On Early Chinese Morphology and its 

Intellectual History

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DAVID PRAGER BRANNER

The medieval Chinese tradition tells us that a given Chinese character may change its meaning when its reading is altered slightly. Modern scholars have sought principles for these changes, and from those principles have reconstructed a skeletal system of early Chinese morphology – with such elements as derivation by tone change, causative infixes, transitivising prefixes, etc. Yet it is an arresting fact that some of pre-modern China’s linguistically most astute scholars inveighed against the multiple readings on which this research is based. They seem to have held strong opinions, not always made explicit, about precisely how it is that Chinese characters represent language. These two views, modern and traditional, represent fundamentally different models of how early Chinese evolved into modern Chinese.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with some aspects of the question of morphology in early Chinese – with its intellectual history and practical application. Morphology in general concerns the rules of word-formation, especially inflexion and derivation. Although these processes are not usually considered present in Chinese on any large scale, a number of morphological functions have been posited for early Chinese and incorporated into reconstructions. Laurent Sagart’s important Roots of Old Chinese (1999) is a recent effort to assemble evidence for it.

Reconstructed morphology is of varied kinds, but the best attested form is that represented by variant readings in the medieval phonological tradition. I hold the view that our chief received sources on medieval Chinese phonology, the ‘rime-books’ of the Qiéyùn 切韻 tradition and the ‘rime-tables’ of the Yünjìng 韻鏡 tradition, embody a fundamentally conservative and artificial literary ideal, and not the actual speech of any real time or place. The rationale for this viewpoint is discussed in Norman and Coblin (1995) and my own thoughts set down in Branner (2000, pp. 147–174). Note that the medieval tradition is the earliest whole phonological system we have for any type of Chinese; reconstructed early Chinese is, conceptually, derived in large part from the medieval system, with the addition

1 An earlier version of this paper was read 17 January, 2000, at the University of Hong Kong, and a still earlier version as “Did Early Chinese Really Have Morphology”? (delivered 1 November, 1998, Annual Meeting of the Western Branch of the American Oriental Society, Seattle). My thanks to South Coblin, Victor Mair, Tsu–Lin Mei, Martin Kern, Margaret Chu, and Thomas Bartlett. A portion of the writing of this paper was done with support from Victor Mair and the University of Pennsylvania.

2 I use the term “early Chinese” to refer to what is also called “Old Chinese” or “Archaic Chinese”, because those terms seem to suggest a clearly defined linguistic entity. In fact, early Chinese is imprecisely defined, and is reconstructed using materials of greatly varying dates.
of data from rhyming, character structure, and other sources. Consequently, in the discussion that follows, I illustrate phonological points in the main using medieval phonology, clothed in the direct transcription system presented in Branner 1999b. (Medieval forms are always placed in curly brackets {})

Below, I offer two well documented examples of pairs of medieval variant readings that are understood to derive from morphologically related words in early Chinese. The first are examples of a noun derived from a verb, in which the tone changes to q`ush¯e from something other than the q`ush¯e:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verb in non-q`ush¯e</th>
<th>noun in q`ush¯e</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>脴 chú {tshyuQ̃b} ‘to dwell at’</td>
<td>脴 chú {tshyuH̃b} ‘place’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>知 zhī {trĭb} ‘to know’</td>
<td>知 zhī {triH̃b} ‘knowledge’ (≡ ¯zhi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>胡 chén {dreñb} ‘to set out, arrange’</td>
<td>胡 chén {dreñb} ‘battle formation’ (≡ ¯zh`ı)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>繼 ch`eng {zyeng} ‘to ride’</td>
<td>繼 zh`ıng {zyengH̃} ‘carriage with team of horses’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>處 chu`an {druañb} ‘to transmit’</td>
<td>處 zh`an {druañb} ‘a record’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>触 sh`u {sruQ̃c} ‘to count’</td>
<td>触 sh`u {sruH̃c} ‘number’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q`ush¯e is indicated in medieval transcription by the letter H at the end of a syllable. It is thought by some that this H may be a survival of a nominalizing suffix, hence an example of early morphology whose only trace survives in a tonal distinction.

When we read classical Chinese, it is conventional to pay attention to these variant readings, and in traditional sishú education one of the teacher’s chief responsibilities was to train pupils in when to read a given character in its “basic” pronunciation and when to read it in its “changed” pronunciation. For instance, consider the line

[The finest thing is to make one’s home among good people; if, in choosing, one does not dwell among the good, how can one gain knowledge?] (Analects 4: 1)

We are supposed to read, in Mandarin, 里 rì rén wéi mèi; 脛 bù chú rén, yǐn dé zhì. The boldfaced words chú ‘to dwell among’ and zhī ‘knowledge’ are special readings, and we must not read them *chú ‘place’ and *zhī ‘to know’ if we are to understand the passage grammatically. In medieval transcription this passage is {liQ̃d nyeñb ghwĭb miQ̃c; dreik̃a pweit̄a tshyuQ̃b nyeñb an̄ a tek1 triH̃b}, and the jìngdiàn shìwén entry for this passage duly supplies sound-glosses on these two words:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>脶 chú</th>
<th>脸 li</th>
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<td>{tshyuQ̃b}</td>
<td>{tshyuH̃b}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The readings in this particular passage are uncontroversial and known to all people literate in Chinese, although some others of this type are far more recondite.

My second set of examples consists of pairs of verbs, in which a stative or “inactive” (jìng 静) meaning is derived from a transitive or “active” (dòng 動) sense, when a voiceless initial changes to voiced:

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active verb with voiceless initial

敗 {peiH2} ‘to defeat’

別 {patjb} ‘to separate (tr.), distinguish’

著 {trak} ‘to place on; to wear’

見 {kanj} ‘to see’

解 {keiQ2} ‘to unite’

紀 {keiH} ‘to tie’

會 {kweiH1} ‘to bring together’

inactive verb with voiced initial

敗 {beiH2} ‘to be defeated’

別 {batjb} ‘different, to depart’

會 {drak} ‘to be attached to’

見 {ghan} ‘to have audience, be seen’ (= gh)

解 {gheiQ2} ‘to be released, relaxed’ (as in xièdài ‘sluggish’)

紀 {gheiH} ‘to be connected to’

會 {ghweiH1} ‘to come together’

Here there is a small discrepancy between medieval and early phonology:  {b} is the voiced form of voiceless {p} in both systems, and  {d} is the voiced form of voiceless {t}. Medieval  {gh} (phonetically probably a voiced velar or laryngeal fricative [y] or [?] in the time of the Qièyùn) is believed to derive from a voiced stop [g] in early times, and it is that voiced g that corresponds to the voiceless {k} in the medieval forms shown.

Now consider the line

君子以文會友，以友輔仁

[The well-bred person assembles friends through culture, and nurtures goodness through friendships.] (Analects 10.24).

We customarily read this line jūnzi yì wén huì yǒu, yǐ yǒu fù rén ({kwen tsQ yiQ muen, kweiH1 ghouQ, yiQ ghouQ baoQ, nyen})]. The meaning of 會 is clearly a transitive verb ‘to bring together’ because it takes 友 ‘friend’ as direct object, and so according to the received tradition it should be read kuài {kweiH1}. But for some reason the Mandarin reading kuài for 會 is now associated only with the word kuài ‘accounting’ (literally, “to assemble and tally up”). Kuài as a reading for the literary character 會 in the sense of “to assemble” has dropped out of modern reading practice.

The content of this paper is twofold. First, I review the background of these variant readings and introduce two modern views of them, one native to China and one the product of the western-Chinese synthesis in recent times. Second, I consider the evidence for and against these two recent views and consider the place of variant readings and reconstructed morphology in the modern study of and research in classical Chinese.

2. The conservative lexicographic tradition of variant readings

Chinese variant readings have been transmitted since antiquity in the native lexicographic tradition. I see three main phases in the evolution of that tradition.

The earliest examples are found in exegetic commentaries on high classical texts. This first phase was in full bloom by Eastern Han (25–220), and is typified by works such as the Máo shì jiān 毛詩箋 of Zhèng Xuán 鄭玄 (127–200). Zhèng Xuán’s commentary consists of running notes on the whole classical text, and sound-glosses, embracing both variants and more usual readings, are included. But phonological glosses occupy a very small part of what is primarily devoted to discussion of content and meaning.
Original phonological glosses continue to appear in large numbers in commentaries through at least Táng times. But a second phase of the native glossing tradition was attained in compendia of variant readings, which flowered in the Six Dynasties period (222–589). It seems likely that the growth of Buddhism favoured the Chinese interest in phonology, even when the texts being glossed were non-Buddhist. By far the best known exemplar of this type is the Jingdiàn shiwèn 經典釋文 of Lù Démíng 陸德明 (c. 550–630). The Shiwèn, which was completed before 589, is a dense collection of earlier semantic and phonological glosses, without an index. It differs from the commentaries of Zhèng Xuán’s type in that it does not attempt to subordinate its glosses to a full and corrected version of the text itself. Rather, it is intended to be used as an adjunct to the original texts, and is arranged following their order. Here commentary seems to be raised up at the expense of text; glosses have become the body of the work, like an entire meal made up of condiments.

But although the Shiwèn assembles thousands of sound-glosses from various sources, it does not attempt to make an orderly interpretation of the variant readings in those glosses. The actual interpretation of the readings seems to have been undertaken rather later, mainly in the Sòng and after. For example, the Jìyuàn 集韻 (completed 1039) incorporated many of the Shiwèn’s glosses wholesale into the phonological framework of the Qièyùn, generally adding an exemplary textual passage for each unusual variant reading.

