Title:

Defining Leadership and Promoting Action in the Warring States: A first look at the recently discovered military manuscript Cao Mo’s Battle Formations

Abstract:

Recent excavations of Chinese bamboo manuscripts have so far yielded a wealth of information about classical philosophical debate, but conspicuously absent have been contemporary manuscript copies of texts on the most prevalent socio-political issue of the aptly named Warring States period, namely warfare. Recently, however, the Shanghai Museum began publishing several Warring States bamboo manuscripts from the state of Chu which it acquired in 1994. Among them is the manuscript of a previously unknown Warring States military text titled Cao Mo’s Battle Formations. Through a lengthy dialogue between Duke Zhuang of Lu and his advisor Cao Mo, this manuscript offers new insight into perceptions of the ruler’s military duties in relation to contemporary debates over proper rule. While many contemporary philosophical schools considered the betterment or detriment of a state or army as being inextricably linked to the power of both virtue and Heaven, Cao Mo gives precedence to the real-world efficacy of the ruler’s actions and the subsequent response of the populace and soldiers. In this paper I offer the first codicological analysis and translation in English of this newly published manuscript. I go on to analyze Cao Mo’s central theme of personal action, which requires the ruler to be a visible, decisive, and active participant in handling mundane affairs of the state and in commanding the military. Finally, I compare this theme to the theories of leadership found in other extant and recently discovered Chinese military texts, such as the Sunzi bingfa and Sun Bin bingfa.