

Zhou History Unearthed: The Bamboo Manuscript *Xinian* and Early Chinese Historiography. By Yuri Pines. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 333. \$120.00 hardcover, \$30.00 paperback.

The study of recently discovered wooden- and bamboo-strip manuscripts is currently invigorating Chinese historiography. In this book, Pines demonstrates their usefulness by concentrating on one brief text from among a cache of Warring States–period (c. 450–221 B.C.) manuscripts acquired by Tsinghua University on the Hong Kong antiques market in 2008. That text—named *Xinian* 繫年 (Linked years) by its modern editors—provides an abridged narrative of political crises and realignments from the time of the Zhou conquest of Shang (c. 1046 B.C.) down to the early fourth century B.C. Pines considers, as one must with any unprovenanced materials, the possibility that the *Xinian* may be a forgery, but he marshals convincing linguistic evidence that this cannot be the case (pp. 45–48). The text was likely compiled about 370 B.C. (pp. 42–43); radiocarbon dating of the bamboo strips suggests that the extant manuscript version was produced c. 305 B.C.

At c. 5,000 characters, the *Xinian* is comparable in length to the *Laozi*. It is subdivided into 23 sections (*zhang* 章), written on 138 bamboo strips, two of which are fragmentary. In Part II (pp. 151–241), Pines transcribes and translates the text section by section. As a raw rendering would make little sense on its own, he adds introductions and notes providing historical context and relating the *Xinian* to other sources. Through a careful weighing of similarities, inconsistencies, and previously unknown bits of information, and by pinpointing scribal errors and instances of confusion, Pines is able to assess the historical accuracy of the *Xinian*, which varies somewhat from section to section.

The *Xinian* raises few philological problems; in handling them, Pines very appropriately relies on previous works by Chinese and Japanese scholars. His concern is, after all, mainly with historiography. Even though the text was published only in 2011, a vast secondary scholarship has grown around it; Pines's command of it (extending even to proliferating scholarly blogs) is extremely impressive. His translation, while somewhat workmanlike—mirroring the *Xinian* itself, which shows no sign of literary ambition—is accurate and

reliable throughout.¹ In his renderings of specialized vocabulary such as titles and names, Pines adheres to the choices made by Durrant, Li, and Schaberg in their recent translation of the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳,² a text to which the *Xinian* bears some resemblance. This will doubtlessly facilitate undergraduate reading assignments.

In the Introduction (pp. 1–9) and Part I (pp. 11–147), Pines positions the *Xinian* in its wider intellectual context. Informed by the author’s decades-long investigations into the written sources of pre-imperial and early imperial Chinese history,³ this part of the book, while focusing on the *Xinian*, amounts to a compelling précis of the development and nature of Zhou historiography. In Chapter 1, Pines reconsiders transmitted historical texts: both instances of “ritualistic historiography” (p. 11 *et passim*) such as the *Chunqiu* 春秋 and the *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年, and narrative texts like the *Zuo zhuan*. He argues that the authors of the *Zuo zhuan* drew on written historical narratives compiled at the courts of the various polities of the Zhou realm. In Chapter 2, he extends this argument to the *Xinian* and shows how its authors amalgamated records from Chu 楚, Jin 晉, and the royal Zhou. With well-chosen examples, he characterizes and explains the differences in how the *Zuo zhuan* and the *Xinian* treat some of the same historical events. The *Xinian* notably dispenses with much of the contextual detail provided by the *Zuo zhuan*. Pines concludes that “*Xinian* represents a heretofore unknown historical genre: a text written for its practical

¹ The only apparent error I have spotted is on p. 211 (Section 17), where 朝歌之師 is rendered as “the Quwo campaign;” it should obviously read “the Zhaohe campaign.”

² *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals,”* 3 vols., trans. Stephen W. Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016).

³ As attested by three important monographs: Yuri Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 772–453 B.C.E.* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002); *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009; also available in French and Chinese translations); and *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); as well as several edited volumes. This book is Pines’s second edition-cum-study of an important historical text, following *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

value for policy makers rather than for the moral education or entertainment of a broader elite” (p. 67). He likens its chapters to executive summaries of the “historical background for the current balance of power” (p. 66), compiled for use by officials during diplomatic meetings. This resonates with the function of other kinds of texts found in tombs: to help the deceased person find his/her bearings in space and time as s/he embarked on his/her post-mortem journey.

Chapter 3 introduces other palaeographic sources for the history of the period covered by the *Xinian*. Pines finds that, while bronze inscriptions are problematic because of their terseness and ritual bias, recently found Warring States and Western Han bamboo-strip manuscripts that ostensibly provide historical information are often highly unreliable. In Chapter 4, Pines highlights how the *Xinian* corrects and augments Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (c. 145–86 B.C.) *Shi ji* 史記 on several important points; perhaps because of the loss of the local chronicles in the First Emperor’s “Burning of the Books,” Sima Qian’s information, especially on the Warring States period, was grossly inadequate.

