ISSN: 2688-8653

Sarah Allan's Studies on the Guodian Chu Bamboo Slips: From Textual Interpretation to Cosmological Construction

Lan Zhang

School of Humanities and New Media, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, 434000, China

Abstract

Sarah Allan is a renowned scholar in the field of Sinology in the West. Her research on pre-Qin Chinese culture, as well as the methods employed by Western scholars represented by Allan in studying Chu bamboo slip texts, holds significant reference value. In particular, her research on the nature, textual relationships, and systematic issues of the Guodian Chu bamboo slips and the *The Great One Begot Water* text has put forward unique academic perspectives. Allan's research on the Guodian Chu bamboo slips is representative, not only enriching the history of Chu bamboo slip studies abroad but also providing domestic scholars with new research perspectives and methods, thereby promoting academic exchange and cooperation between China and the West.

Keywords

Sarah Allan; *Laozi*; Guodian Chu bamboo slips; *The Great One Begot Water*.

1. Introduction

Sarah Allan, born in the United States in 1945, is a renowned scholar in the field of Sinology in the West. She studied Chinese at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of California, Berkeley, and earned her PhD in 1974. She began teaching at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London in 1972. From 1995 to 2016, Sarah Allan served as a distinguished professor at Dartmouth College in the United States, where she taught and researched Chinese culture.She specializes in the study of oracle bone inscriptions, bronze artifacts, and bamboo slips. During her tenure at SOAS, she taught ancient Chinese philosophical texts for many years, developing deep expertise in pre-Qin literature, archaeology, philosophy, and culture.Her research has yielded notable achievements in both the fields of textual artifacts and philosophical thought. Her research on the Guodian Chu tomb bamboo slips sparked a wave of interest in bamboo and silk text studies in the United States and Europe.

2. Sarah Allan's Writings of Chinese Culture in the Pre-Qin Period

The Heir and the Sage :Dynastic Legend in Early China employs a structuralist approach adapted from mythology to analyze historical accounts concerning the transfer of power from Yao to Shun, dating up to the early Western Zhou period.Allan points out that the idea of dynastic cycles contains an inherent contradiction between the principles of ruling by virtue and hereditary succession. Hereditary and virtue are the themes of ancient Chinese dynastic legends, revealing how ancient historians characterized the compilation of history by linking legends to the times [1]. Allan's research methodology is illuminating, and the structuralist analytical approach embedded in the study of ancient Chinese history provides a fresh perspective for understanding the dynastic turnover in ancient China.

In her exploration of Shang culture and belief systems, Allan attempts to reconstruct the early dimensions of mythological thought in the late Shang period. In *The Shape ofiheTurtle: Myth,Artand Cosmos in Early China,* Allan examines the myths, art, cosmology, ancient divination, and rituals of Shang religious thought, assuming that there is a holistic correlation

ISSN: 2688-8653

between them [2].Allan argues that the later-recorded myth that there were ten suns in the sky originated in the Shang dynasty. In response to the hypotheses of Guo Moruo and H.G. Creel that Di(帝) was the supreme god of the Shang dynasty and Tian(天) was the supreme god of the Zhou dynasty, Allan argues that only the ten suns were specifically associated with the Shang, and that God Di, conceived as the North Star, was the supreme deity common to both the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, whereas Tian was a general term referring to the sky.

In *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue: The Metaphors of Early Chinese Philosophy,* Allan adopts contemporary metaphor theory to interpret and organize early Chinese philosRT44ophical concepts [3].Drawing on the theory of metaphor, the book examines early philosophical thought from the perspective of the original metaphor of “water”. By tracking the metaphorical use of concrete natural imagery, the book reconstructs the framework of early Chinese philosophical thought. This methodological approach is novel and insightful. Futhermore, in the edition published by the Commercial Press, Allan also discusses GuoDian Laozi in detail.

Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and ldeal Government in Warring States Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts, a recent book by Allan, provides an overview of Warring States period bamboo-slip colletions, including the Guodian Chu slips, the Shanghai Museum slips, and Tsinghua slips.It examines problems encountered in interpreting these documents and discuss their significance for understanding the development of early Chinese literature, especially philosophical writings [4].

