

General Preface I

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a series of important archaeological discoveries has greatly enriched contemporary scholars' understanding of ancient China. Among the many archaeological excavations, several discoveries of Warring State, Qin and Han manuscripts stand out as milestones: the Han-dynasty bamboo-slips unearthed at Yinqueshan 銀雀山, the silk manuscripts unearthed at Mawangdui 馬王堆, and the Warring States Chu 楚 manuscripts from Guodian 郭店. The publication of these ancient manuscripts has attracted the greatest interest from the scholarly world, and has had a profound influence on the development of contemporary Chinese scholarship. Scholars both at home and abroad have approached these new documents from different scholarly backgrounds to explore such different topics as ancient history, ancient literature and paleography, bringing manuscript studies to the forefront of contemporary scholarship.

The profound influence that the discovery of these manuscripts has had on contemporary Chinese scholarship is a sign of their extraordinary significance for the study of ancient China. As one of the great civilizations of the world, Chinese civilization has had a long and unbroken history, and its writing system is the only one in the world that is still in use today and that still maintains its ancient form. For this reason, there is a continuous tradition of literature written in Chinese characters, making China the richest source of literature in the world. Even though Chinese history saw the calamity of the burning of the books during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), after the

establishment of the Han dynasty Emperor Hui of Han 漢惠帝 (r. 194–188 BCE) abolished the Qin proscription on literature and thereafter there were continuous efforts during the remainder of the dynasty to restore pre-Qin literature. This established a firm foundation for the transmission of classical literature over the next two thousand years, throughout which time the sacred place of classical literature was never shaken.

In modern times, the prestige of the ancient classics was called into question by the rise of the new historiography of the “doubting antiquity” movement. Nevertheless, against the background of the “doubting antiquity” movement’s attack on classical literature, repeated discoveries of such paleographic sources as the oracle-bone inscriptions and Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, as well as the Warring States, Qin and Han manuscripts had an especially important significance. In 1925, while teaching the course “New Evidence of Ancient History” at Tsinghua University’s Institute of Sinology, Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) announced his famous principle of “dual evidence.” In this, he found a middle ground between traditional scholars’ excessive belief in antiquity and the modern excessive doubting of antiquity. What is more, he also demonstrated the value of combining “paper sources” and “underground sources.”¹ Some of the Warring States, Qin and Han manuscripts discovered since the 1970s correspond to texts in the received literature, and these manuscripts have resolved certain questions of long standing concerning those texts; some have confirmed the authenticity and date of texts that have been doubted, while many others provide hitherto unknown sources for the literature of the period. More important still, these unearthed manuscripts allow an entirely new understanding of how ancient texts were created, transmitted, modified, and systematized.

These discoveries have also furthered the development of contemporary Chinese scholarship, especially as represented in the fields of history, literature and paleography. This has prompted the scholarly world in general

1 Wang Guowei 王國維, *Gu shi xin zheng: Wang Guowei zuihou de jiangyi* 古史新證——王國維最後的講義 (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 1994).

to rethink the history of Chinese scholarship. For instance, Li Xueqin 李學勤 (1933–2019) spoke of “leaving behind the doubting antiquity period,”² and proposed instead to “rewrite the history of scholarship” “based on new materials, new viewpoints, new methods, new heights, and under new historical conditions.”³ He also argued that “rewriting the history of scholarship should especially include a renewed emphasis on the history of twentieth-century scholarship.”⁴ Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 has proposed “reestablishing classical studies,” suggesting that “the first of the recent reestablishments of Chinese classical studies began in the 1920s,” when “doubting antiquity gradually became the main current of classical studies, to a considerable extent replacing traditional classicism.” According to Qiu, because of the great amount of paleographic materials unearthed beginning in the 1950s—and especially of manuscripts discovered beginning in the 1970s—Chinese scholars then “began the second reestablishment of classical studies.”⁵ This rethinking of Chinese scholarship has not only had an enormous influence on scholars within China, but has also attracted the notice of Western scholars. In the Preface to his book *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts*, Edward L. Shaughnessy said:

