



China Perspectives

APPROACHING THE TSINGHUA BAMBOO SLIPS

Guozhong Liu



Approaching the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips

This book provides a detailed introduction to the study of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips, explaining the preservation and analysis of the artifacts and their significance in historical research of the pre-Qin period.

The Tsinghua Bamboo Slips are a collection of Chinese texts inscribed on approximately 2,500 bamboo slips. They were excavated from a Warring States Period tomb and are now preserved at Tsinghua University. The book delves into the traditions and discoveries of bamboo manuscripts in China and discusses the preservation and research of the slips, covering the procedures of artifact processing, authentication, digitization, editing, and interpretation. The manuscripts are remarkable for their quantity, period of creation, and distinctive content coverage. They contain important historical documents that differ from or are missing from the extant literature. The analysis of these texts helps to unravel some of the unresolved mysteries in pre-Qin historical studies and illuminates scientific achievements of ancient China previously unknown to the world.

This book is essential reading for scholars and students of Chinese studies, pre-Qin history, and early literacy. It will also appeal to general readers interested in ancient Chinese history and culture.

Guozhong Liu is a professor at Tsinghua University, China. His expertise lies in ancient Chinese history, specifically the study of bamboo and silk. He is particularly focused on the research area of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips.

China Perspectives

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Guozhong Liu

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Contents

<i>Foreword to the Chinese Edition</i>	vii
<i>Preface to the Chinese Edition</i>	ix
1 Written on Bamboo and Silk	1
2 Kongbi and Jizhong: Discoveries of Bamboo Texts in Ancient China	9
3 A Century of Bamboo and Silk Discoveries	20
4 Rescue and Preservation of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips	39
5 Authentication and Photography of the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips	52
6 Editing and Interpreting the Tsinghua Manuscripts	61
7 Mysteries of the <i>Shangshu</i>	72
8 King Wen's Will	86
9 The <i>Jinteng</i> and the Duke of Zhou's "Stay" in the East	102
10 Prognostication of a Great Dream: King Wen of Zhou Receiving the Mandate and the Tsinghua-Slip <i>Chengwu</i>	123
11 New Knowledge in the <i>Xinian</i> (1)	137
12 New Knowledge in the <i>Xinian</i> (2)	163

13	Discussions on Some Political Figures in the Tsinghua Manuscripts	180
14	The Science and Thoughts in the Tsinghua Bamboo Manuscripts	200
15	An Initial Step	244
	<i>Epilogue</i>	248
	<i>Appendices</i>	252
	<i>Index</i>	266

Foreword to the Chinese Edition

Dr. Guozhong Liu's *Approaching the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips* is the first work that systematically introduces the Tsinghua bamboo slips and their collation to the academic community and the general public.

"Tsinghua Slips," the shortened form for the Warring States bamboo slips collected by Tsinghua University, has gained widespread recognition due to recent media coverage. These highly valuable Warring States bamboo slips were initially discovered in the Hong Kong antiquities market in the winter of 2006, amidst a flood of counterfeit slips. It took numerous twists and turns before their true value was verified. Thanks to an alumnus' generous donation, this collection found its way to Tsinghua University on a scorching day in July 2018, marking the beginning of extensive efforts in its rescue preservation and editing.

Dr. Guozhong Liu has been extensively involved in all aspects of work related to the slips, including cleaning, protection, transcribing, and interpretation. His profound personal experience and significant contributions deserve recognition. It is worth mentioning that the editing process for the slips is exceedingly difficult and challenging, involving indescribable hardships. Dr. Liu's unwavering dedication and immense sacrifices toward this endeavor are widely acknowledged and deeply appreciated.

Those familiar with the study of bamboo and silk manuscripts will undoubtedly recognize Dr. Guozhong Liu for his extensive expertise and profound contributions in this field, which are reflected in his numerous published dissertations and books. Many readers may be acquainted with his notable work *Gudai boshu (Ancient Silk Manuscripts)*, published by Cultural Relics Press, where he adeptly elucidates intricate theories through clear and eloquent writing. *Approaching the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips* serves as yet another testament to his exceptional ability to convey complex ideas in a concise manner.

The Tsinghua Slips have attracted widespread attention due to their inherent nature and content. These slips were all inscribed prior to the Qin bibliocaust and primarily consist of classics and historical texts, which are of immense significance for the study of ancient Chinese history and culture. Many scholars argue that the discovery of these slips is as significant as uncovering classics from the wall of Confucius' residence in the Western Han Dynasty or the Jizhong 汲冢 cemetery of

the Western Jin 西晋 era. Consequently, editing, transcribing, and annotating these slips pose considerable difficulties and challenges.

For historical reasons, it may not be proper to compare our situation with that of Kong Anguo 孔安国, Xun Xu 荀勖, and Shu Xi 束皙, who lived in ancient times, but the problems we face are rather similar or the same. Among the classics from Confucius' wall was an ancient-script edition of the *Shangshu* 尚书, and the Tsinghua-slip manuscripts include some twenty texts from the *Shangshu* or of the same genre as the *Shangshu*. What was unearthed from Jizhong was the *Zhushu jinian* 竹书纪年, while the Tsinghua manuscripts contain a similar historical annal, the *Xinian* 系年. Any attempt to edit such bamboo slip classics would undoubtedly be a demanding academic task.

As readers can easily see from *Approaching the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips*, especially from some of the articles in the appendix of this book, our understanding of the content of the bamboo manuscripts has gone through a difficult process. In the beginning when the media introduced this collection of slips, some statements were either premature or even totally wrong. For example, on a slip were sentences similar to the ending of the *Shangshu: Kang Gao* 尚书·康诰. We wrongly believed that the text was the *Kang Gao*, which proved to be wrong later. The annotations of the *Baoxun* 保训 published at first were just preliminary, many of which have been revised today. In this book, Dr. Liu Guozhong has clearly displayed such a process. All through the work, we often cannot help thinking about what can be definitely right or wrong. The real criterion, we believe, lies in the efforts of all.

“Tsinghua Slips” is so rich in content. On the one hand, it is our responsibility to preserve, edit, and publish the manuscripts, while on the other hand, further in-depth research on these slips rests on the shoulders of the entire academic community. It is our hope that through Dr. Liu's book, readers will understand what we have done and provide us with suggestions so that we can do a better job.

Xueqin Li

September 14, 2010

Research and Conservation Center for Unearthed Texts
Tsinghua University

Preface to the Chinese Edition

A Special Meeting

It was a cool and refreshing autumn day on October 14, 2008. In the afternoon, a special meeting was being held in Conference Room 327 of the main building in the beautiful Tsinghua University. Eleven scholars from Peking University, Fudan University, Jilin University, Wuhan University, Sun Yat-Sen University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the National Cultural Heritage Administration, the China Academy of Cultural Heritage, the Shanghai Museum and the Jingzhou Museum were busy with a heated discussion. Surprisingly, none of the leaders and faculty from Tsinghua University could be seen in the room, though they were the hosts of the conference. Instead, they were all in the corridor out of the room, waiting quietly. The scene conjured doubt in any beholder. What conference was it? What were these experts discussing?

In fact, these eleven experts were invited by Tsinghua University to attend the Symposium on the Authentication of the Bamboo Slips Collected by Tsinghua University. On July 15, three months earlier, Tsinghua University acquired a collection of cultural relics, including bamboo slips. These experts came from all over the country to identify the age and evaluate the content and academic value of these bamboo slips. Among them were archaeologist Prof. Li Boqian 李伯谦 from Peking University, paleographer Prof. Qiu Xikui 裘錫奎 from Fudan University, etc. All of them were representatively the most prestigious scholars of such disciplines as archeology, history, paleography, and ancient philology in China. The topic under discussion was what phrasing should be used to accurately and objectively state their appraisal of the Tsinghua Slips.

