TOWARDS A PROFILE OF GRAPHIC VARIATION
On the Distribution of Graphic Variants within the
Mawangdui *Laozi* Manuscripts

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Abstract

This article examines different sorts of graphic variants within the two so-called *Laozi* manuscripts from tomb 3 of Mawangdui with the aim of establishing for them a profile of graphic variation. Such a profile should ideally take into account all kinds of variant character forms and their distribution, within a manuscript corpus as well as within a single manuscript, in order to gain from them information about the particular way in which the respective manuscript was produced. Non-structural variants are observed here chiefly for the purpose of distinguishing different hands. The present article further examines also structural variants to determine the actual degree of orthographic regularity applied in particular manuscripts or parts of manuscripts. Whatever regularities have been observed within a certain scope, they can serve as criteria to reconsider outstanding cases of orthographic irregularity. Finally, a hierarchical order of criteria for deciding upon the reading of a character is proposed.

Introduction

Graphic variation belongs to the intrinsic qualities of manuscripts, and any handwritten text will usually offer a much greater variety of graphic variation than

printed ones do. It is, therefore, no surprise that we encounter a wide range of graphic variation on different levels also in ancient Chinese manuscripts. Understandably, not all sorts of variation draw the same amount of attention. Discussion of variants very much concentrates on cases of hitherto unknown or otherwise historically discontinuous characters[1] or cases in which the presumed word is represented by a character structurally different from the one or ones that would write the same word according to later standard orthography as well as on cases in which the manuscript in question differs from an apparent counterpart in transmitted literature. Yet, all sorts of variants, including slight differences in shape, convey information potentially relevant for the interpretation of the manuscript as a whole and for understanding its position within a manuscript corpus.

I believe that it may be useful to establish what I shall call a *profile of graphic variation* for each individual manuscript. This may on the one hand serve to determine which of the manuscripts of a given corpus were produced by the same scribe or school of scribes, as can well be the case also with manuscripts written in different types and styles of script.[2] On the other hand, such a profile may help to specify the degree of arbitrariness and the scope of orthographic regularities applied in writing the manuscript in question. In some cases, the distribution of variants also allows to draw conclusions with regard to the circumstances and actual process of the production of a particular manuscript.

As a step towards such a profile, this article will, on the basis of a few examples, discuss the distribution of different kinds of graphic variation within

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1   For the term "historically discontinuous character" see Takashima 2000: 371.

2   We do not yet have any established consensus about how to define and distinguish between types and styles of script in early manuscripts. For the moment, I use "type of script" in the sense of differences as, e.g., between seal and clerical script, and I will call "styles" the different executions of such a type of script that share common features (such as a certain degree of regularity or ornamentation, or preferences of certain graphic elements) – features that need not be expressions of an individual hand, but can be practised by groups of people (e.g. a school of scribes or a certain community). Thus, the same style could be written by different scribes, but one scribe could also write in different styles. The manuscript *Shi lü* 史 律 from the early Han tomb no. 247 at Zhangjiashan 張家山 (only some 250 kilometres northwest of and less than two decades older than tomb no. 3 of Mawangdui discussed here) explicitly states that scribes were required to master different styles of script (*ba ti* 八體). Cf. Zhangjiashan 247 hao Han mu ... (2001: 46 [col. 475], 203) and Li Xueqin 2002.

the two so-called *Laozi* manuscripts from tomb 3 of Mawangdui 馬王堆[3] and infer from them some tentative explanations as to possible causes of these variants. Based on these observations, assumptions will be made about degrees of orthographic regularities to be found in the two manuscripts. These assumptions can then serve as a basis for the revision of doubtful readings.

A profile of graphic variation must eventually form part of a detailed description of a manuscript, and it is certainly a somewhat artificial restriction not to discuss graphic variation in relation with other features of the manuscript – such as material and size of the writing support, text layout, spacing and punctuation, errors and corrections, type and style of script, as well as other physical features of script (e.g. regularity of individual strokes or their saturation with ink), and finally the genre of the text and its content in detail. However, as a first step towards such a thorough multi-level examination, this article will focus on the actual characters written in a particular manuscript and will regard other features only occasionally, when it seems necessary from the chosen perspective.

To begin with, I should make clear what I understand by graphic variation. The distinction between lexical and graphic variation has been systematically and profoundly discussed by William G. Boltz,[4] who in his article in the present volume introduces a further terminological refinement of his model. Classifications of variants have been offered, chiefly from the perspective of textual criticism, both by Boltz and Martin Kern.[5] I will not here attempt yet another classification, but rather content myself with a few basic distinctions. The question of what constitutes a graphic variant involves two fundamental aspects: first, what is the *object of comparison*, i.e., from what does the character in question differ; and second, what *degree of difference* makes a variation?

As to the first, in sinological practice the term "graphic variation" is, as far as I can see, used first, for cases in which the manuscript has a character different from its counterpart in another manuscript or in transmitted literature; second, cases in which the writing of a word deviates from modern orthographic

3   Cf. Marc Kalinowski's codicological study of the Mawangdui manuscripts in the present volume. For details of this early Han tomb (dated to 168 BCE) from the Chu 楚 area, see the first part of the excavation report (He Jiejun 2004).

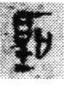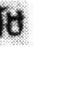4   Most notably in Boltz 1994, 1995, 1997.

5   Boltz 1994: 158–167 and Kern 2002: 155–162. What Martin Kern terms a "typological distinction of textual variants" explicitly embraces "lexical variants, graphic variants, and scribal errors" and thus covers more or less the same wide range that I call "graphic variation", including both – in Boltz's terms – "graphic-only" and "graphic-lexical variation".

standard; and third, cases in which one word is written in different ways within the same manuscript.

Often a variation involves all three of these aspects: e.g., the graph 謷[6] (≈ 聲) for the word *shèng* {聖}[7] in part of the Mawangdui *Laozi* A manuscript (henceforth: MWD.A)[8] differs from the modern standard form 聖 that we encounter in the received text as well as from the forms used in other parts of the same manuscript (dominant left-right division of the graph 耵) or in the *Zhou Yi* 周易 manuscript (dominant top-bottom division of 聖). Finally, it also differs from the form 耵 used in the *Xici* 繫辭 and *Laozi* B manuscripts (henceforth: MWD.B):[9]

6   The mode of transcribing manuscript characters in the present article does not follow any consistent principles as I would suggest them for transcribing manuscript texts in general. The methods applied here may vary, depending on the requirements of the specific question discussed in each particular instance. I have made more general, tentative suggestions on an earlier occasion (cf. Richter 2003), and more profound and systematic treatments of this problem are presented in the present volume by Xing Wen and Crispin Williams.

7   Following the example of Qiu Xigui (2000), I use brace brackets { } to indicate that I am talking about a word independently of different possible ways of representing it in writing and that the character in brackets merely serves to identify this word according to modern orthography.

8   We do not have as yet any satisfactory conventions of naming early Chinese manuscripts. Current practice unfortunately often confuses, on the one hand, the distinctions between *codicological* and *textual units* of the manuscript (for a discussion of these see Marc Kalinowski's article in the present volume) and, on the other hand, the distinction between manuscript texts and their counterparts in the received literature. These two fundamental confusions frequently generate or enhance one another. In order not to add new sources of misunderstanding by *ad hoc* proposals of new names, I here follow the convention of naming the two Mawangdui manuscripts that both, among other texts, contain a counterpart of the received *Laozi* after this most prominent of the several texts they contain. In case of the other manuscripts discussed, I likewise use the names prevalent in Western sinology. I will in this article consistently use the term "manuscript" in the codicological sense of an originally integral physical object, i.e. one piece of writing support or several pieces bound together to form a "book" that may contain one or several texts or, less often, only part of a text. The question on which level of textual units of a particular manuscript to speak of texts or parts of texts will be decided pragmatically, as it is not possible to do full justice here on a fundamental theoretical level to the complex question of what constitutes a text.

9   This table shows the characters in original size. Further below, the images of characters have often been resized either to allow better observation of details or merely to better fit the format of the text.

MWD.A	*textus receptus*[10]	MWD.A	MWD *Zhou Yi* ms.	MWD.B	MWD *Xi ci* ms.
睿/聲	聖	聖	聖	耵	耵

As to the second aspect, i.e. what *degree of difference* constitutes a variation, scholarly discussion very much concentrates on rather evident differences in character forms, mostly the absence or presence of a component (i.e. *pianpang* 偏旁) or the choice of a different component. More subtle differences are often ignored. This applies even to structural differences like the absence or presence of single strokes that are not considered components in their own right, as well as to differences in the position of components. Even less attention is being paid to non-structural variation, i.e. differences in size or shape of graphic elements or of the whole character.[11] As far as I know, there does not yet exist a generally accepted definition of "structural variants".[12] I would at present tentatively circumscribe it as cases of:

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10   It is always the Wang Bi 王弼 text of the *Laozi* that is cited as *textus receptus* in the present article. This does not imply any claim of superiority for this particular version.