More systematic interpretation of variant readings is found in the Qúnjīng yǐnbìan 群經音辨 of Jiā Chāngchāo 賈昌朝 (998–1065). The Yǐnbìan seems to be based in large part on Shiwèn material, but it is organized as study of individual characters, and indicates which readings of a given character are to be considered primary and which derived. The concept of “derivation” is not explicitly stated, but Jiā Chāngchāo clearly presents what he considers the main reading first and the derived reading second. Derivation is more clearly evident in brief comments of Huáng Zhèn 黃震 (1213–1280), found in his Huánshì tíchāo 黃氏日鈔 (Zhèng and Māi 1964, p. 195). Huáng attempts to assert a general principle for relating meanings to readings: the primary reading is said to have a jìng 靜 “inactive” meaning and the derived reading a dòng 動 “active” meaning. This dòng-jìng contrast has a long history in Chinese philosophy, but its importance in grammatical thinking is explicitly attested only since Sòng times.

Jiā Chāngchāo’s work has been immensely influential, and seems to have served as the basis for similar presentations down until the beginning of the period of native-western synthesis in Chinese linguistics, around the end of the Manchu period. For instance, the section “Dòngzì biānyìn 動字辨音” in Mǎji ànzhǒng’s 1898 Mǎshì wèntōng 马氏文通 owes most of its material to Jiā’s book.

Overall, the native Chinese tradition of variant readings was quite conservative. Its exponents seemingly felt unable either to discard the tradition or to develop it beyond collating and arranging the examples. Most significantly, they apparently never asked how the tradition related to the language of early China. That line of inquiry was taken up, in different ways, by two different groups of iconoclasts: the kǎozhèng 考證 philologists of the Manchu period, and westerners from the early missionary period onward.

Below I deal first with the western tradition, because its assumptions are more widely accepted today, and then with the Manchu-time philologists.
3. Western reconstructionism based on variant readings

Western sinology has long been concerned with the nature of early Chinese and the ways in which it differed from other languages of the world. Indeed, even before they knew about China, a larger curiosity about foreign things has been characteristic of European and other Mediterranean civilizations. Certainly from the time of Herodotus (c. 485–post 425 BC, the beginning of the Warring States period in China), western intellectuals have been fascinated with describing and comparing the many different cultures and languages they encountered. Mediterranean civilization has long understood itself to be a neighbourhood of cultures, some newer, some older, and many of them literate. The whole context of the Odyssey implies a world in which different cultures were accustomed to encountering each other. This cultural memory of the meeting and mingling of peoples is borne out even in records the modern world has retrieved from bronze age Minoan Crete and Mycenæ. It is very different from classical China’s view of its own place in the world, even if it turns out that bronze age China was also a meeting place of many cultures.

The watershed in the European practice of Chinese historical linguistics was the application of comparative-historical linguistics to the materials of the Chinese tradition, most famously associated with Bernhard Karlgren’s (1889–1978) work after World War I. But the history of the Western reconstruction of early Chinese morphology actually predates Karlgren; I see four stages in its development.3

The first stage, which I call the “metaphysical” view, I shall dispose of briefly. It was exemplified by such different personalities as Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), Étienne Fourmont (1683–1745), and J. P. Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832). The feature of Chinese that attracted the most attention in this period was the writing system, which seemed to many savants to exist independently of any spoken language, and perhaps even to represent a pure and abstract “philosophical language” akin to a mathematical notation of pure ideas. This idealistic (and factually baseless) view was firmly debunked by Pierre (Peter) du Ponceau (1760–1844), heir to Franklin and Jefferson as President of the American Philosophical Society and a major intellectual force in the early republic. Du Ponceau’s 1838 book begins with a useful resumé of the exponents of the metaphysical view, ending in a long but resounding rebuttal. Du Ponceau holds that any true written language must necessarily be based on speech.

More significant is the next stage, the “typological” view, according to which Chinese was seen as the consummate representative of “primitive” monosyllabicity. The prime exponent of this view was the founder of modern linguistic typology, the polymath Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). Von Humboldt is concerned with language as a token of cognition — that is, with the relation between the way a nation speaks and its “national” mental characteristics. He was the first to characterize human language as falling into three distinct types, of which he saw Chinese as one of the prime specimens. He cited Chinese, together with Burmese, as an extreme example of the isolating type of language, in which morphology is fundamentally absent.

3 In researching this section I have benefited from reading van Driem (1979).
Von Humboldt must have had access to reasonably good information about Chinese, because he is by no means numb to the aesthetic power of the classical language, nor is he without sensitivity to Chinese culture. But he describes Chinese as lacking one essential refinement of an advanced language:

Niemand kann lügen, dass das Chinesische des alten Styls dadurch, dass lauter gewichtige Begriffe unmittelbar an einander treten, eine ergreifende Würde mit sich führt und dadurch eine einfache Größe erhält, dass es gleichsam, mit Abwerfung aller unnützen Nebenbeziehungen, nur zum reinen Gedanken vermittelst der Sprache zu entfliehen scheint. (1903 [1836], p. 164)

[Nobody can deny that the old style Chinese reveals a stirring dignity owing to the fact that important ideas impinge directly upon each other; it reveals a simple grandeur because, by discarding all useless secondary designs, it seems to take recourse in depicting pure thought via language.] (tr. 1971, p. 124)

Wenn man daher auch gern zugesteht, dass die Form der Chinesischen Sprache mehr, als vielleicht irgend eine andere die Kraft des reinen Gedanken herausstellt und die Seele, gerade weil sie alle kleinen, störenden Verbindungsläute abschneidet, ausschließlich auf den reinen, direkt auf den reinen Gedanken hinrichtet, wenn die Lesung auch nur weniger Chinesischer Texte diese Ueberzeugung bis zur Bewunderung steigert, so dürften doch auch die entschiedensten Vertreter dieser Sprache schwerlich behaupten, dass sie die geistige Tätigkeit zu dem wahren Mittelpunkt hinlenkt, aus dem Dichtung und Philosophie, wissenschaftliche Forschung und beredter Vortrag gleich willig emporblühen. (1903 [1836], pp. 255–256)

[Hence, even though we are willing to admit that the form of the Chinese tongue more than perhaps any other brings out the power of the pure idea and directs the soul toward it more exclusively and precisely because it lops off all small disturbing connecting phonemes, and even if reading of but a few Chinese texts increases this conviction to a state of admiration, the most resolute defendants of this language could scarcely claim that it guides intellectual activity to the true central point from which poetry, philosophy, scientific research, eloquent recitation blossom forth.] (tr. 1971, p. 196)

Von Humboldt feels that Chinese is primitive because it has failed to develop in an important way. Specifically, because it lacks derivational morphology, in his view it is inadequate for certain delicate mental processes. I do not wish to dwell on von Humboldt’s possible ethnic prejudices, which are intrinsic to his work and which have been commented on since his own day.4 My interest here is rather his view that Chinese is primitive because in lacking morphology it has failed to develop something essential.

As influential as von Humboldt deservedly was, his assumption that Chinese reflected a primitive stage of linguistic monosyllabicity did not persist unaltered. Between his day and Karlgren’s a number of western scholars advanced the opinion that Chinese, even though it lacked derivational affixes, must have descended from a language that did display some form of morphology. This third stage of development, the “morphological” viewpoint, was apparently first enunciated by the astute phonetician Karl Lepsius (1810–1884). Below are some passages from his 1861 monograph:

4 Du Ponceau was an early critic see Sweet (1980, pp. 403–406) and Aarsleff (1988, pp. lxi–lxv), but compare the clear-headed remarks of Sweet (1989) and Koerner (2000, p. 9).
At first glance Lepsius may seem to hold a contemptuous view of Chinese-speaking people, but in fact he is arguing for the malleability and fundamental equivalence of all human language. Chinese is not immutable monosyllabic, he holds, nor are western languages immutably derivational. An important development beyond von Humboldt’s position is his claim that Chinese must have become monosyllabic only after having passed through a polysyllabic stage, and hence it has lost something. Chinese monosyllabic is secondary, not primary in the history of world languages. Chinese is not primitive, but advanced, he feels: it has developed in such a way as to lack something necessary, just as a species might lose a trait that had evolved earlier. A similar view was expressed in the 1881 essay of Wilhelm Grube (1855–1908), which Karlgren apparently knew.

Lepsius and Grube held views of Chinese more accurate and sophisticated than Leibniz or von Humboldt. But it strikes me that common to all is the deeply Indo-European conviction that morphology is something essential. For Chinese not to exhibit morphology is, therefore, a defect, and it must have been tempting to try to correct the defect, to restore or recover the missing morphology.
The idea of identifying lost morphology in Chinese apparently arose on at least two separate occasions. The earlier one was due to the general linguist Otto Jespersen (1860–1943). He seems to have been the first person to propose that variant readings could be treated as reliquary evidence for a now-lost system of derivational morphology. In his 1894 book he cites the following examples:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ wang } & \text{ 'king'} \\
\text{lao } & \text{ 'work'} \\
\text{cong } & \text{ 'to follow'} \\
\text{hao } & \text{ 'good'} \\
\text{shou } & \text{ 'to acquire'} \\
\text{mai } & \text{ 'to buy'} \\
\end{align*}
\]

and continues:

\[
\text{ wang 'to become king'} \\
\text{lao 'to pay the work'} \\
\text{zong 'follower'} \\
\text{zong 'footsteps'} \\
\text{hao 'to love'} \\
\text{shou 'to give'} \\
\text{mai 'to sell'}
\]

and continues:

\[
\text{ [...] I see no reason why we should not set forth the provisional hypothesis that the above-mentioned pairs of Chinese words were formerly distinguished by derivative syllables or flexional endings and the like, which have now disappeared, without leaving any traces behind them except in the tones. This hypothesis is perhaps rendered more probable by what seems to be an established fact — that one of the five tones, at least in the Nan-king pronunciation, has arisen through the dropping of final consonants (p, t, k).}
\]

