

Mediation of Legitimacy in Early China: A Study of the Neglected Zhou Scriptures and the Grand Duke Traditions. By Yegor Grebnev. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. Pp. xiii+343. \$65 hardcover, \$64.99 eBook.

As the English philosopher and diplomat Stuart Hampshire observes in his *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), few philosophers or historians of political activities have any idea of how politics actually works in the real world, and consequently their heads are filled with highly unlikely, if not impossible scenarios. I require my undergraduate and graduate students to read Raymond Geuss's *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) and Patricia Crone's *Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: B. Blackwell, 1989), at a minimum, before they examine any specific piece of political rhetoric, because the works we have dubbed "philosophy" or "political speech" in recent times were all written, compiled, copied, and read within small communities composed of members of the governing elite, whose families aspired to have their sons (and sometimes their daughters) become would-be and actual office-holders. These people knew the politics of their day, and were not interested in spinning fairy tales about "omniscient" sage-rulers in eras when vast swaths of the territory that the throne lay claim to were sparsely settled.

Grebnev's first book, a revision of his PhD thesis at Oxford, tackles one of the two most difficult political compendia from the early empires in China, the *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書, the second being its companion piece, the *Shangshu* 尚書 (*Documents classic* or *Venerable Documents*). So far as we know, one or more texts circulating under this title were transmitted from the Han down to the Qing (a fact which speaks volumes in manuscript culture), when the formidable and formidably activist editor, Lu Wenchao 盧文弨 (d. 1796), produced the edited version that became the basis of the *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 recension. Not long afterwards, Ding Zongluo 丁宗洛 provided a complete commentary (preface 1825), as well as tables of variant readings, proper names, and so on. Currently, the *Yi Zhou shu* exists in two standard citation texts: that edited by Zhu Youzeng 朱右曾 (preface 1846; published in 1873) and that edited by Huang Huaixin 黃懷信, with the former the base text for the Taiwan edition (2015) by Niu Hongen 牛鴻恩 in two volumes. Niu's version provides a complete translation of the entire text into *guoyu* 國語, along with a "guide to readers" (*dao du* 導讀) that establishes the linkage between the *Liu tao* 六韜 and the *Yi Zhou shu* texts. Liu Shipai 劉師培 blessed us with a study of the "Wang hui" 王會 chapter, and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 produced several chapter studies. Huang Peirong 黃沛榮 wrote an excellent thesis on the *Yi Zhou shu* at National Taiwan University in 1976. In 2011, Li Xueqin 李學勤, in order to promote the unprovenanced Tsinghua manuscript cache, compared part of that cache to chapters in the *Documents classic* and the *Yi Zhou shu*. In English, Robin McNeal gave us first a thesis and then a book examining the explicitly military chapters of the text that purport

to describe the conquest of Shang by Zhou. Now Grebnev has supplied his study on a group of several chapters that the ideal ruler-minister interactions that supposedly pertained during the Shang–Zhou transition, while offering, by way of background, a useful survey of previous scholarship that updates the *Early Chinese Texts*¹ entry.

