BOOK REVIEW


Manuscript finds and purchases from the last few decades have triggered a thorough reconsideration of the ancient Chinese textual landscape. Texts surfaced which had been passed over by bibliographic records; forms and types of writing reappeared that for centuries had remained beyond the ken of scholars. So did variant versions of extant writings, casting doubt on the stability and identity of works long taken for granted. Dirk Meyer has been plowing this shifting landscape for over a decade, questing for literary forms, argument structures, and principles of textual transmission.1 While tinged with philosophical ambition, his approach has always been ostentatiously technical and espouses a fixation on formalistic description that has not gone without criticism.2

Recent finds encompass texts on bamboo manuscripts akin to the received Shangshu, a body of archaic or archaizing, (pseudo-) historical proclamations interspersed with occasional narrative elements. While one received selection of such texts, the New Text version, was officially canonized, another one, known as the Old Text version, was discredited by philologists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who unmasked it as a mosaic of quotations gleaned from a range of older works. Transmitted sources on ancient Chinese history are scarce, so the appearance of non-canonical, Shangshu-like texts has elicited considerable interest. To accommodate them conceptually and place them historically, Sarah Allan posited a “literary form” of Shu that existed and developed independently of canonical selection(s). Her hypothesis of Shu as a genre would also account for a further extant collection of writings labeled Shu, the “Lost Documents of Zhou” (Yì Zhou shù).3 Meyer sets out from similar assumptions, though he does not tether his conception of a “Shu genre” explicitly to Allan’s earlier “literary form.” For him, Shu are “a historically evolving practice of literary production, suitable to deliver a variety of arguments,” which involves “the creative recontextualisation of authoritative text material by participating social groupings” (p. 7). On Meyer’s inter-

1 See Dirk Meyer, Philosophy on Bamboo: Text and the Production of Meaning in Early China (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011); Joachim Gentz and Dirk Meyer, ed., Literary Forms of Argument in Early China (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).


pretation, as purported records of royal acts and proclamations from the distant past, Shu store up communities’ “cultural capital” (p. 74 and passim), a concept that in Meyer’s book seems to be associated with Jan Assmann’s “cultural memory” rather than traced to its Bourdieusian provenance. In formal terms, Shu serve, in Meyer’s words, as “text moulds” which were “solidifying” up to the Warring States period “as they are now appearing repeatedly in texts of Shū description” (p. 118).

In the main body, Meyer combs at great length through a number of received Shang-shu chapters and related excavated texts to substantiate his thesis that literary forms of Shu served as templates apt to be variously reutilized. All too often, though, Meyer pads out his exposition with retellings where readers may rather hope for analysis. Frequently, he belabors the obvious. The narrative matter conveyed by Shu—Meyer’s “cultural capital”—is discussed with a smattering of narratological vocabulary (introduced on pp. 19–21) which, technical as it sounds, affords little insight. The brevity and moderate complexity of the texts under discussion hardly require the terminological armamentarium to which they are subjected. Variations between them—mainly differences in narrative sequence or emphasis—could be made plain in a more straightforward way. Matters get outright confusing in the discussion of genre where, instead of falling back on textbook treatments to prepare the ground, Meyer throws in a barely comprehensible summary of a single article by Russian literary theorist Sergey Averintsev. The article’s only English version is an unpublished translation by one of Meyer’s former doctoral students, and its relevance to the issue at hand remains opaque (pp. 101–102). Beyond that, Meyer has little of substance to say about genre, notwithstanding his declaration to have approached “the social reality behind the Shū traditions by reference to genre theory” (p. 119).

