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PRINTING THE SILK MANUSCRIPTS OF MAWANGDUI FOR MAO ZEDONG

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*The excavation of some tombs dating from the Eastern Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) at Mawangdui, near Changsha in Hunan province, uncovered some of earliest manuscript of the Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing) (or book of Lao-tzu (Laozi), the major text of the Taoist school. It also uncovered many manuscripts concerning the “Cult of Laozi and the Yellow Emperor,” which had been a kind of state religion before the official canonization of Confucianism around 150 BC. The manuscripts inspired some major reinterpretations of early Chinese history and thought, both inside China and in the scholarly world at large. The discovery coincided with a political campaign directed against Confucius and his supposed contemporary disciple Lin Biao (Lin was China’s top military figure at the time and had been designated Mao Zedong’s official successor, until he supposedly perished in a coup attempt against Mao in September 1971). This campaign was conducted by the Maoist radicals and was directed against Premier Zhou Enlai, for whom Confucius was a kind of stand-in. The essay translated/paraphrased below presents Chairman Mao as somewhat aloof from the struggle, although it is probably putting him in a kinder light than he deserves. Kang Sheng was a close ally of the radicals around Mao’s wife and also head of the political police and espionage system—a very sinister figure although also, apparently, a highly cultured man. This essay gives some of the flavor of the times, when everything was a matter of politics, and anything a matter of politics highly dangerous.*

*Original Editor's Comment: In the summer of 1972 the veil of mystery covering the Han dynasty tombs at Mawangdui was thrown aside, startling the whole world. The publication today of Archaeological China: Record of the Excavations of the Han Tombs at Mawangdui provides details concerning those excavations along with background information on the times. It shows the difficulties and efforts of those involved in the dig resulting from the special background and the conditions then of political life. This article is an excerpt showing how the China State Cultural Artifacts Bureau and other units speeded up publication of the silk manuscripts for the sake of Mao Zedong.*

Mao Zedong was very much affected by the Lin Biao incident. His health rapidly declined. By the second half of 1974 he was able to walk only with difficulty and was losing vision in both eyes.

Perhaps because the political atmosphere in Beijing was so foul and tense; perhaps because of the annoyance of the constant noise made by the “Gang of Four” headed by Jiang Qing; perhaps for reasons of health and homesickness for his old country—for whatever reason Mao Zedong decided secretly to take up residence in Changsha, on the pretext of convalescing.

Arriving in Changsha, Mao Zedong moved into Building Number 1 at the Rong Gardens, the Hunan Provincial guest house. In that very high-status residence, reserved for the use of Central leaders, Mao Zedong learned of the Mawangdui excavations from reports by Xinhua and the *People's Daily*.

Everyone is aware of Mao's fondness for old books. When the personnel who served as his readers would read from the *Laozi*, the *Stratagems of the Warring States*, the *Classic of the Yellow Emperor*, or other such books, Mao Zedong would grow interested

and his spirits would improve. The working personnel read the last sentence: “The silk documents, bamboo strips, silk paintings, and the other precious artifacts that have been excavated have been fully secured by the state, and specialized organizations are in the process of arranging, restoring, editing, and studying them.” Mao Zedong blew out a breath of smoke and said with a smile, “Very good; they are doing something very good. It’s wonderful that they dug up so many precious things. The Chinese people have a marvelous history! When you have time you should read more history. It will be good for both your political and cultural levels. I wonder when these things will be put into proper form.” An alert working personnel perceived how curious and interested Mao Zedong was, and said, “I hear that the Comrade Li Zhenjun, a member of Hunan Provincial Party Committee, is in charge of the excavation. If the Chairman is interested, why not have him come by and talk to you about it?”

“OK. See if Comrade Zhenjun is in his office. If he is, have him come over for a talk.”

When Li Zhenjun got the phone call, he left the Provincial Committee compound by a side door and came to the Rong Gardens Building Number One. As soon as he saw him Mao Zedong said, “I just read a report of the excavation at Mawangdui. You are all doing a great and good thing! Sit down and talk to me about it.”

Li Zhenjun sat down on the sofa opposite Mao Zedong and discussed in detail the Mawangdui dig and the support given it by Zhou Enlai and others. When Mao Zedong had heard what he had to say, he said, “I have seen a silk manuscript discovered in a tomb that was given to the Japanese Tanaka [Tanaka Kakuei, Prime Minister of Japan in

the early 1970s]. It was very pretty and very rich in substance. I wonder when this batch of manuscripts will be put in order. Will they be printed up in a book?"

Li Zhenjun answered, "I'm not very clear about that yet, but I'm pretty sure they will be printed. It's just a matter of how soon. I can get in touch with Comrade Wang Zhiqiu, in the State Cultural Artifacts Bureau, about this."

"When it is printed up, give me a copy to look at." Mao Zedong said this in a warm and friendly manner, as if he were a loving father discussing a happy bit of family news with a member of the younger generation.

Li Zhenjun responded immediately: "I'll get in touch with Comrade Wang Zhiqiu, and we'll fight to get it done as soon as possible."

"Very good..." But when Mao Zedong said this, he hesitated a little, and a fleeting look of sorrow passed across his face. "I'm getting old; I'm afraid I can't see clearly enough to read."

When Li Zhenjun heard this, a feeling of sympathy welled up inside him. The Chairman facing him indeed had aged. There was no longer that noble and romantic heroic young student of years gone by time had rolled on like the waters of the Xiang River. Facing him was an enfeebled gray-haired old man, but one still with the spirit of a giant of his times. Li Zhenjun pondered deeply and then said in a soothing tone, "Chairman, please be at ease. Comrade Zhiqiu and I together can figure out a way for you to see those words clearly. If the Chairman is interested I can go with out to the dig at Mawangdui and to the provincial museum to see these artifacts in person."

