CHAPTER 6

The Zidanku Silk Manuscripts

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“Written on bamboo and silk” is the well-known phrase recorded in the book of the famed philosopher of classical China Mozi 墨子. “Bamboo” (zhú 竹) refers to slips of bamboo, “silk” (bó 布) to sheets of fabric. Modern archaeological discoveries prove that among the materials used as the support for writing in early China, the two materials used for everyday writing were precisely these. Between the first and fourth centuries CE, paper gradually replaced bamboo or wooden slips and silk. At present, batch after batch of Warring States, Qin, and Han slips continue to be discovered in amounts that are nothing short of amazing. In contrast, however, there have been just two discoveries of silk manuscripts, both in Changsha 長沙, Hunan. The most recent discovery occurred in 1973, when Mawangdui 馬王堆 tomb 3 was excavated and the tomb yielded a lacquer box with silk manuscripts from the Western Han period, known to scholars as the “Mawangdui silk manuscripts.” The earlier discovery was in 1942, when tomb robbers looted the Warring States tomb at Zidanku 子彈庫 and found a lacquered, plaited-bamboo basket with silk manuscripts inside.

The Zidanku Silk Manuscripts include the famous manuscript that was first published in facsimile in 1945 by Cai Jixiang 蔡季襄 (1897–1980) and was acquired in 1965 by Arthur M. Sackler (1913–1987). Since the 1950s, this manuscript was known in Chinese as Chu boshu 楚帛書 and in English as the Chu Silk Manuscript but is now referred to as Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 (plate 4). Although the existence of additional silk fragments was known, and there was talk of a second silk manuscript, no one had a clear idea of what these were and what their relation to the Chu Silk Manuscript might be, nor was the Zidanku tomb identified as the source of the looted manuscripts. My involvement with the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts began more than thirty years ago when I first became engaged in research on Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 using available photographic reproductions and published a monograph with an annotated transcription of the manuscript. Work on the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts entered a new phase in 1992 when the other silk manuscript fragments and basket came to light again. I have recently completed a book that addresses all aspects of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts: the looting of the tomb at Zidanku and the manuscript discovery, the subsequent history of the manuscripts in China and the United States, their state of preservation and contents, and related artifacts from the tomb. This chapter summarizes the results of my research and further addresses the significance of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts for our understanding of ancient Chinese hemerology and hemerological literature.

The former name “Chu Silk Manuscript” given to Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1, the best preserved and best known of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts, is imprecise and could be applied to any silk manuscript from the ancient state of Chu. The name gained currency in the 1950s, first, because people knew of only the one manuscript looted at Changsha (which was situated on Chu’s southern boundary in the second half of the first millennium BCE) and there were no other discoveries of silk manuscripts from the same region and, second, because the provenance of Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 was unclear. It was not until 1973 that a Hunan archaeological team whose members included the tomb robbers from 1942 returned to the tomb site at Zidanku and completed a formal excavation. After publication of the Zidanku tomb excavation report in 1974

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1 Mozi, 4, p. 111 (“Jian’ai xia” 兼愛下).
2 Tsién, 2004, p. 150.
3 There have been isolated discoveries of writing on silk, most recently the personal letter on silk from the Han settlement site at Xuanquan 煙泉, Gansu; see Dunhuang Xuanquan Han jian shicui, pp. 187–91. However, the Mawangdui and Zidanku manuscripts remain the only examples of texts written on silk for circulation among readers and users.

4 Li Ling, 1985.
5 Li Ling, 2017.
6 To my knowledge, the first published use of the name Chu Silk Manuscript for Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 is Barnard, 1958, p. 1. Rao Zongyi (1958) also used “Chü Silk Manuscript” in the English-language title for his Chinese monograph, but in the Chinese title, the manuscript was referred to as “Warring States silk manuscript excavated at Changsha” (長沙出土戰國繒書). As for use of zengshu 繒書 or boshu 布書 to refer to the manuscript, Cai Jixiang (1945) used zengshu; Chen Pan (1953) used boshu as the general name for pre-Han and Han manuscripts on silk, including the newly discovered manuscript from Changsha, which he described briefly in an appendix to his article. By the 1960s, most Chinese publications were referring to Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 as Chu boshu.
and the reemergence of the silk fragments with basket in 1992, the provenance of Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 has been confirmed by archaeology, and its place among the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts in the basket is certain.7

