

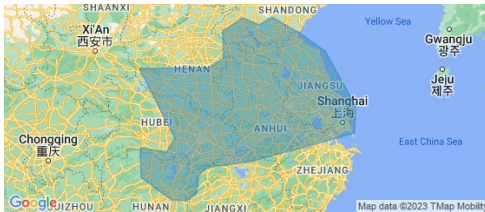
Heng xian 恆先

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Entry tags: Yellow and Yangzi Rivers Region, Early Chinese text, Cosmogony, Excavated text, Cosmology, Text, Daoist text, Daoism, Early Chinese Traditions, Chinese Religion, Religious Group

The Heng Xian 恆先 (Before Constancy) is a looted bamboo manuscript acquired by the Shanghai Museum from the Hong Kong Antiquities Market in 1994. The manuscript has been dated by archaeologists around the 300 BCE and it is deemed as an original Chu 楚 state text. The text, consisting of 13 bamboo slips, has been reconstructed by scholars from a total of around 1200 bamboo slips acquired from the same market. The first edition of the text has been published in 2003 by the paleographer Li Ling 李零. Since then, the manuscript has been analyzed by many scholars, yet there is still no consensus among them regarding the arrangement of the slips. It is even possible that part of the original text is missing: in fact, some passages that are linguistically unusual or odd in content might be the result of an erroneous assembling of the slips. Most of the thirteen bamboo slips in the Shanghai Museum's possession are intact, yet some characters are corrupted and hardly legible, while some others can be possibly read in more than one way, posing further difficulties for the understanding of the text. The title "Heng Xian" appears on the back of the third slip with the writing 𠄎, the ancient form for 恆. The character heng 恆, as defined in the Shuowen Jiezi 說文解字, means "constancy" (恆, 常也), originally related to the constancy of lunar phases (Shuowen Jiezi on 𠄎: 古文 恆, 从月). The phrasing Heng xian 恆先, as it emerges from the text, appears to indicate a state of emptiness and stillness preceding the constancy that characterizes the workings of nature. Along the lines of this understanding of the manuscript, Sixin Ding equates the concept of Heng with the tiandao 天道 (Way of Heaven). The text can be summarily divided into two halves, with significant variations in content: the first half is a cosmogonic account in which material reality comes into being starting from a state of absence of being; the second half is concerned with human affairs that should always be conducted in accord with the tiandao. The cosmogony presented in the first half of the Heng Xian recalls Daoist cosmological thinking, since it describes the arising of reality from an original state of wuyou 無有 (non-being). This primordial state is defined as pu 樸 (simple), jing 靜 (quiet), and xu 虛 (empty). The cosmogonic process is initially set in motion by the arising of yu 域 (space, boundary), originally written on bamboo as huo 或, followed by qi 氣, defined in the text as self-generating (zi sheng 自生) and self-arising (zi zuo 自作), you 有 (being), shi 始 (beginning), and wang 往 (direction). The text proceeds with the description of the coming into being of the sky and the earth: turbid qi (濁氣) forms the earth, while clear qi (清氣) forms the sky, thereby setting up the space for the various things to reproduce. In the second half of the manuscript, the topic changes considerably. From strictly cosmogonic matters, the text moves to human and linguistic matters. First, humans are identified as the cause of the disorder on earth. The text reads: 先者有善, 有治無亂. 有人 焉有不善, 亂出於人, "formerly there was good, order, and no chaos. Once there were humans, there was non-good, chaos comes from humans." Subsequently, the manuscript focuses on the mechanisms of reproduction (fu 復) of things and on the origins of names (ming 名). Fu 復 is most commonly intended in the meaning of "returning", as for example it its occurrences in the Daodejing 道德經. Yet, in this context, the idea of "repetition" implied by the verb fu seems to be more properly connected to the reproduction of things within the cosmogonic process. In fact, the manuscript does not only give a definition of fu as the process of generation of life (復, 生之生行), it also states that only fu is the means to avoid dying out (唯復以不廢). With regard to the names, they are said to be established emptily (xu shu 虛樹) to become unchanging (bu ke gai 不可改) only via usual practice (xi 習). Names in the text also appear to be subject to a cosmogonic process: they are said to come from speech, while services in turn come from names (名出於言, 事出於名). The discourse on names, and especially their relationship with the objects to which they refer, was particularly lively during the Warring States (475-221 BCE), especially among the thinkers of the Ming jia 名家 (School of Names) and later Mohists. Slip 13 directly involves the enlightened ruling elite (ming wang 明王, ming jun 明