After full discussion, the experts finally submitted to Tsinghua University the report *Opinions on the Authentication of the Tsinghua Slips*.

This is an important document that would surely go down in history. The report gave a very high appraisal of the bamboo slips collected by Tsinghua University. It reads,

Judging from the shape, constitution, and written characters, the team of experts affirms that this collection of bamboo slips are bamboo manuscripts of the Warring States period unearthed in the Chu region.

The bamboo manuscripts are rich in content. By preliminary observation, they mainly consist of slips of corpus, among which are classics and

histories, important in Chinese history and traditional culture. Many of them are of great academic value and have never been seen in the received corpus of bamboo slips from the pre-Qin period. Moreover, they are of great significance to the research of the shape and constitution of bamboo slips and ancient philology.

The appraisal team agrees that these Warring States bamboo slips are extremely valuable historical artifacts relevant to the core content of Chinese traditional culture. They are an unprecedented discovery, which will definitely be valued by scholars both at home and abroad. Furthermore, they will exert a profound and everlasting impact on many disciplines such as history, archaeology, paleography, and philology.

When the experts finished reading out the “*Opinions*,” the whole venue thundered with joy, and everyone was immersed in ecstasy.

What kind of cultural relics are these bamboo slips that made these learned scholars sing high their praise? What stories are associated with these artifacts? What impact will they exert on the research of Chinese history and culture? In this book, we will review and reflect on these special artifacts and the research process related to them. In addition, we will make an introduction to the acquisition of the Tsinghua bamboo slips, their protection and research, and the academic value of this collection of bamboo slips. Any suggestions and corrections will be appreciated if there happen to be some mistakes.

Translators’ Note

Translating *Approaching the Tsinghua Bamboo Slips* has been a challenging and formidable task for us. When we received the prestigious funding from the Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2021 to translate this remarkable work from Chinese into English, we felt an immense sense of pride in sharing the profound revelations of the Tsinghua Slips with a wider audience in the Western world.

The final form of our translation would not have been possible without unwavering support from a group of distinguished professionals. Foremost among them is Professor Guozhong Liu himself – the author of the book and an eminent archaeology scholar, who graciously assisted us whenever uncertainties arose regarding nuances embedded within the original text. Additionally, Professor Youzu He and Professor Yingchun Pan from Wuhan University’s School of History engaged in enlightening discussions with us, elucidating aspects related to ancient writing techniques and historical context. A cohort comprising English-language educators from Wuhan University’s School of Foreign Languages and Literature made significant contributions during the initial drafts. Their selfless dedication deserves utmost appreciation: Associate Professors Bo Liu, Fang Wen, and Mingyao Zhang; Dr. Cong Chen; and Mr. Jesse Barkin, who proofread and polished the translated text. Last but not least, we owe our gratitude to Ms. Wenqiong Lai and Ms. Jianhua Hao from Tsinghua University Press for their invaluable assistance.

1 Written on Bamboo and Silk

Section 1: The Rise and Fall of *Jianbo* in Ancient China

We know that the invention of writing is a great event for humanity and a milestone in human progress. With writing, people are able to record their experiences, inventions, and thoughts, and pass them on from generation to generation, thus younger generations can make use of their forefathers' experience and wisdom as a starting point for their own development. In addition, writing can be used for the creation of many immortal literary works. By reading, we can communicate with our ancestors from thousands of years ago, touching upon their souls and feeling their joys and sorrows. Without writing, each generation could not have learned from their forebears and would have had to start over from scratch, and consequently human progress and development would have been impossible. It is for this reason that the invention and use of writing are often recognized as an important symbol of human civilization.

The existence of writing goes hand in hand with the materials used for writing. As each of the early civilizations was unique, it is not surprising that the writing materials were equally diverse.

The ancient Egyptians made extensive use of a plant called papyrus, which was abundant in the Nile Delta. Papyrus is a plant similar to a reed, with triangular leaves. Its stalks can grow over 3 meters high, with a thickness comparable to that of a human wrist. The ancient Egyptians peeled off the outer skin of the stems of papyrus, cut it into narrow, thin slips along the grain of the fiber with a sharp knife, and placed the slips together vertically and crosswise. Then, they struck the slips with a wooden mallet to allow the juice to ooze out. When dried out, these long slips were permanently glued together and could be used as writing materials. Numerous such papyrus sheets and scrolls have been found in Egypt. The ancient Greeks and Romans used papyrus for writing as well. The English word "paper" can find its origin from "papyrus."

Early civilizations in West Asia, such as the Babylonians, carved their script onto clay tablets. Because the script was wedge-shaped, much like that of nail heads or arrows, this style of writing is known as cuneiform script.¹ The clay tablets with this kind of script became very hard when dried in the sun or by fire, making it possible for the writing or designs to be preserved for long periods. We call this

2 *Written on Bamboo and Silk*

kind of writing “clay-tablet manuscripts.” Such clay tablets have been discovered in large quantities in West Asia, and have consequently opened a door to our understanding of the early civilizations in West Asia. Although these clay tablets were cheap to produce and incredibly solid and durable, they also had a fatal drawback: They were extremely heavy. For instance, if we are to carve on clay tablets the content of a 50-page modern book (32-mo), we will end up with a clay “book” that weighs about 50 kilograms! Such heavy “books” surely would have been inconvenient to store and read.

Unlike the ancient Egyptians or Babylonians, the ancient Chinese used bamboo slips, wooden tablets,² or silk sheets as writing materials, which can be considered a major invention in ancient China.

The basic procedure for making bamboo slips is as follows. First, bamboo stalks are sawed into shorter ones following the joints in its stem, and then sliced into thin slips. Afterward, these slips are cut to the desired length, made thinner, and polished smooth. On the yellow side, characters are written in ink – thus a slip is completed. When making bamboo slips, the bamboo that is split open must be dried out over fire to remove moisture and kill insect eggs inside. The writing on such bamboo slips can be preserved for a relatively longer period. For convenient reading, the bamboo slips are bound together into volumes (册 *ce*). To fix the binding strings properly, small notches are often engraved on the right of the “yellow” side so that the binding strings do not slip off easily. The binding strings are often made of silk.³ Traces of silk binding strings have been discovered on some bamboo slips.

In areas where bamboo is not available, wooden slips are used. The process of making wooden slips is roughly the same as that of the bamboo slips.

All the characters on bamboo slips were written with brushes dipped in black ink. The brush was used quite early in China.⁴ On pottery vessels from the Neolithic Yangshao culture, evidence can be seen that a brush-like tool was used for drawing and writing; a pot bearing the character *wen* 文 written with a brush was excavated from ash pit H3403 at the Taosi site in Xiangfen, Shanxi Province. This site dates back to around 4,000 years ago, no later than the early Xia period. In Yinxu 殷墟 (a capital site of the late Shang Dynasty), there were oracle bones written with a brush rather than carved with a knife. As for the brushes used later to write on bamboo slips, their tips were mostly very stiff and thus were capable of writing very small characters. Some people may have the misconception that characters on bamboo slips were inscribed with a knife, which is incorrect. Knives were used to process bamboo slips; they were also used to scrape off erroneous characters, much like the erasers we use today. With a clear understanding of their function, no one will mistakenly assume that knives were used to inscribe characters on bamboo slips.

Nowadays, people have a pretty good understanding of oracle bones in the Shang and Zhou periods. In the Shang period, characters were inscribed on oracle bones and cast onto bronze vessels. However, it is a misunderstanding that oracle bones and bronze vessels were the earliest artifacts in China bearing characters. The oracle bone and bronze inscriptions were written for special needs. While oracle bones were the divination records of the Shang kings and nobles, and the bronze

inscriptions were cast to commemorate specific events, neither of them should be mistaken as truly popular texts. In the Shang period, more ordinary texts were written on slips and tablets made of bamboo or wood.