In accord with the standard practice in archaeology of assigning names based on excavation site, “Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1” should replace “Chu Silk Manuscript” as the preferred name for the single manuscript. Up to now, the public record of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts has concerned primarily this manuscript. Between the 1940s and 1980s, the decipherment and interpretation of Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 set the stage for the remarkable discoveries of Warring States manuscripts in recent decades, both archaeologically excavated and looted. After 1992, conservation of the Zidanku silk fragments progressed slowly because they were fused in two masses of carbonized silk. By 2007, nearly four hundred fragments of different sizes (some without writing) had been removed from the two masses and conserved. The fact that more fragments remain fused in the masses means we cannot be certain how many separate silk-sheet manuscripts were originally placed in the basket with Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1, but based on my examination of the conserved fragments, I have identified at least two manuscripts, which I call “Zidanku Silk Manuscript 2” and “Zidanku Silk Manuscript 3.”

This chapter is organized in three parts: the discovery of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts and the history of ownership; their content; and their relation to ancient Chinese hemerology. Discoveries of daybook manuscripts and other manuscripts with hemerological texts since the 1970s provide new evidence for our understanding of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts, and the contents of Zidanku Silk Manuscripts 2 and 3 clarify the importance of ideas related to hemerology and the calendar in Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1. Thus we are finally able to place the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts in their original context alongside other examples of ancient technical occult and scientific literature.

**Discovery of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts and the History of Ownership**

In view of the at times conflicting accounts of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts presented since the 1940s, we begin with a summary of the basic facts regarding their discovery and where they are today. After being looted in 1942 from a tomb that we now know is the tomb at Zidanku, the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts were acquired by Cai Jixiang. In 1946 in Shanghai, Cai turned the manuscripts and basket over to John Hadley Cox (1913–2005). Cox agreed to find a buyer in the United States within a specified number of months, and at that point in time, the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts left China for the United States. The piece to be sold was Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1, a darkened piece of silk measuring 47 centimeters by 38.7 centimeters with text barely legible or illegible in places, that had already been mounted in the Chinese style. There is no indication that Cox ever attempted to sell the other manuscript fragments and basket. Twenty years passed before Arthur Sackler purchased Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 in 1965 from the New York antique dealer J. T. Tai as part of the John Hadley Cox Collection (consisting of artifacts that Cox sold as a group to J. T. Tai).

Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 is still owned by the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation in New York but is kept at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The Sackler Gallery, established by Sackler in 1987, adjoins the Freer Gallery of Art with its extensive Asian collections, and they are known collectively as the Freer/Sackler. In 1992 the Sackler Gallery received the fused silk fragments as an anonymous donation along with the basket that had held all the manuscripts. The donor is known to be John Cox. Conservation of the fragments that constitute Zidanku Silk Manuscripts 2 and 3 was performed in the Freer/Sackler Department of Conservation and Scientific Research. As of 2007, all three of the Zidanku Silk Manuscripts are kept at the Freer/Sackler, and photographic reproductions are available for scholarly study. They are the oldest silk manuscripts, and the only Warring States silk manuscripts, discovered to date.

The narrative of these modern events begins in Changsha, located in the middle Yangzi River region, in the first decades of the twentieth century. Modern Changsha was extraordinarily rich in buried artifacts of ancient Chu culture, which were known to Chinese and American antique dealers as “Changsha goods” and were quite famous. Yet, once in the United States, Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 did not receive positive attention from antique dealers and art connoisseurs or from the museums and institutions Cox approached. While some recognized its cultural value, few were able to read the writing on Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1—even when legible, many graphs were difficult to decipher and could not be read by the best paleographers in China at the time—and Zidanku Silk Manuscript 1 was most often judged by the

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7 *Wenwu* 1974.2 is the brief excavation report; *Wenwu* 1973.7 reports on the silk painting found during the archaeological team’s excavation of the Zidanku tomb. For the 1992 events, see p. 258 in this chapter.