Du Shang was young, “his family was poor, he did not cultivate any educational activities, nor was he recommended to office by his village.” 家貧, 不修學行, 不為鄉里所推舉. It goes on to describe how he quickly rose up from such dire circumstances to become prefect, then to astound the people with his good government, until they regarded him as “spirit-like” (shenming 神明).
The Han, the court tended to extend fiefs and offices to men of martial valor rather than to men of bureaucratic expertise; even after classicism and administrative ability grew in importance, military skill continued to be valued to the end of the dynasty. In stead of describing how their subjects mastered texts in their youth, as Han standard history biographies often do, the biographies dedicated to such men might begin, “In his youth, he possessed a willful qi” (少有志氣). Again, the exceptions demonstrate the rule, as in the case of Du Liang 杜涼 (d. 43 CE), who is said to have possessed a tall and ferocious bearing, “Although he was a military general, he still penetrated the canons and documents” (雖武將，然通經書), reinforcing the stereotype that the two normally did not mix. In a second case, Chancellor Wang Yun 王允 (fl. second half of 2nd c. CE) in his own youth “possessed a will to establish great deeds, constantly training in and chanting the canons and commentaries, as well as day and night practicing horsemanship and archery” (有志於立功，常習誦經傳，朝夕試馳射). Wang Yun became regarded as a venerable antagonist partially responsible for the ultimate demise of the Han. In other words, not only were martial types perceived as less inclined toward memorial culture, but those who combined the martial and the civil were sometimes considered over ambitious.

Fourth, a literary education was not esteemed highly by everyone. A small minority of biographies describe their dedicatees as devoted to the tradition of “Huang-Lao” 軒轅 (i.e., of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi) in their youth, to its “words” (言 言) or its “techniques” (術 術). Sometimes labeled as “Daoist” but in fact extremely hard to classify, Huang-Lao is not identified with named books or written texts in these biographies, and the dedicatees are not described as “penetrating,” “mastering,” or “receiving” these materials—terms we will soon see are associated with textual competence. Rather, they only “delighted” (好 好) in them, an expression almost never used in reference to classicist texts. The implication is that classicism was perceived by some as more scripted than this Huang-Lao discourse, that the classical tradition was a bookish one. This implication is supported by anecdotes that depict classicist memorial culture as a straitjacket on independent thought and behavior. In a biography that takes a critical view, Chen Zun 陳遵 (d. ca. 25 CE), for example, is characterized as an arrogant drunk who still managed to enjoy high office; in his youth he had “forced through” (涉 涉) the commentaries and records
in only a sketchy manner, but, as he concluded later in life, nothing was lost: “When you, sir, recite and chant the canons and documents, it’s like tying up your own body. You don’t dare take a step out of place, but I give free rein to my mind and release myself, drifting among the common lot” (足下應頌經書，若身自約，不敢差跌，而我放意自恣，浮湛俗閒). As if in preemptive response to these textless Huang-Lao students, classicist stalwarts such as Confucius and Xunzi 詠子 (ca. 335–ca. 238) had already complained that spending a whole day lost in pure thought was not worth a few moments in proper learning.

Thus, on one hand, the poor, women, the martially inclined, and Daoists were four groups stereotypically perceived as not normally engaging in classicist recitation. On the other hand, the classicists themselves were subject to stereotyping, particularly when it came to their constant intoning of texts. In preimperial China, this stereotyping came from diverse ideation systems, including what are retrospectively identified as Daoism, Mohism, and legalism. As will be seen below, there was a strong classicist perception that constant recitation improved personal character, but some Daoists denied the link. Zhuangzi 莊子 (4th c. BCE), for example, offered anecdotes about insincere reciters. He depicts two classicists breaking into a grave to pillage it and, while cracking open the corpse’s jaws with a crowbar to steal the pearl that had been placed there at death, reciting wholesome, virtuous, and entirely inappropriate verses to each other. Here Zhuangzi is playing classicist insincerity in canonical recitation against another of their preoccupations, namely their ritual reverence for the dead. Mozi likewise attacked classicists on both grounds, complaining that between their constant mourning for the dead and their unending recitations, they never got anything done. He lamented to one of them as follows:

惡以不喪之闌誦詩三百，詠詩三百，歌詩三百，舞詩三百。若用子之言，則君子何日以能治？於人何日以從事？

Otherwise in the intervening times when you are not mourning, you chant the three hundred poems of the Songs canon, strum the three hundred poems of the Songs canon, sing the three hundred poems of the Songs canon, and dance the three hundred poems of the Songs canon. If we listened to you, then on what day would a nobleman heed his government obligations? On what day would a commoner discharge his duties?

Text chanters were also useless from the legalist perspective, and Han Feizi 韓非子 (d. 233 BCE), in a chapter entitled “Treacherous, coercive, and assassinating ministers” (“Jianjie shichen” 緦極弑臣), referred to “the world’s stupid scholars” (shí zhi yuexue 世之愚學) as “forever talking nonsense and always chanting the books of antiquity” (誦誦多詠先古之書). Government did not need people like that, nor the values they espoused. He continues in the same chapter:

夫嚴刑者，民之所畏也；重罰者，民之所惡也。故聖人執其所畏以懲其所邪，說其所惡以防其害。是以國安而暴亂不起。吾以是明仁義愛民之不足用，而嚴刑重罰之可以治國也。

Generally, it is harsh punishments that the people fear and severe penalties that the people dread. Thus a sage sets out what they fear to limit their straying and establishes what they dread to restrict their treachery. This is how the state is pacified and how violent chaos never arises. This is how I know that benevolence, propriety, affection, and kindness are not worth using, while harsh punishments and severe penalties are the means for governing the state well. Han Feizi draws a bright line between a government based on fear of the sage ruler’s punishments and one based on a desire to emulate the sage ruler’s best qualities—mainly because the latter strategy doesn’t work—and while this exacting legalist position is somewhat more muted in the Han, the same arguments carry over into court discussions almost two centuries later. For example in the Yantielun 釜鐵論 (Analysis of the salt and iron monopolies), the government officials lambast the “literati” (文學) for their shabby dress that attempted to mimic the styles of the Duke of Zhou (trad. r. 1046–1036) and Confucius, for their “slowly walking around in deep thought” (靜念徐行) and, not surprisingly, for their “deliberative analysis and chants of praise that plagiarized the words of [Confucius’s disciples] Shang and Ci” (議論稱頌，窮商、賜之辭). Echoing Han Feizi, the officials further complain:

唯以彼論，論死人之語，則有司不以文學。文學知極之在延麾之而不知其事，聞君之而不知其務。

If you [merely] hum and drone from rotting bamboo strips as well as chant the words of dead people, then the officials have no use for you literati. You literati understand that the prison is located behind the court, but you don’t understand what goes on there. When you hear about what goes on there, you don’t understand its fundamentals.

Like Han Feizi, the writers of this passage associate classicists with book chanting and simultaneously condemn them for not understanding how punishment worked. Is there thus a link between a person’s constant textual recitation and his opposition to penalty-driven government?
The Han classicist imitated the sages by reciting their words and wearing their clothes, and through that mimicry sought to affect his own character in a positive way through constant repetition, an idea further explored below. In essence, the scholar was conditioned to sagely behavior by habituation; he transformed himself, not by force nor by commandments uttered by a lawgiver-on-high. Repetitive mimicry is how he learned texts and is also the basic message of what he was learning. That is, reciting the sage’s words was the means to improving the self’s behavior. The classicists extended this type of thinking to the populace at large, but instead of the scholar resonating with past sages, the commoner would resonate with his ruler. The best ruler was then an exemplar, a model that commoners would want to mimic and thereby transform their own characters. The worst ruler ordered commoners to change, backing up those orders with fear of punishment and prison. Mimicry relationships were perceived as contrary to control relationships. Thus the mechanics of classicist memorial culture (habituating a text) and the political agenda of classicism (mimicking an exemplar) went hand in hand. The basic manner in which a young person was indoctrinated to become a classicist reinforced the classicist argument he subsequently espoused. He was trained a certain way, and so the resulting message was something to which he himself bore witness on an experiential level. Here in the Han Feizi and the Analysis of the salt and iron monopolies, such idealism is deemed unrealistic, and they dismiss both classicist book chanting and the classicist understanding of government.

In the end, identifying who recited is an exercise in identifying who didn’t. Stereotypically, as we have seen, reciters were not impoverished, female, military-oriented, or Daoist. But stereotypes are perceived, not real, categories; there are a sufficient number of exceptions to blur distinct demarcations. For example, Daoist and classicist texts have been excavated from the same tombs, and many of the versified Daoist texts were most likely memorized in their own right.

What to Master and Recite

Just before the Qin unification, Xunzi described the classicist corpus as being “the world’s great deliberation” (天下之大慮也), one that warranted active thought and investigation. It was the alpha and omega of education itself:

Thomas H. C. Lee contends that, among the classicists, it was Xunzi “who contributed more to the shaping of Chinese views about education during and after the Han.” Here in addition to succinctly surveying the classicist education program, he reveals three assumptions about an oral performative culture. First, education begins with chanting. Second, two of the classics to be chanted—the Songs and the Music—directly reference oral presentation, whereas other classics such as the Documents consist of oratories and performance pieces through which the reciters duly took on their forebears’ roles. Finally, both the noble and petty man take in their education through their ears, not their eyes. That is, Xunzi and other early sources assume that education is primarily oral and not visual. Even from an etymological perspective, the graph for the “sage” (聖) that Xunzi used here to refer to what he wants students to become is in fact written with both the “ear” (耳) and “mouth” (口) radicals.
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This last point continues to hold weight to this day, and it has been convincingly argued that the written Chinese language as a whole does not so much index visual images in the reader’s brain to communicate meaning but rather first cues the oral language that only then communicates meaning. David Prager Branner has recently explained the advantage of this two-step process:

Explicitly phonetic writing makes readers much more certain about the word they are reading. It lets them identify the word from the sound, assuming they actually know the word (surely a necessary precondition of literacy). Systematically speaking, a phonetic compound represents a specific word more parsimoniously than does a semantic compound, and the larger the number of explicit phonograms in the inventory of graphs, the more efficiently that inventory can be learned.35

The Chinese written language is hence derived from oral language, and so Xunzi and others were apparently correct to privilege the ear over the eye, thereby enhancing the importance of chanting and reading out (not just reading) the classics.