“[Professor Li’s call to leave behind the doubting antiquity period] has had a resounding effect in China, numerous books and articles published in the intervening ten years featuring the word ‘rewriting.’ Even in the West, the notion of rewriting China’s early history, if not the word itself, inspired the recently

2 Li Xueqin 李學勤, *Zouchu yigu shidai* 走出疑古時代 (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1994).

3 Li Xueqin 李學勤, “Yigu sichao yu chonggou gu shi” 疑古思潮與重構古史, *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* 中國文化研究 1999.1: 4; rpt. Li Xueqin, *Chongxie xueshushi* 重寫學術史 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 2.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, “Zhongguo gudianxue chongjian zhong yinggai zhuyi de wenti” 中國古典學重建中應該注意的問題, *Beijing daxue Zhongguo guwenxian yanjiu zhongxin jikan* 北京大學中國古文獻研究中心集刊 2 (2001): 4; “Chutu wenxian yu gudianxue chongjian” 出土文獻與古典學重建, *Chutu wenxian* 出土文獻 4 (2013): 1–18.

published *Cambridge History of Ancient China*.⁶

Expressions such as “leaving behind the doubting antiquity period,” “rewriting the history of scholarship,” and “reestablishing classical studies” surely show the great significance of these discoveries of Warring States, Qin and Han manuscripts.

In this context, the appearance of the Tsinghua University Warring States bamboo slips (commonly referred to as the “Tsinghua manuscripts”) can be said to have “met the moment,” and to have provided a further impetus to the “rewriting” of Chinese scholarship. In 2008, Li Xueqin encouraged Tsinghua University to salvage this corpus of invaluable manuscripts from the Hong Kong antique market. Based on AMS ¹⁴C analysis, the bamboo slips can be dated to about 305±30 BCE, which is to say toward the end of the middle of the Warring States period. This is consistent with the opinion of the group of experts that Tsinghua University convened to evaluate them. As of the end of 2023, after more than ten years of work preserving, editing, and studying the more than 2,500 separate slips, thirteen volumes, including sixty-seven different texts, have already been published. We have already finished more than two-thirds of the editorial work, and the overall picture of these manuscripts is already perfectly clear.

The contents of the Tsinghua manuscripts are extremely rich. Just the texts already published include long-lost texts of chapters of the *Shang shu* 尚書 *Exalted Scriptures* and *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書 *Leftover Zhou Scriptures*, Western Zhou poems not seen in the *Shi jing* 詩經 *Classic of Poetry*, historical materials of the Three Dynasties period through the Springs and Autumns and Warring States periods, as well as astronomical and hemerological texts. These texts touch on the core topics of Chinese civilization, and their publication has received the attention of scholars in all the related fields and has added invaluable new materials for the rewriting of ancient Chinese history.

6 Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2006), 1.

After having been buried for more than 2300 years, the Tsinghua manuscripts have now finally been exposed to the light of day, allowing us to see something of the intellectual culture of the pre-Qin period; how fortunate this has been for those of us who study ancient China! Nevertheless, it is disappointing that these slips did not come to us by way of archaeological excavation, but rather were robbed from some unknown tomb, destroying the context from which they were taken and losing whatever other objects may have been buried in the same tomb. This has given us many problems in terms of preserving, editing and studying the slips, but the team at Tsinghua University's Research and Conservation Center for Unearthed Texts (清華大學出土文獻研究與保護中心) has worked very hard to preserve and edit them. We have made use of the most advanced technology to produce enhanced images of the texts; we have made every effort to put the slips, most of which came to us in great disarray, back in order; and, to the extent possible, we have attempted to return them to their original appearance. On this basis, the editorial team has produced transcriptions of the text, as well as notes on disputed characters, all of which has been published in the formal volumes that have made it possible for other scholars also to study the texts.

