

Matthias L. Richter

The Embodied Text: Establishing Textual Identity in Early Chinese Manuscripts.
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Over the course of the past four decades, Chinese manuscripts written on bamboo and silk have surfaced in various parts of China and these finds in turn have revolutionized the study of early China. New groups of bamboo slip manuscripts continue to be discovered, generating much excitement in academic circles and inevitably directing the attention of researchers to the latest sensation. In contrast with this somewhat regrettable academic race to keep abreast of new discoveries and be among the first to publish an article about a text, Matthias Richter's book under review chooses to focus on a manuscript entitled by its modern editors **Min zhi fumu* 民之父母 (Parent to the People), high quality photographs of which have been available for over a decade.¹ Yet since Richter uses this manuscript as a case study in establishing a practical methodology for working with newly excavated manuscripts, the book contains observations and insights that are fresh, exciting and relevant not only for this particular text but also for manuscripts that are currently in the process of being published.

Photographs of the **Min zhi fumu* came out in 2002 in the second volume of the series devoted to the Chu bamboo slip manuscripts purchased by the Shanghai Museum on the Hong Kong antique market.² Although the acquisition of the collection and the subsequent publication of the manuscripts was a major event that had a profound impact on the field, this particular manuscript did not attract as much attention as some of the other texts (e.g. **Kongzi shilun* 孔子詩論, **Ziyi* 緇衣, **Wuxing* 五行). Richter convincingly shows, however, that this relatively understudied text is just as interesting as others that have received significantly more attention, and that it can enrich our knowledge of early Chinese manuscripts in a number of important ways. Although transmitted counterparts of the text are known from the 'Kongzi xian ju' 孔子閒居 chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 and the 'Lun li' 論禮 chapter of the *Kongzi jia yu* 孔子家語, Richter demonstrates that paying attention to the visual appearance of the manuscript, including its layout and orthography, rather than the text itself in its bare-bones transcription, enables us to arrive

1 Following Richter's practice, this review uses an asterisk (*) before the title to indicate that a text was named by modern organizers, as opposed to cases when the title was present in the original manuscript.

2 Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu (er)* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書 (二), Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002.

at a more realistic model of textual identity and can also provide additional information about the social context in which the manuscript was produced.

One of the primary aims of the book is establishing textual identity, or rather developing the methodology to do so. The **Min zhi fumu* is merely used as a case study which serves as a concrete example of how such methodology should be applied in practice. Throughout the book, the emphasis is on 'embodying' the text, that is, moving away from its decontextualized form towards taking into consideration its physical appearance and material form. By doing so, Richter hopes to reconstruct, as much as possible, its original context, condemning the approach that mainly relies on comparing the text with parallel versions from early China. Thus there is emphasis on the materiality of the manuscript and on the differentiation between text and manuscript, a distinction all too often overlooked in traditional Chinese scholarship. Richter points out that a manuscript is but one material realization of the text and we should try to make sense of the differences with its transmitted version or other manuscript copies, as these may be indicative of the social or historical background of the manuscript. Thus the book is a critique of what Richter calls the 'homogenizing approach' to early texts, characterized by trying to assimilate newly discovered manuscripts to their transmitted counterparts. This approach in turn creates an impression that there is fundamentally one text and the various versions differ from each other only as a result of textual corruption. In contrast with this, Richter argues in favour of the 'non-homogenizing reading' of texts and emphasizes their differences, which he regards not as unintentional corruptions but as conscious changes introduced by editors in the process of fitting a text into a new ideological context.

Structurally, the book is divided into three parts and a total of fourteen chapters, preceded by an 'Introduction' and followed by a 'Conclusion'. Part One, entitled '**Min zhi fumu: examining the manuscript and establishing the text*', provides a careful description of the manuscript and the text which will be used as a case study in the book. Richter begins his enquiry by looking at the context and provenance of the manuscript, then explores its codicological and palaeographic features, and finally presents a careful transcription of the text itself. While all of these steps are very concrete and specific to the case at hand, they abound in important insights that are highly relevant to reading early Chinese manuscripts in general.