Hundreds of biographies in the Han documents (Hanshu 漢書) and Later Han documents identify the particular text mastered in the dedicatee’s youth, but while more than three-quarters of them are indeed related to the classicist canon, Han learning did not necessarily begin with them, despite Xunzi’s advice.34 Instead it more likely began with primers and abecedarians. As seen above, it was claimed that when Empress Deng was five she mastered a text called the Historical documents, said to be a Zhou work for teaching children. This text appears in other imperial biographies, such as that of Emperor An 安 (r. 107–26 CE), who studied it when he was ten.35 In addition to the Historical documents, some young people had access to the metered verses of primers such as the Xiao-xue Han guan pian 小學漢官篇 (Han offices explained for beginning students) as well as the vocabulary builder Jijupian 急就篇 (Quick mastery of the characters).36 The latter versified work in fact includes its own list of texts to study:

The learning of an official consists of reciting the Songs, the Filial piety canon, the Analects, the Spring and Autumn annals, the Venerable documents, as well as the texts of the laws and orders.

According to the Tang commentator Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645), some versions of this text read shì 詩 in the first line as zōng 詩 and thus have the would-be official “reciting and chanting the Filial piety canon and the Analects.”37

The Filial piety canon purports to be a dialogue between Confucius and a disciple of his by the name of Zengzi 曾子, in which Confucius explains why filial piety is important and how its mechanics extend outward to an imperial government.39 Since the Lì shì chunqiu 劉氏春秋 (Spring and autumn annals of Mr. Lí) quotes from it, the text in some form must predate imperial unification, but the scope of its circulation for the early Western Han is unknown.40 By the mid- to late Western Han, the imperial heirs were studying it in their youth at least as early as Emperor Zhao 昭 (r. 86–73) and including the future Emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 73–48), who had come from a collateral branch well outside the direct line of descent.41 His son, the future Emperor Yuan 尹 (r. 48–32), mastered it by the age of twelve.42 In 3 CE, during the reign of Emperor Ping 平 (r. 1–6), the regent Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23) codified the family rituals and established teachers of the Filial piety canon in the villages and district schools. Those who could recite the canon earned a spot on the registers that determined the selection of officials.43 Its widest circulation may therefore be due to Wang Mang, who would later usurp Han rule, and not due to a Han emperor, just as Wang Mang was also predominantly responsible for the long legacy of the imperial ritual code. Several Eastern Han references further allude to its popularity, although usually with a sense of nostalgia rather than pride in the present. A prominent member of the secretariat, Fan Zhun 委正 (d. 118), endeavored to demonstrate the past breadth of scholarly studies by claiming that even military men had mastered the Filial piety canon.44 The historian and minister of works Xun Shuang 興哀 (128–90 CE) correlated the Han interest in this work with its ruling under the “fire phase” of the five phases (to be discussed in Part I) that assigned the particular qualities of fire, earth, metal, water, and wood to particular historical eras. After linking fire with filial behavior, Xun Shuang observed: “Thus the Han
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system caused the empire to penetrate the Filial piety canon and selected officials via the “Filial and incorrupt” recommendation system” (故漢制使天下讀《孝經》. 選舉孝廉).65

The imperial history of the circulation of the Analects is somewhat similar. A whole collection of brief dialogues between Confucius and his various disciples, the text in its diverse versions may have been dubbed the Analects only at the beginning of the Han. In the first century BCE, Emperors Zhao, Xuan, and Yuan all received it alongside the Filial piety canon, and their imperial tutors were composing commentaries to explain it.66 Wang Chong wrote that around their time it had been “transcribed into li-script so that it would be widely chanted” (更隷寫以傳誦).67 Yet unlike the Filial piety canon, it does not seem to have enjoyed the benefits of Wang Mang’s patronage. Even so, excavated versions have been found in Hebei and Gansu provinces, and in the Eastern Han it was the only text not related to the original classicist canon to be engraved on steles and erected near the capital’s imperial academy, a project that began in 175 CE.68 Post-Han works continued to identify it as one of the first texts to be studied.69

Yet, with the exception of records concerning the imperial family, the vast majority of Han biographies make no reference to mastering primers, the Filial piety canon, or the Analects. They seem to have been regarded as an assumed primary level of education that had to be achieved before moving on to mastering particular canons. Such is confirmed by a few chance résumés preserved in the standard histories, such as that of Fan Sheng 彭升 (d. ca. 65 CE), which notes, “When he was eight years old, he penetrates the Analects and the Filial piety canon, and when he became an adult he trained in the Changes canon of the Liang Qiu tradition as well as the Laozi, teaching them to later students” (九歲通《論語》. 《孝經》,及長, 《老莊》, 教授後生).70 The almanac Simin yueling 四民月令 (Monthly ordinances of the four classes of people) makes it clear that these texts belonged to a lower level of education. In this farming estate calendar, education was mandatory when the agricultural cycle permitted it,71 and among the activities associated with the first month of the year, the children were divided into two groups:

農事未起，命成童以上入大學，學五經師法求備，句讀書傳，研義釋，命幼童入小學，學篇章。

Before agricultural activities begin, tell any boy who has reached adolescence to attend the upper school and study the five canons. The instructional model should endeavor to be absolute, and there shall be no reading out of records and commentaries (yet). When ice no longer forms upon the ink stones, tell the younger children to attend the lower school and study the chapters and verses.72

This almanac provides its own commentary, which stipulates the age of fifteen as dividing upper from lower school, and includes abecedarians such as the fujiu pian among the “chapters and verses” to be studied. In an entry under the eleventh month, the almanac further notes that those same lower-level children are “to read out the chapters and verses of the Filial piety canon and the Analects” (讀《孝經》. 《論語》篇).73 Thus from the perspective of texts, there were at least two levels of initial Han education, the first being basic texts such as the abecedarians, the Filial piety canon, and the Analects, and the second being canonical studies.74

On that second level, the Songs canon would seem to be a natural candidate for memorization, given that it had a metered-verse format, like the first-level abecedarians, and also because Confucius himself in the Analects advises young people to learn the Songs because they teach a great deal, including the names of birds, animals, plants, and trees.75 Xunzi also gave preference to the Songs, and other descriptions of memorization outside the biographies regularly earmark the Songs as the object of that memorization.76 Yet in the Han biographies, the Spring and Autumn annals with its commentaries is the canon most frequently named as the one mastered, and the Songs and Documents roughly tie for second place.77 Because of its content of historical and even legal precedents, the Annals was perhaps more useful for young people destined for Han officialdom, and its language was relatively formulaic. Han legal matters often reference the “sense of justice in the Spring and Autumn annals” (春秋之義).78

Even so, Wang Chong soundly criticized a preoccupation with any single text,79 and while students may have mastered a particular classic, the speeches and memorials contained in their subsequent biographies also demonstrate a thorough familiarity with the rest of the canon as well. That is, they appear to have been well-rounded scholars even if they were said to have mastered one focal text.

Beyond the canonical texts, some biography dedicatees mastered Daoist, military, mathematical, and historical works, a few of them written as late as the Han itself. For example, Sima Qian’s Shi ji 史記 (Historical records), originally known as the Taishi gong ji 太史公記
(Records of the grand clerk), was studied by his own grandson. Yet it probably never enjoyed a wide circulation, and by the end of the Western Han, requests for copies of the Taihsi gong shu 太史公書 (Documents of the grand clerk)—probably the same work, judging from the name and contents—were being refused on the grounds that it diverged from the classicist corpus too much.80 In the Eastern Han, both surviving literature and stelae inscriptions demonstrate that a limited circulation of what are now known as the “standard histories” continued to some extent.81 The works of the historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) likewise found their way into the Han’s oral performative culture, and, as Fan Ye 房嶽 (398–446) later summarized, “it was appropriate that the age very much esteemed his writings and that there was not a scholar who did not recite and chant from them” (當世甚重其書，學者莫不誦焉).82 Thus a text did not have to be old in order for it to be memorized, though age helped.

When to master and recite

According to the self-commentary of the Monthly ordinances of the four classes of people cited above, “lower school” covered the ages of ten through fourteen and “upper school” continued until the age of twenty.83 Well before this Eastern Han estate calendar, scholars were strongly advising that education begin early, and Xunzi, who explicitly laments that many of his contemporaries were not good reciters, stresses that reciting and chanting must commence in youth.84 If it didn’t, the results would become apparent later in life, and even the future First Emperor of Qin (r. 221–206 BCE) confesses this shortcoming in his own upbringing. The Zhanguo 戰國策 (Strategems of the Warring States) relates the following: “The king [i.e., the First Emperor’s father] called upon his son to chant, but his son said, ‘While still young I was neglected and sent abroad. I never had teaching from a tutor, and I am not trained when it comes to chanting’” (王使子諭，子曰：‘少棄在外，受師傅所教，不習於諭．’).85

Here textual recitation is akin to performance with, in this case, a royal audience, and it assumes that young nobility should all be able to recite properly. Later, Jia Yi 賈逵 (201–169) would advise that instruction generally began early, “when the mind was not yet overflowing” (xin weilans 未流), in order to effect major changes in later character,86 and the Da Dai liji 大戴禮記 (Ritual records of Dai the Elder) specifically insists on the importance of developing memorization skills prior to analysis and explanation when it offers the following warning: “If he does not recite and chant as a child, does not discuss and deliberate as a youth, and does not instruct and admonish as an elder, then he can certainly be called an untrained person” (其少不誦記，其壯不論議，其老不教誨，亦可謂無業之人矣).87 Like their ancient Greek counterparts and their medieval successors, educators in early China recognized the suppleness and receptiveness of the young mind that would become ossified in adulthood.88

The Ritual records recommends that boys should be chanting the Songs by the age of thirteen.89 In at least a dozen biographies from the Later Han documents and from Eastern Han stele inscriptions that state the age of textual mastery, the dedicatee is in fact noted as having penetrated or chanted canonical texts by this age. Whether thirteen was considered ordinary or extraordinary—and hence warranting biographical mention—is unknown. Sima Qian was “chanting ancient texts” (誦古文) by the age of nine, and, never to be outdone, Ban Gu was “competent in composing narratives and chanting poems and poetic expositions” (能屬文，誦詩賦) by the age of eight.90 Still others claimed the ability to chant the Songs by age eight or to write by age five.91

In one anecdote, a child’s precocious textual mastery marked him for life:

張霸字伯駿，蜀郡成都人也。七歲通《春秋》，復欲述餘經，父母曰：‘汝小未能也。’霸曰：‘我欲為之。’故字曰：‘霸。’馬援，後亦早通而並受《爾雅》等。92

Zhang Ba’s courtesy name was Borao [lit. “The eldest son Much”], and he was a man of Chengdu in Shu Commandery. . . When he was six years old, he penetrated the Spring and Autumn annals, and he also wanted to advance into other canons. His mother and father told him, “You can’t study more canons yet because you’re little.” Ba replied, “But I am ‘much’ because I study them.” Therefore his courtesy name was “Much.” He later went to Colonel Fan Chou of Chanzhui and received Mr. Yan’s tradition of the Gouyang commentary for the Spring and Autumn annals and subsequently became well versed in all five canons.93

Two things should be noted here. First, the boy Much claimed to have become “much” as he mastered the canon, and this statement should not be dismissed as merely the simplistic reasoning of a precocious child. Children are indeed better than adults at developing certain skills, such as picking up languages or developing their memories, but they are also
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affected by the content of what they master, more so at that age than later in life. Indeed, the impact of memorizing texts at an early age cannot be overemphasized, as it most likely had a major impact on character development. In the following description, Tu Wei-ming highlights how this kind of approach to a text significantly differs from that of a student in a nonmemorial culture:

The traditional Confucian student was likely to begin his study on (the "Zhongyang" or "The central and the universal" in the Ritual Records) as early as the age of eight. After thoroughly memorizing the text, he had time to grasp its meaning by being gradually steeped in it. Without imposing a preconceived interpretive scheme upon it, he could try to realize its inner logic through personal knowledge. For him, systematic recitation, which is often misconstrued as unreasoning rote-learning, was a long and strenuous process designed to foster a holistic vision by integrating the cognitive and experiential dimensions of his understanding of the text. Chu Hsi was absolutely serious when, in response to his students' queries about the expedient method of reading Confucian classics, he simply instructed them to experience the taste of it by "embodying" it in their daily lives. Such advice must sound odd, if not totally irrational, to modern readers. 89

Thus much probably did become "much," at least in the sense of embodying the text and developing his character.

