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# READING THE EARLY *LAOTZYY* 老子

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## *Abstract*

The discovery of the Maawangduei manuscripts in the 1970s has changed the way in which students and scholars look at the textual record of early China. The received textual tradition has lost its exclusive claim to represent the whole of the literary world of pre-imperial China and has come to be seen instead as the result of a process of textual editing and emendation, picking and choosing, deliberate and accidental that affected a large body of textual material much of which has not been transmitted. The manuscript evidence of individual texts such as the *Laotzyy* typically presents us with a large number of variants *vis-à-vis* the *receptus*. The study of these variants calls for an approach different in both theory and method from the conventions of western textual criticism, chiefly because of the difference between western and Near Eastern alphabetic or syllabic writing systems and the logographic writing system of the Chinese manuscripts. In particular deciding whether a variant is orthographic or lexical is considerably less straightforward in the logographic case than in the alphabetic; even knowing clearly what to recognize as one word different from another is more problematical in a logographic script than in an alphabetic or syllabic one.

In the decades since the discovery of the Maawangduei manuscripts there have been, as everyone knows, a great many more discoveries of early Chinese manuscripts, some that have attracted a good deal of attention chiefly because they appear at first glance to include substantial parts of well-known transmitted literary texts, in particular the *Laotzyy*.<sup>1</sup> The most important of these later discoveries is the now well-known group of three separate manuscripts from the so-called Guodiann bamboo strip corpus, discovered officially in 1993 (tomb robbers knew of it earlier). By 1998, when the Guodiann manuscripts were pub-

1 This is a revised version of the Herrlee Glessner Creel Memorial Lecture that I presented at the University of Chicago on 7 May, 2004. I am grateful to Edward L. Shaughnessy for having invited me to deliver this lecture, to William Baxter, Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Donald Harper, Matthias Richter, Edward L. Shaughnessy, and numerous other members of the audience and workshop on that occasion for their comments, questions and suggestions in connection with that presentation, and to Robert Gassmann and M. Richter for agreeing to include this version of the paper in published form here.

lished, the world of sinological scholarship had become accustomed to learning of new manuscript discoveries in China. Such events were, and still are, welcomed with much interest, of course, but students and scholars by now have some idea of what to expect and how to react to another announcement and publication of newly discovered manuscript material. With the Maawangduei silk manuscripts, first announced and published more than a quarter of a century ago, it was a different matter. The discovery in 1973 and the publication a few years later of those manuscripts, which included two separate, largely complete, versions of the *Laotzyy*, set in motion a kind of thinking and study that would eventually change our perception of the world of early Chinese texts markedly, some might even say dramatically, from what it had been before.

Of course there had been manuscript discoveries before 1973, many of them in fact, of many kinds, in at least one famous case as much as seventeen hundred years before, not to mention discoveries of the so-called “hard texts” such as the bone, shell and bronze inscriptions of the Shang and early Jou periods. All the same, the discovery and publication of the Maawangduei silk manuscripts of the *Laotzyy* in the mid-1970s changed unmistakably the way early Chinese texts were studied in the west and also perhaps to some extent in China and Japan.<sup>2</sup> How the corpus of early Chinese transmitted texts came to be viewed as a result of the discovery of the Maawangduei silk manuscripts is comparable in magnitude to, though of course different in substance from, the way early Chinese history came to be viewed as a result of the discovery of the so-called oracle bone inscription texts at the turn of the twentieth century. In both cases the discovery opened up entirely new perspectives on early China and put entirely new demands on the methods whereby we study early Chinese history and texts. And in both cases the emerging picture was a lot less tidy than the traditional views would have us believe.

The discovery of the Maawangduei manuscripts was different from the discoveries of Shang inscribed bones and shells from Anyang, of Jou bronze inscriptions from all across north and central China, of Hann wood and bamboo texts from the deserts of Central Asia; in fact it was different from virtually all types of prior manuscript discoveries in one critical respect. Those other discoveries rarely included texts that were known from the transmitted literary

2 Professor Li Ling 李零 of Peking University, has in fact devoted a whole volume to surveying how recent manuscript discoveries have had, and continue to have, a major effect on our understanding not just of particular aspects of early Chinese history, texts, and culture, but equally, if not more importantly, on how we understand the course of development of Chinese historical science itself (Li Ling 2004).

tradition. Of all manuscripts found in Han tombs or earlier, only about ten percent have identifiable counterparts among the corpus of transmitted texts. And within this ten per cent, the distribution seems other than simply random. The *Yih jing* 易經 and the *Laotzyy*, for example, both show up more than once, and the *Shy jing* 詩經 appears in a fragmentary form among the Fuhyang manuscripts from Shuangguuduei and as cited lines in numerous other manuscripts, while dozens of contemporaneous transmitted texts of the same general kind, especially Warring States period texts that came to be included in the *tzyy buh* 子部 category of the later bibliographers, are so far entirely unknown in manuscript form. Most chapters of the *Lii jih* 禮記, for example, are not known in manuscript versions at all, but the *Tzy i* 緇衣 chapter, not traditionally one of the most important literary or philosophical works of the early period, is known in two different bamboo strip manuscript versions, one from the Guodiann finds and one from the manuscripts preserved in the Shanghai Museum. This surprisingly uneven distribution of well-known transmitted texts within the aggregate corpuses of discovered manuscripts might, of course, be nothing more than an accident of the archaeological record. But it is skewed enough, it seems to me, that it might call for some consideration in its own right, quite apart from the philological and textual questions of how to deal with manuscript counterparts themselves of transmitted texts.

Whatever the implications of the unexpected appearance of some received texts among the discovered manuscripts and the total absence of others, prior to 1973 it was generally assumed that discovered manuscripts would usually have very little to do with the transmitted literature. And this meant that students of literature, philosophy, history, etc. whose primary sources were found in the well-known corpus of the received tradition could safely ignore the substance of discovered texts and the philological methods that were called for in studying them. Even the rich manuscript treasures from Duen Hwang, which had been known since the beginning of the twentieth century and which to be sure did include manuscripts of important literary works, were often, we might have to say *typically*, ignored in textual as well as literary studies.

