
*On Early Chinese Morphology and its Intellectual History*¹

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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, transitive 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.

I. Introduction

This paper deals with some aspects of the question of morphology in early Chinese – with its intellectual history and practical application.² Morphology in general concerns the rules of word-formation, especially inflection 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 *Qièyùn* 切韻 tradition and the ‘rime-tables’ of the *Yùnjìng* 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

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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 *qùshēng* 去聲 from something other than the *qùshēng*:

verb in non-*qùshēng*

處 *chú* {*tshyuQ_{3b}*} ‘to dwell at’
 知 *zhī* {*tri_{3b}*} ‘to know’
 陳 *chén* {*dren_{3b}*} ‘to set out, arrange’
 乘 *chéng* {*zyeng₃*} ‘to ride’
 傳 *chuán* {*druan_{3b}*} ‘to transmit’
 數 *shù* {*sruQ_{3c}*} ‘to count’

noun in *qùshēng*

處 *chù* {*tshyuH_{3b}*} ‘place’
 知 *zhì* {*triH_{3b}*} ‘knowledge’ (=智)
 陳 *zhèn* {*drenH_{3b}*} ‘battle formation’ (=陣)
 乘 *shèng* {*zyengH₃*} ‘carriage with team of horses’
 傳 *zhuàn* {*druanH_{3b}*} ‘a record’
 數 *shù* {*sruH_{3c}*} ‘number’

Qùshēng 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 *sīshú* 私塾 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

里仁爲美、擇不處仁焉得知

[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, *lǐ rén wéi měi; zé bù chǔ rén, yān dé zhī*. The boldfaced words *chǔ* ‘to dwell among’ and *zhī* ‘knowledge’ are special readings, and we must not read them **chù* ‘place’ and **zhī* ‘to know’ if we are to understand the passage grammatically. In medieval transcription this passage is {*liQ_{3d} nyen_{3b} ghwi_{3b} miQ_{3c}; dreik_{2a} pwet_{3a} tshyuQ_{3b} nyen_{3b} an_{3a} tek₁ triH_{3b}*}, and the *Jīngdiǎn shùwén* entry for this passage duly supplies sound-glosses on these two words:

處、昌呂反 = {*tshyuQ_{3b}*} (*i.e.*, rather than the usual reading {*tshyuH_{3b}*})

知、音智 = {*triH_{3b}*} (*i.e.*, rather than the usual reading {*tri_{3b}*})

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* 靜) meaning is derived from a transitive or “active” (*dòng* 動) sense, when a voiceless initial changes to voiced:

active verb with voiceless initial

敗 *bài* {*peiH_{2c}*} ‘to defeat’
 別 *bié* {*pat_{3b}*} ‘to separate (tr.), distinguish’
 著 *zhù* {*trak₃*} ‘to place on; to wear’
 見 *jiàn* {*kan₄*} ‘to see’
 解 *jiě* {*keiQ_{2a}*} ‘to unite’
 繫 *jì* {*keiH₄*} ‘to tie’
 會 *kuài* {*kweiH_{1b}*} ‘to bring together’

inactive verb with voiced initial

敗 *bài* {*beiH_{2c}*} ‘to be defeated’
 別 *bié* {*bat_{3b}*} ‘different, to depart’
 著 *zhù* {*drak₃*} ‘to be attached to’
 見 *xiàn* {*ghan₄*} ‘to have audience,
 be seen’ (=現)
 解 *xiè* {*gheiQ_{2a}*} ‘to be released,
 relaxed’ (as in *xièdài* 懈怠 ‘sluggish’)
 繫 *xì* {*gheiH₄*} ‘to be connected to’
 會 *huì* {*ghweiH_{1b}*} ‘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 [v] or [ʃ] 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 *jūnzǐ yǐ wén huì yǒu, yǐ yǒu fǔ rén* ({*kwen_{3a} tsiQ_{3d} yiQ_{3d} mwen_{3a} kweiH_{1b} ghouQ_{3b}, yiQ_{3d} ghouQ_{3b} buoQ_{3c} nyen_{3b}*}). 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* {*kweiH_{1b}*}. But for some reason the Mandarin reading *kuài* for 會 is now associated only with the word *kuàiji* 會計 ‘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 Hàn (25–220), and is typified by works such as the *Máo shī jīān* 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 *Jīngdiǎn shìwén* 經典釋文 of Lù Dè míng 陸德明 (c. 550–630). The *Shìwén*, 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 *Shìwén* 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 *Jíyùn* 集韻 (completed 1039) incorporated many of the *Shìwén*'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 yīnbìàn* 群經音辨 of Jiǎ Chāngcháo 賈昌朝 (998–1065). The *Yīnbìàn* seems to be based in large part on *Shìwén* 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 Jiǎ Chāngcháo 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 *Huángshì rìchāo* 黃氏日鈔 (Zhèng and Mài 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.

Jiǎ Chāngcháo'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 biànyīn 動字辨音” in Mǎ Jiànzhōng's 1898 *Mǎshì wéntōng* 馬氏文通 owes most of its material to Jiǎ'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 æsthetic 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 läugnen, 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 designations, 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 Verbindungslaute abschneidet, ausschliesslicher und gespannter auf denselben hinrichtet, wenn die Lesung auch nur weniger Chinesischer Texte diese Ueberzeugung biz zur Bewunderung steigert, so dürften doch auch die entschiedensten Vertheidiger dieser Sprache schwerlich behaupten, dass sie die geistige Thätigkeit zu dem wahren Mittlepunkt hinlenkt, aus dem Dichtung und Philosophie, wissenschaftliche Forschung und beredter Vortrag gleich willig emporkblühen. (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).

