CHAPTER 1

Written on Bamboo and Silk

The Tsinghua manuscripts reveal a chapter in Chinese book history that predates the invention of ancient paper—a history of writing on bamboo and wooden strips. Bamboo and wooden strips were China’s earliest writing supports and textual form. These strips, and an additional type of writing material, silk, are frequently referred together as “bamboo and silk” (jianbo 簡帛).

The Rise and Decline of Bamboo and Silk Manuscripts in Early China

The invention of writing may be considered one of humanity’s greatest achievements. With writing, people are able to record their experiences, discoveries, and thoughts, and pass them on to later generations, who may then in turn build upon the cumulative knowledge of their forbearers. It is, moreover, in the composition of literature that one may win immortal fame, creating a work that lasts long after the author has passed away. In short, writing allows us to transcend the limitations of time and space, and even communicate with ancestors from thousands of years ago, sharing in their thoughts and experiencing their joys and sorrows. Without writing, each generation could only start over from scratch, and as such humanity would only progress extremely slowly. It is for this reason that the invention of writing is widely recognized as an important indicator of civilization.

The technology of writing requires the use of a writing support (or “textual support” 文字載體), that is to say, some material must be adopted to bear the marks of writing themselves. And as each of the major early civilizations was unique in its own way, it is not surprising that the writing supports they adopted were equally diverse. The ancient Egyptians made abundant use of papyrus, a type of plant that flourished in the Nile River Delta. Papyrus is a reed-like plant with triangular leaves. Its stalks can reach three meters or more in length, with a thickness similar to that of the human wrist. Papyrus contains many layers of fiber. Ancient Egyptians peeled away the outer layer of the stems, and, using a sharp knife, cut off long, narrow strips along the grain of the fiber. These strips were packed firmly together and then beaten with a wooden mallet, which caused the sap residing naturally within the plant to ooze out. When dried out, these long strips were permanently stuck together and could
be used as a writing support. Many of these kinds of papyrus documents have been found to date, and even the Ancient Greeks and Romans also later used papyrus for writing. In fact, the English word “paper” is derived from “papyrus.”

Ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, such as the Babylonians, carved writing onto clay tablets. Because the ligatures were wedge-shaped, rather like the point of a nail or an arrow, this style of writing is referred to as cuneiform script. Clay tablets with this kind of writing were dried by fire or in the sun and became extremely hard, allowing the previously inscribed writing or designs to be preserved for long periods of time. We call these texts “clay-tablet documents” (泥版文書). Such clay-tablet documents have been discovered in great numbers, and have consequently greatly advanced our understanding of ancient Near Eastern civilizations. Although clay-tablet documents were cheap to produce and incredibly durable, they also had a serious shortcoming: they were extremely thick and heavy. By comparison, if we were to take the content of a 50 page mass-market paperback and inscribe it on clay in the same manner as they did in these ancient civilizations, we would end up with a clay “book” that weighed over 50 kilograms! No matter how they were stored or read, books this heavy must have been inconvenient.

The ancient Chinese, unlike their contemporaries in ancient Egypt or Babylon, used strips or tablets made from bamboo or wood as writing supports instead, in addition to silk sheets. The invention of these forms of writing support should be regarded as one of ancient China’s greatest discoveries. The chaîne opératoire for bamboo strips generally is as follows. First, bamboo is cut into short sections following the naturally occurring joints in its trunk, and then split into thin strips. These strips are then further cut and shortened to the desired length, before being shaved and polished smooth. On the exposed side (often called the “yellow” side or 竹黄 in Chinese), characters can be written in ink. This is a completed bamboo strip. When the bamboo trunk is split open to make strips, it must be dried out over fire, in order to remove moisture and exterminate any insect eggs that had been laid inside the plant. If the bamboo...