PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEXICON AND WRITING IN THE GUODIAN TEXTS

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Abstract

The following paper deals with variant characters and their possible relationship with the words they represent. Character variation is an ubiquitous phenomenon in the manuscripts that have hitherto been recovered from archaeological sites. Due to the characteristics of the Chinese writing system(s) the study of variants poses a number of methodological problems, and a number of papers of the workshop testify to the diversity and to the scope of these problems. Whereas certain texts (e.g. the covenant texts from Wenxian or Houma) seem to embody variants which are mainly orthographic rather than lexical, other texts (e.g. the so-called Guodian *Lao Zi*) seem to point in the direction of lexical variation. The purpose of my paper is to explore the latter possibility, i.e. to test whether variant characters in the fields of certain *cognate words* (such as those transcribed as 美) mirror a lexicographically relevant difference in the words. If so, which aspect of individual members of such fields of cognate words is being or could be represented? As an important tool the notion and scope of *derivation* in the Chinese lexicon is introduced and discussed.

Writing and words

Dealing with Chinese texts, ancient or modern, it is immediately noticeable that the Chinese writing system has a rather distracting quality: it generally covers most traces of word classes by using one and the same character in all instances.[1] In certain contexts this leads to utterances collocating a series of identical characters denoting several tokens of one word or of different but derivationally related words. This leads to a certain amount of structural ambiguity (of the type illustrated by the famous Chomskyan dictum that "flying planes can be

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[1] I should like to thank the participants of the Workshop for the constructive criticism, which I hope I have been able to take account of. I am especially indebted to Rudolf Pfister, who raised a number of points in need of further clarification, and to Matthias Richter for concise comments.

dangerous"), but translating a passage such as the following one from the *Xun Zi* should be more than a simple matter of trust:

1   信信信也,疑疑亦信也.貴賢仁也,賤不肖亦仁也.言而當知也,默而當亦
     知也.故知默猶知言也.
     Trusting the trustworthy is trust; suspecting the suspect is also trust.
     Esteeming the worthy is humaneness; deprecating the unworthy is humane-
     ness as well. Speaking when it is appropriate to do so is knowledge; re-
     maining silent when appropriate is also knowledge. Hence knowing when
     to remain silent is as important as knowing when to speak.[2]

This omnipresent phenomenon, i.e. the representation of different words with the same character, I shall term *homography*. That one and the same character may represent totally different words is also visible in the fact that in many cases we have different received pronunciations.[3] In order to illustrate the extent and the 'richness' of homography, I have drawn up the following table with examples containing the character *fù* 富 in examples from pre-Han texts. It gives a pre-liminary and presumably incomplete survey of words actually represented by this character:[4]

1   V_2 X is rich (in Y)
                 段干木富乎義,寡人富乎財.
                 Duan-gan Mu is *rich in* correctness, I, the solitary Ren, am *rich in* resources. (LSCQ 21.3)

1.1   N   (the state of) being / (the process of) becoming rich
                 貧,富不同也.
                 Being poor or being *rich* are states that are not the same. (MENG ZI 1B.16)

2   *Xun Zi* 6.9; Knoblock 1988: 1.225.
3   Cf. Pulleyblank (1991) for a convenient access to the many cases still recoverable for Middle Chinese. G. B. Downer (1959) has set up several lists of "cognate words" for Classical Chinese.
4   I am aware that taking examples from different texts from different periods might present regional and diachronic problems, but for the purposes of this paper we can ignore them.

2	N	the rich, i.e. people who are in the state of being rich

其妻問其所與飲食者,則盡富貴也.

When his principal wife asked about those with whom he drank and ate, then they were all rich and noble people. (MENG ZI 4B.33)

3	V_2	X is richer than Y

君富於季氏.

You, Sire, are *richer than* the chief of the Ji(sun) tribe. (Ding 9 fu 3 ZUO) fu 3 ZUO)

4	V_3	X makes Y rich; X enriches Y

君不行仁政而富之,皆棄於孔子者也.

When a prince did not practice humane government and (disciples) still enriched him, then they were such who were all discarded by Master Kong. (MENG ZI 4A.14)

4.1	N	the enriching of Y (by X); the making rich of Y (by X)

是富桀也.

This is the enriching of a Jie. (MENG ZI 6B.9)

The items numbered 1 to 4 are the sources or roots of a derivational process, i.e. in most cases we have verbs at the beginning of the derivational process and nouns as the result. The sub-items 1.1 and 4.1 are derived lexemes. Common understanding is that in all these instances the character has the same pronunciation.[5] This lexicological classification can be arrived at by systematically exploiting the syntactic, semantic and contextual information contained in the text. To illustrate the methods involved, I shall return to the passage quoted above from the *Xun Zi* and try to ascertain whether John Knoblock's matching of the multiple characters 信 to different words is plausible:

1a 信信信也,疑疑亦信也.貴賢仁也,賤不肖亦仁也.

Trusting the trustworthy is trust; suspecting the suspect is also trust. Esteeming the worthy is humaneness; deprecating the unworthy is humaneness as well. (translation by Knoblock)

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5   This assumption is based on the fact that we hitherto have no identifiable traces of a differentiation in pronunciation, but identity of character form is clearly not a sufficient basis for this assumption, as many examples listed in Downer illustrate.

I shall proceed step by step, not because I distrust the expertise of the reader as regards syntactic or semantic analysis, but in order to ensure that every step taken is fully accounted for:

(Step 1) The presence of the postposition 也 marks the utterances as *equational sentences* of the type 'X is Y'. (Step 2) The presence of the adverb 亦 makes it possible to unmistakably identify the strings 信信 and 疑疑 as the *subjects* X, and the remaining two 信 as the *predicates* Y. (Step 3) Based on the structure of equational sentences both the subject strings 信信 and 疑疑 as well as the predicate strings 信 must belong to the class of *noun phrases*. (Step 4) In order to function as noun phrases the strings 信信 and 疑疑 must contain a *noun* in the *head* position. Taking the first word as the head we arrive at a construction with a verbal noun and its complement, i.e. 'the V-ing of Y' or 'to V Y', taking the second as the head we arrive at a genitive construction, i.e. 'the N of X'. The parallelism with the strings 貴賢 and 賤不肖 makes it more plausible to assume a construction with a verbal noun and its complement.

