
Among the most exciting archaeological finds from the past half-century in China are the manuscript texts excavated from some Warring States- and Han-period tombs. Brush-written with ink on bamboo or wooden strips or on pieces of silk cloth, some of these texts correspond to bodies of writings transmitted over the centuries, while many others do not. Their discovery has tremendously enriched our knowledge of the intellectual atmosphere of the time when they were buried, necessitating a thorough rethinking of conventional historical accounts. The present book intends to prepare the ground for such a revision by laying out the methodology for the editing of the newly discovered texts and by pointing out what they can tell us about how the much-studied classical texts transmitted from antiquity may have been changed over the centuries.

What sets this book apart from the voluminous recent scholarly literature on related subjects is that Shaughnessy attempts to apply his findings from the study of the newly discovered manuscripts to a body of transmitted texts known to have been copied from now-lost manuscripts that were excavated in AD 279 from the tomb of a Warring States-period ruler of Wei at present-day Ji Xian (Henan). Through his analysis of extant manuscripts of similar date, he is able to infer what the texts from Ji Xian might have looked like when they first came out of the tomb, and how they were likely changed by their learned editors. To exemplify this, Shaughnessy extensively revisits the Zhushu jinian (Bamboo Annals), a year-by-year account of events from mythical times down to the mid-Warring States period based on the official chronicles of Jin and Wei—a text on which he has extensively published before.

The dual focus of Rewriting Early Texts on recent and traditional text-processing practices is of great value. For if there is a potentially negative consequence of the new discoveries, it is that the scholarly enthusiasm over the previously unknown evidence entails the danger of neglecting the rich transmitted textual heritage of ancient China. In a sense, the Ji Xian texts are lodged in an intermediary position between texts that have been continuously transmitted since antiquity and the recently excavated manuscripts. By relating these earlier discoveries to the new finds and analyzing both with the same methods, Shaughnessy very commendably bridges the often separate domains of epigraphy and traditional philology. A next step—which may have to wait until an even greater corpus of original manuscripts has become known—will be to apply the insights thus gained to the continuously transmitted texts of which no manuscript versions are extant, and to attempt a reconstruction of earlier versions thereof.

In Chapter One, “The Editing of Archaeologically Recovered Manuscripts and Its Implications for the Study of Received Texts,” Shaughnessy explains how the Chinese experts charged with “putting in order” the excavated manuscripts prepare these texts for publication in modern form. He patiently and judiciously exposes the problems encountered and the choices made, highlighting the merits as well as the disadvantages of the established procedures, which, as he rightly argues, lead to a veritable “rewriting” of the texts in question. Such rewriting must, of course, precede any attempt at translating an ancient manuscript into a foreign language.

As his main example for demonstrating the editorial handling of the newly excavated texts, Shaughnessy has chosen two manuscripts of the Zhiyi: one excavated in 1993 from a mid-fourth century BC Chu tomb at Guodian, Jingmen (Hubei), the other, of unknown provenance but almost certainly also from Warring States-period Chu, acquired by the Shanghai Museum in 1994. The Zhiyi is a philosophical text traditionally associated with Confucius’s grandson Zengzi; the manuscript versions are direct precursors of the “Zhiyi” chapter in the transmitted Li ji, from which they nevertheless differ in important respects. Chapter Two, “Rewriting the Zhiyi: How One Chinese Classic Came to Read as It Does,” is devoted to a close reading of the Zhiyi, comparing the two manuscript versions to one another as well as to the transmitted Li ji chapter with its extensive associated hermeneutical apparatus, and also adducing citations in other ancient texts.

In Appendix One (pp. 94-121), Shaughnessy presents an annotated translation of the Warring States-period Zhiyi as documented in the Guodian (G) and Shanghai Museum (S) manuscripts. In establishing the text to be translated, he first juxtaposes the two manuscript versions, character by character, into their exact modern graphic equivalents. In spite of rendering virtually the same text, the two manuscripts often use different characters for the same words; and these words in turn often correspond obviously to words we are used to seeing written with characters that do not correspond to those used in either manuscript. Shaughnessy therefore distills from his transcriptions a new recension (M), in which he substitutes the characters used in the manuscript texts by those used in standard Classical Chinese. While this procedure unquestionably constitutes interpretation, it should be emphasized that it aims to capture the meaning intended by the authors of the manuscripts, and it emphatically does not serve to assimilate the manuscript text to the transmitted “Zhiyi” chapter of the Li ji, which reflects a somewhat changed set of intellectual agenda. Indeed, the comparison shows great differences, not merely in the arrangement of the texts and in the incomplete overlap of their contents, but also in the nuances of wording of obviously corresponding text passages. Shaughnessy facilitates such a comparison by inserting corresponding text passages from the Li ji version (labelled R) near each pericope of the manuscript text in Appendix One, and by giving the full text of Li ji “Zhiyi,” in the order transmitted since the Han dynasty, as Appendix.