All of this changed with the Maawangduei manuscript discovery. Central among those manuscripts, in contrast with earlier discoveries, was one of the best known and most influential, not to mention enigmatic, of all transmitted pre-Hann works: the *Laotzyy*, *Daw der jing*, in not one, but two nearly complete versions. This was to be crucial in two respects; first, because the *Laotzyy* was such a famous and such a singular pre-Hann text, the manuscript find attracted a considerably greater measure of attention from a much wider community of



students and scholars than would likely have been the case otherwise, and second, because two different versions of the *Laotzyy* were included in this one find, scholars were unable to avoid facing the disconcerting fact that the received text of the *Daw der jing* with which they were familiar was not the single, immutable version on which they had been able theretofore comfortably to rely. They were instead compelled to think about the nature and implications of textual variants, not just between the manuscripts and the received text, but between different manuscripts themselves.

The outcome of these two inter-related reactions to the discovery of the Maawangduei silk manuscripts was to make scholars of early China far more aware of the variable textual nature of their sources than they had been up to this point, forcing them ultimately to reconsider what limits or qualifications might in fact pertain to conclusions drawn from studying only the transmitted, received version of a text. The received version of a text, which had been traditionally and conventionally thought of simply as “the text,” because typically that was all that existed, now had to be recognized as merely one of two or more alternative versions, versions that sometimes seemed to show differences one from the other. In the introductory discussion to his translation and study of the Maawangduei *Yih jing* manuscript, Edward L. Shaughnessy points out that it is “too often assumed that the received text represents the definitive text, and that *variora* in the manuscript are due merely to scribal error.” (Shaughnessy 1996: 17.) Even when the differences are modest, the very fact of variation undermines the happy innocence of taking the well-known received version of a text as fixed for all time and sufficient for all purposes.

Because the *Laotzyy* was, and still is, so popular among western students of early China, everyone who came into contact with the Maawangduei silk manuscripts realized the potential interest and importance of finding places in the text where the manuscript versions might differ significantly from the received version. The reactions to this realization took two distinct and nearly opposite forms. On the one hand, some scholars were eager to find passages in the manuscript that differed from the received version, to explore the interpretive implications of those differences, ultimately finding themselves prepared to tell us that the text doesn’t mean what we thought it meant, but something else entirely, with luck something that will surprise us. On the other hand, at the other extreme, other scholars seem to have been horrified at the prospect that the *Laotzyy* might be shown to mean something quite different from what they knew very well from tradition it did mean, and they were eager to argue that those features of the manuscripts that appeared to represent significant textual differ-

ences from the received version were no more than orthographic irregularities and anomalies, the results of ill-trained, careless, and ignorant scribes and copyists, and that the traditional understanding, based as it was on the familiar *textus receptus*, should remain untainted and undoubted.

The natural inclination for some scholars and students was to be skeptical of both extremes and to look instead for textually sound interpretations of whatever implication. The catch here was that knowing how to judge competing explanations of the textual differences and how to assess the respective competing claims about the meaning of the text was unfamiliar territory for most of us. Identifying and classifying what kinds of differences there might be, what their impact was, both individually and in the aggregate, deciding which of these might be significant, and even knowing how to define “significance”, were experiments in textual criticism that, for many of us, were completely new. Not only were we largely untrained in the theory and methods of textual criticism, the field of textual criticism itself had in most respects not been explicitly developed or elucidated in any systematic or comprehensive way in western scholarship on early Chinese texts. There was, in short, very little recognized scholarly method for the study of early Chinese manuscripts in comparison with what had been established in the course of more than a century of philological and textual research in the world of classical Mediterranean or ancient Near Eastern texts.

As study progressed, the question of how to assess the significance of these manuscripts received increasing attention. Did the value of the newly discovered manuscripts lie in their capacity to correct the received text, providing alternative readings that in the aggregate gave different interpretations to the text, or did these manuscripts with their apparent differences serve instead to validate a traditional understanding based on the received text? Or, possibly, is there a kind of “middle road” that recognizes the difference between these two extremes, allowing the traditional understanding of the received text to stand and yet establishing alternative readings of the seemingly same text, based on the manuscript evidence? Do variants reflect competing “schools” or doctrinal preferences or are they simply the consequences of careless and poorly informed textual transmission? Or some of both? Is it the job of the editor to use the manuscripts only to correct details of the received text, or conversely to show from the evidence of the received text the errors of the manuscript and thus to explain away as many of the variants as possible? Or should the primary goal be to try to establish through comparison of the manuscripts with the received text a version of the original as close as possible to what the author first wrote? In what

sense can we, in fact, even talk about an “original” text and an “author”? To adopt these terms uncritically from other textual traditions might actually blind us to some of the most interesting implications that could arise from studying these manuscripts.

In order to find other than just impressionistic ways to answer questions such as these, we need above all to be able to say what textual variants are significant and what ones are not. A variant is *significant* if it reflects a different wording, and therefore *sensu stricto* a different meaning, from one version of the text to another.<sup>3</sup> Variants of this kind are often called *substantives* in Western textual criticism, as opposed to *accidentals*, which are variations in the transient graphic forms of the words of the text.<sup>4</sup> We can usually pay less attention to the latter, the accidentals, because they are merely orthographically different ways of writing the same thing, though those may be interesting for other reasons, and we pay more attention to the substantives, which by definition involve differences in meaning. In either case, we have to know how to recognize which is which, how to tell, in other words, the lexical variants from the graphic variants. This means knowing when a textual variant in version A writes a different word from its match in version B and when it writes the same word as in B, but in a different way. This might at first glance seem a fairly easy assignment. But, among other things, it means that we must know not only how to recognize one word from another in their various written guises, but still more fundamentally what a word is in the first place. And these things may not be as obvious as we might think.

3 The term “significant” is also used to refer to that kind of lexical variant (in this context often called an “error”) on the basis of which we can establish unambiguously the stemmatic relations among a group of textual witnesses. Such a usage is slightly different from the use suggested here, which instead applies the term “significant” to lexical as opposed to graphic variants in general simply because the former imply a difference in meaning and the latter do not. In a stemmatic study of a text a lexical variant, which by definition implies a difference in meaning, may all the same be shown to be a secondary development in the text and therefore “insignificant” in that it can be eliminated from consideration when determining the original wording of the text in question. For a full, if succinct, presentation of that part of the field of textual criticism known as *stematology* with particular reference to early Chinese textual traditions, see Simson 2002.