The “Duo shi” 多士 chapter of the *Shangshu* 尚书 is a written record of the Duke of Zhou 周公 admonishing the remnant people of the Shang Dynasty at the beginning of the Western Zhou. In it the Duke of Zhou says, “the ancestors of the Yin people had books (ce 册) and classics (dian 典).”⁵

The Chinese character ce 册 was written as 册 or 册⁶ on oracle bones. This is a pictograph in which the uneven vertical strokes represent slips of bamboo, while the central horizontal strokes represent the silk string used for binding. Therefore, the so-called ce were books made from bamboo slips. Likewise, the character for dian 典 in bronze inscriptions, which was written as 𠄎 (Shaobogui 召伯簋) and 𠄎 (Gebogui 格伯簋),⁷ has its upper part resembling the Chinese character 册 and the lower part 几 representing a shelf. The entire character may be interpreted as classics placed on a shelf to showcase their value. The Duke of Zhou said that the Shang dynasty had manuscripts written on bamboo (ce 册 and dian 典). This is evidence that bamboo slips were already commonly used as writing materials during the Shang Dynasty.

We also know from the oracle bone inscriptions that the Shang Dynasty had professional “Document Makers” (zuo ce 作册), historians whose job was to write documents on bamboo slips. This provided further evidence that bamboo slips were common writing materials during that period.

In fact, the very way Chinese characters are written is related to the unique aspect of writing on bamboo or wooden slips. Many of the pictographic Chinese characters have changed in their forms. A large majority of the characters for animals, such as “horse 马” or “pig 豕,” which are supposed to be on all fours, are vertical on the slips. This is not in line with the image of these animals in the general state of nature. This situation is related to the use of bamboo and wooden slips as the major writing materials in China. The long and narrow bamboo and wooden slips were well suited for writing long and thin vertical characters for animals. As a result, horizontal characters for animals vanished, and the “vertical” principle has been maintained to this day.⁸ This “vertical” feature of writing Chinese characters was already obvious in the Shang Dynasty texts, which is further evidence that the use of bamboo and wooden slips was already quite common at that time.

The custom of writing Chinese characters in columns of vertical lines is also closely associated with the use of bamboo and wooden slips. As scholars have pointed out, Chinese characters were arranged in columns from top to bottom and from right to left for obviously practical reasons.

When writing, the left hand held the slip while the right hand wrote characters. Usually, one line was written on one slip. Since the left hand held the slips, for convenience’s sake, blank slips were kept on the left side. When one slip was finished, it was put in order on the right side with the left hand, so that the used slips would not be mixed up with the blank ones. Under such circumstances, the lines of a text were always arranged in such a way that the

4 *Written on Bamboo and Silk*

first finished slip was placed to the furthestmost right position, and subsequent slips were placed in order from right to left. Moreover, slips in the left hand were held up straight, perpendicularly, just like any long and thin objects are normally held in one's fingers. Thus, the lines of Chinese texts came to be arranged from top to bottom and from right to left.⁹

This custom for arranging lines of Chinese texts took shape during the Shang and Zhou periods, which provides further evidence that bamboo and wooden slips were primary writing materials.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned evidence, it is clear that bamboo and wooden slips were already the basic writing materials for our ancestors by the Shang period at the latest. Unquestionably, they would remain so until the advent of paper.

The use of slips had a profound impact on Chinese textual culture. Many of the technical terms used in the study of Chinese manuscripts can be traced to the time when bamboo and wooden slips were used. For example, the character *die* 牒 (document) originally referred to bamboo slips, and *zha* 札 (letter) initially referred to short, small, and light wooden slips. Other similar terms, such as *pian* 篇, *ce* 册, and *juan* 卷 were used to refer to the binding together of slips into scrolls. Even the origins of the “eight-column letter” (*bahang shu* 八行书), a format of eight lines per page for letter writing in earlier days, can be traced to the use of bamboo and wooden slips.¹⁰

In addition to bamboo slips, silk sheets were also utilized in ancient China for writing. Because of this, “bamboo slips” and “silk sheets” are often referred to by the technical term “bamboo and silk” (*jianbo* 简帛). While it is uncertain when exactly silk was first used as a writing material, according to the recorded literature, silk texts were used during the Spring and Autumn period. The term “written on bamboo and silk” (书于竹帛)¹¹ reflects a true picture of the historical use of bamboo slips and silk sheets as writing media in China.

Bamboo and silk abounded in ancient times. However, due to their fragility, it is even more difficult for them to survive being buried underground. We have not found any actual bamboo slips from the Shang period. At present, the earliest bamboo and silk texts we have found so far date back to the Warring States period. As for the excavation sites, they were mainly concentrated around areas near the Yangtze River and the Huai River. In this region, rivers and lakes crisscrossed, so the underground water table was so high that tomb chambers were usually filled with water. If a tomb chamber is completely sealed off with earth, it becomes air-proof. Microorganisms living in the tomb will exhaust all the oxygen within the tomb chamber, forming a nil-oxygen state. These microorganisms then die out, allowing the corpse and burial objects such as bamboo and silk texts, clothing, lacquerware, and so on, to be preserved in good condition. As a result, we have been able to find well-preserved bamboo slips and silk texts from the Warring States period thanks to the unique and favorable geographical conditions in this region.¹² Hopefully in the future, archeologists will find more actual bamboo and silk objects from even earlier periods.

It can be seen from the above discussion that since the Shang and Zhou dynasties, slips had been used continuously until the invention of paper when the situation began to change. Archaeological discoveries have revealed that paper had been used earlier than we previously thought. Though it was not commonly utilized at that time, paper came into use during the Qin and Western Han dynasties. During the Eastern Han period, Cai Lun 蔡伦 improved the papermaking process, so bamboo slips and paper were both circulated and used simultaneously. With the gradual popularization of paper, bamboo and wooden slips slowly withdrew from the stage of history at some point around the Wei-Jin period and the Northern and Southern dynasties.

In the latter part of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, in the second year of the Yuanxing era of Emperor An (403 CE), the powerful minister Huan Xuan, the son of Huan Wen, dethroned Emperor An and declared himself emperor. During his reign, Emperor Huan Xuan issued an imperial order, decreeing that bamboo slips had been used for writing in ancient times because there was no paper, and that henceforth paper should replace bamboo slips.¹³ Although the use of bamboo slips was not completely abolished by an edict from Huan Xuan, it is known that the practice of using bamboo slips as writing materials declined during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. If we consider Huan Xuan's decree as the beginning to end the use of bamboo slips, it can be concluded that the common use of bamboo and wooden slips as writing materials lasted more than 2,000 years from the Shang Dynasty until the Wei-Jin dynasties. Therefore, in the study of Chinese cultural history, we must attach importance to the role of bamboo and silk classics.

It should be noted, however, that even after the dynasties of the Central Plains stopped using bamboo and wooden slips, some regional political regimes in China still used them. For example, wooden slips bearing other languages such as Kharoṣṭhī¹⁴ tracing back to the Han and Jin dynasties have been unearthed in Xinjiang and Gansu. The Turfan and Western Xia kingdoms all once used slips dating much later than the Tang Dynasty.

Section 2: Bamboo and Wooden Slips Abroad

Besides China, the ancient Korean Peninsula and Japan in East Asia also used slips. Interestingly, it was after China gradually ceased using bamboo and wooden slips that slips became popular in these two areas.