11   These slight differences are a frequently discussed in palaeographic studies of individual obscure characters or character components. They also attract a great deal of interest of those who study the calligraphy of manuscripts as an art historical phenomenon, but their relevance for understanding also other dimensions of manuscripts still seems to be largely overlooked. Xu Baogui (2002) and He Linyi (2003: 202–265) both offer a detailed observation and classification of graphic variants. Yet, He Linyi studies the variants from a palaeographic perspective as phenomena in the development of the several Warring States' scripts; he does not in his typology consider variation within a particular manuscript or inscription. Xu Baogui explains graphic variants within certain bronze inscriptions as a – chiefly aesthetically motivated – device to avoid repetition, and thus appears to keeep close to the art historical perspective. His theory may be generally convincing for bronze inscriptions and in a sense perhaps also for oracle bones. However, even with inscriptions such as these, which the beholder could contemplate at once in their entirety, this explanation appears somewhat mono-causal. In the case of longer, brush written manuscript texts the causes for graphic variation must certainly be sought in several directions. Li Feng (1997 and 2002) offers important methodological insights as to how a close observation of graphic details can yield information about the production of bronze inscriptions and their cultural background.

12   I do not see any substantial progress in this question after the disputes, which began in the late 1950s, between Noel Barnard and several Chinese scholars about the structural con-

additional or missing elements:	不/禾/秂(不), 後(後) // 丂(乃), 匃(笱)
variation in one or more components:	魝(雌), 炙(侮), 息(仁)?
different positions of components:	邽(邦), 靔(靜), 咊(和), 叵(可), 售(唯), 孞(好), 夊(奴)
difference in both identity and position of components:	夊(如), 釁(藏), 礻(功)
entirely different character:	嗖(聰), 愚(化), 息(仁)?, 匃(后/後)?[13]

As a further preliminary, I should like to consider what causes graphic variation. Variants may occur accidentally as writing errors or as mere whims of the scribe, or they may be intentionally introduced as an aesthetic feature. Frequent variants may be due to lacking or loose orthographic standards or to negligence or poor skill on the part of the scribe, but they may also reflect an orthographic convention we are not aware of. We can distinguish three levels on which the actual notation of a text is determined:

a) *collective factors* (orthographic and other formal conventions or standards that may vary over time and according to different regions or sorts of texts);
b) *individual factors* (skill, erudition, physical and psychological condition and/or attitude of a particular scribe);
c) *circumstantial factors* (material used, writing position, allotted time, copying either from a written or an oral model or from memory).

In judging variants one has to keep in mind that they are often caused by an *overlapping* of these sources of influence.

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stancy of inscription characters. Barnard's (1973: 24) description of non-structural variants as cases of "one or two strokes omitted [...] accidental omissions whose significance is little greater than that of a Westerner who fails to dot his 'i's or cross his 't's" leaves much room for different subjective judgements. Xing Wen's article in the present volume illustrates the great complexity of this question in connection with the problem of transcription methods.

13   Two cases in the table required a cautionary question mark for the following reasons: It is unclear whether 息 is a character entirely different from 仁 or whether the two have a component in common, because what appears as 身 in the transcription contains 亻 plus an additional component. The discussion of the character 匃 in this article will show that the decision whether it should be treated as an equivalent of 后 or rather 後 is not as trivial as it may seem.

I will in the following first discuss some characteristic cases of non-structural variation to show that they can indicate relations between different manuscripts. Next, I will present some examples that yield information about the process of copying the manuscript, and then some variants that involve the question of orthographic standards. Eventually, I will discuss the different weight of several criteria for deciding upon a reading.

1. Non-structural variation

Slight variants in the shape of structurally identical characters may not seem the most exciting feature of a manuscript, but they are none the less important for establishing a profile of graphic variation. A clearer understanding of these rather simple phenomena consolidates the basis on which we can then consider the more intricate and complex issues. For example, if we know that certain parts of a manuscript or several manuscripts were written by the same scribe this not only helps to judge orthographic questions in these manuscripts; it may also be of great consequence for understanding the composition of a tomb "library" like that of Mawangdui, as it allows us to determine which manuscripts come from the same source. In discussing this type of variation I will restrict myself to the *Laozi* B manuscript (MWD.B). This manuscript, like MWD.A, is written on silk and consists of six texts (titles in pointed brackets are not original ones but given by modern scholars), two of which are a counterpart to the transmitted *Laozi*. It differs, however, from MWD.A in all four other texts, in the position of the two *Laozi* texts, as well as in format and type of script:[14]

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14   The *Laozi* text is in both manuscripts divided into a *De* 德 and a *Dao* 道 part. For a convenient overview of the arrangement of the texts on both manuscripts, as well as a profound discussion of this issue, see the article of Marc Kalinowski in the present volume.

MWD.A	MWD.B
silk scroll of 24 cm width	folded silk of 48 cm width
script: "archaic clerical" (*gu li* 古隷)	script: "Han clerical" (*Han li* 漢隷)
text 1: <德>	text 1: 經法 (9 titled sections)
text 2: <道>	text 2: 十六經 (14 titled sections)
text 3: <五行> (3a 經, 3b 說)	text 3: 稱
text 4: <九主>	text 4: 道原
text 5: <明君>	text 5: 德
text 6: <德聖>	text 6: 道

The Mawangdui tomb "library" contained several other manuscripts written in the same type of script, labelled by Chen Songchang and others as "Han clerical" (*Han li* 漢隷) as opposed to the supposedly older types "archaic clerical" (*gu li* 古隷) or "(hybrid) small seal / clerical" (*zhuan li* 篆隷):[15]

> *Zhou Yi* ms. (texts: <周易>, <二三子>[16]), folded silk of 48 cm width;
> *Xi ci* ms. (texts: <繫辭>, <易之義>, 要, 繆和, 昭力), folded silk of 48 cm width;
> *Xing de* B ms. (<刑德・乙>), folded silk of 44 cm width;
> *Wu xing zhan* ms. (<五星占>), folded silk of 49 cm width;
> *Xiang ma jing* ms. (<相馬經>), folded silk of 48 cm width.

Distinguishing hands demands the observation of a large number of recurrent graphic elements. In alphabetic writing we are almost completely independent of the text in so doing, as no matter what the text says, the same letters occur again and again in basically the same size and shape in completely different words. In a Chinese text, if we study whole characters, we must choose those that occur most often in all sorts of texts, e.g. characters representing frequent particles like *yě* {也} or *bù* {不} or common words like *rén* {人} or *yǒu* {有}. Besides that, we should also study frequent character components like 人, 口, 女 or 目, although – due to the different combinations in which they occur – they vary in size and shape more than Latin letters in an alphabetical text do. Furthermore, to recognise a certain handwriting one should not start with complex forms but focus attention on frequent and simple ones, as their features are not so much

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15   Cf. Chen Songchang 1996: foreword, p. 4.
16   The title *Er san zi* 二三子 (without the additional "*wen* 問") was suggested by Zhang Liwen 張立文, for which see Xing Wen 1998: 64).

determined by the observation of rules or by other conscious decisions but rather by habitual automatic movement of the hand.

The ways of writing the word *zhǔ* {主} shall serve as a first example. Two types of what is structurally the same character are used in the Mawangdui manuscripts to write the word *zhǔ* {主}: One has a dot on top (主) and the other a horizontal stroke (主), usually shorter than the three horizontals below. MWD.B has both forms. In the beginning, the first stroke is written as a dot just like in most other Mawangdui manuscripts; later the other form with a line on top gains dominance and is finally written exclusively. But even then the character continues to change – at the beginning of the manuscript the horizontal line on top is markedly shorter than the lower three horizontals, but further down in the manuscript it gets longer and finally reaches almost the same length.

22.59[17]		27.55		87.11	
23.10		28.3		128.35	
23.29		28.14		130.16	
23.48		28.34		138.17	
23.56		29.39		144.69	
24.11		29.51		164.23	
24.29		30.7		165.25	
24.60		45.3		166.10	
25.40		55.9		208.60	
26.5		55.43		244.65	
26.35		61.61		249.49	
26.59		63.53		249.66	
27.26		63.55			
27.47		67.44			

17 The number before the dot indicates the column, the number after the dot is that of the character in this column.

As far as I can judge at the present moment, the manuscript was written by one person, so the differences do not indicate different hands, neither do they have any conceivable semantic function. There are several possible causes for this graphic variation: First, the scribe was supposed to write a standard form with a dot on top, but after repeatedly relapsing into an old habit of writing a line, he may have given up and stuck to his habit. Second, the required form was the one with the line on top, and the scribe only after some time managed to get used to the standard. The third and much more likely possibility is that both forms were common alternatives, and the development in this manuscript is one of de-creasing differentiation, which from the point of view of the scribe means simplification.[18] It takes less effort to draw four horizontals instead of a dot plus three horizontals, because one need not concentrate so much on adjusting the movement of the hand.

I have not yet come across the same phenomenon in other Mawangdui manuscripts. It seems that usually one form of 主 was chosen and applied throughout a manuscript, e.g. the *Xing de* B manuscript consistently uses the form with the line on top, just as the *Zhou Yi* and *Wu xing zhan* manuscripts use the form with the dot. Unfortunately, the character 主 is not frequent enough in these manuscripts to allow any further conclusions.

A more frequent character is that representing the word *bì* {必}, which also occurs in two forms in MWD.B: One has a hooked central stroke 必, the other one has a curved one 必. The distribution of the two shows no meaningful pattern, but the ratio of 46 hooked forms to only five curved ones at least shows a clear preference for the former.

both forms of 必, hooked form 必 preferred	only curved form 必
MWD.B *Xing de* B ms.	*Wu xing zhan* ms.