4 The apt phrase “transient graphic forms” is taken from Derek Herforth’s 1980 M.A. thesis (1989: 92) where he has taken it in turn from the earlier work of Fredson Bowers (as cited in Herforth 1989: 137).

As a starting point for making our methods of textual criticism clear and more rigorously applicable to the study of early Chinese manuscripts than they sometimes have been, I would mention refinements of two kinds:

- (1) a strict adherence to the principles of textual criticism as they have been developed in western classical and Near Eastern scholarship and consideration of the extent to which those already established procedures can be usefully applied to the study of Chinese texts and, by contrast, particular attention to where those traditional procedures must be modified or revised in order to be useful for our purposes, and why;
- (2) a keener sensitivity to the relation between language and script than has often been recognized.

These two points are not unrelated to each other, and it is in regard to the second in particular that the traditional methods and assumptions of textual criticism as they have been developed in the western context will call for revision and modification when we apply them to the reading of Chinese texts.

There are three general categories into which textual variants found in the manuscripts typically fall. In traditional terminology, the first of these is *graphic variation*; that is, the occurrence of different *graphs* used to write the same word in corresponding places of different versions of the same text.

Ex. 01:	MWD.A:	聲人不仁以百省□□狗.
	MWD.B:	聃人不仁□百姓□芻狗.
	G, HSG:	聖人不仁以百姓爲芻狗.
		( <i>Laotzyy</i> ch. 05)

There are two cases of graphic variation in this line. The first word, *shenq* < *\*ləŋs* ‘sage’, is written with three different graphs, two of which are known from the received orthography and the third, and the third, in MWD.B, is easily recognizable as constitutently akin to the everyday 聖 of the received text. This is, of course, a well-known example, and no one doubts that what is written as 聲 in MWD.A is a graphic variant for 聖 of the received text.

Formally, the argument is based on the fact that the pronunciations of the words associated with each of the two graphs in their conventional usages (*sheng* < *\*ləŋ* ‘sound’ and *shenq* < *\*ləŋs* ‘sage’) are compatible with each other

to an extent that allows in principle each to be used to stand for the other.<sup>5</sup> The question here is what does it mean to be “compatible”, and the answer is usually given in terms of the words’ initials and finals.<sup>6</sup> The usual claim, implicit or explicit, is that for two characters to be used interchangeably with each other to write the same word, the words for which they are conventionally used must have initials that are homorganic or otherwise reconcilable with each other and must belong to the same *Shy jing* 詩經 rime group. Neither of these two criteria is absolute; both can be loosened to allow for graphic variation when other data suggest a sufficiently compelling case. How much loosening one can indulge in before the argument loses all force is an empirical problem that so far has no good solution. All the same, we can call this two-criteria rule the “phonetic compatibility canon” (PCC) and we can see in this way that graphic variation in the manuscripts is nothing other than a special type of the traditional *jea jieh* 假借 usages of the kind long recognized by Chinese scholars in the study of transmitted texts. And just as with traditional *jea jieh* proposals, the point that is often at issue is whether the two characters in question are in fact intended to write the same word or do they actually write two different words.

In the case of 聲 vs. 聖, both words belong to the OC *geng* 耕 rime group and have OC \*l- initial, the difference between the two being only in the MC tone, whatever the OC source of that might have been. As it happens, the second case of graphic variation in this line, the correspondence between 省 and 姓 also in the OC *geng* 耕 rime group, this time the words in question have OC \*s-initial. There is no contextual basis for thinking that in either case the variants write two different words. That, together with the fact that the two criteria of the

5 As it happens, in the Guodiann manuscript corpus, the latter graph is often used for the former, but never the former for the latter. Strictly analyzed, this would mean that 聖 is semantically the unmarked form, available to write both words, while 聲 is the semantically marked form, used only for *sheng* ‘sound’. Whether this is a significant feature of the overall orthographic system of the Guodiann manuscripts or is just a fortuitous distributional accident remains to be seen.

6 The term “final” corresponds to the word *yunn* 韻 ‘rime’ as used in the study of Chinese historical phonology traditionally, both by Chinese scholars and western. In reference to Old Chinese phonology it typically refers to that part of a syllable exclusive of the initial; i.e., head vowel and final consonant or off-glide, and may sometimes include post-initial medial and tone, sometimes not. The two terms “final” and “rime” are often used as equivalents, “rime” in particular referring to the set of *Shy jing* rime groups (*yunn buh* 韻部) established by the Ming and Ching philologists and still serving as one of the mainstays for theories of Old Chinese pronunciations.



PCC are met, leaves little doubt that these are both simply cases of graphic variation.

Ex. 02a:      MWD.A,B:      金玉盈室.  
                  G:                金玉滿室.  
                  HSG:            金玉滿堂.  
                                       (Laotzyy ch. 09)

Ex. 02b:      GD:                𠄎勿慈章.<sup>7</sup>  
                  MWD.B:        □物茲章.  
                  G, WB            法令滋章.  
                  HSG:            法物滋章.  
                                       (Laotzyy ch. 57)

In general lexical variation is the alternative to graphic variation. In a case such as this one, where everyone recognizes that *yng* 盈 and *maan* 滿 are two different, if synonymous, words, the argument for lexical variation is essentially an

7 The transcription for *faa* given here reflects the graphic structure of the form that we find in the manuscript itself as best as I can determine. I am grateful to Matthias Richter for advice on how to understand this GD form of the character and for examples from reference works not available to me in Seattle. The GD character clearly is not, component for component, simply 法; nor is it, again component for component, just the “complicated” allograph 灋 often seen for *faa* in transmitted texts, although Richter’s notes show that it is likely a valid variant of those components.