The Korean Peninsula not only borders China geographically, but historically had close cultural ties with China. In 1931, Eastern Han wooden slips were excavated in South Pyongan Province on the Korean Peninsula. Since 1975, over 100 wooden slips have been excavated at Anap Pond (Anapji) in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang Province. Among these slips, there were over 60 recording the history of the Kingdom of Silla in Korea. Afterward, there have still been wooden slips unearthed from time to time on the Korean Peninsula, with contents belonging to Baekje in the Three Kingdoms period of Korea and the Silla period when the Korean Peninsula was unified. In total, more than 300 wooden slips have been unearthed.¹⁵ These wooden slips are very similar to those excavated in China in terms

of design and calligraphy. Judging from the similarity, it's highly likely that the Qin and Han wooden slips in China directly influenced the manufacture of wooden slips on the Korean Peninsula during the 6th to the 8th centuries. Likewise, it is quite possible that the Korean wooden slips influenced the manufacture of wooden slips in Japan.

Japan has preserved a collection of about 50 wooden slips in its Shōsōin. In 1915, two wooden slips were excavated from the western side of the Wakitatana site in Fujiki Village (the modern Shimofukai area of Omagari city), Senboku District, Akita Prefecture. The excavation confirmed for the first time that wooden slips may have been buried in the Japanese archipelago. In 1928, three wooden slips were found in a well at the Yui site in Kuwana District, Mie Prefecture when a farmland cultivation project was underway. In 1930, two wooden slips were excavated again at the Wakitatana site. Thereafter, large numbers of wooden slips have been found in various places across Japan. At present, the number of discovered slips has already exceeded 350,000, with most of them coming from the Nara period Heijokyu site. The wooden slips excavated in Japan fall into two categories. The first is official documents, such as communications between local authorities and registers. The second category includes wooden placards (labeled as *tsukefuda* 付け札 by Japanese scholars). Some of these hung on objects for taxation, recorded information of taxpayers, such as geographical origin, head of household, taxation category, object name, amount, and date. Others were used for sorting out objects in stores, recording the names and quantity of those objects. Judging from factors such as dates recorded on the slips themselves, the stratigraphy, and the chronology of archaeological sites, these slips mostly date to the Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods, with some from more recent times. The largest number of slips come from the 8th-century Nara period.¹⁶

In 1974, Tsuboi Kiyotari coined the term “wooden slip studies” (*mokkan gaku* 木簡学) at a Japanese history conference. Thereafter, some scholars in Japan founded the Society for the Study of Wooden Documents (*Mokkan gakkai* 木簡学会), and published the periodical *Mokkan kenkyū* (木簡研究). Japanese scholars often included in their wooden slip studies slips discovered in China.

In addition to China, Japan, and Korea in East Asia, wooden slips are also found to have been used in ancient Europe. It is reported that since 1973, wooden slips have also been unearthed at Vindolanda near Hadrian's Wall in Britain.¹⁷ These wooden slips were made of birch or alder, and they are generally 16–20 cm long, 6–9 cm wide, and 0.1–0.2 cm thick.¹⁸ More than 1,200 wooden slips have been unearthed from Vindolanda, dating from the late first century CE to the early second century CE, which is equivalent to the Eastern Han period in China. More than half of the Vindolanda slips were found to have writing on them, in the Latin script used throughout the ancient Roman Empire, their contents including letters, official documents, and accounting records. More specifically, the Vindolanda slips are similar in content to those excavated in Dunhuang and Juyan in Northwestern China. They are official documents, accounting records, and letters, revealing the institutions and daily life of a military frontier. From the Vindolanda slips, scholars have gained new insights into the frontier society, military, and territorial defense

of the ancient Roman Empire. Although Vindolanda, Juyan, and Dunhuang are located in the Western Hemisphere and the Eastern Hemisphere, respectively, they share some common features as the Northwestern fortress to the Roman Empire and the Han Empire, respectively. It is hard to imagine in the remote areas on the Earth, at roughly the same time, some similar people used similar writing materials to record their real lives.¹⁹

Since the discovery of wooden slips at Vindolanda, there have been scattered discoveries at several other locations in Great Britain. Besides, wooden slips are also reported to have been unearthed at historical sites of Roman times in southern Italy and Switzerland.

Notes

- 1 This kind of writing was invented by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia in about 3000 BCE. Later, the Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, and other people used it to write their own languages.
- 2 Generally speaking, bamboo slips were often used because bamboo abounded in southern China. Due to the lack of bamboo in the north, wooden slips were used instead. Large bamboo and wooden slips are called *du* 牍 (“tablets”). It should be noted that the climate in ancient China was warmer than it is today. Therefore, according to records, bamboo also grew in Henan, Shaanxi, and Shandong areas of the Yellow River Basin. Later, as a result of climate change, bamboo in these areas became rare.
- 3 Later, hemp strings were also used. It is said that when Confucius read the *Yijing* 易经 in his later years, he “broke the leather three times” (韦编三绝). The “wei 韦” is said to be leather strings, but such a material object has never appeared in archaeological discovery.
- 4 Legend has it that the brush was invented by Meng Tian 蒙恬 of the Qin Dynasty. This is obviously incorrect according to archaeological discoveries, as the brush was already used in ancient China thousands of years before this date.
- 5 Kong Anguo 孔安国 comp., Kong Yingda 孔颖达 commented, “Shangshu Zhengyi (vol. 16)” 尚书正义, in Ruan Yuan 阮元 ed., *Shisanjing zhushu (I)* 十三经注疏上册 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 220.
- 6 Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所, *Jiaguwen bian* 甲骨文编 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 87–88.
- 7 Rong Geng 容庚 comp., Zhang Zhenlin 张振林 and Ma Guoquan 马国权, ed., *Jinwen bian* 金文编 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 308.
- 8 You Shunzhao 游顺钊, “Guhanzi shuxie zongxiang chengyin” 古汉字书写纵向成因, *Zhongguo Yuyan* 中国语文 5 (1992), 371–375.
- 9 Lao Gan 劳榦 wrote a postface for Qian Cunxun’s book, *Shu yu zhubo*. See Qian Cunxun 钱存训, *Shu yu zhubo* 书于竹帛 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2004), 163.
- 10 Qian Cunxun 钱存训, *Shu yu zhubo* 书于竹帛 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2004), 71.
- 11 See narratives in the *Mozi: Minggui* 墨子·明鬼.
- 12 Other regions where bamboo slips and silk texts have been excavated are areas in northwestern China, such as Gansu, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. The climate in these regions is hot and dry, with little rainfall, so objects like wooden slips and corpses become seriously dehydrated, thus dry bamboo slips and dry corpses are preserved. However, most of the slips excavated in the northwest are mainly from the Qin, Han, or later periods. A majority of them are official documents from the western frontier regions of the Han and Jin, and are primarily related to economy, military, and social life. Pre-Qin slips and tablets have not yet been discovered in these regions.

