

In the Fields of Shennong

*An inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Cambridge on 30 September 2008
to mark the establishment of the Joseph Needham Professorship of Chinese History,
Science and Civilization.*

by

ROEL STERCKX

Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues, friends,

I

In a letter dated 11 October 1886 addressed to the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge, Sir Thomas Wade, who had just pledged his collection of over four thousand Chinese volumes to the University Library, writes that it had been suggested to him “that the University of Cambridge might be induced to found a Chinese professorship, which [he] might possibly be asked to hold.” Wade, who had spent nearly forty years in China as interpreter and diplomat, was rightfully cautious about the prospects that a Chair in Chinese would be established at Cambridge. He was after all nearly seventy on his return to Britain. “The idea”, he writes, “was not indeed absolutely rejected. On the other hand the encouragement given it was very slight.” Wade continues his letter by stating that since little progress had been made, “it had been thought possible that I might be willing to discharge the duties of Chinese Professor without a salary.”¹ Two years later, on 21 April 1888, Sir Thomas Wade, who as a young man had been withdrawn from Trinity College and sent to the army by his father sensing the unsuitability of his son for academic enterprise, was elected the first Professor of Chinese in the University of Cambridge. He did not draw a salary, nor did his successor Herbert Giles until two years into his appointment.

In those days the odds of introducing to the academy what Wade referred to as the “Res Sinica” were extremely small. It took Giles until 1903 before Chinese was fully recognised as a subject for Tripos examination.² The aspirations of those pioneers to put the study of the Chinese language on a university curriculum were not helped by the fact that, unlike many of their contemporaries in the academy, they were considered “Old China hands” who had acquired their knowledge about China not in the secluded corners

¹ Charles Aylmer, “Sir Thomas Wade and the Centenary of Chinese Studies at Cambridge (1888-1988)”, *Hanxue yanjiu* 7.2 (1989), pp.408-409. For accounts of the history of Chinese Studies at Cambridge see David D.L. McMullen, “Chinese Studies at Cambridge: Wide-Ranging Scholarship from a Doubtful Start,” *The Magazine of the Cambridge Society* 37 (1995-96), pp.62-66; Que Weimin 關維民, “Jianqiao Han xue de xingcheng yu fazhan” 劍橋漢學的形成與發展, *Hanxue yanjiu tongxun* 21.1 (2002), pp.31-43; and Fu Yong 傅勇, “Jianqiao Han xue guankui” 劍橋漢學管窺, *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* (2004), pp.148-151.

² Charles Aylmer, “The Memoirs of H.A. Giles,” *East Asian History* 13-14 (1997), p.43.

of a library but by long years of service in the field.³ And while the latter may explain why some of their scholarly methods can appear rather cavalier to us today, their status as outcasts within the University community stood in shrill contrast with the reputation their names would ultimately acquire in the history of Chinese studies: Wade and Giles lent their names to the romanisation system of the Chinese language that would set the standard in Western sinological publication until the 1980s.

Sixty years later –corresponding, incidentally, exactly to one full cycle in Chinese calendrical numerology-- in a letter dated 22 May 1948, Joseph Needham, an accomplished biochemist, ventured a letter to Cambridge University Press proposing a project entitled “Science and Civilisation in China”. It would be addressed, “not to sinologists, nor to the general public, but to all educated people, whether scientists or not, who are interested in the history of science, scientific thought, and technology, in relation to the general history of civilisation, and especially the comparative development of Asia and Europe.”⁴ Needham promised to tell his story in one large volume, a thought which today, twenty-four long volumes later, might cause a grin on the faces of some Syndics at the Press. Needham’s interest in China was not uncontroversial among his contemporaries but it was firmly acknowledged, and not before long he was relieved from the cumbersome task of teaching or supervising in the department of biochemistry and allowed to retire to his college (a prospect some of us here today might envy indeed). There he could dedicate himself full-time to the task of studying and writing about China, a China he first discovered through his love for a young Chinese scientist who came to work with him in Cambridge and his mission as head of the Sino-British Science Co-operation Office in war-torn China.