Another quite frequent character is that for the word *rú* {如}. Again, the *Laozi* B manuscript has two forms and shares this phenomenon with the *Xing de* B and *Xi ci* manuscripts as opposed to the other manuscripts in the same type of script.

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18   The tendency towards simplification is universally acknowledged as one of the most funda-mental qualities of handwritten documents not only in the West. Cf. He Linyi (2003: 202): "趨簡求易, 是人們書寫文字的共同心理."

rú 如: balanced, static vs. dynamic, enclosing

and	only
MWD.B	*Wu xing zhan* ms.
Xi ci ms.	*Zhou Yi* ms.
Xing de B ms.	

There is no apparent regularity or semantic relevance in the change of these two forms. Their regular alternation in a passage at the end of text one in MWD.B is an exception: 燔淬事之反也由矯生之反也.[19] Here the scribe switched between the two forms probably either for aesthetic reasons or merely to alleviate the monotony of his work. To assume that this change of form was consciously employed to emphasise the antithetical structure of the sentences, would be an attractive speculation, but seems to over-interpret the scarce evidence.

Having observed some features which MWD.B shares with the *Xi ci* and *Xing de* B as opposed to the *Zhou Yi* and *Wu xing zhan* manuscripts, one is tempted to conclude that the MWD.B, *Xi ci* and *Xing de* B manuscripts were written by the same scribe. Yet, different scribes may have chosen to use identical stylistic features, especially if they had been trained in the same school tradition. The identification of particular scribes, therefore, cannot rely on such criteria alone but must be supported by the observation of more subtle forms of variation, i.e. variation of graphic elements that are formed more or less automatically, following habit rather that conscious choice.

Forms that are fairly frequent in the manuscripts under discussion and therefore lend themselves to the purpose are the components 亻 and 彳 as well as the characters 不 and 有. As to the first of these features, there are two distinct ways of writing the classifiers 亻/人, 彳, 行, 亻止>辵, which belong to the most frequent graphic elements in the manuscripts, one is a rounded form and the other is written with straight strokes forming a pointed angle.

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19 Text *Jing fa* 經法, section 9 (*ming li* 名理). Robin D. S. Yates (1997: 99) translates: "First heated, then quenched, so are human affairs reversed; first submissive, then conceited, such is the reversal of life."

Rounded vs. angular forms of 行/彳/亻 (examples from MWD.B):

行	行	行	行
往	往	得	得
信	信	侍	侍
仁	仁	伐	伐

The distribution of these forms is a complicated matter, as they depend not only on the scribe but also on the combination with other components in which they appear in different characters. Even though it will hardly be possible to explain the choice of form in each particular case, the different distribution in the manuscripts is evident: The MWD.B, *Xi ci* and *Xing de* B manuscripts all show a clear predominance of the rounded forms, whereas *Zhou Yi* and *Wu xing zhan* by far prefer the angular form.

The other two examples that allow a clear distinction between the MWD.B, *Xi ci* and *Xing de* B manuscripts on the one hand and the *Zhou Yi* manuscript on the other are the especially frequent characters 不 and 有. In the *Zhou Yi* manuscript, the vertical stroke of 不 is placed conspicuously far to the right and the stroke running from top left to bottom right starts in a slightly upward direction until it crosses the vertical stroke, where it bends downwards.

MWD.B

Xi ci ms.   *Zhou Yi* ms.
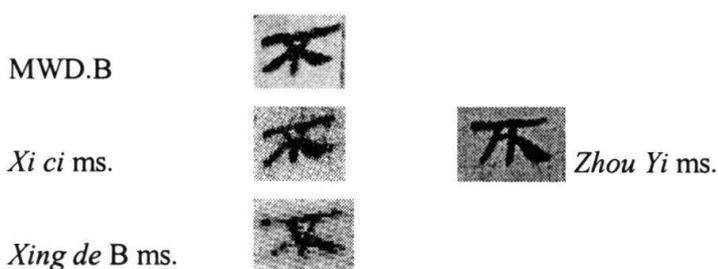
Xing de B ms.

Also in the *Zhou Yi* manuscript, the upper component of *yǒu* 有 is written at an angle of approximately 45 degrees to the vertical column. In the MWD.B, *Xi ci* and *Xing de* B manuscripts the strokes of this component, especially the topmost one, run nearly in horizontal direction.

upper component: vs.

MWD.B   *Zhou Yi* ms.
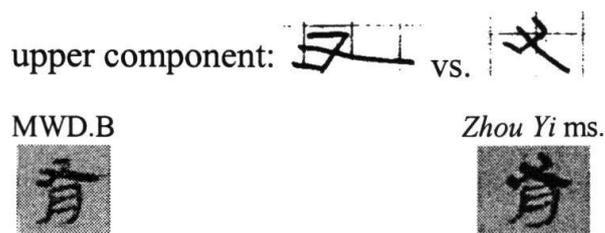
To sum up, I assume that the *Laozi* B, *Xi ci* and *Xing de* B manuscripts were written by the same hand and the *Zhou Yi* manuscript by another one.[20] Most probably the *Wu xing zhan* and *Xiang ma jing* manuscripts were written by yet other scribes.[21]

MWD.B *Xi ci* ms. *Xing de* B ms.	*Zhou Yi* ms.
preference of 王	only 主
preference of	only
occasional	only
preference of rounded -forms	preference of angular -forms
always	always
always	always

20 Whereas different styles are hardly an indication at all for different scribes, different hands usually are. But it must be pointed out that this is not necessarily always the case. Theoretically, what I call different hands here could have been written by the same person at a considerably far removed point in time, e.g. a few years earlier or later.

21 This assumption is based on the available reproductions and on notes I made during inspections of the originals at the Hunan Provincial Museum, but I cannot provide sufficient evidence here to make this claim with any certainty. Suffice it to name a few peculiarities that seem unique to the respective manuscripts: The handwriting of the *Wu xing zhan* ms. features different proportions, its characters are relatively short and wide, two forms of 之 alternate, and 也 is written in a way markedly different from the other mss. The *Zhou Yi* ms. has a special form of writing 出, which is shares with the *Wu xing zhan* ms., but also – as a unique feature which I have not yet found in any of the other mss. – the positioning of vertical strokes above a 口 component so far to the left that it does not meet the 口 in the middle but in the upper left corner (esp. in 吉 or in the 言-component of some characters). The *Xiang ma jing* ms. features extraordinarily elongated vertical strokes in characters such as 也, 見, 下, 乃, which go well together with a more generous spacing between characters as compared to the other mss. of this group.

Having now established some features that distinguish different hands in several manuscripts written in the same type of script, I further assume that MWD.B was written by one hand only, because the said features are constant in the entire manuscript.

2. Structural variation

Knowing that a manuscript was written by one hand excludes one of the chief possible causes of graphic variation and thus helps to judge the degree of arbitrariness or orthographic standard that determined the writing of the document in question. I will in the following discuss the distribution of some variants in both MWD.A and MWD.B. In so doing I will start from the heuristic assumption that the readings given in the 1980 *Wenwu* edition are all correct – which most of them probably are. The assumption of a certain reading for each character even in doubtful cases is a necessary pragmatic device without which it would be impossible to observe regularities in the notation of the text at all. These regularities, once noted as statistical data, must then be exposed to doubt again: They merely indicate a certain probability with which a particular word may be expected to be written in a certain way in the manuscript (or part of it) for which the regularity has been observed. They can thus serve as an additional criterion in reconsidering doubtful readings. In discussing graphic variation within the two *Laozi* manuscripts, I will proceed from rather unambiguous cases, where there is little doubt about which words the respective characters write, to cases involving orthographic issues.

One ubiquitous feature in manuscripts in general is increasing simplification. Slight changes that may be explained as simplification (such as in the character 主) have already been mentioned above. The most common form of simplification, however, is abbreviation. Both *Laozi* manuscripts contain a large number of abbreviations, among them the characters standing for the word *luàn* {亂}. In MWD.A the word occurs only four times, the first two are damaged, the other two have one slightly abbreviated and one full form.[22] But the MWD.B gives a clear picture of increasing simplification, it writes the slightly abbreviated form in the first third of the manuscript and then abbreviates further,

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22   The two damaged instances of the character occur in columns 3 and 98, the first example
      shown here is from col. 126, the other from col. 354.

leaving only the claw and the curved stroke.[23] The change between the two forms occurs in the middle of the last section (*Ming li* 名理) of text 1 (*Jing fa* 經法) and does not seem to have any special significance beyond the wish of the scribe to facilitate his work.

