

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band: 52 (1998)
Heft: 4

Artikel: The earliest manuscripts of the Laozi discovered to date
Autor: Bumbacher, Stephan Peter
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147441>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE EARLIEST MANUSCRIPTS OF THE *LAOZI* DISCOVERED TO DATE

Stephan Peter Bumbacher, Universität Tübingen

In October 1993, almost exactly twenty years after the discovery of the famous *Laozi* silk manuscripts A and B at Mawangdui, Changsha (Hunan Province), three *Laozi* mss., written on bamboo slips, were unearthed from tomb no. 1 at Guodian, a village in the Shayang district of Jingmen city (Hubei Province). The cemetery of roughly a dozen burials to which this tomb belongs—being part of a large necropolis containing thirty odd Chu tombs—is located ca. 9 km north of the old capital of Chu, Ji'nancheng.¹

As the excavators write in their report, grave-robbers reached the outer wooden shrine which contained the coffin including the skeleton of the buried person and the grave goods in August 23, 1993. In October of the same year, they returned and this time, having removed the backfill, dug out a hole, the opening of which measured 7.2 square meters and the depth 6 m, and cut a rectangular hole of 40 x 50 cm into one of the planks of the shrine. They removed items and put the rest into disorder, damaging remaining grave goods. In addition, as a consequence of this unlawful intrusion, clay and water entered the interior.² As the probability is very high that the other tombs in the area might also contain mss. and that stolen bamboo slips of at least one made their way to the market, not only the local officials but even governmental authorities should take immediate

1 Hubei sheng Jingmen shi bowuguan, "Jingmen Guodian yi hao Chu mu" 荆門郭店一號楚墓, in: *Wenwu* (WW) 7, 1997: 35-48; Cui Renyi 催仁義, "Jingmen Chu mu chutu de zhujian *Laozi* chu tan" 荆門楚墓出土的竹簡《老子》初探, *Jingmen shehui kexue* 5, 1997: 31-35 (a copy of this article was kindly provided by Hans van Ess); Pang Pu 龐朴, "Chu du Guodian Chu jian" 初讀郭店楚簡, *Lishi yanjiu* 4, 1998: 5-10; Jingmen shi bowuguan, *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡, Beijing 1998 (Wenwu chubanshe). Seven tombs with their relative positions are shown on map 1 in WW 7, 1997: 35—note that, for unknown reasons, no exact scale is provided. The author wishes to thank his colleagues Hermann Kogelschatz and Peter Kuhfus for stimulating discussions.

2 WW 7, 1997: 35.

measures either to protect the tombs from robbery or to excavate them systematically and as carefully as possible and according to the state of the art.³

Unfortunately, the report does not document this situation as detailed as one would wish in view of the importance of the find. No photograph nor any figure is presented showing the real extent of the disturbance. Rather, figure 4 of the report gives the misleading impression that the grave goods in general and the wooden slips in the north-eastern corner of the outer coffin were all orderly arranged. However, it emerged at a conference held at the end of May of this year in Dartmouth, where nearly two dozen handpicked scholars from China, Japan, the USA and Europe were invited to take part⁴—including members of the excavating team—, that in fact the bamboo slips in question were virtually floating in the

- 3 The bamboo slips of one partial “chapter” of *Zhuangzi* from a late Zhanguo (?) or early Han (?) tomb of this area recently discovered in Hong Kong, where they were offered for sale, were acquired by the Museum of Shanghai, and are now, hopefully, being prepared for publication; Harold D. Roth, personal communication. If the dating can be confirmed, this *Zhuangzi* fragment would be by far the earliest specimen of the text, and its importance could not be overrated. It must, however, be added immediately that any unearthed ms. whose exact archaeological circumstances (location, stratigraphy, “associated” grave goods, etc.) are unknown loses much of its scientific value, as—if no date can be deduced from the ms. itself (e.g. by exploiting occurring taboo names)—indirect dating must be applied, which has to rely on the dating of grave goods, etc. Although the most advanced Western laboratories such as, e.g., that of the Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich (Switzerland), are able to analyse tiniest organic fragments using C-14 dating, the result will always be a statistical one yielding a time period of plus/minus thirty (or more) years within which the “true” date of the specimen lies with a probability of 95%. This means that the true date may be anywhere within a sixty years interval. This is clearly not precise enough for our purposes; yet as long as no other hints at the date of the ms. are available it may be justifiable to sacrifice one gramme or so of an already fragmented bamboo slip for C-14 dating. On the principles of radio-carbon dating, cf. M.J. Aitken, *Physics and Archaeology*, Oxford 1974: 26-84.
- 4 The participants received a photocopied version of *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* a few weeks in advance. The revised papers will eventually be published in a monograph. Sarah Allan, personal communication, 29 June 1998.