With this last decision we have already moved from pure syntactic rules to other considerations. Basing on our experience that characters such as 信 and 疑 normally represent words with a verb-centred meaning, we assume that the primary derivational root of the nouns in our example is the verb *xìn* 'to trust' (or the verb *yí* 'to doubt'). If we take the derivational patterns described in the case of *fù* 'to be rich' as a guiding model, we may expect derivations of *xìn* 'to trust' in the following ways:

	word class	meaning	derived from
1	verb (V$_2$)	X trusts (in) Y	
1.1	(V$_1$)	Y is trusted; trustworthy; inspires trust	1 > (passive)
3	verbal noun	trusting Y, setting trust in Y	1 > (process)
4	noun	act of trust	1 > (act)
5	noun	feeling of trust	1.1 > (result)
6	noun	trusted person; the trustworthy	2 > ('categorial')

Which of these words are now concealed by the multiple characters 信 in the utterance taken from the *Xun Zi*? Based on the syntactic analysis and the lexical

options laid out in the table above we could arrive at an understanding basically confirming the one proposed by John Knoblock:

1b 信信信也,疑疑亦信也.
Trusting (verbal noun, 3) the trustworthy (noun, 6) is (an act of) trust (noun, 4); suspecting the suspect is also (an act of) trust.

Much ado about nothing, one is tempted to say. But here we have to take the discussion one step further and to take a closer look at the first two utterances with the same predicate noun *xìn* 信:

(Step 5) The basic function of equational sentences – not only, but also in ancient Chinese – is to furnish a distinct structure for definitions or classifications, i.e. for one of the fundamental activities of human minds. In this structure, the relationship between the two noun phrases involved, i.e. subject and predicate, is one of *equivalence*, or membership in the same classificatory group. Now, the presence of the adverb 亦 makes it clear that the subjects 信信 and 疑疑 must be members of the same class, which is referred to with the predicate noun *xìn* – according to Knoblock '(the act of) trust'. This leads to the paradoxical version above, but – despite the attractiveness of such formulas – should we not put it to the logical test? Is, so we must ask, "suspecting the suspect" in any possible way an act of trust, i.e. a placing of confidence in someone as expressed by 信信? Is it not rather an act of *distrust*? If Master Xun was *not* simply providing an attractive rhetorical shell for a nonsensical or mind-jarring content, what was he saying, what did he mean then? A look at the final utterances in the quoted passage turns out to be helpful:

1c 言而當知也,默而當亦知也.故知默猶知言也.
Speaking when it is appropriate to do so is knowledge; remaining silent when appropriate is also knowledge. Hence knowing when to remain silent is the equivalent to knowing when to speak. (author's translation)

These utterances are clearly speaking of an *ability*, a skill, an awareness that resides in a person, i.e. in the person who is acting or behaving in a certain way. As they have been uttered in the context of the whole passage and by means of the same structures, i.e. equational sentences, we may now apply this insight to the analysis of the preceding utterances. By doing this, we arrive at the following translation:

1d   信信信也,疑疑亦信也.
Trusting the trustworthy is (knowing when to) trust; suspecting the suspect is also (knowing when to) trust. (author's translation)

The expression 'knowing when to trust' can be rendered in English with 'confidence', i.e. a state of mind or a manner marked by freedom from uncertainty, by faith in oneself and one's powers. This interpretation of the utterance has lost all pretence of a paradox, and it clearly obeys the semantic requirements of equational sentences because now the two acts 信信 and 疑疑 do belong to the same class of action. That this class of action is designated with one and the same word is not unusual. In the lexicon of several languages we have many cases where the abstraction of complementary opposites is designated with only one of two possible terms, e.g. height, length. But why not then use the expression 知信 'know when to trust'? Presumably because 信 'confidence' already refers to a state of mind, to an inclination or preparedness to act in a certain way. In other words: the cognitive element represented by 知 is an inherent part of this behaviour or type of action. And this insight we can now apply to the remaining part of the utterance with the predicate noun represented by the character 仁, which in the translation of John Knoblock is left in the paradoxical mode, but which actually not only ought to designate a class of action or behaviour that fits the two contradictory or complementary subject expressions, namely 貴賢 and 賤不肖, but should neither contradict the analogous utterances surrounding it. We can now render the whole passage in the following way:

1e   信信信也,疑疑亦信也.貴賢仁也,賤不肖亦仁也.言而當知也,默而當亦知也.故知默猶知言也.
Trusting the trustworthy is exercising the ability to trust; suspecting the suspect is also exercising the ability to trust. Esteeming the worthy is knowing when to be humane; so is disparaging the unworthy knowing when to be humane. Speaking when it is appropriate to do so is knowledge; remaining silent when appropriate is also knowledge. Hence knowing when to remain silent is the equivalent to knowing when to speak.

The detailed analysis of this passage from the *Xun Zi* has revealed several important facts about the ancient Chinese lexicon and about the rules governing derivation. The most important here is the observation that actions or behaviour that issue from acquired skills or knowledge, i.e. actions that are felt to have an

inherent cognitive component, that these actions are part of the semantic field of the verb which is its primary derivational root. In other words: in such cases we must not only expect a noun designating the action or behaviour but also a noun designating the *faculty* to act or behave in the way designated by the source verb. Examples for this type of derivation in the passage quoted are *xìn* and *rén*.

Does this now imply, on the other hand, that in the case of innate or habitual actions like *yán* 言 or *mò* 默, i.e. of actions that are *not* felt to have an inherent cognitive component, the lexicon has no way of directly deriving a noun with the meaning 'to know when to speak (or remain silent)'? It apparently does have this capacity, as can be shown in the following well-known example from the *Xun Zi*, where not only are the different abilities of different types of beings listed, but their characterization as abilities (能) is – by analogy to 能群 – expressly stated:

2 水火有氣而無生;草木有生而無知;禽獸有知而無義;人有氣,有生,有知,亦且有義.故最為天下貴也.力不若牛,走不若馬,而牛馬為用.何也?曰:人能群,彼不能群也.

