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Introduction: How Can Unearthed Documents Push Forward the Study of Early Chinese Philosophy?

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How unearthed documents can push forward the field is a question of great importance when discussing the history of Chinese philosophy. The discovery of unearthed material can resurrect documents which were either previously unknown or thought to have been lost. They supplement our knowledge of early Chinese philosophy and how it evolved through the ages, allowing us to constantly rewrite the history of Chinese philosophy. It is not simply the reappearance of these hidden treasures that pushes the field forward, but how we interpret them, especially in light of how they confirm or contradict our current knowledge which is primarily based on received documents. We need to be open to the possibility that unearthed documents can forcefully reshape what we thought we knew about early Chinese philosophy. At the same time, prudent analysis of all the texts involved and how they interplay with each other prevents an overzealous rewriting of the history of Chinese philosophy.

In the current issue titled “Unearthed Documents and Early Chinese Philosophy,” we have chosen four representative articles. One article focuses exclusively on the form and format of early philosophical writing as a consequence of the writing materials used. The other three articles take specific examples of unearthed texts, such as *Taiyi shengshui* 太一生水, *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經, and “Wu ji” 五紀, and discuss their philosophical content and how they should be understood in the larger context of early Chinese thought.

Unearthed documents have the obvious advantage of supplementing knowledge not found in received texts. Apart from this, their physical traits offer a rare window to the material aspect of ancient scholars’ writing habits. The

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received texts that we study today have passed through the hands of Northern Song (960–1127) printers who applied their printing and binding techniques to the ancient texts, and since then, those texts have remained in the “book form” we are familiar with today. We hardly have the chance to view these documents in their original forms, as being codified on *jian* 簡, *du* 牘, or *bo* 帛. Unearthed texts, however, typically do not fall under that category. For this reason, they are extremely valuable. In his article “Tablets (*Du*) and Passages (*Zhang*): the Material Conditions for the Formation of Early Short Passage Texts,” Xu Jianwei 徐建委 focuses on the physical characteristics of these documents and how such characteristics affect styles of writing. He first reviews what we already know about ancient Chinese systems of writing and recording, particularly common mistakes that derive from specific writing media. Referencing philologists such as Li Xueqin 李學勤, Li Ling 李零, Edward Shaughnessy, and Sarah Allen, Xu points out that not only can single characters in a text be accidentally effaced or intentionally altered, even individual bamboo/wooden strips or groups of strips can lose their correct order, greatly sacrificing the integrity of the document. This ever-present danger could have caused early writers to adopt the “short treatise” style of writing, lowering the risk of a jumbled document. Xu goes on to discuss the specific question of how the physical traits of the writing medium affected the style of writing. Xu postulates that it was the physical restrictions of the medium, such as the *du*, typically a thin rectangular piece of wood, that contributed to the creation and popularization of the truncated literary form *zhang* 章. One *du* typically fits a maximum of five hundred characters, which corresponds to the length a *zhang*. Xu’s thesis is that this short literary form, which often later became edited as individual chapters of larger, more systematic pre-Qin (before 221 BCE) books, obtained its concise form not merely from the authors’ desire for succinctness and clarity, but also from the physical dimensions of the tablets on which they were written. Because of its popular use, this short essay format eventually became a literary form in its own right, outliving the use of the *du* medium.

In early philosophical texts such as *Laozi* 老子, *Guanzi* 管子, and *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the term *yi* 一 is no doubt an important one, but its place in their philosophy could never compete with the primacy of *dao* 道. In the unearthed texts *Taiyi sheng shui* and *Fanwu liu xing* 凡物流形, however, *yi* is the unmistakable protagonist. *Taiyi* 太一 or *yi* have almost completely replaced *dao* as the primary mover and ultimate source of the universe. Wang Zhongjiang’s 王中江 article “The Development and Varieties of ‘Oneness’ in Early Daoism” takes this as the starting point to reexamine early Daoist thought. Wang posits four forms or phases that *yi* may take in these early Daoist texts, and explains their relationship to one another. This article benefits from comparing

well-known received (*Laozi*, *Guanzi*, *Zhuangzi*) and unearthed texts (*Taiyi sheng shui*, *Fanwu liu xing*, *Huangdi sijing*), to attempt a complete view of this central concept. In one or more of these texts, *yi* can manifest itself as the creator of all things, the guiding principle in state administration, unifying the masses, unifying the legal system, and even unifying all things.

Scholars have long identified the early school of thought known as Huang-Lao thought as an amalgamation of multiple philosophical currents floating around during the pre-Qin and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) era. It took elements from both Daoism and Legalism, and synthesized new ideas of its own. In Xu Ying's 徐瑩 contribution to this issue, she discusses the specific issue of punishments and rewards and the role they play in proper governance as expressed in the unearthed text *Huangdi sijing* and the ideas of Shang Yang 商鞅 (395–338 BCE), Han Fei 韓非 (280–233 BCE), and the *Guanzi*. Through this multifaceted comparison she concludes that Huang-Lao thought, while heavily influenced by Legalism popular at the time, was a creative return to the “Mandate of Heaven” concept of government. The creative aspect is found in its eclecticism. Huang-Lao echoed the Legalist ideas of strict punishment and (occasional) rewards used to discipline the citizenry and order the government, which was a clear departure from the Confucian ideas of a purely benevolent government. However, Huang-Lao was still influenced by Confucianism. This can be seen in the subtle but important ordering of priorities: for Legalism, punishment was primary and rewards were secondary; for Huang-Lao, rewards were primary and punishment was secondary (*xian de hou xing* 先德後刑). Importantly, the *de* in this formula goes beyond the singular idea of rewards from the Legalist school – it encompasses some Confucian virtues such as loving the people and enacting compassionate policies.

In 2021, Tsinghua University published its collated version of the unearthed text “Wuji.” It is rather long for its era, taking up one hundred and thirty strips of bamboo and containing nearly four thousand five hundred characters. Cao Feng's 曹峰 contribution to this issue focuses on the character *zhong* 中 which plays a central role in this text. *Zhong* is a character full of meaning and this text in particular gives us detailed insight into how this character and the varied concepts behind it were an important part of early Chinese thought. *Zhong* was used in discussions of politics, law, morality, ethics, and astrology. Cao's article breaks down the meaning and use of *zhong* into three sections: first, *zhong* as the highest political goal; second, *zhong* as the highest moral virtue; third, *zhong* as the ideal personal conduct. As a political ideal, it represents conformity with the laws of nature and the universe and the establishment of social order. As a moral virtue, *zhong* is one of the five virtues outlined in “Wuji,” and in fact is considered by Cao to be the most important

one. Often considered a loan character for the homophone *zhong* 忠, *zhong* 中 can be understood as being attentive (or loyal) and respectful to the highest authorities, whether that is the monarch, one's parents, or *tian* 天. As an ideal for personal behavior, *zhong* emphasizes fairness, justice, integrity, and generosity. There is also a heavy numerical aspect to *zhong*, which corresponds to the many laws and characteristics found in nature that can be expressed with numbers: the duality of *yin* and *yang*, the four seasons, the five phases, the five virtues, the five colors, the five crops, just to name a few. He points out that *zhong* is not an exclusively Confucian virtue, but rather originated somewhat independently, and at the same time demonstrates how later Confucian thought (especially in the early Han) was influenced by the *yinyang wuxing* 陰陽五行 school.

All of these essays represent just the beginning of what should be an extended study into how unearthed documents may be carefully incorporated into the larger body of texts and knowledge that constitute early Chinese thought.