

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft  
**Band:** 63 (2009)  
**Heft:** 4: The genius loci of Chinese manuscripts  
  
**Vorwort:** The study of Chinese manuscripts : searching for the genius loci  
**Autor:** Gassmann, Robert H.

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 27.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# THE STUDY OF CHINESE MANUSCRIPTS: SEARCHING FOR THE *GENIUS LOCI*

Robert H. Gassmann, University of Zurich

The study of early Chinese manuscripts is still a young and developing science.<sup>1</sup> Much of the exuberance is fueled by the fact that great quantities of manuscripts, especially those on bamboo and silk from the early period, have been discovered since the 1970s, and recent finds and developments seem to confirm that this cornucopia will hardly be exhausted in the near future. There is no doubt that these literary and documentary sources are in fundamental ways contributing to our knowledge of various periods in Chinese history, but now that the first excitement over these obvious gains has abated, the sobering discussions of methodological problems must also be conducted in order to secure the foundations for the interpretation of the sources.

By organizing workshops on various methodological aspects of the study of manuscripts and inscriptions of all kinds and from all historical periods, the *European Association for the Study of Chinese Manuscripts* offers a regular institutional framework for the exchange of ideas and research results in the field. The first of these workshops (Hamburg, 2000) focused on manuscripts excavated from early Chinese tombs and invited scholars to explore the various aspects involved in understanding the manuscript texts as part of a funerary ensemble in a certain historical context.<sup>2</sup> The second workshop (Hamburg, 2004) complemented the approach of the first one by primarily discussing the importance of material features of manuscripts for interpreting their contents, aiming to delineate a wide range of methodological issues.<sup>3</sup> The 2008 workshop, at the University of Zurich, was designed as a follow-up to the preceding workshops. It extended the temporal scope and, by offering as a motto the term *genius loci*, suggested a focus on spatiotemporal aspects, i.e. on issues of dating and prove-

1 This statement must, of course, be qualified in the case of the Dūnhuáng manuscripts, which have received much attention in the past approximately one hundred years.

2 Papers of this workshop have been published in *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003).

3 Papers of this workshop have been published in *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* LIX.1 (2005). It was during this workshop that the *European Association for the Study of Chinese Manuscripts* was founded.

nance and their parameters. The term *genius loci* proved to be a fecund motif, and the papers presented by the scholarly community manifested a great variety of highly stimulating approaches in various fields and periods. A number of the papers presented are published in the present volume.<sup>4</sup>

A number of papers concentrated on one of the most evident issues, i.e. questions relating to regional aspects. Chinese manuscripts have been obtained from different areas, thus giving rise to questions concerning the linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Within the ongoing and controversial debate on the distinguishability and characteristics of a “Southern culture” or “Chǔ 楚 culture”, several contributions demonstrate the, perhaps unexpectedly, fundamental difficulties related to the search for clear and convincing evidence that a manuscript text can be unambiguously termed a “Chǔ manuscript”. Haeree Park (“Linguistic Approaches to Reading Excavated Manuscripts”) argues that the phonetically related textual variants (*tōngjiǎzì* 通假字) within the discovered manuscripts, or between excavated texts and received counterparts, can in the vast majority of cases be accounted for by the compositional or structural variability of the early Chinese *script*. At the stage of the *gǔwén* 古文 archaic script, the two principal components of a character, the phonophoric and signific, in each case could be replaced by members of an inventory of *equivalent phonophorics* and *synonymous significs*. Any attempt to reconstruct dialects contemporaneous with the date of the manuscript copy (say, reconstructing 300 BC Chǔ dialect through the 300 BC Chǔ manuscripts) is thus methodologically not sufficiently foundable. Chǔ script, assuming that any such script can be defined, is not equivalent to a “phonetic transcript” of the contemporaneous Chǔ dialect.<sup>5</sup>

William G. Boltz (“Is the Chuu Silk Manuscript a Chuu Manuscript?”) explicitly raises the question whether the common practice of labelling manu-

4 This introduction is not meant to simply summarize the contents of the papers published here, but rather to focus on the ways they deal with the central topic of the workshop and to indicate the strands of arguments that contribute to a furthering of our understanding, either in agreement with, or in opposition to, positions in current debates. Further opinions, approaches or results presented in other papers at the workshop are mentioned in the footnotes. A personal assessment of the results of the workshop is given at the end of this introduction.