[...] Es wäre denkbar, dass auch die Europäischen Sprachen, wenn je die geistige Fortentwicklung der Völker unterbrochen werden könnte und mit ihr die Quellen auch des leiblichen Verjüngungsprocesses der Sprache, [...] bald auch auf das geistige Niveau der Chinesischen Sprache herabsinken könnten.

[It would be conceivable that the European languages could also sink to the mental level of the Chinese language in short order, if ever the mental development of the peoples could be interrupted and, along with it, the wellsprings of the processes of material rejuvenation of the language [...]]

Der Zeitpunkt in welchem eine Sprache schriftfähig wird, und das Volk eine Litteratur erhält, pflegt der entscheidendste Wendepunkt für die Richtung seiner Sprachentwicklung zu sein, und da wir fast alle Sprachen erst seit dieser Zeit näher kennen lernen, so bleibt uns in der Regel die erste und wichtigste Hälfte ihres Lebens, die des leiblichen wachstums unbekannt. Die Litteratur hält diese in ihrer lebenskräftigsten Entwicklung auf, bringt sie zum Stillstand, dann zum Rückgang.

[The moment at which it becomes possible for a language to be written and the people receives a literature tends to be the most decisive turning point in the direction of its linguistic development. And since we first become more intimately acquainted with almost all languages only from this point, the first and most important half of their life — that of their material growth — remains as a rule unknown to us. Literature arrests this growth at the stage of its most vigorous development, brings it to a halt, and then into decline.]

Die Chinesische Einsilbigkeit ist nicht die ursprüngliche, sondern eine bereits von früherer Mehrsilbigkeit herabgesunkene und in verhärteter Einseitigkeit an der Grenze ihrer Entwicklung angelangte.

[Chinese monosyllabicity is not the original monosyllabicity, but rather one which deteriorated from an earlier polysyllabicity and which arrived at the limit of its development in a state of obdurate partiality.]

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 immutably 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 monosyllabicity 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:

[王] wáng ‘king’	wàng ‘to become king’	
[勞] láo ‘work’	lào ‘to pay the work’	
[從] cóng ‘to follow’	zòng ‘follower’	zōng ‘footsteps’
[好] hǎo ‘good’	hào ‘to love’	
[受] shōu ‘to acquire’	[授] shòu ‘to give’	
[買] mǎi ‘to buy’	[賣] mài ‘to sell’	

and continues:

[...] 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.⁵ Less than a decade after Jespersen, Maurice Courant (1865–1935) proposed a similar principle (1903):

L’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 prononciation 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: 勺 *šyak* (šǎ) “cuiller”; 勺 *čyak* (čǎ) “puiser avec une cuiller”.

[The history of the language will undoubtedly show that, in the majority of the cases, this polyphony comes possibly from confusion over one of the characters which would originally have been different, or from the independent evolution of a dialectal pronunciation, or from various other causes, among which it is necessary to remember the following: phonetic variation corresponding to a modulation of the primary meaning and suggesting the derivational inflection used in other languages: 勺 *šyak* (šǎ) “spoon”; 勺 *čyak* (čǎ) “to stir with a spoon”.]

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 Nánjīng 南京 dialect has to do with the fact that Nánjīng preserves the medieval *nùshēng* 入聲 tone category, in which all words anciently ended in *-p*, *-t*, or *-k*. In modern Nánjīng dialect, these oral stops are lost, and Jespersen’s point is that the Nánjīng *nùshēng* 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 *nùshēng* words in Nánjīng are still distinguished by a glottal stop [ʔ], meaning that the ancient stop ending has not completely disappeared. A second problem is that the Nánjīng *nùshēng* is fundamentally the same contrastive phonological category as the ancient *nùshēng*, 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 *qùshēng* verbs corresponding to non-*qùshēng* 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 *qùshēng* 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 *h-* 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.⁶ 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

⁶ In researching this section, I have consulted the superb collection of relevant materials in Zhèng Diàn and Mài Méiqiào (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 顏之推 (531–591?), whose *Yán's Family Instructions* (*Yánshì jiāxiùn* 顏氏家訓) 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, ostensibly 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 惡. These two pairs of readings he regards as having exegetic legitimacy, although he laments that they are poorly understood by northerners.

夫物體自有精麤、精麤謂之好惡、人心有所去取、去取謂之好呼號反惡烏故反、此音見於葛洪徐邈、而河北學士讀尚書云、好呼號反生惡於各反殺、是爲一論物體、一就人情、殊不通矣 (1960, pp. 123a–b)

Generally speaking, things are naturally either fine or coarse; fineness and coarseness are called 好 {*hauQ*₃} “good” and 惡 {*ak*₁} “bad”. People’s minds either reject or accept things; rejecting and accepting are called 好 {*hauH*₃} “to like” and 惡 {*uoH*₁} “to hate”. These readings are seen in the glosses of Gě Hóng 葛洪 and Xú Mào 徐邈. The scholars of the North read the *Shàngshū* passage “to love living things and hate killing” as {*hauH*₃ *sreng*₃ *ak*₁ *srat*_{2a}} “[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 惡, he disapproves of variant readings, citing among others the specific case of *bài* 敗, whose readings differ as inactive *vs.* active verb with voiceless *vs.* voiced initials (shown on p. 4, above):

江南學士讀左傳、口相傳述、自爲凡例、軍自敗曰敗、打破人軍曰敗補敗反、諸記傳未見補敗反、徐仙民讀左傳、唯一處有此音、又不言自敗敗人之別、此爲穿鑿耳 (1960, pp. 124b–125c)