Second, it is significant that Much began by penetrating a canon and then later went on to receive the explanations and commentaries for it. In other words, from the perspective of textual mastery we now have a three-stage education, with the first level being primers (abecedarians, the Filial Piety Canon, and the Analects), the second level being basic canonical study and recitation, and the third level being a commentarial tradition on that canon. Numerous Han descriptions confirm this order. In Much's case, that final stage in turn translated into a comprehensive knowledge of the canonical corpus. This third level could take a long period of time, as in the case of Feng Yan 馮衍 (d. ca. 60 CE), who grew up during the Wang Mang interregnum. He was so precocious that "at the age of eight he could chant the Songzi canon, and by the time he reached the age of nineteen, he had broadly penetrated a host of books" (年九歲，能誦《詩》， 至二十而博通群書).91 Other biographies record a similar length of time, such as that of Chancellor Zhai Fangjin 稽方進 (d. 7 BCE), whose mother followed him to the capital where he went to further his education, weaving sandals for ten years to support her son's education. 92

Despite the recognition that memorization and chanting had to begin early, a handful of scholars did not start out in pursuit of a bookish life. A few held lowly positions in officialdom and then turned to study, whereas others only opted for education after wild, misspent youths, in a couple of cases not even starting until the age of forty.93 Almost all of the biographies of latecomers to education occur in the Han documents, where almost all of the biographies of early starters occur in the Later Han documents. The difference most likely results from the rhetorical interests of the different authors, but it might possibly reflect a rise in educational professionalism. Over the course of the Han, an increased pool of educated people demanded that longer times be spent at learning in order to rise above the rest and secure official employment, virtually eliminating the possibility of successful latecomers. However, this explanation is only speculative.

Where to Master and Recite

In the Warring States period, the classicists were perceived as concentrated in the regions surrounding Confucius's home state of Lu, a small territory that became synonymous with the teaching of rituals and with much singing of hymns.94 At the time of the imperial unification, once Xiang Yu 章邯 (d. 202 BCE) had been executed, Gaozu 高祖 (r. 202–194) lay siege to Lu, and according to the Historical Records, "the host of classicists within Lu still expounded the recitations of and training in rituals and music, the sounds of their strumming and singing continuing unabated" (魯中諸儒尚講誦儀禮，弦歌之音不絕).95 Credited for first codifying court rituals in the Qin and Han, Shusun Tong 司馬通 (fl. early 2nd c. BCE) brought these classicists to Gaozu's new capital to advise him on ritual matters. Yet while Lu may have been the home of recitation of the classicist canon, it was by no means the home of recitation skills in general, as evinced above in the assumption that the First Emperor of Qin himself should also have been a good reciter. Below it will further be noted that, prior to the classicist success at the Han court, other nonclassicist texts were indeed used to test verbatim recall.

Even so, the question of where texts were mastered highlights a transition between that second and third level of Han education, a transition often accompanied by a significant change of locality. In the Monthly Ordinances of the Four Classes of People, the earliest levels of education not only began at home, they were part of home life, because they were fully
integrated into the agricultural cycles of the farming estate. In both the Western and Eastern Han, this close association between education and home regularly extended to particular canons favored by the extended family. According to standard history biographies or stele inscriptions, it was common that a person, “when young, trained in the studies of his father and grandfather” (少學父祖學), or, when it came to choosing a canon, continued “the undertaking that had been passed down from generation to generation in the family” (家世傳業). For example, in the Eastern Han the well-established Yuan family transmitted the Changes canon as interpreted by Meng Xi 孟喜 (fl. mid-1st c. BCE) down direct and collateral lines of descent through at least four generations.98 Thus there existed a tendency in which particular families were identified with particular canons.100

One reason for this specialization may be that the household possessed certain books. Han officials could account for their early scholarly successes because “the family already had many books” (家既多書), or, if the family was poor, they could turn to relatives and “obtain their family books” (借其家書).101 The Kong 孔 brothers of Lu were impoverished orphans, but “the family possessed the remnant books of their forebears, and so the brothers urged one another on, tirelessly reciting and chanting” (家有先人遺書，兄弟相勉，彌詠不倦).102 These cases suggest that a mastered text first derived from a manuscript medium, after which it entered into the oral performative medium.

While we know little about education within families, we know even less about schools outside the families, and as Yates noted above, there is no clear record of schools where people in the Han might have acquired literacy. Envisioning the Han education system is like excavating the few remaining shards of a shattered urn and then reconstructing the shape with fresh clay. We are reliant upon a handful of chance references to imagine the structure as a whole, and to make matters worse, educational systems no doubt changed over time. That is, we can’t even be certain our surviving shards all go to the same urn. The Shuihudi documents refer to a school or “study chambers” (xueshi 學室) expressly reserved for only the sons of scribes, perhaps reflecting the earlier hereditary ideals of office and scholarship.103 Later the Han documents describe how Emperor Wu 武 (r. 140–86), impressed by an academy established in Chengdu that had attracted many students and had turned out many worthy administrators, ordered all the empire’s commanderies and kingdoms to establish such schools, and while this edict is significant in highlighting the ideal of a widespread, court-mandated education system, historians today doubt it was fully carried out.104 Below we will meet late Western Han regional inspectors who went to the schools and tested the students as a way of taking the pulse of the district’s general health. Among other chance references, we saw above that Wang Mang had insisted the Filial piety canon be taught in the village and district schools, and many mirror inscriptions from Wang Mang’s Xin 新 dynasty (9–23) in fact praise his “instituition of schools” (zhi xiaoguan 治校官).105 Yet Ban Gu later lamented that a proper school network had not yet been established in his own time, resulting in an officialdom that could not properly “recite and explain” (sangshuo 論説) their texts.106 Ban Gu’s contemporary Wang Chong writes that he himself began his learning at the age of five and entered the “writing halls” (shuguan 書館) at seven, where there were at least a hundred other children; he reports that, after successfully acquiring the ability to write, he studied the Analects and the Documents, “daily reciting a thousand characters” (rijing qianzi 日經千字).107 As already seen above, the Eastern Han’s Monthly ordinances of the four classes of people stipulated that, before the agricultural season began, boys aged nine to thirteen were to study primers in the lower grades or xiaoxue 小學, while boys aged fourteen to nineteen were to study the classics in the upper grades or taisue 太學. Conversely, girls were to spend their own time sewing and weaving.108 Particularly in the Eastern Han, there were also individual or private teachers who were recognized for attracting thousands of students who duly “registered” (zhulu 著錄) with them, although the full implications of that registration remain unknown.109 Future archaeology may fill in our fragmentary knowledge of regional education.

Yet if a young person wanted to advance his education further, that advancement could entail traveling farther afield. When describing Eastern Han students, Fan Ye generalized, “If there were a place where canonical scholars abided, they wouldn’t consider a ten-thousand li road to be far” (若為經生所處，不遠萬里之路).110 Sometimes a student’s travels could take him all over the Han empire: Sima Qian in the Western Han, for example, whose extensive travel is listed in his autobiography, or Jing Luan 景鸞 in the Eastern Han, who, “when
young in his pursuit of teachers and study of canons, traversed the territory of seven provinces" (少遊師學, 涉九州之地).\textsuperscript{111} Yet more often than not, these travels were directed to the political and cultural centers of that empire, namely Chang’an and Luoyang. From the beginning of the imperial era, a young person often set out for the capital to “study away from home” (遊學) or, when already in the capital on other business, he might catch the eye of a teacher and then “remain to carry out his studies away from home” (留遊學).\textsuperscript{112} Given the regional differences, dialects, and long distances to travel in Han China, the modern concept of a study-abroad program is not entirely out of place. Sometimes with guardians in tow, adolescents as young as thirteen or fifteen could journey to the capital and enter the Taixue 太學 or Grand Academy to study for a year or more under specialists in particular canons.\textsuperscript{113} This early cosmopolitan experience, coupled with the later probationary period before taking office that was also spent in the capital, no doubt contributed to the remarkable degree of cultural homogeneity within Han officialdom.

**How to master and recite**

The very fact that the text studied in a person’s youth was known and recorded in his or her later biography speaks to the perceived significance a particular text had in a person’s life, the modern equivalent perhaps being a curriculum vitae beginning with the college attended or major pursued. Knowing which particular classic you mastered apparently said something about you. Yet the actual choices of terms for mastering and reciting that text simply reflect the prodigities of the historian and are readily interchangeable. For example, hundreds of biographies in the Han documents and the Later Han documents begin with the dedicatee in childhood “penetrating” (通) “mastering” (治), “training” (習), “receiving” (授), or indeed “reciting and chanting” (誦詠) a certain named text, usually one of the classics.\textsuperscript{114} On one hand, Ban Gu in the Han documents frequently describes a dedicatee as “mastering” a text, and Fan Ye in the Later Han documents rarely uses the term. On the other hand, Fan Ye in almost thirty cases identifies the dedicatee as having “trained” in a particular text in his or her youth, a term Ban Gu uses only two or three times. Fan Ye uses this same term for boys training in archery and horsemanship or girls training in making clothes, suggesting that training in a particular text involved much guided practice and the development of skills.

