

SOME TEXTUAL SOURCES FOR ANCIENT CHINESE HISTORY

What is history? If we take it to be everything that happens relating to human beings it cannot be known. If we take it to be the chronology of important human events, we must know what “important” means, and that depends very much on who is speaking.

Does history teach lessons? If so, out of the millions of facts that we are able to obtain, how can we determine which message the facts are trying to tell us. Are the lessons taught by the great actors of history (are there great actors?) or by the evolution of society on a level beyond what any one historical actor can know?

Sometimes when we speak of history we mean the telling or written narration or analysis of the past. Whenever history is viewed as a verbal activity, rather than as a collection of facts, its basic structure becomes inseparably tied to the speaker or writer, the historian or the creators of the *texts* upon which historians rely.

In ancient China, the word for “history” was one that had once denoted only a court scribe, and even earlier, a type of shaman or priest. The people who recorded the past in records--who inevitably shape our vision of the Chinese past--were men (or in one single case a woman) who had confident expectations that history, which for them was principally a narrative, possessed meaning. That meaning was ethical, and would provide effective guides for the future. The historian was a moral detective, poring through the clues of the past to learn what Heaven or the great sages of the past understood to be the destiny of mankind and of individual men and women. They were asking great questions, and those questions served as a lens that brought the past into one certain kind of focus.

We ask different questions from those of the ancient historians (including these questions about the ancient historians). With regard to ancient China, our interests are more detached and analytical. We are suspicious of ethical certainties and we have learned to detach history from literature and link it instead to sociology and archaeology. We are after different answers, but there are two reasons why we cannot discard the older historical sources and their archaic perspectives. First, those perspectives themselves are historical artifacts for analysis, holding answers to many questions about intellectual and cultural evolution. Second, the garrulous textual sources of the past are so much more articulate than archaeological remains that we cannot possibly do without them. All we can do is attempt to reconstruct the ideological lenses that shaped and reshaped their portraits of the past, and having come to appreciate them as products of the past, also correct for their distortions, so that we may apply the lenses of our own era’s questions.

Being so dependent upon our textual sources, it is critical that we understand something of them. Throughout this course, and particularly for our investigation of the Classical era, a certain set of “primary” texts will lie behind virtually everything we discuss. It is appropriate to take some space here to introduce those texts.

The general nature of early historical texts

In ancient China, the writing and transmission of texts was a difficult chore. Paper had not yet been invented (although it was the Chinese who invented paper shortly thereafter) and most texts were inscribed on one of two media: silk cloth or bamboo strips. The latter form was by far the more common and durable. To create a bamboo text, the long shafts of bamboo sections were split lengthwise into narrow strips and pierced with a hole at one end. Writers used ink and brush to write characters down the length of the strip. Many strips were required for even short texts, and as each bundle of strips was filled with characters, they were tied together with strings at the hole.

This sort of book was difficult to produce and subject to disruption by the disintegration of the string and the subsequent disordering of the strips (which no one ever thought to number!). It was also unbelievably bulky. Scholars of the late Classical period were known to travel with a train of wagons following behind, filled only with texts.

Naturally, with production and shipping so time consuming and expensive, books were relatively rare and only a few copies of major texts existed at any one time. To copy and transport a major text could take weeks of time and physical effort--and of course one had first to travel to some place where a copy of the text existed. *Texts were precious*. In many cases, much scholarly tradition was simply preserved in oral form--sometimes for centuries. Sooner or later, though, if it did not find a textual form it was lost.

Most students of China presume that we have lost the great majority of ancient Chinese texts; it is certainly true that the texts we now possess frequently refer to texts that we do not know. But we nevertheless do have a wide variety of ancient texts, and in many cases their value is so readily apparent that we can understand why ancient readers chose to expend the effort necessary to preserve them.

In recent years, we have come to understand more about the process of text preservation and loss through the discoveries of archaeology. Since the 1970s, a series of tomb discoveries have yielded manuscript copies of "lost" texts – and sometimes early versions of texts that ultimately survived – written on bamboo strips or silk and buried with their owners. These fascinating texts have provided valuable new information and broadened our understanding of the intellectual development of certain schools of thought, such as Confucianism. But the majority of them are of a disorganized or intellectually inferior quality that suggests why they were not protected and successfully preserved, despite being treasured enough to serve as part of "libraries" that were entombed with the dead, presumably to equip them with wisdom or entertainment in the afterlife.

What follows here is a list of some of the most valuable ancient textual sources for studying the history of Classical China. Most of these texts, in translation, will be available in some form at the Library.