君, ming shi 明士) that should be knowledgeable of the cosmology described in the manuscript and, consequently, manage human affairs so to conform them to the “constancy” of the natural proceedings. The manuscript represents one of the earliest testimony on cosmogonic origins from Warring States China. With its detailed account on the transition from an undifferentiated primeval state to the multifaceted reality of the variety of things (cai wu 彩物) through a process of self-generation and self-arising, it provides a crucial insight for the understanding of the cosmogonic thought of ancient China. In particular, the Heng Xian does not only refer to terms prevalent in the cosmogonic debate of the time (such as qi 氣, you/wuyou 有/無有, etc.), but it also incorporates less common categories (such as yu 域 and wang 往) that contribute to making this manuscript distinctive.



Date Range: 400 BCE - 300 BCE

Region: Chu State

Region tags: Asia, East Asia

The southern state of Chu 楚 around the 4th century BCE (Warring States China)

Status of Readership:

✓ Elite

Sources and Corpora

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Ma, Chengyuan (ed.). Shanghai Bowuguan Cang Zhanguo Chu Zhushu 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書 vol.3. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <http://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/manuscript/index.php/manuscripts/view/353>
- Source 1 Description: Manuscripts Database of the Institute of Chinese Studies of the University of Heidelberg

General Variables

Materiality

Methods of Composition

– Written



Inked

– with Ink

Medium upon which the text is written/incised

— Bamboo

Notes: The text is written on 13 bamboo slips (for a total of 512 graphs), acquired by the Shanghai Museum from the Hong Kong Antiquities Market in 1994, together with a total of circa 1200 bamboo slips, dated around the 300 BCE. Scholars are still not sure about the arrangement of the slips, and it is possible that there are one or more slips missing. The title of the manuscript, Heng Xian 恆先, is written on the back of the third bamboo slip. The length of the slips is around 39.4 cm.

Was the material modified before the writing or incising process?

— Other [specify]: Field doesn't know.

Was the text modified before the writing or incising process?

— Other [specify]: Field doesn't know.

Location

Is the text stored in a specific location?

[Note at which point in time, for reference, if known; select all that apply]

— Yes

↳ Tomb

— Yes

Notes: The Heng Xian 恆先 is a looted manuscript, presumably robbed from a Chu 楚 tomb, but we have no precise information about its provenance.

↳ Cemetery

— Field doesn't know

Notes: If the manuscript was indeed excavated from a tomb, that tomb possibly was part of a cemetery area, but unfortunately, we have no precise information about that.

↳ Temple

— No

↳ Shrine

— No

↳ Altar

— No

↳ Devotional marker

– No

↳ Cenotaph

– No

↳ Church

– No

↳ Mosque

– No

↳ Synagogue

– No

↳ Triumphal Arch

– No

↳ Monument

– No

↳ Mass Gathering Point

– No

↳ Cave(s)

– No

↳ Hilltops

– No

↳ Other natural sanctuaries

– No

↳ Boundary markers or lines

– No

↳ Domestic contexts

– No

↳ Library/archive

– No

↳ Specify

– Specify: The manuscript is looted, most probably from a tomb, and is now stored at the Shanghai Museum that acquired it from the Hong Kong Antiquities Market in 1994.

Is the location where the text stored accompanied by iconography or images?

– Field doesn't know

Notes: We do not know the original location.

Is the area where the text is stored accompanied by an-iconic images?

