Re-evaluating Religion, Philosophy, and the Arts of Early China Through Excavated Texts: Excavated Texts from Chu

This workshop helped clarify the overarching significance of particular excavated texts from the Shanghai Museum publications in light of the received textual tradition of the Warring States period (5th-3rd c. BCE). Eleven scholars from the USA and Taiwan shared strategies for understanding and deciphering these texts. Areas of expertise ranged from historical, literary, and cultural approaches to phonological, epigraphic, and orthographic methodologies. Scholars were given the opportunity to collaborate and share material in groups in advance of the workshop, which gave them time and opportunities to explore and consider different possibilities for interpretation. Aside from the eleven presenters, more than twelve additional attendees from colleges and universities around the East Coast participated in the two days of talks, including professors from New York City and Maryland, and graduate students from Harvard, Dartmouth, and the University of Pennsylvania. All totaled, there were roughly 23 full-time participants in this workshop.

Four different texts were presented and discussed over the course of two days. Speakers explained why the chosen text was significant and addressed specific issues of transcription and interpretation. Some scholars approached their text through an examination of its central concepts or themes, showing how the text challenged received understandings of religion, philosophy, and the arts during the period. Other scholars, and especially the paleographers from Taiwan and linguists and orthographers from the USA, focused more on readings of specific ancient characters, the types of problems associated with the bamboo strips at hand, and critiques of certain methodologies that do not yield reliable results. Below, we provide a brief summary of each of the panels, along with a synopsis of overarching conclusions and future directions for collaborative work and publications on these texts.

Text #1: “Heng xian”: Professor Erica Brindley introduced the text as a Chinese genesis story or cosmogony with naturalistic and spiritualistic elements. She showed how the concept of qi was given a foundation in the very earliest stages of cosmic development – something that is not seen in other cosmogonies from the period – and discussed the importance of self-agency as the underlying motivating agency behind all ideal action. The most important concepts in the text, such as huo 或 (“incipience,” “frontier”?) and zuo 作 (“arising”) were discussed, and difficult passages mentioned. Brindley drove home the point that while careful analysis and phonological, orthographical understandings of certain characters are absolutely integral to an understanding of these texts, it was also necessary to use a conceptual approach that not only highlighted similarities with other ideas common to the period, but also was open to and actively looked for areas of difference. In other words, it was important to seek out ways in which these new texts might challenge current understandings of the intellectual life of the period, not merely reinforce common assumptions.

Professor Matthias Richter walked the audience through many aspects of his translation of the text, focusing on thematic, orthographic, and methodological
approaches to it. His translation stressed the underlying political agenda of this ostensibly cosmological text, preferring interpretations that seemed to suggest its use at court and amidst discussions of naming that became paramount during the late Warring States period. In terms of orthography, he demonstrated how a thorough comparison and statistical analysis of certain orthographic practices for each graph could yield more definite results, or “statistically observable regularities.” For example, the graph for zhi4 (治) is always, or at least nearly always, written with the silk radical present, while otherwise the same phonophoric 台 or 司, combined with different radicals, refers to a different lexical item. He also placed the text within a larger context of discourse on names: in between Xunzi’s claims that names are assigned arbitrarily by humans and Dong Zhongshu’s claims that names are ultimately derived from the cosmos.

Professor Xing Wen completed the panel on the “Heng Xian” by presenting arguments taken from the book he is currently writing on the topic. He emphasized certain translations of terms and underscored analyzing the text from the perspective of its rhetorical structure. In a thorough paragraph-by-paragraph manner, Xing demonstrated why his reordering of the strips was felicitous according to certain parallelisms in the text. He presented his proposed textual rearrangement in relationship to what other leading scholars have proposed, showing how his arrangement keeps certain parallelisms intact, thereby increasing readability. Xing’s approach was convincing; it clearly demonstrated that there are many types of clues – often missed by scholars – that help make these texts more intelligible to the 21st century reader.