The foregoing, to my mind, attests the very considerable attention the *Yi Zhou shu* has garnered over the last century or so. Yet both McNeal and Grebnev suspect that there is some scholarly “bias” operating against the book, which accounts for it being overshadowed by the *Documents* classic. Ergo, Grebnev’s decision to translate the “Yi” 逸 in the title as “Neglected.” I do not see it myself. Liu Xiang’s statement that what we call the *Yi Zhou shu* “probably” consisted of what Confucius left out of the *Documents* classic made the corpus “genuinely early” (before Confucius) and thus highly “authoritative,” rather than relegating it to “the brink of oblivion” (p. 4). Throughout Chinese history, there has been some confusion about the term “Zhou shu,” as Sarah Allan and Yanaka Shin’ichi 谷中信一 suggest. But, generally speaking, the Five Classics played second fiddle after Zhu Xi privileged the Four Books, and even today a surprising number of scholars ignore the *Documents* classic when discussing the political paradigms and legal precedents of the early empires in China. More likely, the relative neglect of the *Documents* classic and the para-classical *Yi Zhou shu* stems from two facts: neither text is easy to translate, and while the study of the *Documents* classic is sometimes mired in too many commentaries, the *Yi Zhou shu* has too few, with Kong Chao’s 孔晁 (fl. 260 C.E.) decidedly cryptic at points. Equally pertinently, the *Yi Zhou shu* text can be downright boring, as many chapters contain long lists of ill-defined terms, rather than vivid scenes or compelling arguments. (Read in conjunction with counterpart chapters in the *Documents* classic, some chapters do acquire a bit more life.) In essence, then, I concur with Grebnev’s contrast in Chapter 4, where he pits the “rigidly structured knowledge” in the *Yi Zhou shu* against the “emotionally laden speeches” found in the *Documents*. Thankfully, the secondary scholarship, including Grebnev’s book, has chosen the more readable passages, so as to spare us the worst, although I do flinch before Grebnev’s infliction of the word “scripture” on us. (Perhaps as someone trained in a strict theological tradition, I am overly sensitive to the academic profligacy in utilizing the word, and averse to the high drama attached to the phrase “esoteric transmissions” as well—it is curious that truly esoteric transmissions survived in so many manuscript traditions.)

But let me move on to the undoubted strengths of Grebnev’s book and express my thanks to him for making this text available to a wider readership. We have long

¹ Edward Shaughnessy, “*Yi Zhou shu*,” in Michael Loewe, *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographic* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993), pp.229–33.

wished for more substantive work to be done on the *Yi Zhou shu*, and now here it is. In addition, we have long been cautioned, by Matsumoto Masaaki 松本雅明 and others, that the preoccupation with Zhougong 周公 shown in many authoritative texts dramatically simplified the pseudo-historical narrative we have inherited from tradition. Matsumoto's "Shūkō ka to Shōkō ka: Shō kō hen no seiritsu o meguru shomondai"² proves that the reputation of Shaogong 召公 early on may well have outstripped that of the Duke of Zhou; Grebnev "restores" Taigong 太公 (his Grand Duke) to his rightful place. How interesting, then, that the "Metal Coffers" chapter of the *Documents* so casually dismisses the two dukes, Taigong and Shaogong, as nonentities with Zhougong in charge!

As chapter 4 on "Royal Colloquies" is plainly the heart of Grebnev's book, let me cite its hypothesis in full:

These texts [i.e., the royal colloquies] are created scriptures par excellence, claiming to encompass the foundational wisdom of the sage rulers announced in private settings during the critical moments of their lives and mysteriously preserved in the milieu of text experts. These textual experts are the main social force behind this type of text, and the absence of explicit marks of authorship . . . should not distract us from their conspicuous silent presence. The priorities in royal colloquies are clearly set: they outline a model of governance in which textual wisdom reigns supreme and in which rulers are expected to learn obediently what is imparted to them as the testaments of their great predecessors. (p. 127)

There is much to admire in this hypothesis (though I would expand and complicate his sense of "textual wisdom"), and what leaps out at us is surely, by design, the final phrase "in which rulers are expected to learn obediently." Who are the people from whom rulers are to learn? By Grebnev's account, Confucius and Mozi as "heads of textual communities" whose members—at least during their apprenticeship—submitted to the authority of their masters and not to that of the state, making them part of an "independent" "managerial class" commanding sufficient authority to serve as "legitimate mediators (and not 'creators'!) of scriptures" with "enough independence to negotiate new arrangements with the instruments of traditional power" (p. 128) in the multipolar world of Warring States China. I worry about several claims embedded in this thesis, I confess, but I am mainly excited to contemplate the textual

² Matsumoto Masaaki, "Shūkō ka to Shōkō ka: Shō kō hen no seiritsu o meguru shomondai" 周公家と召公家：召誥篇の成立をめぐる諸問題, *Tōyō gakuhō* 東洋学報 54.2 (Sep. 1971): 188–238.

mediators' "role in providing legitimacy and negotiation of power between the learned elites and hereditary monarchs" (p. 129). That Grebnev is onto something here goes without saying.