Part Two, 'The divergence of manuscript text and transmitted counterparts: a review of homogenizing readings', is concerned with the methodology of identifying words and phrases in manuscripts, and contrasting them with those that occur in corresponding parts of parallel texts. For deciding on disputed readings, rather than following one's intuition or general understanding

of early Chinese thought and language, Richter establishes a methodological protocol one should follow (p. 70). This starts with taking into consideration the internal criteria of the manuscript, namely, the orthographic regularity and logical coherence within the manuscript itself. Only after these avenues of examination have been exhausted can one consider external criteria such as the orthography of closely related other manuscripts; textual parallels in excavated manuscripts and transmitted texts; and one's general understanding of classical Chinese language and script. Richter inspects various levels of variants, ranging from those of little consequence for the meaning of the text to those that are significant as they relate to its central ideas.

Part Three, 'Comparative interpretation of **Min zhi fumu* and its transmitted counterparts: differences in the nature of the texts and their ideologies', is concerned with decoding the reasons behind the differences between the manuscript and its transmitted counterparts, trying to detect a logical coherence in each of them. He demonstrates that rigorously following his own criteria of reading manuscripts, seemingly minor discrepancies can be shown to reflect an ideological shift from the political and intellectual environment of the Warring States period to that of the early empire. Thus the bamboo slip manuscript of the **Min zhi fumu* represents an earlier stage of the text, whereas its two transmitted counterparts have been integrated into longer texts 'to be read coherently as part of a series of Ru instructions on ritual' (p. 188).

To voice some critical remarks, one feels somewhat unjustified to place so much emphasis on orthographic and lexical regularity in Warring States manuscripts, which inevitably suggests intentional changes as the primary reason for variation. Richter presents a convincing scenario of the orthographic consistency in the **Min zhi fumu*, arguing that the discrepancies with its transmitted counterparts can be attributed to different ideological agendas that lay behind the formation of each of these versions, yet one is left wondering to what extent this regularity applies to other early Chinese manuscripts. It is, after all, possible that some variants simply reflect the flexibility of Warring States writing habits or of manuscript culture in general. In turn, if this particular manuscript is exceptional in using a highly consistent orthography, what is the reason for this? And again, how would we apply the methodology developed on the basis of the **Min zhi fumu* to other manuscripts from early China?

Another issue related to the above remark is that although Richter is careful to distinguish between variants in the different versions of the text, the two transmitted texts seem to be treated as coherent entities that exist in a single version. Both the *Liji* and the *Kongzi jiyu* undoubtedly had a rich and complex textual history following the Han dynasty, and survive in a variety of editions. It would have been useful to take a brief look at the extant witnesses

of the relevant parts of the *Liji* and the *Kongzi jiayu*, even if only to reassure the reader that there are no significant differences between the available versions and that these bring no additional insights into the case of the **Min zhi fumu* manuscript.

The book is beautifully typeset and carefully edited; there are very few mistakes or typos. Just to mention a couple of examples, in one place the title of the *Liji* chapter 'Kongzi xian ju' appears as 'Kongzi yan ju' (p. 125), which also results in an omission of this occurrence in the index. Then in the bibliography (p. 200), the Japanese word *kenkyūshitsu* 研究室 is transcribed as *kenkyūshi*. Such problems, however, are rare and inconsequential from the point of view of Richter's general argument in the book.

In sum, this is a thoroughly researched piece of scholarship written in a clear and lucid manner, and will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on the field of early China. Even though the primary concern is methodology, the conceptual results in each case derive from a meticulous analysis of actual manuscript data. Richter is able to show how close attention paid to seemingly unimportant details can be of consequence, providing crucial information about the historical and intellectual milieu in which a given version of text was produced. Even though this is to date the best and most extensive study of the **Min zhi fumu* bamboo slip manuscript, the book has a much wider significance in teaching us how to read excavated manuscripts and utilize the wealth of additional information available in manuscripts, if we are willing to pay attention to them and examine not only the texts but also their physical manifestations.

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