MWD.A	MWD.B
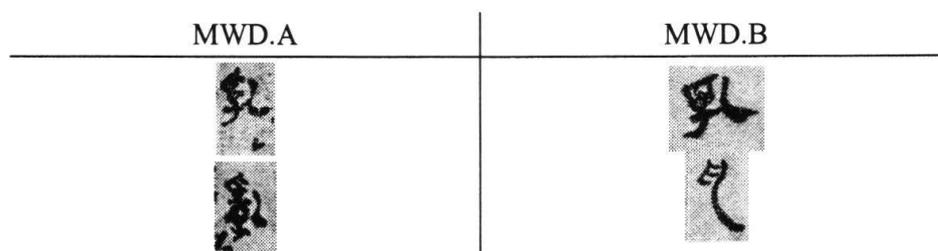
Another case of abbreviation is the writing of the cognate words – or rather two morphologically different forms of one word – *yǒu* < *wi-ʔ[24] {有} and *yòu* < *wə(k)-s {又}. It is quite common for both to be written 有 in early China, and this is clearly the underlying standard in both *Laozi* manuscripts. MWD.A has only this form. MWD.B during the first eighty per cent of the manuscript text almost always writes the full form 有 and only abbreviates less than five per cent of the cases as 又. In the remaining twenty per cent, however, as much as twenty-eight per cent of the cases are abbreviated. This is a clear example of variation that reflects nothing but mere fatigue or laxity on the part of the scribe – a most natural phenomenon, common also in other manuscript cultures.[25]

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23 The slightly abbreviated form, which somewhat resembles 乳, occurs in 15 instances in the first 72 of 252 columns; all remaining 26 instances consist only of classifiers 87 (爪) and 5 (乙). Interestingly, it is the phonetic component (𠬛) that is reduced or left out first of all, when the character is abbreviated.

24 All reconstructed Old Chinese pronunciations in this article were kindly provided by Wolfgang Behr (Bochum).

25 I do not include in my count the two instances of 或 (one in each manuscript: MWD.A col. 376 and MWD.B col. 103b) which the editors read as *yòu* {又}, since in my opinion they may both possibly stand for *huò* {或}.

MWD.A	MWD.B
有	音 / 又
165x *yǒu* 有	223x *yǒu* 有
	22x *yǒu* 又
5x *yòu* 有	8x *yòu* 有
	2x *yòu* 又
1x *yòu?* 或	1x *yòu?* 或

There are other frequent and moreover unambiguous cases of words written alternately by full and abbreviated forms of the same character. The characters used to write the words *qí* {其} and *zhě* {者} are often abbreviated in their upper or lower parts respectively.

MWD.A	MWD.B
其 其	其 none
亓 六	亓 元
者 耆	者 香
考 老	考 耆

The distribution of these variants shows an interesting peculiarity. The scribe of MWD.A in writing the word *qí* {其} does not do what one would expect and what he actually does in the case of *zhě* {者}, i.e. first use the full form and only later occasionally abbreviate it or give it up altogether. In the case of 其 he consistently writes the simplified form from the very beginning of the manuscript and then he suddenly changes to the full form, which he then applies consistently as well.[26] This change takes place exactly where the first text of the manuscript, i.e. the *De* part of *Laozi*, ends and the *Dao* text starts. There can hardly be any semantic significance to writing such a function word differently in different texts. Theoretically the scribe could have written the first part of the manuscript

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26   Among the 60 occurrences of the word *qí* in the text *De*, there is one singular exception (i.e. one of five instances in col. 38), where it is written 其 as in the following text *Dao*. This does not invalidate the claim of an underlying regularity.

in a lax mood or fatigued state, have made a break after finishing the first text and then used the full form of 其 when he continued work on another occasion, e.g. on the following day. One half of the *Laozi* would probably be quite a conceivable amount of text for one day's labour of a copyist.[27]

But there is yet another conceivable explanation: The scribe may have copied the *De* and *Dao* parts of the *Laozi* from separate written models that had been produced under different circumstances, written perhaps by scribes of different schools who therefore had different standards for writing certain words. The historian and codicologist Marita Blattmann (2003) gives a good example of what she calls "the active text": Looking at a list of telephone numbers one has all copied oneself, one often notices that one has used different layout features like spacing or slashes, brackets, dots or dashes to separate parts of the number. These features are often inadvertently taken over from the source copied. I should like to add another consideration of consequence for our assessment of variants in ancient manuscripts: The less one understands what one copies the more one will strive to keep close to the original form in order to convey the information correctly.[28]

Keeping the possibility of a written model in mind, let us proceed to another example of alternating complex and simple forms of writing the same word. This time the simple form is not an abbreviation of the complex one but altogether another character. The word in question is *hòu* < *ɦ(r)oʔ* (after, behind). In the MWD.A this word occurs only in the first three texts. It is written with the complex form 後 in only four instances out of thirty-four. The other thirty instances all have a simpler character . There is a manifest principle that rules the choice between complex or simple forms. The former is, almost without exception, used for *hòu* in contrast to an antonym (*xiān* 先 or *qián* 前 or the like), whereas the simple forms always occur either in the combination *ér-hòu*

27 I hesitate to commit myself to specific estimates of how many characters a day a scribe would be able to write, as this not only depends on the scribe's skill and the material written on, but also on the nature of the text copied, the style of script, the brush etc. Yet, the length of the *De* text is a conceivable amount for a day's work of a copyist and is within the range considered possible also by other scholars; cf. Nienhauser 2003: 57, n.56.

28 To name but two examples from my personal experience: I have, for instance, repeatedly received mail from foreign countries with my telephone number written as part of the address, faithfully copied from my name card. The person who wrote it apparently was not sure what belonged to the address and what did not and rather copied too much than too little, to make sure no information was missing. This is what I myself do when I note an error message from my computer screen; not knowing which parts of the message are relevant for the particular problem, I copy all of it.

{而後} or *rán-hòu* {然後}. I suspect the word written with the complex character is a contrastive or "stressed form" of *hòu* and the other a (possibly even phonetically contracted) "unstressed form".

		MWD.A				MWD.B
text 1	2x 後	both 先↔後		text 1	6x 後	1x 先↔後
	3x 后	all 而后			6x 后	all 然后
text 2	1x 後	先↔後		text 2	13x 後	10x 前/先↔後, 1x 後↔始
					8x 后	all "ruler"
text 3	1x 後	前↔後		text 3	1x 後	
	1x 后	然后				
	1x 笱	然笱				
	25x 旬	9x 然旬, 16x 而旬				
text 4	12x 后	11x "ruler", 1x 然后 (ruler?)		text 4	2x 后	1x 前↔后
text 5	2x 后	both 王后		text 5	2x 後	both 先↔後
					1x 后	而后
					3x 句	而句
text 6	2x 后	both "ruler"		text 6	2x 後	1x 先↔後, 1x 後↔首

後 ⬛ 后 ⬛ 笱 ⬛ 旬 ⬛   後 ⬛ 后 ⬛ 句 ⬛

MWD.A in the beginning writes the unstressed form with the character 后, commonly used to write *hòu* < *gg(r)o-ʔ (ruler, lord). This changes in text three (*Wu xing*), where 笱 is used. However, in the very first instance the scribe still writes 后 just like in text one. I suspect the scribe was used to writing this form. This is not a case of preservative assimilation, because the last time he had written this character was 181 columns earlier in the manuscript, i.e. at least some hours ago.[29] Rather, he must have preferred or been accustomed to using this form in general. Why then did he four columns further down switch to 笱? I suspect he now followed the model he was copying and gave faithfulness to this model precedence over orthographic consistency in the manuscript he was about

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29 后 occurs three times in col. 3 (a presumed fourth instance in the same column is lost) and then again in col. 184.

to produce. Another interesting detail is the change from the double to a single bamboo component. Apparently this is a form of abbreviation. But as single instead of double "bamboo" or "grass" classifiers are fairly common in older manuscripts, perhaps the single bamboo form here could be an indication that the text *Wu xing* was copied from a model which was of an earlier date than that of the *Laozi De* text. This is said merely to point out that it may be worthwhile to observe such small details. But as long as there is not a number of other features pointing in the same direction, any statements about different dates of the model texts would be premature.

Even the assumptions made above about why the scribe chose a certain form are still uncertain, but we do at least have a clear and simple orthographic rule pertaining to this manuscript: The stressed form of *hòu* is written with the complex character, whereas one of the simpler forms is used for the unstressed *hòu* – typically occurring in conjunction with *ér* 而 or *rán* 然.[30] It is possible that this orthographic regularity reflected a phonetic difference between a free (thus: full) and a bound (thus: contracted) form, like the English word "shire" [ʃaɪə] vis-à-vis the syllable "-shire" [-ʃə] in the names of e.g. Yorkshire or Hampshire.

Basically the same rule for writing the complex or simple forms for the word *hòu* is also observed in the MWD.B. Interestingly, the beginning of text five (*De*) has a chain of four parallel sentences with the combination *ér-hòu* in them. The scribe takes the form that he has already used twice in the preceding text four (*Dao yuan*) only two times earlier, but then he switches to 句, which is probably what was written in the model. If so, we do have a case of preservative assimilation here.[31]

30　Although the same character writes the word "behind" in the first part of the manuscript and the word "ruler" in the later portions, there is no orthographic ambiguity *within* one of the six texts of the manuscript. The singular case of 后 after 然 in text 4 could very well mean "ruler", despite the preceding 然.

31　The two instances of *hòu* in text four of MWD.B seem to contradict the rule delineated above, because they both appear in contrast to *qián* 前 and must thus count as the stressed form of *hòu* but are still written with a simple form. I could reformulate the orthographic principle as "the complex form never occurs in *ér-hòu* or *rán-hòu*" just to gloss over this contradiction. But then there is an exception to this rule, too: In one sentence in the *Xi ci* manuscript the complex form of writing *hòu* follows *ér*. However, *hòu* is here also used in contrast to a preceding *xiān* 先, thus fulfilling the condition for a stressed form of the word. It seems, notwithstanding an occasional exception, the distinction between stressed and unstressed forms is still the best explanation for the usage of complex and simpler forms of writing *hòu* in the Mawangdui manuscripts.