Both Ban Gu and Fan Ye frequently speak of the dedicatee as having “penetrated” a particular text, but tong 有 a large range of meanings. Wang Chong, quoted above, regarded a person well versed if the “books he has penetrated (通書) range from a minimum of one thousand chapters to a maximum of ten thousand scrolls.” He dubbed such a person a tongren (通人), “a person who has penetrated,” and the epithet “Penetrating Classicist” or tongru (通儒) was not uncommon in the Han.\textsuperscript{115} As also seen above, Xunzi associated textual “penetration” (通) with the ability to recite the text in question, an equation repeated elsewhere. Once, when Emperor Cheng 慶 (r. 32–6 BCE) ordered the future Emperor Ai 艾 (r. 6–2 BCE) to recite from the Songs canon, the future emperor was deemed “penetratingly trained and capable of explanation” (通經, 能説).\textsuperscript{116} As will be seen below, the court sought out would-be officials who could “penetrate” a canon, and Emperor Yuan even remitted their taxes. Thus tong was recognized as a high standard of textual familiarity. However, the word tong could be qualified, to make it apply to penetration of just the meaning or theme of a work. Some biography dedicates “lightly penetrated the greater principles” (略通大義) or “broadly penetrated the documents and commentaries” (博通書傳). Here the usage is not necessarily dismissive, because an understanding of the core principles could sometimes be juxtaposed against textual recitations that were merely parroting or verbose commentarial traditions that were merely pedantic. If Ban Gu wanted to be dismissive, he might instead say the dedicatee in his youth simply “forsook and hunted through the documents and records” (舍利書敗). In other words, less-than-serious scholars didn’t dwell in the textual realm very long; they were transients merely crossing through it for other purposes, on the hunt to fulfill their own agendas.

Turning to the oral performance of texts, again there is a great deal of overlap among terms. Writing shortly after the Han, the poet Shu Xi 李皙 (d. ca. 300 CE) conveniently enumerated most of them in his “Poetic exposition on reading out books” (讀書賦) which describes a reading session with the Songs canon:

| 講道好生 | 講道好生 | The Master who is Besotted with the Dao |
| 禮法明居 | 禮法明居 | Lives alone in calm composure; |
| 講道精神 | 講道精神 | He finely disciplines his quintessential spirit. |
Introduction

When hymning, intoning, crooning, chanting, and so forth are taken as a group in this piece, two obvious conclusions can be drawn. First, they can readily overlap with one another. Second, an individual's particular interactions with a fixed text were auditory—regardless of whether there was an audience—and even musical to some degree. As noted above, once the words were read out and airborne, they entered the mind through the ear. In early China when a text was performed—whether by reading aloud or recitation—it was an oral and aural experience, and silent reading was sufficiently exceptional that such rare cases warranted reference in the standard histories. Thus to "read a book" (dushu 读书), as in the title to this poetic exposition, means to "read out" from a book, and the character du 读 is in fact written with the radical indicating oral speech (yan 言). Alone, Shu Xi reads out his book, his voice "rising and falling in cadence, measured in time—here quick, there slow." Excavated manuscripts as in the case of the Laozi 老子 at Mawangdui are sometimes found edited with attention marks that are probably "an ancillary device for reading the text aloud," according to Matthias L. Richter, thereby giving it illocutionary force. Shu Xi most likely had the Songs canon memorized, but presence of the physical text could craft his performance of it. In sum, such manuscripts might be better envisioned as performance scripts rather than as books in the modern sense.

Other early texts likewise do not use du as a term for familiarizing oneself with a text but instead as a performance term, with associations even of chanting. For example, the Kong congzi 孔叢子 (Collective masters of the Kong family) records an Eastern Han poem about the renowned scholarship of two Kong brothers that begins, "The Kong family in the state of Lu delighted in reading out the canons (dujing), and when the brothers expounded and chanted, everyone listened" (會國孔氏好讀經, 兄弟講書皆可聽). Usually this "reading out" (du) refers to particular occasions when an individual is in the presence of a physical text. For a typical example from the Western Han, Sima Qian begins one of his genealogy charts by commenting that whenever he reaches a particular dramatic point while "reading out" (du) the Spring and Autumn annals: "I have never once not set aside the book and sighed" (未嘗不廢書而歎也). For an example from the Eastern Han, Li Yu 李育 (fl. late 1st c. CE) had "once read out the Zuo commentary (祚諸左氏) and found it pretty but shallow."
be preserved, carried afar, and transmitted. Through the patterning of
song, a text becomes fixed and repeatable. Unlike speech, which dis-
appears as soon as it is uttered, song is one of the earliest examples of
the fixed text.”13 In Shu Xi’s piece, “intoning” clearly overlaps with the
other musical presentation styles, but some Han scholars attempted to pigeon-
hole the various terms for recitation on a spectrum between normal
speech and singing. For example, in the Zhouli 周禮 (Zhou rituals)
the “Greater master of music” (Da siyu 大司樂) uses feng 風 or ‘recitation’
and song 歌 or “chanting” as tools of education. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄
(172–200) in his exegesis distinguishes them, explaining that “to repeat a
text from memory is ‘recitation’; using tones to segment it is ‘chanting.’
” (禮文曰顔《以聲節之曰誦》). Here Qing commentators further explain
that 楚 is simple recitation of the kind a child might perform without
recourse to musicality, whereas 歌 adds the rise and fall of cadence as
well as the articulated phrasing of music. Yet the same commentators
note that 歌 or “chanting” still remains separate from ge 歌 or actual
“singing,” pointing to a passage in the Zuo commentary in which a duke
orders a subordinate of the chief music master first to “sing” (ge) a stanza
from the Songs and then to “chant” (song) it as well.132 Other preimperial
sources likewise distinguish chanting from singing without comment,133
whereas the Han documents stipulates that “chanting without singing
is called poetic exposition” (不歌而詠應之賦) and that “chanting their
words is called poetic; intoning their tones is called song.” (詠其言謂之
詩，詠其聲謂之歌). Regardless, in common parlance the terms may
not have been differentiated.

It is clear from its general usage that “chanting” implied chanting
from memory as Zheng Xuan defined it, and there are numerous exam-
plars below in which texts are chanted explicitly in the absence of physical
media. For example, in a letter of recommendation for Mi Heng 稲衡
(fl. ca. 200 ce), his contemporary Kong Rong 孔融 (153–208) praises his
sharp mind with the observation, “Whenever his eyes saw [a text] just
once, he was able to chant it with his mouth; whenever his ears heard
something even if only briefly, he would never forget it in his mind.” (目
所一見，輒誦於口，耳所暫聞，不忘於心). As we will also see below,
Mi Heng was often praised for his prodigious memory, and here 歌
seems to draw on that faculty. Yet there are exceptions when 歌 doesn’t
rely on recall. When the much admired Eastern Han official Chen Shi

陳定 (104–87) was still a child, his future patron regularly “saw Shi hold-
ing a book and standing up to chant” (見定執書立誦), implying that
歌 was not necessarily from memory.136 Just as the word “recitation”
in English once meant “to read out or aloud” but now generally means
“to repeat to an audience from memory,” terms such as 楚 and 歌
cannot be pigeonholed with absolute certainty, only context indicating
their specific meaning.

Most of the terms denoting recitation carry with them a sense of
performance and hence an audience.137 This audience could be a teacher,
although the details for how a text was actually recited are few. Guanzi
generlizes that students stood the first time they chanted their lessons,
and in a case in the Han documents, it is recorded that they stood in the
subordinate position facing north.138 Standing seems to be the norm, and
the Huainanzi 淮南子 even records that it would be silly to “squat down
and then chant the Songs and Documents” (埡埡而誦《詩》、《書》), akin
to first pilfering something and then giving it to a beggar or first stealing
some bamboo strips and then writing out the law on them.139 Instead
of the teacher, the audience could be a ruler, and there are several cases
of the Han emperor requesting a recitation to test the knowledge of a
would-be heir apparent or a prospective official. He might even summon
reciters to soothe him with a worthy composition if he were ill.140 Yet as
in the case of Shu Xi, the most common audience was in fact the readers
or reciters themselves.

With this vocabulary of chanting and reading out in mind, let us
turn to two specific features associated with how a text was mastered and
recited, namely the mental focus required to absorb a text and the fixed
understanding that was to accompany that text.

Texts in memorial cultures such as Han China exhibit trademark
mnemonic features such as cliché, exaggeration, stereotyping, parallel-
ism, and versification, all useful for making the text easier to remem-
ber.141 Yet the tools of memorization come not just from the text itself
but also from the mental exertion of the learner, an exertion sometimes
perceived as bordering on meditation. The text learner’s intensity is
frequently denoted through complementry pairings—one recites “day
and night,” “coming and going,” “sitting and standing”—indicating
a constant devotion. Yet in addition to such passing statements, there
survive many anecdotes in the Han documents and Later Han documents
that illustrate textual devotion. For example, Zhu Maichen (who also
appears in Shu Xi's poem above) came from a poor family and had to
earn his living carrying firewood. Yet he delighted in reading out books,
and while toting his wood along the road, he constantly chanted the
texts he was learning, much to the annoyance of his wife, who repeat-
edly asked him to stop singing. Zhu Maichen would then sing with all
the more gusto, in the end driving his wife to leave him. 142 For a second
example, Cao Bao 會政 (d. 102) loved ritual studies, particularly the
works of Shusun Tong, and day and night he chanted them and thought
about them. He slept cradling bundles of texts in his arms, and when he
was out walking, he chanted them and thought about them so intensely
that he would forget where he was going. 143 For a third example, Zhu
Mu 朱穆 (100-163) was also constantly lost in thought as he chanted,
forgetting where he left his clothes or tumbling down into ditches. His
father believed there was something wrong with his mental faculties. 144
For a final example, Gao Feng 高鳳 (fl. later 1st c. CE) would not stop
chanting day or night. Leaving for the fields, his wife once told him to
tend to the drying grain in the courtyard so that the birds wouldn't eat
it. Staff in hand, Gao Feng stood there in the courtyard intently chant-
ing the canons, oblivious to the fact that, all the while, a violent storm
was washing away the grain in front of him. 145 At the very least, these
four light-hearted anecdotes and many others like them demonstrate the
stereotype of intense devotion to recitation and oral performance within
Han culture. A text was mastered only through focused mental exer-
cisions during which the outside world of destinations and ditches would
disappear. 146

This textual separation from the rest of the world is well described
by an imperial advisor named Yan Du 延篤 (d. 167 CE), who, after expe-
riencing troubles at court, had withdrawn into a private life on the
grounds of ill health. In a letter to a friend, he described his time free of
external cares as follows:

吾當夜以棉幃，坐於客堂。朝則誦義，文之《易》，武之《書》，歴公旦之典
禮，覽仲尼之《春秋》，夕則清腸內視，詠《詩》南軒。

Just before dawn, I would comb my hair and sit in the guest hall. In the morning,
I chanted the Changzuo canan of Fu Xi and King Wen 147 as well as the Documents
canon of Shun and Yu the Great; I surveyed the doctrinal rituals of the Duke
of Zhou; and I perused the Spring and Autumn annals of Confucius. 148 In the
evening, I calmly wandered the inner stairs and intoned the Songs canon
on the southern balcony.