Histories

1. The **Zuo-zhuan**, or **Zuo's Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals**

The Zuo-zhuan is the richest of all Classical histories. The main text is an enormous compendium of stories concerning the era 722-464. These tales have been collated to correspond to a different text, a bare-bones chronicle of events of the years 722-481 as recorded by the court scribes of the state of Lu (we will discuss this text, The Spring and Autumn Annals, later in the course). The Zuo-zhuan was traditionally said to have been compiled by a disciple of Confucius named Zuo Qiu-ming, but in fact the text probably had multiple authors. Its overall perspective seems to indicate that it originally derived from the region of the state of Chin in north central China. It most likely assumed a coherent form about 400 B.C.

The Zuo-zhuan is both a rich source of facts about early Classical China and a rich source of fictional romance. The text was heavily influenced by the Confucian school and reflects the notion that history is a narrative that reveals human character and morality. Nevertheless, the authors seem to have had recourse to a large number of relatively accurate written or oral records of the past, and the text is valuable as history as well as entertaining as literature.

A full translation of the Zuo-zhuan exists in a nineteenth century edition by James Legge, but this is very difficult to use (an edition is housed on the East Asian Collection Reference Shelves, Library, 8th floor [PL 2461 .M43 1985]). A recent translation done in the PRC is titled Zuo's Commentary, and consists of two volumes (the Chinese text and translation is included, but the Annals text is not included [PL 2470 .K5 1996]). The translation is awkward, but not inaccurate. Burton Watson's The Tso Chuan is a recent translation and is on Library Reserve; it includes a significant portion of the text in a very readable translation [PL 2470 .K8 1989].

2. The **Zhan-guo ce**, or **"Intrigues of the Warring States"**

This anonymous collection of anecdotes and court speeches brings together a wide variety of anecdotes concerning the Warring States era (453-221; the period takes its name from the text). The tales are arranged geographically, that is, state by state, in rough chronological order within each section. Although there is much historical information in this text, which is a witty and entertainingly amoral book, its principal nature seems to have been as a source book for the study of diplomatic rhetoric, and this has greatly affected its factual accuracy. Large sections of anecdotes appear to be little more than fictional accounts, sometimes of fictional people (although many scholars continue to treat the text as substantially accurate).

A full translation by J.I. Crump is available [DS 747.2 .C3753 1996].

3. The **Shi-ji**, or **"Records of the Grand Historian,"** by Sima Qian

This post-Classical work, dating from about 100 B.C., is by far the most ambitious history written by a single individual in ancient China. Sima Qian was the official historian of the Imperial Han court, and his lifelong ambition was to tell the history of the world, as he knew it, up to his own time in the Western Han, a project his historian-father had urged upon him. The Shi-ji incorporates large portions of the preceding two works, but Sima Qian had access to the Imperial Archives, and explored far more sources than are now available to us.

He arranged his history in a novel order. First appear chronicles of the various kings and

emperors of China, then very extensive tables that clarify chronology. These tables are followed by a series of monographs concerning such topics as the histories of calendrics, astronomy, economics, water conservation, and so forth (the sources of much of our data on the social history of early China). Next come independent chronologies of the patrician states of the Classical period, followed finally by a lengthy series of biographies of interesting and outstanding individuals.

So rich and sophisticated is Sima Qian's book that it is only in recent times that historians have come to detect the biases, omissions, and constraints that mark the text. Despite its defects, the Shi-ji will be an essential resource for us throughout the term.

Although there is no complete English translation of the Shi-ji, one is currently underway: The Grand Scribe's Records, edited by William Nienhauser. Four volumes have appeared so far (1, 2, 5 [pt. 1], and 7 [DS 741.3 .S6813 1994]) and they are on Library Reserve. The sections of the book pertaining to the Qin and Han Dynasties are available in translation by Burton Watson, entitled Records of the Grand Historian (Qin, 1 vol.; Han, 2 vols.), which is available on Library Reserve [Qin: DS 747.5 .S67813 1993; Han: DS 741.3 .S68213 1993b].

The "Classics"

Certain texts of ancient China came to be viewed as repositories of undying sage wisdom, and these came to be isolated into a sacred "canon" of the most studied works in traditional China. A number of these will be important source materials for us.

4. The Book of Documents, also called the Book of History

This text purports to include twenty-nine documents preserving the words and deeds of the ancient sage kings of the distant and near past. They are arranged chronologically and represent a Confucian presentation of history through the "words of the ancients." The "oldest" of the texts, recording the words of mythical culture heroes, are actually products of the Warring States era and serve only to illustrate how authors of that age envisioned the founders of Chinese culture. But some of the later texts, recording speeches and events near the founding of the Zhou Dynasty, do appear to have an early Zhou date, and many historians accept them as genuine.

A significant number of chapters from the Book of Documents appears in G380 online readings. In addition, a semi-readable translation by Clae Waltham is available, Shu Ching: Book of History [PL 2478 .E5].