However, it is Meyer’s presumption to be getting at social realities via textual analysis alone that results in far more insidious shortcomings. After distinguishing in his introduction between “communities” of “meaning,” “text,” and “discourse,” and relating each of these, puzzlingly, to some of his narratological concepts (pp. 21–23), Meyer continues, throughout the book, to refer to alleged purposes, interests, and sociopolitical agendas of these communities—but only in the abstract. His communities are speculative tautological constructs: Meyer posits that texts reflect the specific interests of particular groups, which in turn licenses his repeated contention that a particular text reflects the interests of some such group. Yet he operates with empty categories; he does not state who formed those groups, or clarify their interests. Whilst Meyer stresses untiringly that his analyses deal with “arguments,” he never lets on what these consist in, and the few topics or concerns which he identifies hardly qualify as arguments, strictly defined. To exemplify, for instance, opposing views on dynastic succession, as two of his texts do (p. 155), is not to put forward an argument. Nor does a narrative’s purpose to dispel “distrust and doubt about the […] integrity” of the Duke of Zhou (p. 180) count as argument. Yet “argument” is the term to which Meyer stubbornly clings.

Such conceptual blinkers betray an impossibly narrow understanding of texts’ pragmatic dimensions. Not only are readers left in the dark about what the Shu writings argue for. One is also supposed to accept Meyer’s implicit conviction that they cannot possibly do anything else than promote arguments. Might

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4 Useful points of entry for a discussion of genre theory could be, for example, the introduction by John Frow, Genre, New Critical Idiom, second ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), and the reader Modern Genre Theory edited by David Duff (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).
they not also exemplify attitudes or qualities, formulate indirect appeals, aim at emotional responses, or foster in-group solidarity? If readers, upon studying Shu writings, struggle to settle on any such interpretation specifically, this is because no one alive today can be certain where exactly they originated, or whom they addressed, which inevitably narrows down readers' access to their semantic and historical resonances. This pall of uncertainty shrouds the received texts and the manuscripts under discussion alike. The latter may be available for material inspection and analysis, but they were purchased on the black market, and their archaeological context has been obliterated. Such epistemic gaps, however, do not justify conjuring up fictive "communities" or treating each text indiscriminately and simplistically as a single supposed "argument" of indeterminate content.

The organization of the book can be perplexing. "Conclusions" repeatedly fail to conclude, instead introducing new sources, which are then further discussed. Comprehensibility is a further issue. Lapses like "personal pronouns of the first and second order" (p. 205) and malapropisms such as "literalization" (eight times) in the sense of German *literarisieren* would be a minor irritation if they occurred less frequently. Occasionally, entire paragraphs are so convoluted as to become well-nigh impenetrable:

To move old cultural capital into new problem space not only enables an argument; voicing high antiquity in the present in thus prescribed form constitutes in itself the making of an argument.

During the Warring States the Shu are therefore a genre—voiced by a writing-supported text performance—which is guided by its own premises. This act of literary performance has sociopolitically and philosophically patterning ends as it enables contrasting conceptual communities to link their position to a discourse and thus take stance in a normative setting. In this way Shu genre not only governs how an argument is put. It also rules what that argument entails. [p. 239]

If there is an argument to be found here, it had better greet its audience garbed in less cluttered prose.

At times, arguments seem to be pulled out of thin air. Take Meyer’s attempt to tacitly salvage his hypothesis of a sudden increase in the availability of bamboo as the engine of a rapidly expanding Warring States manuscript culture (pp. 224–27). Previously canvassed in an article, the idea has little merit. In an attempt to rehabilitate his conjecture without acknowledging criticism previously leveled against it, Meyer argues that the slanting engraved line on the verso of some bamboo manuscripts bespeaks a highly developed division of labor, hence points to mass production, and thus hints at the wide availability of bamboo as writing material. The interpretation is controversial on points of detail. More seriously, it is irrelevant. There is little reason to doubt that in many regions bamboo was widely available and not too costly. A developed division of labor in its large-scale preparation as stationery seems plausible as well. The monetarized economy of Warring States China suggests that much. So does the complexity of work processes in other areas of crafts production such as bronze casting. But there is no indication cited by Meyer or known to me that bamboo became more accessible and inexpensive, or that its wider availability would, by itself, have stimulated more vigorous writing or copying of text.