When scholars of the south read the *Zuǒzhuan*, they pass their traditions down orally, and make their own general rules. “When an army is defeated of itself, it is called {*beiH*_{2c}} [the ordinary reading], and when they defeat someone else’s army it is pronounced {*peiH*_{2c}}”. I have never seen this reading in any of the commentaries. Even in Xú Xiānmín’s edition of the *Zuǒzhuan* 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 (1966c[1667], 4/2a, on the Ode “Xiǎoróng 小戎” of the “Qínfēng 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 liǎngshēng gèyì zhǐ shuō bújìn rán 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:

凡上去入之字、各有二聲或三聲四聲、可遞轉而上同以至於平、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、爲愛惡之惡則去聲、爲美惡之惡則入聲、顏氏家訓言此音始於葛洪徐邈、乃自晉宋以下、同然一辭、莫有非之者、余考惡字

All characters in the *shǎng*, *qù*, or *rù* 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 *zhuǎnzhù* [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 惡 when it means ‘to hate’ is read in the *qùshēng*, {*uoH₁*}; when it means ‘bad’ it is read in the *rùshēng*, {*ak₁*}. The *Yánshì jiāxùn* says these readings originated in the time of Gě Hóng and Xú Mò, that is, since the Jin and Sòng [265–479].

Gù now cites five examples from early poetry, in three of which 惡 means “bad” yet must be read {*uoH₁* in order to rhyme, rather than {*ak₁*}, and in two of which it means “to hate”

⁷ Note that Zhōu Zǔmó (1966b, pp. 425–426) contradicts Yán’s assertion about *bài* 敗, but his evidence may postdate Yán. Modern philologists consider Yán’s ordinary reading {*beiH_{2c}*} to be the derived reading.

⁸ His theory of tones, which I do not detail here, is enunciated in his essay “Gǔrén sìshēng yígùàn 古人四聲一貫 [for people in antiquity the four tones were all interconnected]”. (1966a[1667]).

and yet must be read {ak₁} in order to rhyme, rather than {uoH₁}. 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間、而非有此疆爾界之分也、凡書中兩聲之字、此類寔多、難以每舉

自訓詁出而經學衰、韻書行而古詩廢、小辯愈滋、大道日隱、噫、先聖之微言、汨於蒙師之口耳者、多矣、知類通達、吾以望之後之君子

So we know that the distinction between *qùshēng* and *nùshēng* 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、質有精麤謂之好惡、心有愛憎稱為好惡、當體則為名譽、情乖則為毀譽、今考之於詩、邶之日月、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、若譽字三見於詩、車鞶之式燕且譽、振鷺之以永終譽、皆作去聲、而韓奕之韓媧燕譽、獨作平聲、此豈得謂為情乖者乎、以此讀經、所謂泥而未光者也

The “*Shǐjì zhèngyì lùyīn lì*” by Zhāng Shǒujié of the Táng says,

In quality there is fineness and coarseness, which we call 好 {hauQ₃} “good” and 惡 {ak₁} “bad”; the mind has loving and detesting, which we call 好 {hauH₃} “to like” and 惡 {uoH₁} “to hate”. If it involves appropriate form, it is 名譽 {meing_{3b} yuoH_{3b}} “reputation”, but if it involves moodiness, it is 毀譽 {hwiQ_{3b} yuo_{3b}} “condemnation and praise”.⁹

If today we look for evidence in the *Shǐjīng*, we find that the poems “Rìyuè” from Bèi, “Mùguā” from Wèi, and “Nǚ yuē jǐmíng” from Zhèng all rhyme 好 with 報 {pauH₁}, these are cases in the *qùshēng* meaning “to love with the heart”. In the “Hóngfàn” chapter of the *Shǔjīng* are the [rhyming] lines. “無有作好 {hauQ₁}、遵王之道 {dauQ₁} [having no personal likings, pursue the kingly path]”; this is in the *shǎngshēng*, meaning “to love with the heart”. As for the character 譽, it appears three times in the *Shǐjīng*: in “式燕且譽 [I only wish you happiness and joy]” of the poem “Jūxiá 車鞶” and “以永終譽 [for his longevity the people praise him]” of the poem “Zhènù 振鷺” it is in the *qùshēng*. Only in the line. “韓媧燕譽 [Hán Jí was overjoyed]” of the poem “Hányì 韓奕” is it in the *píngshēng*; how can

⁹ Gù is quoting from the “*Shǐjì zhèngyì lùyīn lì 史記正義論音例*” of the Táng scholiast Zhāng Shǒujié 張守節 (preface dated 736; see 1975[1959], p. 15). Zhāng’s lines apparently quote the preface to the *Jīngdiǎn shìwén*, themselves clearly reminiscent of Yán Zhītuī’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 譽, but Gù shows that that claim is contradicted by the rhyming evidence of classical texts.

After quoting Yán Zhītūi’s entire note about the readings of 敗 in the *Zuǒzhuàn* (above), Gù 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 {*kuan*₁} “coffin” vs. {*kuan*H₁} “to encoffin”, {*ghwang*H₃} “king” vs. {*ghwang*H₃} “to crown king”, and {*kuan*₁} “to observe” vs. {*kuan*H₁} “to cause to observe”.

