

## Book Reviews

***Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and Ideal Government in Early Chinese Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts.*** By Sarah Allan. SUNY series in Chinese philosophy and culture. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015. Pp. xiv + 372. \$95.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Among the more unexpected types of new information to emerge from the wealth of excavated Warring States bamboo manuscripts unearthed over the past couple of decades, the emphasis in some on royal abdication as a highly esteemed political act might certainly count as the most prominent. While this aspect of the manuscripts has already garnered great attention among both Chinese scholars and foreign Sinologists alike, Sarah Allan, a specialist in excavated manuscripts who has also been studying dynastic legend in early China for decades, is uniquely poised to analyse and assess the intellectual-historical impact of the relevant manuscripts in a comprehensive framework. *Buried Ideas*, an illuminating work of great scholarly rigour, is the fruit of Allan's many years of dedicated labour on these manuscripts and a must-read for anyone interested in the textual, political, and intellectual history of early China.

The book is roughly divided into a set of three introductory chapters followed by four chapters each focusing on a different manuscript and, finally, a concluding chapter of afterthoughts. Following the opening chapter's general introduction to the book, chapter two, "History and Historical Legend," lays out the intellectual-historical and political backgrounds against which the dynastic legends found in these manuscripts may be evaluated and examined, and analyses the basic parameters of the debates that emerge therefrom over the rights to and proper forms of succession—thus providing the framework within which the manuscripts examined in the later chapters are to be understood. The third chapter, "The Chu-script Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts," then discusses the origins, specifics, and physical nature of the various Warring States manuscripts in question and also provides, particularly for the non-specialist, a cogent discussion of how this all relates to the nature of textual formation and the development of stable texts in early China.

The heart of the book lies in chapters four through seven, which separately discuss and analyse four distinct Chu 楚-region manuscript texts that either emphasize the notion of abdication directly or, in the last case, otherwise highlight the issue of dynastic succession: the Guodian 郭店 manuscript "Tang Yu zhi dao" 唐虞之道, the Shanghai Museum 上海博物館 manuscripts "Zigao" 子羔 and "Rongcheng shi" 容成氏, and the Qinghua University 清華大學 manuscript "Bao xun" 保訓.

Each of these chapters contains an introduction to the manuscript in question and its central ideas in relation to the more general intellectual framework that is the central concern of the book, followed by a section-by-section translation plus commentary for the text as rendered in modern characters, and then a conclusion, which is in turn followed, by way of an appendix to each chapter, by a repetition of the translation and transcription, this time replete with a critical apparatus that reveals how the modern-character transcription is derived and which includes variant readings for many graphs—certainly a most welcome addition for the specialist. Within both the introductory and core chapters, Allan also offers a number of interesting, relevant asides, such as the topic of female literacy in the Warring States in relation to the issue of whether Guojiagang 郭家崗 Tomb One, a woman's tomb, could have been the source of the grave-looted Shanghai Museum manuscripts (pp. 53–58); and, somewhat less speculatively and more central to its chapter's argument, a discussion of the origin of *shu* 書 documents as (following Chen Mengjia 陳夢家) scripts of ceremonial speeches delivered in the name of kings or high ministers in the form of bamboo-text appointment inscriptions (*ce ming* 冊命) (pp. 272–77).

With few exceptions, Allan's translations of the manuscripts are solid and reliable throughout. And while it is easy to cherry-pick potential flaws in any translation, let alone one of such difficult manuscripts, it is equally impossible to produce one that is beyond second-guessing, and so I will not take it as my task here to raise each and every instance where alternative choices could have been made. Here, let me simply note two places where the interpretive choice, if not correct, might potentially mislead the reader to draw broad conclusions that are not entirely warranted. First, in section two of "Rongcheng shi" (strips 31–32), Allan follows Wang Zhiping's 王志平 reading of its four examples of 三佶 as *san gong* 三宮, translating this term as "three tones" and making much of how the text thus presents an implicit correlative system in which "there were three modes in each of the four directions," suggesting a further matching with the twelve months of the year (p. 193). While Allan may be warranted in adopting Wang's reading for the simple reason that no better alternative has yet presented itself (including Li Ling's 李零 initial reading of *san diao* 三調), the reading remains highly problematic on the grounds not only that there are no loan precedents between the two phonetic series, but also, more importantly, because the term itself is exceptionally dubious in musical terms (*gong* never refers to simply "tone" per se, but rather to the central, or "tonic," position within the pentatonic scale, and there is neither precedent nor rationale for the assumption that the term could be used to stand for either pitches or modes in a correlative scheme—despite Wang's best efforts to produce one). Given the high degree of uncertainty involved, it might have been more prudent here to not give the reading such a prominent role in the interpretation of the passage, or at least to more clearly express the proper caveats.