The extent to which it is necessary or desirable to transcribe manuscript characters “algorithmically”, *i.e.* reversibly, component for component, including spatial arrangement, such that we can know from the transcription unambiguously the structure and form of the original, remains a problem still to be thought through. As is well known, components such as 心 and 水, for example, often occur at the *bottom* of characters in the GD (and other Chuu) manuscripts, where in the conventional, transmitted forms of the same characters they regularly occur on the left. Once this regular correspondence is noted, is it necessary always to reproduce this feature precisely with these components at the bottom, or can we accept a transcription that registers these bottom components as conventional left side components without comment? The same general question pertains to numerous other aspects of manuscript orthography and in spite of the widespread tendency among Chinese and western scholars alike to disregard those orthographic variants that are readily deemed “graphic-only” (on which term *vide infra*), it is not a trivial matter and will eventually have to be faced. For a preliminary, tentative proposal of guidelines for the transcription of early Chinese manuscripts see Boltz 2000: 39-41, and Li Ling 2000: 49-51 for a response reflecting a different perspective.



argument *against* graphic variation. That means in effect that the two criteria necessary to defend a claim of graphic variation do not apply; the words do not belong to the same *Shy jing* rime group, nor are their initials homorganic or in any other way systematically reconcilable. Even without checking the OC forms, we can see based just on their modern Chinese readings that *yng* and *maan* are unlikely to meet the criteria necessary to support a claim of graphic variation. The same argument applies *mutatis mutandis* to the correspondence between *wuh* 物 and *ling* 令 in example 2b. This case is more interesting because the two words are not synonyms, as are *yng* and *maan*, and therefore calls, at least in principle, for some kind of explanation beyond simply noting “synonym variation” as could be done for *yng* and *maan*.<sup>8</sup>

The third common type of textual variation we encounter in these manuscripts is what can be called *positional variation*. By this I mean differences in the *order* or *position* of phrases, clauses, or sentences that are otherwise matching counterparts in two or more versions of the text.

Ex. 03: MWD.B: 沌呵丿若樸, 濬呵丿若濁, 汙呵丿若浴, 沌呵丿若樸.  
           G, HSG: 敦兮其若樸,                   曠兮其若谷, 渾兮其若濁.  
                   (Laotzyy ch. 15)

In example 03 clearly the same three lines appear in both versions of the text, but in a different order.<sup>9</sup> To the extent that this third category reflects a *difference in meaning* (because of a different order of phrases or sentences) between two or more versions of a given text it is a sub-type of lexical variation. By the same token, to the extent that it reflects *no more than* a difference in the order of what are otherwise the *same* phrases or sentences it is a sub-type of graphic variation. Thus, in one sense or another it is a sub-class of the other two and is

8 Rudolf Wagner (1989: 47) has suggested that “[t]he reading *fa ling* 法令 [...] directly attacks the Legalists. The Mawangdui manuscripts come from a Legalist milieu and thus do not transmit this version. Wang Bi, however, attacked the Legalism of the Wei court. Thus, even though we have no explicit statement by Wang Bi himself, the reading of the two ‘Old Manuscripts’ must be that of his *Urtext* [...]” (One of the two “Old Manuscripts” to which Wagner refers is the Guu been version included here.) Wagner identifies Wang Bih’s *Urtext* as “the *Laozi* text actually used by Wang Bi” (p. 31). The question that remains unanswered is how to account for the non-Wang Bih reading *faa wuh* 法勿/物 of the early manuscripts, which seems to me to be the *lectio difficilior* and therefore deserves to be deemed the “original”, at least in respect to these two variants

9 This example obviously includes cases of graphic variation also, but that does not bear on the positional variation that I wish to illustrate.

not typically recognized as a third distinct kind of variation in western text critical studies. But, in particular because a differing order of the same phrases or sentences will inevitably carry the potential to affect meaning, even if only subtly, and because this kind of variation occurs in the early *Laotzyy* manuscripts more than just once or twice, we are, I think, justified in setting it up here as a separate category.

We can re-phrase these conventional definitions of graphic and lexical variation in a way that reflects the relation between language and script specifically as it pertains to Chinese slightly more precisely than their general wording allows, as follows:

- |   |   |                    |
|---|---|--------------------|
| 1. different character / same word      | = | graphic variation; |
| 2. different character / different word | = | lexical variation. |

These are the conventional definitions of the two chief types of textual variation in general. Notice that in the strictest and most precise terminology what is called here “lexical variation” is in fact also “graphic variation” and what is called “graphic variation” should really be called *graphic-only* variation. Clearly *sensu stricto* lexical variation as described by number two entails also different characters, which makes it technically a kind of graphic variation as well. So, to be precise in our terminology, we ought to say that number one is *graphic-only* variation and number two is *graphic-lexical* variation.

Phrasing it this way serves to remind us that by the same token there is in principle what may be called *lexical-only* variation. This in turn makes us realize that what we are doing is actually setting out the four possible combinations of two things, characters and words, taken two at a time. And this is what distinguishes logographically written texts from alphabetically or syllabically written texts. Numbers one and two above are just two of the four possibilities. The other two are:

- |                                    |   |                    |
|------------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| 3. same character / same word      | = | no variation;      |
| 4. same character / different word | = | lexical variation. |

Number three is no variation, what we might call formally *null variation*, and is therefore of no particular interest or consequence to the task of textual criticism, unless we are concerned with why the dog didn’t bark. But number four is what in precise terms we would call *lexical-only* variation, which on analogy with *graphic-only* variation, ought to mean variation of the word *but not of the graph*.

In other words, setting out all four possible combinations of graph and word compels us to allow for the possibility that lexical variation may obtain even in the absence of graphic variation. This would mean that the same graph is used in version X to stand for one word and in the corresponding place in version Y to stand for a different word. Is such a formal, theoretical possibility in any way something that a textual critic of early Chinese manuscripts has to take into account?

It is in this regard that we find one of the most fundamental ways in which the study of Chinese texts differs from the study of western and Near Eastern texts. Identifying conventional graphic variation as “graphic-only” variation, in contrast with lexical variation which we recognize as *also* graphic variation, may well seem to be a superfluous, even pointless exercise in western textual criticism because the actual graphic variations that distinguish the one from the other typically occur in graphs at a level lower than that of the word, that is, in what are often called *graphemes*, usually equivalent to “letters” or to “syllabographs”, which represent most of the time only parts of words. These kinds of variation are rarely ambiguous as to which is graphic and which is lexical. Similarly, the phenomenon of lexical-only variation is unlikely to be a useful concept in western text critical studies because different words have identical graphic shapes only in very infrequent instances.