**Text #2: “Fanwu liuxing”**: This text was compatible with the “Heng Xian” in its cosmological orientations. Professor Scott Cook introduced the text as something that might be understood from within the context of other Chu texts and cosmological, poetic musings on the state of the world, such as the “Heaven’s Questions.” He presented his translation of the text and highlighted difficult graphs, along with his interpretations of them.

Professor Lai Guolong continued the discussion of the text by presenting his translation of it, focusing in particular on the interpretations of problematic graphs. For example, in the fourth line of the text, readings may range from “Losing teeth and teething, what happens first and what second?” to “Once they are uprooted, and once again planted, which comes last and which first?” Lai argued for the former reading through an account of the phonological possibilities surrounding the word he takes as “teething.” Aside from phonological arguments concerning specific terms, Lai also discussed the inquisitive tone throughout the text, and placed the author’s rhetorical style within the larger context of inquiries into the natural world. Such natural inquiry is almost invariably couched within a spiritual stance that exhorts the reader and audience to embrace the oneness of oneself and all phenomenal things.

**Text #3: “Kongzi shilun”**: This text was introduced by Professor Constance Cook who also presented a theory about its function as an educational tool. As with many bamboo texts, the “Kongzi shilun” (The Discussions of Odes by Confucius,” hereafter referred to as KZSL) suffers from fundamental debates over the correct order of individual strips and which sections of text should be read together or separately. Complicating this issue is the fact that the KZSL strips are covered with two different
types of punctuating signs, which Cook suggested had more to do with how the text was read by students out loud and thus may be related more to the musical attributes of the text than to marks dividing sections. Cook then proceeded to highlight and expound on specific lines of the KZSL that referred to the ritual use of poetry and music in educating young lords. In the course of this discussion, she presented her own translations of the KZSL, particular corresponding lines in the transmitted *Odes* (*Shijing*), another Shanghai museum manuscript, the *Xizhe Junlao* 西者君老, which describes a ritual for educating the lineage heir. She also discussed the relationship of the Han period “Great Preface” of the *Odes* with the KZSL and briefly mentioned how this obvious connection not only supports her thesis of ritual education but also feeds debates over authorship of the KZSL.

Professor Lin Su-ching followed up with detailed discussions of the various theories over authorship, text type, strip order and section division, and script style. Since the text is written in the style of question and answer, a style familiar from other texts the “quote” Kongzi (Confucius), it is understood that KZSL was written by a disciple, either Zi Gao (the author of another text found with the KZSL), Zi Xia (linked to the Great Preface and other question-and-answer dialogues preserved in transmitted texts), or even Zi You. Some scholars feel the KZSL preserves the actual words of Kongzi and others feel the text may in fact have had nothing directly to do with Kongzi or his disciples.

The issue of style in KZSL is unique because 6 strips contained script only in the center section of the bamboo strip while other strips were covered with script. The controversy is over whether script had been erased (although all scholars who have looked at the originals find no trace; even so Lin feels that they must have originally had script) or if these strips represent a singular style and actually belong to another version of the same text or at least isolates a particular section. Lin reviewed ten different theories regarding how to divide KZSL into sections and the related issues of strip order. Also connected to issues of style was the calligraphic style of the graphs on KZSL which were generally written in a clear script with fewer than normal problematic variants—as is typical of many bamboo texts. Most curious is the possible graphic distinction of certain graphs (e.g., *ming* 命) among the Shanghai and Guodian bamboo books depending on their grammatical function.

Professor William Baxter focused on the analysis of key graphs in the KZSL and their phonetic reconstruction as a means for evaluating their proper transcription as well as showing how elements preserved in the archaic graphs reveal linguistic information on ancient word families. Although he contributed this type of information for all texts presented at the conference, his own presentation focused on the graphs for “poetry” (*shi*), “not have” (*wang*), “conceal” (*yin*), and other words. He discussed at length current relevant issues of historical phonetic reconstruction and how this will affect transcriptions and readings of excavated texts as well as key issues such as regional origin and dating.