By now, dear guests, it will be clear that the men who made Cambridge sinology great were men who arrived at the study of China through unusual and often difficult paths. There are others of course, not in the least Michael Loewe who is present here today and whom I salute. Yet these men have left an indelible Cambridge imprint on the field of Chinese Studies and, today, their names and writings are part of the vocabulary of anyone with a scholarly interest in China, in East or West. And so today, incidentally again exactly one full calendrical cycle of sixty years on from the day Needham wrote his letter, we have reasons for a double celebration. Not only is the chair, which I currently have the honour to occupy, now fully endowed in perpetuity but it also will forever be associated with the name of a scholar whose monumental contributions to the field have put China firmly on the map of Cambridge and made Cambridge known to the Chinese world at large. For this we sincerely thank our benefactors, whose generosity will bear fruits for Chinese studies at Cambridge for generations to come.

Times have changed since Wade, Giles or Needham took up the brush. I am relieved to report that today the Professor of Chinese does draw a salary but, more

³ When Giles was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1897 by the University of Aberdeen in recognition for contributions to Chinese scholarship, he was keen to point out in his memoirs that this was the proverbial exception: “Now had I edited a Greek play, or even discussed the value of ‘πρός’ as an adverb, there is no academic height, however dizzy, to which I might not have risen. “The Memoirs of H.A. Giles,” p.37.

⁴ Simon Winchester, *The Man who loved China* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), pp.170-173.

importantly, the world in which the sinologist works has changed beyond recognition. Stereotypes one might have encountered around some Cambridge high tables as late as the 1950s, so one of my distinguished predecessors notes in his inaugural, of “China as the land where everything is upside down or back to front” and where the men “talk in sing-song”, have luckily waned.⁵

Those who cross the Cam through King’s College today are treated to a white marble stone quoting a verse in Chinese from a poem by Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897-1931), the young romantic who came to study here in the early twenties and writes of Cambridge 康橋 as his “hard to come by friend” (你是我難得的知己).⁶ [The fellows at King’s now also tell tourists to keep off the grass in Chinese]. We celebrate the endowment of this Chair just weeks after China took centre stage as host of the Olympic Games, just months after the British Museum drew one of the largest crowds of visitors in its history to an exhibition on China’s First Emperor,⁷ and we speak at a time when China provides more students to this university than any country other than the UK.⁸

The public demand for knowledge about China is rising so rapidly that a scholarly dedication by self-funded enthusiasts (of whom some, luckily, remain) no longer suffices. Today, the academic study of China has turned, more than ever, into a full-time profession to which students of my generation, unlike many of my teachers, have had the privilege of being trained in full-time and full-subject degree programs surrounded by life-saving reference works that were produced by the pioneers of whom I just spoke.

At Cambridge, the sinologist is no longer the lone scholar whose knowledge about China is expected to range from the prosody of Tang poetry to urban planning in contemporary Shanghai. He, and I am glad to report, she, is now surrounded by expert colleagues who each in their own way carve up our knowledge about China into more identifiable units. Linguists, literary scholars and historians now can test their hypotheses against work conducted by social scientists. We travel to each other’s libraries while electronic libraries and databases travel the wireless to come and find us. The texts Wade once donated to the Library (and that Giles hoped he would have catalogued) will soon be electronically available and searchable by character.⁹

⁵ “Chinese History and World History” An Inaugural Lecture by E.G. Pulleyblank, Professor of Chinese in the University of Cambridge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955, p.5.

⁶ In “Kang Qiao zai hui ba” 康橋再會吧. On Xu Zhimo’s sojourn in Cambridge see Liu Hongtao 劉洪濤, *Xu Zhimo yu Jianqiao daxue* 徐志摩與劍橋大學 (Taipei: Jiwei zixun chubanshe, 2007).

⁷ “The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army”, ran from 13 September 2007 to 6 April 2008 and drew over 850,000 visitors. For a catalogue of the exhibit see Jane Portal, *The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army* (London: British Museum Press, 2007).

⁸ According to the *University Reporter* 138.9 (22 January 2008) (Special Issue, Student Numbers 2006-2007), p.23, there were 702 PRC undergraduates and postgraduates in total registered in full-time degree courses, 69 students from Taiwan, 61 from Hong Kong, and 151 from Singapore.