But both of these considerations are fundamentally applicable to the study of Chinese texts precisely because of the parity between character and word and the fact that for a thousand years the so-called “rebus principle” was the operative feature of the writing system, allowing the same graph to stand in one case for word P and in another for word Q, as long as P and Q were phonetically compatible according to the criteria we identified above. Rebus usages within the writing system, graphic variation in manuscripts, and loan graph usages (= *jea jieh* 假借 usages) in transmitted texts are just three different manifestations of the same orthographic phenomenon. And because the Chinese writing system has remained fundamentally logographic over most of its history the rebus principle continued to allow for any graphic variation to be potentially lexical and to allow for lexical variation even in the absence of graphic variation.<sup>10</sup>

10 Some people prefer to call the Chinese writing system *morphographic* instead of *logographic* because of the relative ease with which a “morpheme” can be identified and defined unambiguously in Chinese in comparison with the much slipperier linguistic entity that we casually call a “word”. While this is a legitimate and important distinction when analyzing mediaeval and modern stages of the language, its import diminishes in consideration of the early history of the writing system as we recognize the predominantly monosyllabic nature

To phrase it another way, because in the Chinese writing system a single character typically corresponds to a whole word and may stand by virtue of the rebus principle for more than one word, combination number four, same character / different word, exists as a possibility in principle on an equal theoretical footing with the other three. In texts where the writing system matches single graphs with linguistic units below the level of the word, where a parity between a single graphic unit and a word does not obtain, such as in the classical languages of the west and the ancient Near East, in fact in most of the written languages of the world, this combination does not normally exist.

In spite of its theoretical tenability, the possibility of lexical-only variation in Chinese texts is not often considered and the phenomenon is rarely identified because under normal circumstances when two (or more) versions of a text have the same characters in the same positions, a textual critic would have no reason or motivation to raise the question of lexical variation. In the absence of any apparent variation to start with we must be willing to ignore the cutting power of Occam's razor if we are to look for lexical variants. Unlike lexical variation of the usual kind, apparent from the occurrence of different graphs in corresponding places of two or more versions of the text, lexical-only variation is orthographically hidden and is in fact probably uncommon. We can call lexical-graphic variation *patent* lexical variation and lexical-only variation *latent* lexical variation.

Consider the following line from *Laotzyy* ch. 55:

GD (a): 蟲蠱 = 它弗螫. (蠱 = 蠱虫, acc. to Qiu Xigui)<sup>11</sup>

MWD.A: 逢徠蠱地弗螫.

MWD.B: 蠱癘虫蛇弗赫.

SE: 毒虫 不螫.

G: 蜂蠱虺蛇不螫.

HSG: 毒蟲 不螫.

The correspondence MWD.A: 蠱 :: MWD.B: 虫 :: G: 虺 looks pretty clearly like graphic-only variation, all three characters standing for the word *hoei*,

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of the language at the time when we first can identify the appearance of the Chinese script, and in any event it does not affect the point addressed here.

11 Jingmenshyh Borwuhgoan 1998: 116 (note 69). My intention here is to give only Qiu Xigui's transcription, not his interpretation of the words lying behind the characters.

meaning some kind of large and unwelcome snake. The MWD.A character, 蜮, apart from its occurrence here, is attested only in the *Yuh pian* 玉篇, where the entry says 音透水蜮也 “homophonous with 透 *uei*, an aquatic ‘uei’”, making it a kind of lexicographical ghost, that is, a character that haunts the Middle Chinese dictionaries but has no active, living existence in any text. The MWD.A manuscript occurrence at least breathes some life into this otherwise moribund graph. Its pronunciation, if we are to take the *Yuh pian* entry at face value, would be modern Chinese *uei*, which could have had an OC origin in the *wei* 微 rime group, with a glottal stop initial. This is completely consistent with its apparent “phonetic,” which would have the same reading in both modern and Old Chinese, save for the tone, and is at the same time consistent with the graph serving to write the word *hoei* < OC initial \*h-, *wei* 微 rime group (*shaang* 上 tone).

Given the perfect lexical match overall between the Sheang eel and Hershanq Gong lines, distinct from the others, the single 虫 in the Sheang eel line would seem to be an obvious graphic variant of the “deltoid” 蟲 graph in the Hershanq Gong line. And that latter is of course read *chorng*, just as the single 虫 graph of the Sheang eel line can be read. So, when we survey all variants of this graph/word in this line together, we find that the single 虫 graph seems to be a lexical-only variant, in the MWD.B manuscript standing for the word *hoei* and in the Sheang eel text for *chorng*. Notice that this argument depends on the assumption that the intended word in the Seang eel line is *chorng*, not *hoei*, an assumption that, as we said, the close overall match with the Hershanq Gong line seems to support. All the same, while the circumstantial evidence may support it, it is still an assumption and to the extent that the “intention” in question is presumed to be that of the author it is not in principle provable. This is simply a consequence of the nature of a logographic writing system.<sup>12</sup>

In any event lexical-only variation is a relatively rare phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Far more typical of the problems one faces in reading these manuscripts is the need

12 I am grateful to Matthias Richter for drawing my attention to the corresponding line in the Fann Ing-yuan 范應元 version of the text, which has 毒蟲虺蛇不螫, seemingly incorporating both the 毒蟲 of the HSG (and by our assumption SE) line and the 虺蛇 of the MWD and G versions. See Shima 1973: 170.

13 When taken at face value the phenomenon of lexical-only variation seems to open the door to an interpretive quagmire of virtually unlimited scope. If *any* character X can stand, in addition to the word for which it conventionally stands, for any other word that conforms to the PCC criteria, then in theory *all* characters are multivalent with respect to the word for which they stand, in any context, and no character can be taken as representing unam-



to choose between lexical-graphic variation and graphic-only variation, what we can now call simply by the everyday terms “lexical” variation and “graphic” variation, since these are typically the only two choices we will face and this is the decision that must be made in the overwhelming majority of cases of textual variation.

