

Sub-project C03

For Palaces and Tombs: Book Collections in Ancient China (3rd -1st centuries BCE)

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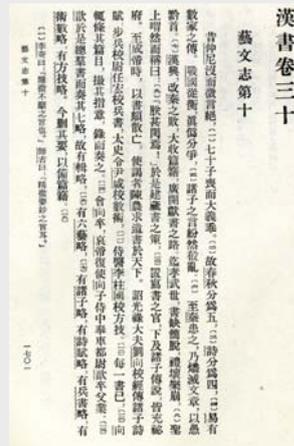
Description of the Project

Until recently the catalogue of the imperial library (*Yiwen zhi* = *Hanshu* 30) from the early 1st century CE was the main extant source on ancient Chinese manuscript culture. This catalogue lists around 600 works in more than 13,000 chapters classified into six bibliographic categories and furthermore gives summaries of them. From a few extant editorial reports it is evident that its compilers, the imperial librarian Liu Xiang (79-8 BCE) and his son Liu Xin (died 23 CE), made use of a new hierarchical classification system. This new classification system, although it probably had not much in common with the organization of knowledge up to that time, became the predecessor of all later ones. The sensational discoveries of ancient manuscripts since the 1970s allow, for the first time, to examine the work of father and son Liu in the light of older manuscripts, which reflect the state before the imperial organization of knowledge.

Manuscripts found in tombs, the earliest dating from around 300 BCE, make it probable to assume that already quite early aristocrats and officials possessed small collections of six to 36 items. Nonetheless the actual status of these collections, which are sometimes designated as “tomb libraries”, remains uncertain: Were they actually the private possession of the tomb owner or were they merely assembled for the purpose of the burial?

Objectives

The sub-project is devoted to the question, how knowledge in ‘private’ and imperial collections of the last century BCE were organized. Furthermore we will try to reconstruct the reasons for the presumed organizational schemes, clarify status and function of the particular collections and seek an answer to the question, to what extent the two Liu followed older, maybe regional, traditions. These questions will



Source: *Hanshu* 漢書, *Zhonghua shu* 中華書局, Beijing 1983, p. 1701.

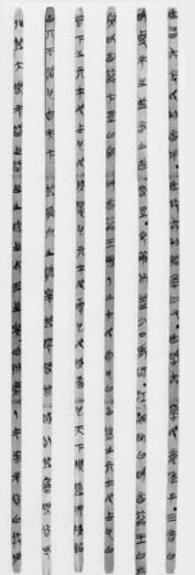
Introduction of the imperial collection of the Former Han, in the version of Ban Gu in *Hanshu* 30 (= *Yiwen zhi*), here standard edition of the Zhonghua publisher from the late 20th century

be answered by examining archeologically excavated collections on the one hand and by reconstructing, based on literary sources, what functions collections had, which were gathered at royal (e.g. King Xian of Hejian, reigned 155-130 BCE) and imperial (e.g. Wudi 124 BCE and Chengdi 26 BCE) courts on the other hand. The comparison will show the differences in the organization of knowledge among the different tomb collections on the one hand and the differences between these and the imperial collection on the other. This will enable us to more closely define their function historically as well as systematically and to answer the question, whether these collections can actually be understood as libraries. Furthermore it will be possible to

put the many multiple-text manuscripts, found especially among the excavated silk manuscripts, into context.

Ancient Chinese Manuscript Culture

The earliest evidence of the Chinese script is found on hard writing surfaces: These are oracle texts on tortoise shells and cattle hip bones from about 1200 BCE on, beginning in the 11th century BCE there are inscriptions on ritual bronze vessels. Less precious materials as writing support, like wooden tablets or bamboo strips, were most probably employed since earliest times, even if the oldest datable texts on bamboo is only from the 5th century BCE. They mostly contain inventories of burial objects, but in some cases other texts, that have been archeologically excavated since the 1970s: divination and ritual handbooks, military, judicial and administrative texts as well as philosophical, historiographical and other literature. From the 1st century BCE mostly documents and correspondences of the military administration in what is today northwest China have been found.



Source: Laozi 老子甲, in: *Guodian chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡, Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社, Beijing 1998, p. 2

Bamboo strip with part of Laozi from tomb Guodian 1, ca. early 3rd century BCE



Source: Fu Juyou, Chen Songchang, *The Cultural Relics Unearthed from the Han Tombs at Mawangdui*, Hunan Publishing House: Changsha 1992, p. 155.

Silk manuscript (detail) with a divination text on atmospheric appearances from tomb Mawangdui 3, probably 2nd century BCE