8 *Written on Bamboo and Silk*

- 13 “Huan Xuan wei shi” 桓玄伪事 records: “In ancient times, people used bamboo slips because there was no paper – not out of respect. Now those who use slips will all replace them with yellow paper.” Quoted in Xu Jian 徐坚, *Chuxue ji* 初学记 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 21.516.
- 14 佉卢文 (Kharoṣṭhī) was an Indian alphabet that was prevalent in Yutian 于田 and Shanshan 鄯善.
- 15 See *Hanguo gudai mujian* 韩国古代木简 (Changwon, South Korea: Guoli Changyuan Wenhua Cai Yanjiusuo, 2006); Liu Jinhua 刘金华, “Hanguo chutu mujian gailüe” 韩国出土木简概略, *Dongjiang Xuekan* 2 (2004), 14–17. Among the wooden slips excavated from South Korea, 252 are with writing on them.
- 16 For information concerning Japanese wooden slips, see Wang Yuanlin 王元林, “Ribengudai mujian de faxian yu yanjiu” 日本古代木简的发现与研究, *Chutu wenxian yanjiu* 9 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 252–266; Li Xueqin 李学勤, *Shiluo de wenming* 失落的文明 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1997), 199–201; information provided by Li Junming 李均明.
- 17 Hadrian’s Wall, built during the Roman Empire for border defense, is a foreign “Great Wall.” It was built between 122 and 125 CE, which is equivalent to the Yanguang 延光 era of Emperor An of Han 汉安帝. Hadrian’s Wall is 118 kilometers long from east to west. Compared with the Great Wall of the Qin-Han period, it is just a side wall. Beyond the wall was a moat. Vindolanda was an ancient castle located just to the south of the middle section of Hadrian’s Wall, about 1.5 kilometers from the Wall, dating slightly earlier than Hadrian’s Wall itself. Between 1973 and 1975, archaeologists discovered 202 wooden slips at Vindolanda Castle.
- 18 Slips of these dimensions, in Chinese technical terminology, can be more precisely referred to as wooden tablets (mudu 木牍).
- 19 Regarding the general state of British wooden slips, refer to Xing Yitian 邢义田, “Luoma Diguo de Juyan yu Dunhuang” 罗马帝国的居延与敦煌, *Jianbo yanjiu yicong* 1 (Changsha: Hunan chubanshe, 1996), 306–328; Li Xueqin, *Shiluo de wenming* 失落的文明 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1997), 202–204.

2 Kongbi and Jizhong

Discoveries of Bamboo Texts in Ancient China

Section 1: Ancient Chinese Bamboo Manuscripts: An Overview

In ancient China, there was a tradition of luxurious burial, in which various articles used by the deceased during his or her lifetime were buried with the corpse, including books. The purpose was supposedly to make it possible for the dead to continue to use these articles in the afterworld. Although this practice of “serving the dead as if they were still alive” was unavoidably considered to be a waste of resources, it is just because of these luxuriously furnished tombs still existing today that we can have abundant materials for historical studies.

Political unrest often led people to conceal valuable items by burial. A particularly important event occurred during the Qin Dynasty. After the unification of China, the First Emperor of Qin adopted Li Si’s suggestion to implement the cultural high-pressure policy throughout the country, promulgating the law of book control “Xieshu lü” 挟书律,¹ and ordering to burn all the historical and cultural classics of the former Six States 六国 of the Eastern Zhou period, as well as works of the hundred schools of authors. This was the bibliocaust, the burning of books in the Qin Dynasty, causing an unprecedented catastrophe to China’s cultural classics, as well as the loss of many works thereafter. At that time, some intellectuals could not bear to see their precious books destroyed, so they buried them secretly. At the beginning of the Western Han Dynasty, the court still adopted the Qin laws, and the book control policy of prohibiting common folks from possessing books was not changed. It was not until the fourth year of the reign of Emperor Hui of Han (191 BCE) when he abolished the “Xieshu lü” that the situation was finally changed, and conditions for a cultural revival emerged. Consequently, hidden books came back one after another. Since many of them were written in the old script of the former Six States of the Warring States period, they were very different from the small seal script and clerical script of the Qin and Han dynasties, and thus needed to be transcribed by scholars. Obviously, the discoveries of bamboo and silk manuscripts did not just start in the 20th century. In fact, since the Western Han Dynasty, there have been many historical records uncovered by the discoveries of bamboo and silk manuscripts, and much work has been done on the editing and transcription of the manuscripts.

The *Xiaojing* 孝经, supposedly written by Confucius and Zengzi, is an ancient classic discussing the meaning of “filial piety.” It is said that during the bibliocaust of the Qin Dynasty, Yan Zhi of Hejian secretly hid a copy, which, Yan Zhi’s son, Yan Zhen, presented to the court at the beginning of the Western Han, and so the *Xiaojing* survived the book burning and later was recirculated.

The *Zuozhuan* 左传, an important work recording the history of the Spring and Autumn period, is believed to have been written by Zuo Qiuming. Its recirculation was closely related to Zhang Cang, a politician in the early Han Dynasty. Zhang Cang was a scholar in the study of the *Zuozhuan* and was once one of Xunzi’s students. Later, he followed Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han, in his cause to conquer the empire, and was then conferred the title of Marquis of Beiping. He also served as chief counselor during the reign of Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty. Zhang Cang was an ardent reader and a master of knowledge. He donated his treasured copy of the *Zuozhuan* to the court, an event which was recorded in the preface of Xu Shen’s 慎 *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字. Later, the study of the *Zuozhuan* was handed down by Zhang Cang to Jia Yi and then circulated ever since in the Western Han Dynasty.

The restoration and recirculation of the *Shangshu* 尚书 is thought to be related to Fu Sheng 伏生. Fu Sheng was from Jinan, and in the Qin Dynasty was once appointed to the position of Boshi (博士, an erudite scholar). When the First Emperor of Qin banned and burned books from the former Six States, Fu Sheng also secretly hid his copy of the *Shangshu*. In the social unrest at the end of the Qin Dynasty, Fu Sheng was forced to flee from place to place and did not return to his hometown until the situation was relatively stable in the early Western Han Dynasty. However, over time, the *Shangshu* that he had hidden was more than half-ruined. After careful sorting and editing, Fu Sheng was finally able to restore 28 chapters. Because the new edition of the *Shangshu* was written in the clerical script then popular in the Han Dynasty, it was later called the “modern-script *Shangshu*,” 今文尚书 to distinguish it from the ancient-script *Shangshu* 古文尚书 written in the Warring States script. Based on this edition of the *Shangshu*, Fu Sheng gave lectures in the areas of Qi and Lu. During the reign of Emperor Wen of Han, the imperial court recruited experts who could study the *Shangshu* but found that Fu Sheng was the only person qualified. The feudal government sent for him to come to the capital Chang’an, but Fu Sheng was over 90 years old, had difficulty moving around, and could not take such a long journey. As a result, the imperial court specially selected a minister named Chao Cuo to learn from Fu Sheng. It is said that at that time Fu Sheng had difficulty talking and depended largely on his daughter for communication. Chao Cuo was a native of Yingchuan, so it was very difficult for him to understand Jinan dialect, and in many cases, he could only get a general idea of Fu Sheng’s lectures.

Liu De, Prince Xian of Hejian, was the son of Emperor Jing of Han. He liked Confucianism and was keen on collecting ancient books. When acquiring the books, in addition to a rich reward for the book donor, he also had a duplicate of the book carefully made to give back to the donor and kept the original himself. Because of his effective measures, many people came from afar to present books

to him. As a result, Prince Xian collected a large number of ancient books, and his collection was so large that it could compare with that of the imperial court. In particular, the book *Zhouli* 周礼, which he obtained, later became a Confucian classic and had a profound significance in history. Wang Mang's reforms and those reforms by the Northern Zhou 北周 official Su Chuo both adopted many ideas from the *Zhouli*.

Liu An, Prince of Huainan, also liked to collect books and had an immense number of tomes in his collection. However, his collection was ridiculed by Ban Gu, a historian of the Eastern Han Dynasty, as being "boastful and superfluous."² It was quite likely that his books were not practical, and because he was later suspected of plotting a rebellion, for which he was severely punished by the imperial court, his collection did not have much historical influence.

During the reign of Emperor Xuan of Han, a woman in Henei Prefecture, when renovating her old house, found lost copies of the *Yi* 易, the *Li* 礼 and the *Shangshu*, all of which she gave away to the imperial court.

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, the famous scholar Du Lin obtained a scroll of a lacquer edition³ of the ancient-script *Shangshu* in Xizhou. He cherished it so much that he often carried it with him for fear of losing it.