⁹ There appears to have been little love lost between Wade and Giles. Giles’s sentiments are clear from the comments he scribbles on a laudatory review of Wade’s *Yu yan zi er ji* 語言自邇集 that appeared in the *China Review* (XVI, XX). The review is glued inside the cover of Giles’ personal copy of *Yu yan zi er ji* (published in 1886) which I currently hold in custodianship. On it Giles writes: “One story is good until another is told. He [i.e. Wade] never did a stroke beyond a foolishly pedantic lecture on Chinese history, which made him a laughing-stock. Didn’t even catalogue the books.”

Our approaches may be different, but we all share the same ambition, understanding China.

II

By now then it should be clear that the tasks ahead for China scholars are challenging. The business of understanding China has become far more complex and indeed far more interesting than the appointment of one particular professor with his or her own specific research agenda.

It would however also be a mistake to attribute new challenges simply to the rapidly expanding visibility of China in the modern world or the steady increase and availability of new source materials. New materials can inspire new directions but they do not of themselves constitute original thought.

Fascinating new developments are taking place in our understanding of the Chinese past. Yet equally fascinating is the persistence of old ideas and scholarly myths against which new findings and approaches are being tested. Nowhere is this as visible perhaps as in the study of early China to which I would like to take you now for a moment.

The classical age of Confucius, who lived in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, and the period stretching into the early empires of Qin and Han was pivotal to the socio-political and intellectual development of China. This period, which saw China gradually evolving from a confederacy of feudal states into a unified empire (221 BC), witnessed the emergence of its classical canon, its masters of philosophy, the birth of its popular and anecdotal literature, and the development of historiography, law and administrative record keeping. No doubt the emergence during this time of some of the foundational texts and philosophies that would influence Chinese civilization for centuries to come was what drew early commentators and translators to study this period, from Leibniz, to Voltaire, to James Legge.

After all, here we had a defining moment in Chinese history which, for some, conveniently ran parallel to the Classical Age of Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander the Great and ended around the time of the Late Republic and dawn of the Augustian period. It was the age in which the written word had aggregated into what appeared as a set of authoritative and finite classics. It was a time when models of imperial sovereignty and empire were conceived that would serve as the *passepartout* to understand China's political fate into the early 20th century. And all of this was alleged to happen against the background of an intellectual landscape of great philosophers –Confucians, Daoists, Legalists, Mohists etc.- that could be conveniently carved up into neat “schools” of masters and disciples.

Yet such apparent similarities on the surface combined with a Chinese historiographical canon driven by the imperial center also fostered some persisting myths

about Chinese civilization that survive until today. I would like to share a few thoughts on some of these and one cultural hero of Chinese antiquity will help me get started; that is Shennong 神農 -- the Divine Husbandman or First Agriculturalist.

In classical literature down to the 2nd century BC Shennong is portrayed as the head of a de-centralized empire of tiny fiefdoms, who tills the fields with his own hands and reigns in universal peace without ministers, laws or punishments. In political mythology he emerges as one of the adversaries of the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 and mythic opposition to the idea of rule through military power and punishments.¹⁰ Together with Fuxi 伏羲, the legendary inventor of the Chinese script, to which I will return later in this lecture, he appears as an exemplary teacher who rules without words and holds audience without being seen. For the philosophers Shennong embodies the ideal of a quasi-anarchistic, primitivist utopian community based on agriculture.¹¹ For the toiling farmers in the fields he is a spirit to be worshipped with sacrifices in harvest times and during an annual plowing ceremony.¹²

Shennong lays claim to other achievements in addition to his role as a patron of agriculture. In the medical tradition, he holds a stake as the legendary father of pharmacological experimentation: he tastes the flavors of every single plant and in teaching the people how to avoid eating certain things he, very graciously, poisons himself seventy times in one day.¹³ In Han iconography, as is shown on your invitation to this lecture, we find Shennong depicted working the fields while pushing a forked digging stick which in turn puts him on a pedestal as the father of agricultural technology. To add to his multiple incarnations he is also credited with founding the market, which, according to the “Great Treatise” appended to the Book of Changes he organized at midday, assembling together all people and goods under Heaven so that the people could exchange what they had for what they lacked and retire, each obtaining his/her place in society.¹⁴

I shall stop piling even more talents onto the Divine Husbandman, for, by now, I hope it will be clear that, in these origin narratives, the figure of Shennong represents a complex variety of achievements and civilizing acts, from high political philosophy to the invention of animal fertilizers. Yet if we were to confine our search to understand the

¹⁰ Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp.174-179; Michael J. Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.182-185.