That is not far from what we believe today. Less than a decade after Jespersen, Maurice Courant (1865–1935) proposed a similar principle (1903):

\[
L'\text{histoire de la langue montrera sans doute que, dans la plupart des cas, cette polyphonie vient, soit de la confusion en un seul de caractères primitivement différents, soit de l'extension prise par une pronunciation dialectale, soit de quelques autres causes, parmi lesquelles il faut retenir la suivante: variation phonétique correspondant à une modalité d'un sens premier et rappelant la flexion usitée dans d'autres langues: ˇsyak (ˇso) "cuiller"; ˇcyak (ˇco) "puiser avec une cuiller".}
\]

[Jespersen and Courant represent the first concrete attempts to connect variant readings with lost morphology, ushering in the fourth stage of western reconstructionism, in which the actual phonetics of ancient language is hypothesized and ancient morphology incorporated. It is in that stage that we live and work today. Although details vary, the morphological principle has been implemented in most reconstructions made in the West or in the period of western-Chinese synthesis since the time of Henri Maspero (1883–1945),

5 The reference to Nándìng dialect has to do with the fact that Nándìng preserves the medieval níshēng 陂声 tone category, in which all words anciently ended in -p, -t, or -k. In modern Nándìng dialect, these oral stops are lost, and Jespersen’s point is that the Nándìng níshēng category could be seen as having been produced by the loss of those oral stops. But that is not sound thinking. One problem is that níshēng words in Nándìng are still distinguished by a glottal stop [ʔ], meaning that the ancient stop ending has not completely disappeared. A second problem is that the Nándìng níshēng is fundamentally the same contrastive phonological category as the ancient níshēng, meaning that in fact no new tone has arisen. It was nevertheless an impressive effort for a non-sinologist.
and it is equally important in most Sino-Tibetan work because it helps establish cognates and typological likeness between Chinese Tibeto-Burman. Although there are some dissidents, especially among traditionally educated scholars in China, this is now the modern majority view in Chinese historical linguistics.

At its best, reconstruction allows parsimonious explanations of large collections of data. (It should be remembered, without prejudice, that by “explanation” linguists sometimes mean simply “economical representation”.) The dozens of examples of qūshēng verbs corresponding to non-qūshēng nouns, mentioned on p. 46, are today interpreted as evidence of a lost suffix -s which forms nouns from verbs; the suffix -s in early Chinese is considered to erode in such a way as to produce the qūshēng tone category in medieval phonology. Again, the many pairs of verbs mentioned on p. 47, in which an inactive meaning is associated with a voiceless initial but an active meaning with voiced initial, are today interpreted as evidence of a lost prefix ɦ- which forms inactive verbs from active verbs while producing the effect of initial voicing. These two particular affixes are widely thought to be related to Tibeto-Burman morphological processes, and so constitute an important piece of evidence for the Sino-Tibetan hypothesis (see particularly Bodman, 1980 and Mei, 1980).

The medieval tradition of sound-glosses, our prime authority for the variant readings on which early morphology is reconstructed, contains great numbers of these readings, in considerable diversity. Perhaps the most attractive promise of morphological research is that it might explain many of these readings by showing them to have been morphological variants of a single word, or members of a single “word family”. At present, however, that promise has not yet materialized.

If there is one thing that epitomizes this tradition most starkly, it is the West’s long fascination with the absence of morphology in Chinese. Many nineteenth-century western intellectuals declared the Chinese language to be inadequately expressive because it lacked morphology, and while this view would seem to be at odds with the earlier idea of the script as a universal language, both views build on the premise that the lack of derivational processes is the most distinctive trait of Chinese. The more recent movement to reconstruct lost morphology assumes, after all, that morphology is something necessary to a language. In this respect, it appears to be “restoring” something long felt missing in Chinese. It is ironic that one of the best known examples of reconstructed Chinese morphology, Karlgren’s claim to have discovered a kind of ablaut in the early Chinese pronoun system (1920), betrays a characteristically Indo-European conception of what morphology should look like (Karlgren’s evidence was irretrievably undermined by George Kennedy in 1956). That example should remind us that any language without derivation seems unnaturally plain to many in the West.

4. The Chinese purist school

What I call the Chinese purist school is mainly associated with the kǎozhèng考證 philologists of the Manchu period. Its hallmark is an opposition to the tradition of variant readings that came down from medieval scholiasts and were consecrated in ‘rime-books’ and standard commentaries. Its ideal conception of Chinese writing is that one character has only

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6 In researching this section, I have consulted the superb collection of relevant materials in Zhèng Diàn and Mài Mèiqiào (1964, pp. 103–105, pp. 168–199).
one reading, hence I term it purist. Although this movement was primarily active in
the seventeenth century and afterward, one of its important predecessors was the early
medieval moralist Yán Zhītūi 颜之推 (531–591?), whose Yán’s Family Instructions (Yánhshì
jiāxùn 颜氏家訓) contains an important essay on proper pronunciation, the “Yīncí 音辭”
chapter. I deal with Yán first and turn to the Manchu-time scholars afterwards.

Yán generally advocates great philological sensitivity. Many of the lessons he wishes to
impress on the reader are illustrated with anecdotes from literature. Throughout his book,
overtly written to guide his sons in regulating their households, there runs an undisguised
river of pride in his deep knowledge of literate culture, and he does not miss opportunities
to point out the ignorance of scholars and officials from all over the Chinese world. Yán
lived in both north and south at a time when they were different countries with complex
ethnic mixtures and loyalties, and left us precious if sparse comments on the different literary
worlds of the two cultural centres in sixth century China.

Yet it is curious that in spite of his love of philological precision Yán ignores most of the
variant readings we use in morphological study. He apparently approves only of the variants
hǎo “good” and hào “to like” for the character 好, and the parallel forms è “bad” and wù “to
hate” for 恶. These two pairs of readings he regards as having exegetical legitimacy, although
he laments that they are poorly understood by northerners.

夫物體自有精麅、精麅謂之好惡，人心有所取、去謂之好惡。此語見於葛洪徐邈、而河南學士讀尚書云、好生惡死、於斯反否、是為一論物體、一說人情、
殊不通矣

(1960, pp. 123a–b)

Generally speaking, things are naturally either fine or coarse; fineness and coarseness are called
好 {hàuQ3} “good” and 恶 {è} “bad”. People’s minds either reject or accept things; rejecting
and accepting are called 好 {hàuH3} “to like” and 恶 {èH1} “to hate”. These readings are seen
in the glosses of Gè Hóng 葛洪 and Xú Mào 徐邈. The scholars of the North read the Shāngshù
passage “to love living things and hate killing” as {hàuH3 sìng3 ak1 sìa3} “[to love living things
and bad killing]”. This is an example of using the expression for a thing in one case, and using
the expression for a feeling in the other case. It is far from making sense.

Other than the cases of 好 and 恶, he disapproves of variant readings, citing among others
the specific case of 毁敗, whose readings differ as inactive vs. active verb with voiceless vs.
voiced initials (shown on p. 4, above):

江上學士讀左傳、口相傳述、自為凡例、軍自敗曰敗、打破人軍曰敗補敗敗、諸
記傳未見補敗敗、徐仙民讀左傳、唯一處有此音、又不言自敗敗人之別、三此穿
鑿耳

(1960, pp. 124b–125c)

When scholars of the south read the Zuòzhùn, they pass their traditions down orally, and make
their own general rules. “When an army is defeated of itself, it is called {bèiH2} [the ordinary
reading], and when they defeat someone else’s army it is pronounced {pèiH2}”. I have never seen
this reading in any of the commentaries. Even in Xú Xiánmin’s edition of the Zuòzhùn there
is only a single place with this pronunciation, and there, moreover, he does not talk about the
difference between an army “being defeated” and “defeating someone else”. This is hair-splitting.
It is significant that Yán was active at the end of the period of greatest sound-glossing activity, yet he regards most of the alternate readings current at that time as spurious. Clearly the authenticity of the variant reading tradition is not something we should take for granted; it was already being challenged in its own time.

The greatest partisan of the purist school was the independent scholar Gù Yánwǔ 顧炎武 (1613–1682). Gù doubted the existence not only of variant readings but actually of all tonal distinctions in ancient times. He attributed morphological variants to the ignorance of medieval scholiasts after the Classical period, and seems to have believed that Chinese in its earliest form was a pristine language in which every character had a single and distinctive reading, a dìngyīn 定音 (1966[1667], 4/2a, on the Ode “Xìăoróng 秦風”). In a way this recalls the “metaphysical” view of the early western admirers of the Chinese script (p. 49, above). Gù was, in any case, no ordinary philologist. He was a fanatical opponent of the Manchu government, who advocated what Thomas Bartlett has called “Confucian fundamentalism” (1985). Phonology occupied a clear place in Gù’s messianic vision:

天之未亡，必有聖人復起，舉今日之音，而還之淳古者

The fact that Heaven has not abandoned us means that a Sage will surely arise again; he will raise up our modern pronunciations and return them to those of pure antiquity.