5 With the same degree of skepticism, Wolfgang Behr (“Dialects, Diachrony, Diglossia or All Three? Tomb Text Glimpses into the Language[s] of Chu) came to the conclusion that the phonological evidence (based, e.g., on phonophoric replacement in writing) is not sufficient to establish a clear linguistic *genius loci*. In other words: the language of the manuscripts, as understood so far, does not clearly present itself as a regional variety of Old Chinese.

scripts as “Chǔ manuscripts” is methodologically justifiable when this is merely based on the simple fact that they were found in tombs dating from the Warring States period, in an area associated historically with the state of Chǔ. Judging the so-called “Chǔ silk manuscript” (CSM) against the criteria of language and script, he argues that it is not distinctively identifiable as “Chǔ” (e.g. because “typical” names for the months or “typical” written forms are absent).<sup>6</sup> As for the features of content and form, these are known from texts of “non-Chǔ” provenance and therefore neither unambiguously mark the CSM as distinctively Chǔ. Finally, its undeniably unique features cannot be relied on to define or to indicate a type.<sup>7</sup>

Olivier Venture (“Looking for Chu People’s Writing Habits”) argues that, even accepting that in the Warring States period the Shāng-Zhōu writing system was basically used, growing regional administrative bodies over the centuries must have entailed the development of different writing habits. To what extent regional writers’ habits differed from those in other regions is, according to his research, still difficult to demonstrate, mainly because of the lack of comparable corpora of documents. Most promising for this purpose would be the comparison between manuscript types that reflect administrative procedures, but not “literary products”, as the former tend to be prepared for events fixed in time and space (and in limited copies), whereas the latter tend to be perennially copied and adapted, thus effacing the place of origin and possibly acquiring and reflecting a variety of features from several regions. But even where such corpora exist (e.g. Qín 秦 and Chǔ), they are from different periods, leaving open to consideration the complications of substantial time gaps (end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC in Qín

6 Such differences or anomalies may provide missing links between concepts and texts lost or not evident in the transmitted textual tradition, as suggested in the paper presented by Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann (“The *Rongcheng shi* Version of the ‘Nine Provinces’ and Transmitted Texts: Multiple Parallels”), where the unusual names of the “provinces” (*jiǔ zhōu* 九州) in the *Róng Chéng shì* 容成氏 manuscript (Chǔ provenance, late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC) trigger a comparison with other accounts of “provinces”, revealing a complex system of parallels with the transmitted versions and a large range of other received texts.

7 When we do have a specific type of text, quite different questions may be raised, as Rudolf Pfister (“The *mài*-Texts from Mawangdui and Zhangjiashan in Comparison”) did in the case of roughly contemporaneous medical texts dealing with an important early medical topic, namely, the eleven *mài/mò* 脈, often translated as ‘vessels’ or ‘channels’. He mentions: developments of the descriptive language (body terms, topographic knowledge of the body); linguistic regionalisms; formation and formal development of accumulated textual materials; stages in the development of specific doctrines; specifics of technical writing; absence of commentary etc.

versus 4<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC in Chǔ). Comparing examples of the few contemporaneous documents extant, he concludes that there appear to be noticeable differences in the respective writers' habits.

