Zhou History Unearthed: The Bamboo Manuscript Xinian and Early Chinese Historiography


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Zhou History Unearthed magisterially reconstructs the landscape of early Chinese historiography, a field that has long suffered from a dearth of primary sources as well as contextual information concerning their composition and circulation. Against this backdrop, Yuri Pines uses Xinian, a newly discovered (looted) fourth-century BCE historical text, as an Archimedean point from which to revise and enrich our understanding of preimperial Chinese historiography.

A five-chapter analytical section is followed by a meticulously annotated translation of Xinian. Chapter 1 sets the stage by tracing the evolution of historiography from its beginnings to the fourth century BCE, with Zuozhuan as its focus. Chapter 2 introduces Xinian, which overlaps considerably with Zuozhuan. By exposing their respective internal heterogeneities and then comparing the two texts, Pines infers that the building blocks of pre–Warring States historical texts were detailed local histories produced by court scribes (pp. 31, 60–64). The differences between the two are equally telling. Zuozhuan, rich in edifying content, is “first and foremost an interpretative history” (p. 32), although its interpretive elements are complemented by historical details. Conversely, Xinian, abandoning most minute details and didactic elements, is a highly informative, practical, and teleological history of Chu: only major geopolitical shifts that shaped the status quo of Chu were recorded for traveling diplomats’ quick digestion (pp. 66–67).

Chapter 3 reaffirms the fundamentality of local histories by examining other new paleographic discoveries. Pines argues that didactic anecdotes were not the building blocks of historical narratives; instead, they were “one segment of larger local histories” (p. 74). Their didactic value caused subsequent thinkers to detach them from local histories, but the tie was not entirely cut. Pines highlights omissions from two Chu anecdotes and infers that these freestanding anecdotes “were composed in a way that presupposed the readers’ working knowledge of local histories,” without which they could not be properly understood (p. 80). As time passed, however, informative local histories gradually lost their relevance, whereas newly produced anecdotes with obvious historical inaccuracies started to dominate the market (p. 91). Pines thus proposes a radical change in attitudes toward history in the Warring States period, namely, a shift away from informative toward interpretative histories: “The question of why mattered more than ever, but the questions of who, what, when, and where seem to have lost their appeal” (p. 93).

The consequence of this “didactic turn” was, in turn reflected, in Sima Qian’s Records of the Historian, the focus of chapter 4. New data from Xinian reveal numerous factual mistakes and omissions in the work of Sima Qian, who was a victim of his sources, although his reconstruction of history is more often than not confirmed by the new materials. Modern researchers must therefore strike a balance between heroizing and doubting Sima Qian, the father of Chinese history. Finally, chapter 5 brings the new Chu historical texts to bear on the debate about a distinctive Chu cultural identity. Contrary to expectations, Pines shows that most of them show no pro-Chu bias, as evinced by their “cosmopolitan” and self-critical perspective.

Pines’s points are generally well made. I have only three minor reservations. The first concerns chapter 5. A cosmopolitan and self-critical text could still forge a distinctive cultural identity. What matters here is not only how they were composed but how they were read: readers’ responses and
the agency of the interpretive community should be considered when evaluating the social impact of historical writings.

Next, perhaps more could be said about Xinian’s nature: does its unpolished prose,¹ its numerous inaccu\(\text{rat}ies\) (pp. 58–59), and the uneven length of its subsections suggest an amateurish or hasty product? Pines, moreover, omits one important difference between Xinian and Zuozhuan: the latter contains numerous references to poems, whereas the former, presumably read by traveling diplomats who often needed to chant poems, has none. Were these poems intrinsic elements of local histories? If so, why does Xinian drop them? If not, why were the Zuozhuan compilers eager to insert poems into a “historical” text?

Lastly, the “didactic turn” theory may face at least three challenges. First, interpretive histories and the distortion of history were prevalent from the outset: the Western Zhou “prescriptive history” that represented how things should have happened (pp. 14–15), the “ritual reality” constructed by the Spring and Autumn Annals (p. 21), the “sacred reading” of the Annals that was scarcely concerned about “real historical facts” (p. 20), and the Jin scribe who insisted on inscribing his moral judgment rather than pure facts in the local history (p. 22) together suggest the continuous existence of interpretive histories before 400 BCE. In fact, Pines identifies the rise of the concept of “Heaven’s Mandate” in early Western Zhou as a defining moment of Chinese historiography. Given the lack of Heaven-human communication channels, Heaven’s will could be disclosed only by analyzing its past manifestations. In other words, history writing was born as an interpretive enterprise. Concerning the distortion of history, moreover, even diplomats, presumably the target audience of Xinian, often constructed counterhistories to gain political advantage during the Spring and Autumn period.² In this light, striving for historical accuracy and distorting history seem to have been two perennial options throughout the preimperial period.

Second, although his dating of Zuozhuan, which combines both informative and interpretive elements, as a fifth-century BCE text that captures the allegedly transitional moment allows Pines to construct a linear narrative, big books like Zuozhuan (200,000 characters) appear to have gained currency only from the mid-third century BCE onward. Thus, one wonders whether Zuozhuan could be a fifth-century text.

Third, Pines may have downplayed the vitality of informative history after 400 BCE. Indeed, “an informative history had a much shorter life span” because as time passed, details became increasingly irrelevant (p. 67). But this inevitability does not mean that informative history was no longer composed. In fact, both Xinian and Chu ju, another purely informative historical text (p. 72), were produced after 400 BCE. Furthermore, if there were really such a radical turn, it would be difficult to explain the continued existence of scholars and sponsors of the informative Zuozhuan from the mid-third to the first century BCE: Zhang Cang (253–152 BCE), Jia Yi (201–169 BCE), Liu De (ca. 170–ca. 130 BCE), and Sima Qian (ca. 145–ca. 85 BCE). Above all, the paucity of Warring States historical writings (presumably because of the Qin biblioclasm) inevitably renders any grand narrative tentative. Although Pines suggests that it was because of “the lack of circulation of these histories that their destruction was complete and irreversible” (p. 94), one could also argue that it was only because informative histories were still considered potentially relevant (and politically threatening) that they were massively destroyed.

Overall, not unlike Zuozhuan itself, Zhou History Unearthed strikes a laudable balance between being interpretive and informative. Pines’s impeccable mastery of the field, as evinced by his numerous incisive observations and wide-ranging bibliography, allows him to dig deep into textual details without losing his grip on the bigger picture. This learned book, an indispensable guide to ancient Chinese historiography, history, and manuscript studies, will surely stimulate new and meaningful debates.