water, some even being damaged.⁵ In figures 3 and 4 of the report no traces of the looting are to be seen. Circumstances like these may, of course, be vital when having to assess the published reconstruction of the texts. The report is even somewhat misleading: although it says (p. 35) that the hole was made in the “south-eastern” corner of the coffin, figure 5 (p. 38) indicates a trapezoid hole (?) in plank no. 1 at the “north-western” corner of the coffin. If the written record is correct then figure 5 should be rotated by 180°. Superimposing this figure on figure 4 (p. 37) and adjusting its scale it becomes obvious that an ordinary adult person with a forearm length of ca. 35 cm from elbow to the closed fist could easily reach well into the area where the slips laid and fetch some. If they were already floating in water it would perhaps have been even easier to grasp and remove quite a few of them.

The rescue operation of excavating and documenting tomb no. 1 at Guodian took place between October 18 and 24, 1993. In other words, the removal of roughly 160 (!) cubic meters of soil, careful opening of the shrine and securing of the goods, as well as (hopefully!) the documenting of each single step of the operation were done within only one week. Although we do not know how many workers were involved, it seems that this all must have been done in a hurry, probably influencing the quality of the documentation.

Direct dating is not possible since none of the remaining artefacts bears a date. Nor was it possible to identify any tabooed character in the mss.⁶ The excavators base their dating on historical circumstances according to which the tomb cannot be later than 278 BC, thus providing a *terminus ante quem*. Comparing this tomb's mirrors and other grave goods with those of tomb no. 2 of Baoshan, which is dated 316 BC, the archaeologists narrow the date of the tomb down to ca. 300 BC. Whether we

5 Sarah Allan, personal communication, 29 June 1998.

6 On the other hand, the Guodian ms. named *Wu xing* 五行 has the character *bang* 邦 (slip #29, *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, p. 150, transcription; p. 33, photo), for which the Mawangdui version gives *guo* 國 (*Mawangdui Han mu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書, vol. 1, Beijing 1980 (Wenwu chubanshe): p. 18, “column” 200), thus avoiding the tabooed personal name of the founding emperor of the Han, Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 206-194 BC). We now can infer from this that the Mawangdui *Wu xing* ms. must have been written sometime before 206 BC.

agree with this date or not, even if we only accepted the “latest possible” date of 278 BC, the *Laozi* mss. would thus be at least 80 years older than MWD *Laozi* ms. A, which must have been written before 195 BC.

The bamboo slips were originally bound together into bundles and rolled up in some way. Although the threads were rotten and had disappeared when the slips were discovered, they nevertheless left some marks, shadows as it were, on the slips. Examining the rescued bamboo slips, as reproduced in *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, it becomes immediately obvious that parts of a whole series of slips are missing.⁷ Not only are quite a few slips incomplete⁸, but there are also fragments extant that no longer can be matched with available slips, as the appendix shows.⁹ Apparently these fragmented slips do not show any traces of “natural decay”, rather they must have been broken by external force. If they were broken before the tomb was opened or during the excavation proper, one would expect that all parts would still have been around somewhere in the tomb and thus were available to the scholars reconstructing and transcribing the mss. Accordingly, it should have been possible to combine all these parts like a jigsaw puzzle. The fact that this is not the case is clearly another indication of the robbers’ activities. As a consequence, one must be extremely cautious when speculating about the nature of any of the Guodian *Laozi* mss. as far as complete “texts”.

Among the 804¹⁰ recovered bamboo slips, 750 recombined slips and 27 fragments are reproduced and transcribed in *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*. Of these, 71 recombined slips represent three *Laozi* “sets”, or *Laozi* mss.

7 Apart from the *Laozi* mss. discussed here, another 15 mss. were recovered by the archaeologists and edited by the editorial team of the *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*. Note that the text *Wu xing* 五行 is an early recension of the text which became known for the first time to the scholarly world by way of its Mawangdui recension (cf. above, note 6). Whereas the editors of the Mawangdui transcriptions considered “columns” 170-351 as belonging to the *Wu xing* ms., it is now clear, thanks to the Guodian ms., that in fact the Mawangdui *Wu xing* ms. must end with “column” 214. What follows on “columns” 215-351, therefore, are different texts.

