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Book Reviews



Sarah Allan, *Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and Ideal Government in Early Chinese Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. 372 pages, ISBN: 978-1438457772.

Political discourse in imperial China owes much to its formative texts, which were standardized and compiled mostly during the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BCE–220) and transmitted to the present primarily by copyists. Such texts brim with legendary anecdotes that employ the rhetoric of historical priority, in which the likes of Yao 堯 and Shun 舜—sage kings of greatest antiquity—act according to the greatest political ideals. Many texts already had long histories when they were compiled in the early empire, and some originated many centuries before. But were the sage kings of distant antiquity really who they are made out to be in these standardized, Han versions? What if, as it turns out, pre-imperial accounts of the sage kings' exemplary deeds—and, consequently, the political ideals they embody—differed significantly and systematically from the deeds we know in transmission? Perhaps this should not be entirely surprising, given that the Qin are infamous for prohibiting and burning works of private learning and that the Han (building on the Qin) compiled and shaped the versions of many of our transmitted texts. But transmitted texts have long been our narrow window into antiquity, and it is a very rare and surprising gift to have the intellectual landscape more broadly illuminated by unearthed manuscript texts that were prohibited or lost in the early empire. Sarah Allen examines a set of such manuscript texts in her new book, addressing a consequential and long-standing question of Chinese political philosophy: should China be ruled by hereditary monarchs or meritorious ministers?

This has also been a longstanding question of interest and area of expertise for the author. *Buried Ideas* builds substantially on her 1981 monograph, *The Heir*

and the Sage,¹ which examines a similar political tension in transmitted texts. The primary sources of the new book—all recently discovered bamboo manuscript texts—were still underground when *The Heir and the Sage* was written. In contrast to transmitted texts, the unearthed manuscripts tend to come down on the side of meritorious ministers. The new book has two primary aims: (1) to demonstrate a systematic transformation of historical legend in the transition from the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) to Han, culminating in a discourse that supports hereditary rule; and (2) perhaps more fundamentally, to translate and contextualize a set of fascinating new manuscript texts for non-specialists, in part by introducing the modern developments (in scientific archaeology, in tomb robbery, in paleographic and codicological sciences, etc.) that have brought the manuscript texts to light.

The first three chapters are given over to lucid introductions of various sorts: Chapter 1 gives a brief general synopsis; Chapter 2 offers an introduction to the main problems of intellectual history; and Chapter 3 introduces the physical manuscripts, which were all made of bamboo slips, originally bound together by thread. The manuscripts are written in scripts from the preimperial state of Chu and are estimated (or in some cases presumed) to have been buried in South Central China around 300 BCE, give or take a few decades. The texts come from three caches: a 1993 excavation at Guodian 郭店 in Hubei Province, several caches of manuscripts purchased by the Shanghai Museum starting in 1994, and a cache anonymously purchased and donated to Tsinghua University in 2008. Chapter 3 also considers the effects of the physical media on the formation of transmitted canons.

Translation of the new and difficult sources is what lies at the heart of *Buried Ideas*, and Chapter 4, the first core textual study, focuses on a manuscript from Guodian, called “Tang yu zhi dao 唐虞之道 [The Way of Tang (Yao) and Yu (Shun)].” The name of the manuscript, chosen by the editors based on the first line of the text, also introduces the theme shared by the four focal manuscripts examined in *Buried Ideas*: each text presents a version of a succession legend in which the sage king [Tang] Yao does not pass the throne to his hereditary heir, abdicating, instead, in favor of his worthy minister [Yu] Shun.

According to “Tang yu zhi dao,” “to abdicate and not monopolize [political power] is the fullest expression of sagehood” (119). Allen’s discussion in this

1 Originally published as Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981). A new edition has been published in the same series as the book under review, the SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture: Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China*, rev. and exp. ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

chapter thoroughly explores the theme as it is presented in the transmitted tradition. Although the *Mozi* seems to condone abdication, its currency of merit is impartial love [*jian ai* 兼愛]. In “Tang yu zhi dao,” it is precisely a worthy’s partiality in loving kin [*ai qin* 愛親] that makes him a worthy patriarch of the realm-as-family. And although the story of Yao’s abdication is not unfamiliar from transmitted texts, such as the *Mozi* or the *Mencius*, the philosophical orientation of the “Tang yu zhi dao” is unique. As Allan shows, we can catch glimpses of this orientation in the *Mencius* but only obliquely, for example, as a fallacy that Mencius disputes. For Mencius, kingly abdication is impossible, as only *Tian* 天 [Heaven] can truly decide matters of succession. Calling in such a dispassionate, invisible third party is one solution for negotiating a compromise between meritocracy and heredity. Another possible response, seen in the *Han Feizi*, is to change the story altogether and portray Shun’s succession from Yao as a usurpation. Such a narrative would have supported hereditary rule in the early empire and may have even contributed to the demise of the less-favored abdication narratives presented by Allen’s four texts.