Gù cited most of his evidence from rhyming and from the glossing tradition. His chief statement on this subject is his short essay “Xiānrú 晚如 zhī shù bú jìng 先儒兩聲各義之說不盡然 [the theory of former scholars, that readings with two different tones each have their own meanings, is not necessarily true]” (1966b[1667]). He begins by offering contradictory examples of characters with multiple readings in early poetry:

凡去入之字，各有二聲或三聲四聲，可遮變而同以至於平、古人謂之轉注、其臨文之用、或浮或切、在所不拘、而先儒謂一字兩聲各有意義、如惡字、為愛惡之惡則去聲、為美惡之惡則入聲、顏氏家訓言此音始於蕪洪徐邈、乃自晉宋以下、同然一辭、莫有非之者、余考惡字

All characters in the shàng, qù, or nù tones have two or three or even four readings. They can shift around and turn into each other and even into the píng tone. People in ancient times called this zhùinzhù [change and confluence]. The way a word is actually used when you are face to face with the writing is sometimes hazy and sometimes precise; it lies in an unconstrained state. And so the scholars of former times said that when one character has two readings, each has a meaning. For example, the character 去 when it means ‘to hate’ is read in the qūshēng, {uōH₁}; when it means ‘bad’ it is read in the nìshēng, {ak₁}. The Yànsìjì zhùün says these readings originated in the time of Gě Hóng and Xú Mò, that is, since the Jìn and Sòng [265–479].

Gù now cites five examples from early poetry, in three of which 去 means “bad” yet must be read {uōH₁} in order to rhyme, rather than {ak₁}, and in two of which it means “to hate”

7 Note that Zhōu Zúmó (1966b, pp. 425–426) contradicts Yán’s assertion about bīi 古اط but his evidence may postdate Yán. Modern philologists consider Yán’s ordinary reading {beiH₂} to be the derived reading.
8 His theory of tones, which I do not detail here, is enunciated in his essay “Gùrén 段辯 the yìguān 古人四聲一貫 [for people in antiquity the four tones were all interconnected]”. (1966a[1667]).
and yet must be read \{ak\} in order to rhyme, rather than \{uoH\}. That is, actual early rhyming practice contradicts the tonal assignments of the medieval scholiasts. He continues:

乃知去入之別不過發言輕重之問，而非有此疆爾界之分也。凡書中雨聲之字，此類實多，難以每舉

自訓詁出而經學衰，韻書行而古詩廢，小辨愈滋，大道日隱，噫，先聖之微言、

治於蒙師之口耳者，多矣。知難通達，吾以望之後之君子

So we know that the distinction between qiūshēng and niūshēng was nothing more than between light and heavy pronunciation, and not a sharp distinction as between separate pieces of land. Among characters that have two pronunciations in books, a great many are of this kind. It would be hard to list them one by one.

From the time when glossing arose and Classical learning declined, when ‘rime-books’ were current and old-style poetry was put aside, petty disputation has spread more and more, while the Great Way has disappeared day by day. Alas! many are the subtle words of the former sages that have become confused in the mouths and ears of school-teachers! One can generalize from these cases, and for that I look ahead to some Gentleman of the future.

(This “Gentleman of the future” is the none other than the Confucian messiah who will restore classical pronunciation, together with true ancient-style government.)

Gù goes on to attack another commentator by name:

唐張守節史記正義論例曰：質有精蠢謂之好惡，心有愛憎稱為好惡，當體為名

譽，情乖則為毀譽，今考之於詩、箋之日月、衛之木瓜、鄭之女曰雞鳴，并以好

韻報，此心所愛而去聲者也、書洪範無有作好遵王之道、此心所愛而上聲者也、

若聲字三見於詩、箋之義燕熾譽、撃謗之以永終譽、皆作去聲、而韓奕之韓姑

燕譽、獨作平聲、此豈得謂為情乖者乎、以此讀經、所謂息而未光者也

The “Shìjī zhēngyì lùnyīn lì” by Zhāng Shǒujié of the Táng says,

In quality there is fineness and coarseness, which we call 好 {hauQ} “good” and 惡 {ak} “bad”; the mind has loving and detesting, which we call 好 {hauH} “to like” and 惡 {uoH} “to hate”. If it involves appropriate form, it is 名譽 {meing3b yuoH3b} “reputation”, but if it involves moodiness, it is 毀譽 {hwiQ3b yuo3b} “condemnation and praise”.9

If today we look for evidence in the Shìjīng, we find that the poems “Rìyuè” from Bèi, “Mùgū” from Wèi, and “Nǚ yuè jīmíng” from Zhèng all rhyme 好 with 報 {pauH}, these are cases in the qiūshēng meaning “to love with the heart”. In the “Hóngfān” chapter of the Shìjīng are the [rhyming] lines. “無有作好 {hauQ}, 造王之道 {dauQ} [having no personal likings, pursue the kingly path]”; this is in the shàngshēng, meaning “to love with the heart”. As for the character 譽, it appears three times in the Shìjīng: in “式燕且譽 [I only wish you happiness and joy]” of the poem “Jǔxiá 轟豐” and “以永終譽 [for his longevity the people praise him]” of the poem “Zhènlù 振驚” it is in the qiūshēng. Only in the line. “韓姑燕譽 [Hán Jī was overjoyed]” of the poem “Hányì 韓奕” is it in the píngshēng; how can

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9 Gù is quoting from the “Shìjī zhēngyì lùnyīn lì 史記正義論音例” of the Táng scholast Zhāng Shǒujié 張守節 (preface dated 736; see 1975[1959], p. 15). Zhāng’s lines apparently quote the preface to the jinghàn shùi, themselves clearly reminiscent of Yān Zhīnǎi’s remarks, cited above.
anyone call this “moodiness”? Reading the classics according to principles like this is what is known as “not being illuminated, having gotten stuck in the muck”\(^{10}\). Here again the Táng commentator is claiming a consistent relationship between sound and meaning in the variants readings of 好 and 奠, but Gú shows that that claim is contradicted by the rhyming evidence of classical texts.

After quoting Yán Zhīru’s entire note about the readings of 败 in the Zuòzhuan (above), Gú goes on to cite contradictory glosses on a given classical passage by different commentators, showing that these medieval assignments of sound to meaning were not universally agreed upon even in the pre-modern period. Among the examples he cites are the readings \{kwan\} “coffin” vs. \{kwanH\} “to encoffin”, \{ghwangH\} “king” vs. \{ghwangH\} “to crown king”, and \{kwan\} “to observe” vs. \{kwanH\} “to cause to observe”.

In the “)}} of the Han shu, it says “the counties supplied clothes and quilts, coffins and burial implements”. Ru Chun comments: “coffin” is pronounced like \{kwanH\}, but [Yán] Shīgū says, “At first they made coarse body-boxes, but when [the bodies] reached their home counties, they supplied fresh clothing and coffins, and prepared their burial objects. There is no need to go to the trouble of changing the reading to \{kwanH\}.”\(^{11}\)

Again, it says “Xiàng Yú went back on his agreement and declared himself king; our ruler is king at Nán Zhèng”. [Yán] Shīgū says, “The first \( \) is read \{ghwangH\}”.\(^{12}\) Liú Bān [of Sòng times] says, “I say, what is wrong with \( \) being treated according to its usual reading”\(^{13}\).

Based on these two items, where there are two readings for a single character with superfluous expositions and twisted explanations, [we can see that] among people in the past there were already those who denied [these cases], having realized the truth.

Gú then turns the question of the need for dual glosses and dual readings:

左傳昭五年，觀兵于郊其之山，釋文曰，觀舊音官，讀爾雅者，皆官反，周禮司爟，鄭康成讀如子若觀火之觀，是以觀為去聲

宋魏了翁論觀卦曰，今轉注之說則象義為觀示之觀，六爻為觀瞻之觀，覆意未有四聲反切以前，安知不為一音乎，且考諸義則二字固可一而參諸易詩以後東漢以前，則凡有韻之語，與孫炎沈約以後，必限以四聲，拘以音切者，亦不可同日語也

In the fifth year of Duke Zhāo, in the Zuòzhuan, it says “[He] displayed the troops on the hill at Díjí. The jíngdiàn shiwén says, “觀 was formerly read \{kwan\}”, but in reading the Ėryá it is

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\(^{10}\) Alluding to the xiángzhuan commentary to the fourth line of hexagram Zhèn震

\(^{11}\) Han shū 1962:65.

\(^{12}\) Han shū 1962:30.

\(^{13}\) Han shū 1955:40 (1 28/b).
always \{kwanH1\}. In the Zhōu lì, in the title sīguàn 司空 Zheng [Xuán] reads it as in “干戈代火 [I am like a flame on display]”; thus 鬣 is qūshēng.14

The Sòng scholar Wēi Liàowēng [1178–1237] said of the Yíng hexagram “Guăn 觀 [Observation],

“Here, on account of the principle of ‘change and confluence’, in the text proper and the symbolic commentary 觀 is read \{kwanH1\} \[=guăn\] as in guănshì ‘to exhibit for observation’, while in the six line-texts it is read \{kwan\} \[=guăn\] as in guănzhān ‘to observe from a height’. What I wonder is, before the four tones and fānqiè existed, how did people know these did not have the same pronunciation’?

Indeed, if you examine this matter with respect to meaning, the two words can be treated as one. If you consider this question with respect to the period from the Yíng and Shǐyìng to the Eastern Hán, all rhyming passages were, after the time of Sūn Yán and Shèn Yüē, always constrained within the four tones and pinned down by fānqiè glosses. You cannot speak of them as being of the same moment in time.

In addition to introducing evidence from classical rhyming and attacking early medieval commentaries, Gù claims that in Táng poetry many alternate readings coexist, without a semantic distinction:

如唐人律詩至嚴其中，略舉一二，如翰字或平或去、看字或平或去、望字忘字或平或去、醒字或平或上、且得謂之有兩義乎、此正六書所謂轉注之字，而偏中之兩收三收、以示天下作詩之人，隨其逞疾輕重而用之者也

Let me just cite one or two examples from among the strictest regulated verse of the Táng:

翰 is read sometimes in the píngshēng and sometimes in the qū, 看 sometimes in the píng and sometimes in the qū, 瞻 and 忘 sometimes píng and sometimes qū, 醒 sometimes píng and sometimes shǎng — and can you say these are cases where there are two different meanings? This is precisely what in the study of ancient scripts is called zhuānzhù [change and confluence]. The fact that the rime-books admit such words in two or three different places indicates that the poets of the world used these words differently depending on whether they were spoken slowly or quickly, lightly or heavily.