¹¹ Angus Graham, "The Nung-Chia 'School of the Tillers'" in Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (rpt. Taipei, 1986), pp. 67-110

¹² Hubei sheng Jingzhou shi Zhou Liangyuqiao yizhi bowuguan, *Guanju Qin Han jian jiandu* 關沮秦漢簡牘 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 132, plates of the strips (no. 347 through 353) on pp. 51-52; Hu Pingsheng 胡平生 and Li Tianhong 李天虹, *Changjiang liuyu chutu jiandu yu yanjiu* 長江流域出土簡牘與研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), pp.303-304.

¹³ Liu Wendian 劉文典 ed., *Huainanzi honglie jijie* 淮南子鴻烈集解 (Taipei: Wenshizhe, 1992), 19.630; Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: an Introduction* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 49. See also Paul Unschuld, *Medicine in China: A History of Pharmaceutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 11-16, 132.

¹⁴ *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 (Shisan jing zhushu ed.), 8.5a (“Xici, xia”).

multidimensional and complex manifestations of a figure such as Shennong to the master narrative in the imperial canon, we are unlikely to be treated to such a multiplicity of images. The same could be said for many other sages or cultural heroes in Chinese antiquity for that matter. My point is that the example of the First Agriculturalist – and I could have chosen a host of other examples – throws into doubt aspirations to explain traditional China as a story of unquestionable unities, images that carry only one meaning, uninterrupted continuities, and canonical certainties. Often our ancient Chinese protagonists are said to represent *either this* ideal or virtue, *or that* tradition and intellectual affiliation; our texts are alleged to speak with one voice and not infrequently they are presented as if they do so unchangeably and for everyone at all levels of society, in all the languages of China, through the centuries and across all territories of geographical “China”.

The first of these assumptions I would like to revisit is the notion that the land of the Divine Husbandman, was a land of farmers only, an image that has been periodically reinforced throughout Chinese history, not in the least during the Mao years. One version of this theme is the claim that in traditional -- quote “Confucian” -- society the professions were neatly conceived of in a hierarchy that put scholars and farmers on top of a morally productive society as its brains and sweat while relegating craftsmen and merchants and all those engaging in wealth creation through means other than agriculture to the branches of society. With agriculture comes the ideal of the perfectly balanced society which, to borrow an image from Mencius (1B.5), consists of communities that can be delineated proceeding from an agricultural grid in the shape of the Chinese graph for a well (*jing* 井), where all family units work together in harmony to cultivate one communal plot for public need. And to this then are regularly adduced passages in the literature that condemn the act of seeking profit, question the morality of the market exchange, and praise the past for its mercantile simplicity.

Now nobody can deny the central role agriculture occupies in the arguments of early China’s masters of philosophy or indeed be blind to its economic reality in the fields of ancient China and China today. Yet anybody walking down a main street of an average town in China be it in imperial times or indeed today might be puzzled by some textbook claims that Confucian thought is somehow intrinsically opposed to the notion of trade and enterprise. How does a society which, throughout most of its philosophical, political and religious discourse, appears to value ideals such as frugality, eremitism, abstention, and material altruism, at the same time present itself as a community in which virtually every social, political and religious transaction involves the exchange of goods, whether it be sacrificial bronzes in early China, merit money in late imperial China, or hospitality gifts in business today? Is the canonical basis for such claims unquestionable?