In alphabetically or syllabically written texts deciding between lexical and graphic variation is usually a straightforward and unambiguous matter. When we read, for example, in the QS (the so-called “stolen and surreptitious” quarto of 1603) version of *Hamlet* the line as

*With Marshall stalke he passed though our watch,*

and then in the first Quarto the same line as

*With martial stauke hath he gone by our watch,*

we have no trouble recognizing the variation between *stalke* and *stauke* as graphic; same words, different orthography, and that between *passed though* and *hath [...] gone by* as lexical; patently different words. (van Dam 1924: 29.) These choices are easy because the orthographic differences come at a level below that of the word. Most of the time such a difference does not change the word, but reflects a difference in merely the spelling or pronunciation, or maybe grammatical form, of the same word. And when such a difference does result in a different word, we see it clearly. There is rarely any uncertainty over whether

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biguously a given word. Such a degree of imprecision and uncertainty in a writing system is inherently untenable, and no one would suggest that the received Chinese writing system worked this way. Writing systems naturally become standardized and conventionalized precisely as a way to eliminate this kind of ambiguity and uncertainty. The problem that we face in reading early manuscripts is to determine how far the process of standardization and conventionalization has come, so that we can have some sense of when a possible case of lexical-only variation is tenable and when not.

In fact from this perspective lexical-only variation is no more than the limiting case of *jea jieh* variation, and the same interpretive quagmire opens in front of us whenever we consider the possibility that a manuscript character stands for a word different from the one that the character conventionally stands for in the received writing system, irrespective of other witnesses or variants. The recourse is, again, to have some sense of how far the norms of orthographic standardization and conventionalization can guide us and when can we safely, even if speculatively, set those norms aside in favor of an interpretation not attested to by conventional usage. The issue has a tendency to excite animated commentary, and for this reason alone is worth further scrutiny. See, for example, my paper in the Proceedings of the International Conference on the Guodiann *Laotzyy* (Boltz 2000 in Allan and Williams 2000) and the response that it elicited from Scott Cook (Cook 2002 : 54–62).



the variant reflects a different word or just a different way of writing (“spelling”) the same word.

In logographically written texts, such as Chinese, where orthographic differences are inevitably and by definition always at the level of the word, this nice distinction is severely compromised. Any orthographic difference has the potential to be lexical. Consider the first line of *Laotzyy* ch. 57:

- GD:            𠂇正之𠂇, 𠂇戢甬兵, 𠂇亡事取天下.  
 MWD.A:    • 以正之邦, 以畸用兵, 以无事取天下.  
 MWD.B:    以正之國, 以畸用兵, 以無事取天下.  
 G:            以正治國, 以奇用兵, 以無事取天下.  
 HSG:        以正治國, 以奇用兵, 以無事取天下. (var. 之 for 治)

Look first at the correspondence GD, MWD.A,B: 之 :: G, HSG: 治; both 之 and 治 belong to the OC 之 rime group, and both have OC apical initials, 之 is \*t- and 治 is \*l-. They satisfy, therefore, both requirements for a claim of graphic variation according to the criteria of the PCC set out above. And the majority of text critics of this passage take them that way, understanding the line in all of its versions as meaning something like “keep the state in order by means of rectitude/orthodoxy.” But it would be careless criticism to accept this decision without considering the alternative, namely, that this may in fact be a case of lexical variation. Just because the two criteria of the “phonetic compatibility canon” are satisfied does not prove that this is graphic variation; it simply allows for it. Those two criteria are necessary, but not sufficient, to demonstrate graphic variation. A sufficient argument means that we have ruled out the possibility of lexical variation, or at least relegated it to an unlikely status, by showing that no other possible words make sense in the context in question.

In this case there is at least a possibility that the 之 of the manuscripts is to be understood as writing the word *jy* ‘to go to, approach’. In that reading the line clearly would mean “approach the state through orthodoxy”, a reading not entirely devoid of sense. I am not insisting that this is the meaning. I am merely pointing out that the possibility exists that this is a case of lexical, not graphic variation, and the serious critic must consider this option.

There are at least three things that make this reading more than just idle speculation: first, as I have indicated in the transcription, some (but not all) HSG witnesses have the 之 *jy* ‘approach’ reading rather than 治 *jyh* ‘order’, mean-

ing that from the stemmatic perspective that reading takes precedence over the 治 *jyh* ‘order’ reading. Second, the HSG commentary to this sentence says: 以至也天使正身之人使至有國也. Several post-Hann manuscripts of the HSG commentary, including the so-called Nara manuscript, have a variant 之至也 for the first three characters, which seems to me to suggest pretty clearly that the text to which this line is a commentary had 之 *jy* ‘approach’ rather than 治 *jyh* ‘order’. (Jenq Chernghae 1971:344.)

The third point is contextual. No one who is familiar with the *Suentzyy* will fail to recognize the complementary pair of words *jenq* 正 and *chyi* 奇 meaning ‘to join an attack directly, head-on’ and ‘to make a flanking attack’ respectively. Both of these technical terms are descriptive of a particular kind of *approach* that one’s troops may take toward the opponent. And that specific, technical sense having to do with ‘approach’ seems to me to lend some weight to understanding the 之 *jy* as ‘approach, go to’, rather than dismissing it as nothing but a graphic variant of 治 *jyh* ‘order’.<sup>14</sup>

Look now at the variant in the second sentence of the line of the graph used for the word *chyi*. The character used in the *Suentzyy* text, both transmitted and manuscript versions, for this technical term *chyi* is the everyday character 奇 *chyi* as here in the G and HSG versions. And the technical meaning in the *Suentzyy* having to do with battlefield tactics is generally taken as a special sense of the basic meaning ‘eccentric’, much as describing an approach from the side of something in English as ‘eccentric’, meaning ‘off-center’, is a special, even if literal, sense of the general meaning of ‘eccentric’ as ‘odd, strange’. But as can be seen, the characters used in the manuscripts for this word are distinct from those of the received texts. In the MWD versions the character has the ‘field’ classifier, yielding the character 畸, well-known in the received writing system as standing conventionally for the word *ji* ‘odd, left-over bits of land’, that is, small plots of land that cannot be accommodated readily in an orderly layout.<sup>15</sup> In the GD manuscript the character is 奇 *chyi* with 戈, classifier 062, *ge* on the

- 14 The *locus classicus* for *jy* 之 in the meaning ‘approach, go toward’, esp. with the state as the object, is *Analects* 5.19: 崔子弑齊君. 陳文子有馬十乘. 棄而違之. 至於他邦則曰猶吾大夫崔子也. 違之. 之一邦. “Tsuei tzyy assassinated the lord of Chyi. Chern Wen tzyy had a ten-team fief, which he abandoned, thereupon turning away from him [*i.e.*, from Tsuei tzyy]. When he arrived at another state he said ‘Here it is just as with my old master Tsuei tzyy.’ And so he turned away from there and approached (之) still another state [...].”
- 15 *Shuowen jieetzyh guulin* 6190: 畸殘田也. The character is also attested in the Wu yeu 吳語 section of the *Gwoyueu* 國語 meaning ‘the flank of an army’.

right, producing the character 戢 which is not attested in the received orthography as far as I know.