During the Southern Qi, a tomb near Xiangyang, which was believed to be the tomb of a Chu king, was robbed. Many treasures were taken from the tomb, such as jade clogs, jade screens, and bamboo slip manuscripts bound with silk threads. The bamboo slips were two *chi* 尺 long and the surface and joints of the bamboo looked like new. When searching for treasures, tomb robbers set the bamboo slips on fire for illumination. Later, someone obtained more than ten slips within the tomb and took them to the famous scholar at that time, Wang Sengqian, for consultation. Wang thought that it was the *Kaogongji* 考工记 written in "tadpole script," a missing part of the *Zhou Li* 周礼. However, modern scholars do not quite agree with Wang Sengqian's judgment and tend to think that the bamboo slips unearthed at that time may be *qiance* 遣册, a kind of inventory recording burial items.

During the Northern Qi, a tomb near Xuzhou was robbed, which was said to be the tomb of Xiang Yu's concubine. In the tomb, a copy of the *Laozi* 老子 was found. From the ancient records, no information was given on whether this edition of the *Laozi* was written on bamboo slips or silk sheets, but some scholars have used it to rectify problems in the received edition of the text, and the results of their collation have been preserved in the Daoist canon.

Section 2: Amazing Discoveries of Kongbi and Jizhong

In addition to the aforementioned discoveries, the most extraordinary bamboo and silk manuscripts in ancient times were the "Kongbi zhong jing" (classics from Confucius' wall 孔壁中经) of the Western Han period and the "Jizhong zhushu" (Jizhong bamboo manuscripts 汲冢竹书) of the Western Jin period.

"Kongbi" 孔壁 refers to the wall of Confucius' old residence, which is located in Qufu. Emperor Jing of Han enfeoffed his son Liu Yu as the Prince of Qufu. Later generations called him Prince Gong of Lu.⁴ Prince Gong was a stammerer and had

difficulty speaking, yet he indulged himself in all kinds of sensuous pleasures. His other hobby was building luxurious palaces, and he incessantly expanded the scale of his palace. As Confucius' former residence happened to be next to Prince Gong's palace, he issued an order to demolish it. Consequently, when people tore down the walls, they unexpectedly found many bamboo slips and books, which had probably been hidden by a descendant of Confucius to escape the Qin emperor's bibliocaust. Prince Gong rushed to the scene when he heard about the discovery. As he walked into the residence, he seemed to hear the faint sound of music playing from within the walls. Thinking it was Confucius' ghost, Prince Gong was so frightened that he immediately ordered to stop the demolishing work. Thus, Confucius' old residence was preserved, but the manuscripts hidden within the walls of Confucius' old residence came to light as a result.

Among the many manuscripts discovered in the walls of Confucius' old residence were the *Shangshu*, the *Liji*, the *Lunyu* 论语, the *Xiaojing*, and others, amounting in total to several dozen volumes (pian 篇). They were all returned to the Confucius family after they were unearthed. These are the famous "Kongbi zhong jing." Since they were written in a pre-Qin script, they were called the "ancient-script" manuscript.⁵ The *Shangshu* found in the kongbi was later called the "ancient-script *Shangshu*." Among the descendants of Confucius, there was a very learned scholar named Kong Anguo, who once served as *Boshi* during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han. He studied the ancient-script *Shangshu* discovered at this time and found that, apart from the 28 chapters transmitted by Fu Sheng, there were 16 chapters that were not included in Fu Sheng's modern-script version. Kong Anguo spent much time editing the ancient-script *Shangshu* and other manuscripts, comparing the ancient-script versions with other versions current at that time, and transcribing the ancient texts in clerical script (隶书 *lishu*) of the Han Dynasty. That is how "*liding*" 隶定,⁶ a term often used in paleographic work today, is said to have been derived. Kong Anguo's approach to editing the Kongbi classics set up the earliest paradigm for editing excavated manuscripts of texts once lost. His interpretation and transcription of these materials into clerical script became a major event in China's academic history and marked the beginning of ancient-script studies. After Kong Anguo passed away, his family members donated the Kongbi classics to the imperial court. Unfortunately, these classics did not receive due attention and were left ignored and forgotten for a long time due to political turmoil within the imperial court. It was not until the end of the Western Han period, when scholars were sorting out books in the royal library, that these long-sealed manuscripts were rediscovered. Because of the great differences between the "ancient-script" manuscripts written in pre-Qin characters and the modern-script versions written in clerical script, there arose the debate between the modern-script and the ancient-script, which has had a profound impact up to today.

Unfortunately, during the Wei and Jin periods, precious manuscripts such as the ancient-script *Shangshu* edited by Kong Anguo were destroyed in the war, leaving many mysteries in history.

Another major discovery of bamboo slips in ancient times took place in the Western Jin Dynasty, which is the famous "Jizhong bamboo manuscript."

In the fifth year of Xianning of the Western Jin Dynasty (279 CE),⁷ a man named Bu Zhun⁸ in Jijun, robbed a Wei tomb of the Warring States period and found bamboo manuscripts of over 10,000 characters. According to records, each bamboo slip was two *chi* and four *cun*, under 56 centimeters in length, and were bound with silk threads. The script on the slips looked very similar to those of “Kongbi zhong jing.” When entering the tomb, Bu Zhun did not pay much attention to the bamboo slips. He even set some slips on fire for illumination when searching for treasures. Thus, some of the bamboo slips were damaged, and the rest of them were left scattered. After the local feudal government learned about this, they sent people to collect and bring back the remaining bamboo slips and other articles. However, the people were not careful enough in collecting the bamboo slips, causing damage to even more slips.

Among the artifacts unearthed from the same tomb as the bamboo slips were jade pitch pipes, bells and chimes, and bronze swords, all of which were common burial items. Considering the large number of bamboo slips, it can be inferred that the scale of the tomb was relatively large. Therefore, people at that time thought that the tomb belonged to a Wei king of the Warring States period. Some scholars thought it was the tomb of King Xiang of Wei, while others believed it was the tomb of King Anli of Wei. So far, no further evidence has been available to confirm the hypotheses.

In about the first year of Taikang (280 CE), these bamboo slips were transported to the capital at Luoyang. Emperor Wu of Jin ordered that Secretariat Supervisor Xun Xu and Secretariat Director He Qiao be responsible for the editing of the manuscripts. Scholars who participated in this work included Xun Xu, He Qiao, Shu Xi, and Wei Heng.

Xun Xu, whose courtesy name was Gongceng, was the great-grandson of Xun Shuang (who once served as Sikong 司空 in the Eastern Han Dynasty). When he was only about 10 years old, Xun Xu could already write good essays. He once wrote a letter to Sun Hao of the state of Wu on behalf of Sima Zhao, compelling Sun Hao to enter into an alliance through marriage. Sima Zhao praised Xun Xu, saying that his letter surpassed an army of 100,000 soldiers in its power. Xun Xu was also gifted at music and once took the responsibility for sorting out the royal collection of books of the Western Jin. After the bamboo manuscript Jizhong zhushu was unearthed, Emperor Wu of Jin ordered Xun Xu and others to join in the editing work. Xun Xu made great contributions to the editing work of the manuscript the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子传 unearthed in Jizhong. He passed away in the tenth year of Taikang (289 CE).

He Qiao, courtesy name Changyu, was of noble origin. From a very young age, he exhibited both a charming personality and a gentle character and had a high reputation in his time. After the excavation of the Jizhong zhushu, he put a great deal of effort into the editing work of the *Jinian* 纪年 (often called the *Zhushu Jinian* 竹书纪年 by later generations).