The core textual studies in Chapters 4 to 7 have more or less parallel structures in that they begin by introducing the text and the physical manuscript. Allen then provides an English translation and delves into topics specific to each text (translation and discussion are interleaved in the longer *Rongcheng shi* [*Progenitor Rongcheng*]). The chapters are followed by expanded annotated translations that address in detail the philological problems of preimperial (and prestandardization) archaic scripts on sometimes fragmentary or scrambled bamboo “pages.” These are difficult texts. In all cases, Allen’s translations show a close and ongoing engagement with Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholarship, demonstrated in part by the lists of abbreviated references that serve as philological bibliographies to each translation. I skipped to the annotated translations while reading each chapter and found that most of my doubts about matters of interpretation were addressed in detail when I returned to the chapter, if not satisfactorily resolved. It is unlikely that Allen (or anyone else) will have the last word on interpretation, but her engagement with interpretive problems can only be called thorough, transparent, and convincing.

The second core textual study focuses on the *Zigao* 子高 manuscript text in the Shanghai Museum corpus, a dialogue in which Zigao asks Confucius about the divine progenitors of the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou). The reply shows Confucius rehearsing the sort of divine conception mythology that is visible in Han apocrypha and Wang Chong’s 王充 (27–100 CE) *Lunheng* 論衡, but absent from the *Analects*, *Mencius*, or *Xunzi*. Whereas the Confucius of the *Zigao* allows that the progenitors were divinely conceived, when the

dialogue turns to the topic of Yao and Shun, it becomes apparent that abdication is a more ideal mode of succession than birthright. A final section of the text, although damaged, seems to indicate that even the divinely conceived progenitors would have served the meritorious (self-made) Shun.

In the *Analects* and other transmitted sources, Zigao is portrayed as dull, but his portrayal in the manuscript text is different. As Allen notes, Zigao's "poor image in the transmitted tradition ... is also consonant with the interest of the *Zigao* in miraculous events and its message that lineage is not as important as merit" (142). Indeed, she takes the position that "Confucianism" as indicated by texts such as the *Zigao* is considerably more diverse in ideology than previously recognized. Early Confucianism, she argues, should be regarded as a social orientation toward Confucius and his followers, rather than as a particular strain of philosophical thought that can be gleaned from a given set of texts.

Chapter 6 studies a text in the Shanghai corpus labeled *Rongcheng shi* 容成氏 on the verso of its fifty-third slip. The text is quite long and has been identified as the earliest historical narrative,² although Allen treats it as philosophical. *Rongcheng shi* heads a long line of successions by abdication.³ The text contains what Allen characterizes as a devolutionary narrative in which abdication from the good to the good was practiced in highest antiquity; in later, devolved eras, exemplary men can only operate by securing allegiances. The text—perhaps the most compelling in translation just by virtue of its continuous narrative—is certainly of a piece with the others in its positive portrayal of abdication. Allen identifies the text as "populist" (221), noting that its text lacks the ethical vocabulary (e.g., *ren* 仁 [humaneness]) found in many philosophical texts. Indeed, it seems to be less concerned with moral constructs of merit than with practical results.

Chapter 7, the final core study, emerges from a translation of the *Bao xun* 保訓 [*Cherished Instruction*] held by Tsinghua University. This takes a form characteristic of *shu* 書 documents, much like those known from the *Shang shu* 尚書 [*Venerated Documents*] and the less canonical *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書 [*Remnant Documents of Zhou*]. The text portrays King Wen 文王 of Zhou at the end of his life, before the Shang conquest, giving a written charge to Prince Fa 發, who would later conquer the Shang and become King Wu 武. Compared to Zhou speeches in the *Shang shu*, *Bao xun* is unique in putting the Yao–Shun

2 See Yuri Pines, "Political Mythology and Dynastic Legitimacy in the Rong Cheng Shi Manuscript," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73, no. 3 (2010): 503–29.

3 Most of the list of kings is unfortunately missing from the damaged manuscript; even *Rongcheng shi* can only be reconstructed at the top of the list partly on the basis of the *Zhuangzi*.

abdication narrative in the mouth of a Zhou king. Allen takes this as a clue to its Warring States origin. The key to *Bao xun*'s message (and, implicitly, King Wu's conquest) may lie in controlling the "Center" [*zhong* 中], which Allan identifies as the cosmological and geographic center of Songshan 嵩山, held by the Shang.