The elements have liveliness, but they lack the ability to procreate. Plants have the ability to procreate, but they lack the ability to know. Animals have the ability to know, but they lack the ability to behave according to status. Human beings have liveliness, the ability to procreate, the ability to know and beyond all these also the ability to behave according to status. Hence they are beings that are most valuable for the empire. As for strength they are no match for the oxen, and as for their ability to run fast they are no match for horses, but both oxen and horses have become animals of service. Why is this? Humans are beings that are *able* to form societies, the others are beings that are *not able* to form societies.[6]

Derivation and the ordering of the lexicon

There is literally more to Chinese characters than meets the eye. But look at the poor way we deal with the ancient and middle Chinese lexicon in most current dictionaries:

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6   Author's translation (and italics). Cf. *Xun Zi* 9.16a; Knoblock 1990: 2.103–4.

富　*fu⁴*; Wealth; wealthy. To enrich[7]

富　*fu⁴*; reich[8]

富　*fù*; rich, wealthy[9]

Either we spread out the existing riches[10] (as it is done e.g. in monolingual dictionaries of English or French, but not in Chinese ones), or we furnish an introductory chapter dealing with the main derivational rules. There are four fundamental derivational processes in Ancient Chinese: (a) a verb can be the source of a derived verbal noun; (b) a verb can be the source of a derived causative verb; (c) a noun can be the source of a derived verb; (d) specific rôles constituting the syntacto-semantic framework or inherent elements of the meaning of the verb can be the source of corresponding derived nouns.

As these processes furnish part of the background for my interpretation of character variation in the Guodian-texts let me briefly illustrate them:

(a) A verb can be the source of a derived verbal noun. Compare the following two examples from the *Xun Zi*:

3　星隊,木鳴,國人皆恐.曰:是何也?
　　When stars *fall* or trees *groan*, everybody in the state is terrified. They ask: what is the cause of this?[11]

The utterance begins with two statements containing the characters 隊 and 鳴 representing the verbs *zhuì* and *míng*. Their respective subjects are the noun *xīng* 星 and the noun *mù* 木. Immediately following this we find a transform of this utterance in the same passage:

4　夫星之隊,木之鳴,是[...]物之罕至者也.
　　Now: the *falling* of stars, the *groaning* of trees, these are [...] events that seldom occur.[12]

7　　Mathews 1931: no. 1952.

8　　Unger 1989: 20.

9　　Pulleyblank 1991: 101.

10　　There is to my knowledge only one notable exception to these desolate findings, i.e. Axel Schuessler's *Dictionary of Early Zhou Chinese* (1987), where word classes are an ordering principle throughout.

11　　Author's translation (and italics). Cf. *Xun Zi* 17.7; Knoblock 1994: 3.18.

12　　Author's translation (and italics). Cf. *Xun Zi* 17.7; Knoblock 1994: 3.18.

The strings *xīng zhī zhuì* 星之隊 and *mù zhī míng* 木之鳴 are clear instances of genitives, i.e. of noun-centred constructions. The characters 隊 and 鳴 must therefore here represent *nouns* derived from the corresponding root verbs, not only a vivid illustration of the phenomenon of homography but also a graphic example of the ubiquitousness of this derivational process.

(b) A verb can be the source of a derived causative verb. *Causativity* manifests itself syntactically in the presence of an additional rôle, namely that of an actor, thereby increasing the valency by one compared to the root verb. Compare the following two passages from the *Xun Zi*:

5 裕民,則民富;民富,則田肥以易.
 If the people are allowed to make a generous living, they will *become rich*. If the people *are rich*, their fields will be fat because they are well cultivated.[13]

6 故王者富民,霸者富士,僅存之國富大夫,亡國富筐篋,實府庫.
 Accordingly, the True King *enriches* the people; the lord-protector *enriches* his scholar-knights; a state that barely manages to survive *enriches* its grand officers; and a state that is doomed *enriches* only the ruler's coffers and fills up his storehouses.[14]

(c) A noun can be the source of a derived verb. This is possible with nouns that designate beings capable of a kind of action or behaviour which can be said to be typical or normative. Again a passage from the *Xun Zi*:

7 君君,臣臣,父父,子子,兄兄,弟弟一也;農農,士士,工工,商商一也.
 The lord acting as lord, the minister as minister, the father as father, son as son, the older brother as older brother, the younger brother as younger brother is a unifying action. The farmer functioning as a farmer, the knight as a knight, the artisan as an artisan, and the merchant as a merchant, is a unifying action.[15]

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13 *Xun Zi* 10.2; Knoblock 1990: 2.121. My italics.
14 *Xun Zi* 9.6; Knoblock 1990: 2.98. My italics.
15 Author's translation. Note that the rendering "unifying action" (versus Knoblock's "a unitary principle") agrees with the fact that the subject phrases of the equational sentence, e.g. "the lord *acting* as lord" denotes an action, not a principle. Cf. *Xun Zi* 9.15; Knoblock 1990: 2.103.

(d) Specific rôles constituting the syntacto-semantic framework or inherent elements of the meaning of the verb can be be the source of derivation for corresponding nouns. In the examples cited we find designations of persons: 賢 'the worthy'; 不肖 'the unworthy'; 信 'the trustworthy'; 疑 'the suspect'; 富 'the rich'; 貴 'the noble'. In the case of 富 we may also find 'the riches'. As demonstrated, we also have to reckon with nouns designating the ability or faculty inherent in the meaning of the root verb, e.g. 信 'confidence (i.e. knowing when to trust, the ability to trust)'; 仁 'ability (i.e. knowing when) to be humane'; 生 'the ability to procreate'; 義 'the ability to behave according to status'; 走 'the ability to run fast', etc.

I think there is sufficient evidence that the reconstructed entities represented by characters can not only be termed words, but also *different* words – in the sense of being members of a group of cognate words partly belonging to different word classes or semantic classes. However, lacking the competence and the help of native speakers to penetrate the enigmatic surface of the specimens of the writing system as we currently know it (and to make the assumption plausible that there must have been a concept of 'word' in Ancient Chinese), we not only have to devise methodically sound ways and means to analyse and understand the manifold and growing number of interesting specimens of this language, but we also have to get a better idea of the richness and the structure of the lexicon. This would allow us to define the range of possible words which a certain character could represent.
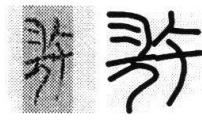
Although homography in Chinese presents itself in a very extreme form, nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Chinese characters *do* represent distinct words (and are not words themselves, which is clearly implied – and in most cases also quite mistakenly taken to be true – when we say that such and such *character* has this or that *meaning*). But if homography is demonstrably the latest word in the development of the Chinese writing system, was it also the first word?