漢書高帝紀、縣給衣衾棺葬具、如淳曰棺音貫、師古曰、初爲椁、至縣更給衣及棺、備其葬具耳、不勞改讀音爲貫也

又項羽背約而王、君王於南鄭、師古曰、上王音于放反、劉攽曰、予謂王作如字何害、

據此二條、則一字兩聲、繫辭曲說、昔人已有悟其非者矣

In the “Gāo dì jì” of the *Hàn shū*, it says “the counties supplied clothes and quilts, coffins and burial implements”. Rú Chún comments: 棺 “coffin” is pronounced like 貫 {*kuan*H₁}, but [Yán] Shǐgǔ 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 貫 {*kuan*H₁}”.¹¹

Again, it says “Xiàng Yǔ went back on his agreement and declared himself king; our ruler is king at Nán Zhèng”. [Yán] Shǐgǔ says, “The first 王 is read {*ghwang*H₃}”.¹² Liú Bān [of Sòng times] says, “I say, what is wrong with 王 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.

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

左傳昭五年、觀兵于坻箕之山、釋文曰、觀舊音官、讀爾雅者、皆官喚反、周禮司燿、鄭康成讀如子若觀火之觀、是以觀爲去聲

宋魏了翁論觀卦曰、今轉注之說則象象爲觀示之觀、六爻爲觀瞻之觀、竊意未有四聲反切以前、安知不爲一音乎、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 *Zuǒzhuàn*, it says “[He] displayed the troops on the hill at Dìjī. The *Jīngdiǎn shìwén* says, “觀 was formerly read {*kuan*₁}”, but in reading the *Èryǎ* it is

¹⁰ Alluding to the *xiàngzhuàn* commentary to the fourth line of hexagram Zhèn 震.

¹¹ *Hàn shū* 1962:65.

¹² *Hàn shū* 1962:30.

¹³ *Hàn shū* 1955:40 (1 上:28/b).

always {*kwanH₁*}. In the *Zhōu lǐ*, in the title *sīguàn* 司燿 Zhèng [Xuán] reads it as in “予若觀火 [I am like a flame on display]”; thus 觀 is *qùshēng*.¹⁴

The Sòng scholar Wèi Liǎowēng [1178–1237] said of the *Yíjīng* hexagram “*Guàn* 觀 [Observation]”,

“Here, on account of the principle of ‘change and confluence’, in the text proper and the symbolic commentary 觀 is read {*kwanH₁*} [= *guàn*] as in *guànshì* ‘to exhibit for observation’, while in the six line-texts it is read {*kwan₁*} [= *guān*] as in *guānzhān* ‘to observe from a height’. What I wonder is, before the four tones and *fǎnqiè* 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 *Yíjīng* and *Shǐjīng* to the Eastern Hàn, all rhyming passages were, after the time of Sūn Yán and Shěn Yuē, always constrained within the four tones and pinned down by *fǎnqiè* 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、而韻中之兩收三收、以示天下作詩之人、隨其遲疾輕重而用之者也

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 *qù*, 看 sometimes in the *píng* and sometimes in the *qù*, 望 and 忘 sometimes *píng* and sometimes *qù*, 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 *zhuǎnzhù* [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 {*ak₁*} to 惡 in classical rhyming texts does not always match its expected meanings, and there are similar cases such as 好 and 譽, 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 棺 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 Zhèng Xuán for 燿 in the *Zhōulǐ zhùshù* (1980:831 上, 843 中). The line “予若觀火” appears in the *Shǔjīng* “Pán’gēng 上”, 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 Qíling 毛奇齡 (1623–1716), in his *Yùnxué zhǐyào* 韻學指要 (1991), and the poet and bon-vivant Yuán Méi 袁枚 (1716–1798), in his “Yīnyì fānchóng 音義繁重”, in *Suíyuán suíbǐ* 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 *Xūzì shuō* 虛字說 (Zhèng and Mài 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 惡 each having different meanings started in Gě Hóngē’s *Zìyuàn*. Before the Hàn 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 Liǎowēng, mentioned above by Gù Yánwǔ (see p. 58), and continues:

[...] 斯可謂先得我心者矣、大學國治之治、陸德明音直吏反、而先治其國之治無音、則當讀平聲、此尤可笑、夫齊家家齊、修身身修、正心心正、誠意意誠、格物物格、皆不聞有兩音、而讀於治字辨之、曾不審上下文、不幾乎菽麥之罔辨乎 (Qián 1927–35: 1/3b)

This man can really be said to have “anticipated my very thoughts”. In the *Dàxué*, for the character *zhì* 治 [“well-governed”] as in “the state is well governed”, Lù Déming [in the *Jīngdiǎn shìwén*] reads it {*driH_{3a}*}; but in “first govern the state”, as there is no reading given it is supposed to be read *píngshēng*, as {*dri_{3a}*}. 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 “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

¹⁵ The allusion is to the story of the mentally deficient elder brother of Sūn Zhōu 孫周, described in the *Zuǒ zhuàn* 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, has separate readings for both its active and inactive forms: {*dri*_{3d}} (in Mandarin, *chí*) and {*driH*_{3d}} (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 qūbié 字義不隨音區別 [the meanings of characters are not distinguished by pronunciation]” Lú cites interesting evidence from some early glossing traditions, including *Ēryǎ* 爾雅 and *Bóyǎ* 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 *Ēryǎ*, one of the earliest surviving glossaries (traditionally said to have been in existence in Confucius' time!), which contains a line

台朕賚畀卜陽、予也 (see *Ēryǎ jiàozhù* 1984: 9–10)