After briefly describing his leisurely life among the commoners, he then
explains how this text-bordered world was all absorbing, focusing his
attention inward:

當此之時，不知天之為蓋，地之為履；不知世之有人，己之有躬也；猶昆蟲擊
細，俾若無人，豪風隴書，不知暴雨，方之於吾，未足況也。

At that time, I didn't know heaven was covering me and earth was holding me
up. I didn't know there were people in the world or that I myself had a body.
When Gao Jianli played his flute, it seemed as if there were no others around
him, 149 and when Gao Feng read out his books, he was unaware of the violent
storm. Yet neither of them could compare to me. 150

This self-imposed isolation was not merely mental. A scholar reciting
texts frequently erected barriers between himself and his surroundings,
giving rise to descriptions such as "he barred his door, expounded, and
chanted" (biwu jiangong 閂戶講誦) or "he barred his gate, chanted, and
trained" (bimen songxi 閉門講習). 151 Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 179-
ca. 104) lowered his screens to expound and chant and only commu-
nicated with the disciples who had been with him the longest, so that
some of his followers never saw his face. It is said that for three years
he never even looked out at his own garden. 152 Liu Xiang 劉向 (79-8
CE) likewise "did not deal with worldly affairs and concentrated his
accumulated thoughts on the canonical works" (不交接世俗，條誦思於
經術). By day he chanted texts, and by night he watched the stars. 153 As
seen above, Shu Xi was already living a hermit's life in an isolated hut,
but before he began his textual orations, he still lowered his curtains and
reduced his world even further. Thus accessing the textual infrastructure
is like building a border between the outer mundane environment and
the inner mental realm.

In Shu Xi's case, his readings clearly carried the trappings of a medita-
tion experience. He calmed his spirit, controlled his breathing, and
projected his mind before he began reading out his text. Others would
first endeavor to reach "a purified state without any desires" (qingjing
wuxiou 清淨無欲) before concentrating their minds on the canons. 154 In
a story from the Fensou tongyi 風俗通義 (Comprehensive discourse on
customs), an investigator stopped at a district station for the night, and
when the clerks brought him lanterns, he said: "I would contemplate the
Dao, and so I cannot see any fires. Extinguish them... When it was
dark, he adjusted his clothes, sat down, and chanted the Six jia, the Filial
pity canon, and the Root of the Changes. Once finished, he lay down"
characteristic of these models seems to have been fixing interpretation, preventing people from taking intentional or unintentional liberties when citing the texts. “Say what your teacher says, and your understanding will be on par with your teacher” (師云而云，則如若師也)，Xunzi argued. Throwing aside the instructional model and instead “delighting in self-reliance” (好自用) would be like asking the blind to distinguish colors or the deaf to distinguish sounds. In other words, the yardstick of the textual infrastructure cannot be lengthened or shortened; instead, the desired ideality was matching it as perfectly as possible.

Besides Xunzi, several other late Warring States sources similarly advocate a rigid continuity of the teacher’s instructional model. According to the Stratagems of the Warring States, it was considered offensive not to quote from one’s teacher when discussing any important issues, and as acknowledged by the Spring and Autumn annals of Mr. Liu, the reciting and chanting disciple always endeavored to please his teacher, never disobeying him and always heeding his words and his model. By the Han, scholars were labeled as “maintaining the instructional model” (shou shifa 守師法) or “possessing the instructional model” (you shifa 有師法), sometimes abbreviated to “possessing the model” (youfa 有法), and this label was always a sign of excellence. There are clues that these instructional models took on substantial proportions, and in one case, a disciple increased his teacher’s instructional model to reach a million words. One on hand, a disciple might be singled out as the only one who “maintained his studies without losing the instructional model” (shouxue bushi shifa 守學不失師法). On the other hand, if the emperor heard that a disciple had “changed the instructional model” (gai shifa 改師法), he might not make use of that disciple. The implication seems to be that innovation and independent interpretation were frowned upon. Just as lengthy verbatim recall preserved fixed texts, the explanations for those texts were to be equally unchanging.

What made up an instructional model? We do not know how closely everyday written Chinese conformed to everyday spoken Chinese, but we cannot assume they were equivalent, just as in the West formal writing was once done in Latin but spoken discourse regularly resorted to regional languages. Because Chinese is not an alphanumeric language, the separation between writing and speaking becomes more easily exacerbated. Furthermore, the classics themselves were written in an archaic
language with an archaic pronunciation, a fact recognized as early as Confucius's lifetime; Confucius himself insisted on "elegant speech" (yuyan 雅言)—that is, the proper classical pronunciation, which was implicitly separate from daily speech—when reciting them. As now evident in excavated documents, in which up to a third of the characters consist of textual variants, texts required guidance in how to read them. Kern surmises that "in order to be fully intelligible, texts were transmitted within a defined social framework, most likely a master-disciple(s) structure of face-to-face teaching and learning. This framework enabled the interaction of the oral and the written word, implying the necessity of direct personal contact between those who master the text and those who learn it." Alongside teaching the contexts, explanations, and potential applications of passages from the traditional texts, this guidance in correct pronunciation and correct characters may have figured as a major component of the instructional model or shift.

Preserving this instructional model is thus regularly listed alongside recitation. Sometimes a description may be limited to the fact that a promising scholar's "chants and explanations possessed a model" (songshuo yufa 誦説有法), to quote Ban Gu describing one of his own great uncles. Other times a slightly longer account survives, such as the following:

The scholars Tang [Changbin] and Chu [Shaouen] responded to the academicians' call for disciples. When they went to the academicians, they hitched up their robes and ascended the hall. Their hymns and rituals were extremely grave, and when tested on their chants and explanations, they possessed a model. Like Confucius, they wouldn't speak about suspect places in the texts. All the academicians respectfully asked who their teacher was, and they answered that they served [Wang] Shi.

Not surprisingly, this praise for rigidity and implicit condemnation for personal interpretation led others to damn classicism, as seen in Chen Zun's comment above that recitation and chanting were akin to "tying up your own body." The Huainanai similarly laments how scholars inherit their practices and "maintain the old teachings" (shou jiujiu 守舊教) instead of necessarily changing with the times. So why were conformity and conventionality so valued by the classicists? It is perhaps because classicism saw itself as embodying the faithful transmission of textual precedents from a golden age, not the creation of something new. That is, its textual infrastructure was rooted in the distant past, a past that was regularly privileged as being more correct and genuine than the present. Older was better, and the further back down the trunk of tradition one ventured, the fewer digressive offshoots (i.e., rival school interpretations) were encountered. The longer lifespan claimed by an instructional model that explained those original texts meant its closer proximity to the root origin and hence the greater likelihood it was correct. Individualized interpretations in which the interpreter "changed the instructional model" were like the upper branches coming off the main trunk. Thus continuity and conformity in themselves became virtues.

As an outgrowth of having fixed instructional models and of education's increasing professionalism over the course of the Han, each of the classics developed several interpretative traditions that were most likely manuscript in nature. Biographies and stele inscriptions frequently identify the dedicatee's particular interpretative tradition, such as the Documents canon as interpreted by Ouyang Sheng 歐陽生 (fl. early 2nd c. BCE) or the Gongyang 公羊 commentary of the Spring and Autumn annals as interpreted by Yan Pengzhu 楚大夫 (fl. mid-1st c. BCE). The volume of each of these interpretations alone suggests a predominantly written medium. As noted above, Zhang Huan boiled down an older commentary of 450,000 words to a mere 90,000 words. Others ran up to a million words, and such word counts are far beyond the already high standards of Han recitation ability. It is possible these explanatory works were halfway between purely memorized texts and purely referential texts. While the content may have been committed to memory, it is likely that these explanatory texts remained at the level of writing and not verbatim memorization. That is, these secondary sources were more like reference materials, as in the following description of how a certain Zhang Xuan 張玄 (fl. early 1st c. CE) conducted his studies at the beginning of the Eastern Han:

"In a purified and quiet state without any desires, he concentrated his mind upon the canons and documents, and when he reached a point in which he had a question, he wouldn't eat for the whole day. Whenever he came upon a difficulty, he would open up the various explanations of the specialists, making his selection based on what seemed natural."
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Here the explanations are written, are divergent, and are used like reference works, and in this case there appears to be no instructor in sight. One possible cause for this change might have been the development and availability of proto-paper and paper during the Eastern Han. Thus it is possible the disciple’s dependency, in antiquity, on a master devolved into the student’s dependency, in early imperial China, on commentaries, as a growing manuscript culture began to function more and more in tandem with the existing memorial culture.

Why master and recite

After establishing as best we can who recited what in Han memorial culture, as well as when, where, and how, we must finally address the question of why recitation was regarded as important in the first place. What would one gain by participating in an oral-performative culture? The answers to this question can be distributed across a spectrum of lofty, practical, and even arcane goals.

First, on the lofty end of the spectrum, one masters and recites a fixed text to gain self-transformation. Mencius famously noted that if one wears the clothing of the sage ruler Yao, carries out Yao’s behavior, and “recites the words of Yao” (song Yao zhi yan 诵尧之言), one simply is a Yao. A strong advocate of recitation, Xunzi offers a similar assessment: “The gentleman . . . thus recites and enumerates in order to become familiar with [the classics], ponders and inquires in order to penetrate them, becomes their kind of person in order to situate them,” and clears away the harmful in order to support and nourish them” (君子 . . . 故诵数以言之，思数百通之，為其人以處之，除其害者以養之). Here the gentleman reaches into the past with his mind via the classics and brings them forward until his own person serves as their shelter and support. Yet the message is the same—one begins with memorization and recitation and ends with ethical transformation.

Western Han scholars such as Lu Jia and the literati in the Analysis of the salt and iron monopolies continued this correlation between recitation and ethics, the latter again including clothing in this formula: “It is rare for those who focus on wearing the ancient clothes and on reciting the ancient Dao to do wrong” (服古之服，诵古之道，舍此而为非者，鲜矣). Bringing together recitation, ethics, and clothing yet again, Wang Chong transforms the “clothes make the man” requirement into a metaphor: “As for a scholar’s nature, not every one is good, but by clothing himself in the teachings of sages, reciting and intoning them day and night, he takes on the conduct of the sage” (儒生之性，非能皆善也，被服聖教，日夜諷詠，得聖人之操矣).

Numerous sources thus make the connection between recitation and ethics. The memorized texts not only influence character; they naturally become part of the psyche itself through habituation. As Jia Yi once noted, if one’s proper “training” (xu 訓) were so all-encompassing during the formative years, it would be like growing up in the state of Qi and naturally speaking the language of Qi or growing up in the state of Chu and naturally speaking the language of Chu. Like acquiring one’s native language, canonical memorization led to character construction on a fundamental, subconscious level. We are what we repeat.