You can guess what my answer would be. But as it would take up all night I will limit myself here to presenting one among several counter narratives that give a different take on the issue. This one, ironically, deals with one of Confucius’ most famous disciples, Zi Gong 子貢. He stands out among Confucius’s disciples in that he is able to spot the potential for moral action without declining the material benefits that come with them (an ideal advocated in many passages throughout the *Analects*). So it is Zi Gong

who advises Confucius (*Analects* 3.17) to abolish an antiquated sacrifice to announce the beginning of the month implying that such things are a waste of resources. It is also Zi Gong who (in *Analects* 9.13) forces Confucius to compare himself to a precious piece of jade, ready to be sold if the price is right. In a biography compiled by the Han historiographer Sima Qian 司馬遷, Zi Gong's occupation as a merchant is directly linked to the export of Confucius's ideas: first he studies with Confucius, next by "by buying up, storing, and selling various goods" he becomes the richest among his disciples. While other disciples live in dire straits Zi Gong rides about with a team of four horses attended by a mounted retinue, bearing gifts of bundles of silk to be presented to the feudal lords who all welcome his presence.¹⁵

The historiographer in this case concludes that it was due to Zi Gong's efforts that Confucius's fame was spread over the empire. And so in *this* narrative at least Confucius's ideas appear to be most successfully marketed through the intermediary of his most successful merchant disciple. And it seems that in all this our merchant-disciple does not sell himself short in the Olympics of virtue: he builds an extra hut on Confucius's burial ground and mourns his master on his own for an extra three years [as Mencius (3A.4) is keen to point out].

What this reading suggests then is that the mercantile metaphor is not alien to the Confucius figure and if Confucian thought was indeed an ideology that sought to relegate merchants to the lower ranks of society because of their non-productivity, it sits, perhaps, rather uncomfortably with the idea that it was spread across the empire with the help of a disciple-turned-merchant.

From the myth of agriculture allow me to move on to another problematic assumption, namely, that the harmoniously labouring farmers on Shennong's fields lived in perpetual harmony and concord with their natural environment. Traditional China, according to this view, offers an alternative framework to Western environmental ethics since its relationships between human beings and the environment are less characterised by an emphasis on the domination and utilisation of nature.¹⁶

It is encouraging to see that environmental historians invoke the denuded slopes of Ox Mountain in the Mencius (6A.8) to bring China into that evolving narrative of how humans have interacted with their natural environments.¹⁷ Or likewise that animal rights folk lift another story from that classic text to serve their arguments. This is a scene in which a king abolishes the blood consecration of a ritual bell because he couldn't bear the sight of the shivering sacrificial ox (overlooked here is that, at the end of the story, the same king decides to slaughter a sheep instead)(*Mencius* 1A.7).

¹⁵ Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian, Han Dynasty II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, rev. ed.), pp. 433-54.

¹⁶ See e.g. See Mary E. Tucker and John Berthrong eds., *Confucianism and Ecology: the interrelations of heaven, earth, and humans* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 1998); and Norman J. Girardot, James Miller and Liu Xiaogan eds., *Daoism and Ecology: ways within a cosmic landscape* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2001).

¹⁷ See e.g. J. Donald Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), pp.21-24.

Yet physical and historical evidence also suggests that for all its Daoist hermits in mountains and eulogizing landscape poems and literati paintings, the early Chinese were also acutely aware of the hardships natural environments exerted on human communities. Environmental degradation resulting from human activity and potential remedies to redress these are documented in sources as diverse as Qin dynasty law and late imperial gazetteers. Droughts, famines, floods, and epidemics run as a leitmotiv through the written record of philosophers, technocrats, court memorials and cosmological treatises, poetry and medical works. Often the same texts that invoke utopian models of society in which humans live in balance and seasonal harmony with their surrounding fauna and flora also contain hard references to the disasters and hardships that nature causes and that are the result of human activity.