3. The Methods of Western Scholars, Such as Dylan, in Studying the Texts of Chu bamboo slips

The way "biblical scholars" handle the use of Chu bamboo slips is not the traditional Chinese way.Learn from others' experiences to improve your own. In the West, a range of methodologies developed in classical studies, biblical studies, and religious studies have contributed to a rigorous and systematic examination of the bamboo slips from the Chu tombs in Guodian.

3.1. Textual research methods

In Western textual research, there are two research methods closely related to textual proofreading and textual analysis, namely, textual historical research and textual critical research, which are concerned with the history of literature circulation. Textual history research involves studying the transmission and evolution of texts, determining their authenticity and attribution, and examining various bibliographic compilations and book production processes. Textual criticism research involves obtaining relevant materials from textual history research to establish the most similar edition to the original text of a particular work. The specific process involves two steps: first, carefully reading the variant readings in important manuscripts or editions, analyzing the underlying causes of these variant readings, and creating a genealogical chart that logically aligns with the author's original text; second, revising those variant readings that cannot be definitively determined based on the genealogical chart. As demonstrated by Bao Zeyue's creation of the genealogical chart for the *Laozi*, this philological research method aids in analyzing and determining the important terms in the Guodian Chu bamboo slips.

A text is a unique composite and form of expression created by one or more authors that is related to ideas. From the creation of a text to its dissemination, it is influenced by copyists and transformed into various different forms. Each form has its own unique variant. The original text serves as the foundational state of the text and is commonly found in numerous later versions. The most important of these is called the “revised edition,” which manifests as a new

ISSN: 2688-8653

"record" form. A single original text can have multiple revised editions, with the earliest confirmed revised edition referred to as the "first revised edition," which largely preserves the original form of the original text. For example, the existing original text of *Laozi* by Wang Bi is actually a hybrid revised edition. In this case, the transmitted text is Wang Bi's, but the majority of the original text of the *Laozi* actually originates from He Shanggong's foundational text. Therefore, there is a significant divergence between Wang Bi's foundational text and the first revised edition of Wang Bi's foundational text.

Scholars such as Allan believe that there may be three possible relationships between the content of the extant text *Laozi* and the *Guodian Laozi*. These are represented by three models: first, the "compilation" model. The content of the *Guodian Laozi* is a compilation of the original text of *Laozi*; second, the "source" model. The content of the *Guodian Laozi* is one of the sources of the original text of *Laozi*; third, the "parallel text" model. The content of the *Guodian Laozi* constitutes an independent text in its own right, just like the original *Laozi*, deriving from earlier primary materials. In the "compilation" model, the content of the *Guodian Laozi* does not constitute an independent text on its own but is merely a special abridged version of the original *Laozi.* In the latter two models, the Guodian Chu bamboo slips constitute an independent text rather than a foundational, revised, or copied version of the original *Laozi*. Although it contains passages corresponding to the transmitted *Laozi*, the Guodian bamboo slips still exhibit a unique layout and textual organizational form. Therefore, the presence of corresponding passages does not necessarily indicate that the Guodian bamboo slips' passages originated from the *Laozi*, nor does it indicate that there was a text called the *Laozi* circulating at the time the Guodian slips were copied. The Guodian slips are likely an independent text. Some of the material in these texts was later copied into the transmitted text of the *Laozi.*