Sometimes the assumed links between textual mastery and character are most overt in negative examples, namely, when canonical training only took partial hold or no hold at all. Such was the case with Liu He 劉賀 (ca. 92–93), the ambitious and undisciplined would-be emperor who was quickly deposed in the Western Han. When Liu He was still king of Changyi, Gong Sui 董氏 (d. 62 BCE), who was then leader of the gentlemen of the palace, endeavored to direct the boy toward classicist studies. He suggested a training program in which ten hand-selected retainers always attended the king so that he would constantly be chanting the Songs canon while sitting and practicing ritual while standing. The king agreed, but his patience lasted only a few days before he terminated the program. On another occasion, Gong Sui chastised the king, arguing that chanting the Songs canon was the perfection of the royal Dao, but even though the king outranked the lords of the states, his tainted behavior was really on par with commoners. “Where does your behavior match a single verse of the Songs canon?” (王之行中《詩》一篇何等也?) he critically asked. Soon after that, the king had an ominous dream, and he asked Gong Sui for an interpretation. Yet again Gong Sui pointed out the king’s educational failure—“Isn’t it discussed in your Songs canon?” (《詩》不言乎?)—after which he interpreted the dream via one of its poems. Not surprisingly, the king failed to heed the dream’s omen. Yet because the imperial court had documents evincing Gong Sui’s anxiety over the king’s training, he escaped the death penalty and was only sentenced to hard labor when Liu He was deposed.
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Less fortunate was Liu He's Songs canon teacher, Wang Shi, who had been sent to prison to await execution. Such a penalty in itself demonstrates the seriousness given to successful canonical training. When asked why there were no documents proving that he, too, had remonstrated to the unruly king, Wang Shi replied as follows:

臣以(詩)三百五篇朝夕孜孜者, 至於忠臣孝子之篇, 非善不為王復誦之也; 至於危亡失道之君, 非善不流傳焉王深明之也。臣以三百五十篇誦, 是以亡諸書。Day and night I presented the king with the three hundred and five verses of the Songs canon. Whenever we reached verses on loyal ministers and filial sons, never once did I not make the king chant them over and over again. Whenever we reached cases of people who were in danger of perishing or who had lost the Dao, never once did I not in tears make the king explain them in depth. I remonstrated with him using these three hundred and five verses, and so there are no documents of remonstrations.185

Like Gong Sui, Wang Shi managed to escape execution and returned home, where he then refused to teach any more. He was invited to come back to the court only after the impressive canonical recitations of Tang Changbin and Chu Shaosun, who, as noted above, claimed Wang Shi as the source of their instructional model.186 Ultimately, Liu He's repeated failure to absorb the Songs canon well demonstrates the assumption that mastering the classics indeed transformed a person's character, just as scholars ranging from Mengcius to Wang Chong had described it. He failed to achieve self-transformation through the habitual conditioning of recitation.

A second and more practical goal behind mastering the classics was the chance to secure employment. To this end, the desirable quality was not only the content of what had been committed to memory but also the skill of having a well-trained memory in itself. Here it might be fruitful to explore just how extensive that memory capacity could be, a capacity that is astounding by our modern standards, in which our limited memory abilities are in great decline as we come to rely more and more upon technological aids.

After the famous late-Han classicist Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133–92) had died, the Hu people kidnapped his daughter Cai Wenji, and she lived with them for twelve years. Out of respect for her father, the warlord Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) bought her back from the Hu, and he later inquired about the state of her father's abundant writings. Cai Wenji replied:

As the Cai Wenji legend well demonstrates, texts endured on paper and in heads. On one hand, texts survived—or in this case did not survive—via the written or manuscript medium. Her father's physical writings had perished during her captivity, but she would resurrect some of them through her own calligraphy. On the other hand, texts also survived through memorization and oral performance, although here it was somewhat hampered by the fact that gender placed certain restrictions on performance ritual.

Cai Wenji's repertoire of more than four hundred memorized chapters may seem vast to us, but anecdotes of Han memory and recitation feats are in fact relatively common.

- Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (fl. 130 BCE), an advisor and trickster for Emperor Wu, claimed that he could chant 440,000 words, half from the classicist canon and half from military treatises.188
- Lou Hu 樂護 (fl. end 1st c. BCE), governor of Guanghan, was able to chant medical and pharmacological lore to the volume of several hundred thousand characters.189
- Wang Chong (27–ca. 100) was too poor in his youth to afford his own books, but whenever he visited the bookstalls in the marketplace, he was able to memorize the books in a single reading.190
- Du Zhen 杜真 (fl. ca. 135 CE) was said to be able to chant a million characters of the classicists tradition.191
- Yan Du (d. 167 CE) as a child was able to recite the Zuo commentary from memory after only ten days of study.192
- Xu Yue 蕭穎 (d. 209 CE) was said to be from a relatively poor (but locally influential) family, and like Wang Chong he memorized books in a single reading whenever he went out in public.193
- Mi Heng (fl. ca. 200 CE) could write out the stele inscriptions that he had seen during his walks without missing a single character, even though he had given the stele only a glance.194
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Xu Gan 余幹 (170–217) was said to be able to "chant texts" (songwen 詠文) to the length of several hundred thousand characters while still in his youth.194 Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), upon encountering a stele while out walking with friends, could turn his back to it and recite it without missing a word.195

At the very least, the frequency if not the veracity of these claims to prodigious memory suggest that lengthy verbatim recall in general was valued as a quantifiable skill in early imperial China.197 Yet the ability to memorize was more than just an intellectual boast; it was regarded as a relatively nontechnical standard by which to measure certain cognitive abilities of those officials or officials desiring promotion. Future officials needed to hone two main skills, namely writing and recitation, to secure employment, and among others wooden and bamboo slips surviving from northwestern China, a piece of surviving verse from the Cang Jie pian 蒼頴篇 (Essay on Cang Jie) highlights these two abilities.198 Because at least ten examples of this verse survive from diverse locations, we might surmise that the beginning of this abecedarian was itself a writing warm-up exercise, perhaps akin to a singer's practicing the scales before a performance. The longest intact version is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cang Jie invented writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To teach later generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young children have inherited his proclamation,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiously and carefully respecting the [character] forms,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They [also] make every effort to recite and chant,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never stopping day or night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If they devote their energies to becoming a clerk,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To calculating and organizing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then they will transcend their class and rise above the crowd,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing out in an extraordinary manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If in the beginning they are painstraking and earnest,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then in the end they will certainly achieve their goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upright and honest, loyal and trustworthy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careful and thorough, [garbled]. . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The poem provides few details about when and what these children recited and chanted, but early Western Han legal material excavated at Zhangjiashan gives us more information; it specifies that aspiring government clerks begin three years of study at the age of sixteen and that their examinations be regularly conducted in the eighth month of the year. In particular: "Examine the boys studying to become clerks by using the Fifteen chapters, and if they can recite at least five thousand words, 

In particular: "Examine the boys studying to become clerks by using the Fifteen chapters, and if they can recite at least five thousand words, they can become clerks" (試 試學童以十五篇，能[風] 試書五百字以上，乃得為史). Two similar but much later passages are found in the Han documents and in the Shuo wen jiezi 說文解字 (Explaining single-component graphs and analyzing compound characters), although they both bump the number of recited characters up to nine thousand. After being tested in recitation and chanting as well as in writing skills, the best students, according to the Zhangjiashan regulations, were then reserved for higher office. As for would-be diviners and incantators, their recitation bar was set much higher than for clerks in the Zhangjiashan materials, at six thousand and seven thousand characters respectively. Furthermore, their required secondary skills were not in writing but in divination accuracy and in explaining sacrificial protocol. Because the diviners had the highest bar, it is not surprising that they were depicted, in texts ranging from the Zuo commentary to the mid-Han divination poetry corpus known as the Yi lin 易林 (Forest of the Changes), as protocol masters who were "good with words" (善言). Anecdotes in the received literature as well as in excavated materials group clerks and invocators together because they made formal presentations and announcements to the ghosts and spirits.

Later, when Emperor Wu's court first established the classic of academicians and their student body, success was measured by whether the students could "penetrate" (tong) at least one canon after a year of study. As noted above, the meaning of "penetrating" a text is somewhat unclear, and so how it was tested remains unknown. Those who passed this test, as established by Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (ca. 200–121), were declared exempt from serving in manual labor, a reward also offered by later emperors. However, for existing officials educated in the classics who were seeking further advancement, the testing process was explicit and straightforward: "Give preference to those who can chant the most" (先用讀多者). As in the Zhangjiashan regulations, the volume of lengthy verbatim recall was what mattered. Still later, during Emperor Cheng's reign, recitation skills were deemed a measure for a district's health.
routine of a regional inspector of Yangzhou by the name of He Wu (d. 3 CE) is described as follows:

行部必先即學官見諸生，或其頑論，問以得失。然後入傳舍，出記問暨田頑敏，
王姓感喜，已乃見二千石，以為常。

Whenever he traveled into a district, he would without fail go first to the schools and meet with all the students, testing them on their chanting and analysis and asking them about gain and loss. Only then did he enter the district’s post house, bring out the records, and ask about new acreages under production and the quality of the five grains. Afterward he would meet with the two thousandshi officials. He took this order as a constant.211

Yet it was not only would-be officials who were being measured in recitation; would-be emperors had to demonstrate such abilities as well. When Emperor Cheng was considering who should be his heir-apparent, he called upon his youngest half-brother to recite from the Documents canon, but the young man broke off in the middle of the recitation, having forgotten the text. When he called upon his half-nephew to recite from the Songs canon, this second young man had “penetratingly trained and was capable of explanation” (tongxi nengshuo 通習能說). Despite his more distant blood relationship, this half-nephew became the heir apparent and the future Emperor Ai, ostensibly because of his recitation and explanation abilities.212

Wang Mang’s rise and fall were also marked by his demand that would-be officials recite texts, but these were texts of his own composition. In 3 CE, when his son opposed him for meddling in imperial affairs, Wang Mang had him imprisoned, where he died. An adept spin doctor, Wang Mang framed this incident as an example of how he had cast aside his private interests and had willingly let his son suffer for his crimes in the name of the empire. He committed the whole incident to an eight-chapter essay, and anyone able to recite this essay would have his name added to the registers of men eligible for officialdom.213 Twenty years later, as his Xin dynasty was collapsing, he also wrote a thousand-word essay demonstrating his achievements to heaven, and anyone able to recite this piece would win the title of “gentleman” (lang hao).214 On the surface, it may seem arrogant for Wang Mang to insist upon the memorization of his own compositions, but given the recognized impact of memorization on character, such indoctrination would seem to be a mild but efficient form of conditioning or, more cynically, brainwashing. If one were to recite only texts from antiquity, one’s allegiance would be directed toward that antiquity rather than toward the present regime. Particular dynastic loyalty would become secondary.215 Thus memorization of Wang Mang’s own texts, especially as they both related to the Xin’s dynastic foundations, would seem logical.

