THE SUBJECT AND THE SOVEREIGN: EXPLORING THE SELF IN EARLY CHINESE SELF-CULTIVATION

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Introduction

One of the broadly shared assumptions of Western philosophy is that the dominant function in human beings is thinking and knowing. It deals with self-conscious subjects as the sole cause of their actions, transparent to—and sovereign over—themselves. Philosophers find, in the thoughts they entertain about their own thoughts, the very substance of their beings. They focus their sight and attention on thought as if it were the summit of their activity. They deliberately forget everything that is prior to thought, prior to language, prior to clear and distinct ideas, namely their inner dispositions, moods, frames of mind, mental impulse or life force. The essence of classical metaphysics revolves around the question: how is true knowledge possible? Plato’s concept of psyche, Aristotle’s noos, Descartes’ res cogitans, or Kant’s transcendental subject were all posited in order to answer this fundamental question of true knowledge.

From this very general perspective we can discern a duality that runs from ancient Greece through the Hellenic world down to Christianized Europe—a duality first outlined by Pierre Hadot and then by Michel Foucault—between a theoretical subject primarily conceived as a thinking being aspiring to authentic knowledge, and an ethical subject engaged in the process of transforming himself through various practices. The latter tendency seems to prevail in early China and constitutes one of its most salient orientations. These practices transform the self conceived as an ethos, defined by one’s character, inner dispositions and behavior. Contrasting with the theoretical question of knowledge, the way of ethics explores the construction—but, as we will see below, also the dissolution—of the self. The subject or the self is conceived as the totality of its concrete aspects, not as an immortal ontological reality distinct from the body. How were these practices of the self envisioned and debated in their formative period? To what extent did they contribute to the development of a religious sensibility? What kind of body is shaped in
self-cultivation? Is there a compatibility between individual practices and social norms? How did the exploration of the self affect, and how was it in turn affected by, the conception of political authority? What is the role played by texts in the self-formation process?

The history of self-cultivation for the period of the Warring States can only be retraced through very incomplete records that offer a fragmentary portrait of the beliefs, discourses and practices developed at the time. The dating and authorship of the relevant writings is a matter of conjecture and frequently revised working hypotheses. Many texts pertaining to the so-called philosophical traditions have been read over the course of the past decades in the light of new material discovered in tombs. These materials confirm and strengthen the ties between philosophical speculation and concrete practices. It should be noted that in many cases manuscripts found in tombs have a higher degree of technicality than the transmitted texts from the same period. Such are the legal and administrative documents unearthed at Shuihudi 肳虎地, Zhangjiashan 張家山 and Juyan 居延. The tombs unearthed at Baoshan 抱山, Wangjiatai 王家台 and Yinwan 尹灣 contain divinatory speculations intertwined with administrative concerns, while political and cosmological insights define the overall hybrid inspiration of the scrolls and slips found at Guodian 郭店 and Yinqueshan 銀雀山. The site of Mawangdui, where one version of the Wuxing pian 五行篇 (Five kinds of action) was discovered in 1973, also harbored a wide array of technical texts, even if some of them do have a philosophical inspiration or offer a variant of transmitted texts such as the Daode jing. Among others, Mark Csikszentmihályi reminds us that our textual record has not only been augmented, but now enjoys an unprecedented variety of genres which dangerously shakes the frail edifice of received notions of schools and textual genres.1 We must now take stock of this variety and variability of texts and patiently rewrite the intellectual history of pre-imperial China.

Historians also keep reminding us that an absolute beginning is never to be found anywhere. There is certainly a prehistory of self-cultivation practices in archaic China, or during the Spring and Autumn period. Unfortunately, what we know about it is most incomplete. The written records are often from a later time, and the earliest extant texts that

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