Interestingly, the orthographic convention observed above seems to have been very widespread both in time and space: The manuscripts from Guodian 郭店 tomb 1[32] consistently use the (in Xu Shen's 許慎 terms)[33] *guwen* 古文 form 後 for the stressed, and an equivalent of 句 for the unstressed *hòu*.[34]

後		前↔後, 先↔後, 初↔後, 進↔後
句		然句, 而句
后		然后, 后稷

The same principle is observed in the manuscripts of the Shanghai Museum that have so far been published.[35] There are slight differences, such as the Shanghai *Zi yi* manuscript writing 后 where the Guodian counterpart has 句, or the name of Hou Ji written 句, but the principle of choosing the complex vs. simple forms is the same. To mention an example from further north, a cursory examination of

32 For a brief account of this tomb, excavated 1993 in the area of the former Chu 楚 capital Ying 郢, near present-day Jingmen 荊門, Hubei, see *Wenwu* 494 (1997.7): 35–48; cf. also Allan and Williams 2000.

33 Cf. Duan Yucai 1815: II.16 (p.77a).

34 In the Guodian manuscripts, the character 後 occurs eleven times, including two variant forms 後 in the phrase "先後" on slips 17 () and 19 () of the manuscript *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出, which (along with *Cheng zhi wen zhi* 成之聞之, *Zun de yi* 尊德義 and *Liu de* 六德) belongs to those of the Guodian manuscripts written in a rather liberal style of script. The fact that the scribe omitted the lower part of the preceding 先 on slip 17 betrays a certain lack of either care or proficiency on the part of the scribe, which may also explain the variant 後. While the instances of 句 in the Guodian manuscripts count by the dozens, the character 后 occurs only twice, namely in the manuscript *Tang Yu zhi dao* 唐虞之道, which is written in a style of script clearly different from all the other GD manuscripts: 后 first stands for the *hòu* in *rán-hòu* (, slip 3) and then for Hou in the name of Hou Ji 后稷 (, slip 10). Both characters – used in this manuscript, very probably by the same scribe, to write two different words – are structurally identical, yet markedly different in shape. Whether or not this is accidental, cannot be decided on the basis of but two specimens.

35 These are Warring States bamboo mss. from the state of Chu that were acquired from the Hong Kong antique marked by the Shanghai Museum in 1996 and are probably close to the Guodian manuscripts both in terms of time and space. Cf. Ma Chengyuan 2001–04.

the Yinqueshan 銀雀山 manuscripts showed that the same rule is apparently observed there as well.[36]

If the assumption be correct that 後 and 后 (or 句/筍/旬) stand for a stressed (~full) or unstressed (~contracted) form of a word *hòu* meaning "after / behind" respectively, this would make the complex vs. simple character(s) something like a hybrid of graphic-only and graphic-lexical variation. It would not be the only instance in which graphic variants have been overlooked on grounds of a wrongly assumed complete lexical identity. A notorious case is that of the final particle 殹 (*yì* < *ʔʔe-s/*ʔʔi-s; typical for the language of Qin 秦), which is often erroneously read as 也 (*yě* < *laj-ʔ), because it is used in the same function as *yě* without any discernible difference. This case of variation has been thoroughly and convincingly explained by Ōnishi (1998) and need not be further discussed here.[37] Another case is the variation of 於 (*yú* < *ʔa) vis-à-vis 于 (*yú* < *wa), which is often treated nonchalantly in transcriptions of manuscript texts, probably because the two words are semantically alike, homophonous in modern Chinese and both written as 于 in simplified orthography.[38] For early Chinese manuscripts the variation is nevertheless significant, as *yú* 于 is more typical of pre-classical language and its use in quotations in the manuscript shows that the different usage was still preserved, i.e. it may indicate that the language of the quotation had not been modernised when it was incorporated into a more recent text. The distribution of 於 and 于 in the Mawangdui manuscripts certainly requires a thorough study. However, a cursory examination already shows significant differences: The use of 于 in the *Zhou Yi* ms. vis-à-vis 於 in the *Xi ci* ms. could indicate an earlier date of the text of the former. In MWD.A, the eleven instances of 于 (as compared to 116 於 in the whole manuscript) all occur in the text *Wu xing*, and all but two in recognised *Shi* 詩

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36   Nearly 5.000 bamboo strips, most notably military manuals, were excavated in 1972 from a Han tomb (tomb 1 of this site) in the county of Linyi 臨沂, Shandong province. Cf. the several publications in *Wenwu* in the years 1974 to 1977 and the first volume of a planned series *Yinqueshan Han mu zhujian* 銀雀山漢墓竹簡 (Wenwu chubanshe, 1985); for a complete transcription of the manuscript texts, see Wu Jiulong (1985).

37   For an earlier, though less detailed, account of this phenomenon, see Li Yumin 1981. Jiang Yunyu (2002) also discusses the distribution of 也 and 殹, but does not always clearly distinguish between words and characters.

38   Even Qiu Xigui's (2000: 361–62) assertion that these two words, although "in antiquity […] by no means homophonous […] possibly due to dialectal or temporal differences […] may well represent differentiated forms derived from one word" cannot justify to neglect the difference between the two either in transcriptions or interpretations of manuscript texts.

quotations.[39] The mere five instances of 于 (as compared to 119 於) in MWD.B may also witness the archaic character of the respective passages or may be traces of a certain regional tradition, as they appear in the texts *Jing fa* and *Shiliu jing*, which both have close parallels in several cognate texts of earlier literature.[40]

Finally, we must examine some of the more conspicuous cases of graphic variants, i.e. words written with characters that stand for different words in modern orthography. I will only in passing mention some cases that are constant within one manuscript: e.g. the words *zhàn* "to fight" and *shèng* "to overcome". Both words are written in a constant orthography in both manuscripts, albeit different from modern standard in MWD.B:

	MWD.A	MWD.B
zhàn {戰}	always (17x) 戰 	always (16x) 單
shèng {勝}	always (36x) 胜 (勝) 	always (26x) 胖 (朕)

The more interesting cases, however, are those in which the writing of the same word varies *within* the manuscript, e.g. *tīng* {聽, "to hear"} and *cōng* {聰, "the capacity of acute hearing"}: In MWD.B, *tīng* takes a constant form and *cōng* does not occur at all. In the MWD.A, *tīng* is written in two forms. The change to the abbreviated form takes place just with the beginning of a new text. *Cōng* is also written in two forms, this time entirely different characters; here the change occurs in the middle of the *Wu xing* text. But it is not just anywhere in the text. The unusual character for *cōng* is used only in the *shuō* 說 section. So perhaps

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39 One of the two exceptions (the sixth character in col. 176, erroneously transcribed as 於 in the 1980 Wenwu edition) is clearly not accidental, as the Guodian counterpart of just this passage has 于 as well. I could not find a Guodian counterpart to the second exception, but it appears that the Guodian *Wu xing* ms. observes the same distinction between 于 and 於 as MWD.A does.

40 Edmund Ryden's (1997) term "Wu-Yue-literature" points in one direction; the parallels in *Guanzi* 管子 and *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 might invite claims to more northerly regional traditions. Assumptions such as these need to be verified (or falsified) by a thorough text critical examination that takes into account the actual orthography of the manuscript texts.

this commentary and the *jīng* 經 section it commented on were copied from different sources, respectively.

	MWD.A		MWD.B	
tīng {聽}		varying		constant
	text 1:	—	text 1:	7x 聴
	text 2:	2x 聽	text 2:	—
	text 3b:	1x 聽	text 3:	2x 聴
	text 4:	5x 耴	text 4:	1x 聴
	text 5:	1x 耴	text 5:	—
	text 6:	—	text 6:	2x 聴
cōng {聰}		varying		
	text 1:	—	text 1:	—
	text 2:	—	text 2:	—
	text 3a:	3x 忘 (>恖)	text 3:	—
	text 3b:	10x 嚶	text 4:	—
	text 4:	—	text 5:	—
	text 5:	—	text 6:	—
	text 6:	2x 忘 (>恖)		

A yet more intriguing case is the orthography of two words closely related to *tīng* {聽}, namely *shēng* {聲, "sound/voice"} and *shèng* {聖, "extraordinarily perceptive > sagacious"}.[41] Whereas in the earlier Guodian manuscripts all three words are written approximately as we write only *shèng* {聖} today and other comparable manuscripts from that period seem to distinguish the words just as little,[42] the later Mawangdui *Laozi* manuscripts make a clearer orthographic distinction between the three.

41 The words *shēng* and *shèng*, and to a lesser degree also *tīng*, have long been acknowledged as etymologically and/or etymographically related, on which see Gu Jiegang 1979, Mei Tsu-lin 1994, Boltz 1994: 115–116, and Qiu Xigui 2000: 195–196.