Shu Xi's courtesy name was Guangwei. Well-educated and knowledgeable, he was widely celebrated as the most learned scholar of his time. It is said that someone once found a bamboo slip at the foot of Mount Song, with two lines of

“tadpole script” on it, which no one could read. Someone asked Shu Xi for advice. Shu Xi immediately pointed out that the bamboo slip came from the Xianjie Tomb of Emperor Ming of Han. After verification, Shu Xi was indeed correct and thus won the admiration and respect of all for his broad knowledge. He devoted a great amount of effort and made the greatest contribution to the editing of *Jizhong zhushu*. Unfortunately, he died at the age of only 40.

Wei Heng, the son of Wei Guan, had the courtesy name of Jushan. Having made a close study of ancient-scripts, he was a master in calligraphy, and the author of the *Siti shushi* 四体书势. Unfortunately, in 291 CE, when political unrest broke out in the Western Jin Dynasty, both Wei Heng and his father were killed.

Apart from the aforementioned scholars, many other people also participated in the sorting and editing of the *Jizhong zhushu*. Because the relevant historical records are too brief, there is no way that we get to know the details of their work. Nevertheless, it should be said that this editing team gathered a group of the most renowned scholars at that time, and they made satisfactory achievements in their editing. On the one hand, they exerted a great deal of effort in rearranging the disordered and broken bamboo slips; on the other hand, they tried to identify the Warring States characters on the slips and transcribe them in the modern-script. In addition, they worked hard to make sense of what was written and interpret the ideological implication, annotating for clarity the difficult points. In brief, the practices and research they were engaged in so many years ago were already quite similar to the editing research we do in modern times.

The content of the edited *Jizhong zhushu* fell into 16 categories, consisting of about 75 chapters (*pian* 篇) in total. The *Jinshu: Shu Xi zhuan* 晋书·束皙传 lists in detail the title of each chapter as follows:

- 1 The *Jinian* (12 chapters),⁹ also known as the *Zhushu jinian*, recording the history from the Xia to the beginning of the Warring States.
- 2 The *Yijing* 易经 (two chapters), the same as the *Zhouyi* 周易 consisting of two parts.
- 3 The *Yi yao yin-yang gua* 易繇阴阳卦 (two chapters), roughly the same as the *Zhouyi*, with different divination statements (*yao ci* 繇辞) in many places.
- 4 The *Gua xia Yijing* 卦下易经 (one chapter), similar to the “*Shuo gua* 说卦” commentary, with slight differences.
- 5 The *Gongsun Duan* 公孙段 (two chapters), recording the discussion between Gongsun Duan and Shao Zhi 邵陟 concerning the *Zhouyi*.
- 6 The *Guoyu* 国语 (three chapters), relating to the history of Chu and Jin.
- 7 The *Ming* 名 (three chapters), similar to the *Liji* and partly similar to the *Erya* 尔雅 and the *Lunyu* 论语.
- 8 The *Shichun* 师春 (one chapter). “*Shichun*” is probably also the writer’s name, and it concerns words of divination from the *Zuozhuan*.
- 9 The *Suoyu* 琐语 (11 chapters). It was about how people from different states practiced divination, by using oracle bones, dreams, spirits, and physiognomy of states, etc. It was a work related to the divinatory arts (*shushu* 数术).

- 10 The *Liangqiu cang* 梁丘藏 (one chapter), relating to historical events of the State of Wei 魏.
- 11 The *Zhuoshu* 缴书 (two chapters), discussing methods for shooting wild game or bow-hunting.
- 12 The *Shengfeng* 生封 (one chapter), discussing enfeoffed lands.
- 13 The *Dali* 大历 (two chapters), similar to Zou Yan's 邹衍 theory of Yin-yang and the Five Elements.
- 14 The *Mu Tianzi zhuan* (five chapters), recording the travels of King Mu of Zhou.
- 15 The *Tu shi* 图诗 (one chapter), of the literary genre of "painting-appraisal" (*hua zan* 画赞).
- 16 Assorted texts (19 chapters), including the *Zhou shi tian fa* 周食田法, the *Zhoushu* 周书, the *Lun Chu shi* 论楚事, and the *Zhou Mu Wang meiren Shengji sishi* 周穆王美人盛姬死事. Besides the above, there were seven other chapters of slips that were so fragmented that their titles were missing.¹⁰

It is a pity, though, that the political situation of the Western Jin changed dramatically before the editing work was completed. After the death of Emperor Wu of Jin, his Son Emperor Hui ascended the throne. Emperor Hui was developmentally disabled, while his empress Jia was a woman with strong political ambition. The princes of the Western Jin royal family also intrigued and vied for power and profit, leading to the "Rebellion of the Eight Princes (八王之乱)," which lasted for 16 years (291–306 CE). The capital of Luoyang became the principal battlefield and became a city of ruin. Consequently, the editing of the Jizhong zhushu could not continue, many of the edited manuscripts were lost in the war, and the bamboo slips themselves eventually vanished. The Jizhong zhushu, unearthed and meticulously sorted out by scholars through innumerable trials and tribulations, turned into ash and were lost again. It is really painful to recall the tragic fate of the Jizhong bamboo slips.

Among the 75 chapters of the Jizhong manuscripts, only the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* and its appendix *Zhou Mu Wang meiren Shengji sishi* have been transmitted uninterrupted to the present day. The *Zhushu jinian*, due to its great significance to the study of the pre-Qin history, received careful editing and for a long time aroused heated debate. However, in successive social turmoil, the complete *Zhushu jinian* was lost as well, and only some fragmentary pieces could be found in other ancient manuscripts. As for the other 60-odd chapters of the Jizhong zhushu, many of them were lost again before they could be carefully edited. As a result, only their titles are known to us today, and there is no way to study their content in detail.¹¹

A profound lesson should be learned from the second loss of the Jizhong zhushu. After the bamboo slips were unearthed, the Western Jin government invested a considerable amount of manpower and material resources in their editing. Whereas the editing work lasted a long time, ultimately no great achievements were left for the world. In the end, much to the regret of posterity, the slips did not escape their tragic fate of being lost again after appearing in the world for only a short time. Several reasons may account for this unfortunate outcome. Political turmoil during the Western Jin period directly interrupted the editing work on the Jizhong bamboo

manuscripts, and one of the editors, Wei Heng, died in the social unrest. The results of the scholars' editing and the bamboo slips themselves were destroyed by the war, which was the most fundamental reason for the loss. In addition, the difficulties in identifying characters written on the bamboo slips and interpreting archaic and abstruse content made the editing work extremely difficult, consequently delaying the project.¹² Another equally critical reason lies in its unstable editing team. Team members were replaced frequently, and the team lacked effective leadership. In general, the team did not pay enough attention to their work (The scholars were interested in only a few of the bamboo manuscripts from the *Zhushu jinian*, and very little energy was devoted to the majority of the Jizhong manuscripts). As a result, the editorial work took a long time and ultimately ended in disaster due to social unrest.

As the Western Jin scholars gave only a brief description of the physical state of the Jizhong bamboo slips, we are limited as to the amount of specific information contained in them. However, we can make some conjectures about their physical condition based on our understanding of the Tsinghua bamboo slips and those of the Warring States excavated in recent years.

Firstly, although the Warring States bamboo slips can be categorized as “waterlogged slips” since they were preserved in water, the Jizhong slips are different and can be classified as “desiccated slips.” They could have been burned by Bu Zhun for light when he robbed the tomb; whether he did that or not, they were desiccated slips. This is a major difference between the Jizhong bamboo slips and the Warring States slips that we see today. That must have been related to the different conditions underground.