With the Guangwu restoration of the Han dynasty, examining the recitation skills of would-be officials continued as before. For example, when Emperor Guangwu traveled through Runan, he summoned the lower officials and tested them on the canons. A sixteen-year-old clerk by the name of Zhou Fang 周防 (fl. late 1st c. CE) was deemed “especially capable in chanting and reading out” (you neng songdu 尤能誦讀) and so was granted an exceptionally high position—one that he declined because of his young age.216

It would seem that textual mastery leading to self-transformed officials was now the norm, but two obstacles would obscure this rather rosy image. First, Eastern Han thinkers continued to note that recitation by itself was not sufficient. Wang Chong generalizes that his contemporaries were not intent upon the canons, disliked reading them, didn’t think about them and simply followed their teachers’ instructions. Instead they were given over to histories and to “reading out the law and reciting the edicts” (duli fengling 諸律詐令), and once in office, any devotion to the canonical tradition withered away.217 Exhibiting an eternal problem, they learned what they needed to make the grade, not the man. Second, textual mastery no longer automatically led to officialdom because the Eastern Han experienced a glut of scholars, who evolved into a class of educated elites with a life beyond the court. Sometimes the biographies in the Later Han documents depict the decision to enter officialdom as separate from but perhaps influenced by one’s canonical training. For example, Zhou Pan 周磐 (d. 127 CE) is portrayed as chanting the Songs canon until he came upon a verse that spoke of the royal house ablaze, a royal house that needed true officials. His loyalty stirred, he only then left his life of isolation and began his rise through the government.218

A final goal behind textual recitation was to gain extramundane powers, although this colorful objective was less common (as well as less lofty and practical). For example, the Comprehensive discourse on customs depicts a legendary showdown between the classicist scholar Dong Zhongshu and the shamans at Emperor Wu’s court. The shamans
attempted to curse the scholar, but, wearing his courtly robes and facing south, Dong Zhongshu "chanted and intoned the canons and analyses" (songyong jinglun 诵詠經論) until the shamans suddenly fell down dead. In a second example, Chancellor Xiang Xu 向相 (d. ca. 184 CE) of Zhao was confronted by Yellow Turban banditry in his region, but he was opposed to raising troops. Instead he sent his generals to the Yellow River, where they faced north and read out the Filial piety canon, after which the banditry diminished of its own accord.

Such may be the stuff of myth, but textual recitation indeed served as a tool imbued with magical or religious powers. Recited poetic expositions were sometimes used as apotropaic incantations that staved off illnesses and nightmares through their word magic. The Celestial Masters exhorted their Daoist membership to chant the Laozi alongside their practices of embryonic breathing and abstention from cereals.

In the late Han, Buddhism was still new on the scene and was probably no more than a minor influence in the western regions and expatriate communities of traders. Its early forms perhaps split between a popular and an elite understanding of this new idea system, an idea system that would eventually come to dominate Chinese religious thinking. Yet the translation of some sutras is dated to the Han, including the Pratyutpanna samādhi sutra, which urged the Han Buddhist to "recite and chant when getting up in the morning or resting at night" (早起夜寢而誦誦). Over and over, it charges the devout person first to reach a high level of moral rectitude, eliminate conceptions of self, single-mindedly concentrate on the dharma, and stave off distractions such as sleepiness, and after reaching that point, to "well recite and chant this Pratyutpanna samādhi sutra" (善誦誦是三昧). The meditation would thereupon transform the reciter, allowing him or her to leave the nets of this world and enter the Great Way. In sum, such recitations for the purpose of gaining extramundane powers further hint at the authority invested in this skill. Recitation may transform the self, but here in the hands of an adept scholar, it may also transform the world around that self.

Section 3: Inking and Chanting share their secret of longevity

In recounting the pedigree of her secret to longevity, Zhuangzi’s sage (quoted above) traced a history that swung back and forth between auditory and visual states, ending with "Continuous Chanting" and "Repeated Inking." Note that she doesn’t claim an evolutionary model that simply presumes that the visual permanently replaced the auditory, and, in cultural terms, when it comes to memorization and writing, the visual does not in fact forever eclipse the auditory. Rather, modern scholarship now contends that the skill of lengthy verbatim recall only develops after writing is firmly anchored in a culture. That is, early imperial China may have been a predominantly oral culture, but it was an orality underpinned by its manuscript discourse. Generalizing the Han either as a manuscript culture based on the circulation of written texts or as an oral performative culture based on memorization and recitation would therefore be misleading. It was both. But was it an equal relationship?

While oral performative and manuscript cultures are interdependent, this interdependence can still let one form dominate the other. Writing on Western medieval practices, Carlo Ginzburg describes how the medieval reader of texts sometimes “projected onto the written page, elements taken from oral tradition,” so that he translated traditional texts such as Christian doctrines “into images that corresponded to his experiences, to his aspirations, to his fantasies.” Ginzburg recounts the trial of a miller known as Menocchio (1532–ca. 1599), who was charged with heresy. Menocchio was well read, but his reading was always tempered with his own interpretation of passages and his own slant on religion. Thus the written text played a role somewhat alien to modern cultures:

Any attempt to consider these books as “sources” in the mechanical sense of the term collapses before the aggressive originality of Menocchio’s reading. More than the text, then, what is important is the key to his reading, a screen that he unconsciously placed between himself and the printed page: a filter that emphasized certain words while obscuring others, that stretched the meaning of a word, taking it out of its context, that acted on Menocchio’s memory and distorted the very words of the text. And this screen, this key to his reading, continually leads us back to a culture that is very different from the one expressed on the printed page—one based on an oral tradition.
In early China, speakers achieved a similar result: passages frequently cited from earlier texts such as the Songs canon were significantly reinterpreted to fit the new situation in which they were recited. In other words, the quoted passage often did not necessarily index the original meaning; instead, the meaning derived from how it interacted with the newer text that quoted it. Mark Edward Lewis has studied this phenomenon in terms of the Zhuo commentary, the Analects, the Mencius, and the Xunzi, noting that "while this practice often distresses modern scholars—but not postmodern ones—who privilege original meanings and an author's intent, the men of the Spring and Autumn and early Warring States period perhaps valued the ability to make the poem say something other than what had originally been intended."228 While the result is similar to Menocchio's, the cause differs. Ginzburg's Menocchio unconsciously filtered written tradition through his oral culture, whereas the early Chinese speakers were, Lewis assumes (perhaps correctly), consciously changing the original meaning and in fact valued that ability to change it. Regardless of cause, this practice of changing a quoted passage's original intent continued into the Han, as is evident in texts such as the Filial piety canon, the Lienizhuan 列女傳 (Biographies of exemplary women), and the Han Shi wZhuan 韓詩外傳 (Outer commentary to the Han version of the Songs). All these texts end each of their numerous brief expositions with a Songs citation that often seems difficult to justify via the citation's original context. Even grave stelae near the end of the Han regarded the original meaning of a quoted passage as secondary relative to the new meaning derived from how that passage sat within the newer inscribed text.229 Whether the gradual growth of manuscript commentaries and fixed "instructional models" over the Han reduced the ability to distort a text's meaning requires future research.210

For Ginzburg's Menocchio, one's personal experience with the oral tradition overshadowed the fixed text, but in another version of the interdependence between manuscript and oral cultures, the fixed text can in fact overshadow and even shape personal experience, particularly in the case of verbatim memorization. Like Ginzburg's The cheese and the worms, Mary Carruthers's The book of memory explores the usage of books in medieval Europe but to a very different end. She highlights the fact that medieval culture was fundamentally memorial in the same way that modern culture is fundamentally documentary. That is, while "texts" are now roughly synonymous with books, in a memorial culture the text existed over and above the written page or visible instantiation, the book being only one way among several to assist in remembering the text, in provisioning and cueing the memory.231 To explain by way of example, she cites the case of Heloise, the pupil and lover of Abelard (1079–1142), who, just before taking the veil, justified her action by reciting the ethical exemplar of Cornelia in Lucan's poem "Pharsalia":

O noble husband,
Too great for me to wed, was it my fate
To bend that lofty head? What prompted me
To marry you and bring about your fall?
Now claim your due, and see me gladly pay.232

Unlike Menocchio, who disregarded a passage's original context, Heloise quotes a verse that is only understood by going back to the original. Cornelia was about to offer herself in sacrifice to the gods, just as Heloise will sacrifice her life by entering the convent. Carruthers writes that this poem was within Heloise's memory and helped to make up her experience; Heloise did not so much "see herself" as Cornelia, but Cornelia's experience—through the process of memorization—had been made hers as well.233 Carruthers further comments:

A modern woman would be very uncomfortable to think that she was facing the world with a "self" constructed out of bits and pieces of great authors of the past, yet I think in large part that is exactly what a medieval self or "character" was. Saying this does not, I think, exclude a conception of individuality, for every person had domesticated and familiarized these commones loci, these pieces of the public memory. It does underscore the profound degree to which memory was considered to be the prerequisite for character itself. . . . Perhaps here as clearly as anywhere else in ancient and medieval culture, the fundamental symbiosis of memorized reading and ethics can be grasped, for each is a matter of stamping the body-soul, of charakter.234

Carruthers is here playing with the word "character," the Latin derivation of which is "to stamp" or "impress."235

With the poem recited by Heloise in mind, let us turn to another woman about to sacrifice herself for what she likewise sees as a greater good. The wife of Liu Changqing 劉長卿 (d. late 600s CE) of Pei first lost her husband and then ten years later lost her only son, her resulting anguish driving her to self-mutilation. The other wives of the Liu family pitied her and attempted to dissuade her from this pointless and
extreme act, but Liu Changqin's wife persisted: "The Songs says, 'Do not disgrace your ancestors, but transmit the cultivation of their virtue.' Therefore I am prepared to do injury to myself in order to make known my emotions" (詩云：無忝爾祖，孝悌惟讓。是以燀自刑罰，以明我情). 236 Like the "Pharsalia" for Heloise, the Songs canon poem made up part of the experiences of Liu Changqin's wife, 237 and again the original context of the quoted passage may be useful in understanding the latter's intentions. The poem was addressed to the subjugated descendants of the Shang, beseeching them to remain obedient to their new lords. As outsiders who had married into the Liu family, the Liu wives were expected to shift their allegiance to the ancestors of a new household—a topic to be explored in Part III of this book—and self-mutilation was one way of staying loyal to their new family, by making marriage out of it and into another family out of the question. 238 The Liu wives were to use this historical event, internalized through the mnemonic of verse, to organize their own experiences.