That is to say, the six characters 台, 朕, 賚, 畀, 卜, and 陽, appearing in early texts, may be defined as “予”. This 予 does not represent a single word or reading: it can be read *yú* {*yuo*_{3b}} to mean ‘I, me’ or *yú* {*yuoQ*_{3b}} to mean ‘to give’. Lú has noticed that in three of the six cases in the *Ēryǎ*'s entry, 予 is defining words meaning ‘I, me’ and in the other three, words meaning ‘to give’:

yí 台 ‘I~me’ (appears in the *Shūjīng*)
zhèn 朕 ‘I~me’ (*Shūjīng*)
yáng 陽 ‘I~me’ (Guō Pú 郭璞 cites the *Lǚ Shī* 魯詩 and says it is a regional word)
lài 賚 ‘to give as a gift to an inferior’ (*Shūjīng*)
bì 畀 ‘to give’ (*Shūjīng*)
bǔ 卜 ‘to give’ (*Shūjīng*)

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

Lú finds a similar case in the *Bóyǎ* (or *Guǎngyǎ* 廣雅), a later work modelled after the *Ēryǎ*:

遂壘畹畢終、竟也 (see *Guǎngyǎ gùlín* 1998: 192)

The seven characters 遂, 壘, 畹, 畢, 終, 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 {*keingQ*_{3a}} and have the sense ‘border’ (this word is written 境 today), or it can be read {*keingH*_{3a}} and has the sense ‘to come to an end’:

sui 遂 ‘ditch between fields’ (appears in the *Zhōu Lǐ* 周禮)
jiāng 壘 = 疆 ‘boundary’ (*Zhōu Lǐ*)

jiè 畧 = 界 ‘boundary, border’ (*Shǐjīng*)
 gǎng 畹 ‘border’ (*Shuōwén*, said to be a regionalism)
 bì 畢 ‘to be done, finished’ (*Zuǒzhuàn*)
 zhōng 終 = 終 ‘to die, come to an end’ (*Shǐjīng*)
 zú 卒 = 卒 ‘to die’ (*Shuōwén*)

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

未別四聲以前古人爲詩亦無平側之分、往往互用、義或與音不諧、後人往往疑爲假借而不知字義之本不隨音而變也、何假借之有

Before the four tones were distinguished, people did not make the *píng-zè* 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 *jiǎjiè*, have not realized that meaning fundamentally does not change with pronunciation. What sort of *jiǎjiè* is that?

Lú’s evidence was supplemented by Wáng Yún 王筠 (1784–1854), best known for his *Shuōwén* studies. He left one note on the subject, headed “Gǔ bùfēn sìshēng, gài běn wú sìshēng yě 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 Lú Wénchāo’s, and is taken from the *Ēryǎ*. Below I tabulate his additional examples more concisely than above:

fān shē guǒ yì kè jié	= {syengH ₃ } ‘to defeat’
犯 奢 悞 毅 尅 捷 功 肩 堪	勝也 (<i>Ēryǎ jiàozhù</i> 1984: 8–9)
	= {syeng ₃ } ‘to bear (responsibility)’
xiǎn jāo jiāo	= {ghanH ₄ } ‘apparent, obvious’
顯 昭 覲 釗 覲	見也 (<i>Ēryǎ jiàozhù</i> 1984: 15)
	= {ghanH ₄ } ‘to have audience before’

In the case of the words glossed with 見, Wáng notes, “雖皆讀胡旬切、固是兩義也 [although they are both read {ghanH₄} they are certainly two different meanings]”.

jiān	chǔn	chù	= {tsuoH ₁ } ‘to make’
淳 肩 搖 動 蠢 迪 俶 厲	作也 (<i>Ēryǎ jiàozhù</i> 1984: 17)		
bó	yáo	dòng	= {tsak ₃ } ‘to be stirred up’
	dí	lì	
fēi	shè		= {syeQ ₃ } ‘to discard’
廢 稅 赦	舍也 (<i>Ēryǎ jiàozhù</i> 1984: 18–19)		
shuì			= {syeH ₃ } ‘rest house’

The remainder of Wáng’s note claims that early scholia on pronunciation cannot be related to the tonal distinctions of the received tradition. He cites the Hàn commentator Hé Xiū’s 何休 (129–182) comments on a passage in the *Gōngyáng zhuàn* 公羊傳 for the 28th year of Duke Zhuāng 莊:

春秋：齊人伐衛

公羊傳：…春秋伐者爲客

何休注：伐人者爲客、讀伐長言之、齊人語也

公羊傳：伐者爲主

何休注：見伐者爲主、讀伐短言之、齊人語也 (*Gōngyáng zhuàn* 1992: 9/1a)

Chūnqiū text: The people of Qí “*fá* [sent an expedition against]” Wèi.

Gōngyáng zhuàn: In the *Chūnqiū*, *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.

Gōngyáng zhuàn: *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 *Gōngyáng*'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,

雖因傳兩言伐者、無所區別而爲此說

although he follows the *Gōngyáng zhuàn*'s double mention of *fá*, [Hé Xiū] makes this explanation without any basis for distinguishing them.

He concludes,

但古言五音、不得變爲四聲、況韻書所收之字、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 Duàn Yùcái 段玉裁 (1735–1815) was sorely limited by the tiny amount of data that could be put to evidentiary research. Duàn'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. Duàn's discovery allowed scholars to see that there was a much closer relationship between the *qùshēng* and *nùshēng* than between the other tones, and that led to new and less radical theories of early Chinese tone. In fact, even well before Duàn'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 Hàn 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 Zhītuī, living a millenium 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 shuō* 右文說, the “explanation by reference to the right side of the character” (see the seminal study of Shěn Jiānshì 1986[1933]). The earliest statement of this principle has been attributed to Yáng Quán 楊泉 (fl. 4th c?), from whose *Wùlilùn* 物理論 the following passage is cited:¹⁶

在金石曰堅、在草木曰緊、在人曰賢 (Tàipíng yùlǎn 402: 4b)

In metal and stone it is called {*kan*₄}, “firm”; in plants and trees it is called {*ken*Q_{3b}}, “tough”; in people, it is called {*ghan*₄}, “sageliness”.