The publication of each of these volumes has stimulated wide attention within China and even abroad, such that both Chinese and foreign scholars have produced a great many studies of the manuscripts. At the same time that foreign scholars have written articles about the Tsinghua manuscripts, they have also translated some of them into foreign languages, making them available to those who are unable to read Chinese. However, these translations have been occasional, based on individual scholars' own interests. This suggested to us the need to organize a systematic effort to translate all of the manuscripts. But this is truly an intimidating project. After all, these texts are over 2300 years old, and even if the basic editorial work has been relatively well done, there are still many characters and phrases that still have not been explained, and for some of the manuscripts there is no scholarly consensus at all regarding their meaning. Because of this, one can imagine

just how difficult it would be to translate these texts into a foreign language, not to mention one of a completely different culture. It demands that the translators not only thoroughly understand the language of the texts, but also their historical background. This requires the very greatest of scholarly competence.

Fortunately, the internationally renowned scholar Edward L. Shaughnessy has already succeeded in translating some of the Tsinghua manuscripts, and his translation of the *Yi Zhou shu* texts has allowed us to see the dawn of this work. In 2019, while Shaughnessy was visiting Tsinghua University, we proposed this translation project to him and invited him to join us in a cooperative effort. After careful deliberation and much communication back and forth, Shaughnessy has organized a team of translators and is working together with us to bring this giant project to fruition. At the beginning of 2020, when this effort was just taking shape, we agreed to work together to make available the results of our research on the manuscripts and to provide the best possible conditions for the translations. I myself organized the editorial team at Tsinghua University's Research and Conservation Center for Unearthed Texts to produce revised editions of the manuscripts, to reorganize them according to their contents, to provide more detailed notes, and to translate them into modern Chinese, to be made available to the English translators. Shaughnessy has been responsible for organizing the team of excellent international scholars to undertake the translations, and is responsible for the quality of their work. After considerable consultation, we have settled on the principles of translation, the format, the framework of the series, and the publisher. As of the end of 2021, this project was finally on the way forward, with the Tsinghua team and the English translation team both making progress toward the publication of the revised editions of the manuscripts and of the translations.

The translation and publication of the Tsinghua manuscripts is an enterprise of great significance, but it is also one that will require a long-term effort. We hope that this effort will advance still further the scholarship on the Tsinghua manuscripts, and we hope too that it will also contribute to

scholarly cooperation between Chinese and foreign scholars. We sincerely hope both that all scholars will give enthusiastic aid and support to this project, and will provide criticism and suggestions.

For my part, I am extraordinarily pleased and honored to have the opportunity to work with Shaughnessy and his team to undertake this English translation. As the first volumes of the series have become available to readers, I am happy to express my highest admiration and gratitude to Shaughnessy and the international team of translators he has assembled. I also express heartfelt thanks to Tsinghua University for its wholehearted support of this project, as well as to Tsinghua University Press and to all those friends whose hard work has made possible the publication of these English translations.

General Preface II

Edward L. Shaughnessy

Early in 2006, rumors about an important new cache of ancient bamboo-slip manuscripts began to circulate on the Hong Kong antiques market. This was but the latest in a rash of antiquities coming on the market as a result of tomb robbing in China that began in the early 1990s. Reprehensible though tomb robbing is, robbing both the ancients of their dignity and also the modern science of knowledge about the context from which the antiquities came, cultural organs within China, especially museums and universities, have taken it upon themselves to “rescue” and repatriate these products of traditional Chinese civilization. This has been especially true of bamboo-slip manuscripts, the writings on which are regarded as the highest expression of this civilization. Thus, in 2008, Tsinghua University of Beijing dispatched a small group of select scholars led by Li Xueqin 李學勤, at the time universally acknowledged as the leading expert on all aspects of early Chinese cultural history, to go to Hong Kong to examine this new cache of manuscripts. According to an account by Liu Guozhong 劉國忠, now a member of Tsinghua University’s Research and Conservation Center for Unearthed Texts (清華大學出土文獻研究與保護中心), once Li determined the slips to be authentic, the university moved quickly to arrange for their purchase.¹