Second, in perhaps a less crucial case in the second half of section two of the same text (strip 5), Allan renders the phrase 禽獸朝，魚鼈獻 as “Birds and beasts arrived at court and fish and turtles presented (themselves)” (pp. 192–93). But as there are no other examples of such anomalous supernatural events to be found elsewhere in the manuscript, it might perhaps have been preferable to have simply rendered this in the passive voice: “Birds and beasts [were presented in] court, and fish and turtle were offered in tribute”—or to at least make the reader aware of that alternative. That said, it is testimony to Allan’s careful diligence that one has to look far and wide to locate any such instances that might possibly lead to misinterpretation, and the reader may generally proceed with confidence that Allan’s renderings consistently adhere to strict norms of fidelity, accuracy, and scholarly rigour.

In presenting us with these manuscript translations, Allan’s main project is to examine how these and related texts fit in with or challenge the earlier, orthodox view of a dynastic cycle, a view which entailed the inescapable tension between hereditary right and loyalty to the family on the one hand, and, on the other, the justifiable need to occasionally replace unjust royal lineages with new ones out of a broader sense of loyalty to the state or larger community—a tension which the notion of “Heaven’s mandate” (*tianming* 天命) served to mediate. Among Allan’s points of emphasis is the notion that by the time these manuscripts were written, there was no longer any central power that still “exercised sufficient political control over the states” such that its overthrow might “result in the establishment of a new dynasty” (p. 15), a situation so unlike the model of the Zhou’s overthrow of the Shang that it resulted in an “historical and ideological crisis” unique to the Warring States that may have served to prompt a proliferation of texts harkening back to a golden age when sage-kings practiced abdication (even though, for parallel reasons, abdication was itself not an entirely adequate model for that age). The central example of this latter practice was, of course, Yao’s 堯 legendary abdication to Shun 舜. Yet, as Allan points out, in the limited examples found in received texts of this sort of paradigm of direct abdication to the most meritorious, it is almost invariably challenged in one way or another, given that it was inherently politically “subversive to any hereditary dynasty” (p. 20)—likely explaining why such texts as those found in these manuscripts, which were favourably disposed toward abdication, did not survive the Qin and Han dynasties. The manuscripts thus represent a unique moment in time when the absence of a central power served both to generate new quasi-historical models of political succession and to allow this to happen in a manner that remained, for the time, relatively free from political suppression.

In terms of the specific texts, the first, “Tang Yu zhi dao,” is unique in that it “challenges the very principle of hereditary rule” while still “conform[ing] to the same dualistic pattern and stress[ing] the necessity of fulfilling the demands of family

obligation, as well as those of the state” (p. 80). Allan argues that rather than correlating the story of Yao’s abdication to Shun with the foundation of later dynasties, as we see done in transmitted texts in a way that “support[s] the idea of hereditary rule within a pattern of dynastic cycle rather than challenge[s] it,” “Tang Yu zhi dao” instead presents abdication as the “ideal form of royal succession” for any era (p. 82). The second text, “Zigao,” supports the idea of abdication as an ideal without, as Allan notes, explicitly advocating it, primarily by favourably juxtaposing Shun, the recipient of Yao’s abdication, against the progenitors of the three dynasties—Yu 禹, Xie 契, and Houji 后稷—the legitimacy of whom is (uniquely in this text) conversely “attributed to their hereditary lineage from divine progenitors rather than the changing mandate of heaven,” thus making abdication “an alternative to hereditary rule rather than the precedent for dynastic change found in the transmitted texts” (p. 138). This, Allan argues, is also undoubtedly a reflection of the times in which the text was produced, when “the old hereditary aristocratic lineages were being challenged, sometimes by people who could not legitimately claim any noble lineage” (p. 163).

