

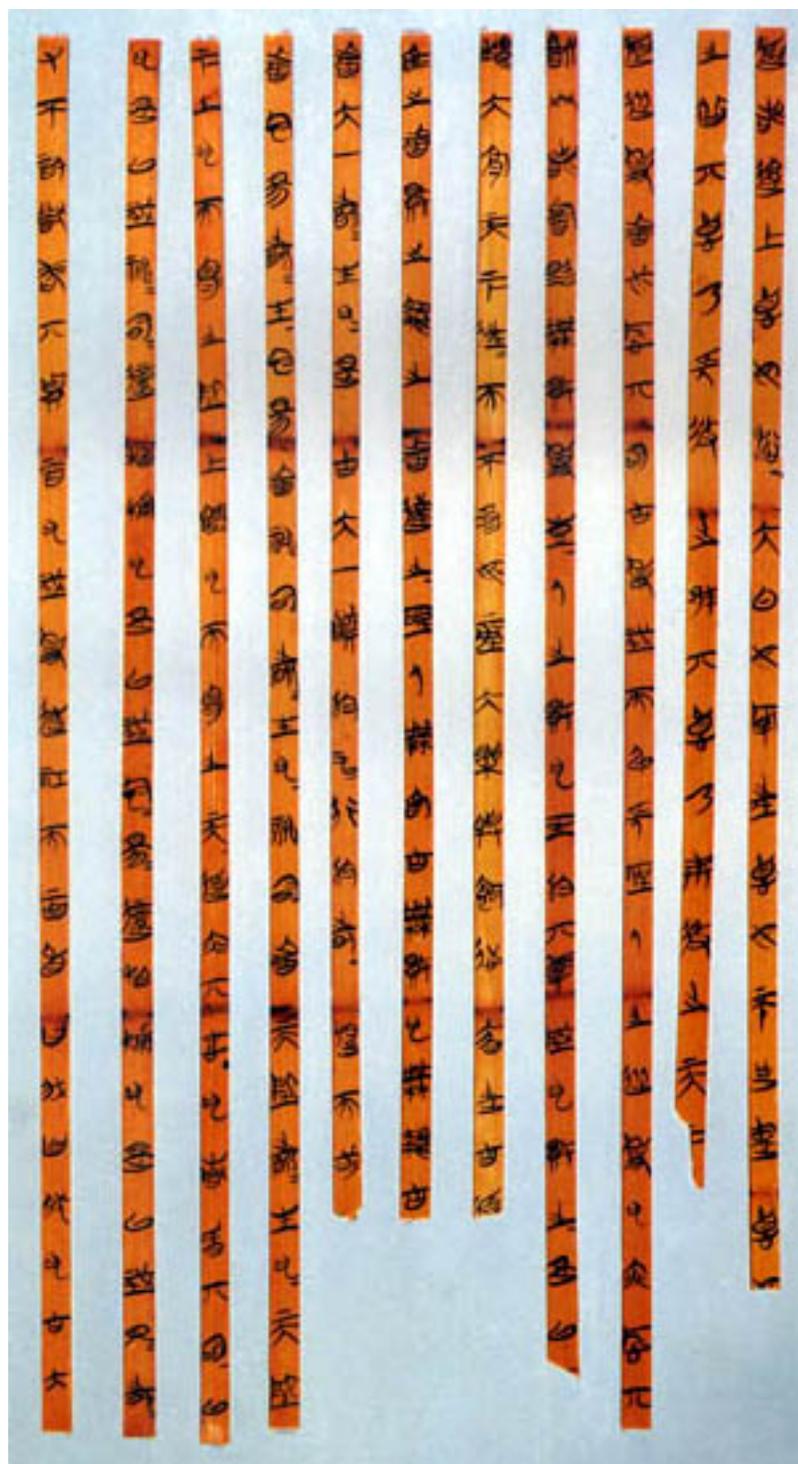
Ancient script rewrites history:

'This is like the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls'

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Near a river in Guodian, China, not far from a farmhouse made of earth and thatched with straw, Chinese archaeologists in 1993 discovered a tomb dating back to the fourth century B.C. The tomb was just slightly larger than the coffin and stone sarcophagus within. Scattered on the floor were bamboo strips, wide as a pencil, and up to twice as long. On closer scrutiny, scholars realized they had found something remarkable. "This is like the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls," says Tu Weiming, director of the Harvard Yenching Institute (HYI), who has played a key role in the preservation of, accessibility to, and research on the Guodian materials since 1996. The 800 bamboo strips bear roughly 10,000 Chinese characters; approximately one-tenth of those characters comprise part of the oldest extant version of the Tao Te Ching (also known as Daodejing), a foundational text by the Taoist philosopher Laozi, who lived in the sixth century B.C. and is generally considered the teacher of Confucius. The remaining nine-tenths of the writings appear to be written by Confucian disciples, including Confucius' grandson Zisi, in the first generation after Confucius' death. (Confucius lived from 551 to 479 B.C.) These texts amplify scholars' understanding of how the Confucian philosophical tradition evolved between Confucius' time and that of Mencius, a key Confucian thinker who



Bamboo strips discovered in a tomb dating back to the fourth century B.C.

lived in the third century B.C.

"With the discovery of these texts, I think you can say that the history of Confucianism itself will have to be rewritten," says Tu. "And by implication, the history of ancient Chinese philosophy in general will have to be reconfigured."

Shortly after their rediscovery, the 2,000-year-old strips were immersed in solvents to restore the faded writing. "They became so brilliant, as if the characters were written yesterday," said Tu. The length of the strips, their content, and special markings, like bands on a bird leg, helped scholars sequence the strips.

With scholars such as Sarah Allen, a sinologist at Dartmouth College; Harvard scholars Michael Puett, Susan Weld, and Feng Yu; and others at Wuhan University and Beijing University, HYI began working in 1994 to ensure the texts' accessibility to scholars and the widest possible international exchange of ideas. The Institute helped sponsor an international conference at Wuhan University in 1999, and has overseen three Chinese publications devoted to the Guodian manuscripts. It has also participated in the development of a Chinese language Web site, <http://www.bamboosilk.org>, devoted to the Guodian texts. Professors Wang Bo and Guo Yi, from Beijing University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, specialize in the Guodian manuscripts and are visiting scholars at HYI this year.