This is a fascinating story that has yet to be written in full and one in which historians, scholars of texts and scientists should be able to make great advances. Recent studies suggest that the period from the 5th century BC to the end of the Han dynasty in the middle Yangzi region alone already saw noticeable shifts in humidity levels as well as average temperature variations.¹⁸ Chinese scholars have estimated, based on written records, that during the less than four centuries of the Six Dynasties period (early third to late 6th centuries AD) China was plagued by natural disasters and epidemics at a frequency rate of 21%, that is, roughly once every four years and seven months. Not coincidentally, such frequencies vary depending on political stability.¹⁹

It is easy to reduce such conclusions to statistical accounts while overlooking the human stories that are often hidden behind dry court memorials and official records. Yet these are the stories that need to be unmasked. One such tragic story from the early second century BC I will share with you here. This is a particularly moving case since it is told from the perspective of a young boy who was kidnapped at the age of four or five from a poor family and sold into slavery from one master to another until he ended up working for a private iron industrialist near Luoyang in present-day Henan. Having cleared a hillside of its trees to provide charcoal for the iron furnaces, one night, while he and his fellow slaves were sleeping, the entire mountainside collapsed burying over one hundred men and boys alive.²⁰

Now one could choose to seek refuge in the Chinese classics and in edifying parables of Mencius's Ox Mountain or that of the Daoist Zhuangzi who reminds us that it is better to be a twisted and ugly tree than a straight and handsome one since the latter

¹⁸ Chen Yexin 陈业新, "Zhanguo Qin Han shiqi changjiang zhongyou diqu qihou qingkuang yanjiu" 战国秦汉时期长江中游地区气候情况研究, *Zhongguo lishi dili luncong* 22.1 (2007), 5-16. See also Chen Yexin 陈业新, *Zaihai yu liang Han shehui yanjiu* 灾害与两汉社会研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2004).

¹⁹ Gong Shengsheng 龚胜生 and Ye Huping 叶护平, "Wei Jin Nanbei chao shiqi yizai shi kong fenbu guilü yanjiu" 魏晋南北朝时期疫灾时空分布规律研究, *Zhongguo lishi dili luncong* 22.3 (2007), 5-20.

²⁰ *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 49.1973; Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, *Artisans in Early Imperial China* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2007), p.99.

runs more risk of being chopped down.²¹ Joseph Needham has drawn our attention to the importance of understanding the technology of the furnace, its iron and steel. But it is this young boy's account that may provide the best witness to the reality of deforestation and the hardships suffered by those who laboured the fields of Shennong. And this, I hope, will also be part of the story.

Those who have turned the soil in the fields of Shennong have sparked a truly spectacular revolution in our understanding of the Chinese past. Scholars who until three decades ago expressed the hope that early China's textual and archaeological corpus was largely described and that hence philology and text critical labour could conveniently be shelved to make place for great ideas, have been mistaken. Indeed one of the most poignant examples of how China's present has prompted a radical re-examination of its past stems from, one might say, a certain degree of mechanical contingency. Rapid modernization and construction work across China has unveiled a constantly increasing corpus of newly excavated manuscripts on silk and bamboo, new tombs, and new artifacts that will require doctoral dissertations for generations to come.

The list of all types of new materials recovered over the past four decades is too long to be reviewed here. Written materials alone include Shang oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, legal documents, administrative records, mantic materials, calendars, medical texts, philosophical texts, poetry, funerary inscriptions, commentarial materials to cooking books. The sheer volume of this continuing flood of new texts and objects from archaeological excavations is startling and their importance in testing the transmitted canon is invaluable. The impact of these new discoveries touch on all aspects of our work: from the edition of texts, to the interpretation of hitherto unseen pictorial motives, to our knowledge of daily life. Fit to this evening's theme, you will be glad to know that only very recently, among a cache of no less than 37,000 bamboo and wooden documents found in well in the town of Liye 里耶 (Longshan 龍山 district, Hunan; dated between 222 and 208 BC), storage records have been found for sacrificial offerings including some for the cult of our Divine Husbandman!²²

Deciphering and editing these new materials so that they become available to the scholarly community at large will require fulltime specialization, if it will prove possible to remain on top of all new finds at all. Technology in the form of emerging databases offers help but it also magnifies the sheer volume of materials and of the tasks that lie ahead. Difficult choices between engaging in philology with philological intent or relying on philology as an adjunct to questions posed in other disciplines sometimes have to be made again. With every new set of materials that is uncovered, the need to train researchers who master the technical arsenal of Chinese philology (palaeography, historical linguistics, phonology and lexicography) remains pressing.

²¹ Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 ed., *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Taipei: Guanya, 1991), 20.667 ff.