While “Tang Yu zhi dao” also floats the idea that there were in fact “six thearchs” (*liu di* 六帝) in ancient times who all passed on their rule through abdication, the third text, “Rongcheng shi,” details such an idealized early history more explicitly. The text presents a uniquely “devolutionary view” of history which, Allan contends, “reflects a breakdown of faith in the idea of dynastic cycle” at the same time that it espouses unabashedly meritocratic ideals: the rulers of high antiquity each passed on his rule through abdication to the most worthy, and, concomitantly, each achieved an order of perfect social harmony in which all were employed in a manner most ideally suited to their abilities or disabilities. And even in later ages, as virtue declines and conflicts, crime, and social inequities increase, men of worth periodically emerge to re-establish stability, “achiev[ing] their position either by the abdication of the previous ruler or by attracting the allegiance of the people” (p. 183). But unlike such works as the *Mengzi* 孟子, wherein this motif of “people moving from a ruler belonging to one lineage to a virtuous man of another lineage” is utilized as “a unifying theme that links change of rule in the predynastic era with the three dynasties,” here it instead “serves as a later alternative to abdication” and “the method by which a man of worth may establish rule in an era in which abdication is not a possibility” (pp. 199–200)—i.e., the era in which the text itself was written. The overall effect of the text’s unusual model of devolutionary historical change, Allan concludes, is “to change the paradigm from a correlative one,” wherein “the competing demands of heredity and merit” appeared “at critical intervals,” into “one in which the sense of historical change predominates”—all “reflect[ing] conditions in which the idea of a dynastic cycle determined by a moral spiritual force (heaven) had become increasingly difficult to defend” (pp. 220–21).

“Bao xun,” the final text examined in Allan’s book, does not actually broach the subject of abdication at all but is nonetheless centrally concerned with the topic of dynastic change, as it takes the form of Zhou King Wen’s 周文王 deathbed advice to his son to follow the example of Shang founder Cheng Tang 成湯 and the latter’s forefathers by obtaining “the center” (*zhong* 中) and thereby acquiring Heaven’s mandate to become king. Allan interprets this “center” both figuratively and literally, as the “cosmological and ritual center of the world” (p. 264) located geographically in the region around the Central Peak, Mt. Song 嵩山. Given the text’s emphasis on establishing dominance over this symbolic ritual central region, Allan surmises that “Bao xun” was most likely a Warring States product of Chu, the somewhat peripheral region from which the manuscript was undoubtedly unearthed, at a time when the model of a dynastic cycle no longer made sense against the backdrop of contemporary political realities.

In short, Allan shows how all these manuscript texts challenge the positions found in transmitted texts through their individual manners of opposing—rather than correlating—the model of abdication with the succession patterns of the three dynasties, or, in the case of “Bao xun,” by presenting yet another new model of dynastic change entirely. Allan wisely states at the outset that while these manuscript texts are all thematically related and “strongly meritocratic,” they “do not form a coherent philosophical group” (p. 4). Nonetheless, through a highly sound and level-headed analysis that is certainly more often convincing than not, Allan clearly demonstrates how these texts may be fruitfully read against both one another and related texts from the received tradition to help us re-evaluate the political and intellectual history of the Warring States in a manner less skewed by both the accidents and non-accidents of transmission. Allan’s will undoubtedly not be the last word on this subject, but that is not the point: the main worth of this significant study lies rather in laying out the groundwork and parameters for further discussion, and for presenting a compelling alternative analysis against which other excellent studies involving these recently excavated “abdication texts” and Warring States political history (such as those of Yuri Pines) may be placed in productive dialogue. Thus, both for the cogency of its own conclusions and for the promise of further competing analyses of implicit arguments interred within these complex manuscripts that it will surely generate, Sarah Allan’s *Buried Ideas* is an exceptional work that deserves to be thoughtfully read, carefully absorbed, and critically celebrated for years to come.

SCOTT COOK  
Yale-NUS College