8 To name but a few: p. 5, slip #26; p. 7, slips #1, 2, 6, 7, 10; p. 8, slips #11, 12, 17, 18.

9 Cf. p. 108, slips #1 to 27.

10 WW 7, 1997: 46.

These sets were defined by the scholars working with the slips according to certain physical properties of the slips. In fact, both the top and bottom ends of the slips belonging to set A, usual length 32 to 32.3 cm, are tapered, whereas the ends of the B (length 30.5 cm each) and C slips (length 26.3 cm each) are straight cut. As the distance between the “shadows” of the two rotten threads in set B is 12.7 cm but in set C 10.6 cm, this is one criterion by which both sets can be distinguished. On the other hand, since this “shadow distance” in set B is the same as in set A, one might speculate that the slips of both sets A and B, although of different length, were bound together in the same bundle and thus perhaps might represent one single scroll. However, a close inspection of the photographic reproduction in *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* reveals that both sets of bamboo slips were inscribed by two different hands.¹¹

According to Cui’s report, set A consists of 28 slips, each presenting between 19 to 24 characters, totalling 610 characters. Set B, 18 slips with 22 to 25 characters, 410 characters in all. Set C, 40 slips containing 27 to 32 characters each, 1170 characters in total.¹² The authors of the *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, however, relabeled the sets. According to them, set A (甲) consists of 39 slips, 1073 characters in total; set B (乙), 18 slips, 383 characters; set C (丙), 14 slips, 269 characters.¹³ Hereafter we will use the labels given in the *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*.

11 To give just one example, the character *yue*, whose modern form is 月, is represented in set A by a semi-circle, open at the top, with two parallel horizontal strokes inside (for example characters 3 and 8 on slip #35 on p. 6), whereas in set B it is written as an oval into which one horizontal character is inscribed (for example characters 10 and 15 on slip #3, p. 7). Note that the former is also found in the Baoshan Chu slips, whereas the latter is identified as *ri* 日 (sun) by the scholars who transcribed the Baoshan texts, cf. Zhang Shouzhong 張守中, *Baoshan Chu jian wenzi bian* 包山楚簡文字編, (no place) 1996 (Wenwu chubanshe): 71 and 113. Transcriptions from mss. into “standardised” Chinese characters as made by Chinese sinologists should, as a general rule, be regarded as hypotheses. It is absolutely necessary that some Western sinologists enter this area and become experts themselves to be able to independently assess the results obtained by our Chinese colleagues.

12 Cui 1997: 32 f.

13 *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, pp. 3-10 (photos).

These three sets amount to less than a fourth of the *textus receptus* (taking into account that “chapter” 64 of the *textus receptus* is contained in both Guodian sets A and C). Does this mean that the Guodian *Laozi* of ca. 300 BC was much shorter than, say, the Mawangdui *Laozi* of before 195 BC and that the bulk of the “text” was added in the period between? This question cannot be answered, since, as we have seen, the tomb was robbed. It is quite possible that the Guodian *Laozi* was shorter, on the other hand it is equally possible that the Guodian *Laozi* was already “complete” but most of it was stolen and may eventually emerge on the black market. We therefore desperately need a *Laozi* ms. of an undisturbed tomb of the same date as the Guodian tomb to decide the point.

Why, then, are there three mss.? They could have complemented each other: none of them represents the whole text, but all fractions taken together would make up the whole. This seems rather unlikely in view of the fact that both sets A and C contain identical parts of “chapter” 64 of the *textus receptus*. As the Mawangdui example shows (where there were two complete texts of two slightly different periods), there could have been several copies of the same text buried together with the dead, for unknown reasons.

What can be said about the structure of the “text”? Although it must have been comparatively simple to assign the individual slips to one of the three sets, the task of determining the order of the slips within a single set was not a trivial one, as the slips were originally not numbered. Only when there is an “overlap” of a sentence from one slip to another one, can these two be combined. This requires that the sentence is already known as a whole—in other words: that there is already a text available (either the *textus receptus* or the Mawangdui recension) with which the slips can be collated.¹⁴ *Stricto sensu*, such a procedure implicitly assumes that the sentences in question were not changed in the intervening period. All sentences thus following each other could be said to form a “cluster”. A cluster ends whenever a given sentence ends at the end of a slip so that there is no “overlap” with another slip. There is, however, no way to

14 Take, for example, slips #11 and #38. Both begin with the character *zhi* 之. In principle, both slips could be exchanged, so that slip #10 would be followed by #38 and slip #37 by #11. Both “combinations” would make some «philosophical sense».

establish the order of the clusters, because there exists no hint whatsoever as to which cluster should come next. For set A the list of clusters is as follows:

cluster 1: slips #1-20;
cluster 2: slips #21-23;
cluster 3: slip #4;
cluster 4: slips #25-32;
cluster 5: slips #33-39.

Similarly, for set B the following list is obtained:

cluster 1: slips #1-8;
cluster 2: slips #9-12;
cluster 3: slip #13-18,

and for set C:

cluster 1: slips #1-3;
cluster 2: slips #4-5;
cluster 3: slip #6-10;
cluster 4: slips #11-14.