3.2. Literary research methods

Throughout the 20th century, Western scholars have employed literary criticism methods to study the biblical text. Three aspects closely related to this methodology are: stylistic analysis, research into the ideological background of the compilers, and analysis of compositional techniques. Stylistic analysis involves examining the standard styles or forms used in oral and early written traditions, such as narratives, proverbs, hymns, and poetry. Each style is interpreted within its original specific cultural context. Allan argues that, in the case of the Guodian Laozi bamboo slips, stylistic analysis requires focusing on the independent units of the text, which are separated by dark square symbols on the bamboo slips. Like the content of the transmitted text of the *Laozi*, many of these units appear to contain rhyming sections, some of which are fully rhyming poetic forms. For example, in lines 5 to 17 of Group B of the Guodian Chu bamboo slips, the poetic lines attributed to "jianyan" also appear in Chapter 41 of the transmitted *Laozi*. The stylistic analysis method treats these poetic units as objects of study, suggesting that these units originated from an oral tradition that was memorized and transmitted through poetic forms. Therefore, when conducting a systematic stylistic analysis of the *Guodian Laozi* bamboo slips, special attention should be paid to the independent units within them.

Research into the ideological background of compilers seeks to identify the religious or ideological views of compilers of texts in different genres. Research into writing techniques examines the literary techniques employed by early compilers of a particular tradition, as well as how they collected and arranged the materials they possessed to create a unified work. Both methods require the identification of independent poetic and prose units. When the editors of the Guodian Chu bamboo slips compiled the collected materials into three sets of *Laozi* texts, what evidence is there of the editors' ideological perspectives? What is the meaning of each segment? Is there a reasonable basis for placing these segments in the bamboo slips? Does each set of bamboo slips express a dominant philosophical viewpoint? If so, do the three sets of

ISSN: 2688-8653

bamboo slips express the same philosophical viewpoint, or three different philosophical viewpoints? Scholars such as Allan believe that research into the compilation of the Guodian Laozi bamboo slips may provide clear answers to these questions.

3.3. Philosophical and religious research methods

Allan hypothesizes that during the early historical period, there existed a lineage of disciples centered around Taoist philosophy, along with a large body of oral philosophical poetry. These verses were later compiled into the three sets of bamboo slips of the *Guodian Laozi* and the extant text of the *Laozi*. From this, one can conclude that *Laozi* was not a historical figure, and the *Laozi* text, along with the legend of *Laozi* as its author, did not emerge until the 3rd century BCE. Through research on a series of Taoist works from the late Warring States period and the early Han Dynasty, American scholars such as Luo Hao proposed three "general categories" to classify the different philosophical ideas of Taoism. The first is cosmology, which is a view of the universe based on the Dao as the dominant unifying force of the universe; the second is "self-cultivation," which involves eliminating distracting thoughts from the mind until a state of extreme tranquility is achieved, and ultimately attaining the Dao through this process; the third is political thought, which involves applying this view of the universe and method of self-cultivation to the issue of governing the state. Based on these three categories, early Taoist works can be divided into "individualistic tendencies," "primitivist tendencies," and "harmonistic tendencies." They share a common cosmological perspective and self-cultivation methods, but differ in their political ideology. Using this method to classify Taoist works avoids the confusion caused by traditional labels in research. The two most important traditional labels are "Lao Zhuang" and "Huang Lao," both of which have been criticized by Western academia, who argue that these labels were added by later generations and have little historical basis.

Western religious criticism research emphasizes the study of the unique states of consciousness and psychological states achieved through different religious methods. This is of great help in better understanding early Taoist thought and its historical context. "Self-cultivation" primarily involves systematic meditation practices to achieve an extremely tranquil and transcendent state. This mystical practice is referred to as "inner cultivation." In the A and B groups of the *Guodian Laozi,* there are nine sections of verse related to the theory of "inner cultivation." For example, Chapter 13 of the A group (Chapter 16 of the *Tao De Jing*): "Be extremely empty, remain steadfastly calm,"[5] advocates attaining emptiness and maintaining the middle way; Chapter 18 of the A group (Chapter 44 of the *Tao De Jing*): "Excessive accumulation of possessions will inevitably lead to heavy losses. Therefore, knowing when to be satisfied will prevent humiliation; knowing when to stop will prevent danger; only in this way can lasting peace be maintained." [6] Chapter 1 of Section Ji (Chapter 59 of the *Tao De Jing*): "Through self-cultivation and accumulation of merit, one can achieve longevity and broad horizons."[7] Both suggest that longevity is the result of inner cultivation. Therefore, the compilers of the *Guodian Laozi* Sections A and B may have regarded this mystical practice as an integral part of their own philosophy. Therefore, it is assumed that there was one or more closely related master-disciple lineages whose members participated in the composition of independent poetic units, which were later incorporated into the *Laozi, Neiye*, and the *Guodian Laozi.*