Moving away from these questions focusing on linguistic, lexicological and graphic characteristics which might serve as "localizing markers" for attributing manuscripts to a specific manuscript culture of a specific region, a number of contributions focus on the question of different regional provenance of copied manuscripts and on the intricacies of this relationship. Paul van Els ("Dingzhou: The Story of an Unfortunate Tomb") focuses on the "local genius" responsible for the assembling of tomb libraries comprising manuscripts of different provenance and on a great variety of topics. In his view, the Dìngzhōu 定州 tomb and its manuscripts should attract more scholarly attention despite the difficult archaeological record.<sup>8</sup> The high degree of calligraphic regularity and uniformity on all Dìngzhōu strips, for instance, obviously effaces characteristics of other regions, posing questions regarding the impetus for, and manner of, procuring "foreign" manuscripts as well as the reasons for copying them in certain ways. This uniformity clashed with the diversity visible in the intellectual affiliation of entombed manuscripts and the alleged polemical relation of different intellectual trends. Similar to the discoveries of Guōdiàn 郭店 (early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) and Mǎwángduī 馬王堆 (early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), the Dìngzhōu tomb (mid 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) contains texts of various orientation, e.g. "Confucianist" and "Daoist". The storage of supposedly incongruous works in the posthumous libraries of tombs covering three centuries, in van Els' view, call for a revaluation of the "struggle between schools", as ancient libraries do not seem to bear witness to it.<sup>9</sup>

8 Difficulties of a similar kind in connection with the so-called Shanghai Museum corpus, coupled with questions on its authenticity, were dealt with by Hans van Ess ("Some General Remarks Regarding the Shanghai Manuscripts"). In a similar vein, Enno Giele ("The Discoveries and Source Value of the Han Time Documents from Northwest China") discussed the value of the Dūnhuáng 敦煌 and Jūyán 居延 (or Edsen-gol) Hàn strips by retracing their discovery, transfers and publications, as well as the description of the sites of discovery.

9 Martin Kern, in his paper ("The South as Text and Context in Warring States and Western Han Manuscripts"), focused on the unexpected concentration of early philosophical and literary manuscripts in the southern area of Chǔ (Guōdiàn, the Shanghai Museum corpus, and the early Western Han tombs of Mǎwángduī and Shuānggǔduī 雙古堆). As no northern tombs have yielded similar riches, this forces a revaluation of traditional prejudices regarding the intellectual and cultural south of late Warring States and early imperial times.

Dirk Meyer (“Texts, Textual Communities, and Meaning: The *Genius Loci* of the Warring States Chǔ Tomb Guōdiàn One”) also addresses the question of the composition of tomb libraries by dealing with the surprising fact that Guōdiàn One is the only tomb to date that contains philosophically oriented texts only. Apart from noting the extraordinary stability of texts known from other findings of palaeographic materials or received traditions – a feature indicating that “travels” in time and space during the late Warring States period were, and could be, effected without fundamentally changing the body of a manuscript – he identifies two classes of materials contained in the library, which he calls “argument-based” and “authority-based”, suggesting that they belonged to two different intellectual traditions, because they, as a rule, depended on entirely different (and mutually conflicting) “textual communities”. Their location in one and the same tomb again raises questions concerning the alleged polemical relation of different intellectual trends and textual communities, as well as such regarding the library’s relationship to the locus of texts, i.e. the tomb, and to the “original” contexts of the manuscripts.

The last-mentioned relationship, i.e. the one between place of discovery and place of origin is – along with questions of dating – the topic of Imre Galambos’ contribution (“Manuscript Copies of Stone Inscriptions in the Dunhuang Corpus: Issues of Dating and Provenance”). Although many of the Dūnhuáng 敦煌 manuscripts come from the vicinity of the caves, a significant number of them originated from elsewhere. Palaeographical and codicological features are indispensable to determine the date or provenance of manuscripts,<sup>10</sup> but most of these features are transmissible from earlier copies together with the text. In the case of the *Mògāo kū jì* 莫高窟記, the colophon was copied together with the date, without any reference to the point in time when the act of copying took place. The Gǎntōng sì 感通寺 manuscript, on the other hand, shows that such a colophon could have also been added by the person who made the copy. Furthermore, when trying to determine date or provenance, it is important to keep in mind that manuscripts often represent composite objects the components of which might have a history of their own.<sup>11</sup>

10 In a similar way, the study of formal features of text and material in combination with an analysis of content and context is the foundation of Maria Khayutina’s interpretation of the 153-characters-long inscription on the Róng-shēng zhōng 戎生鐘 in the collection of the Beijing Poly Art Museum (“Localizing the Recently Discovered Bells of Rong-sheng in Time and Space”).