Beauty and its character(s)

Having dealt with the necessary preliminaries, so to speak, with the main ways to words, I shall now move on to an assessment of the rôle of certain passages in tomb texts within the framework of the ancient Chinese lexicon. I shall be con-

centrating on the fragments of the so-called Guodian *Lao Zi*.[16] My aim shall be to show that character variation may – amongst other causes mentioned by participants of the workshop – be caused by lexical variation originating within the framework of derivations processes.

In the three texts we are confronted with the following situation: Where the received text has 美, the Guodian *Lao Zi*-texts have *four* variants, not (like the Mawangdui-texts) of the predecessor form of 美 (which does not appear at all), but apparently variants of the character 媺 (GSR 584g: "variant of 美 [Chouli]"). These variants appear in chapters 2, 20, and 31 (traditional numbering); the co-ordinates of the characters on the bamboo slips are 1.15.12 and 1.15.15 (both chapter 2), 2.4.19 (chapter 20), and 3.7.11 and 3.7.13 (both chapter 31). 1.15.15 and 3.7.11 are the same characters.[17] The following survey of the character forms shows all instances:

transcribed as 敗 (Illustration 1: 1.15.12)

transcribed as 敚 (Illustration 2: 1.15.15)

transcribed as 岦 (Illustration 3: 2.4.19)

transcribed as 敚 (Illustration 4: 3.7.11)[18]

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16   The reason for this decision lies in fact that in the case of the *Lao Zi*-texts we not only have parallels within the Guodian cache but we also have successor texts (Mawangdui) and a received version. Although this reduces the number of variants, I believe the basic points I shall make retain their validity. Furthermore, it opens up a diachronic aspect and also removes a number of interpretative difficulties.

17   I am referring to the material and the transcriptions published in Jingmen shi bowuguan 1998 (in the following abbreviated as *GDCMZJ*).

18   This character is wrongly transcribed in *GDCMZJ* as 媺.

 transcribed as (Illustration 5: 3.7.13)[19]

The character 美 represents words that roughly belong to the same derivational pattern as the words represented by the character 富. Basing on this and on our reading experience, we can thus confidently posit the following lexical items:

1	V_1	X is beautiful
1.1	N	(the state of) being beautiful; beauty
2	N	a beauty, the beautiful, something beautiful, i.e. people or things that are in the state of being (regarded as) beautiful
3	V_2	X is more beautiful than Y
4	V_2	X makes Y beautiful; X beautifies Y
4.1	N	the beautifying of Y (by X); the making beautiful of Y (by X)
5	V_2	X takes Y to be beautiful
5.1	N	the taking to be beautiful of Y (by X); the regarding something (Y) as beautiful

Given this collection of confirmed (confirmable) lexical items and comparing it to the character variants as they present themselves in the texts, the question naturally arises whether the variants represent different words belonging to the above field built around the primary root verb *měi* 'to be beautiful' (whether we translate *měi* with 'to be beautiful' or 'to be good' is a semantic question of no relevance to the following arguments).

The first instance with a variant character I should like to discuss is to be found in chapter 20 of the *Lao Zi* (according to the received numbering). I shall first present the passages with two translations generally deemed quotable (D.C. Lau and Victor Mair), then advance my arguments, and finally offer my own attempt at a translation. Here, then, is the passage:

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19   The upper left part of this character seems to be identical with the corresponding elements in the characters 1.15.12, 1.15.15 and 3.7.11, where they are all transcribed with the character 山 – clear evidence of the necessity of consistent notational or transcription systems (as proposed in the papers of Richter and Xing Wen in this volume).

8   唯之與阿相去幾何?[美]之與惡相去若何?人之所畏不可不畏.
     [LZ 20] Between yea and nay how much difference is there? Between good
     and evil how great is the distance? What others fear one must also fear.[20]
     [LZ 64 (20)] Between "yes sir" and "certainly not!" how much difference is
     there? Between beauty and ugliness, how great is the distinction? He whom
     others fear, likewise cannot but fear others.[21]

The corresponding Guodian-text reads as follows:

8a   [GD 乙04] [...] 唯與可(呵),相去幾可(何)?肖(美)與亞(惡),相去可(何)
     若?[乙05]人之所{衤畏}(畏) 亦不可以不{衤畏}(畏).• [...]

A brief comment on this passage will suffice: The syntax of the coordinating
constructions, respectively 唯之與阿 (唯與呵) and [美]之與惡 (肖與亞)
clearly marks the coordinated words as members of the same word class, i.e.
nouns. Basing on our knowledge that the characters 唯 and 阿 normally re-
present root verbs with the respective meanings 'to say yes' and 'to say no', the
nouns most probably must be taken as immediate derivations, hence 'saying yes'
and 'saying no'. The character 肖 being the primary form among the variants
allows us to assume that it represents a root form, an assumption corroborated by
the primary partner form 亞. Hence, the pair 美/肖 shall be taken as representing
a word with the meaning 'being beautiful', derived from the primary root verb
'to be beautiful'. I thus translate the passage as follows:

8a   Answering in the positive or in the negative, what does one control by
     creating a distance between the one and the other? Being beautiful or being
     ugly, what does creating a distance between the one and the other compare
     to? What people fear likewise cannot but be feared. (RHG)

We can now posit that the variant represents the following lexical items (we
shall see that the root and the immediately derived form are represented by the
same character):

(1)   V$_1$ 肖   X is beautiful
1.1   N   肖   (the state of) being beautiful; beauty

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20   Lau 1982: 29.
21   Mair 1997: 83.

The next two instances, which should 'trustfully' remind us of the 信信信-situation in the *Xun Zi*, are to be found in chapter 2 of the *Lao Zi* (according to the received numbering) and are not so easily dealt with.

9   天下皆知美之為美[也], 斯惡已; 皆知善之為善[也], 斯不善已.
      [LZ 2] The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad.[22]
      [LZ 46 (2)] When all under heaven know beauty as beauty, already there is ugliness; When everyone knows goodness, this accounts for badness.[23]

The corresponding Guodian-text reads as follows:

9a   [GD 甲15] [...] ■天下皆智(知)散(美)之為散(美)也, 亞(惡)已; 皆智(知)善, 此其不善已.