4. Allan's Research on The Great One Begot Water

Another name for *Laozi* is the *Tao Te Ching*.The Guodian Bamboo Slips of the *Laozi* from Jingmen, Hubei, contain three distinct sets of content. The editors categorized them into three groups—A, B, and C—based on the shape of the bamboo slips and the traces of characters. All materials in Groups A and B are found in the extant text of the *Tao Te Ching*, including the two

ISSN: 2688-8653

texts unearthed at Mawangdui. Group C includes some materials not found in the *Tao Te Ching*, which the editors listed separately as a single text titled " The Great One Begot Water." Allan has conducted a relatively in-depth analysis and study of *The Great One Begot Water.*

4.1. Analysis of the Relationship Between The Great One Begot Water and the Guodian Laozi

The three groups (A, B, and C) of the *Guodian Chu Tomb Bamboo Slips* were all written in the script commonly used in the State of Chu during the middle to late Warring States period.Allan argues that there are no repeated passages between Groups A and B, suggesting that these two groups may represent two distinct sections of the same text. However, there is one passage in Group A (corresponding to lines 10–18 of Chapter 64 of the *Tao Te Ching*) that also appears in Group C. This indicates that Group C was not originally part of the same text as Groups A and B, but all three groups were written based on a common source [8]. Although the content of *The Great One Begot Water* is not found in the transmitted text of the *Laozi,* it shares no differences with the bamboo slips of Group C in terms of format, calligraphy style, and other aspects. The length of the bamboo slips is the same, the font is the same, and the traces of the binding threads are also the same. This indicates that *The Great One Begot Water* should be regarded as part of Group C.

Regarding the issue of the chapter arrangement order of the *Guodian Laozi*, Xing Wen argues that: The content discussed in Group B of the *Laozi* primarily concerns people and events; *The Great One Begot Water* and Group C of the *Laozi,* along with Group A of the *Laozi,* primarily discuss the Dao, the Dao of Heaven, or the Dao of the Sage, with occasional references to other topics. From both content and structural perspectives, the *The Great One Begot Water* and the C Group Laozi discuss abstract principles rather than specific people and events. Compared to the content of Group B, *The Great One Begot Water* has a greater connection with Group A and C. From a formal perspective, the bamboo slips of Group A are the longest, most exquisitely crafted, and contain the most content, clearly making Group A the most important section and thus should be placed at the beginning; while the bamboo slips of Group B are longer than those of Group C, they are not as exquisitely crafted and also have less content than Group C. In summary, the order of arrangement is: Group A, Group C, and Group B. Allan has a different view on this. She believes that there is no evidence in the extant literature regarding the chapter arrangement order of the *Guodian Laozi* , and there is no clear sequence between the chapters of the *Guodian Laozi* . Furthermore, the *Guodian Laozi* was not widely circulated. This suggests that when the *Guodian Laozi* was produced, its chapters were part of a larger body of materials and did not have a fixed arrangement order[9].In her research on Chu bamboo slips, Allan particularly emphasizes the mutual corroboration of transmitted texts and excavated materials, rather than relying solely on textual analysis and interpretation.