In all, Gù has three main objections to the variant readings, apart from polemic. First, the assignment of the readings \{uoH1\} and \{ak\} to 觀 in classical rhyming texts does not always match its expected meanings, and there are similar cases such as 好 and 睹, from which he would have us generalize the problem. Second, in some cases scholiasts appear to be at variance over which of two readings is appropriate to a given character, as in the cases of 棟 and 觀. Third, some characters for which alternate readings seem to have no semantic distinction between the alternates, and both may occur in strictly regulated Táng poetry.

His explanation is that there were actually no tones in ancient times, merely different ways to pronounce words. Those different ways, he feels, were pinned down in an artificial way by the medieval scholiasts.

14 I cannot find a sound-gloss by Zhēng Xuán for 觀 in the Zhōu lì zhūshū (1980:831, 843). The line “干戈代火” appears in the Shānjīng “Pānggēng”, where it may also be understood to mean “as for me, it is like gazing at a flame”. 
Gù was not the only Manchu-time savant to attack the received tradition of variant readings, and to claim that early Chinese had no tones. The idea begins to be expressed by a number of voices after his time. For example, the textual critic Máo Qílíng 毛奇齡 (1623–1716), in his Yínxué zhíyào 韻學指要 (1991), and the poet and bon-vivant Yuán Méi袁枚 (1716–1798), in his “Yíní fānchōng 音義繁重”, in Suíyuán suíbì 隨園隨筆 (1993), both assert that dual readings only began to appear with the compilation of ‘rime-books’ after the Qí齊 and Liáng梁 periods (479–557), and that semantic glosses were distinguished to match the diverging phonetic glosses. Yuán Rénlín袁仁林 (fl. c. 1700), in his Xuúzi shuò 虛字說 (Zhèng and Mái 1964: 197) attempts to distinguish between characters that have variant meanings but not variant readings, and characters for which the glosses vary together with sound.

Apart from unornamented statements of opinion, there also appear a few other pieces of textual evidence to boost Gù’s. Here are remarks by Qián Dàxīn 錢大昕 (1728–1804):

古人訓詁、寓於聲音、字各有義、初無虛實動靜之分、好惡異義、起於葛洪字苑、漢以前無此分別也

[...] 學者因循不悟、所謂是末師而非往古者也(Qián 1927–35: 1/3a–b)

When people wrote glosses in antiquity, they put much information into the readings. Each character had meaning; there was not, at first, a distinction between “empty” and “full” words or “active” and “inactive” verbs. Examples such as 好 and 恶 each having different meanings started in Gè Hóngshì’s Zìyuàn. Before the Hán there was no such distinction.

[... ] Scholars follow what has gone before them as if in a stupor. This is what is known as “trusting the teaching of the most recent authority, and denying those who delve into the past”.

Qián now cites Wèi Liàowēng, mentioned above by Gù Yánwué (see p. 58), and continues:

[...] 斯可謂先得我心者矣、大學國治之治、陸德明音直反反、而先治其國之治無常、則當讀平聲、此尤可笑、夫齊家家齊、修身體修、正心心正、誠言誠誠、格物物格、皆不聞有兩音、而讀於治字辯之、曾不習上下文、不幾乎禽莊之同辯乎(Qián 1927–35: 1/3b)

This man can really be said to have “anticipated my very thoughts”. In the Dàxüé, for the character zhì治[“well-governed”] as in “the state is well governed”, Lù Déming [in the jīngdiǎn shìwén] reads it {dr3jm}; but in “first govern the state”, as there is no reading given it is supposed to be read píngshèng, as {dr3jm}. This is really ridiculous. [In the same text, the famous pairs]

“balance the household” and “the household is balanced”,
“cultivate yourself” and “you are cultivated”,
“make upright your mind” and “your mind is upright”,
“make honest your thoughts” and “your thoughts are honest”,
“categorize the things of the world” and “the things are categorized”
− in all these cases, I have never heard of there being two readings. Only for治治 “well-governed” is there a distinction. If you don’t read the whole paragraph, isn’t it almost the same as “not being able to distinguish beans from barley”?

15 The allusion is to the story of the mentally deficient elder brother of Sūn Zhōu孫周, described in the Zuòzhuan左傳 under the 18th year of Duke Chéng成. Here Qián means only that the two “readings” are indistinguishable to us.
The relevant passage from the opening of the Dàxué 大學 is one of the most striking examples in classical literature of the active and inactive forms of a series of verbs used in close juxtaposition. To Qián, it must have been all the more conspicuous because of its prominent place in children’s education. Of the six verbs involved, only the first, 治治 has separate readings for both its active and inactive forms: \{dri₃d\} (in Mandarin, chí) and \{driH₃d\} (Mandarin zhì). If the alternation of chí and zhì is legitimate, asks Qián, then where are the parallel examples for the remaining five verbs? If they do exist, they have not made their way into the commentaries. (I return to the problem of restoring the exegetic tradition on this passage; see p. 68, below.)

A different kind of evidence was introduced by the textual critic Lú Wénchāo 盧文弨 (1717–1796). In a note entitled “Zìyì bù suí yīn qūì yì zì qí yì bù yí yín qūì [the meanings of characters are not distinguished by pronunciation]” Lú cites interesting evidence from some early glossing traditions, including Ēryá 博雅 and Bóyá 博雅, to the effect that the authors of those books sometimes seem unaware that a given character has variant readings with different meanings (Lú Wénchāo 1985: 1).

His first example is from the Ēryá, one of the earliest surviving glossaries (traditionally said to have been in existence in Confucius’ time!), which contains a line

台閩音界卜陽、子也 (see Ēryá jiàozhì 1984: 9–10)

That is to say, the six characters 台閩音界卜陽 and 子 also appearing in early texts, may be defined as “子”. This 子 does not represent a single word or reading: it can be read yú \{yuo₃b\} to mean ‘I, me’ or yú \{yuoQ₃b\} to mean ‘to give’. Lú has noticed that in three of the six cases in the Ēryá’s entry, 子 is defining words meaning ‘I, me’ and in the other three, words meaning ‘to give’:

yi 台 ‘I’ (appears in the Shūjìng)
zhēn 音 ‘I’ (Shūjìng)
yang 陽 ‘I’ (Guó Pú 郭璞 cites the Lù Shā鲁詩 and says it is a regional word)
lái 賞 ‘to give as a gift to an inferior’ (Shūjìng)
bì 畫 ‘to give’ (Shūjìng)
bǔ 卜 ‘to give’ (Shūjìng)

The point is that the compiler of the Ēryá does not seem to have minded that 子 represents two different words with different pronunciations.

Lú finds a similar case in the Bóyá (or Guāngyá 廣雅), a later work modelled after the Ēryá:

遂靈字界終粹、竟也 (see Guāngyá gūlín 1998: 192)

The seven characters 遂靈字界終粹 and 竟, appearing in early texts, are defined as “竟”. However, this 竟 does not represent a single word or reading. It can be read \{keingQ₃a\} and have the sense ‘border’ (this word is written 畔 today), or it can be read \{keingH₃a\} and has the sense ‘to come to an end’:

sui 遂 ‘ditch between fields’ (appears in the Zhōu Lǐ 周禮)
jīng 銘 = 畔 ‘boundary’ (Zhōu Lǐ)
ji`e 价 = 界 ‘boundary, border’ (Shijing)
gàng 岔 ‘border’ (Shuowen, said to be a regionalism)

bì 边 ‘to be done, finished’ (Zuo zhuan)
zhēng 终 ‘to die, come to an end’ (Shijing)
zú 止 ‘to die’ (Shuowen)

Again, the person who compiled the Boya gloss did not seem to mind using one character in two different senses, to which the medieval tradition assigns two different pronunciations. Lü summarizes his conclusions this way:

未别四声以前古人虽亦无平侧之分，往往互用，义或与音不谐；后人往往疑为假借而不知字之本不随音而变也，何假借之有

Before the four tones were distinguished, people did not make the ping-ze distinction in their poetry, but always used the two interchangeably. If it sometimes happened that meaning did not match sound, people in later times, always suspecting jiájìe, have not realized that meaning fundamentally does not change with pronunciation. What sort of jiájìe is that?

Lü’s evidence was supplemented by Wang Yun (1784–1854), best known for his Shuowen studies. He left one note on the subject, headed “Gubufen si sheng, gai ben wusisheng ye 古不分四聲，蓋本無四聲也 [in antiquity the four tones were not distinguished, and this was probably because there originally were no four tones]” (1985: 20). His evidence duplicates and enlarges Lü Wenchao’s, and is taken from the Erya. Below I tabulate his additional examples more concisely than above:

f`an sh`e guo yi ke ji`e = {syengH3} ‘to defeat’
犯奢裸毅魁捷功能堪 = {syengH3} ‘to bear (responsibility)’

xiàn jiao jiao = {ghanH4} ‘apparent, obvious’
顯昭觀劍戰 = {ghanH4} ‘to have audience before’

In the case of the words glossed with 見, Wang notes, “雖皆讀胡句切，固是四義也 [although they are both read {ghanH4} they are certainly two different meanings]”.

jıan jiǎn = {tsuoH1} ‘to make’
汴肩搖動精迪做屬 = {tsak3} ‘to be stirred up’

fei she = {syeQ3} ‘to discard’
廢稅故 = {syeH3} ‘rest house’

The remainder of Wang’s note claims that early scholia on pronunciation cannot be related to the tonal distinctions of the received tradition. He cites the Han commentator He Xiuf’s 何休 (129–182) comments on a passage in the Gongyang zhuàn 公羊传 for the 28th year of Duke Zhuang 庄：
Chūnqìu text: The people of Qí “fá [sent an expedition against]” Wèi.