In both of these cases the graphic forms that the character takes seem to me to make sense, given the fact that the word in question is *chyi* ‘to approach an opponent on the battlefield eccentrically, in a flanking strike’. As it happens, the character of the MWD manuscripts has been transmitted into the received orthography standing for a different, but phonetically compatible, word, and the character of the GD manuscript has not been transmitted at all. Suppose for a moment that this GD character had been transmitted into the received writing system, standing precisely for this word *chyi* in its technical sense having to do with a very particular kind of battlefield tactics. Would we then consider *chyi* ‘eccentric, odd, strange’ and homophonous *chyi* ‘a flanking battlefield manoeuvre’ to constitute two different words, rather than thinking of the latter as a so-called “special sense” of the former? This leads to the general question of to what extent the Chinese orthography influences what we identify as words in the language.

In this case, however we decide to deal with the question of graph vs. word, there can be little question that the second part of the line of the text shows only graphic variation. Even if the best-known translators have overlooked it, all five versions of the line given here can be understood as saying “take advantage of your troops through the expedient of surprise, flanking manoeuvres.” But, is it by the same token the same for all five in the first half, speaking either of *approaching* or of *ordering* the state in a direct, head-on way? Or does the meaning of 正 *jenq* change as we move from the GD manuscript version to the received text versions, especially that of HSG? The HSG commentary that was cited above to support a claim that the 之 *jy* could be understood as ‘approach’ also seems to suggest that the word 正 *jenq* here is not the technical, military tactic term, but the more general ethical term ‘rectitude’.

For a still more straightforward example of the difficulty of deciding between graphic and lexical variation consider this example, from line 2 of ch. 57:

GD:	虐司△智	亅狀也
MWD.A:	吾何□□	□□也戢
MWD.B:	吾何以知	亅然也才
G:	吾奚以知天下其然	哉以此
HSG:	吾何以知	其然 哉以此 (var. 天下之)

Look for a moment in particular at the second word in the line, which in the MWD and received versions is written with the interrogative pronoun 何 *her*, in the *Guu been* text 奚 *shi*. In all of these cases clearly the line means “how do I know that it is so?” In the received texts we even get an answer to the question. 以此 *yii tsyy* “by means of this”, referring to the immediately following lines. By contrast, the GD line, read as written, seems to say “I can know that it is so,” a simple declarative statement, not a question. The second character there is the normal way the word 可 *kee* is written in these manuscripts regularly, dozens of times. And understanding the line this way makes perfect sense, both in isolation and in context. The GD manuscript version does not have the two-word phrase *yii tsyy* “by means of this,” further allowing for the possibility that the line was not understood as a question.

All the same, all critics known to me take the second character of the GD line as a graphic variant of interrogative 何 *her* and understand the GD text as saying the same thing as all other versions, manuscript and transmitted alike. They do this as far as I can see on no grounds other than that is what all other known witnesses say. The question is this: is such an argument compelling? Would we find ourselves inclined to read the GD line as a question *in the absence of* the other witnesses? We can also ask, does reading it as a declarative sentence change anything substantially? This last-mentioned question is of a different kind from the others, since it deals with interpretation rather than what the line actually says. These are questions that cannot be swept under the rug, even if the best answers eventually turn out not to change anything substantial in the traditional way of understanding the passage after all.<sup>16</sup>

Line 3 presents a similar, if interpretively thornier, problem:

16 One sometimes hears it claimed that deciding between X and Y in a particular case is unimportant because “they mean the same thing anyway” or “there is no real difference between them” or something along those lines. In fact, except for cases of graphic-only variation, deciding between X and Y is *always* important, even when the difference in meaning may at first seem minimal. A text may have numerous “minimal difference” X and Y cases, none particularly striking in its own right. But their cumulative effect may well be more than just minimal on the overall meaning of the text in question. This point is often made, in many different ways, by western textual critics. For one brief example, see Bowers 1959: 1-3 *et passim*.

GD:	夫天 多昇韋而民爾𨔵	民多利器而𨔵 慈昏
MWD.A:	夫天下□□諱而民彌貧	民多利器而邦家茲昏
MWD.B:	夫天下多忌諱而民彌貧	民多利器□□□□昏
G:	夫天下多忌諱而民彌貧	民多利器而國家滋昏
HSG:	天下多忌諱而民彌貧	民多利器 國家滋昏

The phrase 忌諱 *jih huey* of the received texts and the MWD.B manuscript is typically understood as ‘prohibitions and taboos’, and the line seems to say something fairly straightforward such as “the more you multiply prohibitions and taboos in the world, the more the people become impoverished.”<sup>17</sup> But clearly the last word in the GD counterpart is different; the graph 𨔵 is regularly understood as a variant of the conventional character 畔 standing for *pann* ‘to overstep the boundaries’, usually taken as equivalent to *pann* ‘to rebel’ (conventionally written 叛), and not *pyn* ‘impoverished’. The first question then is how to account for this difference. If we are bent on speculating about an “original” text, which of these two options has the greater claim to that status? If we try to invoke the *lectio difficilior* / *lectio faciliior* rule of thumb, giving priority to the more difficult reading, we would have to decide whether 𨔵 / 畔 *pann* ‘overstep the boundaries’ is an “easier” reading than 貧 *pyn* ‘impoverished’ or *vice versa*. If we look further at the structure of the line, we might say that 貧 *pyn* is the preferred reading because it preserves the rime with 昏 *huen* at the end (\***pjən** and \***mhhwən** respectively, both in the *wen* 文 rime group) and 畔 *pann*, of course, does not (\***bbans**, *yuan* 元 rime group). Alternatively, we might argue that 畔 *pann* is original and that the shift to 貧 *pyn* occurred precisely to create a rime where none existed. However we decide these questions, we cannot ignore the curious fact that the two lexical variants are phonetically quite close to each other, not just in modern Chinese but in OC as well. The chief difference is simply between an -a- vowel and a schwa.