These cryptic phrases are understood to refer to the underlying meaning of the *xiéshēng* 諧聲 element that the characters 堅, 緊, 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 shuō* 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 *Dàxué* passage cited by Qián Dàxīn (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 *chí*, both written 治, have any commentary 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.

I 古 之 欲 明 明 德 於 天 下 者 先 治 其 國
 gǔ zhī yù míng míng dé yú tiān xià zhě xiān chí qí guó
 {*kuo*Q₁ *tsyi*_{3d} *yuk*_{3c} ***meing***_{3a} ***meing***_{3a} *tek*₁ *uo*₁ *than*₄ *gha*Q₂ *tsya*Q₃ *san*₄ ***dri***_{3d} *gi*_{3d} *kwek*₁}
 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 *Yúwén lèijù* 藝文類聚, but I do not find it there.

- 2 欲 治 其 國 者 先 齊 其 家
 yù chí qí guó zhě xiān qí qí jiā
 {yuk_{3c} dri_{3d} gi_{3d} kwek₁ tsyaQ₃ san₄ dzeiH₄ gi_{3d} 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 qí qí jiā zhě xiān xiū qí shēn
 {yuk_{3c} dzei₄ gi_{3d} ka₂ tsyaQ₃ san₄ sou_{3b} gi_{3d} syen_{3b}}
 those who wanted to **balance** their households first **cultivated** their own selves;
- 4 欲 修 其 身 者 先 正 其 心
 yù xiū qí shēn zhě xiān zhèng qí xīn
 {yuk_{3c} sou_{3b} gi_{3d} syen_{3b} tsyaQ₃ san₄ tsyeingH_{3b} gi_{3b} 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 qí xīn zhě xiān chéng qí yì
 {yuk_{3c} tsyeingH_{3b} gi_{3d} sem₃ tsyaQ₃ san₄ dzyeing_{3b} gi_{3d} iH_{3d}}
 those who wanted to **rectify** their minds first **made honest** their thoughts;
- 6 欲 誠 其 意 者 先 致 其 知
 yù chéng qí yí zhě xiān zhì qí zhì
 {yuk_{3c} dzyeing_{3b} gi_{3d} iH_{3d} tsyaQ₃ san₄ triH_{3c} gi_{3d} triH_{3b}}
 those who wanted to **make honest** their thoughts first **let wisdom be attained**;
- 7 致 知 在 格 物
 zhì zhì zài gé wù
 {triH_{3c} triH_{3b} dzeiQ_{1a} keik_{2a} mvvet_{3a}}
attaining wisdom resides in **categorizing** the things [of the world].
- 8 物 格 而 后 知 至
 wù gé ér hòu zhì zhì
 {mvvet_{3a} keik_{2a} nyi_{3d} ghouQ₁ triH_{3b} tsiyH_{3c}}
 After the things of the world are **categorized**, wisdom **comes**;
- 9 知 至 而 后 意 誠
 zhì zhì ér hòu yì chéng
 {triH_{3b} tsiyH_{3c} nyi_{3d} ghouQ₁ iH_{3d} dzyeing_{3b}}
 after wisdom comes, one's thoughts **become honest**;
- 10 意 誠 而 后 心 正
 yì chéng ér hòu xīn zhèng
 {iH_{3d} dzyeing_{3b} nyi_{3d} ghouQ₁ sem₃ tsyeingH_{3b}}
 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 tsyeing H_{3b} nyi_{3d} ghouQ₁ syen_{3b} sou_{3b}}
 after one's mind is upright; one's person **becomes cultivated**;

- 12 身 修 而 后 家 齊
 shēn xiū ér hòu jiā qí
 {syen_{3b} sou_{3b} nyi_{3d} ghoul_{Q1} 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 nyi_{3d} ghoul_{Q1} kwek₁ driH_{3d}}
 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 driH_{3d} nyi_{3d} ghoul_{Q1} than₄ gha_{Q2} being_{3a}}
 after the state is orderly, the world is at peace. (*Lǐjì* 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.

Example	Lines	Character	Pīnyīn	Medieval	meaning
1.	6	致	zhì	{triH _{3c} }	to allow to be attained
	8	至	zhì	{tsyiH _{3c} }	to arrive
2.	1	治	chí	{dri _{3d} }	to bring order to
	13	治	zhì	{driH _{3d} }	to become orderly
3.	1	明	míng	{meing _{3a} }	to make a shining example
	1	明	míng	{meing _{3a} }	bright
4.	2	齊	qí	{dzei ₄ }	to balance
	12	齊	qí	{dzei ₄ }	to become balanced
5.	3	修	xiū	{sou _{3b} }	to cultivate
	11	修	xiū	{sou _{3b} }	to become cultivated
6.	4	正	zhèng	{tsyeingH _{3b} }	to rectify
	10	正	zhèng	{tsyeingH _{3b} }	to become upright
7.	5	誠	chéng	{dzyeing _{3b} }	to make honest
	9	誠	chéng	{dzyeing _{3b} }	to become honest
8.	7	格	gé	{keik _{2a} }	to categorize
	8	格	gé	{keik _{2a} }	to be categorized

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 shùwén*)
 {dri_{3d}} ‘to put in order’

治 (*Jīngdiǎn shùwén*)
 {driH_{3d}} ‘in order’

This is the solitary example admitted by the *Jīngdiǎn shùwén*. 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 *Shùwén* onward instruct us to read *chí qí guó* 治其國 but *guó zhì* 國治.