Gōngyǎng zhuan: In the Chūnqìu, fá refers to the recipient.

Hé Xiū: The one who sends the expedition against others is the recipient [of provocation]. We read fá prolonging the sound. This is expressed from [the point of view of] the people of Qí.

Gōngyǎng zhuan: Fá refers to the active party.

Hé Xiū: The one against whom the expedition is sent is the party active [in provoking the other]. We read fá shortening the sound. This is expressed from [the point of view of] the people of Qí.

The Gōngyǎng’s comments do not seem comprehensible unless fá 伐 is meant to have two different readings that are not apparent in the written text. But, Wáng Yún notes,

雖然傳言伐者、無所區別而為此說

although he follows the Gōngyǎng zhuan’s double mention of fá, [Hé Xiū] makes this explanation without any basis for distinguishing them.

He concludes,

但古言五音、不得變為四聲、況頌書所改之字、以偏旁考之、多不類乎

Just because in antiquity they spoke of the “five sounds”, we cannot simply convert this into our four tones. So too, all the characters collected in the rime-books: if you examine them according to their component structures, most of them do not fall into neat categories.

The purist view of early Chinese may be epitomized by Gù Yánwǔ’s idealized conception, in which each character has one reading and one meaning. For a hundred and fifty years after his death, progressive philologists and intellectuals averred that early Chinese had lacked tones, and that the received medieval tradition of variant readings was hopelessly flawed.

But the study of early Chinese phonology in the period between Gù and Duán Yùcái 段玉裁 (1735–1815) was sorely limited by the tiny amount of data that could be put to evidentiary research. Duán’s ground-breaking achievement was to realize that the phonetic components of all xíngshēng 形聲 characters could also be taken as evidence, opening up most of the dictionary to direct phonological research. Duán’s discovery allowed scholars to see that there was a much closer relationship between the qǐshēng and nǐshēng than between the other tones, and that led to new and less radical theories of early Chinese tone. In fact, even well before Duán’s time, the movement away from Gù’s austere model is already evident in the thinking of Jiāng Yǒng 江永 (1681–1762), who wrote that “漢以前不知四聲 [before the Hán the four tones were not known]” (1966[1819]: 4b). As Doong Jongsy 董忠司 has argued, Jiāng Yǒng claimed not that there were no tones in antiquity, merely that tones “were not known” i.e., had not yet been discovered and made use of by scholars
(Doong Jongsy 1988, pp. 79–101). This claim has persisted in the native tradition since that time.

We should not assume that the purist movement was entirely the creation of Gù’s highly distinctive beliefs. I have shown that Yán Zhîtuî, living a millennium earlier, was almost equally as purist. More significantly, Gù was anticipated by a long native tradition in which xíngshēng 形聲 characters containing the same phonetic element were considered to be semantically cognate – the so-called yòuwén shuò 右文說, the “explanation by reference to the right side of the character” (see the seminal study of Shèn Jiânsì 1986[1933]). The earliest statement of this principle has been attributed to Yáng Quán 杨泉 (fl. 4th c?), from whose Wǔlîlùn 物理論 the following passage is cited:

在金石曰堅，在草木曰堅，在人口曰賢 (Taiping yulan 402: 4b)

In metal and stone it is called {kan⁴}, “firm”; in plants and trees it is called {kenQ3b}, “tough”; in people, it is called {ghan⁴}, “sageliness”.

These cryptic phrases are understood to refer to the underlying meaning of the xíeshēng 註聲 element that the characters 堅, 堅, and 賢 share. The fundamental meaning and sound of that element give rise to the three distinct daughter characters. Such a conception of an etymologically primary “root” form is related closely to the purist ideal of one character, one reading.

The yòuwén shuò certainly outlived Gù’s purist view of variant readings; Huáng Yǒngwǔ (1965) has collected hundreds of examples of this the use of this explanation in philological notes into the twentieth century.

5. An experiment in the recovery of evidence

The arguments of the purists point to specific challenges for adherents of the “reconstructive” view to overcome. One is to search more carefully for morphological variants, not merely by combing the old dictionaries, but by actually reading texts. This point cannot be stressed enough.

As an example, I present below the text of the Dàxuè passage cited by Qián Dàxîn (p. 20, above). It contains of a series of verbs which appear in both active and inactive usage, which are printed in boldface. The question is: for how many of these words can variant readings be found in the tradition, or plausibly reconstructed? Qián feels that only the verbs zhì and chì, both written 治, have any commentatory justification.

In the presentation below, each line is printed first in characters, followed by Mandarin transcription, medieval transcription, and then a rough English translation. The verbs under discussion are printed in boldface.

1 古之欲明明德於天下者先治其國

{kuoQ₁ vsd yuk₃, meing₁רג, meing₁רג, tek₁, u₀, than₁, ghaQ₂, tseyQ₁, san₁, dri₃rg, gi₃rd kuek₁}

In antiquity, those who wanted to make a shining example in the world of their bright virtue first bring order to their states;

16 Most modern references to this passage cite the Yùwén lêijù 専文類纂, but I do not find it there.
2 欲治其國者先齊其家
yù chí qì guó zhě xiān qì qì jiā
{yuk₆ dri₃d gi₃d tsyaQ₃ san₄ dzeiH₄ gi₃d ka₂} those who wanted to bring order to their states first balanced their households;

3 欲齊其家者先修其身
yù qì qì jiā zhě xiān xiū qì shēn
{yuk₆ dzei₄ gi₃d ka₂ tsyaQ₃ san₄ sou₃b gi₃d syen₃b} those who wanted to balance their households first cultivated their own selves;

4 欲修其身者先正其心
yù xiū qì shēn zhě xiān zhèng qì xīn
{yuk₆ sou₃b gi₃d syen₃b tsyaQ₃ san₄ tsyeingH₃b gi₃b sem₃} those who wanted to cultivate their own selves first rectified their minds;

5 欲正其心者先誠其意
yù zhèng qì xīn zhě xiān chéng qì yì
{yuk₆ tsyeingH₃b gi₃d sem₃ tsyaQ₃ san₄ dzyeing₃b gi₃d iH₄d} those who wanted to rectify their minds first made honest their thoughts;

6 欲誠其意者先致其知
yù chéng qì yì zhě xiān zhì qì zhī
{yuk₆ dzyeing₃b gi₃d iH₄d tsyaQ₃ san₄ triH₃b gi₃d triH₁b} those who wanted to make honest their thoughts first let wisdom be attained;

7 致知在格物
zhì zhī zài gě wù
{triH₆ triH₃b dzeiQ₁a keik₂a mwet₃a} attaining wisdom resides in categorizing the things [of the world].

8 物格而后知至
wù gě ér hòu zhī zhí
{mwet₃a keik₂a nyi₃b ghouQ₁ triH₁b tsyiH₁₃} After the things of the world are categorized, wisdom comes;

9 知至而后意誠
zhī zhī ér hòu yì chéng
{triH₁b tsyiH₆ nyi₃b ghouQ₃ iH₃d dzyeing₃b} after wisdom comes, one's thoughts become honest;

10 意誠而后心正
yì chéng ér hòu xīn zhèng
{iH₄d dzyeing₃b nyi₃b ghouQ₃ sem₃ tsyeingH₃b} after one's thoughts are honest, one's mind becomes upright;

11 心正而后身修
xīn zhèng ér hòu shēn xiū
{sem₃ tsyeingH₁b nyi₃b ghouQ₁ syen₃b sou₃b} after one's mind is upright; one's person becomes cultivated;
12 身 修 而 后 家 齊
shēn xiū ér hòu jiā qí
{syen³b sou³b nyí³d ghouQ₁ ka₂ dzei⁴}
after one’s person is cultivated, one’s household becomes balanced;

13 家 齊 而 后 國 治
jiā qí ér hòu guó zhì
{ka₂ dzei⁴ nyí³d ghouQ₁ kwek₁ driH₃d}
after one’s household is balanced the state becomes orderly;

14 國 治 而 后 天 下 平
guó zhì ér hòu tiān xià píng
{kwek₁ driH₃d nyí³d ghouQ₁ than₄ ghaQ₂ being₃a}
after the state is orderly, the world is at peace. (Lìjì 禮記 “Dàxué 大學 [The Great Learning”)

I identify and boldface twenty-one pertinent items in this passage, which can be reduced to the following eight examples, each of which embraces the active and inactive forms of a verb.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Medieval</th>
<th>meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>致</td>
<td>zhì</td>
<td>{triH₃}</td>
<td>to allow to be attained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>至</td>
<td>zhì</td>
<td>{tsyiH₁₈}</td>
<td>to arrive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>治</td>
<td>chí</td>
<td>{dri₃}</td>
<td>to bring order to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>治</td>
<td>zhì</td>
<td>{driH₃}</td>
<td>to become orderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>明</td>
<td>míng</td>
<td>{meing₂₉}</td>
<td>to make a shining example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>明</td>
<td>míng</td>
<td>{meing₂₉}</td>
<td>bright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>齊</td>
<td>qí</td>
<td>{dzei⁴}</td>
<td>to balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>齊</td>
<td>qí</td>
<td>{dzei⁴}</td>
<td>to become balanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>修</td>
<td>xiū</td>
<td>{sou³b}</td>
<td>to cultivate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>修</td>
<td>xiū</td>
<td>{sou³b}</td>
<td>to become cultivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>正</td>
<td>zhèng</td>
<td>{tsyeingH₁₈}</td>
<td>to rectify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>正</td>
<td>zhèng</td>
<td>{tsyeingH₁₈}</td>
<td>to become upright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>誠</td>
<td>chéng</td>
<td>{dzyeing₂₉}</td>
<td>to make honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>誠</td>
<td>chéng</td>
<td>{dzyeing₂₉}</td>
<td>to become honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>格</td>
<td>gē</td>
<td>{keik₂₉}</td>
<td>to categorize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>格</td>
<td>gē</td>
<td>{keik₂₉}</td>
<td>to be categorized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are two verbs for which the variant forms are already quite well known in the literature. Below I place the active verb forms on the left side of the page and the inactive verb forms on the right. First example:

治 (jīngdiǎn shìwén)  
{dri₃} ‘to put in order’

治 (jīngdiǎn shìwén)  
{driH₃} ‘in order’

This is the solitary example admitted by the jīngdiǎn shìwén. The Mandarin reading chí for the active form is now obsolete. Presumably it is the same morpheme as chí 持 ‘to administer,
despatch’. Commentaries from the Shiwen onward instruct us to read chi qi guo治其國 but guo zhi国治

Here is the second example:

致 (Guangyin)
{trih} [Baxter’s OC *trjits]
‘to cause to arrive’

至 (Guangyin)
{tsyiH} [Baxter’s OC *tjits]
‘to arrive’

This alternation exhibits the causative -r- infix proposed by Pulleyblank and championed by Sagart (1993). In fact, it is one of a very small number of clearly attested examples of this putative infix. The forms are homophonous in Mandarin: zhi.