Beyond these considerations, we must also take note of the other variant forms in the GD version of this line, the graphs 昇韋 matching what is clearly 忌諱 *jih huey* ‘prohibitions and taboos’ in all other versions. The unanimous opinion of the text critics whom I have checked on this is that the unfamiliar character 昇 in the GD manuscript corresponding to 忌 *jih* ‘prohibition’ everywhere else is just a graphic variant for the latter. Structurally, the graph itself is a ‘sun’ <日> over <丌>, the base part of 其 *chyī*, itself a commonly

17 See, for example, Wing-Tsit Chan 1963: 201.



seen graphic form. These two components together constitute a variant form, constituent for constituent, of 夙, registered in the *Shuowen* as the *guuwen* of 期 *ji / chi* ‘time period, schedule’ etc. (*SWGL* 3001).<sup>18</sup> The two words *ji / chi* (期) and *jih* (忌) are both in the 之 *ji* rime group, and both have velar initials, so the dual criteria of the PCC are met, and the argument for graphic variation is allowed. But, as we have said, satisfying the requirements of the PCC is a necessary condition for graphic variation, but it is not in itself a sufficient condition. We must at the same time eliminate the possibility of lexical variation.

Suppose again that we read the GD line with no knowledge of the other versions. Would we unhesitatingly take the graph 昇 before *huey* as *jih* ‘prohibition’? Or would we consider the possibility that it stands here for the word that it conventionally stands for, namely, *ji* ‘time period’ in some sense? Notice also that the GD version seems to specify the agent of multiplying the *ji(h) huey* as 天 *tian* ‘heaven’, where the others have 天下 *tian shiah* as a locative phrase. Again, all critics known to me assume this is just an accidental lacuna and that we should assume a 下 *shiah* after the 天 *tian* of the line. But if we suppose again that we are reading the line with no knowledge of the other versions, would we automatically read 天 *tian* here as a slip-up for 天下 *tian shiah*? Could the line of the GD text actually have meant something like “when heaven multiplies the *temporal taboos* (perhaps referring to seasonal or annual taboos), the people will increasingly overstep the boundaries”?

## Conclusion

A.E. Housman in a short article called “The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism”, famous for its piquant prose and uncorrupted candor, defined textual criticism as “the science of discovering error in texts and the art of removing it.” He emphasized that the procedure is as much art as it is science, as much science as art, and he insisted that this combination art and science should be and could be governed by reason and common sense. With these latter points most everyone would likely agree, but his precise notion of textual criticism does not quite apply, I think, to what we have to deal with in studying early Chinese manuscripts. The specific point where I would revise Housman’s definition is in his

18 This would appear to be a case where the graphic form of the word in question alternated between a constant phonophoric with a variable semantic component, in one case the ‘sun’ and in the other the ‘moon’, both commonly used in words having to do with ‘time’.



confident use of the term “error”. For Housman, the holder of the Cambridge Chair in Latin a century ago, we can suppose that “error” was an unambiguous thing; when he dealt with the texts of *Manilius*, *Lucan* and *Juvenal*, for example, error was when a recension differed from the author’s original, and it was the textual critic’s responsibility to identify that and remove it. Housman did not have, of course, an author’s original of any of these texts, nor did any other critic since the invention of criticism, but that inconvenient fact did not deter him from assuming an original and endeavouring the scholarly challenge of establishing it. And on that basis, then, he was in a position to identify error.

With pre-Hann Chinese texts, especially with the *Laotzyy*, I am not so sure that we can with equal confidence entertain quite these same assumptions or speak of “error” in quite such a clear-cut way. I will not say much about the question of an author’s original, since that topic has been discussed elsewhere more than once. Suffice it to say that the textual evidence that we have in the Guodiann manuscripts does not support a claim that this is in any way an original of what later comes to be known as the *Laotzyy*, *Daw Der jing*.

Instead, let me end with a question. In what sense is it useful to call one or another variant in this text an “error”? When we encounter lexical variation, we try to explain how word one in version X came to appear as word two in version Y. That explanation may depend wholly on the identification of a scribal misunderstanding or error, of course, but it may also include considerations of changing views and beliefs in the religious, literary, intellectual and social background of the text. If in the fourth century B.C. how one approaches the state is described metaphorically in technical, tactical battlefield terms and by Hershanq Gong’s time a few centuries later it is described instead as maintaining an orderly state through attention to a socio-ethical principle of rectitude, is it accurate to say that the latter is an “error” in the text and the former is the “correct” version? Or are we coming closer to understanding the role these kinds of texts played in early Chinese society by recognizing where meanings may have changed and trying to determine how those changes might have arisen in relation to the intellectual, religious, or doctrinal practices and beliefs as they evolved over time and how as a consequence the variant version of the text tells us something about its context that we might otherwise not know?

## Abbreviations

- G Guu ben 古本 (text of the *Laotzyy*).  
 GD Guodiann 郭店 (ms. with *Laotzyy* counterparts).  
 HSG Hershanq Gong 河上公 (text of the *Laotzyy*).  
 MC Middle Chinese, the language of the Tarnq and Songq period.  
 MWD.A Maawangduei 馬王堆, *jea* 甲 ms. of the *Laotzyy*.  
 MWD.B Maawangduei 馬王堆, *yii* 乙 ms. of the *Laotzyy*.  
 OC Old Chinese, the language of the Warring States period.  
 PCC Phonetic compatibility criteria (or ... canon).  
 SE Sheang eel 想爾 (ms. of the *Laotzyy*).  
*SWGL* *Shuowen jieetyzh guulin* 說文解字詁林 (Ding Fwubao 1928).  
 WB Wang Bih 王弼 (text of the *Laotzyy*).

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