4.2. The first-eight chapters and the last six chapters of The Great One Begot Water are different parts.

The fourteen bamboo slips named *The Great One Begot Water* were separated by the editors of the *Guodian Chu Tomb Bamboo Slips* and consist of two parts. The first part, numbered 1-8, contains a logically structured theory of cosmic generation, and its structure and style are unique. The first part of the bamboo slips has conceptual connections with the *Laozi* and should be considered an appendix. The second part of the bamboo slips is numbered 9-14. The cosmological theories presented in these two sections differ, and their thematic connections are not closely aligned. The reason they are included in the same text is that their content is not found in the *Laozi*. Stylistically, they resemble certain passages in the *Laozi,* making them easily mistaken as part of it. Allan argues that the bamboo slips numbered 9–14 should be classified as part of Group C rather than the *The Great One Begot Water* section. These six bamboo slips were composed early on based on materials related to the , forming one or two paragraphs, but

ISSN: 2688-8653

were not included in the *Laozi* when it was later compiled. She believes that Group C consists of two parts: the first includes the chapters found in *Laozi* and bamboo slips 9-14 from the *The Great One Begot Water,* which form the main text; the second includes bamboo slips 1-8 from the *The Great One Begot Water* ,which serve as appendices to the main text, discussing the theory of cosmic generation.

The issue of the sequence of bamboo slips 9–14 has long been a focus of historical scholars. Allan believes that bamboo slips 9–14 belong to part of Group C and advocates the view proposed by Qiu Xigui. Bamboo slip 9 begins with a new sentence, suggesting it may mark the start of a new section. However, since these slips are incomplete, we cannot determine which slip should follow them. Some scholars suggest placing Bamboo Slips 9 before Bamboo Slip 13, but Allan leans toward the original opinion of the excavation team. Qiu Xigui proposes placing Bamboo Slip 9 before Bamboo Slip 14, which divides the text into two parts: Bamboo Slips 10 to 13, and Bamboo Slips 9 and 14. Since bamboo slip 13 is broken, it can only be inferred that it is the concluding part; bamboo slip 14 has black square markings, which can also be seen as the end of a section. In terms of coherence, Qiu Xigui's argument is persuasive. In the *Laozi*, the coherence between chapters is often not very tight. Allan believes that reading bamboo slips 13 and 9 together does not pose any difficulty. Therefore, there is a possibility that one or two sections of bamboo slips 9–14 were originally part of other chapters of the *Laozi.*

4.3. The Great One Begot Water and Laozi belong to different systems

Allan believes that *The Great One Begot Water* is semantically related to the *Laozi* but does not belong to the same system. The final line of Group C of the *Laozi*, C 13:19-14:7 (the latter half of Chapter 64 of the *Tao De Jing*): “Therefore, sages are able to assist all things in developing according to their natural nature, rather than forcibly interfering with or changing them,”[10]is related to*The Great One Begot Water* in both meaning and wording. The concepts of Fu(辅) ,Wanwu(万物), and Ziran(自然) are identical to those in the *The Great One Begot Water* in both language and thought. Interestingly, A 21:21-22:6 (a section of Chapter 25 of the *Tao De Jing*) states: “Not knowing its name, we call it the Dao(道); forcing a name upon it, we call it the Da(大).” [11] The character Tai(太) in Taiyi(太一) is written as Da on the bamboo slips. Therefore, the phrase “if one must name it, call it Great” in the *Laozi* may be an indirect reference to “Taiyi (Dayi).” In the first chapter of the *Laozi,* the name of the “Dao” is described as something indescribable: “The Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the beginning of all things; the named is the mother of all things.”[12] In *The Great One Begot Water* the name of the “Dao” is described as: “The Dao is also its character. Please ask its name. Those who follow the Dao must rely on its name.”[13] Li Xueqin believes that *The Great One Begot Water* is a transmission of the 42nd chapter of the *Laozi,* which states: “The Dao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to all things.” Allan argues that although both texts mention “one,” they may be related in general, but the numerical sequences in these two sections cannot be reconciled, and they belong to different systems.

