



Guodian The Newly Discovered Seeds of Chinese Religious and Political Philosophy

Kenneth Holloway

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In 300 BCE, the tutor of the heir-apparent to the Chu throne was laid to rest in a tomb at Jingmen, Hubei province in central China. A corpus of bamboo-strip texts that recorded the philosophical teachings of an era was buried with him. The tomb was sealed, and China quickly became the theater of the Qin conquest, an event that proved to be one of the most significant in ancient history. For over two millennia, the texts were forgotten. But in October 1993, they were unearthed.

The discovery of the Guodian texts, together with other recently discovered Warring States manuscripts, has revolutionized the study of early Chinese intellectual history. Kenneth Holloway argues that the Guodian corpus puts forth a political philosophy based on the harmonious interconnection of individuals engaged in moral self-cultivation. This unique worldview, says Holloway, cannot meaningfully be categorized as "Confucian" or "Daoist," because it shares important concepts and vocabulary with a number of different textual traditions that have anachronistically been characterized as competing or incompatible "schools" of thought. He finds that within the Guodian corpus familiar philosophical concepts and texts are applied in distinctive ways, presenting a worldview that is quite different from the received textual traditions.

In the corpus, the most important function of government is to assist in the harmonization of state and family relations. It sees the relationship between these two entities - the family and the collection of families that ultimately constitute the state - as being inherently conflicting social groupings. The texts posit an interesting solution: State and family disharmony can be overcome by developing a hybrid government that employs both meritocratic and aristocratic methods. Without knowledge of the emphasis on hybridization found in the Guodian texts, however, scholars were unable to understand the interrelationships between these two methods of government. This new understanding illuminates central issues of government, religion, and philosophy in early China that were overlooked in received texts.

As part of the contribution to our understanding of this particular body of texts, Holloway proposes a methodology for assessing a corpus of texts without relying on assumptions and definitions that derive from two thousand years of scholarship. The Guodian corpus, and Holloway's analysis of it, are now absolutely indispensable to any student or scholar of ancient Chinese intellectual history.

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