– Field doesn't know

Notes: We do not know the original location.

Production & Intended Audience

Production

Is the production of the text funded by the polity?

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Since the provenance of the manuscript is unknown, it impossible to answer questions regarding the production of the text.

Is the text considered official religious scripture?

– No

Notes: Although we do not have information regarding the manuscript's provenance and original use, the text does not appear as an official religious scripture. It has been acquired together with a large number of bamboo slips on different topics, presumably robbed from the same tomb and originally part of a larger debate on cosmogony and various other subjects.

Written in distinctly religious/sacred language?

– No

Intended Audience

What is the estimated number of people considered to be the audience of the text

This should be the total number of people who would serve as the intended audience for the text.

— Field doesn't know

Notes: The Heng Xian 恒先 was most probably only accessible to the educated elite.

Does the Religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members?

— Field doesn't know

Are there clear reformist movements?

(Reformism, as in not proselytizing to potential new conservative, but "conversion" - or rather, reform - to the "correct interpretation"?)

— No

Is the text in question employed in ritual practice?

— Field doesn't know

Is there material significance to the text?

— Field doesn't know

Context and Content of the Text (Beliefs and Practices)

Context

Is the text itself accompanied by art?

— No

Are there multiple versions of the text?

— No

Is the text part of a collection of texts?

— Yes

Notes: The Heng Xian 恒先 is part of a collection of around 1200 bamboo slips acquired by the Shanghai Museum in 1994 from the Hong Kong Antiquities Market. Scholarship is inclined to think that these manuscripts were buried together in the same tomb, but, unfortunately, being looted, it cannot be known for sure.



Is there a sense of canonization?

— Field doesn't know

- ↳ Is the text part of a series of volumes?
– Field doesn't know

If the text is not explicitly scripture, is it part of another important literary tradition?

– Yes

- ↳ Cultural with religious implications?

– Yes

Notes: The text is part of a larger discussion on cosmogonic issues that characterized the philosophical debate during the Warring States period, and in particular, it aligns with cosmogonic and cosmological ideas that we find in the Laozi: e.g., the origin of material existence starting from a state of non-being; qi 氣 as the first substance that separates into clear and turbid qi to form the sky and the earth.

- ↳ Behavioral literature?

– Yes

Notes: The text asserts that both non-good and chaos arise from humans and that human affairs should be brought forth modelling on the "constancy" of nature.

- ↳ Other

– Other [specify]: The Heng Xian 恆先 is part of a larger debate on cosmogony and cosmology

Content

Is the text - or does the text include - a ritual list, manual, bibliography, index, or vocabulary?
(Select all that apply)

– Other [specify]: None.

Are there lineages or a single lineage established by the text?

– No

Does the text express a formal legal code?

– No

Formulating a specifically religious calendar?

– No

Beliefs

Is a spirit-body distinction present in the text?

— No

Is belief in an afterlife indicated in the text?

— No

Is belief in reincarnation in this world specified in the text?

— No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses dicated in the text?

— No

Does the text indicate if co-sacrifices should be present in burials?

— No

Does the text specify grave goods for burial?

— No

Are formal burials present in the text?

— No

Are there practices that have funerary associations presented in the text?

— No

Are supernatural beings present in the text?

— No

Notes: The text elucidates a cosmogonic process that develops starting from an original state of non-being (defined as still, empty, and quiet) and this original source might have been the object of religious cults. Tian 天 (sky) does also appear in the text, but, rather than as a god, it essentially appears in its naturalistic sense. In its first occurrence, it is paired with 地 (earth): sky is formed by clear qi, while earth is formed by turbid qi, and together they provide the setting for things to multiply and flourish. Furthermore, in slip 5, the manuscript refers to tian xing 天行: in pre-Qin and early imperial texts, the verb xing 行, meaning to “proceed”, is often employed to define the motion of the sun and other celestial bodies, and here might refer to the apparent rotation of the day and night sky.