Secondly, judging from the excavated Warring States slips, the bamboo pieces used for writing are very slender, and the Jizhong slips ought to be very similar to them. The Jizhong manuscripts consisted of 75 chapters in total and approximately several thousand slips were used. According to the *Jinshu: Wudiji* 晋书·武帝纪, there were over 100,000 characters¹³ written on these bamboo slips. Their number and volume could not have been very huge. Therefore, the theory that the Jizhong bamboo manuscripts filled tens of carts was groundless and could not be taken seriously. We may presume that many other artifacts from the tomb were transported in the carts as well. That's why they could appear to have such a vast scale. Anyway, only more than 70 chapters of bamboo slips wouldn't fill ten carts.

Thirdly, among the recently unearthed Warring States slips, we have found that the manuscripts, even though from the same tomb, were transcribed by different scribes, thus the handwriting styles were often quite different. And that was probably the case with the Jizhong bamboo manuscripts. The scripts from the tomb were not necessarily written by one individual, but actually by multiple hands. Evidence for this comes from the text *Lun Chu shi* 论楚事, which Wei Heng once praised for its exquisite calligraphy. Of course, we may not know the specific circumstances, but we can infer from Wei Heng's case that the Jizhong manuscripts were probably by the hand of more than one person.

Finally, the lengths of the Jizhong slips were probably not uniform. To our present knowledge of the Warring States bamboo manuscripts, the making of the slips

at that time was not standardized, resulting in bamboo slips of various lengths. There were so many of the Jizhong slips, and naturally, their lengths were not precisely the same. The *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子传 might be only an exception. Xun Xu once stated that the slips on which the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* was written were 2 *chi* 4 *cun*, with 40 characters on each slip. In the case of other manuscripts, however, the lengths of the slips and the number of characters per slip would not be the same as those for the *Mu Tianzi zhuan*.

The discovery and subsequent editing of the Jizhong manuscripts has a far-reaching impact. Some principles used for editing the Jizhong scripts have been adopted as a routine practice till the present. A case in point is the use of the square “□” to represent missing and fragmented characters on the bamboo slips. Another example is, *Jinian*, which has been highly valued by scholars ever since it was edited. Du Yu (杜预), a commentator of the *Zuozhuan*, cited it in his epilogue to the *Chunqiu jingzhuan jijie* 春秋经传集解 after reading the *Zhushu jinian*. Drawing on the *Zhushu jinian*, Jin historian Sima Biao corrected 122 errors in the *Gushi kao* 古史考 composed by the Three Kingdoms scholar Qiao Zhou. During the Tang Dynasty, the renowned scholar Liu Zhiji wrote the *Shitong* 史通, expounding the similarities and differences between the history narrated in the *Jinian* and similar anecdotes found in other classical texts. Until after the late Qing Dynasty, many scholars were still conducting significant research on ancient history based on the *Zhushu jinian*. It is no exaggeration that although the *Zhushu jinian* was lost, it still plays a great role in promoting the study of ancient history, especially the history of the Warring States period.

The research on the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* has also produced fruitful results. Professor Li Xueqin recently pointed out that the meaning of the phrase “lice of the spring mountain” (春山之虱) found in this text has been puzzling scholars for a long time. The character for “louse” (虱 虱) should be read as *yin* 阴(陰) (shade, darkness). When read as “the shade (shady side) of the spring mountain,” the sentence becomes coherent and makes good sense. The character 阴(陰) in ancient-script does not always carry with it the component 阜 (fu) in writing. The top is *jin* 今 while the bottom part of the character *yun* 云 is very similar to *chong* 虫 (insect), which is also a component of the character *shi* 虱 (louse). So the character *shi* 虱 must have been a mistaken writing of the character *yin* 阴(陰). The Western Jin scholars didn’t recognize this character in ancient-script and just transcribed it as faithfully as possible.¹⁴ Based on excavated documents, modern scholars are now able to recognize and interpret the character appropriately. It can be seen that even today, further research should be conducted on the Jizhong manuscripts. Such a profound impact of ancient scripts is truly impressive. For this reason, along with the Kongbi classics, the Jizhong bamboo manuscripts have become one of the most influential discoveries of ancient China and are to this day an important topic of scholarly debate.

The Kongbi zhongjing was discovered more than 2,000 years ago, and the Jizhong zhushu more than 1,700 years ago. However, scholars have never ceased their efforts in studying these collections and advancing their research even further. This also reminds us that the research on such important discoveries as the

Kongbi zhong jing and the Jizhong zhushu could never be completed only in one generation or two. Instead, it requires intensive study from several dozens of generations of scholars. Their influence cannot be fully revealed until quite a long time later. We believe the edited bamboo manuscripts will be studied and discussed from generation to generation.

Notes

- 1 Xie 挟 means “to store.” This law forbids the private collection of books.
- 2 Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 汉书 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 2410.
- 3 The so-called “lacquer texts” 漆书 were written in ink. Since lacquer is very sticky, it is difficult to write with a brush on bamboo slips using lacquer. It is hard to move the brush freely on the slips. What people called “lacquer texts” were written in ink, only the characters were so bright as if they were written in lacquer. Most of the bamboo and silk manuscripts we have recovered were written in black ink with the brush.
- 4 Written as “鲁共王” in the *Shiji: Wuzong shijia* 史记·五宗世家. See Sima Qian 司马迁, *Shiji* 史记 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 59.2095.
- 5 What the Han 汉人 called “ancient-script” originally referred to ancient characters, i.e., pre-Qin characters, but its specific use is quite narrow. During the Han Dynasty, people had very limited access to pre-Qin characters; although some bronze wares were unearthed at that time, the inscriptions on them were rarely transmitted. The “ancient-script” encountered by scholars came primarily from bamboo and wooden slip manuscripts, which were made during the Warring States period, in the scripts of the eastern Six States. These manuscripts were later proscribed by the Qin. Therefore, during the Han Dynasty, the “ancient-script” really referred to the Warring States period scripts developed by the Six States, and people at that time mistook the “ancient-script” forms for the characters invented by Cang Jie 仓颉 in ancient times.
- 6 Li ding 隶定, li gu ding 隶古定 or li gu 隶古, refers to using modern character forms and techniques to transcribe ancient character forms.
- 7 There are three theories concerning the time the Ji Zhong tomb was discovered, i.e., Xianning 咸宁 5 (279 CE), Taikang 太康 1 (280 CE), and Taikang 太康 2 (281 CE). According to research, the bamboo slips were probably discovered in Xianning 5 (279 CE). That was when Western Jin raised its troops against Wu 吴. In the third month of the second year (Taikang 1), Wu was defeated, and the bamboo slips were transported to the capital at Luoyang. In Taikang 2, Emperor Wu of Jin gave orders for the scholars to edit the slips. The different views on the discovery of the slips might have resulted from the different perspectives taken when the events were recorded.
- 8 This man’s family name is Bu 不, and his given name is Zhun 准. Though Bu is an uncommon family name, some scholars consider it to have come down from the Spring and Autumn Pi 丕 clan.
- 9 The original work was comprised of 13 chapters, while many scholars believe it should be 12.
- 10 Some scholars believe that the seven chapters should be included within the 75, to be a part of the 19 assorted texts; while others do not think they should be included, thus not a part of the 19 assorted texts.
- 11 There has long been heated discussion among scholars concerning the relationship between the Jizhong *Zhoushu* and the modern-script *Yi Zhoushu* 逸周书. Evidence supporting their relationship is so limited that we have to leave the question open. Professor Li Xueqin pointed out that “since the *Zhoushu* was listed as one of the 19 chapters of the assorted texts, we can be certain that it could not have many chapters. It is a misunderstanding for the *Suizhi* 隋志 to refer to the ten-volume *Zhoushu* as “Jizhong shu” 汲冢书. Some scholars point out that the chapters of today’s *Yi Zhoushu* which are without