Building on a prior article,⁴ Chapter 7 also advances a rubric for identifying *shu* documents: *shu* are either prerecorded kingly speeches or fictional compositions that reenact such speeches. The matter of prerecording versus live speech must be speculative, but Allan's rubric would otherwise encompass both the materials regarded as most ancient in the *Shang shu* and texts generally thought to imitate them. *Bao xun* seems to fit Allan's rubric well. Nonetheless, compilers or "forgers" at different times have deemed dialogues and songs like those found in *Shang shu* chapters such as "Hong fan 洪範 [Great Plan]" or *Wuzi zhi ge* 五子之歌 [*Songs of the Five Princes*] to be *shu* documents, even though they do not fit the rubric. Allan surmises, for example, that *Bao xun* originated in the state of Chu in the Warring States era, when it was a *shu*. Certainly, being written is a key part of identifying a *shu* document, but in some early contexts, *shu* seems only to mean something written down—"writings," perhaps, generally presumed authoritative. But *shu* documents must have contexts in which they were authoritative. Although texts resembling those found in the earliest layers of the *Shang shu* almost certainly had precipitated some awareness of a *shu* genre by the Warring States, the matter of how that genre was bounded for early users—especially as they composed their own *shu*—is hard to answer without evidence from compilations. The Tsinghua corpus mixes texts that are *shu*-like from a canonical perspective, texts of uncertain genre identity, and others that are decidedly not canonically *shu*-like. Which of these were *shu*-like to the presumed users of the Tsinghua manuscripts? When thinking about this question, I prefer Allen's reasoning in Chapter 6, in which *Zigao* facilitates an understanding of early "Confucians" as diverse communities with varying intellectual norms. Chapter 7's rubric for identifying *shu* documents strikes me, in contrast, as overly reflective of transmitted canons. Might not identifying *shu* genre in Warring States Chu be more like identifying "Confucian" philosophy?

With regard to some larger questions dealt with in part in the introductory chapters, Allen notes in Chapter 3 that bamboo texts tend to correspond to "chapters" that we know from transmitted compendia, whereas silk-scroll

4 Sarah Allan, "On Shu 書 (Documents) and the Origin of the Shang Shu 尚書 (Ancient Documents) in Light of Recently Discovered Bamboo Slip Manuscripts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75, no. 3 (October 2012): 547–57.

manuscripts were a substrate on which these chapter-like units became concatenated into longer units—a step toward the coalescence of compilations that we know in transmission. By analyzing damage to the bamboo *Book of Change* [*Zhou yi* 周易] manuscript held by the Shanghai Museum, Sun Peiyang has shown that the sequence of hexagrams (chapters) in that manuscript may well have been identical to the version known from transmission.⁵ Anyone using a *Zhou yi* without its full complement of sixty-four hexagrams is not playing with a full deck of cards—regardless of whether the text was written on bamboo or silk. And even though the silk cords that bind bamboo texts together often disintegrate, causing great trouble for manuscript reconstruction, the deck of cards did not always shuffle randomly; even bamboo texts may have standard sequences. This is not to say that media did not play a crucial role, as Allen suggests, merely that it is one of several formative factors to which we have limited access.

Who used these texts and what are they for? In the case of “Tang yu zhi dao,” Allen speculates that the text “seems to be addressed to the worthy who must patiently wait for the appropriate moment in order to achieve his ambition” (116) but does not exhaustively explore the question of audience. In the case of *Rongcheng shi*, Allen takes up a debate with Yuri Pines about whether the text is a work of narrative history or a philosophical use of legend (182). I am not sure whether classifying it one way or the other fully does the text justice. Texts that advocate the transfer of political power to the worthy may not merely constitute philosophical tools for would-be usurpers (from the perspective of a hereditary ruling class); they may also be seen, for example, in a religious context as a means of social control in which a particular model of goodness facilitates social order. China’s current rulers seem disinclined to abdication, but they are certainly staunch supporters of social order, which at least the perception of meritocracy must reinforce. Such larger social questions, in any case, are beyond the scope of Allen’s study but call for a broader assessment of how the philosophical orientations of these manuscript texts intersect. Is their model of goodness, for example, as unique as their stance on abdication?

5 See Sun Peiyang 孫沛陽, “Shanghai Bowuguan cang zhanguo chu zhushu *Zhou yi* de fuyuan yu guaxu yanjiu 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書《周易》的復原與卦序研究 [Restoration Work on Shanghai Museum’s Bamboo Version of the *Zhou Yi* from the Warring States Period],” *Gudai wenming yanjiu tongxun* 古代文明研究通訊 46 (2010): 23–36. A version excavated from Mawangdui (on silk) demonstrates clearly that allotypes had different sequences of hexagrams. Sun, incidentally, is not but should also be credited with the discovery of score marks on the verso of bamboo slips discussed on p. 64. These marks are crucial aids in determining the slip sequence.

In sum, Allan's new book bears the fruit of a long, successful career in early China studies. It is of broad interest to scholars in the humanities and required reading for students of Chinese philosophy and intellectual history. The book avoids jargon and is generally well edited.⁶ The focal texts are carefully researched and lucidly translated. Allan's analyses are thorough and absorbing, and the insights of the book are broadly consequential for understanding how political power can transform legends and shape authoritative texts. Some topics are worthy of a monograph. In *Buried Ideas*, Allen shows that her topic is worthy of two.

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⁶ I note here a few errors: on p. 74, *liding* should be 隸定; in the notes to p. 66, the typeface needs to be corrected; on p. 144, Mark Csikszentmihalyi's name is rendered incorrectly.