Here is the second example:

致 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)	至 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)
{ <i>triH_{3c}</i> } [Baxter's OC * <i>trjts</i>]	{ <i>tsyiH_{3c}</i> } [Baxter's OC * <i>tjts</i>]
'to cause to arrive'	'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: *zhì*.

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

齊 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)	齊 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)
{ <i>dzeiH₄</i> } 'to mix in proportion'	{ <i>dzei₄</i> } 'balanced'

Note that in the sense "to mix in proportion", the word {*dzeiH₄*} (Mandarin *jì*, as in *yàojìshī* 藥劑師 "pharmacist") is usually written 劑. Hence the text is perhaps to be read *jiā qí* 家齊 but **jì qí jiā* 齊其家. 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 Gù Yánwǔ *et al.*

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

正	正 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)
{ <i>tsyeing_{3b}</i> } 'to rectify'	{ <i>tsyeingH_{3b}</i> } 'upright'

The meaning 'to rectify' is traditionally associated with the reading {*tsyeingH_{3b}*}. But this word rhymes consistently as {*tsyeing_{3b}*} in the *Shījīng* (standing for the word now written 征 "to carry out a punitive, *i.e.*, 'corrective' military attack"). The reading *zhēng* is still used today in the compound *zhēngyuè*, '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 Qín was born on the first day of the first lunar month (*zhēngyuè* 正月) of the 48th year of King Zhāo of Qín, and later scholia assert that he was named after his birthdate (*Shǐjì* 1959: 223–224). The eighth century Sīmǎ Zhēn 司馬貞 (whose courtesy name, *Zǐzhèng* 子正, contains the character in question) wrote that in Qín times the first lunar month was called *duānyuè* 端月 in taboo avoidance of the Emperor's personal name *Zhēng* 正 (*Shǐjì* 1959: 766 *Suǒyǐn* note on Qín entry).¹⁷

¹⁷ The only inconsistency is that another eighth century commentator, Zhāng Shǒujié 張守節, asserts that the true pronunciation of the Qín emperor's name is nevertheless *zhèng* {*tsyeingH_{3b}*}. "The First Emperor, on account of having been born at Zhào on the morning of the first day of the first lunar month, was named *zhèng* 政. Later, because it was the First Emperor's taboo name, it was read as *zhēng* 征". There seems to be no doubt that his name means 'first lunar month', which we now pronounce *zhēng*; Zhāng Shǒujié'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_{3b}*}, written 征, 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 *xīn zhèng* 心正 but **zhēng qí xīn* 正其心.

A third example is:

修 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)	修 = 秀 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)
{ <i>sou</i> _{3b} } [Baxter's OC *slju]	{ <i>sou</i> H _{3b} } [Baxter's OC *sljus]
'to cultivate,	'to become ripe (said of grain in the ear)'.

Hence perhaps *xiū 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* 諧聲 series (this is another aspect of the *yòuwén shuō*), 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 *qùshēng*-derived inactive form of 修 may be unfamiliar, but is quite sound phonologically.

The fourth example is

格 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)	格 = 落絡 (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)
{ <i>keik</i> _{2a} } [Baxter's OC *krak]	{ <i>lak</i> ₁ } [Baxter's OC *grak]
'a standard' > 'to classify'	'to be classified'

The inactive forms I identify as possible correspondents of 格 are, first, *luò* 落 'to fall' > 'to fall to [someone's domain]', 'dwelling place' (*jùluò* 聚落); and, second, *luò* 絡 '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*₁}. Hence our text should perhaps be read *gé 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

*{ <i>meing</i> H _{3a} } 'to make bright'	明 { <i>meing</i> _{3a} } 'bright' (<i>Guǎngyùn</i>)
--	---

The only character in the *Guǎngyùn* corresponding to the reading {*meing*H_{3a}} 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 明 to the reading *meing*_{3a}. The second example is

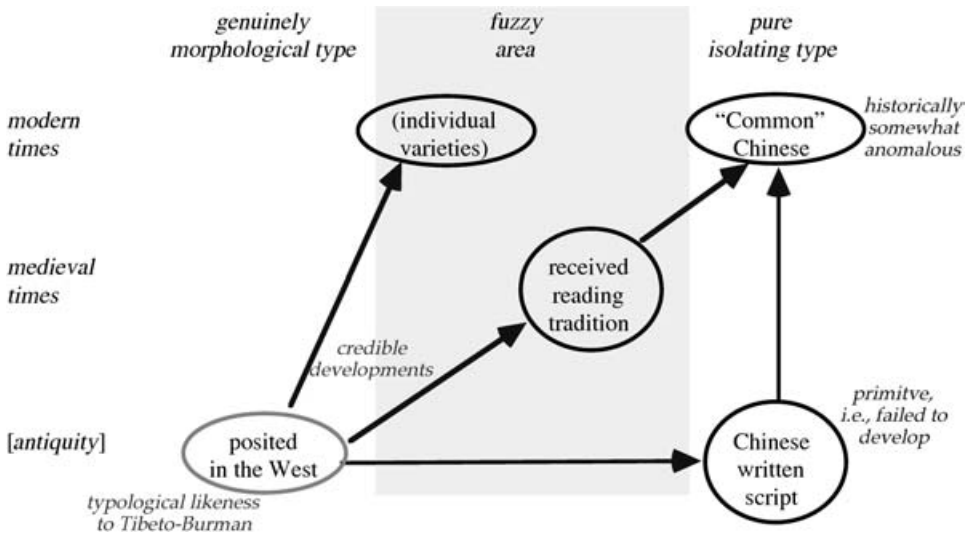
*{ <i>dzyeing</i> H _{3b} } 'to make honest'	誠 { <i>dzyeing</i> _{3b} } 'honest'
--	---

There is no obvious form *{*dzyeing*H_{3b}} 'to make honest' attested in the sources I have examined.