42 Cf. *Qiong da yi shi* #14.17 聖{聽}, *Wu xing* #20.15 聖{聲} / #20.25 聖{聖}, *Xing zi ming chu* #24.3 聖{聲} [Shanghai museum counterpart = SH: 耵] / #24.19 聖{聽} [SH: 聖] / #24.23 聖{聲} [SH: 聖] / #27.18 聖{聽} and several more 聖{聲} in the same manuscript

	MWD.A		MWD.B	
shēng {聲}		constant		nearly constant
	text 1:	1x 聲	text 1:	7x 聲
	text 2:	1x 聲	text 2:	1x 聲, 1x 殸
	text 3b:	13x 聲	text 3:	—
	text 4:	3x 聲	text 4:	—
	text 5:	1x 聲	text 5:	1x 聲
	text 6:	3x 聲	text 6:	1x 聲
shèng {聖}		varying		constant
	text 1:	8x	text 1:	1x 耴
	text 2:	10x 聲	text 2:	1x 耴
	text 3	34x 聖	text 3:	1x 耴
	text 4:	2x 聖	text 4:	1x 耴
	text 5:	—	text 5:	1x 耴
	text 6:	6x 聖	text 6:	1x 耴

Shēng is in both manuscripts regularly written with an equivalent of the modern standard character, the singular exception in MWD.B with the missing ear component (col. 140: 殸) may well be a scribal error or an abbreviation. *Shèng* {聖} is throughout MWD.B written like the modern standard character minus the bottom component. This form is, by the way, also used in the *Xi ci* manuscript. MWD.A uses an equivalent of the modern standard form, except in text two (*Dao*). This is another indication – besides the case of 亓 in text 1 (*De*) vs. 其 in text 2 (*Dao*) – that the two parts of the *Laozi* were probably copied from written models of different provenance.

Apparently the same character is used in text two of MWD.A to write the word *shēng* {聲} once in column 96, and then, beginning fourteen characters further down in the same column, it is used for all the instances of the word *shèng* {聖} in this text. So there seems to be an orthographic inconsistency *even within one text* of the manuscript. However, a closer look shows that the character used for *shēng* differs from the ten others that write the word *shèng*, the former has classifier 79 殳 as the upper right part (聲), where the other ten all have classifier 66 攴 (聲). Moreover, the top part of both these forms in text two is identical, but it clearly differs from the *shēng*-characters (聲) in all other texts of the manuscript. One might argue that text two was perhaps written by a different scribe and therefore uses a different orthography, but as I cannot see

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[SH: 聖]. 聖 is also used on strip #94 of the Baoshan manuscripts, supposedly for the name of Chu Sheng wang 楚聲王, in the phrase 聖冢之夫＝ {聲塚之大夫}.

any other features that would indicate a different hand, I still think it is much more probable that the same scribe faithfully copied different forms he found in different written models that did not share the same orthographic conventions.

MWD.A

text2		all other texts	
shēng {聲}: 聲	col. 96	*shēng* {聲}: 聲	col. 365
shèng {聖}: 聲	col. 96	*shèng* {聖}: 聖	col. 280
聲	col. 104 etc.		

In the following I aim to demonstrate that both *Laozi* manuscripts were probably written with a much higher degree of orthographic consistency than it may appear at first sight. This requires an example offering a sufficient quantity of specimens to allow the observation of regularities. As the most frequent form of apparent orthographic inconsistency in early Chinese manuscripts is variation in the semantic classifiers, a phonetic series seems to lend itself best to such an examination. I chose the series of words that are written with characters *originally* sharing the phonophoric 井, i.e. the characters containing the components 青 or 爭.[43] Their distribution in the two manuscripts is as follows:

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[43] Although Karlgren registers them separately under the 爭 and 生 *xiesheng* series (GSR 811–812), he describes 爭 as being "extracted" from the archaic form of 靜, which is, I believe, borne out also by manuscript evidence. I also follow He Linyi (1998: 821) in identifying 井 (not 生) as the phonophoric of 青, assuming that the erroneous identification of 井 as 丹 led to considering 生, instead of 井, to be the phonophoric. If the character forming the basis for the 爭-series originally shared the phonophoric of the 青-series, it follows that the part of the GSR series 812 from 812c' onwards should rather be considered as belonging to 811 (and eventually also to the 井-series 819 as well as the 开-series 808), whereas the characters sharing the phonophoric 生 (812a–b') should be treated separately. To narrow the scope for the purposes of the present study, I restrict myself to the characters containing 爭 or 青 in modern script.

	MWD.A	MWD.B
qīng {清}	6 instances text 1: 2x 清, 1x 請 text 2: 1x 清 text 6: 2x 清	4 instances text 2: 1x 清 text 5: 2x 清 text 6: 1x 清
qíng {情}	2 instances text 5: 2x 請	7 instances text 1: 5x 請 text 2: 2x 請
qǐng {請}	5 instances text 4: 4x 請 text 5: 1x 請	2 instances text 2: 2x 請
jīng {精}	8 instances text 1: 1x 精 text 2: 2x 請 text 3a: 4x 晴 text 6: 1x 青	11 instances text 1: 3x 精 text 4: 5x 精 text 5: 1x 精 text 6: 2x 請
jìng {靜}	9 instances text 1: 4x 靚, 1x 靜 text 2: 3x 悳, 1x 清	48 instances text 1: 19x 𩇯 text 2: 17x 𩇯 / 1x 争 text3: 1x 𩇯 text4: 2x 𩇯 text5: 3x 𩇯 text6: 5x 𩇯
zhēng {爭}	11 instances text 1: 3x 靜 text 2: 2x 靜, 2x 爭 text 4: 2x 靜, 2x 爭	36 instances text 1.4: 2x 挣 / text 1.6: 1x 𩇯 / text 1.7: 2x 靜 text 2: 15x 争, 1x 挣 text 3: 5x 争 text 4: 1x 争 text 5: 4x 争 text 6: 5x 争

The words listed above are written with different degrees of orthographic regularity. One word may be written with up to four different characters (always classifier variation) in the same ms., but *within* one text the regularity is higher: there is always clearly one dominant form with never more than one instance of the same word written differently.[44] Some words are invariably written with the

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44   The only exception is the word *zhēng* {爭} in texts two and four of MWD.A, where it
       appears four times each and has two exceptions in each text. In text four one could make a
       claim for 靜 and 爭 to reflect a lexical difference. In text two the matter is being com-
       plicated by a tricky combination of textual problems. The two 靜 that are assumed to stand
       for *zhēng* {爭} occur in the counterpart to chapter eight of the received text, where the

same character throughout the two manuscripts, e.g. both *qǐng* {請} and *qíng* {情} are always written with the character 請.

To show that observing such regularities may be of consequence for the interpretation of a manuscript text, I will discuss here only the most striking of the examined cases. The word *qīng* {清} is written with the highest degree of regularity in both manuscripts. Whereas the regularity of writing the words *qǐng* {請} and *qíng* {情} works only in one direction (i.e. both words are always written with the same character 請, but this character does not unambiguously indicate which of the two words it stands for), the relation between the word *qīng* {清} and the character 清 is unambiguous in both ways, i.e. the word *qīng* {清} is written with no character but 清, and whenever this character 清 is used, it is to write the word *qīng* {清} and none else. However, for each direction of this relationship the manuscript has one instance that apparently contradicts the observed regularity. The character 清 is assumed to stand for the word *jìng* {靜}

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expression "不爭" at the beginning recurs at the end of the chapter. MWD.A has "有靜 [...] 不靜" in the corresponding places and MWD.B has "有爭 [...] 不爭". I believe that, the whole chapter taken as an independent textual unit, to read MWD.A in the respective places as *yǒu jìng* (to have the quality of tranquillity) and *bù jìng* (to not be tranquil) can make perfect sense, but it would result in a number of new problems. First, the difference to MWD.B and the *textus receptus* would have to be explained as a series of subsequent – depending on the point of view – corruptions or re-interpretations in the history of the text. Second, one would have to resist the temptation of assuming that the first parts of "夫唯不靜故无尤" (col. 106, WB ch. 8) and "夫唯不爭故莫能與之爭" (col. 137, WB ch. 22) would have to mean the same, simply because they "merely" differ in one character component. Third, to prove a greater orthographic strictness in writing *zhēng* 爭 ('to contend', 'to contest') and *zhēng* 諍 ('to severely remonstrate [at the risk of one's life]') vis-à-vis *jìng* 靜 ('to be tranquil') would require quite elaborate reinterpretations of the respective passages (col. 63–64, WB ch. 66; col. 71, WB ch. 68). Fourth, as the perhaps most unwelcome consequence, the greater orthographic consistency in writing the characters just discussed would imply a yet greater diversity in writing the word *jìng* {靜} as either 恵, 靜 or 清 even *within* text two of the manuscript, while none of the other words discussed here is written with more than two different forms within one text. In the light of all these complications, one is tempted to explain the form 爭 for the word *zhēng* {爭} in MWD.A simply as cases of abbreviation, as both in texts 2 and 4 the more complex forms 靜 and 諍 occur earlier than 爭. For pragmatic reasons, I will postpone the problem to a later study, but should like to stress that the reading of a particular character cannot be decided upon in isolation. The student of such manuscript texts will eventually have to face the whole complexity of problems ranging from minute graphic details to the codicological realisation of the texts and the manuscripts as integral parts of a funerary ensemble, or other archaeological context, indicating a certain historical background. For an early study of the two Mawangdui *Laozi* mss. that follows such a complex approach, see Friedrich 1996.

in text two (col. 143), and it is almost unanimously believed that in the one instance of the character 請 in text one (col. 18) the intended word is *qīng* {清}.[45] The first exception occurs in a part of the *Laozi* (ch. 26) that abounds in the most severe textual problems and seems to me no less questionable in the widely diverging interpretations of the received texts than in the two manuscript versions (unfortunately there is no Guodian counterpart). It is not only all but certain that the reading *jìng* is correct; moreover, there did not seem to exist as firmly established a convention for writing this word as it did for the word *qīng*.[46] It is the alleged unorthodox representation of *this* word that shall be examined in the following.