If this reconstruction by the editors of *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* is accepted, it “translates” into the following sequences of (partial or whole) “chapters” of the received text:

Set A:

cluster 1: “chapters” 19, 66, 46, 30, 15; 64 (2), 32 (1), 63, 2, 32 (2);
cluster 2: “chapters” 25, 5;
cluster 3: “chapters” 16;
cluster 4: “chapters” 64 (1), 56, 57;
cluster 5: “chapters” 55, 44, 40, 9.

Set B:

- cluster 1: "chapters" 59, 48, 20, 13;
- cluster 2: "chapter" 41;
- cluster 3: "chapters" 52, 45, 54.

Set C:

- cluster 1: "chapters" 17, 18;
- cluster 2: "chapter" 35;
- cluster 3: "chapter" 31;
- cluster 4: "chapter" 64.

In other words, with one exception (set A, cluster 4) the sequence *within* each cluster is, as a general rule, entirely different from the sequence of the *textus receptus*.

Quite surprising is the fact that in set C, cluster 4 (slips #11-14), "chapter" 64 can be found in its entirety,¹⁵ whereas in set A it is split into two parts: the second half of the received "chapter" 64 occurs in cluster 1 (slips #10-12), the first half is seen in cluster 4 (slips #25-27). How is this to be interpreted? Was set C later than set A, thus representing already a later stage in the development of the text? But then the *Hanfeizi*, which is possibly half a century younger than the Guodian mss.,¹⁶ in its two chapters of commentary on the *Laozi* also splits "chapter" 64 into two parts separated by comments on "chapters" 52 and 71.¹⁷ Or did such a concept like "chapter" not yet exist, so that the copyists felt free to arrange the "text" almost at will?

Similarly, "chapter" 32 occurs twice: In the same cluster 1 of set A, on slips #18-20, the "complete chapter" is to be found (if compared with the *textus receptus*), on slips #13-14, on the other hand, only its first part. Both items are separated by parts of "chapters" 63 and 2.

15 Apart from two short *lacunae*: the last three characters of slip #11 and the last character of slip #12 are missing (slips broken).

16 Cf. Jean Levi, "Han fei tzu", in: Michael Loewe (ed.), *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, Berkeley 1993: 115-124.

17 Cf. *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 7, ed. (新編) 諸子集成, vol. 5, Taipei 1974: 119 and 121.

If compared with the received text, the following “chapters” are “complete” as they appear in the Guodian slips: 9, 13, 17, 19, 25, 32, 35, 40, 44, 45, 56, 57, 59, 66. As no “chapter” later than 66 appears in the Guodian mss. and as no “chapter” later than 67 is to be found in the *Hanfeizi*, again, one could speculate whether the later parts of the received *Laozi* were not yet “integrated” into the text by the last third of the third century BC. Unless a ms. is discovered which comes from an undisturbed tomb of that period we are perhaps on safer ground if we assume that the “missing” parts of the Guodian mss. were stolen, whereas the *Hanfeizi* as a *commentary, nota bene*, presents its own problems.¹⁸ In this respect it may be worth having a first look at “chapter” 63. Only its beginning and end are represented on the Guodian slips (set A, cluster 1, slips #14-15).¹⁹ The relevant sentences read in their transcription:

[...] ■ 爲亡爲事亡事 (未) [味] 亡 (未) [味] 大 (少) [小]
之多 (惕) [易] 必多 (難) [難] 是以聖人 [end of slip 4] (猷)
[猶] (難) [難] 之 (古) [故] 終亡 (難) [難] ■

The textus receptus has:

事無事味無味大小多少 [...]
[...] 多易必多難是以聖人猶難之故終無難矣

It is now perfectly possible that the scribe responsible for making the actual copy of the Guodian ms. may have had a “complete” version of “chapter” 63 at hand, but while copying it he involuntarily “skipped” from the first *duo* 多 character to the second, thus leaving out the intermediate text. Such dittography or “eye-skip” is a very common mistake made by

18 The fact that commentaries may alter the text they comment on in order to have it better fit with their own intentions is discussed in Rudolf G. Wagner, “The Wang Bi recension of the *Laozi*”, in: *Early China* 14, 1989: 27-54.

19 On the other hand, the *Hanfeizi* also has two sentences of the missing middle part, cf. *op. cit.* 117: 故曰：圖難於其易也，爲大於其細也。

copyists not only in China but also in the West from antiquity up to modern times.²⁰

The opposite, namely that sentences found in the Guodian slips no longer appear in the received text, is also true: e.g., the characters 臨事之紀 on slip #11 of set A are not only not part of the received “chapter” 64, they do not occur at all in the *textus receptus*.

These few notes on a preliminary examination of the published Guodian *Laozi* slips may suffice. We look forward with great anticipation to the publication of the proceedings of the Dartmouth conference.

20 On dittography cf. Vinton A. Dearing, *Principles and Practice of Textual Analysis*, Berkeley 1974: 51-52