²² Hunan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo ed., *Liye fajue baogao* 里耶發掘報告 (Wangcheng: Yuelu shushe, 2007), pp. 194-196. Zhang Chunlong puts together 29 fragments related to the sacrifice in the third month of the 32nd year. See "Liye Qin jian ci Xiannong, ci Yin?, he ci Di jiaojuan" 里耶秦簡祠先農, 祠嘗(?)和祠隄校券, in Wuhan Daxue jianbo yanjiu zhongxin, *Jianbo* 簡帛, vol.2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2007), 393-96.

I am reminded of the visionary comments made by a distinguished previous holder of this Chair, the late Professor Denis Twitchett, in a communication published in 1964 that carried the telling title “A Lone Cheer for Sinology”. In that piece he emphasized that schooling in philology and the techniques of textual criticism would remain “the irreducible essential in the training of a scholar who is to deal professionally with China’s past.”²³ I think Professor Twitchett was right beyond doubt and I would add too, in that spirit, that philology, text critical studies, and disciplinary engagements with sources must converse with each other. One only need to spend one morning leafing through the papers of the fourth holder of this Chair, Professor Gustav Haloun, which are held in the University Library, to be convinced that historical, philosophical, anthropological and religious synthesis in our study of China’s past need not be hampered by a Great Wall of philology but instead can be greatly strengthened by it.²⁴

The topic of philology now forces me to tread briefly on one of the most sacred grounds of China’s assumed and enduring unities and continuities, namely that of its character script. If we have learned anything from the newly excavated manuscripts that are being uncovered in distinct geographical parts across China, it is that another of our textbook claims may need to be modified: that is, the contention that the First Emperor of Qin unified the Chinese script and enforced orthographic standards upon the literate within less than two decades to be upheld and uncontested for over two thousand years until the present.

Nobody doubts that Qin instigated far reaching script reforms. Yet paleography also shows increasingly that most of the population at the time continued to use characters with variable structures. Evidence suggests that the unification of the script was more likely a gradual and repeated process which perhaps only came to completion as late as the Tang period (7-9th century).²⁵ Trawling through received texts also makes clear that, despite graphic conformities in the written language of bureaucracy, people in early China, as they are indeed today, were feeling their ways by means of oral languages and vernaculars that were regionally and at times genetically very distinct. Even the construction of linguistic identity does not appear to be a topic of great concern in our texts.²⁶ So over and above the occasional reference stating that people in the southern region of Chu speak Chu, and those of Qi in the east speak Qi, one more often finds generic expressions for unfamiliar speech that are much more akin to the “sing-song” stereotype of Cambridge high tables I referred to earlier: foreign speech in these Chinese texts is referred to as “the language of birds and beasts” 鳥獸語, “barbarian chit-chat” 夷談 or the language of folk with “twisted tongues” 反舌.

²³ *Journal of Asian Studies* 24 (1964), 110.

²⁴ For an appraisal of Professor Haloun’s contributions, see David B. Honey, *Incense at the Altar: Pioneering Sinologists and the Development of Classical Chinese Philology* (New Haven: American Oriental Series 86, 2001), pp. 152-163.

²⁵ See Imre Galambos, *Orthography of Early Chinese Writing: Evidence from Newly Excavated Manuscripts* (Budapest Monographs in East Asian Studies, vol.1, 2006).

²⁶ See Wolfgang Behr, “‘To Translate’ is ‘to exchange’ 譯者言易也 – Linguistic diversity and the terms for translation in ancient China,” in N. Vittinghoff and M. Lackner eds, *Translating Western Knowledge into Late Imperial China*, vol. 2. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), 177-178.

The unification of the Chinese character script was no doubt instrumental in the coming together of empire, and the written language continues to provide a unique linguistic glue across the Chinese world today. Yet the fact that graphic continuities in the Chinese language are singled out so prominently in our histories of China may perhaps also result from the fact that historians have tended to focus on those periods in China's long dynastic history that were marked by socio-political, cultural, and geographical unity. Such claims to continuity partly reflect the agenda of official Chinese historiography, past and present, and they overlook the fact that China's dynastic history is as much a story of political disunion and regional and linguistic diversity as it is one of concordance, harmony and synergy. Interestingly, the explosion of new text discoveries is sometimes invoked to serve similar assumptions of continuity. The argument then goes that since new discoveries have validated certain traditions handed down in received texts, and confirmed their accuracy and antiquity, therefore the imperial literary tradition ought to be believed at its word as the only true vehicle for the transmission of China's past ...