I can propose another four cases that I think are reasonably well justified. Here is the first example:

齋 (Guangyin)
{dzeiH} ‘to mix in proportion’

齋 (Guangyin)
{dzei} ‘balanced’

Note that in the sense “to mix in proportion”, the word {dzeiH} (Mandarin ji, as in yaojishi 藥師 “pharmacist”) is usually written 藥. Hence the text is perhaps to be read jia qi 贊 but *jì qi 贊其家. However, placement of morphological H is the reverse of the治 example. Mei’s important article (1980) proposes that some apparent examples of derivation by tone change may have been late analogical inventions; though within the reconstructionist camp, his view recalls the claims of Gu Yanwu et al.

There are two received readings of 正, which is my second example:

正 (Guangyin)
{tsyeing} ‘to rectify’

正 (Guangyin)
{tsyeingH} ‘upright’

The meaning ‘to rectify’ is traditionally associated with the reading {tsyeingH}. But this word rhymes consistently as {tsyeing} in the Shijing (standing for the word now written 征 “to carry out a punitive, i.e., ‘corrective’ military attack”). The reading zheng is still used today in the compound zhengyuè, ‘first lunar month’, that is, the “rectified” month, meaning the month at which the beginning of the new year is ritually recognized (recalling the formula “王正月 [the king rectified the month]” in the Spring and Autumn Annals). It happens that the First Emperor of Qin was born on the first day of the first lunar month (zhengyuè正月) of the 48th year of King Zhao of Qin, and later scholia assert that he was named after his birthdate (Shiji 1959: 223-224). The eighth century Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (whose courtesy name, Zizheng 子正, contains the character in question) wrote that in Qin times the first lunar month was called duanyue端月 in taboo avoidance of the Emperor’s personal name Zheng 正 (Shiji 1959: 766 Suoyin note on Qin entry).17

17 The only inconsistency is that another eighth century commentator, Zhang Shoujie 張守節 asserts that the true pronunciation of the Qin emperor’s name is nevertheless zheng {tsyeing}. “The First Emperor, on account of having been born at Zhao on the morning of the first day of the first lunar month, was named zheng 端. Later, because it was the First Emperor’s taboo name, it was read as zheng 端len. There seems to be no doubt that his name means ‘first lunar month’, which we now pronounce zheng; Zhang Shoujie’s claim is that this modern pronunciation is merely the result of taboo avoidance and not an ancient reading. However, I discount his claim because the meaning “to rectify” is clearly related to the word {tsyeing}, written 端, and because taboo avoidance is seen mainly in the substitution of graphs rather than the alteration of readings.
Hence our passage is perhaps to be read 心正 but *zhēng qí zān 正其心.
A third example is:

修 \(\text{Guāngyùn}\)
\{sou\_\text{ja}\} [Baxter’s OC *\text{dju}]
‘to cultivate,

修 = 秀 \(\text{Guāngyùn}\)
\{souH\_\text{ja}\} [Baxter’s OC *\text{dju}s]
‘to become ripe (said of grain in the ear).

Hence perhaps xiú qí shēn 修其身 but shēn *xiù 身修. Let me point out that it is usual practice among philologists to seek cognate words among characters in the same xiéshēng 谐声 series (this is another aspect of the yòuwén shuo), but much less usual to look outside the xiéshēng series. If, however, we really have confidence in our reconstructions, we should not hesitate to rely on them in the practice of etymology. So the equating of 秀 with the qishēng-deriven inactive form of 修 may be unfamiliar, but is quite sound phonologically.

The fourth example is

格 \(\text{Guāngyùn}\)
\{keik\_\text{ja}\} [Baxter’s OC *\text{krak}]
‘a standard’ > ‘to classify’

格 = 落格 \(\text{Guāngyùn}\)
\{lak\_\text{ja}\} [Baxter’s OC *\text{grak}]
‘to be classified’

The inactive forms I identify as possible correspondents of 格 are, first, 落 ‘to fall’ > ‘to fall to [someone’s domain]’, ‘dwelling place’ (jūluò 聚落); and, second, 落 ‘to encompass’. It should be noted that the character 格 was traditionally written for the newer character 落, and was in that case read \{lak\_\text{ja}\}. Hence our text should perhaps be read gè wù 格物 but wù *luò 物格.

In the two remaining cases I have not found acceptable candidates for the active correspondents to the inactive verbs in the text. The first example is

*\{meing\_\text{ja}\} ‘to make bright’

The only character in the Guāngyùn corresponding to the reading \{meing\_\text{ja}\} is 命, usually “to command”. I find no straightforward evidence of a usage “to make bright”. For now, we must leave both the active and inactive senses of 命 to the reading meing\_\text{ja}. The second example is

*\{dzyeing\_\text{ja}\} ‘to make honest’

There is no obvious form *\{dzyeing\_\text{ja}\} ‘to make honest’ attested in the sources I have examined.

On balance, I conclude that the received medieval tradition preserves, or contains, significantly more evidence for morphology than Qián Dàxīn found in primary commentaries such as the Jīngdiàn shuòwen. As long as a small amount of etymological interpretation is allowed, five additional pairs of verbs can be identified. But the received tradition apparently does not preserve enough evidence to reconstruct morphological forms everywhere we would expect to see them. There remain two inactive verbs for which no active forms have been found.
6. Contrasting the morphological and purist models

I have previously argued that, if morphology did once exist in Chinese, we have to assume that a great typological change took place, and that essentially all of modern Chinese dates from after the change (see Branner 2000, pp. 159–166). In another paper (2002) I have discussed modern dialect evidence for the reconstruction of morphology in early Chinese, concluding that it must not have been present in the mainstream language of the late Warring States and Hán. If that is so, our reconstructionist model of Chinese linguistic history looks something like this:

The purist model, in contrast, looks something like this:
Obviously, both of these models cannot simultaneously be accurate. Of the two, the morphological model is probably somewhat sounder; there are serious problems with most of the evidence cited by the purists.

Lú Wénchāo and Wáng Yún mean to show that ancient people were not aware of tones. The Ėryá and Guāngyà are basically compendia of early glosses; a passage such as "台聾夷界卜陽、予也" is not intended to equate the six characters 台聾夷界卜陽, merely to group them loosely together by gloss. As long as the compilers did not always read aloud what they wrote, there is no reason why they should not have confounded different words written with the same graph. The material presented by Lú is clever and interesting, but to claim that tones were not distinguished or did not exist in antiquity, based solely on evidence of this kind, does not follow.

Tonal dissonances in rhyming (cited by Gú Yánwū and Lú Wénchāo) are more serious, but reconstruction resolves many of them: 枚 *ak > {ak}, *aks > {uoH₁}; 予 *yo > {yuoQ₁}. Although the two Mandarin and medieval readings of 枚 (è and wù, {ak₁} and {uoH₁}) are quite dissimilar, it is known (from Duán Yúcái’s discovery) that níshēng and qíshēng forms are frequently connected in early Chinese. The early Chinese reconstructions *ak > {ak}, *aks > {uoH₁} illustrate this closeness, allowing us to reinterpret the qíshēng form wù ~ {uoH₁} as itself a type of níshēng (*aks). When the two forms are spelled *ak and *aks, rhyming suddenly does not seem so strange. They were, after all, almost identical. In the case of 予, the sharp tonal distinction between píngshēng and shāngshēng has been replaced by a simple glottal stop ending (?). In both examples, then, the reconstructions of the two forms are sufficiently similar to be interchangeable in rhyming, but systematically accommodate the variance that is characteristic of medieval and modern readings. We also now realize that ancient rhyming practice often treated tone more loosely than in later periods.

The last issue is Gú Yánwū’s complaint that medieval exegetes sometimes disagreed with each other; Qián Dàxún went so far as to attack the glossing to the Dàxué passage. A somewhat doctrinal reconstructionist answer to Qián would be that we have no reason to assume that the medieval tradition preserved all the evidence from the early period, especially if morphology belonged to an essentially "pre-Chinese" period of linguistic history. As I have shown above more concretely, we can in fact find more evidence than he could.

I think it is plain that in our age the reconstructionist viewpoint has the better support. But the purist view has its own advantage, which we should not overlook: it describes Classical Chinese within the isolating typology of Chinese, as indeed it has been read for many centuries.