Chapter 5 focuses on the *Xinian*’s coverage of the history of the Chu kingdom. Contrary to expectations, Pines finds that the text consistently treats Chu as part of the Zhou state network, never conveying a sense of Chu as a separate political or cultural sphere. When “Southern Barbarians” (*Manyi* 蠻夷) are mentioned in the *Xinian* (Section 7, pp. 178–79), they are clearly marked as non-Chu, vitiating the oft-encountered mischaracterization of the Chu themselves as *Manyi*. One may add that the text contains no recognizable Chu dialect usage. And even though the graph shapes are characteristic of Chu scribal workshops, the differences vis-à-vis other contemporaneous writing traditions are not pronounced—the manuscript would have been legible to any literate participant in Zhou culture. Pines ascribes the pan-Zhou outlook of the text as reflecting the common Western Zhou origin of the regional historiographical traditions of late pre-imperial times, as well as the non-Chu origins of many members of the literate “Gentlemen” (*shi* 士) stratum in Chu society.

To account for the gaps in Sima Qian’s knowledge about the Warring States period, Pines diagnoses a decreasing interest in the facts of history over time: an alleged “didactic turn” in writing about the past that led to the proliferation of shallow anecdotes that could be deployed rhetorically at the expense of historical facticity. Accordingly, the *Xinian* would be a relatively

late instance of a pre-imperial historiographical text intending, like the early chronicles and the *Zuo zhuan*, to provide reliable information about the past. Without wishing to contradict this argument, I propose to restate it in somewhat different terms.

Pre-imperial China had no notion of history or of historiography in a modern sense. As Pines correctly notes, until about the middle of the first millennium B.C., writing about the past was firmly lodged in ritual, linked to survivals of archaic calendrical and mantic practices. Even the elaborate accounts of the *Zuo zhuan*, rather than intending to trace historical developments, assimilate actual events to unchanging ritual standards, pointing out where they conform or fail to do so; their thrust is, if anything, anti-historical. As the traditional ritual order became irrelevant, so did the specific forms of recording that went along with it—even though, as Pines rightly points out, the chronicles continued to be kept through the end of the Zhou period.

The new attitudes observed by Pines were likewise intricately bound up with changes in the socio-economic system. Writing ceased to be the exclusive province of quasi-religious functionaries; literacy became more widespread. The past as recorded or remembered or constructed was now up for grabs. In a recent monograph, Vincent S. Leung 梁萃行 has analysed the strategies of instrumentalizing the past embraced by various historical agents for their respective purposes.⁴ Like the earlier practices, these were not, nor were they intended to be, historiographical; neither were they necessarily didactic. Not accidentally, moreover, the modularization of knowledge in the “marketplace of ideas” shadowed the rise of markets in the economic sphere. The fragmentation of knowledge about the past into anecdotal snippets (which manifested themselves as disarticulated *zhang*) uncannily parallels the expression of value in the form of tiny standardized units—coins. The emergence of historiography in a full sense required an intellectual quantum leap comparable to that from traditional modes of visual embellishment to *l'art pour l'art*. It is probably Sima Qian who deserves credit for making this leap for the first time in China.

Given that the *Xinian* is a recently looted text, it must have taken the author and Columbia University Press some courage to publish this book. Other fields of scholarship—e.g., Mesopotamian and Ancient Maya studies—

⁴ Vincent S. Leung, *The Politics of the Past in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

have imposed a boycott on the use of any unprovenanced materials by scholars, lest academic interest encourages further looting. The possibility of adopting such a policy vis-à-vis unprovenanced texts from China has recently been discussed in Western Sinological circles as well.⁵ Confronting the ethical quandary head-on (pp. 43–45), Pines opines that “the crime of letting invaluable manuscripts rot in the hands of antiquity [*sic*] dealers is arguably even less pardonable than paying these dealers for their illicit purchases” (p. 44). Whether or not one agrees with this particular line of defence, a plea for attenuating circumstances may indeed be made in the case of the *Xinian* on the grounds that it (a) remains in its country of origin, (b) is in the possession of a public institution, and (c) has been published in exemplary fashion.⁶ Things would be different if, as in the Mesopotamian and Maya cases, the target market were private collectors in the ex-imperialist countries of the West.

Pertinently, the Chinese academic community has no qualms whatsoever about dealing with unprovenanced texts, and it might well perceive an attempt by Western Sinologists to legislate “best practices” in Chinese manuscript studies as imbued with a whiff of imperialist arrogance. Pragmatically, in any case, a Western early China specialist who ignores these texts and the important scholarship done about them by Chinese specialists would consign his/her own work to irrelevance.

Pines avoids such pitfalls. In his capable hands, the *Xinian* has become the touchstone for a judicious and highly original inquiry into early Chinese writing about the past. One confidently predicts that this book will have a long shelf life, and that it will be found useful not only by China specialists, but by anyone interested in comparative historiography.

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⁵ Pines refers in particular to Paul R. Goldin, “*Heng xian* and the Problem of Studying Looted Artifacts,” *Dao* 12.2 (2013): 153–60, and Martin Kern, “‘Xi Shuai’ 蟋蟀 (‘Cricket’) and Its Consequences; Issues in Early Chinese Poetry and Textual Studies,” *Early China* 42 (2019): 39–74.

⁶ Li Xueqin, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2011).