

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 59 (2005)

Heft: 1: Methodological issues in the study of early Chinese manuscripts : papers from the second Hamburg tomb text workshop

Vorwort: Introduction

Autor: Richter, Matthias

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

INTRODUCTION

Matthias Richter, University of Hamburg

Excavated and otherwise retrieved manuscripts play an increasingly important role in the study of all aspects of early China. The availability of this new kind of source material, it is often asserted by scholars in China and the West alike, must lead to a re-evaluation of many aspects of early Chinese history and will eventually demand that whole chapters of this history be re-written.¹ The significance of these new sources makes the need to establish a firm methodological basis for their interpretation ever more urgent. With the discovery of early Chinese manuscripts – by no means the first, but at that time the most sensational ones – at Yinqueshan 銀雀山, Mawangdui 馬王堆 and Shuihudi 睡虎地 in the 1970s and with the subsequent partial publication of the texts found in the respective tombs, manuscripts began their ascent to a prominent position in sinological studies. Yet, at that early stage scholars often treated the manuscript texts, especially those with counterparts in the transmitted literature (e.g. *Laozi* 老子 or *Sunzi* 孫子), largely in the same way as was their wont in studying the printed texts of the hitherto known literary tradition.

While the study of the much earlier oracle bones or bronze inscriptions was from the beginning closely and manifestly linked to palaeography and historical phonology and had to consider the material features of the documents as well as their archaeological background, all these problems were less obvious in the case of Warring States and early imperial brush-written texts, which were much closer in nature to transmitted literature, or at least appeared to be so. Consequently, during the first decades after the famous discoveries in the mid-1970s there was comparatively little awareness of and even less experience with the complex problems involved in the study of these manuscripts among scholars both in and outside China. They interpreted the manuscript texts and translated them (into modern Chinese or other languages) on the basis of transcriptions the quality of which they had no means to appraise. Many transcriptions, some of them even in simplified characters, reflected little of the actual features of the

1 Li Ling in the introduction to his latest book on manuscript studies reflects the ongoing discussion of this question among Chinese scholars. (Cf. Li Ling 李零, *Jianbo gushu yu xueshu yuanliu* 簡帛古書與學術源流, Beijing: San lian, 2004.)

original script and often completely neglected punctuation, corrections, or aspects of textual organisation as reflected in layout features, thus making the manuscript texts appear even more to be basically the same as transmitted texts. The originals not being accessible to all but extremely few scholars and the photographic reproductions at hand often being of a deplorably poor quality, awareness of the actual physical features of manuscripts remained very much restricted to the small circle of specialists involved in excavating, cleaning, arranging and preserving the manuscripts – and, eventually, transcribing and editing their texts and reproductions.

This situation has gradually changed over the decades to the present day. Not only has the quantity of edited early Chinese manuscript texts increased and thus allows an appraisal by comparison of different editing and transcribing standards; also the quality of reproductions of the originals has greatly improved, and so has the degree of sophistication of the editions. The 1998 Wenwu edition of the Guodian 郭店 manuscripts and the series of editions of the Shanghai Museum manuscripts bear witness to this most fortunate development.² This greater availability of reliable reproductions that convey a vivid impression of the original, and also the continuously accumulating wealth of widely divergent transcriptions, readings, and consequently interpretations, of the manuscript texts have heightened the general awareness among scholars of the complex palaeographic and codicological problems involved in interpreting manuscripts from early China. Moreover, manuscript texts differ from transmitted literature in more ways than that. In transmitted texts we behold the product of many centuries of a textual history and a history of textual transmission (the borderline between these often being blurred). The beginnings of this history lie very much in the dark, and we tend to view early Chinese texts more in a chiefly literary context than we are able to position them, both in spatial and temporal terms, in a specific historical situation. In a manuscript, however, we have a particular witness of a text that is unambiguously attached to a specific historical context, in so far as we can determine its date and know where it was found.³ Consequently, the historical background will play a greater,

2 Jingmen shi bowuguan 荆門市博物館 (ed.), *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡, Beijing: Wenwu, 1998. Ma Chengyuan 馬承源 (ed.), *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2001 to date.

3 The tombs from which manuscripts were retrieved can often be dated with a fair degree of accuracy (thus at least yielding a *terminus ante quem* for the manuscript texts), and among the manuscripts found outside of tombs there are a great deal of administrative documents which often bear dates themselves (as other kinds of manuscripts occasionally do as well).

more immediate role in the interpretation of manuscripts than it can in the case of transmitted literature.

It is for these reasons that two “Tomb Text Workshops” have been held at the University of Hamburg. In the summer of 2000, the Department of Chinese Studies of the Asia Africa Institute hosted a workshop which focused, though not exclusively, on manuscripts excavated from early Chinese tombs, and was accordingly titled “Hamburg Tomb Text Workshop”. The workshop was initiated by Professors William G. Boltz (University of Washington, Seattle), Michael Friedrich and Hans Stumpfeldt (both University of Hamburg) and was from the very beginning conceived of as the first of a series. This first workshop addressed its topic from a wide perspective, looking at tomb texts as an integral part of a funerary ensemble in a certain historical context and thus throwing light on a very wide range of topics that must be taken into consideration when interpreting the manuscript finds. The diversity of topics treated by the participants ranged from the Spring and Autumn’s kinship system or the social ranking as reflected in Chu funerary ensembles to the relationship between the tomb occupants’ biographies and the texts buried with them, or to structural differences between manuscript texts and their transmitted counterparts. Part of the papers have been published as a Special Section of *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003), and of the others a brief account is given in the introduction to that publication.