There are, of course, several possible ways to deal with such an irregularity. One is to attach little importance to classifier variation in general and to assume an overall lack of orthographic rules or conventions despite the regularities that can actually be observed. One could also simply explain away the irregularity as a scribal error. But both approaches would attach too little importance to the actual manuscript evidence and compel the reader to solely rely on the context and textual parallels to judge what word is written. For deciding upon the reading of manuscript characters I therefore propose a hierarchy in which internal criteria rank before external ones: *First*, whatever orthographic regularities can be observed within the respective manuscript should be applied as an additional criterion to reassess former assumptions about what words the manuscript characters write. The internal logic coherence of the text under examination ranks *second*, but still before arguments based on counterparts in manuscripts or received literature or other close textual parallels, which would consequently be *third* rank criteria. All considerations based on comparable sorts of texts from the same period (in so far as the respective texts can be reliably dated) or even on what is considered general usage in early Chinese literature (i.e. weighing whether the respective expression would sound "typical" or "odd") – all these considerations rank only *fourth*. This seemingly simple consideration is by no means trivial, as traditionally many decisions are based on

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45   The notable exception is William G. Boltz's (1995: 405) straightforward translation of 請 as "invoking", to which I will revert below.

46   MWD.A offers three more ways of writing *jìng* {靜}: 靚, 靜 and 恵. If the character 靜 should have been used for the word *zhēng* earlier, or if an earlier way of writing *jìng*, e.g. as 靚 or 靖 or perhaps 恵, was modified by replacing one of its components with 爭 as an additional phonophoric – if any of these scenarios, which are speculations beyond my competence, were true, this would explain why there was so little stability in the conventions for writing these two words.

a different, if not fundamentally reversed, order: They attach greater importance to external factors; counterparts in parallel or other texts and general usage often rank before internal logic of the text, and orthographic regularities within a manuscript are hardly ever discussed.

3. Reconsidering a reading according to hierarchical criteria

The character 請, addressed above as the most outstanding irregularity in the examined series, occurs in the counterpart to the final portion of chapter 45 of the received *Laozi*. This portion consists of three sentences which can justly be treated as an integral textual unit – independent of the preceding verses that, according to the received text, constitute the beginning of the same chapter:[47]

textus receptus (王弼):	躁勝寒靜勝熱 清靜 以爲天下正
Laozi A ms.:	趮勝寒靚勝炅 請靚 可以爲天下正
Laozi B ms.:	趮胖寒□□□ □□□□□□□

The first part of this textual unit (sentences 1–2) looks quite clear at first sight: "Fidgetiness overcomes cold, and tranquillity overcomes heat."[48] The second part may be read as either "by means of clear tranquillity the world is to be put into order" or "by means of clarity *and* tranquillity the world is to be put into

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47   The independent nature of these two parts of the received chapter 45 is suggested by the consistency of the "A 若/如 B" throughout the first part and the ensuing change of sentence structure in the second part. The fact that in the matching Guodian passage the two parts are separated by a square black mark confirms this assumption.

48   The characters 趮 and 靚 are both well attested allographs for 躁 (*zào*, restless) and 靜 (*jìng*, tranquil) respectively. 炅 ist the conventional character for the relatively rare word *jiǒng* meaning "hot/heat" (later also used in the sense "bright/shining"). It occurs yet another time in the text *Dao* of the A-manuscript (col. 151), where the counterpart in the B-manuscript (col. 244b) has 熱. This and the antithetical structure of the statement support the reading in the sense of "hot/heat" strongly enough to allow me to neglect at this point the disagreement with chapter 29 of the *textus receptus*, which is not under discussion at the moment. The forms 勝 and 胖 have both been discussed above as standard characters for the word *shèng* {勝} in the respective manuscripts. The following character is in both manuscripts not clearly discernible; in both there is a faint trace of what could be an additional stroke that would make the characters equivalents of 塞. The actual character form being not entirely certain, the secondary criterion of internal logic makes 寒 the by far more likely reading.

order" or "be clear and tranquil to put the world into order". As mentioned
above, the MWD.A character 請 is generally assumed to stand for the word *qīng*
{清}. The application of the criteria mentioned above in their hierarchical order,
however, changes the picture: The *first rank* criterion of observed orthographic
regularities in the manuscript makes the reading *qīng* {清} highly unlikely, as
this word is invariably written with the character 清. The character 請 for which
a reading is needed here, is, apart from the case in question, in MWD.A used to
write three different words: *qíng* {情, [true inner] condition}, *qǐng* {請, to beg},
and *jīng* {精, essence}. Looking at it from the opposite angle, *jīng* {精} belongs
to the words written with (next to *jing*) the highest degree of orthographic
inconsistency. The other two words, *qíng* {情} and *qǐng* {請}, are *always*
written with the character 請 throughout both manuscripts, which makes them
by far more likely readings than *jīng* {精}.

Also the *secondary* criterion of inner logic makes this word the least likely
of the three: The idea of "essence" does not have much to do with the rather
simple psycho-physiological insight of the first part of the considered text or
with the political maxim derived from it in the second part. Of the two remaining
words, *qǐng* {請} is the less likely. "I beg, [you] be tranquil to put the world into
order" would be a decidedly untypical way of speaking in this sort of text. The
Laozi in general does not explicitly address a person, and if a personalised
perspective occurs at all, it is that of the ruler; never do we find the ruler
addressed by one of his subjects as we do in other Warring States texts. The
remaining word *qíng* {情} is the most likely reading according to the criteria of
the first and second order: it is regularly written with this character in both
MWD.A and B, and it fits well in the logic of the text: "Restlessness overcomes
cold and tranquillity overcomes heat. By [attaining] tranquil conditions [either in
society in general or within one's person] the world can be put into order."[49]

I should like to stress, however, that I neither claim to propose this as an
urtext version of this *Laozi* passage, nor can the customary reading *qīng* {清} be
ruled out with certainty even for this particular manuscript. I merely want to
point out that no *internal* features of the manuscript, i.e. first and second rank

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49   It must be remembered that *qíng* 情 does not only mean "true inner conditions" of an
      individual (as opposed to whatever they may falsely claim or pretend) in the sense of what is
      sometimes too narrowly understood as "emotions". *Qing* often denotes the actual conditions
      also of the polity or the natural environment. The expression *min qing* 民情, frequently used
      in the political literature of the time, from the ruler's point of view involves the question
      whether the populace were well fed and clothed or whether, if they were not, their emotions
      took an unfavourable turn towards imminent uproar.

criteria, suggest this reading: Orthographic regularities even strongly contradict it; and judging from the contents of the text, after the two statements about the relation between movement and temperature, clarity comes into play somewhat unexpectedly and with hardly any compelling logical necessity.

It is criteria of the third and fourth rank that support the reading *qīng* {清}, i.e. external evidence none of which, however, can reliably be dated earlier than the manuscript in question. This external evidence includes transmitted *Laozi* versions (third rank argument) as well as other sources (fourth rank argument) mentioning the expression *qīng jìng* (by the way, both written as 清靜 and 清 淨), also rhymed with *zhèng* 正 or *dìng* 定 and sometimes in connection with the labels Laozi or Huang-Lao 黃老.[50] But even if it could be ascertained that a relatively fixed *Laozi* text or any other common saying or proverb that was later incorporated into the *Laozi* used the expression *qīng jìng* 清靜 in an identical context, the manuscript text in question could still have intentionally said something else. The frequent occurrence of the phrase *qīng jìng* 清靜 in con- nection with *Laozi* is not necessarily an argument in favour of the transmitted version but rather makes it more suspicious as a possible *lectio facilior*. It is a common feature of not only Chinese literary history that especially popular texts were repeatedly being re-shaped and re-worded to suit changing ideological conditions. The transmitted early Chinese literature abounds in examples of this phenomenon. Moreover, *qīng jìng* 清靜 seems to typically occur in conjunction with the ideas of non-action or non-interference (無爲 / 亡爲, 不事, 不擾, 不撓) and self-restraint (自守, 少欲) – concepts that do not seem to play any role in the *Laozi* passage under discussion.