This passage and the translations I should like to comment on as follows:

1. The received phrase 美之為美[也] is clearly a dependent clause governed by the verb *zhī* 'to know, to recognize'. The postposition *zhī* marks the subject of the dependent clause, the *yě* (emended according to the Guodian-text) marks the predicate consisting of the verb *wéi* and the object *měi*. As members of word classes the first and the second *měi* both belong to the class of nouns. This syntactic parallelism – which should be taken account of independently of how the words are written – is mirrored in the quoted translational versions, but we should be warned by the *Xun Zi*-passage with 信信信 that the assumed semantic parallelism is questionable – and the Guodian-version does confront us with two different variants. Nevertheless, the quoted translations not only sound quite probable and – befitting their fame as deep wisdom from the east – also very intriguing, but is what they are saying an accurate rendering of the original?

2. To answer this question we first have to probe into the meaning of the rest of the chapter and reconstruct its main topic. The most revealing passage is the immediately following one:

22   Lau 1982: 5.
23   Mair 1997: 60.

10   故:有無相生, 難易相成, 長短相形, 高下相傾, 音聲相和, 前後相隨.
[LZ 2] Thus Som[e]thing and Nothing produce each other; The difficult
and the easy complement each other; The long and the short off-set each
other; The high and low incline towards each other; Note and sound
harmonize with each other; Before and after follow each other.[24]
[LZ 46 (2)] Being and nonbeing give birth to each other; Difficult and easy
complete each other; Long and short form each other; High and low fulfill
each other; Tone and voice harmonize with each other; Front and back
follow each other – it is ever thus.[25]

The same passage in the Guodian-version reads as follows:

9a   [GD 甲15] [...] 又(有)亡(無)之相生也,[甲16]戁(難)惕(易)之相成也,長
耑(短)之相型(形)也,高下之相涅(盈)也,音聖(聲)之相和也,先後之相墮
(隨)也.

This passage presents us with a series of opposites and clearly furnishes a con-
text for the beginning of the chapter, as it is introduced with *gù* 故 as a con-
sequence of the first statement. The crucial part is the predicate containing the
character 相 and completed with different characters, e.g. respectively 生, 成,
形, 傾, 和, 隨 and 生,成,型(形),涅(盈),和,墮(隨). All translations consulted
take the character 相 as representation of a reciprocal pronoun, and all transla-
tions see this passage as voicing a well-known phenomenon, namely the arbitrar-
iness of complementary opposites (a short train is still much longer than a short
pencil). This sense of relativity seems also to fit well with the meaning of the
terms beautiful/ugly or good/bad in the first statement. Nevertheless, D.C. Lau
has certain misgivings about this series. In the case of 'note and sound' he
appends the following note: "The Chinese terms used here are not precise and it
is not clear what the intended contrast is." In the case of 'before and after' he
appends another note saying: "It may seem strange to say that before and after
follow each other, but this probably refers to a ring. Any point on a ring is both
before and after any other point, depending on the arbitrary choice of the
starting-point."
    To add to these misgivings we should ask whether "nonbeing" can ever in
reality give birth to 'being' (or vice versa), or in what concrete way does the
difficult 'complement' the easy, or why do 'note and sound' or 'tone and voice'

24   Lau 1982: 5.
25   Mair 1997: 60.

leave the pattern and harmonize *with* each other and not simply each other? A closer look at the list reveals that the pairs are by no means homogeneous and that the relationship between the opposites named are of quite different types. This means that the class concept this list is based on cannot be "the arbitrary choice of the starting point" (D.C. Lau), but must be something else. The choice of a starting point or of a viewpoint is an individual decision inevitably leading to relativity. But what if this chapter is not concerned with relativity in its frustrating aspect but trying to point out how we in reality do overcome this relativity, namely by fixing the point of departure or the view point in an absolutistic way? In other words: if the coordinates of a system are fixed, arbitrariness is suppressed and there is no room for relativity. In such a system the shorter or longer dimensions of a thing is decided (judged) with reference to its form, the difficulty or ease with which something is done is decided with reference to its completion, and whether something precedes or follows is decided with reference to a sequence. I therefore suggest that we take the character 相 to represent the verb *xiàng* with the meaning 'to judge (by)' – a judgement which is corroborated by the syntactic form of the corresponding elements in the Guodian-version, namely genitive constructions such as 又亡之相生也. This leads to the following imperfect translations (I cannot here give detailed explanations for all the decisions taken):

10a   Therefore: Whether something is made to exist or left inexistent is decided with reference to the act of procreation; the difficulty or ease with which something is done is decided with reference to its completion; regarding something as long or short is decided with reference to its form; whether something is regarded as high-standing or lowly is decided with reference to its gradient; taking something to be a tone or noise is decided with reference to harmony; regarding something as before (in front) or after (behind) is decided with reference to its sequential position. (RHG)

10b   [GD 甲15] [...] 又(有)亡(無)之相生也,[甲16]戁(難)惕(易)之相成也,長
       耑(短)之相型(形)也,高下之相涅(盈)也,音聖(聲)之相和也,先後之相墮
       (隨)也.
       The decision whether something is made to exist or left inexistent lies in its procreation; judgment whether something is difficult or easy lies in its completion; judgement whether something is to be regarded as long or short lies in its form; judgement whether something is regarded as high-standing or lowly lies in its fullness; the decision whether something is

taken as a tone or a noise lies in its harmony; judgement whether something is regarded as before (in front) or after (behind) lies in its sequential position. (RHG)

In keeping with this line of interpretation, the following sentence of the passage introduces the person who acts and takes the decisions:

11 是以聖人處無為之事, 行不言之教.
[LZ 2] Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practises the teaching that uses no words.[26]
[LZ 46 (2)] For these reasons, The sage dwells in affairs of nonaction, carries out a doctrine without words.[27]

11a [GD 甲16] [...] 是[甲17]以聖人居亡為之事,行不言之⊗(教).[28]
Therefore the sage occupies the service of making (unauthorized) actions (of others) disappear[29] and practises a teaching of not letting others speak (without authorization). (RHG)