On the simplest level, being isolating means that Chinese does not systematically express changes in the number or case of nouns, the agreement of adjectives with nouns, or the tense or mood of verbs. Verbs may be used as nouns without changing into a special gerund form. Beyond this, however, because most Chinese words do not alter their phonology along with changes in grammatical function, the very concept of the part of speech is formally indeterminate. Part of speech can only be identified by context.

The reader of the classical language has the sensation of manipulating words mentally, turning noun to verb, verb to adverb, inactive to active verb, and so on as context demands.
One may hold several words tentatively in mind, without fixing them as to part of speech until the whole meaning has become clear by gestalt.

By way of illustration, below are two examples of phrases that remain ambiguous until parts of speech are assigned to a key word:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First possibility</th>
<th>Second possibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjust Southern</td>
<td>Noun Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to turn southward</td>
<td>Verb to turn southward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one’s face</td>
<td>Object one’s face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This phrase is perfectly ambiguous. Both interpretations are valid, although the former is more common in ordinary modern language. But the verbal compound nánmiàn means, idiomatically, “to be the ruler”, deriving from the fact that ancient Chinese rulers always held court facing south, sitting with their backs to the north.\(^\text{18}\) The meaning “to face south” survives today in synonymous phrases: nánmiàn wéi wáng 南面為王 and nánmiàn chéng gù 南面稱孤, but readers do not always grasp the verbal sense of nán in nánmiàn alone until pressed to consider it.

Another example, taken (out of context) from the Sūnzi (Tōngdiàn 49:3807) is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First possibility</th>
<th>Second possibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number+Person One</td>
<td>Noun person’s ears and eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘s</td>
<td>Verb to focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ears and eyes</td>
<td>Object [the attention of] people’s ears and eyes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second interpretation is the correct meaning in the original text, but the first interpretation is more natural-looking on first inspection. The reader must manage to see the common numeral “one” as not a numeral but a verb, “to unify”, and then the meaning of the whole phrase snaps into place.

George Kennedy called examples like nán and yī “ambs” because they were ambivalent, behaving sometimes as verbs (in accepting negation) and sometimes as nouns (in serving as adjunct to another noun; 1964: 370 ff.). There are large numbers of such words in the Classical Chinese lexicon. For our purposes, what is most interesting about “ambs” is that for most of them no special variant pronunciations have come down to us in the received tradition, to identify their competing parts of speech.\(^\text{19}\) Indeed, among literate Chinese they are not conventionally thought of as distinct meanings. Skilled readers are generally able to relate many disparate usages of a given word to a fundamental semantic core, and there is a plain likeness between this semantic core and the purist phonological ideal that Gù calls the dìngyín 定音 or “fixed reading”. Although neurolinguists tell us that all language processing involves manipulation of this kind, Chinese is distinctive in that there are no clues at all in the text and few or none in its sound when read aloud. This process of tentative manipulation is a basic part of the skill of learning to read the literary language and, when mastered, a richly satisfying æsthetic experience I suspect that that æsthetic experience is the real, root inspiration that motivated the whole purist viewpoint.

\(^\text{18}\) Běi 北 “north” is an ancient loangraph whose original meaning was the word běi “the back—to turn the back on”, now written 背.

\(^\text{19}\) In standard Mandarin, however, the second example might be distinguished tonally as yīrén for “one person” but yī rén... for “to focus the attention of people[s]... “.
Another kind of ambivalence is, among nouns, the whole relationship between subject, object, and agent, which are unmarked in Classical Chinese, and must be determined by word order and context. Interestingly, however, in the great majority of Tibeto-Burman languages, there is extensive case marking, and their ancestor has been reconstructed as ergative to greater or lesser degrees (see Bauman 1979, DeLancey 1990). Since Tibeto-Burman and Chinese each have many morphemes that seem to show family likeness with the other, and since they are widely believed to descend from a common ancestor, it is quite interesting to consider that Chinese, isolating as it is, has linguistic kin that exhibit affixation of considerable complexity. Did Chinese indeed descend from an inflected language, or from a language with an ergative case-marking system? If so, it appears to have been stripped of all its morphology at an early period, so that it displays one of the major typological characteristics of a creole.

Be that as it may, as we compare the reconstructionist and purist models of Chinese linguistic history, it is clear today that the reconstructionist model will resolve many of the purist’s textual objections, as well establish plausible connections between Chinese and other Asian languages. There is no longer any real doubt that the reconstructionist model, however dubious its origins, has won out. But we should remember that the purists understood Chinese as a profoundly isolating language, which is how we must treat the literary language if we are to master it. Their problem was an inability to see that that language could have evolved from something more complex, as we can no longer avoid doing. Gu Yánwù’s model still survives as a kind of ghost in many Chinese departments in the Chinese world. It is still common in the Chinese study of early Chinese, for example, to assign all variant readings of a given graph to the same early Chinese rime-group, even if doing so violates rules of regular phonological development.

7. Practical matters: How should we read Classical Chinese?

Apart from answering the objections of the purists, the other challenge for the reconstructivist to meet is to find a philologically accurate way to read and teach classical Chinese. There are several options.

(a) We can read according to the values of the purist school. That would mean trying to use only a single reading for each character. Consider that if a great typological change did take place before the medieval period, then the purist model perhaps describes not the reading principles of high antiquity but, effectively, the tendency of the newer, isolating type of Chinese that seems to have existed since at least Yán Zhītuǐ’s time. However, since the

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20 John Cikoski (1978[1977]) has attempted to reinterpret certain qualities of transitivity of the Chinese verb with a property he calls “ergativity”, terminology at odds with the conventional usage of that word. Ergativity more usually refers to a system of case marking on nouns, in which (in the simplest and purest case) the semantic subject and object are marked one way (“absolutive case”), and the semantic agent is marked another (“ergative case”). Cikoski, writing before Dixon’s definitive 1979 study, does not work out systematically the relationship between his ergativity and the conventional usage of the term, nor between ergativity and conventional transitivity in Chinese.

21 I have considered this possibility briefly in Branner 2000: 160–166. Since we lack concrete historical information about the languages and societies that might have been in contact to form such a creole or creole continuum, I see little to do at this point other than speculate.
objections of the purist school to variant pronunciations do not seem to be well justified, for us to insist on reading puristically smacks of laziness.

(b) We can read with full use of reconstruction. Fully incorporating reconstructions into the teaching and reading of Classical Chinese has been proposed many times but is probably too complex to implement pedagogically. It is viable up to a point, but its most serious drawback is that we lack the kind of systematic evidence that would permit all texts to be read this way with confidence.

(c) We can read conservatively, retaining and promoting the traditional variant readings in Mandarin. The disadvantages are that the conservative tradition lacks the reductive explanatory power of reconstruction, and gives the appearance of chaos. There is also the problem that many conservative readings have become totally unfamiliar to modern ears. Consider:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>characters</th>
<th>traditional reading</th>
<th>common modern reading</th>
<th>gloss, comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>连累</td>
<td>liánlěi, liánlěi</td>
<td>liánlěi</td>
<td>'to implicate' (originally léi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>太守</td>
<td>tāishǒu</td>
<td>tāishǒu</td>
<td>'prefect' (Guǎngyùn reading)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>刁難</td>
<td>diǎonán</td>
<td>diǎonán</td>
<td>'to create difficulties [for]'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>土著</td>
<td>tǔzhùo</td>
<td>tǔzhù</td>
<td>'aboriginal, native'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>說服</td>
<td>shuìfú</td>
<td>shuǐfú</td>
<td>'to persuade'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>燕</td>
<td>Yàn</td>
<td>yàn</td>
<td>in personal names alluding to Béijīng</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This list could easily be extended over many pages. Many newer Mandarin dictionaries do not even list the traditional readings as variants, and they are passing rapidly out of the public mind. Gū’s dìngyīn seems to be winning a latter day victory.

In principle, I favour the reconstructive approach, but I would like to see it connected wherever possible with the conservative reading tradition as it has actually existed. The conservative tradition has the advantage of not requiring the student to read reconstruction aloud every time he or she opens a book. The main utility of reconstruction is that it allows us to visualize etymological relationships, but it is often a great burden to the reader when presented as phonetic dogma. There is no question that literature itself is the best vehicle for teaching philology, and the promotion of literature requires that we read in a reasonably normal Mandarin accent.

Even when we know of variant readings, there are practical difficulties in applying them extensively. Consider the Analects passage quoted on p. 47, above: 君子以文會友，以友輔仁 [The well-bred person assembles friends through culture, and nurtures goodness through friendships.] Not only is the fifth character 會 never read kuài today as its meaning demands, but that pronunciation is itself irregular; the medieval reading {kuìH₁b} should correspond to a reading *guī in Mandarin, which is not attested in the modern standard tradition. Should we introduce such a reading in order to be faithful to the medieval glosses, even if that means altering the existing tradition? Or should we read it kuài so as to be traditional, even though we know that we are not being true to the old gloss?

Furthermore, the second-to-last character 輔 ‘to nurture’ is read fǔ, but the medieval reading {bùoQ₃} demands a Mandarin reading *fǔ, not found today. Should we restore
“fu” as well as “guì” or “kuài”? The danger is that our students will be unable to practice this rigour when left to read by themselves, and even more seriously that they will be viewed as ignoramuses when they encounter literate Chinese people.

To take the broad view, if the spoken language of early Chinese was truly related to Tibeto-Burman, then even the written language of that day was probably so far removed from modern Chinese typologically as to be unrecognizable to the modern ear. Even if we invasively restore all the morphology we can, we will still not be able to reproduce the full grammatical system and sound of early Chinese. It seems, then, that we cannot fully throw off the spare typology that has characterized Chinese since medieval times. The conservative tradition, disorganized though it is, offers us the best tool for introducing issues of historical linguistics within a recognizable system of Mandarin pronunciation.

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