11 Donald Harper (“The Dunhuang Manuscript *Baize jingguai tu* 白澤精怪圖 [White Marsh’s Diagrams of Spectral Prodigies] from the Pelliot Collection [P2682r°]”) also affirms that the



Matthias Richter (“Faithful Transmission or Creative Change: Tracing Modes of Manuscript Production from the Material Evidence”) focuses on further problems related to the copying process. A copied manuscript does not simply reflect the actual production standards or conventions of the time and place where it was produced but also those of potentially several models from which it was copied and in turn their underlying models. These standards probably varied between small regions and over relatively short periods of time and were presumably restricted to small circles of persons who learned writing from the same teachers, i.e. scribal schools. Modes and standards of production could, however, also depend on whether a manuscript was meant to grant faithful access to the text, or rather to serve representational functions. This could mean that the most sought-after competence in scribes was not necessarily orthographic correctness or even constancy, but rather a high visual quality of the text as an artifact. Convincing answers to these basic methodological questions are not only necessary to understand the social context and historical significance of a manuscript, but also to inform decisions as textual critics and readers of its text.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Crispin Williams (“Ten Thousand Names: Rank and Lineage Affiliation in the Wenxian Covenant Texts”) exploits the explicit regionality of a specific type of texts to explore the structure of certain social groups. By studying the names of covenantors and enemies given on the tablets, he outlines tentative answers to questions such as the following: How many individuals took part in each covenant? Can sub-groups of covenantors be identified? To what extent do the covenants appear to be bringing together members of different lineages under the authority of a single lineage leader? What were the size and nature of social and political groupings during this period? What role, if any, may the covenants have played in demarcating groups in preparation for statehood? What were the place and function of lineages in these groups?

The study of Chinese manuscripts, especially those dating from the earlier periods in history, is obviously still in its exciting beginnings. The papers presented

---

possible composite nature of a physical manuscript warrants careful examination. In this case, two sheets of paper are glued together, and S6261 (Stein Collection, British Library) is a fragment of the same manuscript.

- 12 Edward Shaughnessy (“Translating the Shanghai Museum Manuscript of the *Zhou Yi*”) gave an overview of some of the methodological issues one is confronted with when transcribing and translating mid-Warring States manuscripts, and of the principles he followed – in this case when translating the *Zhōu Yì* 周易.

at the Zurich workshop and the articles published in this volume not only demonstrate this aspect but are ample proof of the fact that fundamental questions of method still have to be solved, and that great caution regarding the results is still the order of the day. Nevertheless, from the diversity of the materials, the heterogeneity of opinions, and the demonstrated complexity of the spatio-temporal relations the following outlines of a picture, in my opinion, seem to be emerging: The Warring States period and the area from which the majority of the finds come (very roughly: Eastern Zhōu territory including Chǔ) seem to have been culturally and linguistically more uniform than diverse. Evidence of strikingly different literary or philosophical traditions or even of administrative practices is comparatively sparse. Due to the obvious travelling of manuscripts and ideas (e.g. with the political consultants like Squire Mèng and others), the regional characteristics do not seem to play a role significant enough to justify the unambiguous application of the topical term *genius loci*. Neither do the typical materials (bronze, bamboo, tablets) and the fundamental material features (tools, formats and layout, language, orthography and style of writing) differ enough to furnish a foundation for classifying them according to accepted sets of clearly regional parameters. It appears that even the uniqueness of certain artifacts (e.g. the so-called “Chǔ silk manuscript”) or of certain assemblies or corpora (e.g. the library in Tomb Guōdiàn One) is therefore not so much the product of the forces at work in a specific region, i.e. hardly attributable to a specific *genius loci*. It is, basing on our present knowledge, more likely that the usual convergence of the majority of finds is due to a general conformity with a common worldview, and that the spectacular few or the oddities are mainly due to the creativeness of specific persons, i.e. to a *genius personae* – be this the authorizing or the commissioned party.