A recent study by Charles Sanft, published in time to be consulted for this book,
suggests in any case that, both from a sino-
logical and a comparative perspective, Mey-
er’s materialism falls short of more nuanced
and multiperspectival approaches to late
Warring States and early imperial text use.6
Despite Meyer’s confident pronouncements
on manuscript cultures in China and be-
ond, he engages with surprisingly little of
the burgeoning scholarship on comparative
manuscript studies and seldom backs up his
sweeping claims with examples or referenc-
es.7 For example, the assertion that a certain
text was suited to “private” reading (pp. 183,
235) would, in order to convince, call for sub-
stantial empirical detail. It would also ben-
efit from a carefully laid out historical con-
textualization and conceptual clarification.8
Unfortunately, such assessments tend to be
issued ex cathedra.
Considering Meyer’s frequent casual
judgments on the literary quality of received
Shangshu chapters and related manuscript
texts, in particular on the sophistication of
their narrative techniques and supposed ar-
gumentation, one would wish for compari-
sions with some of the received literature, but
these never materialize. Meyer’s study reads
as if, with the exception of Shangshu, the ear-
ly textual tradition had ceased to exist. Cer-
tainly, Meyer could argue that Liu Xiang’s
editorial project erected an impenetrable
screen of ignorance separating modern read-
ers from pre-imperial texts in all their pris-
tine authenticity, and that received writings
should therefore be consulted with caution,
if at all. Yet recent studies suggest that Liu’s
editorial interventions may not have been
as radical as some doubters of antiquity had
speculated.9 And, for better or worse, the re-
ceived literature forms the backdrop against
which manuscript texts, too, need to be read
and understood. Excluding it on principle will
gender curious distortions of judgment
such as the excitement with which Meyer
greets foreshortened narrations of “extend-
ed events” (p. 230 and passim) in manuscript
texts while ignoring narrative compression in
other works, such as Zuozhuan.
To conclude, this monograph displays
shortcomings on multiple levels that make
one wonder about the role of editorial over-
sight and peer review in the production pro-
cess. Despite the title it is, properly speaking,
neither about documentation nor arguments.
More remarkably, it relates at best vaguely
to early China which, rather than being ap-
proached as an object of historical study,
looms as a mystifying, swirling mass of spec-
tral “communities” firing argumentative
blanks at each other. Many of the book’s
more serious flaws would have likely been
remedied had Meyer not chosen to publish
in a series under his own co-editorship; oth-
er, incidental ones could have been weeded
out by a proofreader. That Meyer nonethe-
less published the work in its present form

6 Charles Sanft, Literate Community in Early Imperial
China: The Northwestern Frontier in Han Times (Al-
7 There are two open-access book series, both pu-
blished by de Gruyter and still ongoing, devoted
to material philology and the comparative stu-
dy of manuscripts and inscribed artifacts more
generally: Materiale Textkulturen, edited by Lud-
ger Lieb, and Studies in Manuscript Cultures, edited
by Michael Friedrich, Harunaga Isaacson, and Jörg B. Quenzer. It does not seem that Meyer has
made any systematic use of them.
8 The circumspection with which classicists
approach such issues is exemplary. For a high-
ly sophisticated discussion of private reading
and reading in groups, see William A. Johnson,
“Constructing Elite Reading Communities in
the High Empire,” in Ancient Literacies: The Cul-
ture of Reading in Greece and Rome, ed. William A.
Johnson and Holt N. Parker (New York: Oxford
University Press, 2009), 320–30. See also Holt N.
Parker, “Books and Reading Latin Poetry,” in
Ancient Literacies, 186–229, on different modes in
which Roman audiences experienced poetry.
9 See, e.g., Olivia Milburn, The Spring and Autumn
Annals of Master Yan (Leiden and Boston: Brill,
2016), 13–42.
bespeaks great confidence in his own arguments, yet also hints at a readiness to block out other opinions, although the book approvingly quotes Bakhtin, who professed: “I live in the world of others’ words” (p. 100).

One wishes the author had been more attuned to the words of others.

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