Two more points need to be mentioned in connection with this passage: One is William Boltz's (1995: 400–405) well-founded reading of it in a different sense. He understands 趮勝寒靚勝炅請靚可以爲天下正 as: "Dry-warmth subdues chills, Cool-moisture subdues fevers. Invoking quiescence – able to serve as Rector for the Subcelestial Realm." His is to my knowledge the only interpretation of this passage that strictly gives internal criteria precedence over external ones. Instead of dismissing 炅 (*jiǒng*, "hot, heat") as completely equal

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50 Cf. *Shiji* 史記 63 (7.2143) "李耳無爲自化清靜自正", which is paraphrased by Zhang Shoujie 張守節 (8th c.) in his *zheng yi* 正義 commentary as "無所造爲而自化清淨不撓而 民自歸正也", and *Shiji* 54 (6.2029) "蓋公爲言治道貴清靜而民自定[…]其治要用黃老". In the cases of *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 11 ("清靜貞正", ICS-Concordance 136/68/15) *Zhuangzi* 莊子 11 ("无視无聽抱神以靜形將自正必靜必清无勞女形无搖女精乃可以長生", Guo Qingfan 1961: 381) one could make a claim for an earlier date than MWD.A, but hardly with certainty.

with 熱 (*rè*, "hot, heat"), he understands it in the more specialised sense of "fever", because it is used as such in the complementary pair *jiǒng* 炅 / *hán* 寒 ("fever / chills") in the medical text *Su wen* 素問. Consequently he reads 趮 not as standing for the word *zào* "restless" (趮 being an attested allograph of 躁) but as standing for a word *sào* "dry, warm" (today written 燥 and pronounced *zào*) – according to Lu Deming 陸德明 a Chu dialect word for "fire". Furthermore, Boltz reads 靚 as standing for a word meaning "cool (as of water)" that has still descendants in some Min dialects and would be written 瀞 and pronounced *qìng* according to modern standard.

Convincing as Boltz's argumentation is, especially as it achieves a more pronounced antithetical structure that makes the contrast to the preceding verses less sharp, I hesitate to follow this reading for several reasons: On the level of the logic of the text, I expect the relation between the first two sentences of this latter half of *Laozi* ch. 45 and the concluding third one to be closer than that between the two halves of the chapter. I find the connection between subduing fever by cool moisture, on the one hand, and by quiescence being able to reign the world, on the other hand, less perspicuous than that between overcoming heat by quiescence and by the same means being able to reign. On the level of orthography, I think 炅 can be read as the word *jiǒng* without recourse to *ré* 熱 and yet need not be understood in the narrower sense as a medical term. It can just mean "hot", as it very probably does in the match to chapter 29, not only because MWD.B has 熱 in the corresponding place, but also from the logic of the text in this passage of MWD.A alone, where fever does not seem to be indicated. Moreover, reading *jiǒng* 炅 as "fever" requires the re-interpretation of two more characters, namely that of 趮 as 燥 and 靚 as 瀞. My strongest reservation, however, concerns reading the identical character 靚 first as standing for "cool-moisture" (*qìng*) and only four characters further down in the text as "quiescence" (*jìng*). An orthographic irregularity in such close proximity is not typical of this manuscript and would only be plausible if a pun was intended. In sum, according to my proposed principles I cannot follow Boltz's reading, except for the very character 請 that is my chief topic of discussion here. If understood, as by Boltz, in the sense of "to invoke", it is no less likely than the reading *qíng* 情 – neither is it more so, as both words are regularly written as 請 in MWD.A.

The second point I have not yet discussed is the Guodian parallel of this passage, which is transcribed in the 1998 Wenwu edition as follows:

"枭(燥)剰(勝)蒼(滄)青(清)剰(勝)然(熱)清清(靜)爲天下定(正)"[51]

Judging from this transcription, the Guodian text confirms Boltz's interpretation of the corresponding Mawangdui passage in its first part, if it were read as: "Dry heat overcomes cold, cold (as associated with water) overcomes (burning) heat." But then one would consequently have to read on: "Cold tranquillity will stabilise/order the world." On a closer look, however, the case becomes more complicated again. First, we must remember that the Guodian text is not of first rank value to explain a problem in the Mawangdui manuscript. It need not be the same text (seen from a synchronic perspective) or the same *state* of the text (from a diachronic perspective). Second, an extensive examination of orthographic regularities in the Guodian manuscripts would be necessary to judge the several textual problems with some confidence. I will here restrict myself only to the two characters with the phonophoric 井 as contained in the component 青. At first sight, the "water" classifier in the character preceding "爲天下定" seems to confirm the traditional reading *qīng jìng* {清靜} (that is almost unanimously assumed also by other editions)[52] beyond doubt. However, even as a third rate argument with regard to MWD.A, this would still be questionable. Notwithstanding the presence of the "water" classifier, the reading *qīng jìng* is ultimately based on the transmitted texts only.

Ignoring for the moment the fact that both characters with the 青 component have an additional 口 below, the second of them is a character composed of the 青 (containing the original phonophoric 井) and a "water" classifier to the left, followed by the two small strokes that either signal repetition (*chongwen* 重文) or a ligature (*hewen* 合文). I have never come across a case in which this mark signals the repetition of one part of a character plus an *additional* component – in this case repetition of the 青 component of 清 plus an additional 爭 (or 見 or 立) to yield "清靜" (or "清靚" or "清靖"). Qiu Xigui has solved this problem by suggesting that "清_" either stands for "清青" or "青清", which he in both cases reads as *qīng jìng* {清靜}.[53] The first possibility (清[清]青[靜])

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51   Guodian *Laozi* B ms., col. 15. Cf. Jingmen shi bowuguan 1998: 118.

52   Cf. Peng Hao 2001: 99–100; Yin Zhenhuan 2001: 308–309; Li Ling 2002: 22–23; Liao Mingchun 2003: 474–479. Cui Renyi (1998: 40) writes "清清" without offering another reading in a commentary.

53   Jingmen shi bowuguan 1998: 120, note 24.

would imply that *qīng* {清} is written as 清 and would thus conflict with the reading of the character 青 in the preceding sentence as *qīng* {清} in a twofold way: Not only does this character lack the "water" component required for the word *qīng*, but also the character 青 that actually stands for *qīng* {清} in the former sentence is presumed to write the word *jìng* {靜} in the next. In Qiu's second suggestion (青[清]清[靜]) the character 青 without an additional component would stand for the word *qīng* {清}. This would be in agreement with the 青 in the preceding sentence, but it would also imply that the word *jìng* {靜} had been written as 清. This is especially interesting, because it shows that it is all but certain that the word *qīng* {清} had to be written with the "water" classifier, which again confirms that the reading *qīng jìng* {清靜} is by no means supported by the appearance in the Guodian manuscript of this classifier, but entirely based on the transmitted texts.

It must be stressed once more, that such a reading can nevertheless be entirely correct. Agreement with parallels in other texts is of course an argument for, not against, a certain reading. The important point to keep in mind, however, is that it is of lesser value as compared to the internal criteria discussed above. I have no better reading to offer myself, but in any event I consider the awareness that a particular reading is uncertain as a gain rather than a loss. The study of greater quantities of Warring States brush-written manuscripts is only just beginning to develop. In the long run, the systematic observation of graphic variation also in these kinds of manuscripts with very little orthographic consistency will allow assumptions about orthographic regularities such as I have made above with regard to the Mawangdui *Laozi* manuscripts. This would provide at least a certain probability, which – along with the context and parallels in other texts – can guide us in the decision what word a particular character writes.

Conclusion

The observation also of subtle non-structural graphic variation in the manuscripts helps to distinguish different hands and thus establish relations between the manuscripts of a corpus with regard to their origin. Based on a judgement as to which manuscripts or which particular parts of a manuscript were written by the same person or at least by persons adhering to identical standards in writing a manuscript, an examination of the distribution of variants can lead to conclusions about how the manuscript in question was produced and what

specific reasons may have caused these variants. Moreover, this approach – at least in some cases – allows to establish an underlying orthographic standard, which in turn consolidates the basis for text critical research of the manuscripts. Text critical decisions should take into account the different weight of the applied criteria and let internal criteria rank before external ones.

As regards the two Mawangdui *Laozi* manuscripts, they were apparently written each by one hand. The two manuscripts follow different orthographic standards, MWD.B all in all applying a more uniform orthography than MWD.A. The divergent orthographic conventions of the six individual texts of MWD.A suggest that they were copied from written models of different origins.[54]

Observing orthographic regularities that differ from later standards enriches our picture of the development of writing in so far as we realise more clearly that the standard we know today was not created in an act of standardisation immediately out of a state of general orthographic ambiguity but should perhaps rather be described as the survival (and further development) of one of several coexisting or even rivalling systems of orthography before and well into the early imperial era.

Abbreviations and reference to manuscript editions

ch.   chapter (of received text)
col.   column (line of manuscript text)
GD   Guodian 郭店 (edition: Jingmen shi bowuguan 1998)
MWD   Mawangdui (edition: Guojia wenwuju gu wenxian yanjiushi 1980)
MWD.A   *Laozi* A manuscript (i.e. including the four texts after the *Laozi*)
MWD.B   *Laozi* B manuscript (i.e. including the four texts before the *Laozi*)
ms./mss. manuscript/manuscripts

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54 The question of whether *some* of these models shared the same provenance requires further study. It is important to keep in mind that texts that were copied from models of different origin may nevertheless share peculiarities (in the sense of conjunctive errors). While it is unlikely that one copyist should introduce a diversification without cause, it is always possible that he would unify what is different in the different models from which he copies, i.e. follow his own habits in some features, independently from the models copied. In other words, conjunctive errors in parts of one manuscript cannot be considered sufficient proof of common models for the respective parts.

SH   Shanghai museum manuscripts (edition: Ma Chengyuan 2001–04)
WB   Wang Bi 王弼 (text of the *Laozi*)

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