3. Let us now return to the first sentence of the passage. If we assume that different variants represent different derivational groups, then we are dealing with the same word classes, but with two different *semantic* roots. The first 美 of the received text is transcribed as 散, the second as 敊. As the noun represented by the character 惡 / 亞 already appeared in *Lao Zi* 20 and was equivalent to the character 美 / 肖, we may also conclude that neither 散 nor 敊 represent the root 'X is beautiful'. I therefore tentatively posit two further equivalents and suggest the following literal interpretations:

9b 天下皆知美之為美 [也], 斯惡已; 皆知善之為善 [也], 斯不善已.
[LZ 2] If everbody in the empire acknowledges that (the sage's) beautifying something makes it something beautiful, then its being ugly comes to an end; if everybody acknowledges that (the sage's) approving something makes it something good, then its being not good comes to an end. (RHG)

26 Lau 1982: 5.
27 Mair 1997: 60.
28 The symbol ⊗ here and in some of the following examples marks a character variant the representation of which is irrelevant here.
29 The translation of the expression 無為 / 亡為 I discussed in Gassmann 2000-01.

These step-by-step analyses may seem rather tedious, but I hope that the budding signs of beauty issuing from them can be appreciated. We shall therefore add the following items to our table (2 and 4.1):

| (1) | V₁ | 芾 | X is beautiful |

(1)   V₁   芾   X is beautiful

1.1   N   芾   (the state of) being beautiful; beauty

2   N   妝   a beauty, the beautiful, something beautiful, i.e. people or things that are in the state of being (regarded as) beautiful

4.1   N   妝   the beautifying of Y (by X); the making beautiful of Y (by X)

The final instance with another two variant characters is to be found in chapter 31 of the *Lao Zi*. The passage runs as follows:

12   兵者不祥之器,非君子之器[也].不得,已而用之.恬淡為上.勝而不美,而美之者,是樂殺人.

[LZ 31] Arms are instruments of ill omen, not the instruments of the gentleman. When one is compelled to use them, it is best to do so without relish. There is no glory in victory; and to glorify it despite this is to exult in the killing of men.[30]

[LZ 75 (31)] Weapons are not instruments of the superior man; weapons are instruments of evil omen, to be used only when there is no other choice. He places placidity above all and refuses to prettify weapons; if one prettifies weapons, this is to delight in the killing of others.[31]

The corresponding Guodian-text reads as follows:

12a   [GD 丙06][...] 古(故)曰兵者【非君子之器[也].不】[丙07]得,已而甬(用)之.⊗⊗為上,弗妝(美)也.妝(美)之,是樂殺人.

Because one of the variants makes its second appearance here, this final passage can serve as a test for our assumption that the relationship between variant and word represented is stable. The syntax of the strings 勝而不美 (GD: 弗妝也; 妝 in GDCMZJ is wrongly transcribed as 媺) and the presence of the negations 不 and 弗 inform us that we are in both cases dealing with verbs. In *Lao Zi* 2 above

30   Lau 1982: 47.
31   Mair 1997: 96.

the characters 美 / 敊 represented a noun with the meaning 'a beauty, the beautiful, something beautiful'. If we now assume that there is a semantic relationship between the nominal and the verbal form, then we ought to be able to characterize this with a general rule. Derivational rule (c) above furnishes us with the first step: A noun can be the source of a derived verb, if and when the noun designates beings fulfilling a certain rôle (so-called *nomina agentis*). E.g. *wáng wàng* 王王, i.e. 'the king (*wáng* 王) acts as a true king (*wàng* 王)'. The second step is covered by derivational rule (b): A verb can be the source of a derived causative verb, e.g. X *wàng wáng* X 王王 'X treats the king (*wàng* 王) as a king (*wáng* 王)'.

As the characters 美 / 敊 in *Lao Zi* 2 represent a noun that can by and large be considered a *nomen agentis* with the meaning 'a beauty, the beautiful, something beautiful', we can derive first an intransitive verb 'to act like a beauty (should act)' and then a causative verb 'to treat somebody as a beauty or somebody beautiful'.

The second instance of the character 美 in this passage is transcribed as 敊. The syntax of the strings 美之 (GD: 敊之) with the presence of the object pronoun 之 inform us that we are in both cases again dealing with verbs – to be more precise – with *causative* verbs. It is sufficiently proven that causative verbs of this type exist in two subtypes, in a so-called *factitive* ('to make somebody rich') and a so-called *putative* form ('to regard somebody as rich; to find somebody rich'). We have already encountered the first, factitive subtype in its nominal form, i.e. 'to make somebody/something beautiful; to beautify somebody/something' in *Lao Zi* 2 (天下皆知美之為美［也］, 斯惡已: "If everybody in the empire acknowledges that [the sage's] beautifying something makes it something beautiful, then its being ugly comes to an end." This leaves us with the other, putative subtype for the variant 敊. We can thus translate the passage as follows:

12b (LZ) Things that can be used as weapons are instruments of ill omen, not the instruments of the Junzi. But when he does not reach his goal (by other means), he finally uses them. Equanimity and blandness constitute the highest attitudes. Even if he wins, he does not treat them as something beautiful. The one who finds them beautiful, this one delights in the killing of men. (RHG)

12c (GD) Hence it is said: Things that can be used as weapons are not the instruments of the Junzi. But when he does not reach his goal (by other

means), he finally uses them. Equanimity (?) and blandness (?) constitute the highest attitudes. He is one who refuses to treat them as something beautiful. If someone finds them beautiful, this one delights in the killing of men. (RHG)

One and the same variant character could therefore represent different words, and – by implication – different word classes, if and when the words represented belonged to the same semantic root, i.e. if and when they were derivationally related. Such a variant can thus represent both the source of derivation and the immediately derived words. We can therefore draw up the following rich and beautiful table (the bracketed items have been inferred by derivational analogy):

(1)	V_1	肖	X is beautiful
1.1	N	肖	(the state of) being beautiful; beauty
2	N	敄	a beauty, the beautiful, something beautiful, i.e. people or things that are in the state of being (regarded as) beautiful
(2.1)	V_1	敄	to act like a beauty (should act)
2.2	V_2	敄	to treat somebody/something as a beauty/something beautiful
3	V_2		X is more beautiful than Y
(4)	V_2	散	X makes Y beautiful; X beautifies Y
4.1	N	散	the beautifying of Y (by X); the making beautiful of Y (by X)
5	V_3	訧	X takes Y to be beautiful
(5.1)	N	訧	the taking to be beautiful of Y (by X); the regarding something (Y) as beautiful

