CHAPTER 4

Preservation of the Tsinghua Strips

The recovery of the Tsinghua strips is one of the most remarkable discoveries of bamboo-strip manuscripts from the past century. This unique collection will be the focus of scholarly research for a long time to come.

Acquisition of the Tsinghua Strips

The Tsinghua strips entered into the university’s care on July 15th, 2008. They were first transported by plane in the morning from Hong Kong to Beijing, and then taken by a specially arranged car to Tsinghua University, arriving on site at around two in the afternoon. While we looked on excitedly, workers cautiously unloaded the bamboo strips from the car and carried them to a conservation lab on campus for preservation treatment. This lab is kept at a constant temperature and humidity, providing an ideal environment for their storage. Furthermore, because these bamboo strips were waterlogged, they could not be removed from water without immediately deteriorating. For this reason, each strip was individually placed within custom-made containers and left submerged in distilled water.

Of course, how this collection of bamboo strips actually came to be acquired by Tsinghua University is a much longer story. Because the Tsinghua strips were originally unearthed by tomb robbers and smuggled outside of the mainland, the specific time and location for their excavation is unknown. Hu Pingsheng 胡平生, a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage 中國文化遺產研究, discusses in his article, “On Authenticating Bamboo-Strip and Silk Manuscripts and Saving Lost Bamboo and Wooden Documents”, how he had heard that there was an important collection of Warring States bamboo strips on the Hong Kong antiquities market. He heard rumors about this cache when returning to Beijing from teaching at National Taiwan University, in April 2007.1 He believes that the bamboo strips acquired by Tsinghua University are this same cache. Zhang Guangyu 張光裕, a paleographer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong 香港中文大學, also recollects personally seeing eight

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Chu bamboo strips there as early as the winter of 2006, strips which might have been related to the Tsinghua collection. If this is true, then the Tsinghua strips would have already been floating about the antique market for a considerably long period of time before their eventual purchase.

Now large quantities of fake bamboo strips had appeared in the Hong Kong antiquities market before, and as a result more than a few buyers have been conned into buying forgeries. With forgeries flooding the market, most institutions, whether domestic or foreign, public or private, have since adopted an extremely cautious attitude toward the purchase of any bamboo strips lacking a clear provenance. Reportedly there was even another institution that had once considered buying this very cache of bamboo strips, but ultimately they were unable to do so for a variety of reasons. Under these circumstances, it makes sense that these bamboo strips would have remained adrift on the market for a long period of time, and thus been left in a very precarious situation.

Tsinghua University only first became aware of this collection of bamboo strips much later, when they became a topic of conversation at an important banquet. In 2008, Tsinghua University appointed Fu Xuancong, formerly the editor-in-chief for Zhonghua Book Company, to direct the Ancient Chinese Literature Research Center. As is tradition at Tsinghua University, whenever a senior scholar joins the faculty they are honored with a formal dinner attended by some of the school’s leading figures. On June 4th, 2008, Chen Xi, Secretary of the CPC Tsinghua University Committee, hosted a dinner for Fu Xuancong and his wife. They were joined by the eminent physicist Yang Zhenning and renowned historian Li Xueqin, who were also accompanied by their spouses, as well as Xie Weihe, Dean of Liberal Arts and Vice President of Tsinghua University. Over the course of dinner, as everyone conversed freely, Li Xueqin mentioned that a cache of looted bamboo strips had been seen in Hong Kong, and that while neither the content nor dating was certain, it was perhaps very important material. When asked by Chen Xi to briefly characterize the significance of these bamboo strips, Li Xueqin responded: “If they are authentic, then we are dealing with important ancient documents that Sima Qian himself did not even have a chance to read.” (Sima Qian is the author of the Shiji, one of China’s earliest and most celebrated history.) Chen Xi and the others were all inspired, and agreed that this was a crucial matter which could

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