The cosmology associated with “Dayi” is rooted in the three sets of bamboo slips from the *Guodian Laozi* and the *Tao De Jing*. The *Great One Begot Water* and the *Tao De Jing* were written based on an earlier and more comprehensive text. In ancient China, natural phenomena such as rivers, mountains, and celestial bodies were not only objective entities but also deities worshiped as such. Therefore, “Dayi” is both the North Star and the deity associated with it. During the period when the Guodian tomb was buried, worship of “Dayi” was particularly prevalent in the Chu state. Li Ling utilized archaeological materials and textual records to discuss the importance of “Dayi” worship in the Chu state during the pre-Qin period; Donald Harper expanded Li Ling's views beyond the borders of the Chu state, arguing that worship of “Dayi” was not limited to the Chu state. “Dayi” is equivalent to “Dao.”More precisely, it reveals

ISSN: 2688-8653

the metaphorical foundation of "Dao" that cannot be named. "Dao" is the only constant, an inexhaustible source, the fundamental origin of life, existing before heaven and earth and all things. Other chapters of the *Tao De Jing* not found in the *Guodian Laozi* more explicitly focus on this imagery. All three sets of texts in the *Guodian Laozi* contain materials related to the worship of the "Great One." These materials were also used in the compilation of the *Tao De Jing.*The *Guodian Laozi* includes one or two passages omitted from the *Tao De Jing*, namely *The Great One Begot Water* so the *The Great One Begot Water* must have been compiled after the *Guodian Laozi.*

5. Conclusion

As an overseas scholar, Alan has crossed ethnic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries to dedicate himself to the teaching and research of traditional Sinology, making significant contributions to the dissemination and promotion of Sinology in Western countries and serving as a bridge in academic exchange and cooperation between China and the West. The *Laozi* is one of the most translated and influential texts in the world, and the Guodian Chu tomb bamboo slips are one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the last century. Overseas scholars typically use modeling and data analysis methods to study Chu bamboo slips, with a focus on form and sequence. Overseas sinologists like Allan have broken free from traditional research paradigms on Chu bamboo slips, offering valuable research references. For domestic scholars, appropriately adopting relevant research methods and theoretical knowledge from the West can help Chinese scholars examine historical texts from different perspectives.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Associate Professor Lu Chuan, Department of History, Yangtze University, for his help in writing the paper. Also this paper is a participating paper of the 6th International Symposium on Chu Culture and the 20th Annual Conference of the Chinese Qu Yuan Society in 2025.

References

[1] Sarah Allan, translated by Sun Xinfei and Zhou Yan: The Heir and the Sage :Dynastic Legend in Early China(Peking University Press, China 2002),p.1-116.

[2] Sarah Allan, translated by Wang Tao:The Mystery of the Turtle: A Study of Shang Myths, Rituals, Art, and Cosmology (Commercial Press, China 2010),p.1-228.

[3] Sarah Allan, translated by Zhang Haiyan:The Way of Water and the End of Virtue: The Original Metaphor of Early Chinese Philosophical Thought (Commercial Press, China 2012),p.1-247.

[4] Sarah Allan, translated by Cai Yuqian: Annihilated Ideas: The Legend of Zen Mandate and Ideal Constitutionalism in Unearthed Bamboo Slips (Commercial Press, China 2016),p.1-394.

[5] Laozi,translated by An Lun: Tao Te Ching (Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, China 2021), p. 33.

[6] Laozi,translated by An Lun: Tao Te Ching (Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, China 2021), p.89.

[7] Laozi,translated by An Lun: Tao Te Ching (Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, China 2021), p.119.

[8] Sarah Allan, translated by Zhang Haiyan:The Way of Water and the End of Virtue: The Original Metaphor of Early Chinese Philosophical Thought (Commercial Press, China 2012),p.176.

[9] Sarah Allan and Xing Wen: Studies on Newly Emerged Simplified Palms(Cultural Relics Press, China 2004), p.227.

[10] Jingmen Museum: Bamboo Slips from the Chu Tomb in Kuodian (Cultural Relics Press, China 1998),p.121.

[11] Jingmen Museum: Bamboo Slips from the Chu Tomb in Kuodian (Cultural Relics Press, China 1998),p.112.

ISSN: 2688-8653

[12] Jingmen Museum: Bamboo Slips from the Chu Tomb in Kuodian (Cultural Relics Press, China 1998),p.125.

[13] Laozi,translated translated by Jin Yong and Hu Xiao:Tao Te Ching (Chongwen Bookstore,China 2003),p.3.