"Good, good. Wait until my health is better and we can make the trip together. I need to widen my own perspectives and clear out my brain."

Li Zhenjun could see that the Chairman was tired and thought he should not continue his visit. He said a few more words of good wishes and then took his leave.

When Wang Zhiqiu received Li Zhenjun's phone call from Hunan he knew how important this matter was and did not dare delay. He immediately got in touch with those carrying on the excavation at Mawangdui and told them to compile as quickly as possible the contents of two of the silk manuscripts and to send the text to the printers. They should make sure of the quality of the printing and pay attention to how it could be made legible for Chairman Mao. During the last part of September the first two parts of silk edition of the *Laozi* were compiled by Gu Tiefu and Luo Fuxi, specialists working at the museum. Wang Zhiqiu immediately approved of their publication and sent in an energetic editorial team to get them ready. They made arrangements with a relatively good new printing firm in Shanghai. When the publisher got the announcement it immediately sent Huang Di, who had previously edited *Paintings on Silk from the Western Han*, to take charge of the work. As Huang Di was getting the work ready to send to the printers in Shanghai, Wang Zhiqiu suddenly received a telephone call from the secretary to Kang Sheng. He said Kang Sheng had heard that the Mawangdui materials were being prepared for publication and that the venerable old gentleman wanted to have a look at them himself. He demanded that Wang Zhiqiu should immediately send over the silk manuscripts.

Ever since the beginning of 1972, Kang Sheng, that Central leader whom Mao Zedong called "old Kang," had been suffering from cancer and had been resting in his quarters at Building Number 8, Diaoyutai [in Beijing]. He had transferred work relating to cultural artifacts over to Zhou Enlai. No one knew how after the passing of a few years

he had come to learn of the excavations at Mawangdui or why he would have such an urgent need to see them. When he got the phone call Wang Zhiqiu did not dare delay or refuse, but immediately took the newly edited version of *Laozi* to Kang Sheng's quarters in the Diaoyutai, giving that self-styled "grand vizier" and "expert on cultural artifacts" the chance to look them over.

What gave Wang Zhiqiu great worries was that the next day, when he returned to fetch back the manuscript, Kang Sheng received him on his sickbed. He looked at him fiercely and said in a stern and angry manner: "The first book of *Laozi* is propaganda for reactionary Confucian stuff. What business did you have sending this to me? Who directed you to do this?"

Wang Zhiqiu was shocked and startled. He stood in front of the bed, not knowing what to do. After a long pause, he said in a quiet voice, "The group that has been compiling the text has been busy doing that, and has not had time yet to make a detailed study of the contents. Also, this is an artifact dug up from the ground, not a contemporary propaganda piece that we are editing. If the Venerable Kang has finished reading it, I'll take it away. This thing..." Wang Zhiqiu did not finish his sentence. He felt it hard to go on. There was hot sweat on his forehead.

"Don't say anything more. Just take back the stuff you gave me. I'll report this to Comrade Jiang Qing [Mao's wife; main figure in the radical "Gang of Four"] and give her a clear explanation of the truth of the matter." When Kang Sheng had said this he shut his eyes and his face went blank. He was no longer paying attention to anything.

Wang Zhiqiu stood in front of the bed for a while, frightened and confused. Kang Sheng's secretary took the silk manuscripts and handed them to Wang Zhiqiu. He said quietly, "Venerable Kang needs to rest. You'd better go now."

Wang Zhiqiu left Building No. 8 and got in his car in a daze. He returned to his office, feeling as if he were in a dream. It was only after he had sat in his chair and smoked three cigarettes that he finally felt as if he had woken up. It looked as if the crafty and suspicious Kang Sheng had heard something from Jiang Qing's quarters, or perhaps he feared that Jiang Qing use his having seen the silk manuscripts against him. That is why he had made such frightful accusations.

At that time the banners of the campaign to "Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius, Criticize the Duke of Zhou" were flying throughout the country. Jiang Qing and her crowd were stirring up the flames, sharpening their knives to use against Zhou Enlai. They would use any opportunity to bring about harm. At this tense juncture, it would not do to make the least mistake. Wang Zhiqiu curbed his anger, taking the course of prudence. I decided to keep the part of the *Laozi* that Kang Sheng had said was propagandizing Confucianism with him for the time being, giving only the second part, which was considered to represent Legalist thought, to the young editor Huang Di to take to Shanghai.

At the end of September, Huang Di brought the freshly printed second part of Laozi from Shanghai back to Beijing. Wang Zhiqiu brought in some specialists to make a close comparative analysis of the contents of the book. They all decided that there was nothing in it that was unfitting. The contents had nothing to do with what seemed to be the great

political issues of the time, the ideology and line of the Criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius. Wang Zhiqiu relaxed.

On 2 October hurriedly summoned Huang Di from his home to come to the work office of the State Cultural Artifacts Bureau. He said, “Chairman Mao wants to read the silk manuscripts, but the venerable old gentleman has trouble with his eyes. He cannot see small words clearly. We have looked into it. Are you able to transpose the Shanghai edition into large type and get it printed up as fast as possible?” Huang Di responded in the affirmative without the slightest hesitation and rapidly undertook this urgent task. With the help of others he reprinted the work in eight volumes and had them printed up at the New China printing offices in Beijing within three days. After inspection by the appropriate channels he was very satisfied with the work, and the work was handed over to Chairman Mao in Changsha.

*Wen Hui Weekend Literary Supplement*, 6 July, 2006.