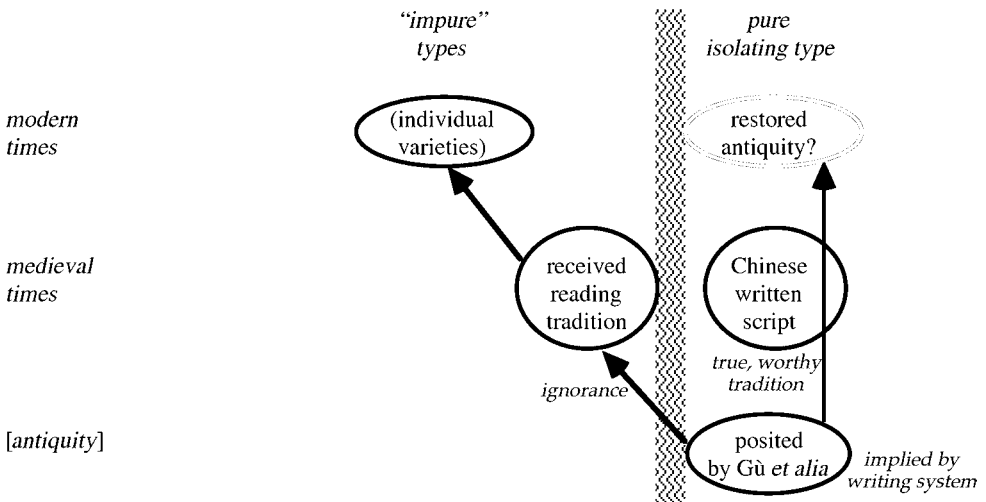
On balance, I conclude that the received medieval tradition preserves, or contains, significantly more evidence for morphology than Qián Dàxīn found in primary commentaries such as the *Jīngdiǎn shìwén*. As long as a small amount of etymological interpretation is allowed, five additional pairs of verbs 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 Hàn. 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 *Ēryǎ* and *Guǎngyǎ* are basically compendia of early glosses; a passage such as “台朕賚畀卜陽、予也” is not intended to equate the six characters 台朕賚畀卜陽, 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 Gù Yánwǔ and Lú Wénchāo) are more serious, but reconstruction resolves many of them: 惡 *ak > {ak₁}, *aks > {uoH₁}; 予 *yo > {yuo_{3b}}, *yo? > {yuoQ_{3b}}. Although the two Mandarin and medieval readings of 惡 (è and wù, {ak₁} and {uoH₁}) are quite dissimilar, it is known (from Duàn Yùcái's discovery) that *rùshēng* and *qùshēng* forms are frequently connected in early Chinese. The early Chinese reconstructions *ak > {ak₁}, *aks > {uoH₁} illustrate this closeness, allowing us to reinterpret the *qùshēng* form wù ~ {uoH₁} as itself a type of *rùshēng* (*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 *shàngshēng* 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 Gù Yánwǔ's complaint that medieval exegetes sometimes disagreed with each other; Qián Dàxīn 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:

<i>First possibility</i>		<i>Second possibility</i>	
Adjust	Noun	Verb	Object
南	面	南	面
southern	face	to turn southward	one's face

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.¹⁸ The meaning “to face south” survives today in synonymous phrases: *nánmiàn wéi wáng* 南面為王 and *nánmiàn chēng gū* 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* (*Tōngdiǎn* 49:3807) is:

<i>First possibility</i>			<i>Second possibility</i>	
Number+N ₁	[poss]	N ₂	Verb	Object
一人	之	耳目	一	人之耳目
one person	's	ears and eyes	to focus	[the attention of] people's ears and eyes

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.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 *dìngyīn* 定音 or “fixed reading”. Although neurologists 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 aesthetic experience I suspect that that aesthetic experience is the real, root inspiration that motivated the whole purist viewpoint.

¹⁸ *Běi* 北 “north” is an ancient loangraph whose original meaning was the word *bèi* “the back~to turn the back on”, now written 背.

¹⁹ In standard Mandarin, however, the second example might be distinguished tonally as *yìrén* 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?²⁰ 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.²¹

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. *Gù Yánwǔ'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 Zhītūi's* time. However, since the

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 ("absolute 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:

characters	traditional reading	common modern reading	gloss, comments
連累	liánléi, liánlěi	liánlěi	'to implicate' (累 originally léi 累)
太守	tàishòu	tàishǒu	'prefect' (Guǎngyùn reading)
刁難	diāonàn	diāonán	'to create difficulties [for]' (nàn 難 'difficulties')
土著	tǔzhù	tǔzhù	'aboriginal, native' (zhuó 著 'to be attached to')
說服	shuōfú	shuōfú	'to persuade' (yóushuì 遊說 'to canvass support for')
燕	Yān	yàn	in personal names alluding to Běijīng

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. Gù'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 {*kweiH*_{1b}} should correspond to a reading **gùi* 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 {*buoQ*₃} demands a Mandarin reading **fū*, not found today. Should we restore

**fū* as well as **gūi* 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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