Chapter 5 in Grebnev's book then retraces links between the *Yi Zhou shu* chapters and the *Liu tao*, a text with a predictably messy textual history whose central protagonist is the Grand Duke. That two excavated manuscripts, one from Yinqueshan 銀雀山 from early in the reign of Han Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 B.C.E.) and one from Dingzhou 定州 (before 55 B.C.E.), include passages that recall the *Liu tao* strengthens Grebnev's case appreciably, although intertextuality is the norm, not the exception, in manuscript culture. In this connection, Grebnev articulates five major themes (p. 162): (1) transgenerational instruction; (2) contractual nature of empowering esoteric knowledge; (3) attribution of such knowledge to sage-rulers from foundational antiquity; (4) insistence on its preservation in secrecy as a treasure object; and (5) humble submission of the monarch to the wise counsellor(s). Further along, Grebnev opines, "The mytheme³ of scribes and scribal records should be understood as an *earlier* one than that of esoteric counselors, and it seems to be *based on real historical precedents*" (p. 171; my italics). This is bracing speculation, but we lack sufficient evidence here to speak of "real historical precedents." Tracing the evolving notion of "scribes" 史 (*shi*, a term that mostly refers to royal "diviners" in the Shang and early Western Zhou), as Bruce Lincoln did for *muthos* and *logos* in early Greece, would add colour to the silhouette of who is mediating with whom and to what end (see, p. 87, for example), no doubt. Eric Henry has just written a marvelous piece on what most deem scribal culture,⁴ as has Kai Vogelsang.⁵ (The first Grebnev would doubtless enjoy; the second he already knows.) I myself have always thought modern academics' romantic propensity to identify with the noble scribes of yore is an obstacle to understanding, but let the debates continue.

It is Grebnev's characterization of Daoism as "emphatically detached from worldly concerns" (p. 16) that strikes me as peculiar, a throwback to a bygone sinological era. Certainly there were recluses (people of breeding and education who

³ A mytheme is the essential kernel of a myth—an irreducible, unchanging element, a minimal unit that is always shared with other mythemes and reassembled in diverse ways ("bundled" was Claude Lévi-Strauss's image—or linked in more complicated relationships, like a molecule in a compound).

⁴ Eric Henry, "Who were the Shi 史?", paper delivered at the Southeast regional conference for the Association for Asian Studies (spring, 2021).

⁵ Kai Vogelsang, "Getting the Terms Right: Political Realism, Politics, and the State in Ancient China," *Oriens Extremus* 55 (2016): 39–71.

were proscribed from office, fed up with office routines, or afraid to engage in office-holding). But even among those recluses, I see little that qualifies as “detachment” in writings from the Zhanguo-Qin-Han or Wei-Jin periods. Given the select readership of the early classics and masterworks, Dominik Declercq’s “writing against the state” strikes me as capturing more of the tone in authoritative discourse. Thus, I find Grebnev’s historical narrative deeply puzzling: “The Grand Duke texts should be understood as part of the early Daoist tradition that emerged as an esoteric response to the earlier scriptures identified with Zhou scribes” (p. 176). Doubtless, I am too stupid to discern the “missing link” between “religious and philosophical” Daoism “hidden in plain sight,” as Falkenhausen puts it in his blurb. Nor can I find written accounts of ritual imagining “a fixed system that is susceptible to corruption and decline, but not to transformation and reform” (p. 194), let alone a new notion positing “an afterworld hermetically separate and independent from the world of the living” (ibid.). After all, the early medical texts stress flows and permeability, as Shigehisa Kuriyama and Nathan Sivin demonstrated⁶. As the book progresses, I feel it grasping for ever-larger claims, when mostly we confront uncertainty when it comes to antiquity, and the Ancients we study openly omitted this, and that is why we trust their insights.

Does it matter if I do not “buy” the very claim the author believes is his signal contribution to Chinese Studies? Not all that much, I suspect. Not only do eminent scholars hold a range of different views about the past, but any book that drives me to mull over multiple passages in classical Chinese, trying to map various connections and implicit messages, deserves plaudits, in my humble opinion.

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DOI: 10.29708/JCS.CUHK.202301_(76).0017

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⁶ Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1999); Nathan Sivin, *Health Care in Eleventh-Century China*, 1st ed., 2015.