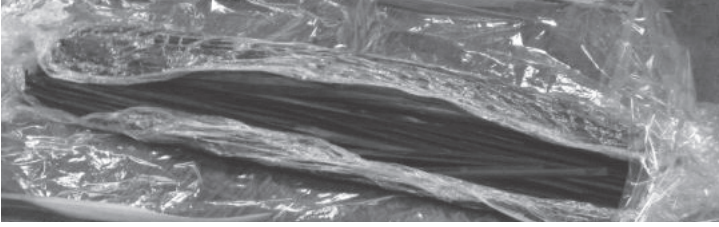
The bamboo slips, totaling nearly 2,500 slips or fragments of slips in all, arrived at Tsinghua University in July 2008. When the plastic wrapping in

1 Liu Guozhong, *Introduction to the Tsinghua Bamboo-Strip Manuscripts*, tr. Christopher J. Foster and William N. French (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 51–54. Tsinghua University claimed that the slips had been donated by an anonymous alumnus.

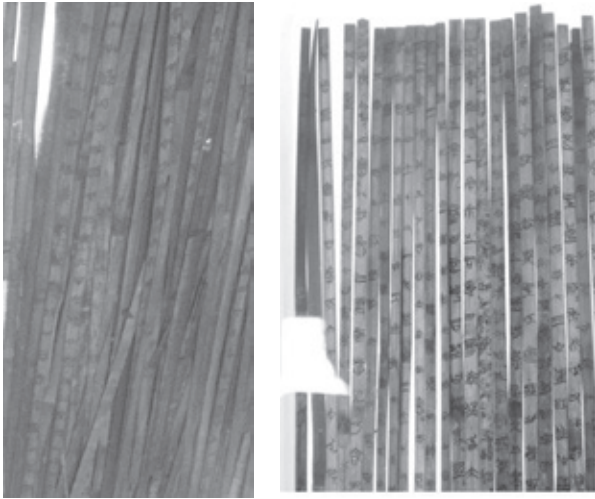
which the slips had been transported to Beijing was opened, scholars there discovered that a form of mold was developing on many of them. They immediately commenced intensive efforts to preserve the slips; these efforts, which required almost three months, were ultimately successful.² A preliminary inventory conducted during the preservation work identified 2,388 slips or fragments bearing writing, to which unique serial numbers were assigned. Subsequent work with the slips turned up writing on another hundred or so pieces, such that the total number of fragments bearing writing is close to 2,500. Also at this time, pieces without writing were sent to the Peking University Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) Laboratory for ¹⁴C testing; the result was a date of 305 BCE \pm 30 years. This matched well the evaluation of both Tsinghua researchers and also a group of China's senior-most paleographers, who were brought to Beijing to evaluate the slips in October of 2008; they agreed that the calligraphy and format of the slips is consistent with other slips known to date to the end of the Middle Warring States period or the beginning of the Late Warring States period, i.e., roughly 300 BCE. The final step in the preservation work was the making of high-resolution photographs of the slips; thereafter, it was from these photographs that the Tsinghua editorial team would work, while the original slips were sealed away in a climate-controlled environment submerged in trays of distilled water.³

2 For a detailed narrative of this preservation work, see Liu, *Introduction to the Tsinghua Bamboo-Strip Manuscripts*, 54–69. Liu was one of three researchers tasked by Tsinghua to work with the original slips, and he kept a detailed diary of all of their efforts, so his account should be authoritative.

3 The tomb from which the slips came was almost certainly filled with water, providing an anaerobic environment conducive to the preservation of organic material such as bamboo. It is for this reason that slips such as these, once unearthed, are generally preserved submerged in water.



Tsinghua Slips arrive at Tsinghua University; 15 July 2008



Tsinghua Slips before and after being returned to natural color



Tsinghua Slips in trays of distilled water