5. The Book of Poetry, also called the Book of Songs or Book of Odes

This wonderful collection of 305 poems, probably written over the period from the Zhou founding to the seventh century, is discussed several times in this coursepack. It includes a wide variety of poems, from love songs and battle odes to political laments and solemn temple liturgies. Many of the poems provide us with the most intimate picture available of life in the early and mid-Zhou, although in many cases, the distortions of millennia of Confucian interpretive tradition make it difficult for us to recapture the poems' original ideas.

The fine literary translation of Arthur Waley is available PL 2478 .F9 1960.

6. The Li-ji, or Records of Ritual

This is a huge compendium of ritual texts and discussions of ritual that was probably edited about 100 B.C., but that include a great deal of older material. It is somewhat difficult to use because it is hard to distinguish between reports of ancient ritual practices and chapters that are little more than a ritual prescription for the future. For the purposes of research, in this course the ritual texts may be considered to be generally accurate Warring States recollections of mid-Zhou practices.

The Li-ji is one of a series of books about “li” (ritual), which was an aspect of culture central to the ancient Chinese world. The reading on ritual in this coursepack also discusses the Yi-li, or “Ceremonies of Ritual,” which is a collection of actual scripts for selected ritual occasions.

There is a two volume translation by James Legge [PL 2478 .G4 v.1].

- Other classics

Two remaining central classics, the Spring and Autumn Annals and the Yi jing will be discussed towards the end of our course, in connection with their roles in the Han Dynasty.

The Texts of the Schools of Learning

The largest number of extant ancient texts is composed of the products of schools of learning, or “philosophical schools,” of which the oldest is Confucianism. These schools generated texts that were meant to persuade, and they often recount “facts” about the past to illustrate their polemical points. While these “historical” elements of the texts must be read with an understanding that each has an ax to grind and will willingly bend the past to any shape that will fit its needs, they do provide an enormous amount of information both about the Classical period and about Classical views of the past. In a sense, no texts speak to us more directly from the past than these.

Space does not allow a detailed description of each of these. Some will be discussed much more fully in later online readings, and in several cases you will read substantial extracts. Below is a listing of those texts that will be available on Library Reserve.

- **Confucian texts**

7. **The Analects of Confucius.** (c. 5th - 4th centuries) Selections will appear in online readings, and a full online translation is linked to the *G380 Resources* page.

8. The **Mencius.** (c. 300 B.C.) The best published translation is probably D.C. Lau’s [B128.M33 E59 1970]. Books I and V are particularly rich in discussions of history. A partial translation is

online at: <http://www.iub.edu/~p374/Mengzi.pdf> .

9. **Xun Tzu.** (c. 230 B.C.) Two translations of this philosophically erudite text are available. A partial translation by Burton Watson [B 128.H68 E5 2003] and a three-volume scholarly translation by John Knoblock [B 128.H66 E5 1988] are available.

- Mohist text

10. **Mo-zi.** (c. 5th - 3rd centuries) An anti-Confucian utilitarian thinker with highly conventional views of history. Burton Watson's partial translation is adequate and fluidly rendered [B 128 .M79 E5 2003].

- Daoist texts

11. The **Dao de jing.** (c. 250 B.C.) There are hundreds of translations of this wisdom book. (Most are as spaced out as the text itself.) A full online translation is linked to the *G380 Resources* page.

12. **Zhuang-zi.** (late 4th century) The most sophisticated and witty text of ancient China. The most accessible version is Watson's partial translation [BL 1900.C46 E5 2003].

- Legalist texts

13. **Han Fei-zi.** (c. 240 B.C.) The Chinese equivalent of Machiavelli, this is the best intellectual representation of the trends that brought the Classical era to a close and the Qin Dynasty to power. Burton Watson's partial translation is an easy access route to this long text [B 128.H336 E5 2003].

14. **The Book of Lord Shang.** (c. 150 B.C.) Although much of this book may be post-Classical, it brings together much older material concerning the political revolution in Qin engineered by Shang Yang in the fourth century. J.J.L. Duyvendak's translation is quite dated, but the best available [JC 50 .K96].

- Miscellaneous

15. **Lüshi chunqiu.** (c. 230 B.C.) The title is variously rendered – the full English translation by Jeffrey Riegel and John Knoblock uses “The Annals of Lü Buwei” [PL 2663.L8 E5 2000], but the book is not an annals, it's an almanac that brings together essays on many topics by erudites of the third century B.C. from a variety of schools. It is an enormously valuable compendium.

16. **Guan-zi** (c. 250 B.C.) A compendium of late Warring States wisdom from various schools gathered in the state of Qi; comparable in its interest to the Lüshi chunqiu. Allyn Rickett's

translation is available in two volumes [B 128.K832 E57 1985].