Above we encountered several early thinkers, ranging from Mencius and Xunzi to Wang Chong and the literati in the Analysis of the salt and iron monopolies, arguing for what Carruthers calls "the fundamental symbiosis of memorized reading and ethics." As Wang Chong wrote, referring to the ideal scholar, by "reciting and intoning [the sages'] day and night, he takes on the conduct of the sage." In fact, "symbiosis" aptly depicts this relationship between the intoned text and the scholar's nature, because Wang Chong also draws an analogy of white silk gauze rubbing against dark silks, taking on dark colors without itself having been dyed. In other words, the absorption of literature can subconsciously impress the reader's character and actions. Recitation provided a means for returning to the root and regaining the privileged position of antiquity. Thus unlike the Ginzburg model, in which personal experience and oral tradition took precedence over the fixed or written text, here the fixed or written text takes priority, organizing and even creating personal experience through memorization. 239

If both were possible, what determined whether the text took the primary or the secondary role? Perhaps the answer lay in the age at which a person mastered the text. Menocchio was mostly a self-educated miller, and we know from the surviving records that it was only later in life that he acquired many of the texts from which he adaptively cites. As seen above, verbatim text memorizers in early imperial China learned the art of recitation in childhood and have their principal texts memorized usually before the age of fifteen or twenty, if not much earlier. Over the course of the Han, they became the product of a canonical curriculum with the goal of official advancement. With such memorization taking place in one's formative years, it is less surprising that what one recited came to shape how one viewed the world, that the text was usually primary for the Han lettered populace. 240

While Inking and Chanting played their joint roles in early imperial China, what of the method for longevity they purportedly transmitted? Although Zhuangzi's enigmatic passage cannot fully express how the Dao actually fostered longevity, it is of interest to us that chanting and writing are indeed direct bestowers of a kind of longevity. Above we saw that Owen described how early commentators equated "intoning" (yong 诵) with "lasting long" (yong 永), since the fixed text could travel across time and space unlike normal speech. Inking and Chanting are partnered media responsible for imbuing longevity upon knowledge from the past.

An odd difference of opinion between Sima Qian and Ban Gu about a particular historical event indirectly demonstrates how writing and recitation were deemed equal preservers of the past. In 213 BCE the Qin attempted to control the circulation of written texts, particularly texts that might be used to evaluate Qin rule because they offered alternative historical and theoretical systems to the Qin. With the empire unified eight years earlier, the Qin court saw no need to draw upon ideas systems better suited to the earlier age of the Three Dynasties, the age of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties prior to unification in 221 BCE. The state therefore destroyed texts, but the ideas in them survived the short-lived dynasty, and Sima Qian gives credit to manuscript culture: "The reason why the Songs and Documents appeared again was that many of them were stored in people's houses, but the historical records were only stored in the Zhou palace and so were destroyed. What a pity! What a pity!" (《詩》《書》所以復見者，多藏人家，而史記獨藏周室，以為滅。惜哉，惜哉！). 241 The Qin people had apparently hidden away physical copies of the Songs and Documents, thus assuring their endurance. Ban Gu gives a different explanation for the survival of the canonical texts, at least with respect to the Songs canon: "The reason why [the Songs canon]
remained intact when it encountered the Qin [book burning] is because it was recited and chanted and not just confined to bamboo and silk documents." Whether via material or memorial transmission, a substantial number of texts survived the Qin bibliocaust, and it has even been argued that the destruction of texts in the Qin may have prompted scholars to write down traditions that had previously depended upon oral transmission alone.

Why did Sima Qian and Ban Gu recognize different media for the survival of the classics? Perhaps it is because these historians and their cohorts themselves possessed different relationships to the classics. In Ban Gu's era officials were steeped in the classics from childhood, learning them through memorization, whereas in Sima Qian's era, that type of education by memorization was only just beginning to affect court ideology. The reception of the classics itself had undergone a significant change, a fact that is essential to the understanding of early imperial public memory. On either end of the Western Han two famous rulers firmly held power to short-term dynasties, but whereas the First Emperor of Qin admitted his lack of recitation skills and his dislike for classicists, Wang Mang of Xin was well trained as a reciter of classicism and closely imitated his heroes. Ban Gu groups them together into the same personality type, and then he notes, "Previously, the Qin burned the Songs and Documents canons to establish its own discourse, but Wang Mang chanted the Six Arts [i.e., the classicist corpus] to embellish his licentious words." Their ambitions were the same, but their approaches to the classics were very different. In two centuries between the two rulers, how did the classics gain such breadth of influence?

Modern scholarship has repeatedly scouring the content of classicism to explain the so-called Confucian victory of the Western Han, but no convincing scenario has come to light. When Emperor Wu brought academicians specializing in the Songs, Documents, and so forth to court around 136 BCE, it was part of a larger trend of attracting specialists in various fields, and even the term used to label the Confucian "classics" or "canons" (jing 经) was not unique to this corpus. Emperor Wu's patronage was not exceptionally generous, and the academicians then disappear from the historical records for roughly eighty years, imperial support of the "classicists" (ru 儒) in fact waxing and waning throughout the Han.

The classicists represented diverse interests—from advising the emperor on matters of state to orchestrating entertainments, from overseeing rituals to interpreting omens—and they themselves regularly lamented their own absence of clear agenda and lack of cohesion among themselves. Even their overall interpretive focus of the Confucian corpus itself was never static. Their rise to power "remains a mystery," as Michael Nylan concludes. Yet in light of the evidence provided here, we might speculate that classicism's content was secondary in terms of classicists securing their foothold at court and that it was instead their training in lengthy verbatim recall that initially made them useful as bureaucrats. We might filter this speculation down into a need, a fulfillment of that need, and then a byproduct of that fulfillment:

1. **The need.** The demand for well-trained people gifted with good memories remained constant throughout the Han, regardless of the content of their memorizations. Dated 186 BCE and long before the Confucian "victory," the Zhangjiashan regulations (described above) show how lengthy verbatim recall, proved through testing, secured employment; fifty years later, Gongqun Hong also established a recitation benchmark for officials seeking advancement. Eastern Han sources also refer to testing the memory of would-be officials. That is, training in lengthy verbatim recall was in itself a useful clerking skill that could be objectively examined. The bureaucratic state needed mnemonics.

2. **The fulfillment of that need.** Due to the nature of their tradition, the classicists were in the best position to fulfill this demand. Training in the recitation of long texts was at the heart of their program, a fact that both classicists and nonclassicists recognized. The classicists were intense memorizers of the canonical works, "reciting and inquiring them day and night," whereas those we now label Daoists, Mohists, legalists, and so forth all dismissed such high devotion to fixed texts.

3. **The byproduct of that fulfillment.** Once classicists began to fill the bureaucratic ranks, their successful education program became widespread, and once classicist content became the subject of that memory training in general (especially at court and among the heirs apparent), court rhetoric and policy adopted that content, too. Both processes took a while, a generation or two, but once established, became entrenched. That is, the children growing up indoctrinated with classicist primers and canons subsequently shifted the court over to espousing classicist values.

Thus we might speculate—and this is only a speculation—that the so-called Confucian victory at court branched out from this basic need to find good reciters who would serve the state. Their bookishness gave classicists the advantage in competitions of lengthy verbatim recall,
which is why they began to pervade the court in the Western Han. It was for their medium, not their message. Yet once at court, that recited message then gradually colored the court’s rhetoric, indoctrinated the court’s thinking, and, through the court’s need to fill the bureaucracy, spread outward from there.

On one hand, classicism began like the modern liberal arts degree, the actual content of which students might not directly use in their future careers, but their college-level training in itself still greatly improved their chances of securing and succeeding in future employment. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the power of those texts once they had been committed to memory from childhood, their content coloring subsequent experience. By the end of the Eastern Han, the classicist story had gained so much breadth that it is even credited for protracting the Han’s very existence. In his retrospective appraisal of Eastern Han classicist scholars in general, Fan Ye credits this textual infrastructure with a great deal of integrity because without it, the Han would have simply ended fifty years earlier than it did:

自桓、靈之間，君臣好佛，朝政日陵，國際屬喪，自中書以下，靡不害其崩離；而禮儀之臣，亦其聞諫之謀，家俊之夫，恊於廟社之議者，人顧先王言也，下憂逆順故也。

From the time of Emperors Huan [r. 147–8 B.C.E] and Ling [r. 168–7 B.C.E], the noble Dao had been cast aside like chaff. The court’s network deteriorated by the day, and the state’s fracture lines were opening up repeatedly. There was no one of even middling intelligence on down who wasn’t aware that it was falling apart. Yet the reason why powerful subjects stayed their plans of stealthy theft and why steadfast men were bent low by the discussions of rustic scholars was because the people chanted the words of past kings and because those below respected the boundary between obedience and disobedience. 14

Even when the dynasty faced its imminent demise, the Han public memory was now held up by an intangible but very real underpinning of these memorized and chanted texts. Murmuring and meditating, the lettered populace shared an invisible infrastructure, a formalized public memory that was strong enough to withstand the tangible threat of collapse. Inking and Chanting had successfully transmitted their secret of longevity to the dynasty itself.

In the course of this book, I will endeavor to explore how these parameters—names, age, and kinship—inserted people into the Han’s “memorial” culture, a word that usually has implications other than memorization and recitation, but this ambiguity is useful. In the conclusion to The book of memory, Carruthers likewise highlights the double meaning of the term “memorial”:

I found, too, that I was dealing in large measure with unstated assumptions on the part of the medieval writers I was studying, chiefly their belief that all human learning is memorative in nature. It is that continuing belief that has led me to emphasize the memorial basis of the medieval cultures of the West. I call them “memorial,” knowing that to modern readers the word has connotations only of death, but hoping that I can adjust their understanding of it—as I have had to do my own—to a more medieval idea: making present the voices of what is past, not to eunuch either the past or the present, but to give them life together in a common place to both in memory. 14

Carruthers here acknowledges how the label of “memorial” evokes images of remembering the dead, and in the Han as well, we will find that much evidence for what structured and occupied the public memory can be found in eulogies, threnodies, and inscriptions from the memorial culture of the ancestral cult. But in the background of public memory will also be this early emphasis on memorization and recitation from childhood, this explicit value placed on the faculty of remembering in itself. Furthermore, as all five parts of this book demonstrate, the content of what was memorized and recited—the sages and heroes of the past—will supply explicit anchor points for more recent forebears. Jing Yun in his stele inscription was both a Confucius and a Shun, remembered because the texts telling us of those two worthies—namely the Analects and the Documents respectively—figured into Han memorative learning. Particularly in Part V, the newly dead will be expressly likened to the appropriate ancient champions, garnering a particular kind of “coattail immortality” of being remembered through association. Overall, the classics provided the big story against which more recent narratives in that public memory found their setting.