The present volume is the outcome of the “Second Hamburg Tomb Text Workshop”, held at the Asia Africa Institute from 27–29 February, 2004. Keeping the wide perspective of its predecessor in mind, the second workshop was consciously designed as a contrast and complement to the first – choosing a narrower range of topics and discussing fewer questions in more detail. The 2004 workshop invited presentations to demonstrate the significance of physical features (especially the script) of the manuscripts for their interpretation, aiming to discuss methodological issues rather than interpreting particular finds. The range of topics addressed in the several papers was fairly wide, nevertheless; they included: the significance of text layout and general codicological design (Ken’ichi Takashima, Marc Kalinowski); modes of transcription and systematic procedures to be applied in reading manuscripts (Xing Wen, Crispin Williams); the scope of orthographic systems that underlay manuscripts from different times and regions (Imre Galambos, Matthias Richter); the classification of variants and possible causes for them on the level of morphology (William G.

Cases like the Shanghai Museum manuscripts, the origins of which are obscure, as they were acquired from the antique market in Hong Kong, are still a rare exception.

Boltz, Robert H. Gassmann); the limitations of traditional Western textual criticism as applied to early Chinese manuscripts (Attilio Andreini); different modes of quoting canonical texts in manuscript texts as compared to their transmitted counterparts and questions of textual transmission (Martin Kern); the early imperial legal system as reflected in specific rules and cases described in manuscripts (Ulrich Lau); diplomatic studies focusing on the role of signatures in Han administrative documents (Enno Giele).

These few keywords cannot, of course, do justice to any of the articles: For an overview the reader is kindly referred to the summaries preceding them. As a rule, each article touches upon several of the topics named above and explores them in relation to each other. Besides the contributions offered in the present volume, two papers were presented which for different reasons could not be made available for this publication: Wolfgang Behr's presentation featured a detailed study of the two textually almost identical Zengsun Yin 曾孫駟 jade tablet inscriptions,⁴ paying special attention to their metric and rhyme patterns. Hans van Ess, who had at the first Tomb Text Workshop discussed the "Shen wu fu 神烏賦" and the diary found in Yinwan 尹灣 tomb six⁵ as reflexions of the tomb occupants' biographies, now explored the significance of the materiality of the different manuscripts from this tomb for the interpretation of their texts. Originally, the workshop was to expect two more very promising contributions: Chen Songchang 陳松長 (Hunan Provincial Museum, Changsha) had offered a paper on peculiarities of the script of the two Mawangdui *Laozi* manuscripts and Li Ling 李零 (Peking University) was going to speak about the Shanghai Museum bamboo manuscript titled *Zhonggong* 中弓 (仲弓). Regrettably, for different reasons neither these two scholars nor Xing Wen and William Boltz were able to attend the workshop. It is all the more fortunate that Xing Wen arranged to have his paper read for him in his absence, and that both he and William Boltz could make it possible to contribute their articles to this publication.

This volume, it will become apparent, embraces not only a wide variety of topics but also vastly different methodological approaches, some of them perhaps even occasionally conflicting. It is my hope that the reader will not perceive this quality of the volume as the jarring sound of discordant voices but

4 For which see Wang Hui 王輝, "Qin Zengsun Yin gao Hua dashan mingshen wen kaoshi 秦曾孫駟告華大山明神文考釋" in *Kaogu xuebao* 2001.2: 143–157.

5 Cf. Lianyungang shi bowuguan 連雲港市博物館 (ed.), *Yinwan Han mu jian du* 尹灣漢墓簡牘, Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997.

rather as a pleasing polyphony in which one voice enhances the others. Methodological questions are by nature controversial issues, and the diversity of approaches and opinions befits the various subjects treated in this volume. By repeated changes of perspective these different methodologies all aim to bring forward a comprehensive study of early Chinese manuscripts that takes full account of the valuable information they have to offer.

In accordance with the variety of voices assembled here, only some features of the different articles have been unified to give the whole volume a certain degree of formal coherence: besides uniform script types and formats, the same general rules of punctuation, citation and forms of bibliographical references were applied in all articles. However, it seemed to suit the subject matter well to confront the reader with a certain variety also amongst the articles of the different contributors. All features that are not of a purely technical nature have been left to the choice of the authors: different systems of English orthography or of romanisation of Chinese have not been unified.

I may certainly speak on behalf of all participants in the workshop in expressing profound gratitude to Robert H. Gassmann (Zürich) for his kind offer to publish the articles at such an early date in this journal. I am most grateful to Michael Friedrich (Hamburg) for not only generously contributing to the planning, organisation and realisation of the workshop but also for his continuous efforts to establish the study of manuscripts in Chinese script at the University of Hamburg on a long term basis. I would also like to thank several colleagues and students of the Asia Africa Institute, namely Ruth Cremerius, Johannes Cyrus, Katrin Grünke, Monika Klaffs and Stefan Thiemann, who helped to make the workshop take a smooth course. Thanks are due also to the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation) for their financial support of the workshop as part of the ongoing research project on early Chinese manuscripts at the University of Hamburg. Last, but not least I wish to thank all participants in the workshop for the amiable atmosphere and the stimulating, fruitful discussions through the long hours within and without the conference room, kindled by the common lively interest of all in the subject.