Professor Anne Kinney focused on strip number 1 of the KZSL which, depending on ones’ accepted strip order, might either be the opening or closing statement of the entire text. Either way this statement (Kongzi said: “The *Odes* have no hidden agenda, the music no hidden feelings, the patterns (of words or music) no hidden expressions”) must epitomize the author’s view of the *Odes*. Kinney examined the relationship between “will” (*zhī*) and “poetry” (*shī*) in KZSL and the transmitted textual tradition.
showing many similar and variant ideas. Next, she examined the concepts of “hiding and revealing” in those texts and how they connected to the “hidden” (yīn) in the KZSL. The discussion of these different threads led to her final comments on the different esoteric schools of Odes interpretation.

**Text # 4 “Zhong Gong”**: Professor Andrew Meyer opened this final discussion session of the workshop with a reading of the short text titled “Zhong Gong.” Meyer showed how the text provides an extended account of an exchange between Master and disciple that is recorded in the Analects, and how it testifies to the perceived importance of Zhong Gong among Confucius’ first generation of disciples. Of particular interest, he claimed, is the way that the text models the relationship between Master and disciple for a Warring States readership. Zhong Gong opens the exchange by offering to refuse employment, based on Confucius’ orders. He thus implicitly asserts that the authority of the Master should be the norm, even though other contemporary texts would contest such claims and argue instead for the importance of official, state authority over that of the Master-disciple. Meyer also compared individual phrases from the “Zhong Gong” with contemporary Confucian texts to reveal its stylistic lineage.

Professor Yen Shi-hsuan provided a detailed analysis of a single controversial graph found on strips 19 and 20b in “Zhong Gong.” He compared the style of the graph with similar graphs in the Guodian and other bamboo texts and discussed the likelihood of the different interpretations provided in the past. He decided on the transcription of xiē 溃 with a reading of jiē 竭 in the sense of “to dry up.” For example, strip 19 might be translated as follows: “mountains have collapsed and rivers have dried up, the sun, moon, stars, and chronograms are likewise off-kilter, and the people everywhere transgress. Worthies….” Strip 20b is fragmentary but seems to talk about three ways in which “emotion” (qīng) was “dried up” (xiē) and “carefulness” (shēn 慎) [a quality required in the practice of ritual] “exhausted” (jìn 穀). Yan showed how his transcription and reading would affect the philosophical interpretation of other bamboo texts that use this graph (especially regarding the Confucian principal of a human-centered cosmos, ren dao 人道.) Finally, he provided a complete transcription of the “Zhong Gong” using a different re-arrangement of the strips.

In summary, the workshop provided a forum for scholars of early China from around the world to hold open dialogue and exchange thoughts on methodologies, strategies, and interpretations of important excavated texts. The general feeling at the close of the workshop was that these texts are best worked out not individually but by a group of scholars, each offering his or her specific area of expertise. Many participants expressed the desire that this workshop should be the beginning of more such gatherings. Based on such feedback, Professor Brindley will host a follow-up workshop later this summer at Penn State, using funds donated by Penn State Asian Studies. This follow-up workshop will focus on a detailed reading of the “Heng Xian” text with a few, select scholars from the Northeastern United States, many of whom participated in this workshop. Presenters will have an opportunity to receive scholarly feedback and criticism on their papers and translations. Afterwards, Professor Brindley (Penn State) and Professor Michael Puett (Harvard) will solicit articles for a critical, edited volume on workshop proceedings related to this text, to be submitted to the State University of New
York Press or the Early China Special Monograph Series (Berkeley). Such a volume will be the direct result of this initial workshop sponsored by the ACLS/CCK.

News of the “New Perspectives” bamboo text workshop at Penn State has already been published in the online Chinese journal, Bamboo and Silk: [http://www.bsm.org.cn/show_news.php?id=270](http://www.bsm.org.cn/show_news.php?id=270)