The character(s) of desire

The analysis of the passages containing different variants of what in the received *Lao Zi*-text is uniformly transcribed with 欲 may serve – although less rich and varied – as a control group to establish that the above observations are not purely singular or idiosyncratic but rather imply systematic traits of the writing system as embodied in text one 甲 vs. texts two 乙 and three 丙. The variants appear in

the following form and in the following positions: 欲 in 4 instances (1.2.18 [19]; 1.5.20 [46]; 3.13.2 and 3.13.4 [64])[32]; 谷 in 7 instances (1.5.24 [46]; 1.6.24 [30]; 1.10.19 [15]; 1.11.31 and 1.12.2 [64]; 1.32.16 and 1.32.18 [57]); 雒 in 1 instance (1.13.21 [37]).

1. The basic root form seems to be the verb 'to desire' represented by the simplest character, i.e. by 谷. This form is in many cases preceded by the negation 不, clearly signalling the verbal character. It is consistently realized in the following passages:[33]

13   保此道者不欲盈.
[LZ 15] He who holds fast to the way [d]esires not to be full.[34]
13a   [GD 甲10] 保此道者不欲[谷]尚盈.
He who holds fast to this way desires not to value fullness. (RHG)

14   以道佐人主者, 不以兵強天下.
[LZ 30] One who assists the ruler of men by means of the way does not intimidate the empire by a show of arms.[35]
14a   [GD 甲06] 以道佐人主者不欲[谷]以兵強[甲07]於天下.
One who assists the ruler of men by means of the way does not desire to force him onto the empire by means of weapons. (RHG)

15   我無欲, 而民自樸.
[LZ 57] I am free from desire and the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block.[36]
15a   [GD 甲32] 我欲[谷]不欲[谷]而民自樸.
I desire not to desire and the min of themselves behave like the uncarved block. (RHG)[37]

32   The figures in the square brackets refer to the numbering of the received text of *Lao Zi*.
33   The passages from the reconstructed text are quoted in a simplified way, i.e. only the variants of interest are specified in square brackets.
34   Lau 1982: 23.
35   Lau 1982: 45. The received text lacks the character 欲.
36   Lau 1982: 85.
37   Even if the object of the verb 欲, i.e. the string 不欲 is classified as nominal, it would as a derived nominal belong to the same root meaning represented by the same character (item 1.1 in the following table). The simple transcription of 民 with 'min' in the translation is discussed in Gassmann 2000.

16   是以聖人欲不欲.
     [LZ 64] Therefore the sage desires not to desire.[38]
16a [GD 甲11] 聖人欲[谷][GD 甲12]不欲[谷].
     The sage desires not to desire. (RHG)

This passage has a parallel in text three 丙, but instead of the variant forms it in both instances incorporates the later regular form 欲. This seems to indicate that text three was edited or written later than text one, as it shows a tendency to regularize the variants and uses the generally received form:[39]

16b [GD 丙12] 是以■[GD 丙13]人欲不欲.
     Therefore [the sage] desires not to desire. (RHG)

The verb 'to desire' has a derived nominal form '(the) desiring', 'the being desirous of' represented by the same character, i.e. by 谷. This form has the same semantic characteristics and is realized in the following passage:

17   咎莫大於欲得.
     [LZ 46] There is no misfortune greater than being covetous.[40]

17a [GD 甲05] · 罪莫厚乎甚欲,咎莫憯乎欲[谷]得.
     No crime is more massive than an increasing of desires, no misfortune is more miserable than the longing for gain. (RHG)

The object of the comparison, i.e. 欲[谷]得 is syntactically in a noun slot and must therefore be centred on a noun. The noun is the derived nominal 欲[谷] with its complement (i.e. object) 得. The string 罪莫厚乎甚欲 does not occur in the received text (see the discussion below).

We can now set up the first two lines of the chart for words cognate with the verb 'to desire':

| 1 | V_2 | 谷 | X desires Y |
| 1.1 | N | 谷 | the desiring (of Y), being desirous of Y, longing for Y |

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38   Lau 1982. 95.
39   Cf. the introductory remarks and the comments on example 20 below, which embodies a similar constellation indicating the validity of assuming different times of creation or editing.
40   Lau 1982. 69.

2. The verb 'to desire' has a further derived nominal form, which designates the desire for something as an abstract entity and is represented by the character 欲. This form occurs syntactically in the position of a direct object and is realized in the following passage:[41]

18   少私寡欲.
     [LZ 19] Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible.[42]
18a [GD 甲02] 少私寡欲.
     Lessen self-interests and minimize desires. (RHG)

The passage mentioned above with no counterpart in the received text[43] also shows the variant 欲 in the position. It is clearly a nominal form, i.e. the complement (object), following the verbal noun 甚 (the string 甚欲 is in a syntactically nominal slot):

17a [GD 甲05] • 罪莫厚乎甚欲,咎莫憯乎欲[谷]得.
     No crime is more massive than an increasing of desires, no misfortune is more miserable than the longing for gain. (RHG)

3. The verb 'to desire' has a further derived form, i.e. 雜. This form is realized in the following unique passage:

19   化而欲作, 吾將鎮之以無名之樸.
     [LZ 37] After they are transformed, should desire raise its head, I shall press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.[44]
19a [GD 甲13] 化,而欲[雜]作,將鎮之以亡名之樸.

The syntactic environment of 欲 is ambiguous. The string 化而欲作 can be supplemented with the subject 物 from the immediately preceding context, and this subject can be taken as dominating the whole string, including 欲, which would then clearly be a verb. The translation would be approximately as follows: 'If they (the myriad creatures), having transformed [themselves], desire to be active, then [...]'. But why should the writer of the text give up the consistent

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41   This derivation seems to have been later integrated in the form 慾.
42   Lau 1982: 29.
43   A variant string 罪莫大於可欲 appears in the Mawangdui-corpus, cf. Lau 1982: 202.
44   Lau 1982: 55.

use of the form 谷 for the verb or its derived noun, refrain from using the later regular form 欲 and confront us with the form 雒?