Dear audience, I hope I have convinced you that these are interesting times for the historian of China who will soon need to rely on his fellow anthropologists to understand yet another ongoing claim to continuities with the past in China. The revival and repackaging of the Confucius figure and ideas associated with him in China today is a fascinating development. We are still too much in the present to evaluate the impact of this movement.²⁷ Statues of the Master and shrines dedicated to him are springing up across campuses and towns. Study classes with running commentaries on the Classics are offered to the business community, and Beijing opened its Olympic games with an impressively choreographed act in which Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 staged hundreds of Confucius actors waiving bamboo copies of the *Analects*. Some of us may shiver at the idea that our prospective undergraduates might soon discover an interest to read Chinese by picking up from the shelves one of the many cartoon versions of the Confucian *Analects* available on the market today. I suspect that Joseph Needham would have loved the idea, not because it would force us to put cartoons on our reading lists, but because it would make it even more clear that we ought to continue teaching our students the original texts and contexts when they come up to Cambridge.

III

It is time to conclude. This evening I have offered you some examples that highlight how deeply embedded assumptions of continuity and unity can sometimes overshadow some of the complexities in our study of Chinese society. We encountered assumptions of unity in the professions in the ideal of the farmer, unity in script and language, unity and continuity between man and his natural environments, unity in historical narrative, and continuity in a textual canon. The questions and problems raised

²⁷ For a useful account see Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, "*Jiaohua*: The Confucian Revival in China as an Educative Project," *China Perspectives* 4 (2007), 4-20.

here of course will not be solved today or by me but will require the joined up efforts of many scholars.

At Cambridge we want to know about China in all its incarnations: its classics and its on-line poetry, its arts, material culture and its living languages, its writers and philosophers, its religions and its living people, in rural and urban centres, in China proper and across the Chinese diaspora. This task will require talents and ideas from across disciplines, sustained training programs, and increased human and scholarly resources equipped to keep pace with a rapidly growing presence of China in the economy of knowledge.

So, before we move on to the more convivial proceedings of the evening, allow me also to share a note of caution. For all the progress the academic study of China has made since the early days of Wade and Giles and the Needham decades, its fate in the academy also remains vulnerable.

The growing economic and political significance of China on the world stage has drawn long overdue attention to the need for our universities to study China and make it part of a general humanities curriculum. In certain corners of the academy and indeed government however this has meant that the engagement with China is limited to the science of understanding China in the contemporary world only, or of studying China's history only when and where it touches on its encounters with the West. To be sure moments of cultural contact have always drawn the attention of China scholars as can be seen in work on the advent of Buddhism in early medieval China, Jesuit and other missionary encounters in the Ming and early Qing, China's encounters with Western imperial powers from the mid-19th century onward, and indeed the contemporary wave of globalisation. It is only natural too that these fields should continue to flourish as long as they do not place China in a historical vacuum by overlooking its centuries-long documented past or by inscribing it into a narrative of world history that is one-sided.

Yet, sinologists also have the duty to study China in-between its grand moments of empire and during its times of crisis and isolation. It is equally important that we continue to examine the history, languages and literatures of China during formative stages that were hidden from Western view, or indeed during times when globalisation did not involve Europe or the modern west, but other parts of the world such as Central, Northeast and Southeast Asia. Or, indeed, during times when globalisation simply meant crossing the Yangzi river. I am struck at times how sinologists today not infrequently find themselves in trouble for expressing the aspiration that it is fine to study China, its languages and its literature for its own sake and for the sake of advancing knowledge. The latter should continue to lie at the core of the business we are in here at Cambridge. Our benefactors have strengthened me and my colleagues in our conviction that today, more than ever before, a comprehensive engagement with the Chinese humanities should occupy a lasting place in the academy. That is what Joseph Needham would have wanted, and that is an ambition we celebrate today. Thank you.