Previously human spirits are present

— No

Non-human supernatural beings are present

– No

Does the text attest to a pantheon of supernatural beings?

– No

Are mixed human-divine beings present according to the text?

– No

Is there a supernatural being that is physically present in the/as a result of the text?

– No

Are other categories of beings present?

– Other [specify]: None.

Notes: The text mentions a series of natural entities, such as the sky (tian 天), the earth (di 地), etc., but it refers to them in their naturalistic acceptance, without characterizing them from a religious perspective.

Does the text guide divination practices?

– No

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present in the text?

– No

Notes: In the Heng Xian, no supernatural monitoring seems to be present, yet there is a sense of a normative framework. In fact, based on the second half of the text, humans, who are identified as the source of non-good and disorder in the world, should accord their behaviour to heng 恆.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment in the text?

– No

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards in the text?

– No

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present in the text?

– No

Is an eschatology present in the text?

– No

Norms & Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the text?

– No

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious text?

– Yes

Notes: The cosmic structure described in the Heng Xian is defined as originally good and devoid of disorder. Human beings are deemed to be the source of non-good and disorder in the world (先者有善, 有治無亂; 有人焉有不善, 亂出於人). For this reason, according to the manuscript, humans should accord their activities and actions to the cosmic patterns.



What is the nature of this distinction?

– Present (but not emphasized)



Are specifically moral norms prescribed by the text?

– No



Moral norms apply to (select all that apply)

– All individuals (any time period)

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the text?

– No

Advocacy of Practices

Does the text require celibacy (full sexual abstinence)?

– No

Does the text require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence)?

– No

Does the text require castration?

– No

Does the text require fasting?

– No

Does the text require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods)?

– No

Does the text require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations?

– No

Does the text require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of adults?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of children?

– No

Does the text require self-sacrifice (suicide)?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of property/valuable items?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of time (e.g. attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.)?

– No

Does the text require physical risk taking?

– No

Does the text require accepting ethical precepts?

– No

Does the text require marginalization by out-group members?

– No

Does the text require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household)?

– No

Does the text require participation in large-scale rituals?

– No

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present as indicated in the text?

– No

Does the text employ fictive kinship terminology?

– No

Does the text include elements that are intended to be entertaining?

– No

Does the text specify sacrifices, offerings, and maintenance of a sacred space?

– No

Institutions & Production Environment of Text

Society & Institutions

Society of religious group that produced the text is best characterized as:

– A state

Notes: The Heng Xian 恆先 was produced around the 300 BCE, during the Warring States period, in the state of Chu 楚.

Are there specific elements of society that have controlled the reproduction of the text?

– Other

Notes: Due to the unknown provenance of the text, we have no information regarding the control over the reproduction of the text.

Are there specific elements of society involved with the destruction of the text?

– Other

Notes: Due to the unknown provenance of the text, we have no information regarding the control over

the destruction of the text.

Welfare

Does the text specify institutionalized famine relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized poverty relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized care for elderly & infirm?

– No

Other forms of welfare?

– No

Education

Are there formal educational institutions available for teaching the text?

– Field doesn't know

Are there formal educational institutions specified according to the text?

– No

Does the text make provisions for non-religious education?

– No

Does the text restrict education to religious professionals?

– No

Does the text restrict education among religious professionals?

– No

Is education gendered according to the text?

– No

Is education gendered with respect to this text and larger textual tradition?

– Yes

Notes: Education in China has been primarily restricted to males for centuries.

Does the text specify teaching relationships or ratios? (i.e.: 1:20; 1:1)

– No

Are there specific relationships to teachers that are advocated by the text?

– No

Are there worldly rewards/benefits to education according to the text specified by the text itself?

– No

Bureaucracy

Is bureaucracy regulated by this text?

– No

Public Works

Does the text detail interaction with public works?

– No

Taxation

Does the text specify forms of taxation?

– No

Warfare

Does the text mention warfare?

– No

Food Production

Does the text mentioned food production/disbursement?

– No

Bibliography

General References

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