D.C. Lau in his translation already seems to have had certain misgivings about the above syntactic interpretation. Judging from his translation he has parsed the string 化, 而欲作, i.e. taking the 而 as adversative and 欲 'desire' as a new subject governing 作. If we decide to accept this analysis of the syntactic structure, we are still confronted with the question why the writer did not make use of the form 欲 for the nominal form in the subject position.

In order to expand the range of our arguments we should focus on the semantic rôles of the verb 作. If 雒 is the subject of 作, then a look at the type of subjects this verb usually co-occurs with might be enlightening. A cursory glance through the *Meng Zi* shows that 作 in a great number of cases is in company of a human or anthropomorphic (e.g. heaven) agent as subject. This would suggest that 雒 represents a noun with the property [+human]. Glancing at the table drawn up for 美 we can see that this is an acceptable derivation (item 2). Taking into account that desires are normally attributed to human beings, a 雒 would thus be 'a desirous person (or being)':[45]

19a [GD 甲13] 化,而欲[雒]作,將鎮之以亡名之樸.
They are transformed, but should desirous persons/beings arise, I shall suppress them with the uncarved block that causes names to disappear. (RHG)

We can now draw up the following table covering the examples found in the *Lao Zi*-texts:

1	V$_2$	谷	X desires Y
1.1	N	谷	the desiring (of Y), being desirous of Y, longing for Y
2	N	欲	desire, wish, passion
3	N	雒	a desirous person/being

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45   This line of argument seems to be supported by the string 民自樸 in example 15 above where we have the human element in 民.

Some preliminary conclusions

The analysis of the passages containing different variants of what in the received text is uniformly transcribed with 美 or 欲 has, in my opinion – and with all due caution as far as statistical paucity is concerned –, shown that the variant characters *can* be analysed as consistently representing different words or roots within the framework of the corresponding derivational pattern. The repercussions of such a result are manifold, and I shall try to sketch some of the more important ones. If now the situation described in the two cases dealt with is not reducible to stylistic or aesthetic considerations (as has also been suggested), but rather must be explained as a general feature of a certain writing system, then a number of very obvious questions arise.

1. Why do we meet with several variants in the fields of certain cognate words (such as 美), whereas most other fields with nearly the same derivational properties do not, or only in part, display this variety or these characteristics? The answer to this could run along the following lines: Changes in the language and in the writing system are not necessarily synchronized. The writing system may conserve characteristics that have disappeared or lost their original function.[46] It may also choose to represent a certain characteristic in one case and to ignore the same characteristic in another. Consistency is not automatically to be expected in a writing system – and not even periodic reforms of the system can completely ensure its homogeneity.

2. If the variant characters mirror a difference in the words, then we should ask which aspect of a word is being represented. Is it the meaning or is it the form, i.e. the phonetic? Generally speaking, writing systems tend to representation of the phonetic aspect of words. This tendency is all the more marked when the words of a language are phonetically complex. The history of the phonetic development of Chinese is generally assumed to have moved from comparative complexity to increasing simplicity (e.g. reduction of consonant clusters, reduction of phonemes through loss of finals, etc.). This would mean that in the case of derivationally cognate words that are represented by different characters we should as a first guess assume that they signal *phonetic differences* and that the

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46 Cf. for instance the velar /gh/ in English 'night', which corresponds to the German /ch/ in 'nacht'. This is similar to the phonetic 同 *tóng* in words like *tóng* 銅 'bronze', *dòng* 洞 'cave', *dòng* 挏 'lead', *tǒng* 筒 'tube' that has developed in different ways.

text showing these characteristics belongs to an early or – when comparing texts – earlier stage of the writing systems.[47] The differences in the distribution of 無 / 亡 in the first and the third *Lao Zi*-text seem to point in this direction, as already met with in the case of example 16 above:

20   是以聖人無為,故無敗;無執,故無失.
[LZ 64] Therefore the sage causes (unauthorized) actions (of others) to disappear, and consequently he causes defeat to disappear; he causes grasping to disappear, and consequently he causes failures to disappear. (RHG)

20a [GD 甲11] 是以聖人亡為,古(故)亡敗;亡執,古(故)亡■(失).

In the corresponding parallel in the third Guodian-text all the 亡 read as 無:

20b [GD 丙11] 聖人無為,古(故)無敗也;無執,古(故)【無■(失)也】.

If my assumption is correct that 亡 is an early character variant representing a derived causative with the meaning 'to cause to disappear' or 'to let disappear'[48], then GD 甲 (and GD 乙) would be an earlier – presumably a considerably earlier – text than GD 丙. This would therefore imply that the earlier a text is, the more variants are to be expected due to the phonetic richness which has not yet been reduced.[49] Variant characters that do not follow the same distributional pattern in different texts (as in example 13, where the word has not changed, but the character has) may therefore be offering us a *diachronic view* of language development as mirrored in the writing system.[50]

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47   I shall not enter into the question of a phonetic reconstruction of the different variants for 美, because it goes beyond the scope of this article and beyond my competence.

48   Cf. footnote 29. Comparing the *Lao Zi*-texts one 甲 and three 丙, the distributional pattern of 亡 / 無 is interestingly identical to that of 谷 / 欲.

49   If these assumptions turn out to be reasonable, then one should consider whether in such cases we should continue to speak of 'variants' (in English no one would refer to 'distribute' and 'distribution' as variant writings). My suggestion would be to call them 'cognate characters' based on the fact that they represent cognate words.

50   This, of course, is not the only possible explanation. There might also be regional, i.e. dialectal (?) differences or traditions that have been conserved. In the present case, given that the texts were found together, this argument, however, seems to me of less importance.

3. The arguments presented in favour of basing character variants in certain cases on lexical differences do not imply that character variants directly represent differences in word classes. As the case of 美 seems to show, the same character represents the root word and its derivations. These derivations are usually members of a different word class.

4. *Derivation* is a very powerful key to the Chinese lexicon, and we should invest more time in exploring its rules and ramifications in all the available texts, either received or issuing from graves. Not only lexicography would benefit from such an investment, but also our syntactical knowledge. And, finally, we would be furnishing phonologists with a more solid framework for their investigation of the phonetic aspect of Chinese words. The so-called Guodian *Lao Zi* certainly has a crucial function in this endeavour.

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