Early Chinese Manuscripts in Archaeological Context

In recent years numerous manuscripts written on bamboo slips, wooden tablets or silk have been excavated from Chinese tombs, and this phenomenon has had a dramatic impact on the study of China’s antiquity. Firstly, it has become possible to compare some of the most important transmitted literati texts such as the *Laozi* with much earlier versions of those texts preserved in their nearly original state. Secondly, these discoveries allow us to get a better idea of the origins of books in early China and their circulation. Thirdly, apart from the texts already known through transmitted versions, many of the excavated manuscripts are first-hand texts such as administration or personal archives that provide illuminating information on the society of the time, from the late fifth century B.C. to the early Christian era.

With these numerous discoveries, a new field of study has developed over the last thirty years, flourishing not only in China but in Japan and in the West as well. A sad consequence of this keen interest for early Chinese manuscripts has been the development of illicit diggings that have supplied the market, in Hong Kong in particular, generating at the same time the production of fake manuscripts. As a result, Chinese museums like the Shanghai museum have started buying manuscripts, and now at least five universities in China possess their own manuscripts, both genuine and fake.

The deciphering of the manuscripts and the understanding of their content demand abilities in several different fields of knowledge, from paleography to philology, from philosophy to history of religions, and also in more specific subjects since the discovered texts may concern questions related to mathematics, for example, or law. Consequently, most of the scholars are highly specialized and, with a few exceptions, their studies focus on the manuscripts themselves, without paying sufficient attention to the archaeological context in which the manuscripts have been discovered. My approach to the problems will be different from theirs since the deposit of manuscripts in tombs should be seen, in my opinion, as part of burial customs and studied from the standpoint of the evolution of the practice from the time when it appeared to the time it vanished.

An international program on divination has been initiated by Michael Lackner at Erlangen (International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, Germany). Part of this program concerns a particular kind of Chinese manuscripts, the “daybooks” (*rishu*), which were effectively “Books of Fate,” and aims at the publication of a book co-edited by Donald Harper and Marc Kalinowski (*Popular Culture and Books of Fate in Early China: The Daybook Manuscripts* (*rishu* 日書) of the Warring States, Qin, and Han). This collaborative project is bringing together Chinese and Western scholars. A full translation of one Book of Fate is already under way. My contribution to the volume aims at understanding the archaeological context in which the *Books of Fate* have been discovered. In my opinion, to explain why *rishu*...
were deposited into tombs, it is necessary initially to have an overview of all the tombs with manuscripts notwithstanding the nature of the texts. In fact, the presence of manuscripts in a very small number of tombs of the Warring States and early imperial periods may be seen in relation to broad social changes. From the period before the unification of China by the First Emperor in 221 B.C., manuscripts have been excavated from tombs situated in two kingdoms, Chu and Qin. A systematic study of the Chu tombs reveals that a certain number of burial practices that formerly were proper to the highest classes of the society were progressively adopted at lower levels of the society during the fourth century BC. In earlier times, the most important burial objects had been markers of status like bronze ritual sets, weapons, prestige objects and magical objects like amulets or jade masks. Sometimes objects of daily use were added to these markers of status. With the passage of time the traditional paraphernalia were progressively replaced by objects of daily use, sometimes very luxurious. Manuscripts that circulated among the living were part of these objects. Initially they were deposited only in tombs of aristocrats of the highest ranks, but starting from the third century BC they appeared also in tombs of government officers.

Several questions have been raised regarding the deposit of manuscripts into tombs. Are they objects that were used by the deceased during his lifetime and that the bereaved neither wanted to see circulate any longer among the living nor wanted to destroy, so that their deposit in the tomb was a way to show their filial piety? Were they made just for funerary use (mingqi) as substitutes in imitation of real books? Did they have a magical function, for instance to protect the deceased against evil influences (some manuscripts were deposited inside the coffin close to the corpse)? Were they prestige objects provided to the deceased in order to show the status of his clan or family or to answer his needs in the afterlife? Personal choice and the marking of status may appear to be conflicting explanations at first glance. However, in a society where people were beginning to express something of their individuality, both explanations may complement each other.

Up to now, all these questions have remained unsolved. In order to address the social significance of these manuscripts it seems to me that the problem must be approached very broadly, taking into account the general trends of burial customs, as well as the social status of the individuals and their activities during their own lifetime. Four tombs containing Books of Fate will be reviewed in the light of the more general evolution of mortuary practices. During the discussion, slides will be shown in order to complement the presentation and focus on specific questions related to the topic.

Alain Thote is archaeologist and art historian. A specialist of Bronze Age China, he is currently teaching as a full professor at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris. He participated in archaeological excavations in China. Among his publications on burial practices in Early China are the following articles: